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ARTS ONLINE

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Within Walls and Memories: Dimensions of Detention

When Jenny Polak began working on Varick Street in Lower Manhattan in 1996, she was unaware that the nondescript building across the street from her new job was a detention center for the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. She soon noticed that this was no ordinary office. For instance, when going out for lunch, she said, "you would sometimes bump into a shackled guy being pulled along."

Ms. Polak, a British artist living in New York, became so curious about what lay behind those walls that, through contacts at immigrant-rights groups, she solicited drawings of that building, the Varick Service Processing Center, and other I.N.S. detention sites. Because these centers often prohibit the taking of photographs, their interiors are rarely glimpsed by the public.

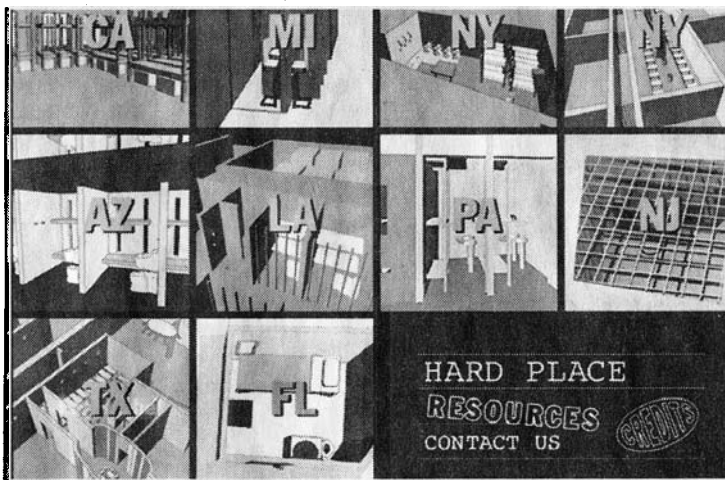
The rough sketches of floor plans she received, made by detained immigrants and their visitors, were the starting point for "Hard Place," an unsettling new digital-art project created by Ms. Polak during an artist residency at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. The artwork can be viewed on the museum's Internet site, at tenement.org/HardPlace.

Disturbed by what she perceived as harsh conditions, Ms. Polak set out to share her discoveries on the Internet. But rather than make a Web-based documentary project like 360degrees.org, which realistically depicts prison cells and other environments in the criminal-justice system, she decided to develop an online artwork that would better advance her political agenda.

The first drawing of the inside of a detention center arrived anonymously by fax in 2000. Others were delivered personally, on crumpled scraps of paper that had been passed from hand to hand. Working from these crude blueprints, Ms. Polak used an architectural software program to create virtual versions of 10 detention centers, including three in the New York region.

As depicted, they are windowless warrens of cramped cells, claustrophobic corridors and drab common areas. For the most part they are shown without human figures.

In an interview Ms. Polak was quick to note that, given her source material and the restricted access to



"Hard Place" offers images of immigration service detention centers.

the detention centers, she cannot verify the authenticity of her 3-D renderings. Nor is accuracy necessarily her aim. Instead, she said, she is straddling "a fine line between actually presenting plans of these places for everyone to see and saying it's people's memories, it's a reconstruction of a nightmare."

Yet the renderings are accompanied by documentary materials that are clearly meant to convey why detention sites have raised concerns among human-rights groups. They complain that detained immigrants are deprived of their civil rights and subjected to unpleasant conditions. (Immigration officials in New York and Washington did not return calls for comment, and the man who answered the phone at the Varick Street center would not say if it was still being used for detainment.)

At "Hard Place," clicking on a keyhole icon, for instance, gives access to pages of detention-center rules and other prisonlike procedures. One detainee sent a sketch of handcuffed wrists raised in prayer. There are poignant audio clips; one from another detainee who said: "I'm not a criminal. I didn't do anything wrong. Why am I here? For what?"

Although Ms. Polak acquired drawings of only 10 sites, it took her more than a year to collect them. One of her methods was to ask immigrant-rights groups to send e-mail solicitations to the families of detainees. The mother of a detainee in Loui-

siana passed the message to her son, who then mailed a package of drawings and documents to Ms. Polak. In other cases detainees' lawyers would slip sketches to Ms. Polak after a court hearing. But, she said, "mostly I was told that people wouldn't be able to make these kinds of drawings with impunity."

As one peers through successive keyholes, a grim reality emerges. Nina Felshin, a curator at Wesleyan University, said, "The layered way in which her Web site reveals information operates as a kind of structural metaphor for the layers of secrecy that prevail within the executive branch of the U.S. government."

Ms. Polak, 44, is a London native who came to the United States in 1990 to study at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. She campaigned against 1996 immigration laws that led to the detention of hundreds of foreigners. "Hard Place" was conceived in part as a reaction against that. "People should know what it will mean for their neighbors if they are picked up by the I.N.S.," she said, "It should not be sugared."

But the points that "Hard Place" was intended to make were not as likely to be accepted after Sept. 11 and the adoption of broader government powers to detain foreigners in the interest of national security. Ms. Polak's four-month Tenement Museum residency began in October, when public opinion had become decidedly more defensive about foreigners.

She remained undeterred. She said: "People got more scared. I got a bit more scared myself. But it became even more pressing to get information out as people were being herded away at such a rate." She and her Web designer, Lauren Gill, plunged ahead.

Jeff Tancil, who runs the museum's artist-residency program, acknowledged that the artwork was critical of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and its treatment of foreigners. But so far the work "hasn't generated any controversy," he said. While that lack of controversy isn't disappointing, he said, "given the reactions to Sept. 11, it's a little surprising."

Regardless of how one responds to the work's politics, Ms. Polak has cleverly appropriated computer-aided design software for her own ends. Typically, such programs are used to design glittering new buildings, and much has been made of how these software tools have liberated architects from rectilinear shapes. Historians also use the programs to reconstruct virtual versions of ancient cities. For "Hard Place" Ms. Polak, who was trained as an architect and now works as a graphic artist, did nothing more than use the software to put her bleak houses in order.

Her approach is reminiscent of another online art site dealing with detainment. In March the Library of Congress put 200 Ansel Adams photographs on the American Memory section of its Web site: memory.loc.gov/ammem/aamhtml. The images were taken in 1943 at the Manzanar War Relocation Center for Japanese-Americans.

Unlike Adams's landscape photographs, which are imbued with a divine light, these images are closer to snapshots. Verná Curtis, the library's curator of photography, said Adams donated the photographs in 1963 without restrictions as to how they could be used, to make sure that the internment camps were not forgotten. "This was a matter of conscience," she said.

With "Hard Place" Ms. Polak seems to have a similar motive. She said: "It makes a lot of difference if the ordinary person, whose neighbor is of Muslim or Arab origin, can see the netherworld that those people might be threatened with. The whole business of 'we're so frightened of everybody' just has to be laid to rest."

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