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Extending Dialogue Beyond the Prison: The San Vittore Situated Vocabulary

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Abstract

The Situated Action is part of San Vittore Situated Vocabulary, an ongoing participatory research project developed inside Milan's San Vittore Prison. During the PDC2026 Conference, the action is hosted at Open Casello (Milan), in close proximity to the prison, and it stages an "impossible dialogue": an indirect yet reciprocal exchange between the prison and the city, through a spatial and writing-based installation. The meanings of four key words emerged from co-design sessions with inmates, prison staff, and volunteers – Life/Death, Justice/Injustice, Responsibility, Fun/Boredom – are presented as fragmented textual constellations holding tension, silences, and contradictions embedded in everyday carceral life. Participants are called to move through reading and informal conversation and are finally invited to live a personal response. Rather than seeking consensus, the action invites contributors to position themselves within unresolved tensions. The collected reflections will later be reintroduced inside the prison, extending the dialogue and positioning participatory design as a situated and agonistic practice that holds plurality and disagreement as conditions for coexistence.

CCS Concepts

• Participatory Design;

Keywords

Agonistic Practice, Situated Knowledge, Prison

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1 BACKGROUND, CONTEXT, AND METHODOLOGY: SAN VITTORE SITUATED VOCABULARY

San Vittore Situated Vocabulary (hereafter SVSV) is an ongoing participatory research project launched in 2023 within San Vittore prison in Milan (Italy) [1], as part of the Off Campus San Vittore¹ initiative of Politecnico di Milano. The project extends a previous Situated Vocabulary experience developed in Milan's Nolo district within the Off Campus Nolo initiative [2, 3], widening the project's methods and objectives in response to the radically different conditions of the prison context.

SVSV explores the transformative potential of words as agonistic spaces [4] for collective reflection and negotiation, where complex issues within the community can be articulated, contested and re-imagined.

Within San Vittore prison, the Imagis Lab research group (Design Department, Politecnico di Milano) in collaboration with Virginia Tassinari (former member of POLIMI DESIS Lab, now at TU Delft's Department of Human-Centred Design), experimented with the collaborative making of a Situated Vocabulary in this contested and highly institutionalised context. Although San Vittore prison is located in the very centre of Milan, it remains physically and socially detached from its surrounding neighbourhood. The carceral system operates through layers of power and institutionalised silences, where dialogue is structurally constrained. This results in interactions that are often fragmented and structured around three main pillars—security, education, and health—each driven by



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¹Off Campus is an initiative promoted by Politecnico di Milano with the aim of strengthening the presence of university in the city of Milan to advance the idea of a more socially responsible university, attentive to societal challenges, open, and closely connected to local territories and communities. Launched in 2018, the initiative opened its first Off Campus space in the San Siro neighbourhood (April 2019), followed by three additional hubs: Nolo (September 2020), the San Vittore prison (October 2022), and Cascina Nosedo (December 2022).

distinct institutional logics and objectives that can be misaligned or even conflicting. This situation particularly affects the relationships between prison staff and detainees, resulting in limited verbal communication, often reduced to functional exchanges or deliberately avoided for safety reasons. This lack of exchanges framed our project as an “impossible dialogue”: a form of discourse that, because it cannot be fully realised within the system, becomes both urgent and revealing. The impossibility of the dialogical interaction is not in the absence of voices but in the asymmetrical conditions under which voices can be expressed, heard or silenced, always shaped by roles and power relations embedded in everyday prison life [5]. Dialogue is not approached here as a reconciliatory practice aimed at consensus, but as an ongoing negotiation across differences that may remain unsolved: the project acknowledges that some forms of dialogue will always be partial, mediated and asymmetrical, and precisely for that, politically revealing.

Methodologically, SVSV is grounded in co-design and participatory action research. Building on this approach, the project experiments with forms of co-creation that acknowledge opacity and conflicts not as obstacles to participation but as its very conditions. Researchers engaged inmates, prison officers, operators, and volunteers in an ongoing process of co-creating shared and situated meanings [6]. Rather than focusing solely on individual keywords and producing a fixed lexicon, we worked on oppositional pairs of words, exploring the liminal space, the margins [7], where semiotic meanings blur.

In a carceral setting, meanings are rarely univocal: concepts such as oppressor/oppressed [8] and right/wrong intersect in ambiguous and often contradictory ways. Oppositional pairs were not predefined but emerged through facilitated discussions, where tensions were negotiated rather than resolved. Each word in the SVSV refers to its opposite and to the nuances of meaning in the queering space in-between them. Working with oppositional pairs allowed participants to articulate tensions: meanings are allowed to coexist even when they remain incompatible, without being forced in coherent narratives.

The keywords were first selected by Young Adult detainees among the ones emerged from the exploration of San Vittore microcosm, then shared with the other prison actors, enabling comparison across roles. The four keywords—each understood through an oppositional tension—around which the SVSV revolve are *Responsibility* (and its contested boundaries), *Fun / Boredom*, *Life / Death*, *Justice / Injustice*.

