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Case study

Inner Journeys in the Outer Landscapes:

Art therapy-based workshops helping immigrant women adjust to a new environment, supporting self-discovery and connection

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Abstract

This article reviews a series of multimodal art therapy-based workshops as a part of the Migrantour project carried out in Ljubljana, Slovenia, designed to support immigrant women from Ukraine, Turkey, Poland, South America, and Kazakhstan in their new environment. Held in Metelkova City, Ljubljana, the expressive workshops were part of a multicultural tourist guide training. The workshops combined mindfulness, walking as conscious movement, and creative self-expression to encourage personal growth and connection.

Twenty-two participants explored the urban landscape through sensory activities, mindful walking, photography, and poetry crafting. These practices helped participants connect with their inner selves and their surroundings. Writing poetry allowed them to transform sensory experiences into personal stories that explored themes of identity, belonging, and cultural contrasts.

The workshops led to a greater appreciation of the environment, with participants expressing newfound confidence and creativity. Many changed their perception of Metelkova City from an unsafe area to a place of inspiration and community.

Results of these multimodal art therapy based workshops show possibility for descovery of inner spaces through multisensory exploration of the outer landscapes, with emerging factor being connection with the new spaces on the account of own memories, past experiences and elements of own identity, all of which are then creatively adapted into a moral and integrated into an enriching experience for the participants.

Having this experience, the participants created authentic and intimate intercultural walks and handicraft workshops, combining their cultural heritage with tourism.

***Keywords**: immigrants, art therapy-based expression, poetry, well-being, urban environment, mindful walk*

Introduction

The Migrantour project, titled Routes and Ties (Promoting Immigrants' Role in the Development of Intercultural and Carbon-Free Tourism), aimed to educate, recognize, and empower immigrant women from Ukraine, Turkey, Poland, South America, and Kazakhstan, aged between 25 and 60. As part of their preparation to work as intercultural tourist guides or facilitators of tourist handicraft events. The project helped women integrate mo-re easily into their new environment while encouraging personal and professional growth. The project was led by the Terra Vera Association for Sustainable Development, with partners including the Oloop Institution for Contemporary Textile Art and Design, the Škrateljc Institute for Culture, Education and Sport, and the OsloMet Department of Art, Design, and Drama.

As project manager, Jana Milovanović, said: "The project addressed challenges such as higher unemployment rates among immigrants, language barriers, discrimination, and limited access to resources, all of which help newcomers understand their new environment." She stated that through this initiative, participants were given opportunities to apply their knowledge, talents, and cultural capital in ways that supported both their personal growth and the wider community.

The Migrantour project offered two distinct training programs for immigrants in Ljubljana between September 2023 and February 2024. The handicraft training, facilitated by the Oloop Institution (Tjaša Bavcon, Katja Burger Kovič, and Jasminka Ferček), took place once a week and focused on creative exploration of specific

neighborhoods and museums through sensory experiences and activities based on art therapy. Participants combined this exploration with learning traditional and modern handicraft techniques and developing prototype products from textile materials.

The intercultural tour guide training, led by the Terra Vera Association, also took place weekly. It provided participants with knowledge of Ljubljana's cultural diversity, its immigrant communities, and their contributions to the city's development. Trainees learned to develop their own city itineraries while connecting personal life stories to urban spaces. By the end of the program, participants gained the skills needed to become intercultural guides, contributing to a tourism offer that combined guided tours and handicraft workshops.

In this article, the author focuses on her role as a leader in four multimodal art therapy-based workshops for 22 participants. Two workshops were intended for participants training in intercultural tourist guiding (9 participants), while the other two were designed for those training to become facilitators of handicraft tourism events (13 participants).

The workshops were led by the author of the article, Jasminka Ferček along with her colleague, Saša Hudnik, an anthropologist and arts therapist. The project also involved a Turkish translator and cultural mediator, an Ukrainian translator, and an arts therapy student who participated in the project as part of her studies. The objectives of the series of workshops were focused on the educational element, support and the personality of each participant, artistic expression, self-knowledge and well-being.



Figure 1 - 3 Photographs taken through a round frame

The workshops were held both outdoors (in Metelkova City) and indoors (at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova)

in October, 2023. As Metelkova City is a very dynamic and diverse place, it was necessary to involve more people in the care of the group in order to ensure a safe and welcoming experience.

