

# Process as the medium for socially engaged art

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mail art exchange, process-based arts, experiential learning, incarceration, translation

## Abstract

Dialogue allows for pathways to places of understanding and unknown islands, whether it be in thought or action. Artists and educators, Anastasia Artemeva and Arlene Tucker use examples of their projects, Invisible Neighbours and Translation is Dialogue (TID) as a means to delve into concepts about the role of the artist, and the process of exchange. We will look at examples of these within the context of process-based artworks, mail art exchange, and experiential learning. A current collaboration, Let It Out, was born from the previously mentioned artworks. Let It Out is a program developed for students studying in juvenile detention centres in Finland and in Russia. This exchange project will utilize artistic and music techniques to create a collective multimedia artwork. It aims to encourage creative process and for the students to learn different tools of self expression. We believe that exchange causes momentum and that is the heart of what these multi-disciplinary and trans-national situations intend to create.

*Meaning without communication is not possible. In this way, we might say, that dialogue precedes language and gives birth to it.*

- Juri Lotman (Lotman, 2005, p. 218)

## Introduction

Dialogue allows for pathways to places of understanding and unknown islands, whether it be in thought or action. Artists and educators, Anastasia Artemeva and Arlene Tucker use examples of their projects, Invisible Neighbours and Translation is Dialogue (TID) as a means to delve into concepts about the role of the artist, and the process of exchange. We will describe these projects and discuss how each is unique in its own right and yet have many shared similarities as they are community oriented and process based. We will look at examples of these within the context of process-based artworks, mail art exchange, and within the influence of David A. Kolb's experiential learning. A current collaboration, Let It Out, was born from the previously mentioned artworks. Let It Out is a program developed for students studying in juvenile detention centres in Finland and in Russia. This exchange project will utilize artistic and music techniques to create a collective multimedia artwork. It aims to encourage creative process and for the students to learn different tools of self-expression. Methodology and approaches will be shared as a way for the reader to apply to their own practice. We believe that exchange causes momentum and that is the heart of what these multi-disciplinary and trans-national situations intend to create.

## Let It Out

Let It Out is a project that connects young people in Russia and in Finland. The teens will exchange artworks, lyrics, and short videos, produced during workshops with artists and musicians. This process will be facilitated using translating techniques and result in a collaborative multimedia artwork, as well as an exhibition of art & design objects. *Free Translation* is an integral platform used in school workshops to share artworks, understand different perspectives, and learn how to respond to various ideas and concepts. Presentation of this methodology is not only to share the project, but also to engage the reader on alternative

approaches to art practice and raise awareness of social issues.

*Let It Out* is a sub-project of Prison Outside, an independent project researching art in and around prison. The research behind Prison Outside is centred on the subjects of imprisonment, justice, and the role of the arts in the relationships between people in prisons and people outside. We are interested in perceptions of incarcerated people and ex-convicts in the society, and how we can break the stereotypes and support each other. We focus on artistic practices, be it prisoners' own initiatives or designed educational projects that promote self-expression, solidarity and communication between people of all walks of life. We also offer a platform for production of artistic projects related to imprisonment, currently with a focus on Finland and Russia.



Let It Out workshop, Culturafest, 2017.

Participants were invited to create a visual response to musical compositions by Sonny Black

### **The process is the experience and vice versa**

Within these projects are the core foundations of experiential learning and process-based arts. David Kolb's book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984) talks about the learning style model, which is still important and currently practiced. In process-based art making, every step of the process is considered to be part of the artwork, and the end product is not the

main goal. Students interact with their surroundings through multi-sensory experiences that includes movement, observation, listening and creating with the materials found in the immediate environment. This way, the dialogue extends from being interpersonal to interspatial. By bringing together experiential learning and process-based arts, the artwork and time spent on the project is a piece of art in itself. It is not about what is being produced, but about production, doing, making, and awareness of being.

Kolb's experiential learning theory includes four steps in the learning cycle and four different learning styles. "Experiential learning offers something more substantial and enduring. It offers the foundation for an approach to education and learning as a lifelong process that is soundly based in intellectual traditions of social psychology, philosophy, and cognitive psychology. The experiential learning model pursues a framework for examining and strengthening the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development" (Kolb, 1984, p 3-4). Due to the fact that Kolb's theory is related to the student's internal cognitive process, it provides the content of abstract concepts that can be used flexible in many different situations. In Kolb's theory new experiences create an impulse to build new perspectives. Kolb states, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

Kolb's learning process is integrative. Every step is equally as important, and helps move towards the next phase. It is possible to enter into the learning cycle at any time, as it logically follows and propels the experience. Effective learning forms when the student has gone through the whole four step model. It is best to do the whole cycle and not just one or two of the steps. Kolb's experiential learning style theory and learning types are represented in a four-step learning cycle in which the student is going through each step.

