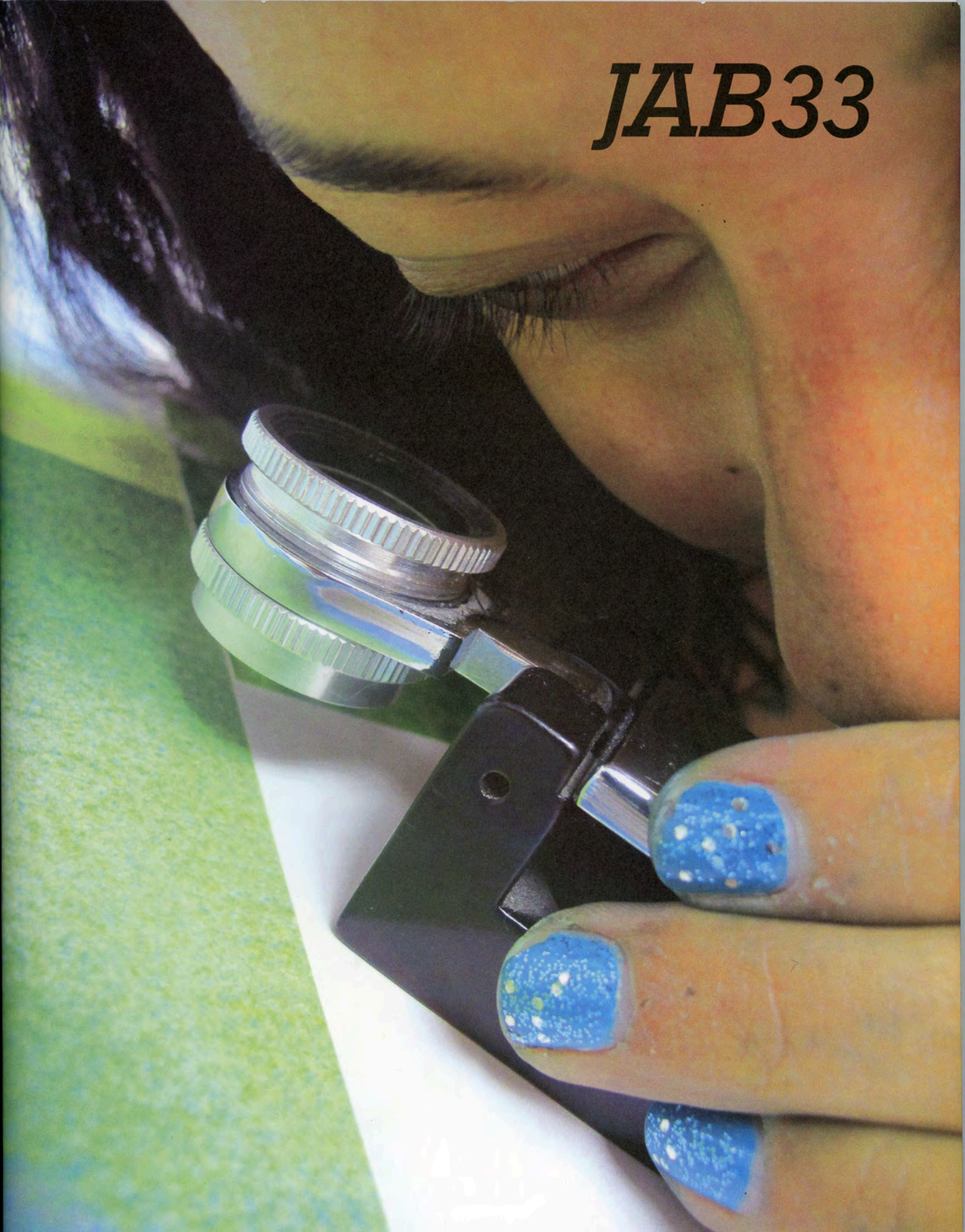


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CENTER FOR BOOK AND PAPER ARTS
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ARTISTS' BOOKS IN AN ARGENTINE PRISON: THE POSSIBILITY OF EXISTING IN A DIFFERENT WAY

