DISRUPTIVE MINDS

TROUBLED WATERS In 2021, <u>Sean Vegezzi</u> uncovered the violence inside New York's floating jail in a film exhibition at n.b.k. Now he's back in Berlin to talk about the ethics of AI in the same prison system. By Wanda Sachs

You've been invited to Disruption Network Lab's conference to present your latest findings on New York City's controversial 'prison ship', which you exposed in your investigative piece, *Edgelands* (2021). Tell us more about that. The Vernon C. Bain Correctional Center (VCBC) in the Bronx is the world's only purpose-built floating detention facility. What's unique about this is that while there is a historical precedent of maritime spaces being used as detention sites, none were ever built with that explicit purpose. VCBC was supposed to be temporary – over 30 years later, it's still in operation. Since 2021, I've found out much more about how and why this structure was built, which I'll present at the conference.

What exactly makes VCBC so controversial? There's the obvious connotation with slave ships; most detainees are Black and Brown. Being detained in a ship in this day and age feels antiquated in the most sadistic way possible. Salt and sewage water often leak into the facility and flood the cells. I think that, plus the movements caused by the strong currents

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and traffic on the East River, creates a uniquely traumatic experience for detainees. Lastly, the facility is essentially invisible. VCBC is part of, but physically disconnected from, Rikers Island, and therefore less scrutinised. It's so geographically isolated that even residents of the Bronx struggle getting there. That's something that the community organisation I work with, Take Back The Bronx, is always citing, saying it's hard for them to get there, let alone if you're anywhere else. So for guards who abuse detainees – something that happens on a day-to-day basis – I think they can feel emboldened knowing there's no real accountability for their actions. You feel like you're operating in a space that's completely invisible to the public.

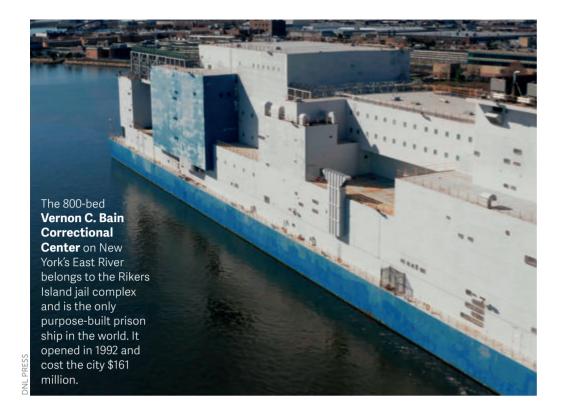**How did you learn about this facility if it is "invisible", as you say?** About 20 years ago, my brother was incarcerated on Rikers Island and almost got transferred to VCBC. The way he described it back then was very strange. He said: "I might get transferred to a ship and apparently, it's dark, and the electricity barely works, and it rocks." It was only years later, in 2015, that I came across it while kayaking the waterways of NYC, which I did to document spaces that are withheld from public view, and realised this was the thing my brother had told me about. That's when I became very interested in researching it. But I didn't really do anything about it until the pandemic.

Why wait five years? The pandemic just made the situation so much worse. Prison is bad enough without

being contained in a facility that's not fit for ventilation during a pandemic. At that time, Laura Poitras was curating this exhibition at n.b.k. in Berlin and thinking about possible projects. I said, "Laura, I don't know how I haven't done anything about this before, but there is this facility." Suddenly, a pandemic was bringing up all of this history, and then you have this facility there waiting to have all of its connection to history unpacked.

Laura Poitras is an acclaimed investigative filmmaker, through whom Edward Snowden leaked the NSA spying scandal to the world. What was it like working with her? One of *the* most moving and interesting collaborations I've ever done. I've always been so impressed by Laura taking all these risks in order to put forward information. Working with her, I was trying to listen as much as possible. Even when the project's meant to be journalism or gathering of evidence, there's still always this appreciation for cinema. I remember so many high-risk scenarios where I contemplated calling things off out of fear. Laura keeps the energy very calm and knows exactly when to stop before it's too late. I also learned so much about source protection and more advanced use of encryption tools. It was a great experience.

