

Global Trajectories of Art as a Human Right: Operating From the Margins of the Art Field in Russia

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During my visit to a state institution in Peterhof, Russia, in May 2016, it became clear that a human rights perspective, the disability rights movement, and the principles of disability studies had not yet entered the center that I visited. Here, I explore limited conditions for artmaking for people with disabilities, and how the need for artmaking is not recognized by the state-run center—and, despite this, how many residents of the center with disabilities find artmaking a valuable and inseparable part of their lives. The four activist-artists, curators, and educators profiled here make artistic production possible for the people with disabilities in the center, and try to evoke conversation in the art field in order to recognize the value of the artistic work made by the people with disabilities that they work with. Their work is based on quiet, but persistent and systematic, resistance against the State.

Tracings Out of Thin Air

Two curators and educators, Joana Monbaron and Alexander Ivanov, created the international project, *Tracings Out of Thin Air*, to problematize the complex questions of norm, ability, and dependency in art.¹ Within the project, they invited international art educators, critical pedagogs, art mediators, and socially engaged artists to St. Petersburg, Russia, in order to increase critical conversation and collaborate with a small group of people from the center. One of the main goals was to raise critical questions about ableism and emphasize the critical role of art in a dialogue with the general public through interventions, discussions, residencies, publications, and exhibitions. The main aim was to promote critical thinking and social engagement. As Monbaron and Ivanov describe:

Tracings Out of Thin Air is an effort to occupy a non-dualistic position, a position “beside” as alongside or nearby, in the interaction, and beside as something that is not always neutral, and that is not without conflict.[...] Operating from the margins of the art field, we see this “beside” positioning as a space for new opportunities, for the development of a semi-visible practice that presents a wide range of potentials and trajectories. (para. 8)

Monbaron and Ivanov are approaching their project through practical activities; for example, by organizing public events. As part of their activities they invited me to give a talk in a university and to visit the center. The purpose of my visit was to meet with the residents who create art in the center, as well as the staff who work with the residents.



Figure 1. Natalia Petukhova in the art studio. Photo by author.

Visiting the Art Studio in a Psycho-Neurological Center

The art studio (henceforth called *the studio*) is a small studio of the not-for-profit charity Perspektivy; the studio is housed within the psycho-neurological center No. 3 (henceforth called *the center*), a state institution in Peterhof, Russia. The center serves approximately 1,000 adult residents. While the staff of the art studio, Natalia Petukhova and Leonid Tsoy, are dedicated to supporting equality and understanding for the residents and their art practice, the understanding of human rights in the rest of the center is quite different. Having always been located physically within the center, the circumstances for running the art studio are extremely challenging. An ideological confrontation between the center and the studio was apparent to me.

Petukhova (Figure 1) has worked in the studio for many years and has experience with the residents' difficulties. When I took a tour in the center, I saw what supported her testimony. Although the basic needs of the residents are fulfilled, the living conditions, in my opinion, are dreadful. The residents are not allowed to make any actual decisions in their lives, own any private property, or leave the institution. Their isolation is secured by the geographical location in a forest, 20 miles away from St. Petersburg, by fences surrounding the institution and by security control on the gateway. The purpose of this is to make sure no one accesses or leaves without a pass.

Figure 3. A resident working in the art studio. Photo by author.

The art studio was established in 2001 to support people who were socially disadvantaged, neglected, and disabled in Russia. Some of the center's residents have been creating art for more than 15 years, becoming self-taught artists. A total of 40 residents make art in the studio; 22 regularly (Figures 2 and 3). The studio has an impressive archive containing more than 3,000 artworks, some having been exhibited nationally and internationally. Each day, from 5 to 10 people go to the studio to make art. Residents with severe movement disorders are given support to access the studio space.

Through my experience, it is clear that the staff of the psycho-neurological center are not interested in the residents' artistic activities. They do not even get to see most of the artwork the residents produce, since all the artwork needs to be left in the studio. Artwork made in the studio rarely gets to be hung on the walls of the center. When that has happened, the aesthetics of the art have not pleased the staff members, and the artwork has been altered by the center's craft instructor. Another example of the lack of respect for the residents' artmaking was a battle between the staff members of the center and the studio when the residents were brought to their own exhibition opening. The staff of the center did not see any reason for the residents to



Figure 2. A resident working in the art studio. Photo by author.



The staff of the center did not see any reason for the residents to take part in their own exhibition openings.

take part in their own exhibition openings. The common principle is, “If he cannot even speak, how could he possibly be an artist?” (Petukhova, personal communication, May 9, 2016).

Art Practice for Human Rights

It was an impressive experience for me to be able to explore how the residents of the center were creating art in the studio, how they were able to regain their otherwise limited human rights during their visits to the studio, and how dedicated they were in their art production. It became clear to me that people who hardly receive any appreciation in their everyday life were being treated as equal human beings during their studio art practice visits. In the studio, artistic activity is not assumed to be a privileged activity, but a human rights activity; however, this artistic activity is in constant negotiation between the residents and staff members of the studio and the center.

Petukhova and Tsoy, respectively, are an artist and a psychologist by education. They consider themselves as facilitators, and sometimes as collaborative artists. They take part in Tracings Out of Thin Air events, and work closely together with Monbaron and Ivanov, who visit the studio weekly. The work of the four activists recognizes the spirit of an affirmative model of disability studies, in that it emphasizes the value of disabled individuals' own lifestyles as culture and a cultural identity (Swain & French, 2000), a discourse also recognized in art education (e.g., Derby, 2011; Kallio-Tavin, 2013; Wexler, 2011).

For Ivanov, it is important that, even though the residents are self-taught artists, they are not defined as *outsider* artists (personal communication, May 9, 2016). The center's residents' artistic production includes a variety of approaches, taking inspiration from multiple sources that cannot be defined under any one category (Figures 4 and 5). Instead of viewing the artworks as a result of being isolated from society, as an outsider, or as residents being exoticized due to disability, some of the artworks can be viewed as having the potential to question the traditional and normative definitions of artistic production and aesthetic appreciation. Perhaps, as Jennifer Eisenhauer (2007) suggests, these artworks might be viewed as a way to

represent a rethinking of the discourse of disability in art from one solely framed within a language of accommodating individual limitations, to a discourse that emphasizes the critical role of art in troubling the social and political issue of ableism. (p. 10)

The center is one of the many institutions in Russia where the human rights of people with disabilities are violated. In collaboration with the dedicated staff of the studio, the Tracings Out of Thin Air project aims for better recognition in terms of



Figure 4. Resident's depictions of the center's interiors. Photo by author.



Figure 5. One resident has a long-term interest on depicting cows in different styles. Photo by author.

social justice for the residents. Together, the studio staff, curators, educators, and the residents are able to make small but meaningful change in the difficult life conditions of the residents. Perhaps their actions will evoke a change in the society as well. ■

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Endnote

- ¹ Monbaron, J., & Ivanov, A. (2016). Tracings out of thin air. Retrieved from <http://tracingsoutofthinair.wixsite.com/about>

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