

Crossing Communities Art Project  
Winnipeg, MB

## **Provisional Routes – Cultural Navigations Through Sites Of Criminalization**

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In the fall of 2004, the Crossing Communities Art Project invited Caoimhe McAvinchey and Magno Barros from People's Palace Project based in the UK and Brazil to join us in OUT AND ABOUT a week-long event of discussions, a workshop and a public forum to explore and discuss arts practices in prisons or with those at risk of imprisonment.

People's Palace Project (PPP) is based in the theatre department of Queen Mary University in London and stages art projects in prisons in the UK and Brazil. PPP is a Non-Governmental Organization that uses participatory arts practices to devise and implement development projects, with a particular focus on human rights. Crossing Communities Art Project, based in Winnipeg, carries out visual art projects with women and girls who are imprisoned, are on conditional sentences, or are at risk of imprisonment.

The Native Women's Transition Centre (NWTC) is a temporary home to Aboriginal women who are leaving histories of violence, including the extended effects of the residential schools. The women there have typically had their children removed from their care by Child and Family Services. As part of OUT AND ABOUT, PPP and Crossing Communities staged a performance/video project with NWTC women, who portrayed their hopes of having their children in their care and their dreams of watching their children play in homes free from violence.

At the day-long forum, PPP presented STAGING HUMAN RIGHTS a theatre project in Brazilian and UK prisons as well as CHANGING THE SCENE with youth in conflict with the law in Brazil, Crossing Communities presented a video and performance documenting and responding to the self-harm that is one of the coping mechanisms of criminalized women and there was a screening of the NWTC video CHORUS OF DREAMS from the workshop earlier in the week. The audience included artists, government employees, staff from treatment centres, a corrections officer, a member of the provincial legislature, students, and criminalized women. A table of first responders were invited to initiate the dialogue: performance artist, Shawna Dempsey, photographer, Diana Thorneycroft, Debra Parkes who teaches Law at the University of Manitoba, Cathy Fillmore who teaches Criminology in the Sociology Department at the

University of Winnipeg, Adele Breeze who served a life sentence, Bernice Keeper and Tryli Anderson, both mothers from NWTC.

These public events are used by PPP and Crossing Communities to situate the process of making art with criminalized people in view of a broader public audience and to generate a forum on human rights, where the people most affected by our justice system and who are often behind bars have entry into that dialogue.

Ten years ago, Grant Kester characterized the artist in community as an aesthetic evangelist working at the hands of a conservative history.<sup>1</sup> In comparing notes between experiences of PPP and Crossing Communities, to assume that we are working with a population that is about to be paternalized is to miss the mark. The women of Canada's, now closed, Kingston Prison for Women expressed this most clearly in the quote they used to represent themselves "If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together."<sup>2</sup>

That being said, we are still navigating in the belly of the beast and defining the course is at best a lengthy process and at worst confusing and potentially damaging.<sup>3</sup> How do we as artists, work in ways that are respectful of the histories and current circumstances of criminalized people, find entry into prisons, find funding to support the long process of establishing connections with prisoners or those at risk of imprisonment and with the justice departments that administer corrections, document the relational process intrinsic to these art projects, and make it count to the people who are in prison and as an exploration into the stakes of imprisonment?

As artists who work in sites of imprisonment, we work in a space that is at once public and concealed, in the concrete buildings and in the social process of criminalization. Miwon Kwon in *One Place After Another*, reviews the history of public art and includes the site of public art as more than a physical space. "In this sense the chance to conceive the site as something more than a place - as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group - is an important conceptual leap in redefining the public role of art and artists."<sup>4</sup>

Crossing Communities works with the Elizabeth Fry Society the Canadian women's justice advocate when we develop art projects. The statistics that they provide describe the woman in prison as someone that society is less in need of being protected from and more in need of supporting.

