

Creating Circumstances for an Institutional Pedagogy: Notes on Tracings Out of Thin

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Independent artists

Abstract

This paper is a study of the current conditions of normality, ability and dependency in an art studio located in a Russian residential care institution. By paying attention to the particularities of the contemporary Russian residential care system, the authors raise the issue about the status of pedagogical, curatorial and artistic practices implemented in an art studio located in such a total institution. Through the introspective analysis of the multi-layered project *Tracings Out of Thin Air* instigated in the art studio, this paper looks at the possibilities of curatorial solutions aimed at investigating and critically reflecting upon disability discourses, ableism, and limited agency in art. It concentrates on convergences between disability justice, critiques of public education discourses, and the politics of representation. Because of its location in a Russian residential care institution, the art studio offers an intersectional space in which the research of informal forms of knowledge that fall outside of structured curricula gain particular meaning.

Keywords

Critical pedagogy, disability studies, post-Soviet studies, educational turn in art.

Our project *Tracings Out of Thin Air* started in 2015. It is a research-in-practice project that explores the history, artistic strategies, and institutional context of the art studio opened by a large charitable organisation at a residential care institution (in Russian: “psycho-neurological internat”; in short: PNI) in one of the suburbs of St. Petersburg in 2001. *Tracings Out of Thin Air* was conceived as a hyper-local multidisciplinary program created in response to contemporary Russian artistic, inclusive and educational initiatives centred on a collaborative work with a given community. The project arose from of a sense of professional frustration and a desire to practically confront the ideals of corporate public pedagogy, “an all-encompassing cultural horizon for producing market identities, values, and mega-corporate conglomerates, and for atomizing social practices” (Giroux, 2004, p. 497). Although conceptualized and implemented in this overall setting, it remained outside the sphere of influence of large institutions. This modest, small-scale initiative was organised independently, albeit with a critical awareness that no one is ever free from institutional behavior.

This paper is an attempt to reflect upon *Tracings Out of Thin Air's* whys and wherefores after two years of work. It offers an introspective perspective, not free of doubts, and modestly aims at defining the practical and conceptual framework of our own practice and commitment as the project's curators. The paper opens with a contextualisation of the Russian care system before continuing with a critical description of the existing working structures inside the art studio. A paragraph is then dedicated to the way the project came to be, while the last paragraph before the open conclusion offers a theoretical genealogy that informs our interest in the implementation of an institutional pedagogy.

Normality, Ability and Dependency at the PNI : Mapping the Possible

PNI is part of the general system of psychiatric care of the Russian Federation and at the same time are social care institutions (cf Klepikova, Utekhin,2012). Despite the fact that by their purposes and objectives, the PNI differs from the psychiatric hospitals of the health care system, and that the PNI residents are not "treated patients" but actually reside in them, the activities of such institutions are built not on the social, but on the medical model of disability. Such a modus operandi has its roots in the Soviet rehabilitation paradigm and is derived from the assumptions fixed in the current Russian legislation on the origin and social status of "normal" and "defective" (sic) corporality. According to the Law on the "Social Protection of Invalid Persons" (and contrary to the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, also ratified by the Russian Federation in 2012), "limited capacity" is not a direct consequence of economic, political or cultural inequalities, but the result of "the disorder of one's body functions as a consequence of diseases, injuries or defects resulting in the limitation of any life activity." (Article 1 of the Federal Law of 24.11.1995 N 181-FZ (as amended on 01.06.2017) "On the social protection of disabled people in the Russian Federation, para. 1).

The Russian psycho-neurological care residences are large administrative and bureaucratic institutions. According to the official statistics, as of October 10, 2016 (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Russian Federation), Russia had 514 psycho-neurological residential institutions, in which more than 152 thousand people lived. The psycho-neurological institution, in which the project *Tracings Out of Thin Air* is conducted, has more than 1000 residents. The demographic composition of these institutions is difficult to delineate. Among those living in PNI, one can meet people who were somehow diagnosed as disabled; people who found themselves in a difficult life situation; young adults coming from orphanages for mentally ill children; people with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, epilepsy or musculoskeletal disorders;

autistics; elderly people; people who survived a stroke; ex-homeless or lonely people left without a home and means of subsistence. The researcher and anthropologist Anna Klepikova states that these people “are placed together in these institutions based not on their mental health status but rather on their inability to take care of themselves and live independently. All of the residents are labelled as *disabled* or *invalids* (in Russian), meaning they are not fit for a so-called normal life” (Klepikova, 2017, p. 23).

