

# Where no Words are Needed: Overcoming Linguistic and Cultural Barriers through Visual Creativity

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“Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.”

Kurt Vonnegut

## Visual engaged art and borders: A borderless exploration

The power of art and creativity in the transformation of people's daily lives and their societal roles has been an enduring focus of inquiry in fields such as sociology, philosophy (Mouffe 2008), and psychology. (Sherman and Morissey 2017) Art evokes emotions of love and belonging, while creativity enhances communication and understanding, facilitating the transcendence of linguistic and expressive barriers and encouraging fresh perspectives on personal situations and social contexts. Throughout history, art and creation have been catalysts for critical thinking and for breaking down barriers, whether they be cultural, social, or even physical and political.

Visual art, akin to performing arts, provides a non-verbal form of expression permitting individuals construct bridges between each other by using their personal experiences and imagination. Distinguishing itself from performing arts, visual creativity thrives in various settings: as a reflective purely individual pursuit or as part of a collaborative group effort within a broader community. Visual art serves as an essential tool for comprehending and surmounting obstacles that isolate individuals from their physical and social surroundings, as well as assisting in the resolution of “inner barriers” associated with psychological issues, trauma, fear, and diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

Borders, beyond their economic, political, and social implications, possess a rich symbolic and visual significance that has long captivated artists as a powerful subject matter. Artists use these symbols to express the human experience of physical, mental, or cultural isolation and division, formulating political and social statements against discriminatory and exclusionary policies that underpin physical, social, and cultural divisions. Recently, the term “Border art” has emerged as a common expression for a diverse group of artists and creators worldwide who aim to draw attention to the varied meanings and forms of borders, exploring their often contradictory uses and implications. Artists situated along significant global borders, such as the Mexican-American and Israeli-Palestinian frontiers, strive to highlight the brutality of spatial, societal, and cultural divisions for the sake of political power.

As articulated by Renée Marlin Benett (2019),

*“Border art deals with various kinds of boundaries, and the works draw our attention to different ways of problematizing the notion of “border” and the political practices that make and remake borders (“bordering practices”). When artists create border art by doing things such as setting a boundary, crossing it, subverting it, using it to block something, erasing it, and so forth, they are engaging in micropractices of global politics.”*

Border art takes various forms, drawing attention to both physical space and personal boundaries. Examples abound, ranging from iconic murals on the Berlin Wall that underscored the political divide between the communist and capitalist worlds, exemplified by Dmitri Vrubel's “Fraternal Kiss”, (Dundon 2022) to the diverse paintings of Banksy and Ana Teresa Fernández's performance, “Erasing the Borders”, at the Mexican-American border in Tijuana. Yet, Border art also delves into more personal “borders,” expressing the devastating impact of boundaries and division. Inner borders, in this sense, reflect political, social, and territorial boundaries, highlighting the plight of individuals who endure isolation from their families, possessions, and cultures due to the often arbitrary boundaries imposed by political powers. Artist like Mona Hatoum depicts the pain of being separated from her family in Lebanon, portraying the intimacy of a long-distance relationship with her mother in her video work, “Measure of Distance” (1998) (Kabakci 2020). In her other works, she employs visual transformations of everyday objects into nightmarish figures to represent the often irrational reactions of people living in displacement and danger (Coxhead 2016).

The representation of both inner and external boundaries facilitates multifaceted communication between the artist and the subjects of bordering, conveying a blend of political, social, and personal messages. Beyond their emotional impact, these messages also serve an educational purpose, aiding spectators in comprehending the various layers of societal bordering. This diverse range of expressive forms makes visual art a valuable tool in educational programs for non-verbal communication and self-expression, a theme that will be further explored in this article.