Natalia Silberleib

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

This story begins when I became interested in Argentine prison libraries and how prisoners had access to reading. In 2009 after research and meetings with specialists in the matter the opportunity arose to create a project in a prison. I had taught classes in publishing at the university level and I was developing a slow but steady research project on artists' books. I was also working as the editor at a foundation dedicated to promoting Argentine art. And so I had some professional experience in the field, but not in prisons. One day I received an email from the National Directorate of Social Readaptation requesting donations of books for the libraries of the various federal prisons around the country. I answered that I was very interested in helping but that I thought I'd like to hand over the books in person at some of the prisons. I was invited to a meeting where I informed them of my interests, and we began to put together what finally became the Artist's Book Project in La Estampa screen printing workshop at N° 3 Women's Prison at Ezeiza. At first the workshop involved recreating an old idea I had once had on training in publishing and the possibility of working with the reinsertion of prisoners back into society. But the fact that the project moved into the field of the artist's book was a challenge that developed into a great experience.

LA ESTAMPA WORKSHOP

N°3 PRISON IN THE EZEIZA PENITENTIARY COMPLEX

"The workshop was created jointly between the Under-Secretariat of Cultural Heritage of the Culture Secretariat of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires and the Under-Secretariat of Penitentiary Affairs of the National Ministry of Justice and Human Rights in the year 2000. Fernando "Coco" Bedoya and Mercedes Idoyaga "Emei" were the first teachers and artistic directors of the workshop. Their intention was to create a serigraphy workshop, in the knowledge that the methodology of productive work habits would later emerge from their experience in the activity.

There was a double purpose to the workshop—to help women learn an industrial technique, such as screen printing, with the aim of acquiring a trade, and to set up an "awareness-raising workshop" in which the management of the technique responded to an artistic and a personal quest.

La Estampa works with the specific tools and materials required for serigraphic printing as well as unusual materials such as parchment paper, toilet paper, vinyl glue, newspapers, and magazines. This means that projects can take a unique aesthetic shape, bringing out a sense of isolation and marginalization often felt by the prisoners through the use of discarded materials. The aim of the workshop is to go beyond the prison situation to encourage inmates to become participants in the art system. The works produced during the year are displayed at art fairs and exhibition spaces, and on such occasions some of the prisoners may obtain permission from a judge to accompany the works."

ARTISTS' BOOKS AT LA ESTAMPA

In January 2010, in a rather complicated context and under the direction of art therapist Mónica Bottini, I arrived at the workshop. We had had a good number of meetings which meant that I had been able to prepare myself for the encounter. Mónica turned out to be a person of great generosity with a very delicate sensitivity who extended a warm welcome together with the women prisoners taking part in the workshop.

I had never been inside a prison so the experience made a considerable impact on me upon arrival that day. The prison is located almost in the open country on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, so although it is surrounded by barbed-wire fences and watchtowers, it has a friendlier, more relaxed atmosphere. The workshop was in the area of the detention blocks, and this

meant that whenever I went in I received an impression of the real lives of these women inmates. On my visits I was able to observe and feel the rhythm of life in the prison.

That day, after the first shock and a certain inevitable curiosity, I arrived at the workshop. I found a large but very pleasant environment with high barred windows, but through which sunlight could enter. The first room contained a small table with several engravings on it and a well stocked bookcase. After that came a larger room with a big work table, large sinks, a half-finished sculpture and curtains, as yet unfinished, hanging from the wall. There were around ten young women waiting for me. They gave me a warm welcome and invited me to sit down. After a brief presentation by Mónica, I started to speak somewhat nervously. I told them who I was, where I came from and asked them to introduce themselves. One rule to respect in a prison is never to ask anything personal or the reason why the inmates are there (time and growing trust meant that they themselves would tell me in due course).

To make the situation easier, I had brought along the books I wanted to donate to the prison, which included two boxes of beautifully printed books by Argentine authors. The women were delighted. As had been explained to me, these women found my proposal to be very interesting, but they also thought the visit itself was important, as it indicated that their wishes had been taken into consideration.

From that moment on, what were first surprises soon became teachings, learning, pain, growth, and a profound commitment to the workshop and its members.

THE ARTISTS' BOOKS WORKSHOP

The idea of the workshop was, first of all, to provide the women with some theoretical basis on the topic of publishing. To do this, I gave a brief explanation of the publishing process, showing them elements such as proofs, printed sheets, etc. I also took along some authors' biographies that we had at the university press, which I photocopied in individual sets so that each inmate could read it in her cell if she was interested. I spent two or three hours there once a week for a year even though conditions at the prison sometimes made the class impossible—searches, punishments, illness.

