

ET Russian is a Seattle-based disability justice activist, author, artist, filmmaker, performer, educator, and healthcare provider. Their recently published book, The Ring of Fire Anthology, exhibits a wide range of their deeply satisfying artwork and writing.

ET Russian inclusivity narrative

"Among many many other things, I'm an artist. I grew up in the Seattle area. I've been disabled since age 18. I have artificial legs, so I have mobility impairments. I use a wheelchair part time. I have chronic pain and PTSD. I'm queer and genderqueer... I identify as gender variant. My preferred pronoun is 'they.' I'm white. I'm a feminist and anarchist.'

"Early on in expressive arts communities, I felt included in the LGBT community and also in the Riot Grrrl scene of Olympia and the Pacific Northwest. There was a lot of vibrant music and arts and independent publishing. I was a drag performer for a long time. I was in a drag troupe called the **Drag Attack Cabaret**, in the 90's. At that point I was disabled, and that was incorporated into the performance I was doing. I was really the only disabled drag performer at the time, that I remember-- that was really out about having a disability-- in the northwest. But I still felt really included in many ways, because in general many of us were exploring themes of body difference, whether it was because of size, gender-- y'know, a lot of trans folk-- race, other things like that. Things like body & identity were being performed.'

"There's been very little actual disability-integrated expressive arts in Seattle, I think. The one clearest example for me, having lived here my whole life, is **Light Motion Dance Company** and **Whistlestop Dance Company**. They collaborate a lot..."

ON THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH LIGHT MOTION

ET has been dancing with Light Motion since the late 1990's. Recently, they performed together at the EMP and the SAM Olympic Sculpture Garden, doing site-specific work. Even though ET is the only person who identifies as queer in the group, they still felt comfortable and very happy about the opportunity to challenge ableism in a performance space.

As an example, ET described a performance from last April that included a recurring piece of transition choreography by Charlene Curtiss, called “Pedestrian Package”. When asked, Curtiss expressed her intention: “I want to model what it’s like for disabled and non-disabled people to be in close proximity with each other with comfort in an enclosed space.... y’know, in an intimate space.”

ET found this intention powerful: “Even though it’s 2014, people still are very unaware of disability on the spectrum of human experience... What we are doing is more than just creative expression; we are also modeling what it’s like to share intimate space with each other without fear.’

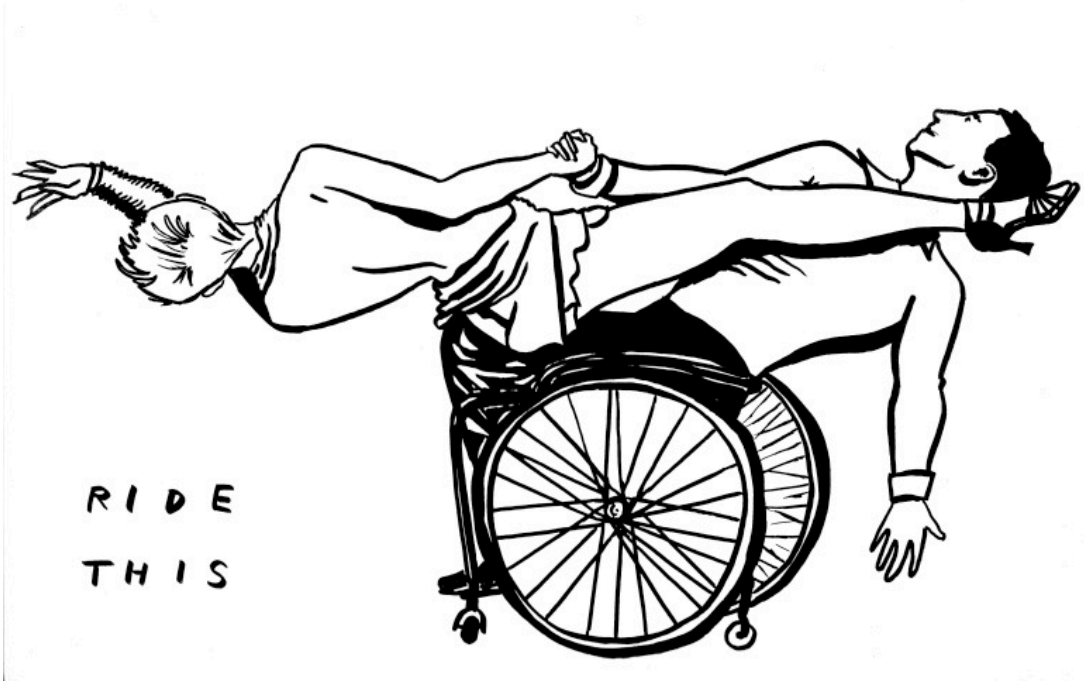
“...The thing about Light Motion is that I think they’re amazing, but they are just one dance company, so they do just kind of give one voice. They have a specific style, and there aren't a lot of other alternatives in Seattle. I actually spent many years going to Portland, and going to Berkeley and San Francisco, the California Bay Area, to draw ideas and community and connections from those communities.”