Visual and conceptual arts, when employed to convey clear political and social messages, possess strong didactic potential, bridging the realms of art and education. The roles of visual art in education are manifold, harnessing the power of symbolism to foster critical thinking, encourage shifts in perspective, enhance empathy and understanding, and raise awareness about concealed values and unseen issues. Art creation can also serve as a communal practice, promoting belonging, collaboration, cooperation, and the sharing of values and mutual understanding. As stated Klausz et al. (2023) “By creating art that challenges the status quo, artists become agents of empowerment, inspiring others to embrace their identities and actively participate in shaping a more inclusive society. Art also plays a crucial role in fostering community engagement and participation. It provides a platform for collaboration and collective expression, allowing individuals to come together, share their stories, and actively shape their communities. Artistic projects involving diverse communities not only promote dialogue and shared experiences but also build strong social bonds that transcend societal divisions.” With its ability to engage in dialogue through symbols and images, visual art possesses the power to help map and understand the complexities of social life without inciting direct conflicts of interest.

The impactful visual messages conveyed by conceptual artworks that address social and cultural borders underscore the idea of transcending these borders through the application of visual art education. In the subsequent article, we will explore how visual art can be employed in teaching and training contexts to enhance the social inclusion of people with migrant and minority backgrounds, helping them overcome communication barriers in their host countries at environmental, social, and individual levels. Following an overview of the artistic and theoretical background, we will provide examples of best practices in teaching and education derived from three distinct adult education projects conducted in this domain: Re-Cult, Re-Store, and Circulart-e. Finally, we will conclude with reflections on how culture- and art-based projects can genuinely effect social change and how this transformation can be assessed.

## Aspects and practices from three educational art projects

The Comparative Research Network<sup>1</sup> and COTA Art for Society<sup>2</sup> have actively contributed to the development, coordination, and execution of three projects aimed at employing visual art creation to support individuals with migrant and minority backgrounds in their social integration into host majority societies. The overarching objective of these projects is to create a comprehensive toolkit and educational curricula to assist trainers, teachers, and educators in incorporating visual art creation into their daily teaching and training activities. The main focus of these projects, promoting social and cultural integration of individuals with migrant and minority backgrounds, is approached through three core strategies: 1) non-verbal communication through visual self-expression and community building, 2) environmental preservation via recycling and upcycling techniques during the creative process, and 3) digitalization by teaching the use of digital tools for creation and communication. These three projects were realized within the framework of the ERASMUS+ program:

**Re-Store** - *Recycling Stories Through Electronic Device*<sup>3</sup>: The project aimed to establish an e-learning platform for enhancing key competences in visual communication with a focus on environmental consciousness and cultural diversity.

**Re-Cult** - *Online Blended Method on Visual Education for Recycling and Rebuilding Cultural Identity of People with Migrant and Minority Backgrounds*<sup>4</sup>: This project centers on harnessing the power of art, creativity, and visual education to support the (re)integration of individuals with refugee, migrant, or cultural minority backgrounds into their local communities. It explores visual creativity to comprehend the complexity of cultural identity and belonging and encourages people to communicate through images by providing a teaching curriculum comprising various art-based exercises and a series of video tutorials.

**Ciculart-E** - *Visual Art Education, Digital and Circular Skills for Boosting Social Entrepreneurship of Youth with a Migratory and Minority Background in Europe*<sup>5</sup>: This project revolves around visual art education,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://crnonline.de/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cotaartforsociety.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.re-stor-e.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.re-cult.eu/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ciculart-e.eu/>

digital skills, and circular skills with the aim of boosting social entrepreneurship among youth with migratory and minority backgrounds across Europe.

Despite having different specific goals and educational contexts, the commonality of objectives and themes across these projects has led to closely interconnected results. The process began with an analysis of the needs of the target groups, proceeded through the identification of main visual creation exercises, and culminated in the development of comprehensive pedagogical tools, including curricula, tutorials, and online platforms. In the subsequent chapter, the primary exercises from the three projects targeting social inclusion of individuals with migrant backgrounds will be reinterpreted from the perspective of their utility in addressing various levels of social, political, and interpersonal barriers.

