



INTERCORPOREAL TOGETHERNESS: On Russian Blind Activists' Technology of Disability Inclusion

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In fall of 2016, blind activists organized a seminar for blind and visually impaired people in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The participants came from all across the country, arriving by plane and train. Short-staffed, the organizers and I started asking friends to help with the task of picking up the participants as they arrived. I addressed my request to Vika,¹ a sighted person with a car. A kind and reliable woman with no prior experience of communicating with blind people, Vika responded quickly but used a surprisingly stern tone: “I will help out on one condition: I will drive them wherever you need me to, but do not make me talk to or interact with anyone.” By “anyone,” she meant the blind person I had asked her to pick up. Since my arrival in Yekaterinburg earlier that year, Vika had repeatedly expressed her admiration for my research, as well as for the social project of the people I worked with—that of *inklyuziya*, disability inclusion. She would tell me time and again: “Of course *inklyuziya* is a great idea; we should all live together.” When an opportunity arose, however, she chose to wall herself off and refused to engage socially with a disabled person. Eventually, Vika and I agreed that we would pick up three people, one after another, and that I would do the talking while she did the driving. I do not think Vika uttered a single word or turned her head even once toward her passengers that night. In driving these blind participants to their

hotels (which, to her credit, she did for no compensation), Vika was helping me, her sighted friend—not her blind passengers. To the contrary, she refused to step out of her comfortable and familiar sighted world for any one of them.

According to my interlocutors, a loosely connected network of blind and partially sighted *inklyuziya* activists in Russia, this refusal to engage is a marker of “fake *inklyuziya*” (*nenastoyashchaya inklyuziya*, emic term). Considered against the foil of Vika’s expressed support of *inklyuziya*, it exemplifies a problem that many disability inclusion practitioners, professionals, activists, and allies worried about—that *inklyuziya* exists in words only: although events are held, programs are completed, and abled people praise *inklyuziya* in public, few practical aspects change, and abled and disabled people still “do not do anything together” (*nichego ne delayut vmeste*). In the discrepancy between words and practice, they saw the manifestation of the ineffectiveness of hegemonic technologies of *inklyuziya* (see also Karayeva 2019). For them, it was a sign that “nothing has actually changed.”

In this article, I analyze how *inklyuziya* activists and practitioners in Russia create contexts for “real *inklyuziya*” (*nastoyashchaya inklyuziya*, emic term) by orchestrating engagements based on interactive corporeality (Csordas 2008; see also Jackson 2021, chap. 3; Meyer 2017; Thompson 2020), instead of circulating information about disability inclusion or mandating inclusivity at the organizational level. I conceptualize their chosen *inklyuziya* technology as *intercorporeal togetherness*.² The concept of intercorporeal togetherness helps me address the work of shaping social habits—among people both with and without disabilities—of corporeally constituted responsiveness and reciprocity across the dis/ability divide. This togetherness characterizes a form of bodily engagement whereby participants—blind and sighted, abled and disabled—become present and available for one another, commensurable as social participants, thereby cultivating the present and future potentiality of sharing the world on more equitable terms.

My use of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the intercorporeal instead of the intersubjective is intentional. I conceptualize social actors as *bodyminds*—defined as “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entitites usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind’” (Price 2015, 269; see also Schalk 2018, 5)—to highlight the inseparable unity of the corporeal and meaning-making in humans as they participate in social worlds. Bodyminds are historical, shaped by what Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 78) called the *habitus*: “history turned nature,” or “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations.” In this vein, the use of *intercorporeal*, rather than intersubjective, helps me capture the role of *habitus* as a lingering corporeal meaning-making apparatus through which people orient toward, away

from, and in parallel to each other, whether in concert or despite their conscious decisions, choices, and rationally made commitments. In my interlocutors' rendition, intercorporeality, the plane of dis/connected and dis/connecting bodyminds, is where disability inclusion and exclusion are differentiated and realized.

In explaining intercorporeal processes, [Christian Meyer, Jürgen Streek, and J. Scott Jordan \(2017, xvi–xvii; emphasis in original\)](#) define them as

activities in which the single body's agency is subsumed by the production of a *We*, and would be pointless without the simultaneous participation of an other My *I* is entangled right from the beginning in a corporeal culture that is not necessarily of my own making, even though I may perpetuate it through my own way of making a body, the way(s) in which I have learned to make a body, with varying degrees of consciousness or self-awareness of what it is that I do.

In this sense, the blind instructors and guides I describe in this essay introduce new impulses and movements into the coordinated and learned choreography of exclusion (see also [Manning 2016](#))—in this way, they actualize togetherness. Specifically, they incorporate new movements, sights, smells, and paces of engagement that their abled students may not have encountered and that help them discover the commensurability between abled and disabled subjects. By using the same grammar of bodymind communication—breathing together, walking, joking, and guiding their abled audiences through the discovery that their blind guides are perceived and perceiving (by way of corporeal sensations)—they establish the possibility of a new moral universe, one in which disabled and abled people inhabit the same sociality ([Friedner and Kusters 2014](#)), oriented toward each other ([Green 2014](#)), commensurable yet not the same.³

Disability exclusion, with ableism as its driver, is adopted corporeally in bodyminds. Bodyminds rarely, on their own, reorient toward disability inclusion, even when encouraging laws and protections exist. One way, though, to shift these bodyminds and align them with the ideals of inclusivity and anti-ableism is to employ the *inklyuziya* technology I call intercorporeal togetherness. Bodies are never a private matter, as [Gail Weiss \(1999\)](#) argues. They form, grow, hurt, and heal together, en-acting themselves within and in attunement with their environments ([Manning 2016](#)). By foregrounding bodyminds as forces and grounds of sociality, I point out that material and sensory anchors act as mechanisms of systemic exclusion and inclusion, thus contributing to anthropological scholarship on the making

and breaking of the collective by sensory means (Hammer 2019; Hankins 2014). I show how they serve as platforms for exclusion's continuous insidious and anonymized operation and, at the same time, how working with them opens up the potential to reconfigure sociality.

