

**Title artwork: White Video Visitation Torture**

<http://WhiteVideoVisitationTorture.net>

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This artwork questions the use of Video Visitation technology introduced in US prisons over the past several years. The new device is promoted as a general security improvement, as well as a means of facilitating remote visitations for inmates. However, there have not been any inquiries into the physiological repercussions of lowering the quality of interpersonal communication through this medium, nor the confidentiality violations caused by recording private conversations.

The term "White Torture" originally comes from Iran, where intellectuals, activists and detainees themselves use it to refer to the use of incommunicado solitary confinement<sup>1</sup>. To create deprivation of sensory stimulus, the prisoner is isolated in a cell with a totally white environment - from the walls and lighting, to an all-white and uniform and basic necessities, and even white food. Through long periods of isolation, surrounded by only the color white, this type of torture makes the detainees lose their sense of personal identity.

Experiencing human interaction through media impoverishes the natural experience of interpersonal communication, often producing a deep sense of solitude and emotional displacement. This feeling can become psychologically harmful in the already extreme situations of isolation of prisoners in detention centers.

An estimated 30,000 inmates in the United States are held in solitary confinement, defined basically as a state of isolation in a small cell for close to twenty-four hours a day.<sup>2</sup> These prisoners experience extremely infrequent human contact even from prison guards, and very rarely from family. Video Visitation technology could drive that isolation further.

The deprivation of the physicality of the loved person, as real body and in a real space, can be considered a form of psychological torture. Intimate human communication mediated through a poor media lowers down the sensorial experience, and in doing so generates a distortion in the perception of emotions and sensibility. If perpetuated, this may produce a permanent psychological trauma. Studies have shown that hallucinations, post-traumatic stress disorder, insomnia and suicide risk are often triggered by solitary confinement.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, there are dangerous legal and political dimensions to the use of Video Visitation technology. The ethical and legal precedent of attorney-client privilege protects the confidentiality of private legal counsel, and is a common law statute in every American state.<sup>4</sup> Video visitations could potentially violate the privacy of inmates, by forcing conversations with defense attorneys to take place over video that is recorded and archived without regulation.

A growing number of US inmates in solitary confinement are illegal immigrants. Language barriers already isolate these detainees and technologies like Video Visitation could further deprive them of human contact, stripping them of identity and personhood. The National Immigrant Justice center has reported that rates of anxiety, PTSD, self-harm and suicide caused by the trauma of isolation are higher among imprisoned immigrants than in the wider prison population.<sup>5</sup>

## About the art installation White Video Visitation Torture

In the installation a reproduction of the Video Visitation device is installed inside a small, uncomfortable white booth. One by one, audience members come inside the booth to watch the videos and pick up the phone receiver to try to communicate through the device. The videos played on the screen are clips recorded from the previous person in the booth. These recordings are extremely overexposed, with the white color (brightness effect) and white noise (added to the voices) in the speakers, making the images opaque and the sounds very hard to understand. The device plays in the previously recorded short video (15 seconds each) for each subsequent visitor. Afterwards, it publishes the clips on a public website.

The installation of White Video Visitation Torture automatically produces video portraits - overexposed with white color and white noise – that deprive the artwork's participants of their normal sensory perception. By taking part in a disturbed encounter with themselves, the installation's participants ultimately become prisoners of the mediated human interpersonal communication.

The audience's experience in first person is a symbolic representation of White Torture – social and sensory isolation through both the attempt to communicate with someone not present, visible or audible, and the state of being under camera surveillance.

This replica of a prison's Video Visitation booth engages the audience in a reenactment of the experience of prisoners interacting with their visitors through the video interface device, in which the quality of communication is deteriorated, and constant, unregulated surveillance is maintained through the automatic publishing of each conversation onto a public website.

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<sup>1</sup> "Like the Dead in Their Coffins": Torture, Detention, and the Crushing of Dissent in Iran. Human Rights Watch, Volume 16, Issue 2. 2004.

<sup>2</sup> American Friends Service Committee, "Solitary Confinement Facts" <https://afsc.org/resource/solitary-confinement-facts>

<sup>3</sup> American Friends Service Committee, "Solitary Confinement Facts" see above

<sup>4</sup> "Confidentially, Privilege: A Basic Value in Two Different Applications," Sue Sue Michmerhuizen, ETHICSearch Research Counsel for the American Bar Association's Center for Professional Responsibility

[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/professional\\_responsibility/confidentiality\\_or\\_attorney\\_authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/professional_responsibility/confidentiality_or_attorney_authcheckdam.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Invisible in Isolation: The Use of Segregation and Solitary Confinement in Immigration Detention," National Immigrant Justice, Center, September 2012  
[http://www.immigrantjustice.org/sites/immigrantjustice.org/files/Invisible%20in%20Isolation-The%20Use%20of%20Segregation%20and%20Solitary%20Confinement%20in%20Immigration%20Detention.September%202012\\_7.pdf](http://www.immigrantjustice.org/sites/immigrantjustice.org/files/Invisible%20in%20Isolation-The%20Use%20of%20Segregation%20and%20Solitary%20Confinement%20in%20Immigration%20Detention.September%202012_7.pdf)