In all three projects, local workshops, designed for groups of 4 to 12 participants and lasting between 2 to 2.5 hours, were conducted. The range of activities provided each participant an opportunity to discover or rediscover and utilize their existing skills, potentially transforming them into a professional pursuit or simply enhancing their living environment by acquiring new skills and knowledge to make their surroundings more personalized and aesthetically pleasing. The methods employed were based on five types of activities:

1. **Activities to Foster Confidence in Artistic Creation and Introduction to Group Work:** Initiating participants into artistic creation and collaborative endeavors.
2. **Exploration and Discovery of Local Culture:** Encouraging walks and visits to museums, libraries, and explorations of the built and natural environment.
3. **Methods for Developing Personal Visual Language:** Assisting participants in cultivating their own visual language and understanding the significance and application of visual languages through practical work.
4. **Recycling Practices and Creative Techniques:** Familiarizing participants with working with various recyclable materials and introducing them to creative techniques that bridge artistic and craft practices with daily life.
5. **Activities Involving Visual, Audiovisual, and Digital Creation:** Fostering the creation and development of digital and visual communication skills, enabling participants to showcase their creations.

These methods target individuals who may face challenges in following conventional training due to factors such as unfamiliarity with local culture, language barriers, lack of self-confidence, or prior academic setbacks. The workshops often commence with enjoyable exercises designed to enhance drawing and writing skills, cultivate the value of visual language, create group dynamics, and acquaint participants with key concepts. Exploration walks encourage participants to actively observe their surroundings, search for sources of inspiration, with the use of tools provided them for documenting and recording their observations.

Following discovery, participants engage in material exploration, creating art objects either collectively or individually. Last but not least, they are encouraged to communicate their creations using visual, audiovisual, and digital tools. Below, we present visual art-based practices organized within six main themes, each associated with the challenge of overcoming distinct barriers.

## Overcoming cultural barriers between people and their environment

Navigating the boundaries between individuals and their immediate environment can be a straightforward task for those who have grown up in a particular area and absorbed its images, patterns, and the meaning of its symbols from childhood. However, for those who have recently moved to a new locale, this process often requires a more extended period of adjustment. The duration and nature of this adaptation process are influenced by various factors, including individuals' cultural backgrounds, language proficiencies, ages, levels of education, and prior places of residence. Regardless of the specifics, people frequently encounter challenges in comprehending the symbols and patterns of a novel physical environment.

The concept of urban explorations encompasses various collective and themed walks, each of which commences with a workshop aimed at generating audiovisual content, such as photos, videos, and sound recordings.

**Map Me Happy:** Participants embark on journeys armed with maps of their surroundings, either printed or utilizing digital tools like Google Maps. Their task is to identify locations on the map that evoke positive sensations related to sound, sight, smell, touch, or an overall sense of well-being. The photos and videos captured during these excursions are subsequently shared within the group.

**Looking for Traces of Cultural Origin:** During these walks, participants actively seek and document details that resonate with their cultural roots.

**Searching for Ornaments:** This walk guides participants to appreciate the beauty of decorative elements in locations they may have previously overlooked. It is augmented by a toolkit that facilitates recording these details through techniques like rubbing or drawing, and smartphone usage.

**Searching for Signs:** Taking place in an urban environment, this walk assigns participants the task of identifying signs indicative of specific concepts, such as borders or symbols of circularity within the city. This activity deepens also their understanding of the diversity of concepts through visual expressions.<sup>6</sup>

These exploration activities can be complemented with diverse types of creative exercises, both collective and individual mapping activities:

**Collective mapping activities** are designed to introduce participants to co-creation and visual representation, stimulating reflection on the challenges of visual expression. These activities foster the development of a personal visual vocabulary, bolstering participants' comfort with artistic creation and drawing through the introduction of simple, accessible techniques. Furthermore, these activities introduce participants to key concepts in visual arts that they can subsequently apply in their own creations.

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<sup>6</sup> The use of these activities can be explored in different contexts, and they are also accompanied by video tutorials and step-by-step activity descriptions:

<https://www.re-stor-e.com/map-me-happy-a-sensorial-exploration-of-the-neighborhood>

<https://www.re-stor-e.com/finding-ornaments-in-the-city>

<https://www.re-stor-e.com/creative-city-crossing-in-matera>

<https://www.re-cult.eu/thinking-of-borders>

One notable activity is the **OrnaMental Mapping**, which entails collaboratively crafting a composite ornamental map from pre-selected ornament fragments. This exercise may be linked to a city walk or a hypothetical journey. The objective is to simplify images into basic geometric shapes and interconnect motifs to establish a transition between two forms of ornamentation. This activity promotes the development of visual abstraction skills, hones communication abilities, and encourages collaborative problem-solving to create transitions, fostering group cohesion.