I collected ethnographic material for this article during fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2017 in Yekaterinburg, the capital of the Sverdlovsk region in Russia, where I grew up. The characters and vignettes originate from my work with blind activists for *inklyuziya* and their sighted allies, as well as from my engagements with a preexisting network of sighted family members, friends, and acquaintances. Innumerable hours of participant observation, informal chats, and more formalized interviews helped me understand the nuances, victories, and failures of inclusion work in the city. I collaborated with the designers and instructors of the workshop discussed below and participated in the data collection (interview and transcription) for the manuals for blind guides and instructors analyzed in the second to last section. As the blind people with whom I worked theorized disability from their position, and as they talked explicitly about disability (i.e., not blindness as such), I choose to retain their vocabulary and to reflect on its limits.

ON DISABILITY INCLUSION IN RUSSIA

Disability inclusion is a concept known throughout the world and constitutes the subject of international agreements, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Although it acts as a powerful political marker of modernity and progress, inclusion has little analytical value. That is, interpretations of the various forms in which inclusion and equal participation materialize differ from one context to the next (as do those of disability exclusion). With this as a premise, in the present article, I adopt the interpretation of *inklyuziya* developed and practiced by a group of blind activists in Yekaterinburg.

Cultivating disability inclusion in a country with a long history of institutionalized disability exclusion, such as Russia, makes for a complex riddle to solve. Since the 2010s, the Russian federal government has taken a turn toward accessibility and disability inclusion: in 2008, Russia signed the UNCRPD; in 2011, the government launched Accessible Environment, a federal program that allocated unprecedented funds to making spaces, services, and information accessible to people with disabilities; in 2012, Russia ratified the UNCRPD; and in 2014, the legislature introduced significant policy changes. These changes included banning disability-based discrimination, introducing the concept of habilitation, mandating accessibility, and requiring special training for employees of the penal system

concerning how to observe the rights of suspected, charged, and convicted people with disabilities. A growing number of *inklyuziya*-themed NGO projects have received support through reputable domestic funding sources. In addition, prominent museums and cultural institutions have launched departments and introduced positions tasked with developing disability inclusion programming. Even so, in 2016–2017, at the time of my fieldwork, vibrant debates occurred about whether anything was “actually changing” and how to encourage people with and without disabilities to engage with each other. In 2016, Vika still refused to say a word to the blind passengers riding in her car.

Scholars have provided ample critiques of inclusion initiatives in neoliberal settings: the use of disability representation as a marker of feel-good and depoliticized diversity (Friedner 2015); the reliance on tokenism and further neglect of disabled people whose productivity cannot be maintained easily with the help of available prosthetic technologies (Mitchell and Snyder 2015); and the disregard for the cost of domestic inclusionism that relies on outsourced geopolitical warfare and exploitative workfare (Puar 2017). Following anthropologists and others who have critiqued institutional inclusion (Ahmed 2012; Jaffe-Walter 2016; Keating and Mirus 2003), I scrutinize the often undertheorized intercorporeal aspects of disability-inclusion initiatives, offering an account of how disability exclusion transcends the power of political decisions and laws. In so doing, I explore the planes of life that are unreachable by public policies (Ghosh 2018; Spade 2015) and that extend beyond the familiar strategies of liberal disability-rights activism, identity politics, and the fight for better laws (see also Puar 2017). Among these planes are culturally configured sensoriums (Geurts 2003; Hirschkind 2006), corporeal habits, and body logics (Brahinsky 2012).

Postsocialist Russia offers a unique environment for developing disability-inclusion initiatives. On the one hand, it aligns with global development discourses through its proclaimed commitment to accessibility, inclusion, and the independence of people with disabilities (Hartblay 2019; see also Kohrman 2005). On the other hand, legacies of Soviet paternalism (Mladenov 2018), such as depoliticizing disability and measuring a person's worth by their capacity to contribute productive labor, remain in full force. The *inklyuziya* technology I analyze in this essay results from this entanglement of lingering legacies and future orientations. It reflects the kind of people with disabilities that Russians welcome and wish to include in that *inklyuzivnaya Rossiya* (inclusive Russia) of the future—independent social participants, skilled in seamless social engagements, and capable of elimi-

nating (or masking) awkwardness, failure, and radical bodymind difference from their social world.

This *inklyuziya* technology has two notable aspects. It not only responsabilizes individuals to “make Russia inclusive” through changing their behaviors (see also [Matza 2018](#); [Rivkin-Fish 2005](#); [Zigon 2010](#)) but, in promoting *inklyuziya*, it also trains people in prioritizing a specific form of sociality—namely, the sociality of anonymous strangers. These are the strangers that provide services, drive taxis, greet guests at hotel reception desks, pass by on the street, check tickets on the train, sell and buy things. It is the spontaneous, corporeal reaction of strangers unfamiliar with the affect and knowledge grounded in intimate family histories or membership in shared communities that many *inklyuziya* programs I observed take as a sign of whether *inklyuziya* is real and enacted.⁴

EMBODIED DISABILITY EXCLUSION

Beginning in the early days of my fieldwork, I regularly received messages from abled acquaintances and friends about their unexpected encounters with blind or deaf people in the city: “Just saw a blind person IN A PHARMACY [sic]”; “Two deaf persons are sitting next to me in a restaurant”; and “You will not believe it! On my way to work, a blind woman stepped into the elevator where I was [*zashla ko mne v lift*]. What was she doing in that office building?” Although such messages provide a lot to unpack, one aspect particularly interests me: my sighted and hearing texters’ surprise at discovering that blind and deaf people shared the *same* city and engaged in the *same* ordinary activities, such as buying medication, dining, and working.

