

Casanza

A conversation with Marina Ballo Charmet and Walter Niedermayr

Stefano Chiodi

Stefano Chiodi: *Casanza is the second project you've done together. Fifteen years after Agente apri, you've come back to working in a prison – then it was San Vittore in Milan, and this time the women's prison in Venice. How did you get the idea of working in such an unusual place, and how did you develop a rapport with the women incarcerated there?*

Marina Ballo Charmet: Together we came up with the idea of a project in the Venice prison, a very peculiar place located in what was a sixteenth-century convent on Giudecca. Inside the walls there's a very large vegetable garden, over six-thousand square meters, cultivated by the women incarcerated there. Our intention was to do a project in the prison, for and with incarcerated women, in relation to this garden. So we decided to do a workshop with them, during which we talked about our respective life paths and how art can deal with any subject, including the everyday, the "always-seen." We showed them various photographic works, historical and contemporary: banal, everyday subjects, like Eugène Atget's leaves, and certain photographs by the Dadaist Raoul Hausmann. We showed them artists' videos, like the one of Andy Warhol eating a hamburger, and the Fischli & Weiss one in which a cat licks a dish of milk. The intention was to help them understand that even simple things can have a meaning in art history.

SC: *How did you choose the women who participated in the project?*

MB: We worked with the group of twelve women who take care of cultivating the garden, which became eleven when one was transferred. The women do a training course to take care of the garden. Our idea was to have them freely create a photographic project about this place themselves, and to witness that during our video shoots.

SC: When you first started the project, did you already have clearly in mind what you wanted to do, or did you make contact with the prison and the women incarcerated there first, and then find the most suitable way to work?

Walter Niedermayr: To work out how we should move forward with it, we did a site visit, trying to understand what we could do, which was not a simple matter since every movement had to be announced and planned in advanced.

SC: Had you already dealt with this sort of difficulty at San Vittore when you shot Agente apri?

WN: There it was a lot easier; to get to the sector where the mothers with children lived there was an obligatory route to follow.

SC: How did you establish a relationship with the women incarcerated at the prison? Were those you worked with serving long or short sentences?

WN: Short in some cases and longer in others – there are women serving life sentences in Venice, too. There are different sentences and nationalities. Most of the women incarcerated there are of African origin, or other ethnic groups, and only a minority are Italian.

SC: Was it easy to establish a rapport with them?

WN: Creating a rapport in the prison, with the limitations in place there, is difficult. We tried first and foremost not to scare them, and to come in with empathy, because the main problem – as we realized right from the start – was their fear of being seen from the outside. Some of them even told us that explicitly.

SC: Fear of being seen by their families and friends?

WN: They didn't want to be filmed, they were afraid. So we explained that our intention was to do a project *with and about* them, but in which they wouldn't appear themselves – they wouldn't be the main subject.

MB: We explained that the subject of the work was the place, the prison itself, and the garden...

SC: *So the subject of the work comprises a visible part – the prison – and a non-visible one – the presence and work of the women incarcerated there...*

WN: Yes, the context is the building with its cells, corridors, courtyards, entranceways, workshops, and the garden, which is the biggest area of the Giudecca prison. And so, our work focused on what this place does to people, to the women incarcerated there, and on what type of relationship is created between them and the garden, and consequently the relationship with “nature”.

SC: *So the key is to not show the women, but only the context?*

WN: In part, yes. When we shot the video, some of the women were visible. Some of them are actually recognizable, too, but we got their permission to show their faces.

SC: *Let’s talk about the photographic part of your project. What does it entail?*

MB: We set up a workshop and gave the women disposable cameras - the ones with film - to use, and told them to freely take photos until they finished the roll of film. They themselves would later choose some of these photographs to make postcards to send to their family or friends.

SC: *Did the women already have experience with photography?*

MB: Yes, we could see that, as everyone does these days.

SC: *The decision to let the women take photographs is significant. It reminds me of the series Hôpital de jour by Marc Pataut, who used a procedure similar to yours; in both cases it was a matter of giving up the dominant position of photographer with regard to the photographed subject. From this point of view, how was the relationship between you and them established?*

MB: They asked us various questions, for example about our experience with children at San Vittore. They told us what they were doing in the garden. One of the women showed us a tree that had been almost dead, but that had recovered thanks to their care. We talked about what it means to be incarcerated, and about imprisonment. Little by little they started to understand - seeing how we worked, hearing the things we said - that we weren't there to film them per se, but to film the space and its use, their relationship with nature and the land, the sense of the place, in short.