Between November 2023 and December 2024, the researchers facilitated a series of co-design sessions involving 66 participants across different groups: 26 detained people, 14 correctional officers, 18 operators (including educators and healthcare staff), and 7 volunteers. Each one-hour session invited small groups to discuss personal interpretations and emotions associated with the words, with the aim of collecting and comparing meanings across diverse perspectives and collaboratively constructing a vocabulary that could hold these differences together. This process generated a collective and situated understanding that revealed the matrices of power [9, 10], and subtle tensions and negotiations of daily life in prison. The process was also conceived as a way to allow these meanings to move beyond the prison walls, fostering mutual



Figure 1: San Vittore Situated Vocabulary at For Love of The World. Philosophy, technology and art festival, March 29, 2025, Theatre de Veste, Delft. Credits: De Schaapjesfabriek.

understanding between the inside and the outside. It engages multiple publics — including the neighbourhood community around San Vittore, as well as experts from different fields such as artists, philosophers, and scientists — in order to gather diverse perspectives and reintroduce them into the prison context. In doing so, it seeks to create a space of exchange between realities that rarely have the opportunity to encounter one another.

2 THE SITUATED ACTION – PERFORMING AN “IMPOSSIBLE DIALOGUE”

The project unfolds as a series of situated actions across places and times. Following an initial presentation at *For Love of the World: Philosophy, Technology and Art Festival* (TU Delft, 2024) (Figure 1) [11], the SVSV will now be enacted again in Milan as part of the 2026 Participatory Design Conference, hosted by Open Casello², opening the project to the local community of San Vittore surroundings and an international design audience. This second iteration aims to re-situate the work in a new institutional and cultural setting, inviting participants to engage in a collective reflection on positionality, representation, and the ethics of co-presence in design.

It combines a spatial reading experience and a lightweight participatory writing practice that invites local publics and PDC participants to contribute their own meanings to the ones that emerged from the exploration of the San Vittore microcosm.

2.1 Enacting the Situated Action

Rather than proposing a direct encounter with incarcerated people, often impossible due to ethical and institutional constraints, the Situated Action stages an indirect conversation articulated in two complementary and temporally distinct moments: a pre-conference

²Open Casello is an urban experimentation hub housed in a refurbished former toll-house in Piazzale Cantore, Milan, dedicated to youth-led creativity, participation, and social innovation. It functions as a public space where young people can propose projects, organize events, and access guidance services, while institutions and cultural operators use it as a platform to connect policies, talents, and community initiatives.

engagement with local publics in Milan, followed by a second moment that takes place during the 2026 Participatory Design Conference. The first is dedicated to local citizens –neighborhood residents who rarely interact with the prison as well as the community of Open Casello –Young-adults creative and innovators– and invites them to engage with the Situated Vocabulary to offer their own perspectives, generating an initial collection of insights from those who inhabit the same urban area as San Vittore prison, for whom the presence of the carceral institution often remains opaque, normalised, or socially unacknowledged. This first corpus of situated meanings serves as the point of departure for the second moment, which addresses the international community of design scholars and practitioners of the PDC Conference.

In both moments, the SA serves as a tense space where words condense actual experiences, institutional limitations, and asymmetrical positions rather than as a neutral collection of meanings. *Responsibility*, for example, condenses opposing viewpoints—care and safety responsibilities for prison officers, accountability and familial pressure for detained individuals—and, when re-situated in the situated action, prompts participants to consider how responsibility is divided between individuals and institutions. *Fun/Boredom* invites to consider the moral frameworks through which incarceration is conceptualized by exposing the unequal regulation of time, pleasure, and legitimacy in prison life. In the *Life/Death* debate, vulnerability, hope, and despair emerged, posing questions for external audiences regarding whose lives are made livable and the shared responsibility for maintaining hope after incarceration. Lastly, *Justice/Injustice* invites participants to consider how injustice is created, normalised, and experienced differently by revealing systemic tensions shared across roles: overcrowding, delays, and structural inequalities affecting detained people—especially the most vulnerable—as well as the working conditions faced by officers. The spatial installation will consist of four large printed panels, each dedicated to one keyword, that from afar appear unified. As visitors approach, it becomes clear that the words are composed of other words: meanings, sentences, fragments of conversations held within San Vittore prison, brought into dialogue with one another. Aside from printed postcards with the same words and a box to collect the participants' meanings and reflections.

The Situated Action unfolds through this sequence: (1) visitors will be invited to read through meanings at their own pace, allowing for spontaneous exchanges; (2) researchers acting as mediators, facilitate informal discussion situating these insights within the lived experience of the prison and narrating the research process while maintaining an intimate and reflective tone; (3) participants will be invited to engage with the installation by interacting with its meanings annotating their own perspectives on the postcards, which will be placed in the collection box.