Its variant is the **OrnaMental City Map** that centers on using towns' and environs' maps as a foundation and source of inspiration. Participants often tie this activity to their mapping excursions. Streets function as guides for forming compositions, either by crafting geometric shapes derived from them or by transforming them into figurative representations. This technical approach cultivates the creation of compositions composed of solid and vacant surfaces through the use of adhesive tape techniques. Additionally, it sharpens observation skills by prompting consideration of how to convert simple abstract shapes and lines into figurative forms.

All activities and workshops are closely connected with raising participants' awareness regarding migration and interculturality. Each activity initially spotlights the cultural heritage of individuals who have recently relocated to Europe. Urban and hypothetical walks serve to unearth traces and markers of cultural diversity, while creative exercises motivate participants to rediscover and integrate elements from their cultural backgrounds into their artistic creations. In the process of co-creation, working collectively on the same canvas using distinct languages and symbols from diverse cultural realms fosters respect for cultural diversity and transmutes these encounters and exchanges into sources of inspiration. Conversations following these activities share the common objective of recognizing that each individual has something to impart to others, embodying the "each one teaches one" philosophy.

Specific themes addressed during these activities, such as the notion of home and the multifaceted meanings of terms like "community," "borders," "limits," or "barriers," aim to explore the varied interpretations of these concepts based on personal experiences, backgrounds, cultural influences, education, and places of residence. Confronting and sharing these interpretations serves to enrich everyone's comprehension of these concepts.

Furthermore, while the workshops are primarily tailored for individuals grappling with linguistic and social barriers, they also remain open to other audiences, including educators and local residents, thereby fostering immediate and direct exchanges.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.re-stor-e.com/ornamental-map>; <https://www.re-stor-e.com/ornamental-city-map>



## **Overcoming cultural boundaries through objects**

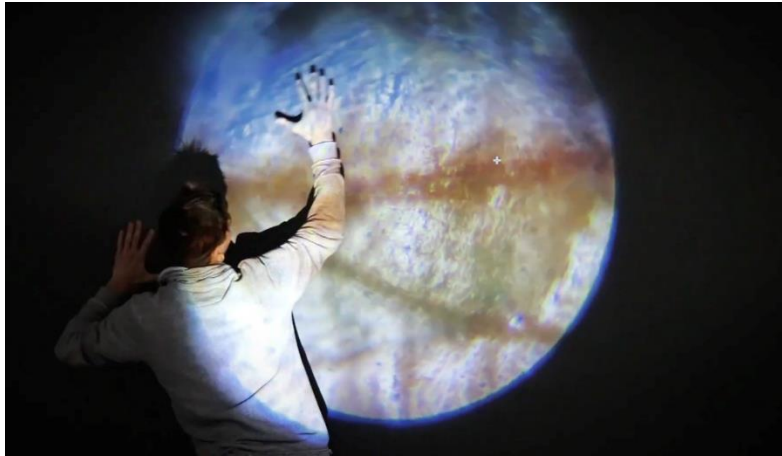
Objects possess their own narratives, which vary in length, tracing their origins from conception to their diverse purposes and methods of use. Beneath the surface of these objects lies an even more extensive narrative, entwined with various cultures, spaces, and traditions. By engaging with the stories woven into these objects, scrutinizing the materials from which they are fashioned, and, innovatively, inventing alternative applications for these items, individuals can reevaluate their habits deeply rooted in their culture. This practice encourages people to create distance between themselves, their possessions, and their everyday lives. In doing so, they gain a deeper comprehension of how their culture can be reimagined in novel ways, expressed through fresh forms.

