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Case study

The Experience of Imprisonment and Art Therapy

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Journal „Nuove arti terapie"
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Abstract

This article describes a twelve-year experience of carrying out integrative expressive therapy projects based on art therapy within the S. Anna prison in Modena, in direct contact with the inmates, but also with the inevitable penal system which amplifies the ambivalent experiences of prisoners. Their fears, true or presumed certainties, aspirations, projects, anxieties, kindnesses, violence, generosity and selfishness, ..., express the different states and emotions they experience in direct contact with the walls, the security bars, the prison controls and with the prison guards, the educators, the social workers, the directors who have come and gone over time.

By establishing a dialogue between the different personalities of this apparently impenetrable "total institution" (Goffman, 1961) and a common language that could serve as a common thread between prisoners coming from very different social and cultural backgrounds, the best solution to this expressive therapeutic process emerged in the integration of art therapy with elements of theater. This method has been perfected over time and has brought very effective results in terms of defining a rehabilitation path for prisoners and promoting their functioning in an individual and social sense.

The final product, the show, was seen as a part, albeit a final part, of the art therapy process, providing prisoners with the opportunity to communicate with the world outside the walls.

In particular, three projects are described which show the importance of integrating art therapy and elements of drama and stage movement: "Little Red Riding Hood", "We are at a loss", and "Free Inside".

This long-term experience proved effective in establishing the preset objectives: reducing isolation, understanding and regulating the feelings that the prison situation imposes, the ability to understand others, establishing boundaries and establishing more socially accepted forms of defense, reevaluating ethics in life choices and creative ideation as a propellant for recovery.

***Keywords**: art therapy, theatre, rehabilitation, prison, prisoners.*

Preface

"*It's a peculiar apparatus," said the Officer to the Traveller, gazing with a certain admiration at the device, with which he was, of course, thoroughly familiar. It appeared that the Traveller had responded to the invitation of the Commandant only out of politeness, when he had been asked to attend the execution of a soldier condemned for disobeying and insulting his superior.*"

from "In the Penal Colony",
Franz Kafka

Crime and Punishment

The theme of condemnation and the related punishment appears repeatedly in the work of the great Prague writer (as in "The Trial" and "The Castle"). This theme is particularly expressed in the works which, according to the author's intentions, should have been a trilogy dedicated to punishment, or "In the Penal Colony", a collection of three stories written in three years: "The Judgment" (1912), "The Metamorphosis" (1912) and "In the Penal Colony" (1914).

In the first two stories, the theme of detention is developed. In the first two stories, the detention is not at all prison-like or institutional, and therefore, it is not social but internal, developed in a family context: the protagonist of the first story experiences a judgment of guilt related to the conflict with his father. The consequent atonement will pass through the path of suicide (more or less induced...), that is, one's own end as the resolution of the problem between oneself and one's origins, another unresolved part of oneself...

In "Metamorphosis", Gregor Samsa, the protagonist, a mediocre exponent of the lower middle class (a travelling salesman), finds himself detained in his room, transformed into an enormous cockro-

ach. The title of the book given by Kafka to the story is interesting: metamorphosis in mythology alludes to the supernatural transformation of one being into another of a different nature. In nature, the term indicates a progressive change of state, while the story alludes to a sudden, inexplicable modification, more faithful to the classic version. Perhaps it is the human condition itself that contains within itself and silently develops the larva of estrangement.

However, the punishment will be increasingly cruel with the increase in spatial marginality, the progressive brutalization and the increasingly manifest hostility of the "loved ones". The problem of transformation will be resolved, also in this case, by the elimination of the protagonist's physical presence and memory of him in his family, that is, complete oblivion.

In the third story, however, the action occurs inside the penal colony.

Here, the scope becomes explicitly social. Let's leave aside the importance of the style of the story, which suggests the metaphorical consistency of how the author experiences guilt (which is also very redundant). We can focus on the instrument of torture itself, a form of torture machine with aesthetic value composed of a Bed (the lower part), an Inscriber (the upper part) and a Harrow (the moving part). The condemned man will have to "sit down" in the machine, then, by means of the Harrow, he will be marked with the text of his sentence: a convoluted and cryptic incision inscribed directly on his body, a sublime and arabesque pain, at least in the intention of the Judge. Here, the "rehabilitative" sense of condemnation is transformed into suffering, a necessary tool to reach enlightenment and awareness of one's being, and will achieve liberation from one's imperfect, disobedient body through atonement and, in this case, inevitable death. Written in hyperbole in the form of fantasy, it acts as an adequate and poetic metaphor for the state of detention in penitential facilities. Moreover, the very concept of punishment has as its consequence the transformation of the personality, but also the "aesthetic" traces of torture created by the usual practice of self-harm, which can lead to suicide, inflicting wounds on others and/or tattooing—the aggression whether latent or manifest, is always present.