According to Russian sociologists Pavel Romanov and Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova (2011), analogous practices of “incarceration” of people categorised as “Other” are due to the post-Soviet cultural codes of citizenship, based on the ideology of ethnic nationalism. The assignment of disabled persons in closed institutions “acts like an imprisonment, and continues to be an act of denial of their citizenship. Although the deprivation of liberty without proof of guilt is illegal, the motive of their crime is their body or mental condition” (“Vooobrazhayemyye negrazhdane,” para. 1).

The Russian psycho-neurological residential institutions are closed and protected areas: one can enter and exit only with a badge. Residents are isolated from the outside world, deprived of personal space, have limited private property, and are heavily dependent on the staff and the temporary rules established by the institution. Men and women live separately (on different floors and at different departments), and share a room for 4 to 15 people. In addition, there are also “closed” psychiatric departments for people whom the staff of the residential care institution considers having a pronounced psychiatric symptomatology or an auto-/aggressive behavior.

The rights of PNI residents are regularly violated. The most serious violations, recorded by public inspections¹, activists, and journalists, include forced medication and abortion, rape, suicide, beating, binding, locking in a punishment cell, labour exploitation, and unconsented deprivation of the resident’s legal capacity status². In a situation of insufficient state control and

almost complete absence of publicness, violence in PNI acquires a systematic and everyday character.

In the institution in which *Tracings Out of Thin Air* is being conducted, there are also volunteers and caretakers working next to the PNI staff members. These volunteers and caretakers are employed by a charity, which started its activity in the early 2000s. At the initiative of this charitable organisation, a special “department of normalisation” was created, intended for disabled young people, and a few ateliers were opened, among which the art studio mentioned above.

These ateliers are a rare example of a space opened by a non-governmental organisation inside a State institution, allowing its staff to participate in the residents’ everyday life. This unique “institution within an institution” situation makes visible the ideological and practical conflicts at stake between the charity’s and the psycho-neurological institution’s staff: the firsts promote a social model of disability and the defense of the residents’ rights, while the seconds are institutionally bound to a medical approach of disability. Thereby, issues of access, control, rules, knowledge production and whose knowledge is valued, whose interests are represented, whose needs are considered, mechanically engender serious professional disagreements and raise the issue of the (im-)possibility of mediation.

To be fair, we must say that the paradigm of normalisation, actively promoted by Russian charitable organisations as an alternative to the medical model of disability, has its share of contradictions. Indeed, while most of the PNI residents have spent all their life in closed institutions, the charity staff makes an effort to include them in “normal” cultural practices, which would make them seem more tolerable in the eyes of the institution’s staff and volunteers. However, this practice of integration often remains unquestioned and ends up being inconsistent (Klepikova, 2017, p. 28). Hence, a constant practice of critical unravelling leading to “moments in which the paradigms we inhabit cease to be self legitimating and in a flash are

revealed to be nothing more than what they are, paradigms” (Rogoff, 2007, p. 98) became in our eyes a compulsory aspect of the practice we wished to develop in and around the art studio.

The Art Studio

The art studio was opened at a state psycho-neurological residential institution in 2001 and exists on the basis of the charity organization mentioned above. Since its foundation, it has an active artistic, pedagogical, and exhibition practice and currently has an archive that contains over 3,000 works of a broad genre spectrum — from abstract painting to photography and digital art.