This section serves as a response to those messages, as it offers a brief outline of the tools that make the metaphors of living “in parallel worlds” ([Phillips 2010](#)) and “on the other side of the Moon” ([Kurlenkova and Nosenko-Stein 2018](#)) ring true for abled people when such tropes are applied to people with disabilities in Russia. In other words, I take a step back to denaturalize the local expectation among abled people in Russia not to engage in public with people with disabilities (see also [Titchkosky 2011](#)). I also seek to show what sustains the doxa—which [Bourdieu \(1977, 164\)](#) characterizes as “adherence to the world, seen as self-evident and undisputed,”—that living apart is something natural, and thus ahistorical.

The surprise noted by my abled friends is not rooted in any “natural” characteristics of their bodies in relation to those of other people; instead, it is rooted in their skilled bodies. Their surprise is conditioned by iterative, embodied experiences of disability exclusion under a regime of compulsory able-bodiedness

in Russia (McRuer 2006). They have developed a sense, or *habitus*—a mixture of entrained perception, habituated action, and the ability to improvise within a given field of contextually appropriate actions (Bourdieu 1977; see also Ingold 2011)—of living in a world monopolized by other abled subjects, or those who manage to pass as such. If disability-rights activists in the United States fought “for meaningful spatial citizenship” and the right to “take up public and private spaces such as homes, workplaces, universities, restrooms, courthouses, and cities” (Hamraie 2017, 9), Russian disability activists have historically employed different tactics: reclaiming their civic worth through engagement in productive labor (Galmarini-Kabala 2016; Shaw 2017), which often took place in segregated locations. Moreover, the chronic inaccessibility of the built environment, insufficient funding for legislated programs, lack of motivation for abled people to redistribute their privilege, and perpetuated ableism led my abled acquaintances repeatedly to confirm for themselves that there were indeed no disabled people at the places they frequented—gyms, concert halls, office buildings, universities, shopping malls, movie theaters, restaurants, clubs, and schools. In what follows, I provide further context for these factors of exclusion.

In Russia, a shift toward broader physical accessibility—the ability of the environment to support the needs of all users—began, for the most part, in the 2010s. Since the launch of the Accessible Environment program and the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2011 and 2012, respectively, Russia’s built urban environments have changed, although not always toward ensuring accessibility by wheelchair users or people with other disabilities. Cases are frequent of what Cassandra Hartblay (2017) describes as check-mark accessibility, whereby required accessibility artifacts are installed and made visible, but owing to poor execution do not, in practice, succeed in facilitating access for target users. Many of the remaining inaccessible buildings, bathrooms, and street infrastructures push people with mobility impairments into their homes (Hartblay 2019; Phillips 2010).

In privately owned or managed spaces, such as workplaces, companies must ensure access to entrances and exits, freedom of movement, and accessible restrooms for all employees. Reworking the spatial organization and figuring out accessible design solutions demands substantial investment, and this serves as a rationale for employers to avoid employing people with disabilities (Podtserob 2019). Working remotely from home may be an option, yet it also reinforces the assumption that disabled people do not belong and cannot survive in the “normal” world; that having “no place” in mainstream work environments, their place is instead at home or in sheltered workshops. Similarly, segregated education, whether at

home or in specialized schools, again lowers the chances of embodied encounters among people with and without disabilities. Importantly, specialized schools (often operating as boarding schools) are few and tend to be located in so-called satellite towns at a significant distance from urban centers; one such school in the Zabaykalskiy region is situated more than three hundred miles away from the regional capital. Such de facto segregation manufactures ignorance among disabled and abled people concerning how spaces and lives might be shared and inhabited together.

The social aspect of accessibility also does not function as intended. There is a low probability that abled people will cross paths and interact with disabled people at major socialization sites such as school or work. Although legislative and practical changes have occurred toward mainstreaming, insufficient numbers of schools offer functional solutions to provide quality education to disabled children. Additionally, the stereotype that only children so-called severe forms of disabilities are “fit” for inclusive education in mainstream schools persists, fueling the stigma associated with disabilities ([Foundation to Support Children in Difficult Life Situations 2017](#)). In practice, this persistent ableism manifests in the bullying, including parental bullying, of children with disabilities and their caregivers (a recent example was reported by [TvRain.Ru 2021](#)).

In addition to inaccessibility and distancing, stigma against people with disabilities, a lack of motivation among abled people, and insufficient knowledge and resources to change conventional—often exclusionary—practices only reinforce the doxa of abled-only spaces for participation and socialization. Consider workplaces. The fines for violating the disability quotas for employers remain meager—between \$65 and \$130 USD (conversion on April 11, 2021). Additionally, employers and applicants alike possess limited knowledge of relevant employment legislation and the employment rights and duties of people with disabilities. One might argue that this enduring ignorance is not accidental but manufactured ([Hamraie 2013](#)). As a result, technologies of non-performative inclusion—acts that are publicly perceived as impactful while their exact purpose is to not bring something into effect ([Ahmed 2012](#), chap. 4)—proliferate. To avoid paying fines, some companies practice the so-called dead souls method of offering a minimum salary to a person with disabilities in exchange for their appearing on the books. In reality, the officially employed person with disabilities is not asked to perform any service or labor; they deliver value to the company simply by providing their name and disability status for company records, thus ensuring its compliance with Russian law. This practice only further entrenches the already deep-seated stereo-

types that depict people with disabilities as incompetent, wasteful, inefficient, and potentially problematic employees (Kurlenkova 2017).

DISORIENTING ENCOUNTERS

One of the *inklyuziya*-promoting projects of a Yekaterinburg-based NGO founded and run by blind activists (who also organized the seminar I discussed in the opening vignette) was an educational workshop offered to abled audiences, led by instructors with different kinds of disabilities. The goal of this workshop (which typically consisted of six ninety-minute sessions with different instructors) was to train abled participants to interact comfortably with people with disabilities, teaching the former “the basics of inclusion” (*osnovy inklyuzii*). The project was designed by blind activists and their sighted allies and funded by a reputable domestic public funding source, which added credibility to the workshop. Instructors included a blind person, a wheelchair user, a deaf person, two persons with mental disabilities who teamed up with two nonprofit workers, and an abled psychologist. Some of the instructors were *inklyuziya* activists (they were directly involved in designing and implementing *inklyuziya* activities in Russia), while others identified as allies (participating only when their time and availability allowed while mostly supporting the activists in spirit). Instructors organized their classroom time as they saw fit; there was no oversight of course design, from either the funding agency or the project administrators. The project administrators and the freelance instructors all received compensation for their work from the funds secured for the project.