These practices assist individuals in adapting to new cultures or facilitating the adaptation of others into their culture. Various methods of visual storytelling through personal objects have been explored with people from diverse backgrounds. The exercise commences with each person recounting, writing, or illustrating a distinctive and personal story, which may revolve around a wide array of objects, from the general objects of everyday life to the more specific ones, such as spices for instance. The common thread uniting these disparate experiences is the manner in which these objects are subsequently treated. Their materials are meticulously observed through microscopes, and they are repurposed, often metamorphosing into talismans or jewelry, for example. Through this process, individual experiences, without resorting to verbal expression, evolve into a shared creative experience.



Consequently, this activity contributes to the dissolution of barriers between people and the construction of a sense of community.<sup>8</sup>

The work involving plants and recycled materials aims not only to heighten awareness of environmental preservation but also to identify common ground, shared interests, and universal values, such as the protection of our environment. The digital activities are designed to impart the skills required for communicating about creations and, by extension, the values they embody, including cultural and artistic diversity. These activities equip participants with tools that can be employed to share their concepts and creations with a broader audience within the local community.



## **Overcoming cultural barriers between individuals and the host country/society**

To transcend the cultural boundaries separating individuals with a migrant background from the culture of their host country, a prolonged process of learning is essential. This process is most effectively achieved by broadening an individual's perspective towards 'third cultures,' thereby gaining insight into their inner workings and how symbols and meanings are woven into objects and artifacts. This exercise guides individuals in creating a psychological distance from both their native culture and that of the host country. The exploration and analysis of a 'third culture' serve as a vital bridge in comprehending a culture they hold a deep sensitivity toward. In this manner, this practice simplifies the crossing of boundaries between their original culture and that of the host nation.

Imaginary walks (through books, objects at home or on internet), much like their physical counterparts in cities or museums, are typically activities of discovery and introduction. These activities enable participants to acquaint themselves with products from specific cultural spheres, distinct craft techniques, or concepts translated into visual representations. This exercise proves particularly effective when working with mixed groups comprising both locals and individuals in exile. It empowers them to familiarize themselves jointly with the unknown and identify universal themes and values within a visual realm unfamiliar to all.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.re-stor-e.com/ice-breaking-throgh-storytelling-with-spices>  
<https://www.re-cult.eu/theatre-perdormance>



Drawing from the recently unveiled visual universe, diverse creative activities can be established, utilizing newly discovered patterns or color associations, such as recycled jewelry workshops.<sup>9</sup>

Rediscovering one's original culture through the lens of someone residing in a new environment also serves as a means of transcending the borders separating two cultures. Observing traditional objects from one's home culture, scrutinizing the items in one's home that have drawn inspiration from these traditions, and subsequently crafting one's own objects or artwork represent a multifaceted process of observation, comprehension, and adaptation.

Imaginary walks or visits to museums and cultural sites provide opportunities to uncover how one's culture of origin has influenced the host country's culture. These experiences can also serve as sources of inspiration, particularly upon encountering rekindled art forms such as Islamic miniature paintings and typical geometric ornaments. Techniques such as drawing, painting, and collage are aptly employed for this purpose.<sup>10</sup>



## Overcoming cultural barriers through community inclusion

Entering a new neighborhood, comprehending and integrating the values and customs of local communities, presents a challenge for everyone. For individuals arriving from another country or facing specific vulnerabilities, this task can be even more daunting compared to a local newcomer. To establish a connection with their new environment and potentially become active citizens in their adopted city, it is crucial to understand the perceptions of recently settled individuals regarding the neighborhood, their expectations from the local community, and to envisage their vision of an ideal living environment.