The art studio works five days a week. Each of the days is divided into two sessions, which the charity staff and PNI residents call "lessons." The frequency of the PNI residents' visits depends on both objective and subjective factors: the schedule, the availability of space, the amount of work of the charity staff, as well as the motivation of the PNI residents themselves. Currently, there are about forty artists working in the art studio, living in nine departments, including the closed psychiatric one. On a regular basis, the studio is visited by 22 people who make up the “core” of its artistic community (most of them are men). Most of the artists work independently; people with musculoskeletal disorders or cerebral palsy work in tandem with the staff of the studio. The art studio's managing team consists of a manager, a psychologist and an assistant. In practice, these functions overlap and combine pedagogical (conducting consultations, discussions, workshops and short presentations) and administrative work (preparation of reports, budget management, purchase of artistic materials, negotiation with cultural institutions for the organisation of exhibitions, interaction with PR and fundraising and other departments of the charitable organisation, etc.). Work in the art studio has ultimately a collective nature and has been formed throughout many years of professional and personal relations between the artists living in the residential institution and the art studio's staff.

The particularities of the PNI construction as a total institution, of which activities are sanctioned by legal and social contradictions that is part of an advanced economy of discrimination, also raise the issue of the status of pedagogical, curatorial and artistic practices in the art studio. Facing daily various types of institutional violence against the residents, the art studio staff takes an active part in human rights activities: they record cases of violence, participate in their investigation and possible elimination, as well as in the resolution of existing conflicts. The very fact of moving a PNI resident from the department where he/she lives to the demedicalized "creative" space of the art studio, is often perceived as a political act.

The combined roles of an "art world" agent and of a representative of public control over the PNI activities, whose practice in the art studio is legitimised by "aesthetics" and structured by human rights functions, permit us to consider the activities of the art studio staff as an interesting case of infrastructural activism. Such a status complicates stances and at the same time allows the creation of new opportunities and trajectories within the institution, and also gives the opportunity to present the artistic activity conducted inside the residential care institution as a complex social and infrastructural phenomenon.

Having said that, it comes as no surprise that the practice of exhibiting the artists' works of art is embedded in the complex controversy surrounding their artistic and social statuses and is structured by the contradictory desires of the art studio staff to focus on the depoliticized aesthetic value of the artworks and at the same time to make visible the political issue of closed social institutions. In the context of the neoconservative patriotic model of Russian culture, mixed with forms of neoliberal economics and social Darwinism, which equally affect the policies of cultural and charitable organizations, these contradictory desires make the adherence to the principle "to generalize without minimizing and to specialize without ghettoizing" particularly problematic (Cachia, 2013, p. 263). Indeed, the works of art of the studio's artists are often associated with the extremely blurred but commercially viable category of "outsider art,"

being deprived of the opportunity to be considered in alternative cultural, political and artistic contexts.

Additionally, the art studio's artists, as residents of a large semi-medical institution, periodically become the target audience of educational programs and events intended for "people with mental disabilities." As a rule, these programs position themselves as agents of change and seek to restore violated social justice. At the same time, they are focused on the nature of mental illness and the PNI residents' personality rather than on society's problems and processes provoking exclusion. The absence of a critical approach and the reproduction of existing categorizations leads to the fact that these programs become themselves part of the discriminatory processes they originally planned to contest. Therefore, inviting PNI residents to take part in projects for "people with mental disabilities," these programs ignore the social construction of the status of mental illness and the associated notion of "capacity" and, as a result, often contribute to the normalization of the medical model of disability. Bearing all this in mind, the search for curatorial solutions aimed at investigating and critically reflecting upon disability discourses, ableism, and limited agency in art is one of the most difficult tasks facing the art studio today.

The Ethics of Frustration: The Issue of Educational Practices in the Contemporary Art System

As the project's initiators, we first encountered the art studio's group of artists while working for the education department of the European contemporary art biennial Manifesta 10, which took place in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg in 2014. Alexander Ivanov devised a project together with the then Head of the art studio Natasha Petukhova, which involved some of the studio's artists. The project conceptually referred to Eric van Lieshout's artwork and comprised a series of workshops culminating in an exhibition.

