

INVENTING THE BOOK

Chula Vista, CA / Claire Hsu Accomando

"What is more meaningful, the book or the text it contains?" asks Ulises Carrion in his essay *The New Art of Making Books*. The current display of handmade books at Southwestern College startles us with the idea that a book need not be mere text-bearer but that it can, in fact, be virtually textless.

Alternative Books/Libros Alternativos is a fascinating exhibition of experimental book art from Mexico City. The books range from exquisitely designed works to pamphlets put together with materials from supermarket shelves. Bracketed between these two extremes are three-dimensional objects with pop-up elements, unbound books and books that surprise the reader at every turn of the page. Text appears on manila folders, lunch bags, school notebooks, leather, bark, tissue paper and burlap.

As if to prove that we can't tell a book by its cover, an inconspicuous booklet bound between two pieces of shirt cardboard and stitched by sewing machine contains a wonderful poem by Manuel José Arce about the first dissidents: Eve and Adam. The expulsion from Eden is illustrated with marvelously simple line drawings by Vlady.

Vincente Rojo and José Emilio Pacheco, in contrast, collaborated on an elaborate volume of poetry, *Jardín de niños*, with Rojo contributing splendid multicolored illustrations. Equally meticulous efforts went into the creation of *Codex Itzpapalotl*, which opens like an accordion—a book form with roots in the pre-Columbian codices of the Aztecs. The text by Brian

Nissen consists of anthropological images arranged to form a symbolic language. The book has the appealing sheen of ancient patinas and is accompanied by a recording of Octavio Paz reading his poem "Mariposa de obsidiana" (obsidian butterfly).

Magali Larra, who also curated the exhibition, makes books that contain delicate drawings and very little text. Some of her work consists of colored tissue-paper shapes pressed between laminated plastic strips as if they were biological tissue preserved on laboratory slides. Her books

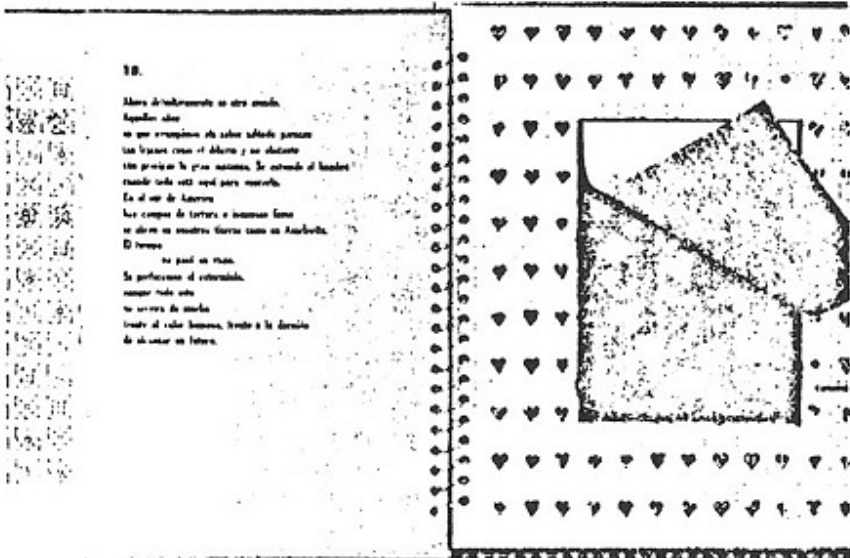
are published by La tercera parte de la noche (The Third Part of the Night). La tendadero (The Clothesline) is a publishing group that puts out "literary lingerie," intimate texts that play on nostalgia. The thin books resemble school notebooks and are appropriately displayed hanging from strings. An origami animal is pasted in one of the booklets, and the facing page gives folding instructions. In *Jardín de niños*, similarly, one finds a blueprint for a fancy paper airplane.

This appeal to the child within us is an

important part of the book-art movement that developed in the seventies as a protest against the lengthy and pedantic processes of academic institutions and the commercialism of the publishing business. Artists and writers united and turned to stencil art and fast, inexpensive methods of reproducing the written word. In Mexico Filipe Ehrenberg and Ulises Carrion pioneered this alternative book movement after returning from Europe, where they had studied the art. By the mid-seventies they had joined forces with other dissatisfied groups, and the streets had become an outlet for the work of makers of books, photographers and performing artists.

The book-art movement was essentially an urban phenomenon; artists and writers sought to rediscover their city and present it as a living document. To do this they became selective garbage pickers, rescuing nostalgic mementos and cultural icons from oblivion. The books displayed in this exhibition bulge with bits of fabric, buttons, old stickers and countless personal documents. Each book is presented as an event—the issue of numbered editions is often celebrated with a performance. Marcos Kurtycz is photographed as he steps on pages of one his new books with inked feet to add rather emphatic footnotes to his work.

Alternative Books/Libros Alternativos has a spontaneity and extemporaneous quality that is refreshing. In our age of mass production, it is mind-opening to see the work of innovative artists who reinvent the manuscript. □



José Emilio Pacheco and Vicente Rojo, *Jardín de Niños*, 1978, mixed media, at Southwestern College, Chula Vista, CA.