In the context of Lego Serious Play, the power of metaphors empowers individuals to visualize their real and ideal surroundings and the communities they inhabit. This exercise aids in identifying specific aspects that people might want to change within their current environment and in shaping their roles within the local communities. The concept of boundaries and ways to transcend them naturally arise while working with Lego bricks, serving as visual metaphors for constructing or dismantling walls.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.re-stor-e.com/migrating-objects>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.re-stor-e.com/from-ornament-to-adornment>

Various interpretations regarding the meanings of community and the barriers obstructing people from belonging can emerge through this exercise. Using Lego brick metaphors provides an efficient starting point for sharing personal stories, experiences, difficulties tied to feelings of exclusion, and pinpointing their sources.<sup>11</sup>



## Overcoming cultural borders by exploring them through the Body

Boundaries between an individual and the host culture often stem from personal and cultural inner boundaries. These inner boundaries may be rooted in psychological factors but are primarily shaped by learned values and behavioral patterns. These values often create tangible barriers between individuals and their environment, although they may not fully comprehend it. Individuals frequently experience these borders through different parts of their bodies. Mapping the connections between different body parts and our immediate and broader environments proves valuable in understanding our profound emotions concerning our physical and psychological place within our surroundings. Observing one another's physical appearances and behaviors in various environments, as well as how others perceive us, provides insight into our roles within our surroundings.

**Body mapping** is an exercise designed for expressing emotions through visual means and linking these emotions to different parts of the body. Participants fill the outlines of life-sized body drawings on paper with symbols, small drawings, words, colors, and ornaments. From a technical perspective, this exercise teaches participants to use contours with the help of objects, bodies, or shadows, providing them with a straightforward and accessible technique for their future creative endeavors.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.re-cult.eu/lego-serious-play>

Mapping workshops encompass two segments: the creative aspect followed by a conversation aimed at sharing experiences. During this discussion, participants talk about their challenges and present their body maps to the group. This conversation is as much about learning self-expression as it is about inspiring one another.<sup>12</sup>

**Blind Portraits** activity involves several individuals working successively on the same portrait, each using a different color. It fosters observation skills in a playful and relaxed manner, enhancing participants' ability to work in a group while respecting each person's contribution to the collective work.<sup>13</sup> Local art workshops have also facilitated the exploration of a wide array of short community-building practices involving visual self-expression and movement. Becoming aware of one's body and its interactions in a shared space has proven essential in overcoming barriers tied to shyness and self-confidence issues, prerequisites for active participation within a community. Group-building activities include imitating one another's gestures and movements, emulating sculptures created during the workshops, transforming words and emotions into actions without relying on verbal communication, all of which have been tested during these workshops.<sup>14</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> Body mapping has been used in different contexts, here are two examples: <https://www.re-stor-e.com/body-mapping>

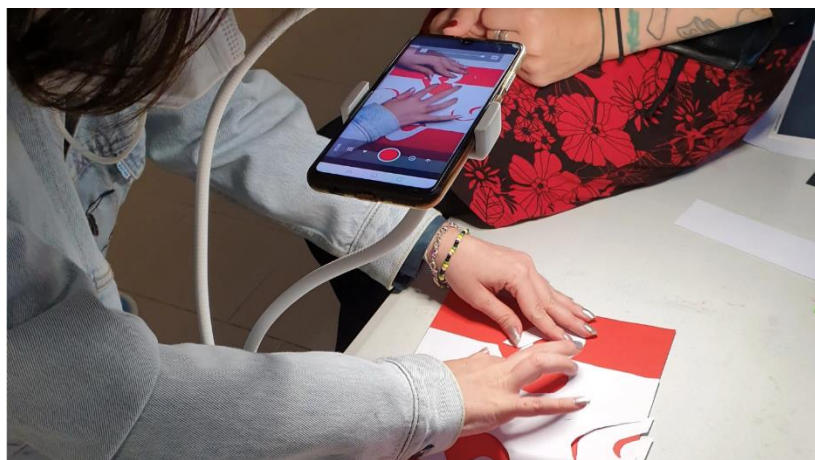
<sup>13</sup> <https://www.re-cult.eu/thinking-of-borders>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.re-stor-e.com/newspaper-and-body-sculptures>  
<https://www.re-stor-e.com/name-and-gesture-ice-breaking-activity>  
<https://www.re-stor-e.com/body-sculptures-for-words>

## Overcoming personal limits associated with self-expression difficulties

During the workshops, some specific digital activities have been implemented with the aim of teaching individuals to communicate about their creations and, in doing so, to convey the values they represent, such as cultural and artistic diversity. These activities equip participants with the tools and skills needed to share their ideas and creations with a broader local audience, ultimately aiding in the easier transcendence of linguistic barriers. While these activities are primarily designed for an audience seeking to overcome language and social barriers, they are also open to other groups, including educators and local residents, fostering the potential for immediate and direct exchanges. The use of visual languages, in and of itself, serves as a method for surmounting language barriers through the act of creation. Among the various digital tools available for breaking down communication barriers, one of the most engaging is storytelling through **Stop Motion short films**. This animation technique entails meticulously capturing a movement or change frame by frame by taking photos of each incremental transition.