Metelkova City was a choice of venue because of its picturesque and rich socio-cultural history. It is an autonomous social center in the heart of Ljubljana, known for its arts and crafts, night clubs and concerts, political activity, and independent cultural production. Its murals, sculptures, benches, playgrounds, pieces of green space, and hidden corners contribute to the liveliness and vibrancy of Metelkova. All these make it extremely attractive to tourists, while many residents avoid it because of its links to drug trafficking.

Leaders of workshops checked with the project participants whether they already knew Metelkova from experience or from other people's stories. Most of them had heard of it, but many avoided it because they considered it an unsafe area.

In addition to the special atmosphere of the space, which shaped the experiences and creativity of the participants, the season, the weather, and the part of the day, during which the workshops were carried out, also played an important role.

Leaders of the activities, Jasminka i Saša, incorporated their previous professional experiences into the planning of the workshops, drawing on their work with nature-based art therapy in urban environments. In collaboration with their colleagues, they conducted workshops titled "Nature. Arts. Health.: Discover the Therapeutic Power of Creating in a Natural Environment" at Tivoli Park in Ljubljana (2022) and Maribor City Park (2023), and another workshop titled "Nature and Art as Spaces of Empowerment" at the Creative Laboratory Krater (2023), located in a construction pit in Ljubljana.



Figure 4 - 6 Photographs taken through a round frame

The Maribor workshop was part of the Platform of Contemporary Dance: "Back to Nature", while the Ljubljana events were part of the Day of Art Therapy in Europe (D.A.T.E.), organized by the European Federation of Art Therapy and the Slovenian Association of Arts Therapists.

The workshops were also inspired by the event titled I Want to Transform 'Just What Is Into Just What Is,' led by members of the Eco Art Therapy special interest group at the European Federation of Art Therapy Conference 2023. The author of this article attended the event and gained personal experience of the power of writing pantoum poetry.



Figure 7 Taking notes

Theoretical Background

A growing body of research in the arts and humanities emphasizes the importance of physical and sensory engagement in environments which promotes self-discovery. Cities, for instance, are proposed as dynamic places where social interactions, memories, and emotions merge with our sensory experience. Sounds of traffic, voices, music, nature, and the textures we encounter all contribute to the city's sensuous character. These "sensory affordances" are not neutral; our engagement with them shapes how we understand and navigate urban spaces (Low, 2015). Matos Wunderlich (2008) explored walking as a fundamental method for perceiving and engaging with urban environments. He argues that walking is more than just transportation; it's a full-body sensory experience that shapes our sense of space. It is an unconscious way we move through cities, absorbing information with our bodies. Walking allows us to interact with the environment through sight, touch, smell, hearing, and even taste, forming sensory experiences (Winkler, 2002, cited in Matos Wunderlich, 2008). These experiences are not passive. Walking shapes beliefs based on sensory values that influence our emotional connection to specific locations and emotional attachment (Tuan, 1977, cited in Matos Wunderlich, 2008). By repeatedly encountering places, we develop a sense of belonging and familiarity (Lynch, 1960, cited in Matos Wunderlich, 2008). Walking is a multisensory practice that promotes a deeper understanding of cities. Through embodied experiences, we develop a sense of space, emotional connections, and a nuanced understanding of urban environments. This "perception-in-moti-



Figure 8 Taking notes

on" creates an "everyday aesthetic" that shapes our relationship with the city.

Reinforcing this concept, Reynolds, Thompson, and Thompson (2017) suggest a reciprocal relationship: "We are shaped by the places we inhabit... just as we shape the places around us". Similarly, Macfarlane (2012, cited in Reynolds Thompson & Thompson, 2017) proposes two key questions: "What do I know when I'm in this place that I can know nowhere else and what does this place know about me that I cannot know about myself?"

Environments, therefore, can act as mirrors of our inner world, supporting self-discovery. Through exploration of diverse spaces and sensory experiences, we can gain new perspectives on ourselves and the world around us.