At the end of the situated action, the collected postcards constituting a tangible corpus of traces – written reflections, annotations, and positional statements – will be archived, analysed, and reintroduced inside the prison to be discussed with detainees and other actors, thus extending the dialogue across prison and society.

2.2 Situating the Project within PDC 2026

The San Vittore Situated Vocabulary directly engages with the PDC 2026 themes of Peace, Dialogue, and Coexistence, exploring how design can act as a mediator of coexistence in spaces of exclusion.

The project proposes a participatory practice grounded in dialogue and confrontation. Dialogue in SVSV is understood as an ongoing negotiation across asymmetries, valuing tensions, silences and disagreement as part of the collective reflection.

Within this perspective, peace emerges not from the absence of conflict – in the carceral setting cannot be reduced to calm or order – but as the capacity to face disagreement and discomfort collectively. Coexistence is approached as a constantly renegotiated condition rather than a stable outcome, and it emerges through ongoing practices of listening, disagreement, and care. Through this lens, the project explores participatory design as a situated and agonistic practice [4] that does not eliminate difference but holds it through dialogue, a form of collective inquiry capable of holding spaces for plurality and vulnerability, within the everyday dynamics of coexistence.

The situated action enacts this agonistic dialogue by placing fragments of prison-based testimonies, such as conflicting interpretations of *Responsibility* from officers and detained people, into a shared public space, where external participants are invited to respond. The juxtaposition of internal and external positions, and their later reintroduction inside the prison, materialises dialogue as a chain of mediated and potentially dissonant exchanges. In this way, agonism is not only theorised but staged through the installation's structure and participatory sequence.

AUTHORS' SHORT BIOS

Virginia Tassinari

Assistant Professor at TU Delft (NL) in the Human-Centered Design Department, she explores the role of philosophy in shaping design discourse, with a focus on topics like the (cosmo)politics of design. She is also a design researcher at Pantopicon (BE), where she explores the making of beyond-the-modern futures. Recently, she co-edited *Designing in Dark Times: An Arendtian Lexicon* (2020) and co-authored of *(Designing) Beyond the Modern: Moments, Dialectics, Potentialities* (forthcoming 2026) with Eduardo Staszowski, and co-edited *Re-Framing the Politics of Design* (2021) with Liesbeth Huybrechts and Oswald Devisch and *Situated Vocabularies. A Situated and Agonistic Conversational Platform* (2026, forthcoming) with Francesca Piredda and Francesco Vergani.

Maria Maramotti

PhD candidate in Design at the Politecnico di Milano. Her research investigates how participatory design practices interact with power dynamics in marginal contexts, with a specific focus on prison as a paradigmatic case of a forced institutional environment. Building on critical and feminist design theories, she explores how design reconfigures collective practices as situated, relational, and political practices. She is part of the POLIMI DESIS Lab and collaborates with the interdepartmental research group Laboratorio Carcere. She is involved in the participatory design research project *Situated Vocabularies* and participatory initiatives within Off Campus San Vittore in Milan.

Chiara Ligi

Research Fellow at Politecnico di Milano's Imagis Lab and Laboratorio Carcere, she specializes in narrative-driven co-design within marginalized contexts. At the San Vittore prison "Off Campus" site, she leads Storylab, a participatory storytelling workshop, and contributes to action-research projects like ReverseLab and Methexis. As a media artist and creative producer, she explores collaborative audiovisual languages through the collective Tokonoma, earning recognition in the ADI Design Index 2023 and a 2021 FNR Award. Her work extends to live cinema performances at venues like the Last Supper Museum and lecturing on multimedia design at the Civica Scuola di Cinema "Luchino Visconti."

Mariana Ciancia

PhD, Associate Professor at the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano. She is a member of Imagis Lab research group and the Interaction and Experience Design (IEX) research group. Since the beginning, she has been part of 'Laboratorio Carcere' (DASU and Design), conducting action research at Off Campus San Vittore. She is Director of the Specializing Master in Brand Communication (POLI.design in collaboration with UNA). Her research and teaching activities, both nationally and internationally, focus primarily on Communication Design, with a particular emphasis on design processes, tools, and the creation of narrative-based artefacts—digital, physical and hybrid—within a media ecosystem shaped by digital transformation.

Aurora Chiaravalloti

Service designer graduated with a MSc in Product Service System Design at Politecnico di Milano. Her focus is on participatory, democratic and non-dominant practices related to socially engaged

design and research, especially in marginalized settings. Since October 2024, she has been collaborating with Off Campus San Vittore, contributing in particular to Storylab, a weekly participatory storytelling workshop with inmates, and to the ART-Link project. With her research thesis, based on her experience in prison and Storylab, she has researched on designing "otherwise", taking a critical position on dominant design and seeking alternative paradigms for more plural, just and reflexive practices.

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