SC: Has the prison garden been in existence for a long time ?

MB: Since 1995. It had been abandoned, then the Venice-based cooperative "Rio Terà dei Pensieri" intervened and proposed to fix it up, and to have it be cultivated by the incarcerated women themselves, together with staff and volunteers. The project was a success - they not only produce fruit and vegetables, which the women sell once a week and actually earn something that way, but there are also activities like the perfumery, with products sold in Venice and elsewhere. It became a work opportunity.

SC: Walter, you have often photograph natural scenarios, but of a nature that's been transformed by the use and abuse of the economy, tourism and consumerism. What did you think when you saw the prison garden?

WN: First of all we have to say that while a vegetable garden is unusual in a prison setting, it's completely normal for there to be one in a convent, where it has great significance from the religious point of view. A garden is certainly a piece of nature, but above all it's a cultivated, and thus cultural space. It's a space the incarcerated women can dedicated themselves to, forgetting where they are. They're in the midst of nature, with its rules and its processes, so they can have a concrete experience, getting to know their own capacities and limitations. It's a liberating place. You get lost in nature and its cycle there.

MB: More than one person described to us a sensation of “forgetting where they are” when they go into the garden. It might be something that helps women who are incarcerated rebuild their sense of self, and heal their wounds.

SC: The modern garden has 18th-century Romantic origins, as a mirror of inner life, a reinvented and “naturalized” nature where one could practice a daily ritual of contemplation. But the garden is also a metaphor for human intellect and sensibility, to be cultivated and made fertile - Il faut cultiver son jardin, as the last sentence of Candide says. The vegetable garden and the pleasure garden share a temporal element, the cosmic and vegetal cycle of death and rebirth that in a certain sense suspends the time of human social existence. The vegetable garden is also an example of productive, beneficial nature, while the prison is all about discipline, straight lines, walls, bars and gates. I wonder if these themes were in your mind when you conceived your project, and throughout the course of the work.

MB: We started out from exactly this contrast between imprisonment, the denial of freedom, and nature, being in nature. In fact, the women’s photos show a lot of walls, some of them torn down, and a lot of trees surrounded by wires, which protect on one hand and delimit on the other. The wall is an element that’s very much present in our video installation as well.

WN: What significance does a natural space take on for people who are incarcerated? Taking care of the garden, and in the broader sense taking care of oneself, through the possibilities that nature provides, certainly with all the problematic issues that come with an existence in a state of imprisonment.

SC: Getting back to photography, how did you approach the work with the women at the prison?

WN: We just explained how the cameras worked, how to use them to shoot photos. They used them during the day, and in the evening returned them to the staff, because they couldn’t take them into their cells. The prison administrators were immovable on that, although we would have liked them to take the cameras to their cells to photograph the interior of the prison.

SC: *So the women had just one “roll” of film available, and they had to take the photos within the arc of a single day?*

MB: The photos could be taken over several days, but the camera had to be handed over to staff before they went back to their cells every day.

SC: *Do you think you’d like to repeat this experience, with the same women or with other women in prison?*

MB: I’ve done several seminars, some with very small children too, and I believe in the power of being able to take photos, which can sometimes activate profound experiences. It’s interesting – we haven’t stopped talking about it yet. We told the participants that they could take photographs however they wanted, that they were absolutely free from any preset rules or positions or predetermined types of framing, etc. We wanted them to take photos in the most natural, spontaneous, authentic way possible, and that’s exactly what they did. The images all have a certain spontaneity and authenticity.

SC: *Can you recognize the individual style of each participant, or are they sort of “neutral,” anonymous images?*

MB: No, they’re not neutral, they’re meaningful, empathic photographs; you can identify different visual results.

SC: *When you saw the developed photos for the first time, what did you think? What was your reaction?*

MB: A sense of authenticity, of immediacy. I had the sensation of looking at uncontrived images, shots that weren’t aiming for any effect, something I’d already seen before. They communicate a sense of place very well, of being inside the place.

WN: They are sincere and highly personal photographs, full of empathy for what’s in the frame.

SC: *When you saw the material they'd shot, did you immediately have an idea of how to present it to the public?*

MB: Walter and I thought it might be interesting to make a sort of "brick," as we called it, a thick little booklet, with all the photographs in small format. We also thought about other possibilities, like presenting the photographs on the wall, in several rows, and other ideas, but we're still thinking about it.

SC: *Are the names of the women who took the photos present in the exhibition?*

MB: The names will definitely be there; they'll decide for themselves whether to include their last names or initials.