The very institutional context of the temporary European biennial — aiming at contributing to the collective imagination of “Europe” — taking place inside the most well-respected Russian museum with its internal labor organization and behavioural rituals, made us acutely conscious of the contradictory aims of the dispositive of arts education. Regarding both organizations’ agendas, the educational apparatus served to include and attract visitors to the exhibition, making their experience enjoyable and meaningful, while at the same time being inclusive of colonial practices and normalizing processes that remained unquestioned. These agendas also resulted in the instrumentalization of educational and inclusive programs as economic indicators that made the biennial justifiable financially and bureaucratically.

That particular experience and our overall involvement with Manifesta 10 allowed us to articulate a critical perspective on art institutions as powerful sites (re)producing and establishing canons and values that could be (sometimes) countered and critiqued by the implementation of a marginal practice situated at the crossroads of an educational, artistic, and curatorial approach. Such a practice, however, never remains fully innocent, a conscious aspect that made us think about the ethics of one’s own engagement while working with discriminated communities (Sternfeld, 2013).

While we were still digesting our complex experience and trying to conceptualize the way we should organize ourselves, we decided to devise a project in its own right that would respond to issues raised by the institutional, economic and social structures fabricating the art studio. We considered the project as an opportunity to politicize and otherwise structure our own professional practice as curators, educators and art managers, giving ourselves the opportunity to independently determine priorities, manage our working time and, most importantly, to rethink and consolidate our practice through the concepts of self-reflection, research and solidarity/collectivity.

Inspired by the philosophy behind projects such as the *Centre for Possible Studies*, we

started to visit the art studio once a week in December 2015. The project was initiated by London's Serpentine Gallery in 2009 led by the mediator and artist Janna Graham, which focused on investigating the center's neighborhood future together with local interest groups. Our first aim was to participate in the Studio's set of relations formed between artists and transversal constituents such as the charity staff members, volunteers and the state psycho-neurological personnel, and to establish a climate of relative trust with the studio's artists and, expectantly, build friendships. We exposed our initial ideas to the artists and discussed a possible title for the project. After a particularly productive brainstorm, we finally voted and chose Konstantin Salamatin's version *Tracings Out of Thin Air* (Рисунки из Воздуха).

After complicated beginnings and an extended discursive process—which was judiciously facilitated by the Swiss collective microsillons—on the project's potential structure, it was decided that it should trace a constellation of satellite activities of co-research named “attempts,” taking as a starting point the practices and working conditions in the art studio. These attempts took the form of semi-visible practices: situations, small talks, and discussions, reading groups, residencies, interventions, and exhibitions. The audience of these attempts were the disabled artists working in the studio, the charity and the PNI personnel, as well as different players of the local artistic community (art students, curators and museum educators).

Through these attempts, we tried to

- Research and get into the context in which we were working and cross-examine disability as a complex social, political, and cultural construction.
- Investigate the complexities, the problematics and the potentials of the current and possible spaces in which art and education combine.
- Consider and make visible (at first for ourselves) pre-learned discriminatory knowledge, inequalities and normativities in art and art education through the lens of disability inclu-

sion/exclusion.

- Create moments for collective reflection, analysis, and examination for all the project’s participants.

Another important aspect of *Tracings Out of Thin Air* was the assimilation of theory that became for us both an instrument and a form of the project. This reflective process was not only a tool to consider our activities critically, but also a central part of our activist practices.

An “intermediate” result, which recorded most of the reflections that came up during the project, was the publication *Tracings Out of Thin Air: Establishing Oppositional Practices and Collaborative Communities in Art and Culture* (co-edited with the great help and support of Marina Gržinić and Aneta Stojnić). This publication made visible some of our ideas and doubts about our own activities and allowed us to map similar initiatives throughout Europe, thus opening up perspectives for further solidarities and correlated actions.

The reflections presented in the next paragraph refer to the process of our own learning through the project, documenting both what we have come to know and at the same time what we did not know when starting. It describes how we have gradually built a theoretical framework, which was formed through the project’s progressive unveiling, and which we constantly tried to expand and push further.