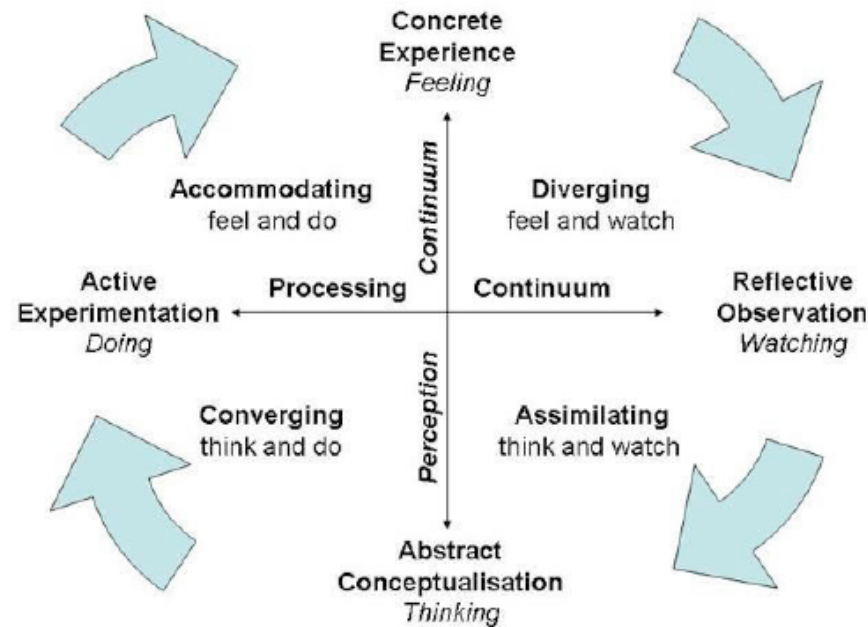


Figure 1: Kolb's Four Stages of Experiential Learning Cycle.

Process art can be traced to the 1960's with its event-based artworks, such as those of Fluxus and Allan Kaprow. In these experimental artworks, the audience was invited as a co-creator of an artwork, and a participant of an event. They used a variety of media to promote a collaborative creative process. In this approach, the process of making was important, rather than a completed product (Higgins, 2002). Mail art movement was popularised around the same time, also by Fluxus, and used the postal system both an environment and a material for creating (Friedman, 1984). It is from these practices that we borrow playful approach to materials and using postal system as a means of exchange.

Ken Friedman, one of the youngest founding members of Fluxus, writes "... the soul of correspondence art remains communication. Its twin faces are "correspondence art" and "mail-art." Here the distinction is

between reciprocal or interactive communication – correspondence – and unidirectional or one-way communication, mailed out without any requirement for response" (Ibid, p. 18).

### Exchange between spaces

Invisible Neighbours (Näkymättömät Naapurit) project was created by Anastasia Artemeva and Annika Niskanen in Autumn 2015, drawing a bridge between the inmates of Helsinki prison Sörkka and the residents of nearby apartment blocks. The project was developed to encourage the connection between people in prison and those on the outside, in this case physically right on the other side of the prison wall. It was facilitated with the help of Esitystaiteen Keskus, a performance art center in Helsinki, and consisted of a series of workshops. These weekly workshops took place inside the male prison and at the arts center, and two set groups of people of various age participated. A medium of postcard was used to facilitate communication. The postcards used had two blank sides, which could be filled with writing or through image making, and a new artistic and creative writing technique was introduced each time. Anastasia and Annika delivered the cards from one group to the other. Every week new postcard were read out loud so the whole group became "the recipient". After that each person responded to a particular, randomly selected card, expressing themselves with the help of artistic and literary techniques introduced. To preserve the anonymity required by the prison, each of the neighbours made their own stamps and used them to identify as the author of the cards. Life on either side of the prison wall was depicted through varying themes and materials of everyday.



Invisible Neighbours workshop, Esitystaiteen Keskus, Helsinki

Invisible Neighbours project encouraged a dialogue between the two communities and a number of individuals at the same time: through exchanging cards a common space was created, a place for individuality within community. Communication process happened both within each group as the cards were read, responses discussed created, and during the exchange between the two groups as the cards were brought from the prison outside and vice versa. The process was both a symbolical one of prison and freedom juxtaposed, and a very personal one, as the event of receiving a personal letter brought tears to the eyes more than once. Travelling across the prison wall, postcards became the in-between place that we all could inhabit. The program allowed for a creative exchange between the inmates and other residents of the neighbourhood – people who do not interact on the daily basis, yet share same space in the city.

The recipients were invited to keep the postcards, but photographs of them were presented at Invisible in Seven Days exhibition in Kallio Kunsthalle, where the process of co-creating and exchange continued. Invisible Neighbours initiated a larger project called Prison Outside. The research behind this project is centred on the subjects of imprisonment, justice, and the role of the arts in the relationships between people in prisons and people outside.