Introduction

Prison Setting

The institution of prevention and punishment of adults in Italy is divided into different types of penal institutions. Those are::

1) Prisons and detentions;
2) Prisons;
3) Workhouses, agricultural colonies, treatment and detention centers, psychiatric hospitals;

4) Observation centers, within the scope of the previous typologies, exist as separate departments or as autonomous institutions (eg. Institute for reduced detention for prisoners in semi-open prison).

There are important differences between a maximum security prison and a detention center, such as: the extent of punishment and the regime. Special penitentiary institutions exist for minors.

Inside the prison there are different types of inmates housed in different departments:

- Department of "general" prisoners (for crimes related to the dealing and consumption of narcotic substances, crimes against property, crimes against the person);
- Department of protected prisoners (repentants, sexual offenders, antisocial people);
- Penitentiary Department (members of organized crime, subjected to a more rigid prison regime);
- Women's Department (various crimes, given the significantly lower percentage of female prisoners compared to the male population);
- Reduced detention facility.

Each department has different characteristics and requires different approaches to interventions.

Although we can easily find synonyms for the word "prisoner" (arrested, detained, convict, forced, recluse, segregated...) or "prison" (jail, penitentiary, penal colony, workhouse, house of correction, reformatory, juvenile prison, prison, establishment or penal prison), we will hardly find an equal terminological richness capable of indicating the words "free" and "freedom", despite a great effort of memory, it's possible at most only through the negative adverb "not" (not tied, not held etc.).

The layers of depersonalization that these names reflect are easily recognizable when working with prisoners.

According to data from the Italian Ministry of Justice (http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/page/it/statistiche; 2022), it is clear that prison is an indicator of social marginalization: foreign prisoners and those coming from only four regions of Southern Italy make up 75% of the prison population. Furthermore, comparing the data for the period 2012-2024 (Repubblica, 17th June 2024; L'Espresso, 5th December 2012) shows that the suicide rate in prison is approximately 20 times higher than outside. This percentage is similar when the research is extended to correctional officers (2012). Furthermore, in our society, adopting the traditional opinion of "just punishment" is widespread as a guarantee of satisfaction for the offended person and to the detriment of the convicted person, despite the laws providing rehabilitation and social reintegration.

The Meaning of Art Therapy in Prison:

Functionality of the Rehabilitation Process through Expressive Methods

Art therapy is a modality similar to psychotherapy that uses expressive artistic processes to mediate internal content in communication with the therapist and relationships with the other participants in the group in a safe therapeutic environment.

Although the rehabilitative and re-educational value of work and creative and expressive activities has been demonstrated, there is sometimes resistance to integrative interventions, even among the rehabilitation staff of the penitentiary institution. This is because a path addressed to the prisoner's conscience, although based on positive experiences such as those activated by artistic processes, is considered contrary to the context of the penal requirement and redemption that our culture assumes.

Art therapy activities are carried out within various prison facilities. In this context, they are oriented towards "the aesthetics of liberation" and "the art of escape", therefore implying something completely different from simply filling time through artistic activity, i.e. simply reducing inner tension with a pleasant activity or, in the worst case scenario, a job that has primarily an internal control function.

In this context, the aesthetics of liberation" can be understood as a reappropriation of oneself, remodelling of one's identity, of one's self. That is, within art therapy contexts, especially in contexts that can be called "Total institutions " (a term coined by E.Goffman, 1961, 2010), the following processes are often activated:

- Performative processes that give expressive action as such the meaning of awareness and cognition;
- Active processes, processes of activation of explicit or potential resources as opposed to the emphasis on the deficit;
- Social processes, to focus attention not exclusively on the "ME", but to build opportunities to focus attention on the "WE";
- Coevolutionary processes, recognition and empathy of the participants in the process through the exchange of feedback and continuity of interaction.

