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**Of Bookbinding in Bolivian Mining Camps**  
**Pilot Project "Handmade Books: Expression,**  
**Repair, Production and Economic Alternative"**  
*Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Danish*  
*Environmental Cooperation Program, Women*  
*Miners Plan: Women Miners Plan by Alex Appella*

"Old x-rays, plastic bottles cut open and flattened, posters and fliers left over from last year's elections, paper only used on one side..." At over 11,800 feet, coming up with materials for making books in isolated mining camps is not nearly as challenging as raising children, as overcoming the cold, or as living in extreme poverty in the poorest country in South America. It is not nearly as challenging as having miner husbands whose average life span is only 37 years. Notwithstanding the fact that only one of the ten mining camps that took part in the initial round of workshops coordinated by the Pilot Project "Handmade Books" has a store that sells any sort of paper, the participants had no end of ideas of what materials could be used in their homes and communities to make books. Equally rewarding were the fountain of uses they immediately envisioned for the knowledge of bookbinding.

Who can imagine the doors that open by doing what one loves to do? Doors like those of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs that sponsors a Women Miners Plan as part of a Danish Environmental Cooperation Program in Bolivia; or the office door of the coordinator of the Women Miner's Program, a female chemical engineer from Catamarca, Argentina, who saw the empowerment of books and bookbinding as a way to enhance three pillars of the Program: the promotion of equal legal rights, equal access to economic resources and equal control over the benefits, and the equality in expression.

Despite how admirable these objectives are, from the moment we were invited to participate in the Women Miner's Plan in Bolivia, my husband and I questioned whether or not we were ethically in favor of marching our ideas into such remote communities. After over 400 years of colonization, the last thing Bolivia needs is more folks from other cultures coming in to impose. Initially what convinced us was the knowledge that other cultures were not going to stop coming and until then, the knowledge of bookbinding, taught in a horizontal framework that empowers rather than

entraps, is a multi-faceted tool. Any other doubts we held evaporated the instant the first workshop began.

In the end of September 2003, Magu and I, with our Bolivian counterpart, Gabriela Barriga, gave five introductory bookbinding and expression workshops to 82 participants from 10 mining communities in Southern Bolivia. The enthusiasm and creativity of the participants is a guarantee that while we may teach how to make books, they will be the ones to lead the content. They, as a group and as individuals, will define how the project advances, and to what end.

For us, as coordinators, the binding workshops softly opened miraculous doorways into these secluded communities. It goes without saying how much we relish and have to learn from this rare opportunity for candid exchange with such a brave group of people. As an American outside of America, one tends to have a lot of explaining to do, and it is not always comfortable. Argentines outside of Argentina, especially in Bolivia, have a lot of explaining to do as well. Bolivians are the cheap labor force in Argentina, a country full of lighter-skinned immigrants, and the discrimination against the darker skinned Bolivians is ferocious. At the start of one of the workshops, a woman stood up and said to Magu, "You Argentineans treat us very badly." There were some nervous giggles, but then a whole room full of Bolivian women sat staring at Magu, waiting for an explanation. "You're right," Magu began, "and it's embarrassing. It shouldn't be that way. Not all Argentineans are that way. Hopefully, soon we'll realize we need to join together down here in South America, rather than bicker."

Argentina had a terrible crisis last year, no?" another woman then asked. In this moment books of all languages and formats that tell stories with text, drawings, photos and any combination thereof, were dispersed around the room. Each workshop began with a discussion about the many different purposes a book can serve, and their power to transmit content in an infinite variety of ways. The range of books handed out went from 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian poetry, to a Griffin & Sabine book; from a collection of Bolivian ghost stories to a photographic account of the Argentine crisis at the end of 2000. This was the book Magu pointed out as the answer to the woman's question. The women studied that book of chaotic photographs and as it was passed around the room, one woman whispered to her neighbor in Quechua. The neighbor

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spoke up to translate the comment: "Like what is happening here, now, in Bolivia." Exactly. Not three weeks later, the enormously unpopular Bolivian president was forced to step down after 70 Bolivians were killed by police and military repression. But that is an entirely different story, perhaps one they will decide to tell as the expression and binding workshops continue.

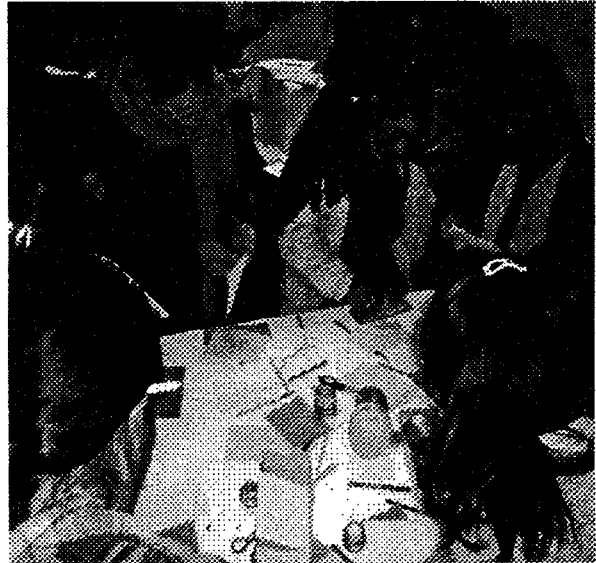
The Pilot Project "Handmade Books" is designed horizontally, so that the participants have as much (or more) voice than we, the coordinators, do in how the program advances, and to what end. The objective of this first round of workshops was to introduce the possibilities books and bookbinding can unleash. After sharing the wide assortment of machine-made and handmade books, we taught a basic Japanese Stab Binding. At the end of each workshop, the women were asked the following three questions: 1. What has been learned today? 2. What can be done with what was learned? 3. How can it be done?

Among the 82 participants, the most repeated answer to the first question was "To appreciate and create books." To the second question, the three most repeated answers were "Repair broken books in our homes and communities," "teach others how to make and repair books," and "make the notebooks and folders our children need for school." And the resounding answers to the third question was, "work in groups" and "learn more."

Teach, share, work together—the resonant voice of a group of women who raise families and work in mining under stark, life-threatening conditions. As per their suggestions, the next round of two-day workshops, scheduled for the first two weeks of December, will focus on book repair, more in depth binding techniques, and expression. We can hardly wait to see what books they have been making in our absence. Given the fact that 60 percent of the participants are illiterate (our Pilot Project works parallel to literacy programs flowering in the same communities), and that all of them speak Quechua as a first language, the distinct books emerging from these mining camps will be vital expressions quite unlike anything else on the planet.

Throughout 2004, as part of the Pilot Project "Handmade Books" the development of productive groups will progress alongside further binding and expression workshops, so that those who want to use bookbinding and repair as an economic alternative,

either individually or as groups, will also develop the



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necessary self-promotion, basic business and organizational skills.

The power of books, their ability to provide identity, to preserve history and tradition, to teach, and to share, has no limits. Not even at 15,000 feet. This faith allowed my husband and me to step over our initial doubts, and to walk through this door, with a few books, some dull needles, and thread tucked under our arms. Understanding that this has just begun, we vividly anticipate witnessing what pages will float back and forth across this entryway.

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