Stop motion workshops run either concurrently with or following one of the creative activities. Participants document their works in progress, revealing the step-by-step alterations made to an object. Alternatively, they breathe life into their creations by orchestrating interactions according to scenarios of their own invention.<sup>15</sup> The audiovisual and digital creation workshops offer a creative outlet for the photos and videos amassed during real or imagined walks. These workshops can be established as parallel activities or extensions of the walks. They also acquaint participants with user-friendly digital tools, such as CANVA and YOUUCUT, which can be harnessed for video editing. The video themes vary in accordance with the respective themes of the walks; for instance, they may represent personal interpretations of a place or the juxtaposition of differing conceptual meanings. Participants learn the art of cutting, editing, subtitling, and exporting their videos.<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>15</sup> Examples: <https://www.re-stor-e.com/stop-motion-movies>

<https://www.re-cult.eu/lego-serious-play>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.re-stor-e.com/video-storytelling>

## What is the use and impact of these practices?

### *The Learning Path*

The practices and exercises presented above can serve as standalone, complex activities or be interconnected to form a specific learning path. Furthermore, these individual exercises and learning paths can be integrated into other educational and training programs that share similar objectives and target social groups. The concept of “learning paths” stems from the idea that these activities can be categorized based on their primary approaches or methods. Four main approaches to these activities have been identified:

1. **Discovery:** Activities within this approach are typically the initial exercises in a learning path. They focus on identifying primary needs, social issues, and visual elements that will be addressed in visual creations. For instance, discovering objects related to one's original culture at home or in a museum, understanding concepts of neighborhood and belonging using Lego Serious Play bricks, or exploring the diverse meanings of borders in the city or on the body. The outcomes of this discovery phase serve as the foundation for the next step, which is the:
2. **Creation:** This phase serves as the core component of the learning path, where participants create or co-create a visual art project using various techniques, as described earlier. These techniques could involve painting ornaments on a common canvas, crafting collages, drawing borders on a body map, or employing embroidery to represent city borders, among others. The creation phase also fosters collaboration and a sense of belonging among participants, contributing to social inclusion.
3. **Digital:** In this phase, participants acquire proficiency in using various digital tools throughout different segments of the learning path. The specific digital tools employed can vary depending on the participants' skill levels, covering basic tools such as photography, video production, and message composition, and advancing to more specialized tools and applications for video editing, social media engagement, mini-game development, stop motion animation, mapping, and more. Regardless of the tool type or level of expertise, digitalization is considered crucial for integration and communication within European societies.
4. **Blended:** Blended learning integrates online and remote learning units into a traditional learning process. In the context of these projects, blended learning is extended to include various forms of remote learning conducted individually by participants at home, in the city, in museums, and other locations. This blended learning element typically aligns with the discovery phase, offering participants free time to explore city borders and other visual elements, as well as identify cultural ornaments in museums, among other activities.<sup>17</sup>

These four main components of the learning paths can be implemented linearly or combined, depending on the creative approaches adopted by trainers or facilitators of the learning activities.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.learnupon.com/blog/what-is-blended-learning/>



## **The Impact**

Assessing the social impact of art projects designed to enhance social inclusion is a challenge that has garnered extensive discussion among practitioners and theorists in sociology, cultural studies, and public policy. Art and creativity, whether pursued individually or through participation in art-related projects or workshops, have demonstrable positive impacts across three key levels:

1. **Individual Level:** These impacts manifest in the form of increased self-esteem, heightened creativity, critical thinking abilities, enhanced communication skills, reduced feelings of social isolation, improved capacity for sharing and collaboration, and better mental health.
2. **Community Level:** At the community level, individuals experience a greater sense of belonging and social inclusion. Art projects also contribute to mitigating the adverse effects of poverty and exclusion.
3. **Systemic Level:** Art projects have a positive impact on urban regeneration, local economies, education, employment, and a reduction in crime rates, among other factors.