These functions are part of the process described in the article.

Objectives of Art Therapy Interventions in Prison

The project objectives are established by the needs of the participants and inmates of the groups mentioned above and can be grouped into personal and social goals.

Personal objectives are strengthened through the choice of theme, dramatization, body movement and the intuitions

resulting from group work with artistic media: the feeling of finally being seen, the confirmation of personal qualities, positive or critical, in oneself and others. In communicating these contents within the group, during which tempers flare up and calm down, the therapists guide participants through the creative processes towards the possibility of understanding these dynamics.

Goals:

- Control of emotions.
- Mitigation of aggression.
- Limitation of rigid self-defense mechanisms.
- Accept and value oneself and others in their mutual differences.
- Awareness and redefinition of identity.
- Initiation of transformation processes – reformulation of personal history.
- Encourage communication.
- Develop listening skills.
- Define the boundaries of the relationship between oneself and others.
- Reduce the feeling of isolation.
- Enhancement of sensorial-expressive and creative abilities.
- Achieve general well-being.

Approach

Educate and Negotiate through Art

> "*Yet each of us, regardless of our abilities, at least once in our lives has done or said things far beyond our nature and our state, and if we could pull that person out of the everyday impersonality in which he loses his contours, or if he himself, with an act of violence, freed himself from nets and prisons, how many wonderful things he would be capable of doing, what profound knowledge he could transmit, because each of us knows infinitely more than he thinks, and each of the others infinitely more than he thinks. we are ready to admit into them.*"
>
> *J. Saramago*

Justifying the use of artistic language without stumbling into the usual stereotypes associated with the word art, such as freedom of expression, valorization of creative potential, recognition of abilities, etc., may seem challenging. This is especially true where freedom, personality, personal expression, and sharing inner contents are expressly denied.

First, the projects are designed as workshops, not courses. Although the two terms may seem synonymous initially, the course structure involves teaching techniques and tools depending on the



Figure 1 Group work, guash on paper

conductor's communicative, didactic, and professional skills. On the contrary, in this case, a workshop ("laboratory") is understood as a space (environment, installation, "setting") within which all participants are open to exchange and learn at higher levels.

This comparison between an art therapy workshop and an art workshop is characteristic of understanding art therapy as a purely artistic activity. Let us clarify that, in this case, it is an art therapy work in a group format. The psychotherapy model here involves choosing topics based on therapeutic and rehabilitative goals, jointly and according to the needs of the inmates as a whole, expressing the inmates' artistic, literary and performative strengths. The process guides each participant through personal themes, their expression through creative media, spatially through movement, and the verbal sharing and awareness of these contents with the support of a therapist.

The art therapist assumes the role of a leader and can become an "educator." "Educare" (from the Latin educere) means the ability to help the prisoner "realise" an idea imagined through the image, to help him express his inner world to the outside world, to translate the metaphorical language into a functional, communicative one, and to overcome mistrust and psychological, physical, cultural, and ethnic barriers.

The therapist thus becomes a "mediator" or a "negotiator" and the one who will manage to "deny idleness". After all, isn't it precisely the stagnant situation of passive daily idleness that characterizes prison?

The terms "detain" and "educate," the former implying the ability to force and keep a person in custody, and the latter, which can be translated as the ability to "extract" or "express," seem opposed. Thus, we witness the conflict between "withholding" and "exiting" needs that require an adequate approach, trust, and mediation.

Creating an Effective Methodology

Art therapy was carried out actively and permanently in Modena from 2001 to 2012 through selected groups of prisoners within the rehabilitation spaces of the S. Anna prison.

In 2001, the "Arte Tre" project was proposed and soon started. It was pioneering and experimental, with a limited number of meetings in the male and female departments, thanks to the support of the Carcere-Città (Prison-City) voluntary organization, already present in the institution with the support of the Municipality of Modena.

After this first experimental experience for both the leaders (an art therapist and a dance-movement therapist) and the inmates, other projects followed: "Painted Wall", "Art Hour", "Participating in Art", "Art Above the Lines", "Little Red Riding Hood", "We are at a loss" and finally "Free inside". The projects have gradually become more continuous and have taken root in the structure of the prison itself, to which the increase in the number of art therapy activities and the total time granted by the Administration for their implementation certainly contributed. It also contributed to the dialogue between managers, staff and prisoners on expectations and needs, which led to the involvement of different departments of the institution in the planning of interventions aimed at the wider community and the dissemination of experiences through the creation of gadgets, the processing of texts and films and their presentation at national conferences, broadcasts and publications in newspapers.

