

## Developing “museum therapy”:

**Nana**

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describes the work

of The State

Russian Museum

in St. Petersburg

In the beginning of the 1990s, due to economic turmoil in the Russian Federation, the State Russian Museum was seriously reconsidering its mission, as well as experimenting with new forms of educational work. The Museum had to address, not only issues of cultural diversity, but also - in a newly formed society of freedom of speech - the issues of class, disability, age, gender, religious belief and sexual orientation. Initially, the programme for people with special needs started within a framework of educational activities. However due to the combination of the professional skills of a psychologist and an artist / art historian, it has integrated a strong art therapeutic element. The State Russian Museum has been developing targeted programmes for people with special needs over the last fifteen years. Much of this activity, which was developed through the active commitment

of curators, artists, educators and psychologists, as well as teachers, has been successful in engaging previously isolated individuals (people with learning disabilities, the blind, people with physical disabilities, people with mental health issues, as well as the socially disadvantaged such as orphans, the homeless, substances abusers and so on). The State Russian Museum has gained recognition for this work at both the national and international level.

Initially, we developed specific programmes and events as well as the studio for these people. However, in the following years we realised that we should approach diversity as a central concept rather than it being marginal to all that we do. It felt timely to address the limitations of our approach and develop a broader strategy. This was supported at managerial level by the Director of our institution. The first step was to set up a cross-department initiative group with a view to developing a museum-wide strategy. We had to analyse the terms and conditions in order to develop an overall policy which would cover issues of access and inclusion. Another important goal was to examine the practical barriers that prevent access.

At that point it was important to acknowledge the role of partners as it seemed unrealistic to think that the Museum could have any significant impact on social inclusion on its own. Collaborating with a number

of non-governmental organisations as well as hospitals, orphanages and other institutions, we realised the benefits of pooling the skills, experience and contributions of people from different backgrounds. Access for people with disabilities, interpreting the collections from multiple perspectives, using museum resources in more integrated ways - the combination of these elements led to the spreading of our experience to the regional museums (Siberia region, Volga region, North-West Russia region, and so on).

The barriers that we were, and still are, trying to overcome are of a physical, intellectual, cultural, attitudinal and financial nature. We perceive a museum to be a place that contributes to social cohesion and acts as a catalyst for cultural and social change. This point of view is disputed by cultural theorist and researcher P. Bourdieu, who points out that museums, despite their appearance of democratic availability for all, constantly allude to a certain cultural exclusivity. (Bourdieu, 1993, p.236). Political debates on availability, broadening of the audience and museum's social activeness have had a direct effect on the work of museum educational services. The sphere of museum education is a balance between populist expectations, institutional tasks and the professional interests of museum experts.

Sometimes the museum as a rigid cultural institution can experience the process of constant questioning (the

assumptions) as a threat, and easily fall into a patronising attitude towards disabled people by making assumptions about what will interest them. In order to counter this



*State Russian Museum*

possibility a number of actions have been undertaken. We strongly believe that the work and the collections should incorporate elements and objects that reflect the diversity of communities with disabilities even though some people argue that the museum should collect only on the basis of excellence in art. The display of work by disabled artists was an opportunity to acquire a collection of so-called "Outsider Art" (now part of the museum drawing collection). A series of creative workshops were held in which creative activities were used to integrate children and young people with special needs with those from ordinary schools. At the same time a collection for tactile use and sculpture objects for blind or visually impaired people was set up. Consultations were organised with a number of Parents' Associations for Children with Special Needs, as well as organisations in Russia mainly focusing on disability problems. One piece of work which illustrates the need for such

activity is the Art Therapy programme which was started a few years ago in collaboration with The City Clinic for people with drug and alcohol addiction. The Museum and Art Therapy programme has become a part of the rehabilitation process, and for many participants the programme became "an opportunity to express hard experience through images" (as one of the participants put it). Groups of people at different stages in their treatment would go to the museum space and discuss art objects with the museum curator/artist/art therapist. Such group interaction can lead into more profound discussions related to their own particular experiences, and then the studio space is available for them to create images. One may ask: "What are the differences and similarities between educational and therapeutic practice?" We strongly believe that through both processes we can participate in creating spaces, both physical and intellectual, that would support various opinions and facilitate the process of making sense of art and personal experience. This can be both therapeutic as well as educational.

We have developed further strategies to sustain new audiences. A volunteer programme exists for those who want to support the work with disability in the museum - through involvement with the full range of the museum's activities and collections. We also initiated evaluation work and modest research. The evaluation led us to the following conclusions and



needs/challenges we have to address:

- Develop related programmes (more interactive museum activities, outreach exhibitions, web-based programmes, etc.) which encourage engagement with the collections.
- Disseminate information and examples of good practice to regional museums, thus contributing to a process of change within the mainstream museum sector, and other networking.
- Educate and share skills - keep the professional dialogue going.

We have organised the first network of museums implementing programmes for people with special needs; there can be a mutual benefit to be gained from such collaborations.

Through these various initiatives and programmes, the pioneering work of the State Russian Museum has acted as a case study for policy makers and enabled other museums to rethink their work with regard to disability.

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