

**PhoneHome: architecture a/part**

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Despite its intrinsic mobility, the smartphone has become a tethering device to friends, family and community that call upon each other across vast distances. For many it stands in for home, kept safe with identity documents in a watertight plastic bag. No longer locating caller or receiver in a specific place (such as home), phones are now linked to individuals who transmit globally; opening up space for maintaining virtual networks of connection. These innate body extensions are also a means for situating, orienting, documenting, representing, transcending and resisting a life lived in exile.

In the 1982 movie *E.T.*, the stranded Extra-Terrestrial needs to “phone home” and constructs a communication mechanism from electronic components found around its hosts’ house. Exemplifying a stranger in a strange land - exiled from its own home - the detained alien (hailing from beyond the known world) is yearning to make connection and return to a familiar realm. 35 years later we inhabit an age where countless humans are forced to leave their homelands and seek asylum elsewhere: finding themselves defined as ‘aliens’ and confined in unhomey refugee camps and detention centres. Can we dismiss such environments as operating apart from architecture?

This installation incorporates videos, created by artists, architects, designers and correspondents, whose work resonates with the notion of ‘phone home’ as a critical spatial apparatus, providing the means for integrating issues of mediation, alienation and detention. The videos play on mobile phones, embedded within a row of replica models of refugee cabins, viewed and heard through the mediating elements of barred windows and headphones.

The miniature cabins epitomise alienating and spatially reductive experiences: barely containers for a bare-life. Directly referencing architecture’s failure to critically engage, both in discourse and practice, they are based on standardised shelters found in organised military rows in Jordan’s Zaatari refugee camp and other sites such as detention centres set up by the Australian Government for those who dared to be trafficked by boat to the “lucky country” and were instead sent to Pacific islands as punishment for such audacity. The cabin equates to Elaine Scarry’s description of an architecture of “protection” as “a materialised image of decreased sentence” supported by the “supersentient” technologies of surveillance and control (349). Its flagrant banality and attention to the minimal requirements of accommodation that scarcely improve on similarly proliferating tents and makeshift shelters, incapable of protecting against the indifference of weather and vermin.

Far from these concentration camps designed to detain refugees’ bodies and avert the eyes of global onlookers, we must recognise the complicity of architects — as well as planners, engineers, builders, technicians, manufacturers, suppliers and politicians — in constructions that spatially control and too often suppress motility, flexibility and expressivity. However, whether directly involved or not in sites of internment, architects are capable of dreaming alternate solutions that draw on compassion, speak truth to power, and address the unpostponable issues of humanitarianism’s crisis.

*Jon McKenzie, who writes of ‘Discargo’ in this catalogue, has proposed that “a resistant performativity cannot do without a global feeling of political love” (133). Referring to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s demand for “a more generous and more unrestrained conception of love” (351), operating beyond romantic and familial ties, McKenzie suggests being ‘a/part’ – “feeling a part of the world and feeling apart from it at the same time” (129). This (dis)passionate approach requires operating somewhere between immersion and critical distance, which the PhoneHome installation calls upon viewers to do: while listening to headphones they must adjust their focal length to observe the screened videos, through an-other screening of the windows’ intervening bars.*

*The screen – a fixed or movable plane that simultaneously divides and connects, reveals and conceals, upon which images and data are displayed and filtered –provides a powerful agent for critical performativity: especially in our highly-mediated world streaming information 24/7 via smart phones, tablets, monitors, slideshow presentations and architectural facades; but also where bodies themselves (both visceral and virtual) are screened to vet who’s in and who’s out.*

*The videos selected for PhoneHome have been created to critique and engage with the pervasive geo-cultural, geo-mythical and geo-political issues of our time. However, by playing them on the mobile phone screens, which are incorporated within the cabins and surrounded by mirrors, they are further mediated and rendered site-specific: understood through the diminutive architecture in which they are housed. By withholding a clear view of the videos, the mobile becomes more apparent as a spatial, social and politicized element: streaming ‘fantasy in the hold’.*

The row of cabins is reflected and multiplied within a mirror-backed wall niche into which they are placed. Their position demands that visitors bend low or kneel to peer within and decipher the videos; thereby appearing to passers-by as votaries expressing deference to these miniature homes for mobile phones. Viewers are invited to engage bodily in order to critically reflect on our own complicity in the spatial histories and architectural realities belonging to some of the most precarious political subjects of our time; the refugee, detainee, asylum seeker and perceived ‘alien’.

- *E.T the Extra-Terrestrial*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (Universal Pictures, 1982)
- Elaine Scarry: *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1987)
- Jon McKenzie: ‘Global Feeling: (Almost) All You Need is Love’ in *Performance Design*, eds., Dorita Hannah and Olav Harsløf (Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008).
- Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri: *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (NY: Penguin Press, 2004).