The aforementioned impacts have been observed through the analysis of various art-related projects focused on social change through art in Europe and beyond. (Jermyn 2001, CISP Report 2020) Nonetheless, the primary challenge lies in establishing effective methodologies to measure these impacts in activities centered around visual art creation. This difficulty is rooted in the ephemeral nature of these activities, which heavily rely on individual capacities, feelings, and creativity.

Efforts to devise effective methods for evaluating the impact of art projects began in the 1990s, in parallel with the growing importance of culture in various fields of social and spatial policies. The work of Matarasso (1996) was groundbreaking in developing methodologies for measuring the impact of art projects across multiple domains, from personal development and social cohesion to community empowerment, local image and identity, imagination, health, and well-being. While this report laid the groundwork for assessing the social impact of art-related projects, it primarily presented a normative approach that has been criticized later as not-conform to the evaluation of the real impact of art projects. (Belfiore 2002)

Nearly two decades later, the Theory of Change (ToC) approach seems to be the most suitable for evaluating art-based activities. ToC offers a comprehensive framework to describe how and why a desired change is expected to occur within a specific context. It explains how a series of interventions are anticipated to lead to a change and relies on a causal analysis based on existing evidence. ToC provides a strategic visualization, commencing with the identification of the expected impact, followed by mapping the interventions needed to produce early and intermediate outcomes, which, in turn, are prerequisites for achieving the anticipated impact and long-term change (Ostrom et al. 2010, Serrat 2017).

While ToC offers a more personalized, process-oriented approach to impact assessment, challenges persist regarding the collection of evidence indicating that the expected change has indeed occurred. For activities like art projects, which place a significant emphasis on the creative process, where the “final result” is just one aspect of success, this task becomes complex. The success of art creation is deeply intertwined with the journey itself—the way people are involved in the creative process, the

emotional, physical, and psychological changes they undergo. These transformations align with the psychological concept of “Flow” identified by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (2014).

The intricacies of the creative process are challenging to fit into an impact assessment system, which typically requires clear, systematic feedback on expected and achieved results and impacts. To navigate this dichotomy, the “lived experience storytelling” method appears to be most appropriate. “Lived experience storytelling” involves individuals recounting their own experiences in their own words, using various media such as spoken word, written text, sign language, performance, photography, and more. It is crucial that these stories are shared freely or through a dialogue with others, free from bias, to maintain an authentic voice. (People’s Voices Media, 2023) The flexibility and human-centric nature of this method accurately capture the needs and experiences of individuals undergoing the creative process, and through their narratives, the main changes brought about by the artistic process can be identified.

As illustrated above, all the creative practices used in the 3 art projects inherently encompass storytelling, providing participants with a means to express their feelings, fears, emotions, and experiences. This storytelling can take various forms, including the use of digital tools and other forms of visual self expression; group discussions at the end of a creative process, or face-to-face conversations with participants in case language barriers have been successfully erased.

## **Conclusions**

The preceding article outlined how visual art creation can effectively support individuals with migrant and migration backgrounds in overcoming communication and inclusion barriers within the context of education and training. It explored best practices from three distinct projects, categorized under six key themes that address the specific challenges associated with internal and external barriers faced by individuals struggling with inclusion. As emphasized in the article, many of these exercises and activities draw inspiration from the diverse forms of expression found within socially engaged visual art. Notably, the article introduced the realm of “Border arts,” a subset of socially engaged art, underscoring its didactic potential for use in educational and training settings.

In conclusion, the article delved into the complex issue of assessing the social impact generated by creative art activities and projects. To reconcile the tension between art processes that prioritize the creative flow and the demand for outcome-oriented impact assessment, the authors proposed the integration of “lived experience storytelling” into art creation activities whenever feasible.



## References

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