SC: *I'd like to talk about the video installation. You've both made numerous video works in your career, obviously with very different subjects, production modes and sensibilities. And you worked together on *Agente apri*, which we've mentioned. I'd like to start from the most basic element, the moment of filming: who decides how and what to film? Whose eye is behind the lens, Walter's or Marina's? Or do you alternate so as to get shots that reflect your different individual sensibilities?*

WN: We tried to use perspectives and framing that we both typically use. They're shooting perspectives that are close to human points of view.

MB: Yes, the "normal" lens...

WN: From wide-angle to normal.

SC: *Did you have a storyboard ready when you started filming?*

WN: We did the storyboard after visiting the prison, with the place in our minds, because that first time we weren't able to film.

MB: Then we thought about where to put the camera...

WN: Yes, we marked the spots that we thought could be interesting. We've always worked with a tripod that lets us watch from a preestablished point. The intention was to work a fixed frame, without moving the camera.

MB: There was never much argument, we agreed from the outset on a fixed frame, without movement. The place comes into the frame – the camera doesn't go looking for it. The important thing is that it doesn't give information or data, but rather the idea of the experience of that place and how the women live inside it, what they do. What we're interested in is presenting the experience of the place, not so much in providing information.

SC: The video starts with a shot of the garden – no transition through walls, gates or bars, we're already inside. Only later do we slowly begin to understand what this place is. At the beginning, this isn't explicit, we don't realize that we're in a prison. It's not a reportage. The work certainly has a socio-political aspect – the women have different lives, nationalities and stories. But the garden, or rather the hortus, we could say, is the real protagonist. Was it this impossible garden/prison combination that you wanted to bring out?

MB: A large garden inside a prison is effectively a very odd thing – it's an open space in a place where the “open” is closely linked with the “closed.” I agree, it's not a reportage, we had no intention of doing that. We wanted to give the idea of an experience of a place inside another place. A place of imprisonment, enclosed within very strict rules and limitations, but where the potential arises for a relationship with nature and its cycle.

SC: For you and Walter, is the video an interpretation of the physical reality of the prison? Is it a sort of “live recording” of the place?

WN: Our approach uses a fixed frame, as if it were a photograph within which there's movement. Everything that happens within the frame can be interesting and can serve a function, including the sound, which is very important in this video because it gives another reference to the place – it gives a sense of place.

SC: *Both of you have noted the strangeness of this vegetable garden inside a prison in the heart of Venice. And in fact, from the images and the sound, we can intuit that there's a city outside.*

MB: Yes, as Walter said, the sound is particularly important, because we can intuit the presence of water just on the other side of the walls.

SC: *How is the video presented?*

WN: There are two large video projections on walls.

SC: *Are the images projected simultaneously?*

WN: Yes, but with some black screens and some shifts on both screens – there's a rhythm, a sequence with a certain logic.

MB: The rhythm of the sequence is created through the editing of the frames and the relationship between the two projections. It was a long process of trials and deliberations. In the editing phase it was actually a matter of creating two films to juxtapose, trying to create a cadence between the two projections; in fact, finding the right rhythm between black screens and frames was very complex.

SC: *And did you have a guiding principle in this editing? Did you alter the temporality of the shot, did you include it as a single sequence shot...?*

MB: We didn't alter the sequences, there are just some cuts. We also had input from Davide Maldi, a talented young director who helped us with editing. It took us a long time to find the right rhythm.

SC: *So visual rhythm is an important component of the work.*

MB: Absolutely – the sequences are very long on purpose to render the sense of the place, a sense of “being there,” experiencing it. It's not about giving information, it's not reportage. The video installation brings out something

“suspended.” A space that becomes a place in itself, and that hints at something utopian.

SC: In comparison to Agente apri is there anything different in the way you worked together on this project?

MB: In this video installation it's as if a fixed camera was floating on the tripod but captured whatever entered the frame. I think that in this sense there's something similar to my work and Walter's work. We rediscovered it there.

WN: For me, using video this way was a given – I've always used a fixed camera. The place is new, and apparently it's nature that does something with the women in the prison, and vice-versa. I think that the main theme of the work is what nature does with us, even outside the prison setting, since we ourselves are nature.

SC: What do you learn from each other when you're working?

MB: We came together around the camera to decide where and how to film, and that's where our affinities emerge. And then, it's also important to review all the material together.

SC: But in a more subjective sense? Walter, you usually work alone, and solitude is actually a necessary condition, for reflection and contemplation of the places you shoot. Working with Marina, who is obviously strongly rooted in the world of words, writing and therapy, does that change the relationship with what you see, with your thinking?