In the first 6 years, the activities were proposed by considering the prisoners' needs and communication characteristics and the rehabilitation objectives proposed by the educational staff of the penitentiary facility. The action in that phase was aimed at finding a balance between these different, sometimes conflicting needs: initially, the supervisory authorities looked with suspicion at the entry of people who were unable to fit in-to the institutional framework, who co-uld potentially upset the routine and we-re initially labelled as those who "entertain" the prisoners, instead of underlining the punitive logic of the place. In the following years, attention was increasingly focused on the dialogue between hierarchical structures (administration, administrative area, agents, volunteers) in an attempt to achieve a better understanding and mutual acceptance of art therapy activities.

At the same time we tried to broaden the horizon of the offer, to work on the originality and quality of the interventions, opening two new perspectives:

a) the introduction of theatrical language and action;
b) extension of the experiences to all inmate departments present in the prison.

The organization of the integrative interventions, initially proposed and implemented by two leaders (an art therapist and a dance-movement therapist), significantly increased the number of professionals involved. We tried to give the project a new shape by formulating "multi-handed" solutions



Figure 2 Group work, oil pastels on paper

and interventions by integrating different modalities.

The approach was gradually developed by introducing new elements and new collaborations, thus preventing repetition and strategies that sought to respond more functionally to individual needs and the characteristics of the groups we worked with.

The relationship with the director, the educators, the psychologists, the volunteers, and, in short, all the protagonists of the rehabilitation process is progressively strengthened, achieving effective communication that is unimaginable in the first editions of the projects. Flexibility (a characteristic necessary for an art therapist) played the role of link between the manager and the system, given that the activities were organized in separate departments, very often impervious to the influence of civil society.

The approach could not be tied to existing models. Still, empirically developing an original methodology through direct experience was necessary. It has reached its peak in the increasingly accentuated integration of art therapy with elements of drama therapy in the last two years. Thus, in the previous three projects, experts from seven different fields were involved: art therapists, multimedia operators, percussionists, actors, a director, a set designer and a musician. Art is thus elevated to the level of space and movement: communication of symbols written in art and of text in the space.

In the final events, the prisoners and the spectators are integrated: the actors were less and less actors, they represented themselves and not fictitious characters, while the spectators did not have a passive role, but actively participated in the interaction with the prisoners.

The event's organisation also allowed the involvement of other experts, who proved very important for the participants' experience (for example, a director who shot a documentary film about the project, which served as documentation of the work and promotional material).

Over the last four years, an effective intervention methodology has finally been defined. A balance has been achieved between elements of art therapy and theatre training integrated into the operational practice in which the visual language finds its amplification and vice versa.

Another specificity was the vision of the "final event" as part of a broader (and more critical) process of group aggregation and individual consciousness. Therefore, in S. Anna prison, unlike other more widespread "theatre in prison" experiences, the theatrical activity was never aimed at a performance, just as the artistic activity was never aimed at an exhibition. Likewise, the perspective of the process as more important than the product, or vice versa, did not prevail, but an attempt was made to use the product – the performance – as part of the process.

The final moment of each group permanently transformed into a performative event: a recital written and chosen by the inmates or a more theatrical representation.

Population

The projects described in this article involved 26 participants, men aged



Figure 3 Scenography for the final event

between 20 and 50 (average age 31). Prisoners from non-European Union countries make up 80% of the total participants, of which 15 come from North Africa, four from Eastern Europe, two from South America, and only 5 Italians (20%) who come mainly from the regions of Southern Italy, with a low level of education and no artistic experience.

In this "caravansarai," the ability to integrate artistic and dramatic language produced quality communication and empathy, which would be impossible to achieve only through the mediation of words. The group's multicultural background limited the understanding between the participants of different origins.