Every week we repeated the process—I would bring books on art and artists' books for the women to look at which we would discuss, and also notes so that the women could read or study in their cells. As would be expected the educational and socio-cultural level of the women varied. Several of them were foreign and had been arrested for smuggling drugs into the country; others had been arrested for reasons of gender violence; and some for armed robbery. Most of them had completed their basic schooling and some had begun their university studies. One highly intelligent woman, in particular, had taught herself English and German. What they all had in common was curiosity and a great desire to receive news of the outside world, in any format. So it was important to take books, magazines, and newspapers. We organized work tables with various materials and with many different books that we looked at together, and then discussed.

A turning point came one day when the women told me that they didn't really understand what I was saying to them. They claimed they found it difficult to understand the ideas because they had been deprived of "half their brain" and that my language was too complicated. I offered to stop offering the workshop but they told me in no uncertain terms that they wanted to continue, but they did ask me to lower the level somewhat. I explained that we would all have to make a special effort and I promised to simplify my language but asked them to try harder too, and to put it out of their minds that prison was turning them into idiots. That was one of the most difficult

most difficult situations I had to deal with in the workshop, but the positive side to it was that it allowed us to establish a degree of mutual trust and this, I believe, was truly the start of our most profound and intense production work.

THE BOOKS AND THE WOMEN

Although the work we did every week was intense, the results took a while to appear. Finally, halfway through the year, their books began to take shape. The women and I worked together: they would tell me their ideas and we would speak about how to carry them out despite the lack of materials. They would then work while I was gone during the week with Mónica. In some cases, the books only remained as works-in-progress and in others, the women made one or more books. In the annual exhibition of the workshop, several of the books were put on display and were received very positively.

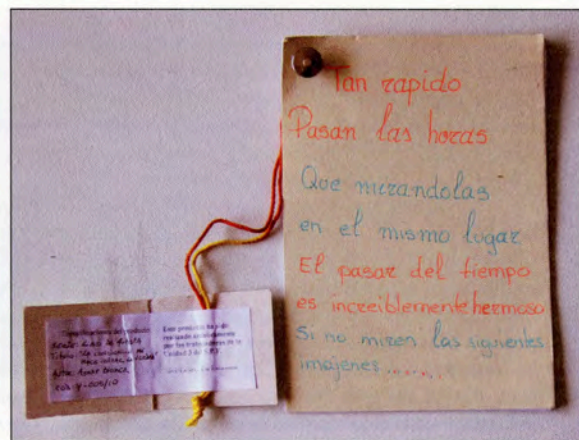
MIREN

Of Basque origin, Miren had been sent to prison for drug trafficking. When I met her she still had another two years of her sentence to serve before being freed and returning to her town in Spain. She had two children and a family who still loved her and were looking forward to her release. At times she was very tough but actually she concealed a sensitive, sad nature and could fall in love very easily. At times her bad moods were frightening, but when we managed to connect she produced a constant flow of work.

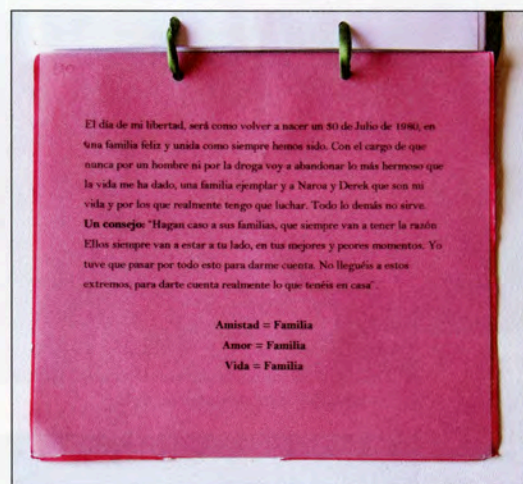
There were two things Miren couldn't live without in prison—dye for her hair and paper to write on. She loved to write, and did so on any blank piece of paper she could find. Even during our first meetings, she would write and write, although she seemed to be listening. Finally I asked her what she was writing and she said things to do with life, and to my great surprise and joy she allowed me to read some of the writing. It was amazing. She was writing her autobiography but with a considerable dose of humor, tenderness, and talent. I suggested that that should be the basis for her production—a book using her own story. Meanwhile, Mónica, the director of the workshop, was enthusiastic about the idea and actually took it one step further. As she taught adolescent populations at risk at deprived schools, we agreed that she would take Miren's texts along to the school for the pupils to illustrate. The results were astonishing—without initially planning to, we had succeeded in bringing two marginal populations into contact, and both groups went on to support, help, and encourage each other.