Creating Circumstances for an Institutional Pedagogy: Genealogy of the Project

As the fundament of our strategy, we supported the social constructionist analysis of disability, in which domineering institutions and policies, prejudiced attitudes, discrimination, cultural misrepresentation, and other social injustices are seen as the primary causes of disability, but without reducing attention to those disabled people whose bodies are medicalized because of their suffering³. Moreover, we perceived disability “in its mutability, its potential invisibility,

its potential relation to temporality, and its sheer variety,” as Michael Bérubé (2006) writes in his Foreword to Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory*, as a particularly elusive element to introduce into any critical pedagogical and curatorial practice because it always interestingly complicates it (p. viii). Considering disability enabled us to confront the omnipresent system of compulsory able-bodiedness reproduced in the art world and, paradoxically, in the PNI itself. Convinced by the potential of intersectional discourses, and mainly by the fact that a critique of neoliberal institutional strategies of behavioral conformity can be illuminated by the case of disability (Hartblay, 2012), it became clear that *Tracings Out of Thin Air* should concentrate on latent convergences between disability justice and critiques of public educational discourses and the politics of representation.

Therefore, we adopted a soft parasitic strategy that would turn inside out the logic of “audience reaching” policies applied by cultural institutions. Indeed, instead of trying to attract a specific discriminated community to a museum or a gallery, the “target group” would actually reach us—the cultural workers—and we would start from the institutional conditions in which that community lives. With working groups comprised of local and international university researchers, educators, and artists from inside and outside the psycho-neurological residential institution, the aim of “Tracings Out of Thin Air” is to develop ongoing, collaborative research projects that simultaneously explore group work, aesthetic production, and the social exclusion of disability. That conceptual framework relates to Janna Graham’s (2010) interpretation of Felix Guattari’s term “Institutional Analysis,” which the philosopher developed to describe the radical re-working of institutions through their “permanent reinvention.” This referred to the heterogeneous opening up of people to “otherness,” both in their work within institutions and those that fell outside their normal modes of existence (p. 135).

The writer and pedagogue Fernand Deligny (Alvarez de Toledo, 2007) had in common with Guattari and other intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century their refusal of fix-

tions about identity and their metaphorical thinking of discontinuity: to the terms “derivations” or “rhizome,” he preferred “detours,” “landmarks,” or “chevêtres.” He controversially perceived the asylum, the psychiatric hospital as networks resisting the concentration of powers and identities, and developed within it frail and fleeting pedagogical experiences as a way to avoid being targeted. What is interesting for us in Deligny’s institutional critique is that it does not tackle the material, spatial and social structure of the institution, but the integration of abstract norms which come and obstruct invention, the “mass of possibles” and efficiency. His strategy of “evasion,” consisting in taking advantage of both the opponent’s weakness and the institutional confusion in order to subvert rules and have the administration confront its own corruption (Alvarez de Toledo, 2007, p. 23), at the same time contradicted and played an inspirational role in the development of our initiatives in the psycho-neurological residential institution.

A crucial part of Deligny’s (1968) pedagogical practice that he carried out in the Cevennes in the 1960s consisted in transcribing the displacements of autistic children. Together with these children, Deligny and his collaborators began to trace these lines, perceived as the reflections of the circulations of the autistic young people in their space of life and to speak of “chevêtres”; knots by which the young people passed and stopped incessantly. For Deligny (1968), who envisaged autistic children as resistant to the colonization and the domestication of symbolic spaces by language, these cartographies constituted a way of offering them a space that escaped speech. He saw these pedagogical experiments as the fruit of circumstances and subsequently characterized the educator as a “creator of circumstances,” ready to welcome the unknown, from which new configurations will stem.