The activities took place in the "common" prisoners' department. These were prisoners awaiting trial or sentenced to relatively short sentences who participated upon request; then the drug-addicted prisoners, selected by the prevention and treatment service staff; and finally, the prisoners convicted of sexual crimes (rapists and paedophiles) or "repentants," i.e. former exponents of organized crime who also participated upon request. It should be underlined that this group has always been considered "more difficult" considering the type of crime (of a sexual nature), which usually defines the predatory profile of prisoners, prone to aggression, less socializing (except for manipulative purposes) and even less capable of sharing and introspection. However, we tried to set minimum achievable goals for each group we worked with.

Materials

The project's methodology, which integrates art therapy and dramatic elements, allowed for relative freedom of expression, making the goal more accessible. Using art and waste materials (card-board, fabric, etc.) allows for more unrestricted communication with the material and a sense of skill and mastery of the material and the task in people not skilled in artistic work.

The activities involved the use of basic artistic materials: tempera, coloured chalks, oil pastels, watercolours, markers, clay, and an assortment of paper, fabrics, cardboard, and packaging; glue, brushes, and tools, obviously excluding sharp objects (except small scissors with rounded tips) and dangerous objects. Audiovisual equipment is available for processing stage presentations.

The experience with "ordinary" prisoners is described in more detail below.

Description of the Process

The project was divided into three periods of approximately 100 days each, during which the themes were developed. An art therapy program was carried out, with a gradual development in space and a targeted intervention at the end of each period.

Three projects are described below, “Little Red Riding Hood”, “We Are at a Loss”, and “Free Inside”, developed in three-month modules when, after 12 years, it was decided to definitively close the art therapy laboratories in the St. Anna of Modena.

Project “Little Red Riding Hood”

The “Little Red Riding Hood” project involved a dramatization of the classic fairy tale to explore universal thematic elements such as innocence, danger and overcoming obstacles. The prisoners worked to adapt the story by introducing personal experiences, using theatrical techniques and visual arts. Participants faced their fears and hopes through this process, creating an intensely personal yet universally understood performance.



Figure 4 Preparation for the show "The Red Ridinghood"

The "Little Red Riding Hood" project in Modena prison was born from the idea that the inmates should create an event dedicated to children.

Prisoners can meet their relatives, including children, during the Christmas holidays (as in this case) or during the summer. With the idea of making prison a different, more hospitable and welcoming place for these children, a place of celebration and surprise, the inmates agreed to directly involve the children in a show they had created specifically for them. Hence, the idea of the fairy tale and, after various suggestions, the fairy tale about "Little Red Riding Hood" was chosen.

The prisoners constructed the scene and then acted it out. In this way, they were encouraged and guided to create images that can stimulate children's imagination and find a mode of interpretation, both narrative and suggestive, suitable and attractive for such a young audience. They hoped it could help them explore and reclaim an essential part of their lives: their childhood.

The story, however, was not interpreted physically (at least not only physically) but through the mediation of silhouettes that the prisoners/actors moved, giving them voice and movement and giving them a life. Thus, the theatrical space became a container of images sequenced through stories and animated by actors, as in Chinese shadow and puppet theatre.

They have become the authors of their spectators' performances, the creators of games and smiles, and the ones who delight us most in our children.

Project "We are at a Loss"

„Solitude is to the spirit what food is to the body."

Seneca

The "We're at a Loss" project focused on using metaphors and symbols from everyday life to encourage prisoners to introspect and understand themselves. The inmates explored their personal stories and feelings through art therapy

activities using paint, clay and recycled materials. The final result was a collection of artistic works that reflected each participant's inner state and transformation.

Francis Bacon said that hope is good for breakfast but bad for dinner. Eating, nourishing, and nutrition are terms that act as synonyms. Still, it is evident that «nutrition" can be understood as a word with more complex metaphorical implications than simple food intake. Inside a prison, food-related actions have a significant symbolic meaning: eating in the cell, for example, implies an agreement between prisoners who share the same space beyond the actual preparation of meals. Relying on the internal canteen is often perceived as belonging to a lower social status, of those who cannot afford food outside.

Furthermore, many prisoners born outside of Europe find it impossible to maintain their gastronomic identity or eating habits. If it is true, as Seneca said, that solitude is to the spirit what food is to the body; it is so as long as solitude is a choice, not a constraint.



Figure 5 Working with masks

Integrating art therapy and dramaturgy in this project has allowed us to develop and explore events that always and without exception place the person at the centre of every activity.