WN: It changes in the sense that I try to understand what Marina wants. We watched together, and we also changed and modified things. That's how it is when you work in a duo – clearly, you have to make compromises, and if the other person sees the same thing in a different way, you learn to see things from another point of view.

SC: *Is it an experience that's useful for all of your work, or is it limited to a two-person experiment?*

WN: It lets you understand how the other person sees or works or wants to do things. Maybe it also helps to better understand her work in general. By now we know how we work together – we've been getting to know each other for years.

SC: *And for you, Marina?*

MB: For the filming, we gradually managed to come to agreement, while reviewing the footage and editing it required a more complex effort and discussion.

SC: *Walter, in your career you've photographed natural spaces altered by human intervention, and a lot of closed spaces – workshops, bank vaults, hospitals, prisons. Marina, you on the other hand have worked on the city, everyday interiors and interpersonal relationships, always observing with an eye for dismissed, unseen details. For both of you there's clearly a strongly critical bent with regard to institutions and the apparent order of things in the world. The prison garden in Venice is an emblematic place for you. I'm wondering – as a whole, does this project contain a political, liberatory, utopian intent, or does it instead focus on time and inner space, the inner space of the incarcerated women as well as your own?*

MB: There's certainly a utopian aspect. We observe what nature does to us and to the people who are there on the inside, controlled by the institution that encompasses and mortifies the person, setting limitations and rules. For these women, cultivating the garden is something very special, a different way for them to share a time, a space, a common task. The project only involved eleven women out of eighty, just the ones who work in the garden, but even so it's enough to show that it's possible to create a relationship with nature during incarceration, but without making it seem like some sort of idyll.

SC: *Walter, what do you think is the prevalent aspect of the work?*

WN: I like what Goffman wrote in his book about hospitals and prisons called *Asylums*, published in 1962. His central idea is that the most important factor that shapes an incarcerated person or a patient isn't his crime or his illness, but the institution he's under the control of – his reactions and his ways of adapting are similar to those of prisoners of other totalizing institutions that help society to keep functioning. Yet these “counterworlds” to the everyday social world are ultimately just reflections of the surrounding society: the analysis of extremes sheds light on what is considered normal and can assert its own normalcy only by excluding and confining deviant behaviors. From this point of view, the “career” of the prisoner or the patient is just the mirror image of the career of the normal citizen. So, if we want to describe and understand the situation of incarcerated people, we have to do it from where they stand. Another significant aspect that came out doing this project was how important a conscious dialogue between nature and man is, a dialogue that, in the future, could help humanity to solve its long-term problems, and maybe even to survive.

SC: Do you think that allowing the women to take photographs, which is something they normally can't do, had a particular meaning or value from this point of view? Did you talk about it with them?

MB: We still haven't finished talking together about their reactions and their comments. For sure, they really wanted to get started – they couldn't wait for us to give them the cameras, and to have this play-like experience – to throw themselves into an experience of visual and mental freedom and go further with photography.

SC: So was it an experience of play, in some way?

MB: Yes, playing, in the way that Winnicott defined it, that “area of illusion” that entails a component of freedom and creativity and has an extraordinary value in a situation of strong constriction, limitation and closure. The possibility to freely create coincides with an opening up.

SC: So is the idea that “You have to cultivate your own garden” still a valid catchphrase, presuming that we take into account the fact that the garden in this case is a vegetable garden in a prison?

WN: Yes, basically, in cultivating the garden the women elude the rules of the prison and follow the laws of nature, the changing seasons. It’s an interesting aspect. People feel useful, working with water and soil, natural elements. And taking care of plants gets them into a dialogue with their own possibilities for development and growth. I think that every garden is like a dream in which many things are hidden. At the end of Voltaire’s *Candide*, in which the world is shown as a cruel slaughterhouse filled with madness, murder and injustice, we come to the wise and by no means suffocating understanding that the only sensible thing to do is to “cultivate one’s garden” in peace.

MB: I think that cultivating the garden helps the women to feel freer, to create a relationship with nature, with all that that entails as far as sensations and individual emotions are concerned. And making something grow, seeing something born, has to do with a possibility of mending oneself. But in prison, the incarcerated person’s identity is completely “wiped out,” “stripped bare.” Imprisonment always seems to have to comprise the additional punishment of *spoliation* that Goffmann speaks of. We might say that here, the garden is an elsewhere, an opening that remains, even if all the rest continues to coincide with the wiping out of the person.