Portland has Wobbly Dance (Yulia Arakelyan and Eric Ferguson), Impetus Arts, and the Disability Arts and Culture Project (Kathy Coleman.)

ON SINS INVALID

“Then, in the Bay Area, Sins Invalid has just been basically a huge turning point for me to be involved in... because they are bringing some things that are not happening in Seattle. That space is not only disabled and integrated, it’s queer, it’s people of color... everything that you are you can bring to that space-- and honestly, that’s the only space where I've truly felt fully whole as a performer and where all of that is brought together.’

“But, you know, I don’t live in California. I live in Seattle, and it is my hometown, and so... trying to bring some of that energy here... Seattle has a different culture than the Bay Area. Racially, it’s still very segregated, and it’s not as diverse as the Bay Area. So, doing disability justice here just looks different, but one of the things that I have learned from Sins Invalid is disability justice, and now that is emerging around the world, but also specifically, it is emerging here in Seattle.”



[this picture and more of ET Russian’s artwork can be seen at etrussian.com/]

ON DISABILITY AND DANCE

“I went to this workshop... 18 years ago. It was just for a day. It was really cool... there was one person… I’m not sure what their disability was, but they had so much spasticity in all their muscles that the only part of their body that they could really control... was their eye movement, and so they were transferred onto the floor out of their wheelchair... They were lying

on the floor on a mat, and they were moving their eyes, and then people kind of came and moved with them in proximity within this contact improv space.'

"I remember thinking like, 'That's really cool because you can dance with your eyes...' That was really early on for me. I had only just begun my healing process of losing my legs… It was kind of intense to be in such an embodied space, but I did feel embodied. It was good.'

"Most of the jams I go to... specifically are integrated. I have jammed with people who are unfamiliar with integrated dance, and their concept of movement is so limited, to be honest. It's very uncreative. It's tough… they don't know how to interact with rolling movement, you know (wheeled movement, like if you're in a chair or... with a walker.)'

"...I think if people could expand their ideas of movement … but it is a process. It is a process. I think there's so many things to say about it. I think giving a lot of room for the people, in an integrated space… who have a movement difference or a body difference or a language difference (like with Deaf dancers) room for their leadership, their choreography-- them to initiate what dance activities they would like to do. I mean, I've been in so many dance spaces, where [someone will] be… like, 'Let's all jump up and down!' and it's like, 'Okay, well, you just excluded two or three people in the room who we know can't do that, so why did you suggest that?''

"... I have a friend who had a bad experience at a... jam session where someone decided to just like lift her up... was that consensual? ...One thing I like about when we jam with Light Motion is we do a body check-in at the beginning… we go around and say our name, and then we give any body check-in that we feel like we need to give, and then we give information about if we're having pain anywhere and where we can accept weight on our bodies, and any physical body needs we have... I think that's really helpful...'

“Everyone is going to move differently. If you have a paralyzed arm, if you have a tremor, if you’re deaf and you’re [experiencing]… sounds through vibrations, or you’re not experiencing the sounds… how do you communicate solely through movement and not with words? … How do you know that dances are consensual if someone is nonverbal? How do you establish that beforehand? If someone has spasticity... all these things.... One of the things I like about disabled dance is that it’s such a site of innovation, and I feel like it just really blows non-disabled dance out of the water. The innovation level, I think, just has … right out of the gate, it’s already at an advanced level…”

ON THE POTENTIAL VALUE OF A BLOG AND ZINE LIKE THIS ONE

One of the questions I asked ET was how they imagined this blog and zine could be satisfying.

