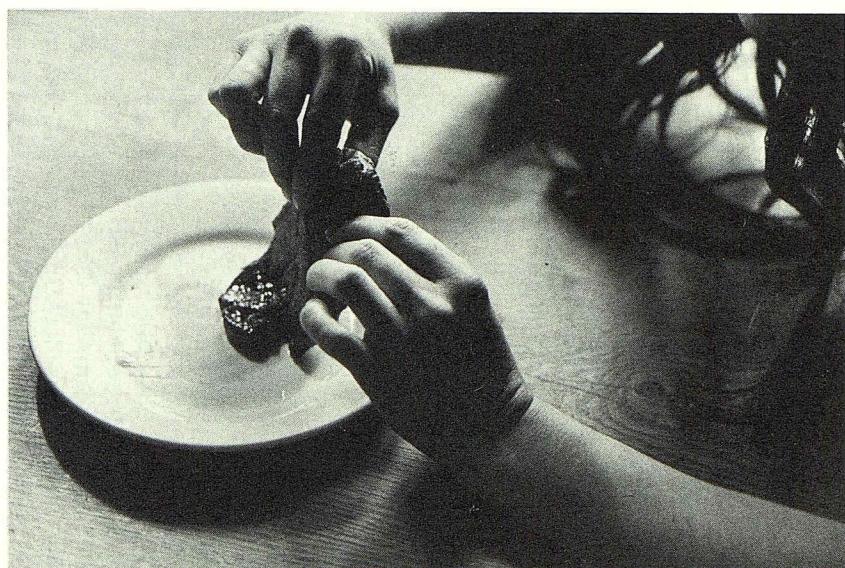
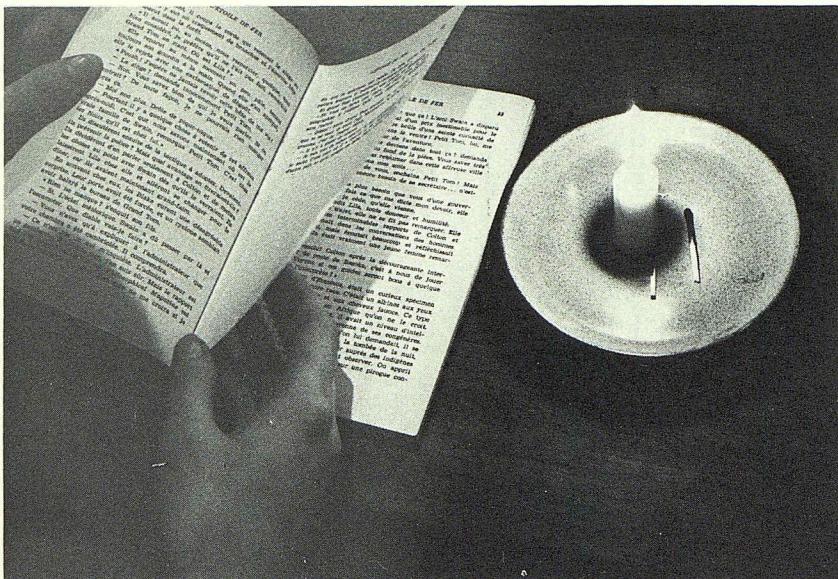


La Roquette, Women's Prison

Groupe de Cinq



The Group of Five is a Paris-based collective consisting of Martine Aballea, Judy Blum, Nicole Croiset, Mimi, and Nil Yalter, who include among their skills video, painting, sculpture, drawing, and poetry; and among their nationalities French, Turkish, Canadian, American. This work on La Roquette began when Judy and Mimi met through their children at a day-care center. Judy mentioned her collaboration with Nil on the theme of living conditions in each of Paris' 20 arrondissements, for which the prison had been suggested to represent the 11th arrondissement. Mimi, it turned out, had been detained there, and she offered an elaboration of her experiences. Martine, whose writing is based on her own memories and dreams, also joined the project, while Nil offered her use of video to universalize the narrative elements, in collaboration with Nicole, who concentrated on the esthetic/sociological aspects of the research. The result is a visual representation of the prison and of the personal experiences of many women, centered around the group's increasing consciousness of the meaning of Mimi's story: "Bonds of friendship, constantly confirmed, played the most cohesive role on the level of the work itself, resulting in the combination of apparently disparate means connected to each other by mutual understanding within the group." The following narrative accompanies a videotape from which most of the images are taken.