The abled participants in these workshops were recruited from various public institutions (medical establishments, higher education institutions, transportation companies) and private businesses (the hospitality sector). Finding participants was not difficult since completing this free program provided participants with a certification in continuing education (often mandated for public employees every five years). Additionally, the program generally received favorable evaluations: of 390 surveyed graduates of the workshop, 94.9 percent remarked that they gained new ideas from this training; 98.7 percent responded that what they learned in the workshop was helpful and applicable in their professional and everyday life. Importantly, having instructors with disabilities helped this provider stand out in the crowd of other inclusion trainings, often designed and delivered by abled people.

In providing substantial freedom to instructors to determine the content of their lessons, the program’s designers maintained that the value of the workshop lay in its experiential dimension—not merely its provision of information. Alex,

one of the organizers and an instructor and blind person himself, explained this to me: “Students can Google the instructions on how to act politely toward people with disabilities, but what they cannot Google is those two hours of in-person interaction with a living, real person with disabilities.”⁵ In attributing high importance to embodied interactions between abled and disabled people, Alex suggested that a regular lack of such encounters and reciprocal exchanges fuels ableism and routinized disability exclusion. In his account, as abled Russians do not have (and do not seek out) opportunities to encounter people with disabilities in their daily lives, they perpetuate the somatic norm (Ahmed 2012) of evading such contacts. People with disabilities, in turn, become accustomed to feeling unwelcome in mainstream spaces, thus learning to avoid them or adopting the mindset of engaging in a perpetual struggle for the chance to be there (Naberushkina 2012). To solve this problem, the workshop designers prioritized delivering to their abled students an embodied experience of interacting with people with disabilities, rather than any curated information about such experiences. In other words, the workshop designers sought to cultivate the conditions of intercorporeal togetherness. To better communicate the workshop’s mechanics and textures, I now turn to one of the sessions led by Alex, a blind instructor.

As Alex and I walked into the classroom, the chatter stopped. Alex turned and whispered to me, with a smile in his voice: “They even stopped breathing, do you hear?” Alex is quick to pick up on the change of mood around him. He knows how to interpret modulations in intonation, breathing rates, muscle tones, silences, and laughter as markers of feelings and moods. The visual cues I noticed confirmed what Alex had sensed, so I added: “Yeah, and they are also watching our every movement.” Alex’s task, then, was to address this bodymind apartness manifested in cautious mutual surveillance.

From the beginning, the students watched us in silence, staring at us and, in a sense, putting us on display (Hammer 2019, 79; see also Garland-Thomson 2009). Some stared overtly and intensely, while others would look away when my eyes would catch them watching us, only to focus on us again when I would look away. They appeared stiff. Their comportment further fueled my doubt about whether they actually wanted to be there—after all, their attendance at the workshop was mandated by their company’s administration. As the students told us later, this was their first meeting with a blind person in which they had to be responsive and could not simply disappear or observe from afar as a regular stranger might do. Many felt at a loss for what to do and “how to be” (*kak byt’*) around a blind person. It was our first meeting with these particular students, too—a

group of middle-aged and (at least by appearance) abled employees of a transportation company that operates a large metropolitan public transit facility.

From the entryway to the classroom, Alex and I headed straight to the instructor's desk. Placing his hand on the desk and chair, I showed him the arrangement of objects and told him how the room was organized, saying that about twenty persons in the audience were seated in two rows in a semicircle around his desk, that the room was a standard meeting room with a projection screen right behind the instructor's chair, and that I would take care of all the presentation materials when he told me to. He replied with a few comments, loud enough for the audience to hear: something about the buzz of the lightbulbs, or the texture of the furniture, or the squeaks of chairs—anything that people in the room would *also* sense, anything that would highlight that they shared the same space. After this brief back and forth, I left Alex at the instructor's desk and went to sit in the back. He took it from there.

As usual, Alex looked sharp, and his movements were confident. He was dressed in a business-casual style, coming across as a middle-class, cisgender heterosexual male in his forties and a fluent smartphone and laptop user. He walked around the desk, touching it gently with his hand, and placed himself right in front of it, facing the audience. He usually presented while standing up, holding his white cane out in front of him, and he often tried to open with an icebreaker to ease the atmosphere. On that day, his opener was: "Sveta, are you sure there are people in the audience? It seems like this room is empty; I have never heard people sit so quietly." People in the audience chuckled, to which Alex responded, "Well, that is better, at least you started showing signs of life." Then he paused for a moment, smiling.

"In such cases, it is better to breathe," he continued in a more serious tone. "When we experience complex feelings [*slozhnye chuvstva*], we stop breathing well. I know right now you are having those emotions. So just breathe deeply. In . . ."—and his torso expanded as he inhaled—"out . . ."—and his torso contracted. "In . . . out . . .," he repeated. Subsequently, the men and women in the audience—most with facial expressions evincing feelings of caution—inhaled and exhaled following his pace. "That's better. I now know that there are actually people in the audience. When you do not breathe or move, it is hard to know for sure"—he circled back to his opening joke, now transformed into a teaching moment. This time, it elicited even more smiles (however shy) from those in his audience.