The author also drew on Pamela Whitaker's walking studio (Whitaker, 2017; Whitaker et al., 2022) and the principles of practice based on experiences in nature and in outdoor spaces. According to Whitaker, this is a modality of art therapy where participants can work on their own needs— with, within, and in-between environments. Environment, she explains, is the here and now and what could be. It affects decisions made in creative work, actions and connectivity. Outdoor space has a role of self-regulation and can restore our psyche, leading to balancing and reconnecting with our external landscapes (2017, 2022).

About the Approach and Process

The art therapy-based workshops aimed to promote self-discovery, connection, and well-being. Two were intended for participants in intercultural tourist guide training, while the other two, having the same structure, were designed for those training for facilitators of handicraft workshops since they took place at the very beginning of the Migrantour project, when participants did not meet each other yet. Leaders prioritized activities that helped them ground themselves, connect with their inner selves, and build connections with each other and the environment. Walking, mindfulness, and

art-based self-expression played a central role in these workshops, allowing participants to self-regulate and self-discover. An engaging introduction to the Migrantour project was held also, helping participants develop the creativity and skills needed to lead multicultural tourism experience shared with the public at the end of the project.

Each workshop lasted three hours. The meetings were divided into three parts; the meeting would begin with a relaxing grounding activity, followed by an expressive art therapy activity, and it would be rounded off with sharing of experiences.



Figure 9 Poetry reading

1. The first workshop

began at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (close to Metelkova City) with an introductory circle, where leaders welcomed the participants and presented the schedule for the day. They established group agreements for confidentiality and smoother collaboration, including guidelines for phone usage, active listening, and translation support when needed.

Playful activity followed: The outdoor exploration began with a mindful exercise, helping participants focus on noticing changes in the environment while slowly walking from the museum area to Metelkova City.



Figure 10 Found natural elements

The key outdoor activity involved a multi-sensory exploration of Metelkova, beginning with a slow, mindful walk through the area to engage participants in its sights, sounds, smells, and textures. Each participant selected a spot that resonated with them, or because they found it interesting and then explored the chosen space using their senses one by one—sight, hearing, smell, taste (in their imagination), and touch.

Those places were not neutral but vulnerable. They challenged participants' sense of equilibrium and asked for attention (Whitaker et al., 2022). In the

specifically chosen external locations, participants inhaled the various scents and tastes that came from dry leaves, moist mint, a coffee shop, or the smoker around the corner. They used sight and touch to explore the textures of colorful walls, the trunk of a ginkgo tree, or a rusty art installation. With their hearing, they captured the unique mix of sounds - birds, music, and traffic.



Figure 11 Finding own spaces

With focused attention, they were then guided to shift from perceiving external stimuli (exteroception) to perceiving what is happening inside the body (interoception). Participants observed bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts, along with memories, images, and associations evoked by the space. They recorded three words for each sensory observation in their journals while also reflecting on personal memories and emotions evoked by the space, capturing their thoughts in brief sentences. They also documented

their experiences through photography, collecting found objects and elements of nature. The photographs were taken through a circular frame to emphasize the key visual message. They served as narratives of what they encountered in themselves and in their surroundings.



Figure 12 Journaling

The participants' reflections during the workshop revealed personal connections to their memories, feelings and emotions, and their current environment. Tatiana shared, "Touching the rough stone reminded me of a landscape in Kazakhstan." Teresa, drawing from her own experiences, remarked, "The mural with sea motifs reminds me of Venezuela and the nature there." Daniela reflected on her connection to the space, saying, "I positioned myself in this space, creating my own working corner, observing the chestnut tree." She found joy and fulfillment in the activity, reconnecting with memories of walking past similar environments during her school days in Kyiv. For Kateryna,

the experience evoked thoughts on cultural differences. "I was surprised by how openly people talk about menstruation and menopause here," she said. "I like that my daughter can tell her gym teacher she's on her period." Felicia, on the other hand, found inspiration in her surroundings, observing "eyes and an old telescope on the facade," which she saw as "a view into the future, a path forward, a good positive sign."

In the next phase of the workshop, each participant presented a chosen part of Metelkova City through a personal story. The result of these presentations was a unique, personal tour of Metelkova City, shaped by the individual experiences of the participants, which facilitated personal reflection and creative engagement with urban spaces, ultimately enriching their understanding of both themselves and their surroundings.