The other women were mostly in the prison for bad checks, prostitution, or, like me, for robbery. There were also some murderers; I knew one in my workshop. Another had been accused of stealing a painting. The first days we asked each other, but afterwards we didn't really say "What are you doing here?" except to our best friends.

These women came from all classes. In general, relations between inmates were pretty good. There were a lot of lesbians; the nuns' attitudes toward them was to turn a blind eye. They couldn't not have known about it. The girls hid it a little—and even a lot—but it was too obvious. As for me, I was not a lesbian, but I nevertheless flirted here and there to pass the time. It could have certain advantages: when you didn't have any money, your friends could buy things at the canteen for you. Or, at one time, I went out with an English girl who was the favorite of a nun who didn't like me, and from that day on, that nun was very nice to me, and I got certain favors I shouldn't have had.

But still there were lots of fights, sometimes for no reason at all,

just because the girls felt like fighting. Sometimes it was a question of class. Some girls felt superior to others: it wasn't a question of money, but of intellect. . . . So sometimes one girl would insult another, or feel insulted, and there would be a fight. We were a whole gang; some had to be in charge. And if you knew how to fight, you were respected. There was nothing you could do about it.

Sometimes fights started over cigarettes. For example, I got into a fight with a girl over that. Every Wednesday we had the right to buy four packs of cigarettes at the canteen. This girl didn't smoke, so, with my money, I had bought her something she needed, and she, with her money, was going to buy me four more packs, which would have made eight for the week. She bought me the cigarettes, but another girl told her to give them to her. She was very weak and she didn't dare refuse. That night I waited for her in her cell and I beat her up. The week after that she bought me cigarettes, and she didn't even ask me for money. Afterwards—it's stupid, she was a coward—she would pick up butts in the yard for me, when I really didn't expect that from her. When the other girls saw that, they all turned against her. When I saw that, I stood up for her, because I don't like to take sides. I'd hit her a little, but I didn't have a grudge against her.

Another time there was a fight in the mess hall, in front of the nun. There was blood on the floor: one girl had had a nosebleed, and the other had been hurt elsewhere. I was drawing; with my finger I picked up some drops of blood and put them on my drawing.

But there was also a feeling of solidarity among the inmates. One time, for example, a girl had been punished and locked up in the mess hall toilets. I didn't know what she had done, I don't even know if she had really done anything; in any case it was totally unjust to lock her up like that. So, with my friend, I climbed onto the ledge over the mess hall door and we said that we would stay there until they let this girl out. Normally we should have done two weeks in the cooler for that, but we didn't get anything. We would have done it anyway because it was unjust.

Or one day a girl gave me a little piece of candle about two inches long. We were forbidden to have candles, but there were a lot of things like that that went around the prison. I don't know how she got it; that was the sort of question you didn't ask. She gave it to me because she knew that I liked to read.

We also managed to pass notes from cell to cell by what we called the "yo-yo" system. You tied the note to a piece of string and you put it through the window. We did that for certain girls who were in the cooler when we were in the yard. We would send them a note

from their best friends or something like that.

As for the nuns, apart from some who were especially mean, they were mostly indifferent. But they had, of course, their favorites. It was a question of personality: they liked the docile inmates. In the beginning they didn't like me because I was stubborn and rude to them. Afterwards, I sometimes behaved better. But in any case, being with the English girl, I could do things that were forbidden and not get punished. Sometimes, for example, I would go into the yard to pick up butts that the richer girls had left; we weren't allowed to do that other than at recess. Or I tried doing all kinds of things so I could go to the cooler, because I had a friend who sang in church and in the cooler there was a lot of echo. But despite all I did I never got sent, while some girls did nothing at all and got sent right away.