To cultivate intercorporeal togetherness among people skilled in being apart does not make for an easy task. It often includes living through what the disability

scholar [Ryan Parrey \(2016\)](#) calls “disorientation.” Disorientation is an embodied moment of rearranging and repositioning one’s bodymind toward, besides, or away from a social phenomenon or experience. [Parrey \(2016, n.p.\)](#) writes, “it is through disorienting encounters that existing meanings of disability are revealed and new meanings generated.” Against the familiarity of the lived world, disorientation reveals existing skills and forms of engagement with the world to be of limited help. For Alex’s students, following the conventional pattern of surveilling a disabled person from afar and withdrawing from engaging with them as an equal dweller was demonstrated as counterproductive to the aim of intercorporeal togetherness. The disorientation facilitated by Alex triggered the reappearance of what had been backgrounded and bracketed—namely, the naturalized, embodied discomfort of *interacting* as commensurable social actors. Such a disorientation provided an opportunity for the students to revisit their position in a social encounter vis-à-vis a person with visible disabilities.

In general, there are many ways sighted people avoid such disorienting encounters and resist their transforming impulse, from maintaining spatial and temporal distance to refusing engagement on equal terms. As a sighted person, I regularly received treatment different from that of my blind companions. As [Seth Holmes \(2013\)](#) writes, the ways in which the anthropologist’s body is treated in the field helps unpack power differentials that constitute the scene. My capacity to maintain eye contact and perceive visual cues would position me as a familiar and relatable subject for sighted neurotypical people: although I noticed that the workshop participants would censor their actions around me more than they might normally (given that I could share my visual observations with my blind companion), I also sensed they were relieved they had an option to interact with a sighted person—for example, if they needed to ask something, they would more willingly approach me, not my blind companion, even if the question concerned something my blind companion had more knowledge about. When talking to me, they would offer me their full presence and focus on our conversation. With their blind instructor, they seemed to feel freer to engage in multitasking behaviors without alerting him that they were being distracted by another activity. When I noticed them doing so—for example, playing with their mobile phones, sending text messages, reading documents, or engaging other sighted people through gestures—they would smile mischievously and gesture toward me to play along, as if we, the sighted, shared a sort of cultural intimacy ([Herzfeld 2005](#)), as if we were playing on the same team against (or, at the very least, apart from) the team of “the blind.” As a blind person, Alex was fully aware of this resistance. Because en-

agement did not happen out of habit, he continuously had to create opportunities for his students to practice unfamiliar patterns of engagement; it was up to Alex to initiate contact and intercorporeal interaction.

During class breaks, he usually asked someone to show him where the restroom was. Often, students would stare at me, assuming that I would be the one to show him the way. I would smile back and remain still, making it clear that I would not comply. That particular day, a woman from the audience volunteered: "I will show you," she said, standing up and approaching Alex. Four other students who stood nearby stopped chatting and looked at her, transforming her mundane act into a scene to be witnessed. The woman's voice was bright and confident. "How will we go?" she asked. "On foot [*nogami*]," Alex joked, pointing out the profoundly ordinary nature of what this scene was framing as extraordinary (Wool 2015). "Give me your right shoulder," he continued, as he lifted his left arm in the air parallel to the floor, with his palm facing down. The woman caught it immediately, placing her right shoulder directly beneath his left palm. She stood stiffly for a second, and so Alex made her turn from side to side while he himself bent his knees in a caricatured attempt to perform a funny dance. The action made her loosen up her posture and take a couple of dancing turns. "So now, after this dance, we can go," Alex quipped. He had achieved what he wanted: now, as they walked, they chatted, and the conversation flowed at an ordinary pace. This kinetic work of helping abled individuals loosen up corporeally and turn toward him, so that they might be present for one another, was part of Alex's daily job as an instructor of *inklyuziya*.

The workshops evidenced further examples of intercorporeal togetherness. Sometimes, Alex would invite his students to observe how he uses his phone so that they could discover that the range and complexity of daily tasks that Alex completes compares to that of a sighted user. He, too, receives and sends texts, uses Uber, gets memes on Telegram, and can find a great restaurant in the area with the help of some reviews. Some students would recommend helpful apps that they themselves used in daily life. Others would send him a text and then receive one back from him, just for fun. Such simple interactions helped undo the presumed naturalness of the apartness of blind and sighted persons. They helped participants discover possibilities of dwelling together, sharing the same world.

Zoë Wool (2015, 140) writes, "movement is always a social accomplishment." This moving together, this intercorporeal togetherness based on coordinated interactions, was indeed accomplished socially, as it was prepared and made possible by the hard work of NGOs, researchers, donors, educators, and instructors—a mixed

team of abled and disabled experts. A complex edifice of labor, which I discuss further below, was required to provide an experience of sharing spaces, projects, and goals among people who tend to do things apart. As Alex and other designers had hoped, this experience took root in the bodyminds of the audience and grew into the possibility and potentiality of further engagement and togetherness.

I am not suggesting that as a result of participating in one workshop, all students radically changed their patterns of engagement with disabled people. Instead, I interpret this workshop as offering a series of small situations through which new affects and bodily experiences are produced, and during which familiar labels are challenged and rendered inadequate. In the lives of some of the students, this workshop did create a lingering echo: for example, my abled mother, once a participant, developed her first friendship with a blind person—they get together for coffee in their free time and chitchat on the phone. Some of the sighted participants stopped having visceral reactions on seeing their blind peers; a blind young intern (in training to become an instructor) started to practice using her white cane; a previously quite overprotective parent of a blind teenager allowed them to attend one such event unsupervised. I treat these small-scale shifts in engagement as minor gestures; as [Erin Manning \(2016, 7\)](#) writes, “the minor is a gesture insofar as it punctuates the in-act, leading the event elsewhere than toward the governant fixity of the major, be it the major in the name of normative political structures, of institutional life, of able-bodiedness, of gender conformity, of racial segregation.” In creating bodily disorientation, these minor gestures create invitations to search for more helpful habits and skills of engagement.