2. The second workshop

also began at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova with a brief shar-ing of participants' feelings and activity which involved working in pairs to cre-ate a relaxed and collaborative atmosphere. Then, participants viewed the printed photographs they had taken during the previous workshop. They spent time cutting and pasting these images into their journals. They also revisited the found objects and natural elements collected during the walk, discussing their significance. The visual journal combined written and visual interventions, allowing for both emotional satisfaction and cognitive awareness (Mercer, 2010).

The guided the poetry-writing process follwed, which took place indoors and in silence. The participants reviewed the texts, sentences, and words previously written in their journals. Then, they selected ten significant words and used them in the pantoum form to create poems based on their collected impressions, visual materials, and verbal reflections, writing in the mother tongue or in a language they felt most comfortable with.

A pantoum is a poetic structure with Malaysian/French roots. It uses an interlocking pattern of repetition, and as the lines repeat and reverberate, the

effect can become almost haunting. Here, the rhythm of the lines repeating aims to capture the emotional impact of appreciating beauty (Chilton et al., 2015). An exciting aspect of the pantoum are subtle shifts in meaning that can occur as repeated phrases are revised with different punctuation and thereby given a new context.

With poems in their hands, the women moved outdoors to Metelkova City for a site-specific poetry reading walk. They read their poems in their language of choice at the places that had inspired them. The participants were visibly surprised and moved by the significant impact their words and stories had gained through the poetic form.

The event concluded with the reading of a poem the leader of workshop had crafted while observing the participants during their creative process. This poem was part of the art response approach, designed to help participants feel seen, heard, and contained throughout their journey of self-discovery and expression.

Results, Examples of Self-discovery and Crafted Poetry

The creative writing as the last part of art therapy-based workshops resulted in a diverse collection of poetic reflections that illustrate the participants' emotional journeys and personal connections to their surroundings. Each poem revealed experiences of the participants as they engaged with their environment and explored themes of identity, memory, and resilience.

These poems explored diverse themes such as current events, personal history, cultural differences, women's issues, and existential questions. Poetry became a powerful tool for expressing emotions and memories that might have otherwise been difficult to articulate. As Chilton and colleagues (2015) noted, poetry moves us through both rhythm and word choice, helping us uncover and create sensory and emotional knowledge. Expressive writing enables individuals to narrate their stories in their own words, offering a fresh perspective through what they have written. This process allows people to shift from a dominant narrative of their

lives—one that may be "told to" them—to one that is "told by" them (Reynolds Thompson & Thompson, 2017).

Tatiana's poem reflected on the connection between her two homes, Kazakhstan and Slovenia, symbolizing the connection between her past and future through tactile sensations of touching the stone sculpture. This connection between locations emphasizes the nature of cultural identity in a migratory context.

"...Old and new,
cold stone and tempting nature,
petroglyphs and dragons,
Kazakhstan and Slovenia,
my past and my future...".



Figure 13 Guiding tour in Metelkova City

At the end of the workshop she came up with the idea of creating her own personal Ljubljana tour based on contrasts, as she realized that she herself is a person of many contrasts - "mixture of incompatible elements."

Ludmila's verses convey a sense of freedom and her desire to express herself with unbridled creativity, linking inspiration from a metal installation to themes of protest, rebellion, and personal empowerment.

"...Rusty iron and concrete
- its tools.
Revolution and hippie culture
- alive!
You can throw out your
protest here.
Express yourself like a child,
protest like a teenager!".

Later Ludmila suggested compiling the poems into a booklet and printing it, which the leaders did after the project had ended.

Contemplating a mural that displayed an Idrija lace motif, Kateryna questioned her own life. She reflected on her inner changes over time, searching for the wild feminine nature that was once more prominent.

"...Wild female nature, keeling
in Idrija lace,

do you still dream as you did in
your rebellious childhood?
Have you found your footing
among the cold metal?
Do you still listen to the rustling
of dry leaves under the
pigeon's feet?
Do you still enjoy a beer and a
potato roasted over an
open fire?...
... How often do you ask yourself?
... "

Later Kateryna decided to use mind-fulness exercises and multi-sensory space exploration in her future guided tours of Metelkova. Moreover, she found the whole experience of the workshops so interesting and informative that she requested that workshops run again for the anthropology students who came to the Migrantour project to do research.