2/3 of women prisoners are moms

78% of incarcerated women are survivors of violence

70%+ of women prisoners in Manitoba are Aboriginal

70%+ of Aboriginal women in Manitoba live below the poverty line

Provincially imprisoned women have an average education of grade 10 or less

40%+ more Manitoba women live in poverty than men

Women self-harm in prison as a way of coping and surviving emotional pain and distress

Most imprisoned women are low risk, high need

If the most humanistic reason behind imprisonment is the protection of others and the prisoners aren't dangerous then how do we reassess our prisons and their purpose? Kim Pate the national director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies cautions that, "we must be careful not to merely repackage and recreate the inequities of our current systems. Even the use of such terms as "restorative" may need to be re-examined through others' lenses. Restore to what – pre-existing inequities?"<sup>5</sup>

The place of the arts in this process of re-examination was outlined by Suzanne Lacy who coined the term New Genre Public Art, "We need to collaborate with small and large social, political, specialized groups of people already informed on and immersed in the issues. And we need to teach them to welcome artists, to understand how art can concretize and envision their goals. At the same time we need to collaborate with those whose backgrounds and maybe foregrounds are unfamiliar to us, rejecting the insidious notions of "diversity" that simply neutralize difference. Empathy and exchange are key words."<sup>6</sup>

During our week of discussions, Caoimhe and Magno compared how the statistics that outline who is in the women's prison in Manitoba (and in Canada) have much in common with who is imprisoned in the UK and Brazil and that many of the challenges we encounter here in establishing art in prisons are parallel with those of PPP as are our goals.

"At the heart of all our projects is the act of performance and the search for active, participatory and creative citizenship. Theatre has for centuries played its part within the network of civic institutions which societies create to ensure the preservation of basic principles of justice and democracy. As the Greek origins of the word indicate, theatre is a place from which we learn to look. Governments can legislate, civic authorities can try to implement those laws, the police can attempt to enforce them but democratic societies function through an active participation in the observance of human rights and justice. We must learn to look.

Peoples Palace developed STAGING HUMAN RIGHTS in Brazil supported by the AHRB, Community Fund UK, the Ministry of Justice (Brazil), FCO (Human Rights Fund) and the British Council. In 2001 the program was awarded the Betinho prize for Human Rights. STAGING HUMAN RIGHTS, a participatory theatre project was initiated in thirty seven prison institutions in the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo in 2001 and has now developed, with considerable financial and political support from the Brazilian Ministry of Justice, into an arts and human rights project in institutions in five states across Brazil.

Recently, the Arts and Humanities Research Board have supported a two year research and development project in women's prisons in Brazil and the UK –STAGING HUMAN RIGHTS: WOMEN IN PRISON. One of the aims of this project was to develop a methodology that was specific to the women's estate and therefore had to be very receptive to the institutions we were working in, the experiences of the women in them and societal perception of women in prison. This culminated IN THE HOUSE – MESSAGES FROM WOMEN PRISONERS, a day-long event highlighting and debating the boundaries between performance, human rights, gender and the criminal justice system in Brazil and the UK. The methodology developed from being entirely theatre based to include visual art practice and digital video and photography.

PPP also established a multi-arts human rights project, CHANGING THE SCENE, within the youth justice system throughout the state of Rio de Janeiro. This project, supported by the Community Fund has been endorsed by UNESCO.”<sup>7</sup>

Crossing Communities Art Project has been working with criminalized women and girls over a ten-year period. Some of our projects are PASSING PICTURES WITH PRISONERS a year long visual mail exchange between artists and women in prison and the publication with the same title that documents that exchange and invited authors’ responses to those exchanges. REPARATIVE PICTURES/CONDITIONAL SENTENCES was the title of the exhibit that documented a year of connection between Winnipeg artists and women recently released from prison or on conditional sentences and ended with a day-long forum and public dialogue.

OUT AND ABOUT was our first exchange with PPP and there is much to be gained through continuing to communicate as we navigate provisional routes through sites of criminalization.

Endnotes:

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- <sup>1</sup> Grant Kester, “Aesthetic evangelists: conversion and empowerment in contemporary community,” *Afterimage*, Jan.1995
  - <sup>2</sup> This quote is attributed to Lilla Watson an Australian Aborigine.
  - <sup>3</sup> I am referring to Martha Fleming’s letter to the editor responding to Grant Kesters article in which she said “We are from inside the belly of the beast trying to be responsible for and to people and things seriously wronged and wrong.” *Afterimage*, June 1995
  - <sup>4</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004 p.30.
  - <sup>5</sup> Kim Pate, “This Woman’s Perspective on Justice: Restorative? Retributive? How About Redistributive?” *Kinesis*, Vancouver Status of Women
  - <sup>6</sup> Suzanne Lacy, ed. *Mapping the Terrain New Genre Public Art*, Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1995 p.128
  - <sup>7</sup> These descriptions are from written communications sent to me by Caoimhe McAvinchey and Magno Barros of PPP in 2004.