The group of actors formed during this process was like a small community that had organized itself within the project to bring a touch of the outside world into the suffocating prison: the audience. The public was welcomed as a family receives its friends or relatives as part of a ritual, in this case, a theatrical show. No one was involved in the theatrical space as a spectator or actor; each person was part of a moment, an experience codified in a role-playing game.

Everyone took part in the show, which ended with a dinner prepared by the inmates on a stage that "magically" transformed into a table, where actors and spectators became hosts and guests. At the end of the event, we could say that the inmate finally felt like a person, indistinguishable from the spectators present. In that specific moment, the role of the human being revived in them without the constraint of imprisonment or condemnation. And the spectator-guest had simultaneously dialogued with the prisoner, discovering with amazement his reflection in him, the reflection of his freedom, hidden under the mask of guilt. Finally, at that moment, instead of condemnation, a human being had emerged with his most hidden trait: dignity. A dignity that no one should ever forget but which our society, founded only in part on human rights and the person's value, often neglects, seriously damaging the reintegration process. Remember that "understanding" means taking towards oneself and not pushing away.

The "Free Inside" Project

The "Free Inside" project was a peak of the work we have done over the years. It focused on the concept of freedom and what it means in the context of a prison sentence. Prisoners worked on individual and group projects that combined visual arts, theatre, and music. Participants explored personal freedom, inner strength, and mutual support through these activities. The final event was an integrated performance that included art installations, musical performances, and interactive elements, symbolizing liberation and personal growth.

The theme of the series of meetings was "the word", that is, the need to intimately recount one's experiences, balanced between reflection on one's past and expectations for the future. This project was very ambitious, taking into account the presence of many non-EU prisoners and people with poor reading and writing skills. Despite these challenges, the interest was great, and the material produced (aphorisms, stories, poems) was so interesting that it was published in two booklets called "Prison Notebooks", which were then presented at a national literary fair. After such demanding work, it was natural to organize an event open to the public, a recital accompanied by theatrical situations that would help the audience better understand the text.



Figure 6 Prison notebooks

Each phase had been carefully monitored, from the writing and correction of the texts to their recitation and the preparation of short choreographic sheets designed to accompany the recital. However, for anyone working in restrictive environments, where flexibility is a distant



Slika 7 Prisoners preparing the stage for the show "Free inside"

dream, an unexpected event had become an insurmountable obstacle to the event's success. The director had moved to another prison, and while awaiting the arrival of the new director, the temporary director had not wanted to take on the responsibility of approving the entry of the guests into the institution on the day scheduled for the final show. This meant that the show could not occur with spectators, that is, civilians.

The possibility of a different ending to the project had been discussed for a long time, and considering the group's great disappointment, it was decided to devise a way to prepare a stage product that could be represented outside the prison because the outside world was locked outside the confines of prison. To this end, a group of young actors from the theatre acting school met several times with the inmates to stage a show that involved a recitation of texts written by the inmates. The actors then performed them during a show open to the public in the city theatre.

This action allowed prisoners' work to be presented to the outside world despite bureaucratic obstacles, demonstrating the power of creative cooperation in overcoming institutional limitations.

The simple scenography consisted of a series of black and white graphic drawings hanging from the curtain, symbolizing the prison situation, and decorated with empty plastic bottles. Inside each bottle, each inmate whispered a message to the imaginary spectator and then sealed it, like a message written by the hand of a castaway, placed in the bottle and left to the waves of the waves.

The presence of the director, who came to immortalize the most significant moments of the prisoners' working process, allowed the creation of a 13-minute film which included some phases of the show. This short film was subsequently screened inside the prison room, allowing, at least virtually, an exchange between the prisoner-author and the spectator.