Through embodied experiences of intercorporeal togetherness, Alex and other instructors make it possible to imagine and move toward a world in which perceived disability does not immediately trigger in abled people an urge to detach or withdraw ([Yarrow, Candea and Trundle 2015](#)). An abled stranger who has attended such a training may take a future opportunity to situate themselves with a disabled person, acting on an embodied memory that being together with a disabled person in the same bus, restaurant, pharmacy, or city is indeed possible. This abled stranger may turn out to be an employer, a parent, somebody’s friend, an educator, or a hospitality worker, in a position to affect the conditions of such sharing of the world. In this, intercorporeal togetherness holds its political impulse, or, in the words of [Manning \(2016, 8\)](#), “the movement activated, in the event, by a difference in register that awakens new modes of encounter and creates new forms of life-living.” Through such small-scale somatic shifts, sensorially and emotionally saturated patterns of sociality morph, congeal, and dissipate. Although

minor gestures do not necessarily become major, or develop into a new habitus (Bourdieu 1977), these encounters prompt questioning of the doxa and the natural occurrence of the major, and one's own participation in its stability.

ENSKILLMENT INTO INTERCORPOREAL TOGETHERNESS

How does one cultivate intercorporeal responsiveness, or bodily response-ability (Haraway 2016; Meyer 2017, 144), when bodies have been trained to be discrete and autonomous? The training program discussed in the previous section is distinctive in that it solicits a particular, corporeal response from all participants. The interactive engagement is carefully organized, facilitated, and attributed significance in serving as grounds for and means of disability inclusion.

I turn now to consider the training of blind instructors. Specifically, I examine the self-directed somatic tactics they employ to develop skills to facilitate intercorporeal togetherness. The analytic of enskillment helps highlight the dynamic, intentional, and expert character of the bodily and mental shifts I observed blind and sighted people undergo during *inklyuziya* activities. These processes of enskillment relied on the repeated iteration and aspirational rematerialization (Butler 1993; Ingold 2011) of ways of collaborating: playing together, working together, conversing, exploring a context, and walking together. Through repetition of coupled action and perception, blind and sighted people grew more accustomed to one another, normalizing each other's presence as social actors and learning to rely on each other, thereby learning the skill of *inklyuziya*.

The blind *inklyuziya* activists I worked with commonly used the term *prodvinutyi slepoy*⁶ (advanced/skilled blind person, masculine) or *prodvinutaya slepaya* (feminine; hereafter, PS) to refer to the figure of a blind person whose comportment and presence are marked by perceived social competence: proficiency in using a white cane, engaging in social interactions, and using technology. They develop sophisticated techniques to navigate a world that prioritizes visual information (see also Hammer 2019). Their clothes are clean, ironed, and color-coordinated; their hair is combed; their nails are tidy; and they follow gendered norms of comportment and talk. They know when to look presentable, when it is appropriate to dress casually, and when to sport a fancy look. They easily discuss colors, cinema, and visual art. They know how to engage with difficult questions, navigate conflict-laden situations, and maintain a safe learning environment. Thus, the PS is constituted as an aesthetic-ethical assemblage, whereby perceived visual features signify this person's ethical standing.

During fieldwork, I came across various tactics to cultivate oneself as a PS: close contact and communication with other skilled blind people, mimicry and imitation, employment, advice seeking, and event participation. Young blind people or people who had lost their vision recently rarely qualified as a PS. Instead, more experienced blind activists would recommend that they participate in activities as guests, lead small workshops, follow written instructions, or work privately on developing their skill sets (under the guidance of a more experienced blind tutor), to discipline their selves into this figure.

During informal conversations, in workshops for the students of the regional school for blind children, and through webinars and direct questioning, more experienced blind people regularly offered advice, commentaries, and instructional feedback on the way their junior peers comported themselves and on the path to embody this figure of a PS: what to present and what to notice in others. For example, when Olya graduated from high school, she announced her desire to become an instructor. I witnessed how two members of the network commented that her voice was too soft, which, in their opinion, was preventing her from being perceived as a reliable professional. Dima took classes on public speaking. Lana held several seminars, webinars, and conversations over coffee and WhatsApp with other blind people, where she shared time and again her path to becoming a blind guide:⁷ how important it was to use a white cane, what kinds of questions she asked, and how she maintained her appearance. I know that some of my blind friends watched her webinars and shared links to them with their friends—although they had never met her, they took Lana's narrative as authoritative and expressed their consent to its disciplinary impulse.

A more articulated and portable version of this discipline exists in the form of the instructional materials available on the blind *inklyuziya* activists' website (developed as part of their funded projects). Having collected multiple expert opinions of practitioners, they generated a list of recommendations for how to become a successful blind instructor or guide and published it on their website, accessible free of charge, along with the authors' contact information. The recommendations began with the importance of visual appearances:

At a minimum, the tutor's [activists use the term *tutor* to speak about blind people in the capacity of an instructor] clothes should always be neat and ironed, and their shoes should be clean. If necessary, the tutor can always ask a sighted person if everything is fine with their appearance: hairstyle, clothes, shoes. Please note that the style of your clothes matches the format

of the event. In a dark room, smells are especially pronounced: mints and lozenges are essential assistants in the work of a tutor.

The work of a tutor, instructor, or guide starts with appearance—blind trainees were instructed to approach their corporeal presence as a reflection and a source of their expertise (Boyer 2005; Friedner and Osborne 2013). Besides appearing in a certain way, their work demanded much more: the art of public speaking and engaging the audience, managing logistics, maintaining an online presence, and following the planned protocol of the event. More specialized tips concern the facilitation of intercorporeal togetherness:

When meeting guests, introduce yourself and ask them to introduce themselves. This way, you will understand how many people are in the group, hear what mood they are in, and can engage them in a conversation.

[Maintain] maximum physical contact in the first minutes. Gradually, after 7–10 minutes, you can reduce this contact, but in the first minutes, you must constantly touch the guest.