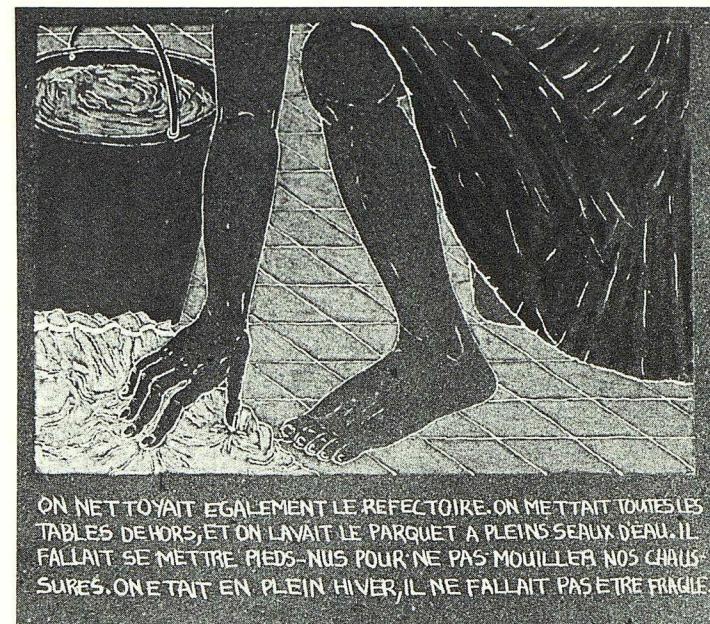
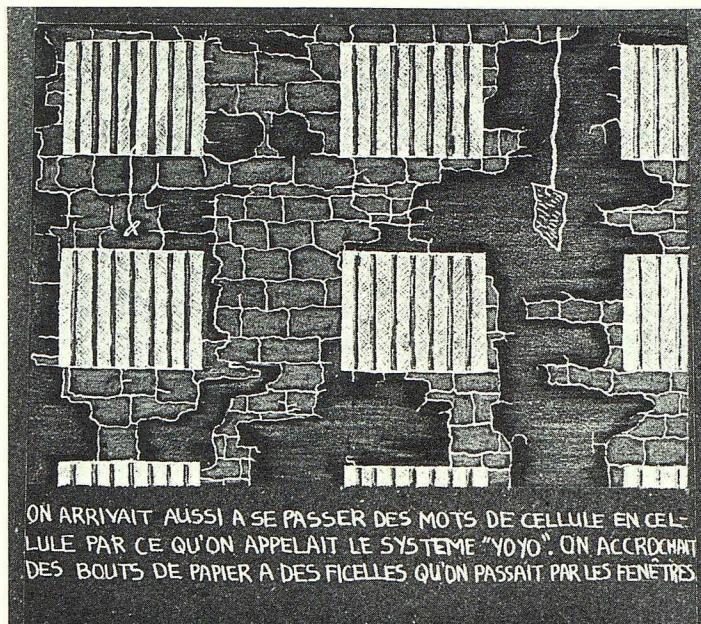
Down in the cooler you were isolated from everybody. You got no mail or visits. You never left your cell, except once a day when you had a walk, alone, in the yard. You only had one meal a day which was brought to you in your cell.

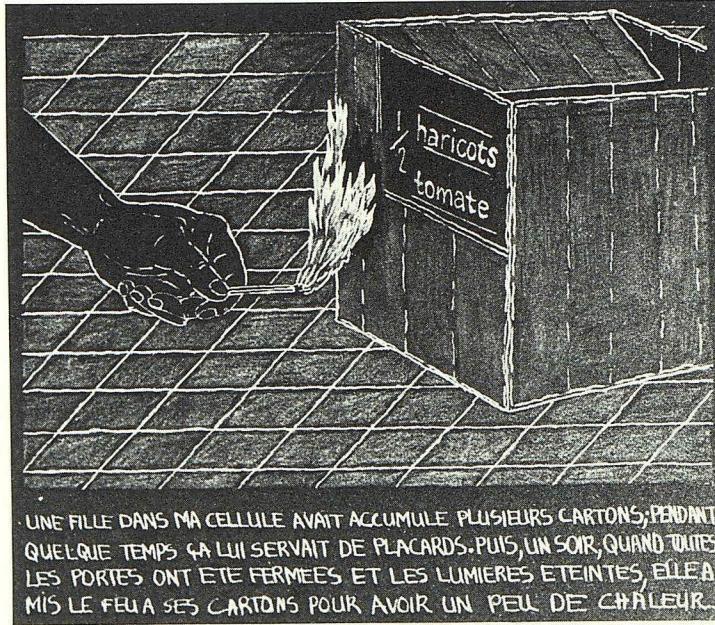
Generally speaking, it took a certain amount of time to make friends. I didn't have this problem because there were already two people there whom I knew when I arrived. But for the others who had no soap, no handkerchiefs (the prison gave you nothing, not even

sanitary napkins; all they gave me when I came in was a rag to wash myself with), if they weren't resourceful, if they didn't get some friends to help them, they couldn't make it. You had to work about ten days before having enough money to buy things at the canteen.