Miren carried on writing but often missed the workshop due to her depression. Nevertheless, at the time of the annual exhibition, she made a little more progress and we helped her give the book which included the illustrations its final shape. This was her first book. Then she did another completely playful book about the passage of time. As can be seen in the illustrations, this project had acquired the concept of the artist's book.

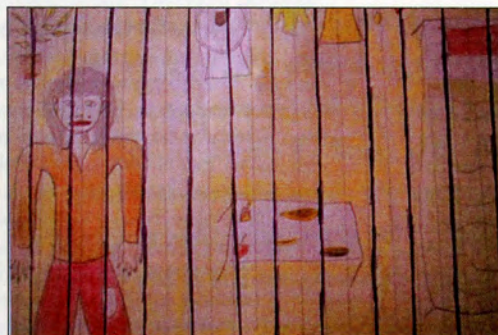
She continued to write her biography and was later contacted by a publishing company that had shown great interest in her material they had seen at the exhibition. Today Miren is free, and lives and works in her home town.



Miren, Hours pass so fast. Looking at them in the same place over time is amazing. Look at these "imagenes."



Miren, Last text of the book that talks about the day she will obtain her freedom and the importance of her family and her son and daughter. She wants other women to not reach these extremes to realize what they have at home.



Drawings completed by young students at school, based on Miren's texts.



Miren: Why live unhappy when I could be very happy. For teenagers with the same problems, avoid making the same mistakes I did

LA GALLEGA

La Galle was special. She was serving a long sentence and had been in prison for years already. She was particularly cultured and well-educated and her days in prison were spent in social, educational and human rights advocacy (her father had been kidnapped during the military dictatorship and is still disappeared). She was one of the fundamental promoters of the Prison University, and she also worked in the library.

During the time of the workshop, besides the art therapist, she was my best ally and also a source of information and learning.

La Galle was very enthusiastic about the project and helped us sustain it from the beginning. She did so by working. She kept producing books from the time we met and always encouraged the other women. She quickly grasped the concept and my intentions and was able to combine artistry, clear communication, and a militant advocacy in her books. She made playful book objects, and even experimented with *trencadis* [a type of mosaic used in Catalan modernism created from broken tile shards]. The texts in her books have an explicit meaning and speak of freedom, and yet she was also able to playfully approach her subjects. It was her idea to identify each book with "product specifications" and she virtually constructed a "brand" for the books. Today La Galle is free and works in a publishing house.



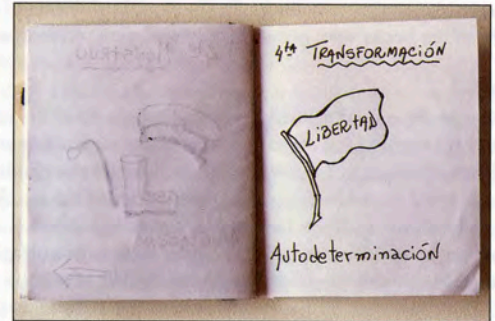
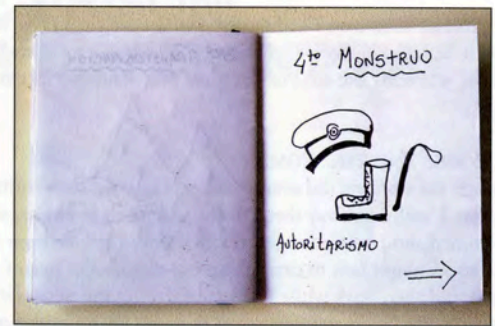
La Gallega, *Eye*, book made in trencadis



La Gallega, *Eye*, "Glances, expresives eyes, feelings. We see all. Sometime we observe, other we look. Lets see."



La Gallega, *Eye*, "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth"



La Gallega, *Monsters*
top, "Fourth monster: authoritarianism"
bottom "Fourth transformation: Freedom and self determination"

JESSICA

Jessica was curious about the world and had good ideas. From the start she wanted to have a project but it took her all year to carry it out. She collected magazines because she wanted to work on some form of collage. One day she surprised me with her beautiful book. Not only had she worked on the idea of the collage but the subject was based on cutting out eyes, noses and mouths to create different faces. When she showed it to me we were both very moved, but the best thing was the smile with which she greeted my words when I remarked that she had understood the work better than anyone else, despite her evident lack of self-confidence.