Julia's discovery of freshness and purity under a ginkgo tree emphasizes the significance of mindfulness and attention to detail in daily life. It shows the importance of small, often overlooked moments that contribute to one's overall well-being.

"...Ginkgo biloba gives freshness
and purity.
When you think in the shade,
you realize that real life is in the de-
tails that are scattered around...".

Afet's poem, inspired by a yard with a tree, revealed a tragic event in her family that marked her childhood.

"... My childhood was a stone wall
covered with moss...
My childhood was trapped in the
branches of a tree...".

Miray, while sitting in front of a large sculpture, realized her strength and perseverance, comparing herself to a scorpion, shows resilience in the face of life's challenges. Her poem conveys themes of vulnerability and strength, illustrating the duality of her experiences.

" ...I have a life with ups and downs,
but I am strong as a scorpion.
I am quiet, but dangerous.
I have a life with ups and downs.
I am lonely, but calm.
Scorpio strength in me...".

Irina found peace with the Chernobyl disaster at climbing frame. Her verses offered comfort following the disaster, conveying a sense of hope and healing through nature. Her poem reflects the restorative power of the natural world in confronting personal and collective trauma.



Slika 14 Walking from museum to Metelkova City

"...The playground is waiting.
A tree gives hope.
Fallen leaves smell good.
Nature is the master of the planet..."

Gulya's belief in freedom and community emerged in her poem, which emphasizes collaboration and mutual support among individuals. Her call for unity and hope resonates with the theme of togetherness. She believes in the potential of shared experiences to build resilience and optimism.

"Let us escape together,
by helping each other,
young and old.
Let's walk on the dirt road,
listening to the sounds of the birds.
So that we can help each other,
young and old ,
helpless but full of hope,
listening to the sounds of the birds.
We walk in silence."

Discussion

The Migrantour project, titled Routes and Ties, aimed to empower immigrant women from Ukraine, Turkey, Poland, South America, and Kazakhstan. It focused on helping women aged 25 to 60 integrate into their new environments through training as tourist guides or handicraft facilitators. Led by the Terra Vera Association, the project addressed challenges like unemployment, language barriers, and discrimination. It provided participants with tools to utilize their talents and cultural knowledge for personal growth and community contribution. By the end, participants gained skills to offer intercultural walks and craft workshops, blending their cultural heritage with tourism.

Research underscores the importance of physical and sensory engagement with environments for self-discovery, as cities provide dynamic spaces where social interactions, memories, and emotions intertwine with sensory experiences. Walking through urban environments is not merely successful transfer from one point to another; it is a multisensory practice that shapes our sense of place, emotional connections, and understanding of cities. Environments can act as mirrors to our inner world, helping us gain new perspectives on ourselves through sensory experiences and exploration of space.

The author co-led four multimodal art therapy-based workshops for the project participants. The workshops integrated art therapy with methods such as mindfulness and creative expression, allowing participants to connect with their surroundings and personal narratives. They recorded sensory observations, emotions, and memories, which they later reflected on through poetry writing. In the next phase, they read their poems aloud in the places that had inspired them. This creative process enabled participants to express their emotions and experiences, enhancing their connection with both the environment and their inner selves.

The author noticed that by integrating mindful walk, embodied experience of the environment, and art-based self-expression through photography, journaling, and poetry, a greater understanding and connection between the participants' inner worlds and the ou-ter environment was facilitated. The walking outdoor practices are beneficial to art-based self-expression as a creative practice that allows participants to fully connect with surroundings, explore and understand others, as well as how they make sense of their worlds.

Conclusion

The integration of mindful walking, embodied experience of the environment, and art-based self-expression, including photography, journaling, and poetry, facilitated a connection between the par-

ticipants' inner worlds and their external environment. The outdoor walking practices proved beneficial in enhancing art-based self-expression as they allowed participants to physically engage with their surroundings, increasing their understanding of both themselves and others. Writing about landscapes, whether real or imagined, helped bridge the gap between interior and exterior worlds, illustrating how these realms shape and influence one another reciprocally (Reynolds Thompson & Thompson, 2017). This reciprocal relationship between the inner and outer worlds emphasizes the importance of exploring such connections further, as they seem integral to creating a sense of being grounded, belonging, and environmental awareness.

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