The money that you made working, making key rings, was only just enough to buy cigarettes. You were paid 80 centimes (15 cents) for one hundred key rings, about a day's work. Those who worked really fast managed to make two hundred. I started working the second day after my arrival, but I lost the tool I had been given. I got yelled at by the nun, and I saw that it was badly paid, so I stopped. Instead, I spent my days reading. I could do this because I was not sentenced yet, while those who were had to work. The catalogue from the library was passed in the workshop and we had the right to two books a week; I would ask some girls who didn't read to order some for me. I read everything—Pearl Buck, books on explorations. I also spent a lot of time drawing, and sometimes I would go out. My seat was at the end of the workshop, near the door, so it was easy for me to go out in the yard when the nun wasn't looking.

The money that you had on you on entering the prison was kept; you could only use it in the canteen. Some inmates received money orders; many of them, actually, got money. As for me, my brother



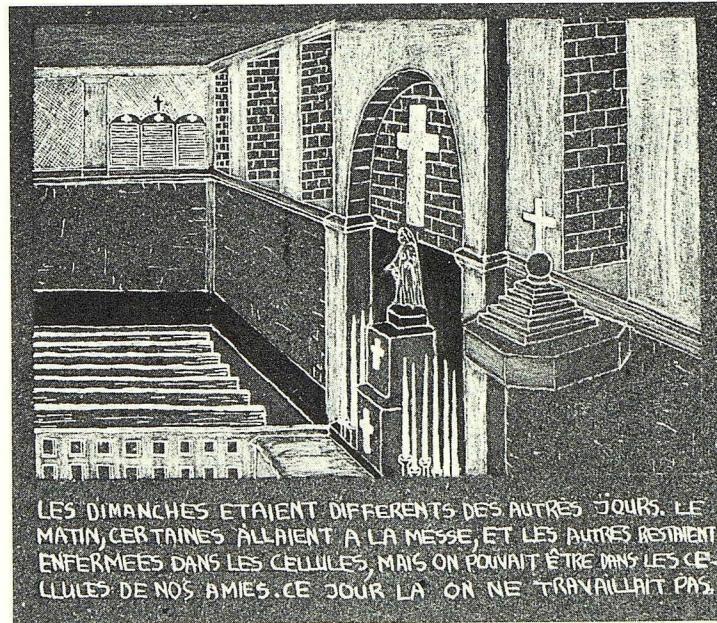


sent me a hundred francs (20 dollars) and a little money that I had left in a book at my mother's. But for those who had no money at all, the only way to get any was to work.

At the canteen you could buy pencils, letter paper, envelopes, toilet articles, or wool. Some knitted; it was winter and it was necessary if you didn't have any clothes. You could also buy french fries, puddings and prepared dishes that you could have on Sundays. We couldn't have newspapers, but we could buy magazines like *Jours de France*.

About these magazines—we bought them for the recipes that were in them. Often there were pictures with the recipe, so we would tear them from the magazine and eat them. For example, if you liked salad, you would eat pictures of salad. We also ate pictures of chicken, cakes, or things like that.

At the meals we got mostly starchy food—potatoes, beans, or cauliflower; there was also bread. They gave us meat, but it was very tough. In fact we couldn't cut it with the blunt children's knives that we bought at the canteen. We ate it with our hands, tearing it with our teeth. At the end of the meal—which had been served by inmates—we did our own dishes. We had brought our bowls and our cutlery to the mess hall in the cardboard boxes that we took every-



where with us, and we went in little groups to wash them with cold water. To wipe them, I used the rag they had given me when I came in. . . .