Further marvellous books appeared too, but they had undergone a different process since they were made by women who passed only briefly through the workshop. The interesting thing is that all the prisoners wished to take part in the bookmaking experience. In one case, a couple of friends lacked a definite idea but eventually decided to work with the engravings that they had made in the workshop, and with excellent results. There was a two-way flow here referring back to the origin of the workshop. They also intervened in an edition of *Sleeping Beauty*, juxtaposing her dream with the internal rules of the prison, and thus revealing their own dreams.

VISITS

One day Matilde Marín, an important Argentine artist and author of beautiful artist's books, came to visit. She spent more than three hours with us and was very generous in her knowledge and in the donation of materials. She arrived with great excitement and left clearly affected by the visit. This is how she relates her experience:

"I was invited to give a talk at an art workshop that had been formed some years ago in the prison of Ezeiza, near Buenos Aires. As I'm an artist and certain situations that occur in relation to art make me restless, I saw the chance to meet women who, for different reasons, had been drawn into a complex life which had tragically led to their finding themselves in prison. I was concerned to know how such conditions had occurred and, at the same time, how art can help sustain moments and perhaps change ways of life.

"On arriving I was surprised by the quality of the art workshop and to see all those women, some of them very young, who were serving sentences of several years. From the way in which they welcomed me, I perceived that my visit was much more than simply contact with the outside world, because their artistic production was not a hobby (rather superficial in such



Jessica, *With or Without Sense*



Jessica, *Sleeping Beauty (and our dreams)*
 "We are inseparable soul mates.
 We would like our dreams to come true as in fairy tales.
 As for me, I will leave in two months to the real world.
 But, I know that my soul will stay in this place
 until my partner is with her family.
 Ours was the kitchen. We will reveal some recipes."



Jessica, *Don't give up*

conditions) but the possibility of existing in a different way. The women taking part in the workshop welcomed me with a little exhibition of their creations. They listened closely to my explanation and looked at the examples by well-known artists on the international art circuit that I had taken them. "Then they showed me their small artists' books, printed with minimal resources under the supervision of Natalia. Those books are very intense because their authors are women who have tough lives, the victims of a great deal of abuse, and art is perhaps the catalyst they need in order to have a future. It was an experience I still recall as an important action in my life as an artist."

CONCLUSIONS

What at first were going to be a series of talks soon became a workshop that lasted a year and which could have continued if the institution had offered its support. The road was tough and intense but led us far away from the starting point. The mere fact of having an art workshop in the prison is important because it allows work on social reinsertion, but from a different angle. In fact, the prisoners who took part are those least likely to reoffend. Having introduced the subject of books, both in their normal format and as a work of art, meant that certain prejudices or barriers between high and low culture could be broken. In fact, the workshop aimed to bring the inmates into contact with books, reading, and the publishing business by working with the book object itself.

What happened next was that the women made the idea and the product their own. It was neither simple nor immediate. Working on trust and mutual understanding, the interest in something new, and the search for a new horizon were fundamental. As often occurs, it is the teacher, often more than the pupil, who learns basic facts of life from their experience together.

The women were able to give a new use to the written word and write differently. They often needed to express themselves on the subject of the

lack of freedom and the denial of their most basic rights, but they were also able to have fun, play, and to exploit the proposal and the format. They understood with the head, with the hands and with the heart what a book is and what it is for. They used books not only as a vehicle of expression but also as a vehicle of communication to transmit their experiences to other women to help them avoid suffering the same fate.

In short, despite being incarcerated these women used the artist's book as a form of expression and as a vehicle of freedom. They could see from the inside what it means to make a book—how they could transmit a message through the book form. They demolished notions created by both themselves and the system with regard to their own abilities. They will never again be passive readers.

Natalia Silberleib lives and works in Buenos Aires. She has been working in publishing since 1996 in various roles. She teaches Edition Publishing and develops workshops on editing. She is currently Academic Coordinator of Publishing Curatorship at the Master in Curatorship and Visual Arts at the University of Tres de Febrero (UNTREF) and she is in charge of the Publishing Coordination of the MUNTREF (UNTREF Museum).
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