For *Tracings Out of Thin Air*, we like to think of ourselves as “creators of circumstances.” But more than a nice appellation, Guattari’s and Deligny’s practice of institutional analysis brought a depth to our approach in turning the perspective of education upside down, taking the focus away from the residents or the participants and redirecting it on the educators. This

encouraged us to be self-reflexive about the rhetoric and terminology that has been used by different players in the projects to shape people's experiences. Throughout the research project, we also reconsidered the notions we would have previously taken for granted. Working together with disabled artists made us critical of our own actions as educators and aware of the implicit, unintended and unrecognised knowledge that takes place in any learning process (the so-called Hidden Curriculum).

Mira Kallio-Tavin's (2013) "encountering pedagogy" led us to think about how we understood our own pedagogical involvement. Arguing for a pedagogy that should not be reduced to something already known, we felt encouraged to question our own assumptions and, instead, to pay attention to elements of embodiment and sensorial knowledge in art pedagogy. This has been enriched by a collective reading of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003) *Touching Feeling*, in which she analyses the prevalent discourse produced around artists categorised as "outsiders," repeatedly diagnosing "outsider" artists in terms of lack, applying to them a "language of emphatic negation." Looking at Judith Scott's sensory relationship with her sculptures, Sedgwick argues that it conveys an affective and aesthetic fullness that can attach even to experiences of cognitive frustration. Bearing this in mind, it became clear to us that the art studio is a thought-provoking place of encounters, in which the research of informal knowledge that falls outside of structured curricula gain particular meaning. By involving the artists and the charity staff in looking at these institutional structures from within, we try to find ways not only to unlearn, but to rethink them.

Open Conclusion

Working with artists living in a closed care residential institution, we encounter difficulties every time we have to speak about the project's aims and conceptual framework or when we are asked to define our roles. These difficulties are multiplied or transformed depending on the

audience we address (would it be for a grant application, an academic conference, or a meeting with local activists). How do we speak about the project without trivializing? We also meet (self-) criticism every time we organise activities with the artists as a group, since the only thing they have in common outside of being artists is their disabled status. Is that justifiable? Aren't we reproducing the very discrimination we denounce?

Coming from the art field, we are very aware that hidden discriminatory processes often reveal themselves in the context of public programmes and discussions that raise socially important topics. Ignoring the problems of inequality within the world of art itself and using critical theory "to satiate an endless demand for circulation of the 'new'" (Graham, 2010, para. 3), such projects become part of processes of the "culturalization" of socio-political conflicts. As a result, these events become "public programmes without a public sphere," staging "alternative" political debates, while deactivating their passage into significant consequences (Graham, Graziano, & Kelly 2016, pp. 30-32).

Tracings Out of Thin Air is our modest attempt to generate forms of political agency through transdisciplinary associations and frictions generated by bringing areas that have come to be artificially disentangled from one another through disciplinary boundaries into an insistent proximity. This proximity might expectantly subvert pre-learned knowledge and rules and have players from the art studio, the charity, the care institution, and the art world confront what is hidden in their/our curriculum. By opening up the transformative potential of dislocation that decentres the very basis of normality, we hope to develop with the art studio's artists a practice that art education theorist Carmen Mörsch names a critical praxis, by which art education becomes a context in which one confronts with society, with institutions and with oneself (Mörsch, 2009).

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Notes

¹The results of public inspections can be found on the official website of the Coordination Council for the Affairs of Disabled Children and Other Persons with Disabilities under the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation http://invasovet.ru/reforma-pni/rezultaty_proverok/ [Accessed 10.08.2017], as well as on the website of the Moscow Helsinki Group <http://www.mhg.ru/publications/389CEE8> [Accessed 09.08.2017].

²PNI residents also have different legal statuses: according to the Russian legislation, a person can be recognised as capable, partly capable or incapable. For PNI residents, the deprivation of legal capacity is a massive, non-transparent and highly subjective procedure (cf Klepikova 2013).

³Here we refer to Susan Wendell's suggestion to pay more attention to impairment while supporting a social constructionist analysis of disability, mainly if we focus our attention on the phenomenology of impairment, rather than accepting a medical approach to it. It is indeed undeniable that some unhealthy disabled people, as well as some healthy people with disabilities, experience physical or psychological burdens that no amount of social justice can eliminate (Wendell, 2013, p. 165).