About twice a week we could bring back up to the cells the rice pudding we had had for dessert at supper. I loved this and often exchanged two cigarettes for a bowl. We went up two by two, and silently. If we talked, the nun made us stop until we were silent again. Between the time we went up and the time we went to bed there was about half an hour, when we had the right to stay near the stove and toast pieces of bread. We talked, or we sang; I had a friend who sang very well, and we gathered around her. She sang some of Adamo's songs, but also some she had written herself, like one about the nuns to the tune of *Morpionibus*. She also sang in church; she had spent years in a religious boarding school and she knew the whole mass in Latin. . . . It was forbidden to sing in the cells once the doors were closed, but we did it anyway. We all sang together. The nuns couldn't put us all in the cooler; they contented themselves with yelling into the void.

On our beds we had the right to three blankets—and no more—and two sheets. In summer it might be enough, but in December I found another blanket when one of the girls in my cell left, but it was

taken away in a search. The heat was provided by a stove in the hall; there was one stove for forty cells. One girl in my cell had accumulated several cardboard boxes; for a while she used them as storage space. Then one night when all the doors had been locked and the lights turned out, she set fire to her boxes to get warm. A nun realized this and came to ask what was going on. We both pretended to sleep, but in the end I lifted my head and told the nun that I didn't know anything, that I hadn't seen anything, and that I couldn't tell her anything else.

It wouldn't stick: I was all alone with the other girl and I was saying that I hadn't seen anything. The next day the girl I was friends with said that I couldn't have done it. She knew me and she knew that I didn't have bizarre ideas like that. The other girl did two weeks in the cooler, but I could have gone too because I hadn't said anything . . .

Every week there was a shower session. It was in cubicles that didn't close, and there were three of us in each cubicle. The water ran sometimes too hot, sometimes too cold. When it stopped, everyone had to be through, and even if your head was full of soap, there was nothing you could do about it. You had to find a way to rinse yourself with cold water afterwards; sometimes when you finally got a chance to do it, your head was already half dry.

As for clothes, pants were forbidden. Men were banished from our environment and the nuns would say "Stop wriggling!" when we saw workers from Fresnes (men's prison). We weren't supposed to look at them. We had to wear dresses or skirts. When I arrived, I was wearing pants, so to replace it they gave me a burlap dress. In the beginning I didn't have any other clothes; I wore it night and day. I couldn't wash it and until I got other clothes, my dress stayed dirty. . . . One girl had made herself a skirt from a blanket, so she went to the cooler. It was a beautiful skirt and it was a long time before they realized what she had done. I don't know where she found the needle and thread; they were among the things that circulated. . . . The sheets and rags which had been given to us were washed in the linen room. The linen maids, like those who served the meals, were inmates who had been there a long time and who had won the trust of the nuns. The sheets were changed about once a month; it was far from ideal when there were lice.

During my stay there was an epidemic of lice. The nuns told us to go to the kitchen and ask for vinegar, and we put it on our heads. When it was dry we put on some powder, and then a scarf; we stayed like that for three days. If you had lice it was considered bad and no one approached you any more. One of the nuns made fun of me; she

said, "If you washed every day . . ." or something like that. I told her that she had surely had them before me. It was the first time in my life that I had them, so . . .

The cells were searched pretty often, sometimes when we were there, but mostly during the day when we were in the workshop. The nuns looked for knives and candles we had gotten by exchange, or other things we weren't allowed to have. They also looked for mail between inmates; we had the right to write letters to each other, but not love letters. Once one of the nuns—a young one who must have been under thirty—wrote to one of my friends. She told her that she liked her and that she would like to have a closer relationship with her. The letter was found and the nun in question was expelled. This sort of thing happened from time to time.

Everything we received from the outside was also searched. We received our packages all cut up and opened. All our letters were read, those that we got as well as those we sent. Some had practically nothing in them, but they couldn't go through because they were too long. People wrote to us with the smallest writing possible because one page, written very small, went through, but 2 pages, written in large letters, didn't. As for the letters that we wrote, everything concerning prison life, the nuns, or what we ate, was censored. We could talk about the books we had read, and a minimum about what we did, but that was all. In general, what went through or not depended on the person who read the mail. Some letters that shouldn't have gone through went anyway, and vice versa.

We were also searched when we left the prison. You couldn't take out anything that might be a souvenir. One of my friends, for example, had made a drawing of a little girl taking water in her hand to offer a doe; they didn't let her take her drawing out. In these searches you couldn't really hide anything, and what was least likely to be found was what wasn't hidden. In the end they looked more often into the girls' vaginas to see if they had hidden letters than in the luggage. As for me, I had certain drawings and papers which normally I wouldn't have been allowed to take out. I just left them with my things and they weren't even seen.