In the first minutes in the dark, guests should regularly hear the confident voice of the guide. Then the guide can allow himself [sic] to pause, to be silent while the guests are doing the task or talking to each other. However, first, the guide should speak as much and as confidently as possible at the beginning of the tour; and second, during the entire tour, pauses in speech should not be long. Guests should not “lose” you.

Even in a well-known room, the guide must move with a white cane. First, during the excursion, while moving between the guests, the guide should not step on the guests’ feet, bump into guests with his [sic] hands or with his whole body—this spoils the impression and is uncomfortable, incorrect. In the same way, the guide has the ability to find with a cane this or that obstacle and warn the guests. Second, the guests see the guide with a white cane in the illuminated part—at the beginning and the end of the excursion. The guide looks more aesthetic and reliable and does not stumble in front of the guests; in addition, in the future, in the minds of [sighted] people, the white cane will remain associated with the positive image of a blind person.

Frequent touch, a confident voice, a smile, movement in the dark, use of a white cane, inquiry about guests' feelings, and leading conversations all constitute specific instructions for comporting oneself in the presence of sighted clients. Importantly, these instructions merge the aesthetic and the ethical, as they associate features of one's appearance with value-laden relationality: confidence, reliability, and care for the guests' feelings and safety.

Personal appearance is rarely, if ever, a private matter, especially for people with disabilities whose ability to appear aesthetically pleasant often acts as a marker of their social competence and worth (Hammer 2019; Zoanni 2019). In this sense, for people with disabilities, the stakes of making a positive impression in public transcend specific instances. By appearing aesthetically and socially non-disruptive, disabled individuals cultivate the possibility of reappearance, for themselves and other people with visible disabilities. In so doing, they cultivate the potential of togetherness in the future. The intentionality of inculcating in others a bodily memory of being together renders "appearance work" in the service of a greater project for social change, one that unfolds through micro-gestures, appearances, and sensory markers. Through attuning to this cultivated atmosphere (Stewart 2011, 445) by aligning sensations, rhythms of movement, tone of voice, and cadence of engagement, sighted and blind people co-create an experience of intercorporeal togetherness.

Although these atmospheres move both blind and sighted participants, the timelines of their movements differ. The sighted students I interviewed had not done any preparation before showing up at an *inklyuziya*-themed event, whereas for blind participants, the event extends well beyond the duration of a specific encounter. They had to become competent guides before entering the organized context where they met their sighted peers. Their effort was markedly more laborious, as they were socially responsabilized to do the labor of appearing competent, relatable, and reliable.

How did blind guides and instructors feel about this preparation and work? The people recognized as PS saw this as a professional activity in which they acted as educators, absolving the abled from responsibility and thus ridding these engagements of pain or trauma. "When you teach children, you do not get mad at them when they do not know how to read," commented Viktor, one of the blind instructors. His analogy between childhood illiteracy and ableism seems notable as it suggests the denial of intentionality to abled people's reproduction of ableism. Others, however, felt more ambivalent about negating this responsibility—they

rejected abled people's innocence and would sometimes make fun of sighted people or get annoyed at them for assuming and acting on their privilege.

Alongside exemplary blind subjects also emerged the “not quite exemplary” subjects—undisciplined subjects “not ready” to commit to intercorporeal togetherness. Among these were those who lacked access to resources or the desire to develop the skill set needed to participate in activities designed to cultivate intercorporeal togetherness. These people tended to emphasize structural aspects of disability exclusion and critiqued the latent productivism of this *inklyuziya* technology. Others were simply unable or unwilling to participate in this initiative. These critiques resonated with David Mitchell and Michelle Snyder's (2015, 12) argument that neoliberal inclusionism exists for the able-disabled, or “those who exceed their disability limitations through forms of administrative ‘creaming’ or hyper-prostheticization but leave the vast majority of disabled people behind.” Underlying the performance of competence and the ability to participate in *inklyuziya* is the neoliberal ideology that centers autonomy, productivity, and self-entrepreneurship in the form of being socially active (Robbins 2013) as a marker of competence and social value. In this context, people with disabilities who do not appear active and competent tend to gain less access to disability inclusion in Russia.

CONCLUSION

The analytic of intercorporeal togetherness prompts us to pay attention to the minor gestures and micro-movements that funnel social interaction and stir streams of social life. As the shifts in embodiment that occurred during the workshops described in this essay proved hard to observe and document, they were sometimes perceived as negligible by those who critiqued the strategy for being too small in scale and who therefore refused to conceptualize it as a driver of social change. Among those critics ranged disabled activists and allies who preferred other *inklyuziya* technologies, such as litigation or the imposition of a system of punishment for those violating the inclusion-favoring legislation. Yet as Manning (2016, 1) writes of social change, building on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1986) concept of the minor, “while the grand gestures of a macropolitics most easily sum up the changes that occurred to alter the field, it is the minoritarian tendencies that initiate the subtle shifts that created the conditions for this, and any change.”

Intercorporeal practices such as coordinated breathing, laughing at the shared predicament of having to sit on an uncomfortable chair for too long, preparing one's bodymind to meet the normative eye of the other, keeping distance,

and reaching out toward another prove fundamental in enacting and challenging social hierarchies and boundaries. Through the skilled choreography of interaction and the establishment of corporeal commensurability—through intercorporeal togetherness, that is—social actors enact, challenge, and morph societal expectations and scenarios. As bodyminds hold history, they also harbor opportunities for change.

To scholars of the material aspects of systems of inequality, anthropologists of care, and researchers of social change, intercorporeal togetherness, in ways distinct but similar to embodied empathy (Buch 2013) or refusal as care (Reese 2019), offers a tool for understanding how people share spaces and time corporeally, and how this sharing implicates them with one another. Additionally, it offers an opportunity to capture how social figures with little shared personal history renegotiate social norms, often anonymously, without necessarily attributing or taking responsibility, without demanding or making articulated amends.