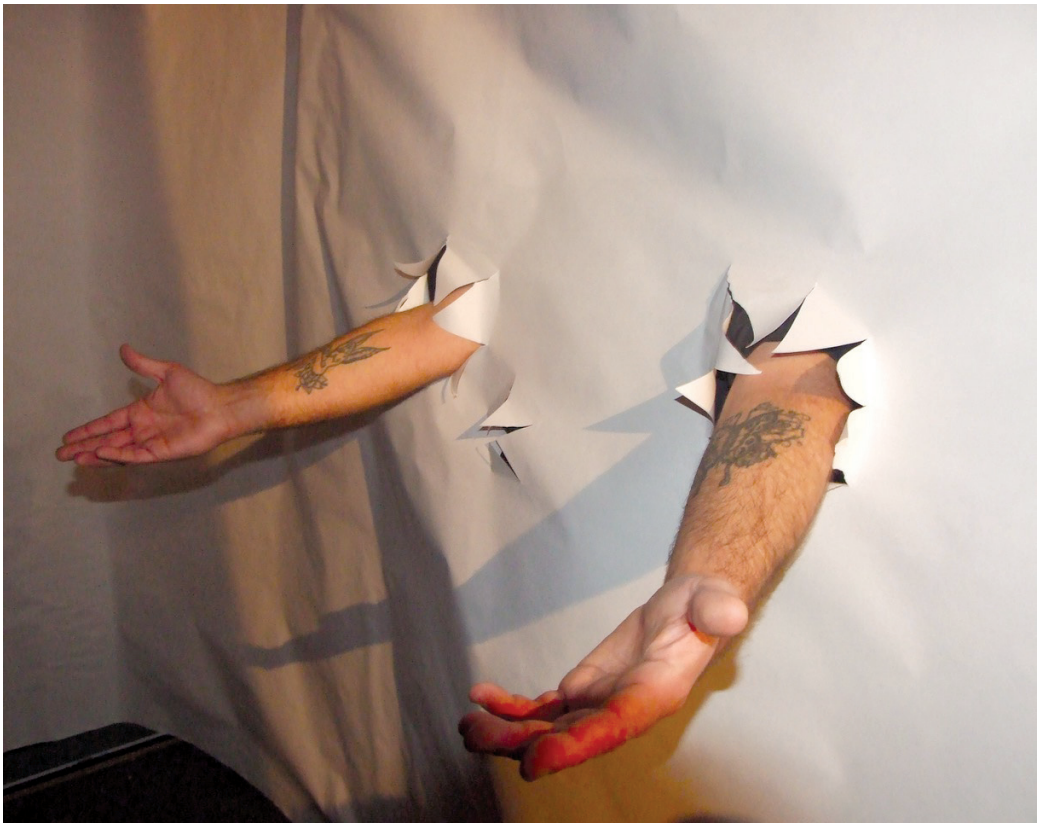


Figure 8



Figure 9 Final performance

Many other situations, anecdotes and stories could be shared, all different and equally significant; stories of a prolonged and considerable plot that has been created over the years, entire of relationships, exchanges, misunderstandings, successes and even great pain, but the author of the text believes that the situations described can convey the importance of art and dramatization in starting the rehabilitation process in a "total institution" such as prison, a place of sensory deprivation waiting to be activated.

One day, the prisoners were asked what they would like to see from their cell; one expressed the desire to see a complete landscape through the window without the rectangular fragmentation of bars and protective nets.

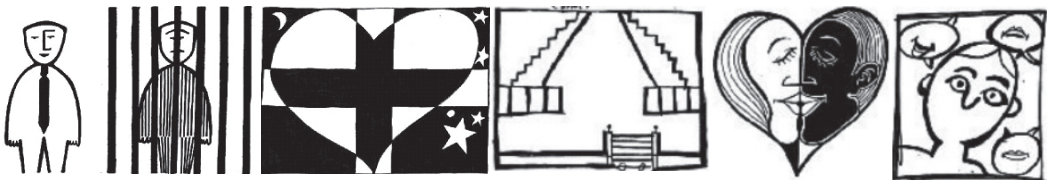


Figure 10 Symbols of the expressive workshops of the men's department, drawings created in the "Free Inside" project:

Discussion and Conclusion

One of the key concepts when talking about prison is "division". The verb divide also alludes to the organization of the army (divide et impera), but also to the division of the living space that determines the daily life of the prison: residential division (cells, corridors, shared spaces, specialist areas such as infirmaries, interview rooms, etc.); perceptive (the frame of reality is divided by grids and protective nets); relational (each department is a world unto itself, and then there are further divisions depending on the origin of the inmates, some crimes, their belonging to subgroups); existential (physical separation from family, friends and the outside world in general).

From a perceptual, relational and experiential point of view, the prisoner always lives on a desert island, but as John Donne says in his famous phrase: "No man is an island...". On the contrary, a better knowledge of one's inner island and possibilities always allows one to discover new horizons. Through a process facilitated by art therapists and interaction with other inmates, isolation is reversed.