It was on the eve of my departure that they told me that I was coming out. Until then I had no idea how long they were going to keep me. I could have gone out on probation before, but only on condition that they tell my mother. I preferred that they didn't. Once out, I didn't have the right to write to my inmate friends who stayed.

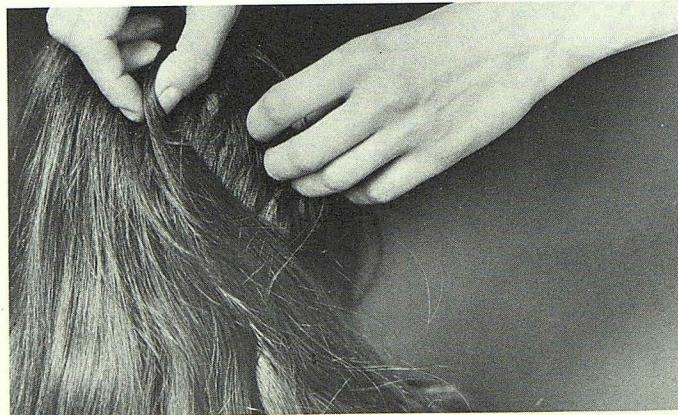
Sundays were different from other days. In the morning, some went to church and the others stayed locked up in their cells, but we could go into our friends' cells. Afterwards we did the cleaning up

That day we didn't work, and we could sit where we liked in the workshop-mess hall. The nuns put the radio on, but they turned it off as soon as the news came on. They didn't let us know what was going on in the outside world. To pass the time we played games. For instance, we played truth games. We asked questions about incidents that had happened a few days before and about which we hadn't managed to find out the truth. The girls were generally honest; you couldn't lie in that game, otherwise you didn't play. But the biggest pastime was cards—Tarot, Belote. Some of them were played with real cards that some girls had managed to smuggle in. The others had been made with empty packs of Gitanes on which we had drawn.

Some girls tattooed themselves. They would take ink from ball point pens and mix it with cigarette ash. This way they managed to make an ink which was pretty indelible—blue-black. Then they took two needles, one projecting in front of the other, and put a drop of ink between them. Then, with the projecting needle they made the drop slip into the hole. This made a point; they made as many points as they wanted. They made snakes, hearts, names, but mostly just three points, which means "Death to the Pigs," or five points—"Alone Between Four Walls." It was the emblem of prison.

We wrote all over ourselves with pens, and there were ways of making up your face. With ashes from the stove in the hall and water we could make mascara. There were black felt pens that we could use as eyeliner, but it was hard to take off and we usually did it with shoe polish that we got at the canteen. We mostly made our eyes up, but some girls put brown pencil around their lips.

Some girls reacted badly to prison life, but we tried to help them, and they managed to make friends, to find people who helped them



overcome their distress. I wouldn't leave a poor girl by herself who arrived here and who looked completely lost. I went to see her, I talked to her. Of course there were those who had their husbands and their children outside; for them it was harder. I was told that once a girl hanged herself. Sometimes there were also attempts at escape; I was told that one inmate hid herself in a garbage can, but she didn't have time to get out and was killed inside the garbage truck.

At Christmas the Salvation Army came. We got together in the mess hall and listened to them sing Christmas carols. These women were very nice. They gave each of us a towel, a handkerchief, and a pack of candy. We had a lot of fun because we weren't used to seeing this sort of woman. Everybody was laughing, but they were well received by the inmates. In the end we thought it was really nice of them to trouble themselves for us. I think a lot of the girls were touched.

For the meal, we put all the tables together to be the most together possible. Those who had saved a little money bought pastries, but almost everything was shared. I, for example, didn't have any money, but I had a little of everything like everybody else. On the part of the prison, there was nothing, except that we didn't work that day and we could go to midnight mass. A lot of people were depressed that day; all this reminded us of our families and of all the things we were trying to forget. It was nice, this party, but actually it was painful. The monotony of the other days was better. We didn't really give each other presents. We didn't have the possibility of giving anything, except cigarettes. The girl I was going out with gave me some cigarettes.