“What I think would be helpful would be… capturing a sense of Seattle’s performance history and knowing our history... because that’s the thing: people don’t even see us as a cultural group. They see us as a bunch of people that have problems, and that’s ableism. It’s... reframing that we are a cultural group with a history, a language. There are a lot of aspects of our culture.’

“So capturing what is our local cultural history, and then also encouraging people that they can perform. I think a lot of people with disabilities, or who are on the spectrum of disabilities, are made to feel shame and internalize that. And they never think they can be creative, or be on stage, or move in a beautiful way-- with a ‘broken’ body or mind or whatever. So I think just really encouraging people that... movement is diverse, and actually diverse movement is some of the most innovative movement, some of the most exciting movement.’

“And just being who you are can be exciting and beautiful. Kind of tapping people on the shoulder… and being like, ‘You are an artist. You could be an artist.”

“…I mean, the Deaf community is really rich, but I think in terms of... physical mobility impairments, and other kinds of disabilities, we don’t see a lot of performance in Seattle. There isn’t a big thriving performance community, you know. I think that’s because of a lot of ableism and internalized ableism... keeps people from even realizing they could do that.”

“...And then creating spaces that give people the opportunity to explore without judgment, and with joy and pride… things like dance jams or workshops. Maybe workshops. Some people need more guidance than a jam. If someone in a wheelchair, who's never danced in their life, goes to a jam with non-disabled people who’ve danced for 20 years, it might be hard... sometimes a guided workshop where people are taught some skills first might give them… “Oh, I've got some tools to work with,” which is what Light Motion has done at times. Light Motion has offered workshops and classes like that.’

“But it’s hard to stay consistent with that, because another experience of disability is often chronic pain and… illness, and so then it’s hard to stay consistent with your creative practice because you have to go to a lot of doctor’s appointments and have surgeries, so there's that.”

I asked ET who they thought would ideally be leading these kinds of workshops.

“You... why not? People who are from the community. People who have a disability justice lens; that’d be awesome. Encouraging people in our own communities to be like, ‘You can do this. You’ve never done it? Who cares? You can do it.’ Or maybe, if we don’t feel like there are a lot of people in our cities who feel ready to do that yet, bringing in people from other cities who are doing that to model for us what that could look like, and then doing it ourselves.’

“That’s where organizations like UW, that have money... using that money to bring people from out of town, to infuse new creative ideas in the art community.”

ET and I then made some drawings:



ET Russian’s art



my art

ON ABLEISM AND AUDISM

The drawing seemed to help me get a little unstuck from my own linear language tangles. While drawing, I asked ET if they ever become aware of aspects of themselves that seem ableist, and how they deal with or process that.

“Totally... I mean, the most glaring example to me is my own audism… ASL is a language, and if you don’t know it or don’t try… just the language barrier alone is a huge barrier. I think that’s why the Deaf community has really created its own culture, very separate from disabilities, in a lot of ways…’

“I think our community is really diverse. There's no way we'll ever fully understand everyone else’s needs and experience, so it’s a constant process of learning and trying to help communicate. Organizing an accessible space is… an enormous endeavor that takes a lot of thoughtful planning and communication, and you have to re-commit yourself to that all the time, so I think... we'll always make mistakes, but it’s okay because as long as we have compassion with each other…’

“...Just being like, ‘Oops, sorry I didn’t fundraise for any interpreters,’ is just not okay.”

“‘I started fundraising, and am finding that I’m not fluent in sign language, but I am in a process,’ [is] okay. If you’re committed to the community, that’s how you can have compassion with yourself but still challenge yourself...’

“I mean when we started the DJC (the Seattle Disability Justice Collective), we all had really different experiences, so just getting each other up to speed on our own experiences was a major undertaking of that project… that was a lot of the work that we were doing, I think.”

ESSENTIAL ACCESSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS

ET went on to articulate a list of some essential considerations for making a venue accessible:

- financial accessibility (“most people with disabilities are living under the poverty level; we are a very impoverished cultural group”)
- being fragrance free
- “ stairless entrance with a wheelchair accessible door and bathroom”
- ASL interpretation
- being near a bus route

- consideration of visual impairments
- good lighting
- asking people what their needs are for the space
- “...not early morning and not late at night. A lot of people with chronic illness and disability have to go to bed early… late afternoons [are] best…”

Seattle Arts Include