The persistence of a directly proportional link between physical, concrete limitations of space and perception of one's body is proven; in other words, between the limited space of coercion and the space of the self: the smaller the physical space available, the greater the limitation of the experience that can articulate the structure of the self. However, the question arises: is there an inversely proportional relationship between the feeling of constraint caused by living in a closed space such as a prison and the predisposition to the process of change in the experience of a prisoner who stays in that space every day?

Ultimately, we are all aware of how much every transformation occurs through the assimilation of lived experiences and how much such experiences must contain elements of novelty, but how can prison be considered a bearer of innovation, where time is always measured by strict, rigid repetitions? Contrary to what one might think, prison rarely allows one to reflect on one's mistakes. The time spent in "prison" represents a poorly illuminated and even less enlightening limbo where repetition reigns.

The male and female prisoners interviewed described two different ways of spending the day: active and passive. In the first case, through the constant search for something to do (courses, activities, work,...) to escape the dictatorship of heavy thoughts, lack of emotions and invasive promiscuity, or, on the other hand, through isolation, systematic inertia, the search to forget, reduce or cancel one's ability to perceive the surrounding reality. Especially in the latter case, time is dilated, insignificant and therefore paradoxically devoid of duration, that is, "infinite". Free time is a term used in prison terminology, although it must be taken with a touch of irony.

Time spent in prison without activity is useless and often harmful.

This is why the therapeutic function of art therapy projects within prisons is so essential, as it involves using images and scenic movement as tools for reflection, reactivation and rehabilitation.

The dangerous combination of this type of time and a limited, depersonalized, and hyper-controlled space can hinder any attempt at self-reflection and frustrate the rehabilitation process.

Therefore, prison risks retaining only its purpose of punishment and social condemnation without sufficiently activating the possibility of different experiences. However, in 12 years of work with the inmates of the Santa Anna prison in Modena, through errors and failures, useful interventions have been developed for the prison population, allowing the participants spaces and ways of thinking. At the end of the workshops, participants often said, "Today, I felt like I wasn't in prison."

The experience of the Modena prison is unique, even after many years, compared to a review of interventions in the various national penitentiary structures that have changed over time. To date, in Italy, there are no other experiences of art therapy workshops for prisoners and inmates that are of such a prolonged duration and with the integration of different modalities.

Through twelve years of interventions, it has been possible to observe that the sign, the colour, but also the sound, the dramatization and the bodily movement, especially if proposed in integrated and disciplined forms, represent the necessary codes of a standard alphabet mainly unknown to the majority of the population, even to those who are out of prison; channels through which to direct one's vital energies and impulses that are not necessarily only positive. In this sense, the expression of the themes of a halted life, obsessive repetition, discouragement, anxiety, and destructive and self-destructive impulses can transform into (re)interpretation and (re)shaping through art, a form that represents one's world (internal and external) but is also new. It is often capable of containing these impulses and sometimes of promoting that sense of self-esteem necessary to start an authentic process of change.

Furthermore, the issue of understanding what we want to communicate in terms of different cultures and languages that impede fluent verbal communication has been made possible through the language of art.

Ultimately, art therapy can be considered an integrated symbolic system useful for transforming a desolate and solitary island into an archipelago with islands well connected to each other (unconscious actions transformed into conscious actions). It acts as a mediator, a connection point between these and the solidity of the base, which is compact but subject to continuous tectonic changes.

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Annex

Art therapy module male section

Duration September December	September/ December 18 sessions	January/ May 20 sessions	September / December 18 sessions	September/ December 18 sessions
Users	Common prisoners	Protected section Prisoners (I)	Protected section Prisoners (II)	Common drug addict prisoners
Training contents and path structure	Expressive art therapy workshop with integration of dramatization and theater in the second part	Expressive art therapy workshop on a weekly basis (2h)	Expressive art therapy workshop on a weekly basis (2h) with theatrical integration in the second part	Expressive art therapy workshop with theatrical integration in the second part
Possible finalisation	Staging at the end of the journey with the creation of a film		Set up exhibition for the end of the year	Staging at the end of the journey with the creation of a film
Relationship with the territory	3 meetings with a visit to Galleria Civica in Modena			3 meetings with a visit to Galleria Civica in Modena