Invisible in 7 days exhibition in Kallio Kunsthalle allowed for further engagement with artworks

Dr. Aislinn O'Donnell from University of Limerick, Ireland interviewed prisoners who took part in a long-running educational program in Portlaoise Prison in Ireland, during 1987-2010. There the value of a presence of an artist, an outsider, is evident: "The fact that the NCAD [National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland] programme was offered by practising artists who could speak about their own practice and who were not seen as part of the 'system' but rather represented third level institutions in Ireland was identified as a significant factor in attracting men to the programme" (O'Donnell, 2014, p.3). This research indicates the importance of an outsider approaching a community with a specific and clear interest.

### **To translate is to communicate**

*Translation is Dialogue* (TID) is an ongoing installation authored by Arlene Tucker. What started out as purely an artistic installation with mail art elements, which aimed to bring awareness of the continual process translation and interpretation has, has since extended into a series of workshops and platforms of sorts. Since its inception in 2010, there have been 18 phases and it has been presented in Finland, Estonia, USA, Iceland, and the UK. Contributing artists have come from the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, as well as Eastern, Central and Western Europe, and Scandinavia. This ever-continuing dialogue happens through various media and platforms and creates a point of entry as the source and target texts are available online and in site-specific installations. Where and how it will continue is in the hands of the interpreter and how the languages, rather artistic medium and form, fall on the ears of the listeners.



A simple beginning grew into a web of translations. It all started from an audio description of a conceptualized dance performance. People then from all over the world were asked to create their interpretation of what they heard and how they perceived the description of the dance. Choice of medium and implementation of the idea was dependent on the creator. Subsequent to the first installation, people could then choose what is their Source Text, which is the original text that is to be translated into another language. In that sense, would the interpretation be based on the original audio recording or an interpretation of that audio recording? This created more space and play for the basis of translation, which is Source Text and Target Text; the result of a translation from a given source text. The visualization of the translation process is seen in the TID installations and also on the Free Translation online gallery, which features artworks of people affected by incarceration. Translation is a natural process for understanding and seeing translations materialize help pinpoint what grabs the reader's attention and what is most important for the translator to convey.



Free Translation workshop in Engels, Russia. Re-organizing a colorful collective translation. October 2018.

Based on translation studies, Tucker has created a program for people of all ages to understand intersemiotically what happens in the communication and creative process. TID introduces various theories of translation and points of entry on how to translate through an array of activities. Tucker offers a series of dynamic exercises, that include movement, verbal, visual, performative, linguistic and semiotic, to help understand the process of interpretation, which thus arrives at a translation. For example, during the series of Free Translation workshops, which was a program designed by Prison Outside and Translation is Dialogue done in collaboration with Moscow University of Psychology and Education Artemeva and Tucker explored the translation process between text and image for social workers and teachers working with juveniles showing delinquent behaviours and also for themselves to self express. Through transforming emotions to colors and then colors to words and finally from words to images, we were able to discuss openly and deeply about our views on each translatable process. This in effect, is a safe way to open up difficult topics, which seem unattainable to reach, but slowly get closer in time. Also, the works made in the workshops are added to the installation making it a collective group of work. Every voice is acknowledged, every person has a place, just as every artwork is part of the larger picture.



Works from the Free Translation workshops in Russia were displayed during Free Translation exhibition at MAA tila in Helsinki, Finland from November 15-29, 2018 and on the Free Translation online gallery where people can upload their interpretation and continue the dialogue.

## Concluding reflections

Communication, regardless of it being interactive or one-way, is at the heart of our practices. That means that we don't approach a community with a goal to educate or create a work of art as an end-goal. We arrive interested in a specific community or an idea, and offer our skills and various artistic tools to investigate this idea together with the members of a group. An important aspect of such interaction is to have a genuine interest in the chosen community, and to communicate it clearly.

Each group presents different challenges. For instance, working with incarcerated individuals gives us a privileged position, as we can leave anytime. At the same time, we also enter as outsiders, and cannot fully put ourselves into the shoes of the participants, yet we can empathise. A crucial part to the exchange is honestly acknowledging each other's positions and aims of the creative process. Free Translation has proven to be a positive and working platform for all participants as this methodology is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, making it inclusive and accessible to a range of age groups and types of people. Learning to accept ourselves and others, and working together with people of different walks of life is important to us as artists, and is something we encourage others to do through our work.

We have taken the model of experiential learning, and combined it with the ideas of process art, as well as mail art, to develop a methodology for artistic practice. The structure of the creative process might resemble building blocks, a spiral or a line, or take on another form completely, depending on the context of the project. The group setting allows for the process to be developed collectively, for the participants to share and co-influence each other. The process is reflective, where changing direction based on input of a participant, is a normal course of events, and is encouraged. We can also offer a dedicated time and space for self-expression.

In the development of Let it Out and Free Translation, taking into the authors' prior experiences with mail art exchange and process-based art in Invisible Neighbours and Translation is Dialogue, the facilitating

artist in these practices can take on a variety of roles. One can be, for instance, a listener, a director, an investigator and a hunter-gatherer, as well as assume many combinations of these. Reflection on the position of authority is a vital and ever-present part of the process. There is no defined end to this process of exchange as it continues beyond the workshops, and can echo much later on different forms.

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