

## **Crossing Communities Art Project** *Edith Regier and Colleen Anne Dell*

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The Crossing Communities Art Project advocates the use of imagination and culture as means to share stories, histories, experiences, identities and values. The project brings together people from diverse backgrounds to collectively make art to work towards social and economic transformation.

Crossing Communities Art Project currently produces participatory videos with marginalized women and girls locally in Winnipeg and nationally, in remote northern communities in Canada. In 2009, we also traveled to Kathmandu to include Nepali women and youth in our film projects.

These short films can be seen on [LookingInSpeakingOut.com](http://LookingInSpeakingOut.com) – an innovative site to look in and speak out about these videos that focus on the sex trade, self-harm, addictions, HIV, violence, suicide, being transgendered and what it means to be widowed in Nepal. Crossing Communities collectively directs these videos together with women and girls whose voices are rarely heard locally or globally. This new web project is a place for people to gather on a global scale to view the films created with women and girls in marginalized circumstances, and to have an intimate view of their histories, thoughts, hopes and dreams, as well as for viewers to add their thoughts in the Speak Out Section of the site. Our goal is to bring the perspectives of marginalized women who are often criminalized women from the margins into the centre of public dialogue.

Crossing Communities Art Project started in 1996 as a weekly art studio in Manitoba's provincial prison for women, the Portage Correctional Centre, and was at that time appropriately called the Portage Art Project. *Passing Pictures with Prisoners* was our first exhibit in 1999 and was the outcome of a year-long exchange between artists in Manitoba and women in prison. The exhibit was held at the Urban Shaman Gallery together with our first public conversation where we brought together women from prison, the local director of the Elizabeth Fry Society, psychiatrist Dr. Jeanne Randolph, along with an Aboriginal elder to engage the public in a dialogue about the images in the exhibit and the issues that these pictures brought forward.

This method of making art with women and then engaging the public in dialogue about the issues the women face and bring forward in their art continues to be the basic process we use today. We invite women in marginalized places, including prisons, to meet with artists and after

spending time together and learning about each other's circumstances and values we collectively make films, photos, and videos that visualize what our participants have to say.

Our public dialogues, exhibits and film screenings take place in art galleries across Canada but also in non-art spaces. We stage events for large and small audiences, and the women and girls who participate in the art projects have lead parts in engaging the public in conversations. We video document the conversations at the events and this becomes part of the art project so that viewers can see and hear what others had to say. For example, we screened our participatory video *Pictures of Self-Harm* with a small group of nurses in Manitoba in a hospital setting and video documented their heartfelt response which is now being screened on the website *LookInSpeakingOut*. Similarly, we showed the same video to a group of youth in Kathmandu, Nepal and documented their response which is also available on the website. Still images from the video screenings provide powerful visual examinations of the women's as well as the audience's responses to the videos and art we have made.



Video still from *A Story of HIV* (2009)  
by Urmilla KC and Crossing Communities Art Project, Nepal.



Video still from *Butterfly* (2008)  
by Jackie Traverse and Crossing Communities Art Project, Canada.



Video still from *White To Red* (2009)  
by Rita Schrestha and Crossing Communities Art Project, Nepal.



Video still from *Gimme My Fix* (2009)  
by Alexis Young and Crossing Communities Art Project, Canada.

Two of our videos, *Women and Girls in the Sex Trade* (2005) and *Pictures of Self-Harm* (2007), are available for purchase on DVD through the Crossing Communities Art Project website [www.crossingcommunities.org](http://www.crossingcommunities.org). These videos are used by a broad spectrum of individuals who work in different public sectors, including government departments who purchase the videos to train service providers, professors who use them in their curriculums, as well as churches, addiction treatment centres, service providing organizations, drop in centres and many others. Our art projects are designed to make visible what is often difficult to see and talk about, creating an opening for dialogue where innovative solutions to social, economic and cultural challenges can emerge. The women and girls who participate in our projects also present their videos and films to open public audiences and lead discussions that increase public awareness of the social risks that contribute to the criminalization of women and youth.

Crossing Communities recently presented at the 2009 Custody and Caring International Conference. This one-day learning event explored issues of substance use in the lives of Canadian women and their ways of healing. Designed as a multidisciplinary educational opportunity, it was delivered to health care professionals, community/facility youth workers,

early childhood educators, teachers, police, policy developers, and all other interested health care and service providers in addictions and mental health services, child welfare, education and the criminal justice system. Art from Crossing Communities' participants, including video, films and photos, was showcased. Tonya Tabobondung, a Crossing Communities participant, highlighted her work during the conference, and assisted with audience participation in the creation of a stop-motion video on women's healing from substance abuse. Through the use of independently created and photographed frames (similar to how a cartoon is made), the conference participants told a short story. This work is available on the Crossing Communities [lookinginspeakingout.com](http://lookinginspeakingout.com) website.

Crossing Communities has been recognized for its contribution through such awards as the National Crime Prevention Strategy Safer Communities Award in 2005 and the 2007 national Kaiser Award for Excellence in Aboriginal Programming. In 2008, Edith Regier – the founder and Artistic Director of Crossing Communities – was named a woman who makes a difference by the Manitoba Status of Women.

For more information on the Crossing Communities Art Project, please contact:

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

*Edith Regier* is the Artistic Director of the Crossing Communities Art Project, located in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Along with being the Research Chair in Substance Abuse, *Colleen Anne Dell* is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and School of Public Health at the University of Saskatchewan. Dr. Dell is a Senior Research Associate with the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, Canada's national non-governmental addictions agency and the Correctional Service of Canada Addictions Research Centre. She is also

an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University and a Research Associate with the National Network for Aboriginal Mental Health Research at McGill University and the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan. She is currently leading a five-year national study of the role of stigma and identity in Aboriginal women's healing journeys from problematic substance use.