As a technology of disability inclusion, intercorporeal togetherness has its limits. Surely, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of physical proximity to the practice of intercorporeal togetherness, highlighting the ethical nature of social proxemics (Strong, Trkna, and Wynn 2021). When my blind research participants faced the need to figure out new ways of bringing bodyminds together—as social contacts became risky and, sometimes, were outright banned—they began to invoke shared inconveniences, such as the exhaustion of being restricted to confined spaces or the strain imposed by virtual socialization. Moreover, sought-after intercorporeal togetherness now depended on one's access to communication technologies and on the willing communicator on the other side of the screen (lowering the chances for this communicator to be a stranger). Without physical co-presence, it became challenging, if not impossible, to garner opportunities for intercorporeal interaction.

Further, if intercorporeal togetherness is predicated on bodymind commensurability, which bodies can be made commensurable? In my research, intercorporeal togetherness was practiced among bodyminds who enjoy at least some moments of independence and productivity. Those with chronic pain or fatigue, neurodivergence that neurotypical people find overwhelming, or an unwillingness to participate, on the one hand, and those whose socioeconomic, ethnic, or religious backgrounds push them into marginal spaces, on the other, may face added difficulties in establishing their belonging through corporeal means—the difference of their bodyminds and backgrounds may prove to be incommensurable. If intercorporeal togetherness remains a tool to be used by able-disabled persons

(Mitchell and Snyder 2015), for those whose social presence may not be so easily prosthetized it remains useless, if not actually harmful.

ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze how inklyuziya activists and practitioners in Russia create contexts for “real inklyuziya” (nastoyashchaya inklyuziya, emic term). They do so by orchestrating engagements based on interactive corporeality, instead of circulating information about disability inclusion or mandating inclusivity at the organizational level. I conceptualize their chosen inklyuziya technology as intercorporeal togetherness—corporeally constituted responsiveness and reciprocity across the disability divide. I argue that disability exclusion, with ableism as its driver, is adopted corporeally in bodyminds. Bodyminds rarely, on their own, reorient toward disability inclusion, even when encouraging laws and protections are put in place. One way, though, to shift these bodyminds and align them with the ideals of inclusivity and antibleism is to employ the inklyuziya technology I call intercorporeal togetherness. By foregrounding bodyminds as forces and grounds of sociality, I point out that material and sensory anchors act as mechanisms of systemic exclusion and inclusion, thus contributing to anthropological scholarship on the making and breaking of the collective by sensory means. I show how they serve as platforms for exclusion’s continuous insidious and anonymized operation and, at the same time, how working with them opens up the potential to reconfigure sociality. [disability; inclusion; embodiment; intercorporeal; Russia; blind; postsocialism]

АННОТАЦИЯ

В этой статье я анализирую, как активисты и практики инклюзии в России создают контексты «настоящей инклюзии». Они это делают не через распространение информации об инклюзии или обеспечение инклюзивности на системном уровне, а посредством организации межличностного взаимодействия, основанного на «межкорпоральной совместности». Межкорпоральная совместность - это телесно сформированная отзывчивость и взаимность, способствующую преодолению разрыва между людьми с инвалидностью и без нее. Я утверждаю, что исключение людей с инвалидностью, движущей силой которого является эйблизм, усваивается на телесном уровне. Без внешнего импульса, сами по себе, социальные субъекты редко начинают практиковать инклюзию, даже в контекстах, где приняты соответствующие законы и программы. Однако один из способов изменить телесную усвоенность исключения и приблизить телесные практики к идеалам инклюзивности и антиэйблизма - использование технологии инклюзии, которую я называю межкорпоральной совместностью. Выдвигая на первый

план телесность как движущую силу и основание социальности, я указываю на материальные и сенсорные маркеры, действующие как механизмы системного исключения и включения. Мой анализ вносит вклад в антропологические исследования того, как социальность создается и разрушается через телесное взаимодействие. Я показываю, как телесное взаимодействие и привычки способствуют воспроизводству исключения людей с инвалидностью и, в то же время, как работа на телесном уровне открывает потенциал для реконфигурации социальности.

NOTES

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1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of my research participants.
2. The technology of intercorporeal togetherness I discuss here is only one among many other technologies (i.e., know-how, or what Michel Foucault [1988, 18] calls “a matrix of practical reason”) utilized across the globe, to create inclusive environments and communities. Some examples of other disability inclusion technologies are advocating for spatial citizenship (Hamraie 2017), cultivating grassroots digital communities of abled and disabled people (Borodina 2021), or demonstrating the normative productivity of disabled people (Shaw 2017).
3. As will become evident, intercorporeal togetherness differs dramatically from disability simulation, a practice commonly used in occupational therapy and rehabilitation science training. Typically, such exercises include wearing blindfolding masks, using noise-canceling headphones, or making use of a wheelchair. Their stated goal is to enable abled pretenders to imagine themselves in the position of a disabled person. Disability studies scholars provide ample critique of such exercises: they individualize disability, disregard skills and knowledge that people with disabilities develop, ignore the diversity of environmental conditions and the broad spectrum of disability experiences, lack evidence of their effectiveness, and reproduce stereotypes and stigma about disability (Brown 2013; French 1992; Omansky 2011; Siebers 2008). Instead of prompting abled people to imagine themselves as other, intercorporeal togetherness prompts abled and disabled people to orient themselves toward each other.
4. For an analysis of the communities and social worlds in which people with disabilities are embedded, see Battalova 2021; Hartblay 2020; Klepikova 2018.
5. This is an approximate rendition of his words, which I wrote down after our conversation.
6. In Russian, the appropriateness of the term *slepoy* to signify “blind” is contested. I use it here as a concept used by the blind activists I worked with, not as a general term for any blind person.
7. A blind guide is a professional occupation in select commercial settings where sighted people participate in an activity typically done in daylight in the dark. Restaurants, ex-

hibitions, tours, quests, and business trainings held in the dark are examples of places where blind guides in Russia work. These commercial projects serve as token examples of desired employment for blind people on the “open market” (as opposed to sheltered workshops).

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