Did that inspire you to continue your research? For sure! The way she thinks about long-term and larger-scale impact really inspired me. Laura understands that in a long-term project, you might come across material that should be released immediately. That's what we did with VCBC before we created the art film. She said, "We can't just put it in a gallery, this needs to be breaking news." So we released it on Twitter, through Ava DuVernay, who is a great filmmaker and friend of Laura's, and it received over a million views with people like Edward Snowden retweeting it. Watching that fierce independence like, we're not going to use the mainstream news, we can use an individual and it has just as much, if not more, impact, I don't think I ever thought like that.

The 800-bed **Vernon C. Bain Correctional Center** on New York's East River belongs to the Rikers Island jail complex and is the only purpose-built prison ship in the world. It opened in 1992 and cost the city $161 million.

DNL PRESS

AI talks

CCTV, drones, motion sensors, delivery robots, personalised ads, algorithms – Big Brother has long since entered our lives. But what happens when you're at the mercy of it? When spaces where your freedom is restricted and your actions already heavily scrutinised rise to new surveillance heights? Aiming to address this ethical tightrope walk, Disruption Network Lab's three-day conference *Smart Prisons: Tracking, Monitoring & Control* investigates the use of Artificial Intelligence and tracking and monitoring technologies in prisons and detention centres. With an approach based on media anthropology, the conference traces back how mass surveillance came about and what a future of criminal justice shaped by AI could look like – an Orwellian sequel, so to say. *Smart Prisons* is linked to Disruption Lab's previous work on whistleblowing using the concept of 'art as evidence', and now US artist Sean Vegezzi follows up on the latest findings of his investigation on the Vernon C. Bain Center as an example of how smart technology can aggravate the coercion and repression within carceral spaces. – *ws*

Smart Prisons: Tracking, Monitoring and Control

DATE conference Mar 24-25, 16:30, workshops Mar 26, 12:00 and 15:00

LOCATION Kunstquartier Bethanien and online, streaming link available at disruptionlab.org/smart-prisons

Disruption Lab's conference tackles the use of Artificial Intelligence in prisons. How does VCBC fit into this?
I'm not sure if this is the case yet, but there might be AI-based CCTV systems being used in the facility. In *Edgelands*, we used radio intercepts from VCBC to give form to its interior, since there's a surprisingly low number of images in the public record. At one point, you could hear guards referring to a security system as a "Genetec", which is an imaging company that seems to use an algorithm-based security system. Looking at the language used on the Genetec website and hearing the guards referring to it by the name makes me think it's rather advanced.

To what extent would the use of AI be a problem? If you stand up for yourself in the NYC prison system and are resistant, you very quickly make enemies with prison staff. These detainees exist in a space where their every move is already surveilled and monitored. Now enter AI into the equation, which is able to send custom alerts for specific individuals, making it much easier to haunt and bully particular inmates.

How are you going to find out?
I can't share that at the moment, but

Sean Vegezzi is a lifelong New Yorker, artist and researcher. In 2021, he released the art film series *Edgelands* in collaboration with Laura Poitras, which documented carceral facilities in NYC using intercepted radio calls and drone imaging. When he's not investigating things withheld from the public eye, Vegezzi works as cinematographer – with Gucci among his clients – and is currently studying at The New School.

I will hopefully gain more information, which I'll present at the conference. This is also part of my broader, long-term goal to create an archive of the facility. So far, VCBC hardly exists in the public record in terms of an archive that people could go see. I'm currently collecting much more material, like who allowed this ship to be created, who actually physically constructed it, funded it, where the historical precedent and inspiration came from – and finding out whether or not AI is being used.

Your project is heavily intertwined with New York. Why come all the way to Berlin? If there were spaces in New York similar to n.b.k., I might've had the opportunity to show my work there. I felt conflicted about Berlin at first, but now I'm seeing it for what it is: a place that is reckoning with a horrible history and hosts a lot of people who want to think critically about human rights violations. The fact that it's so international and there's a big whistle-blowing scene makes it feel more acceptable to me. Also, I'm glad Disruption Lab makes all its conferences available; there's no paywall to view the conference recording. So that's something I can share with everyone in NYC. ■