Master Thesis : In what ways can participatory-collaborative art projects help create spaces in which displaced people can express and make sense of their migratory experience ?

Auteur : Heiniger, Léonie Irma
Promoteur(s) : Mescoli, Elsa
Faculté : Faculté des Sciences Sociales
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NOM: Heiniger

Prénom: Léonie

Matricule: s2403954

Filière d'études: Master en sociologie, à finalité spécialisée en Migration and Ethnic Studies

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Holding Spaces for Artistic Expression

Participatory Art-Based Research with Mobile Youth in the Asylum Apparatus

Promotrice : Dr. Elsa Mescoli

Lecteur·rice·s: Dr Shannon Damery

Dr. Marco Martiniello

Abstract

Research with adolescents living within the asylum apparatus raises important epistemological and ethical questions concerning whose forms of expression are recognised as legitimate and how knowledge about lived experiences is produced. In response to these concerns, art-based and participatory methodologies have gained attention for their potential to engage with experience beyond verbal articulation, foregrounding relational, sensory, and embodied modes of meaning-making. This thesis examines the ways in which participatory art-based projects can create spaces in which mobile youth express and make sense of their lived experiences. Participatory art projects are approached as situated and relational practices whose effects must be examined empirically rather than assumed in advance. Attention is given to diverse forms of engagement, including silence, selective participation, refusal, and presence, which extend beyond artistic outputs or coherent narratives. Empirically, the study draws on participatory art-based ateliers conducted with unaccompanied adolescents living in an asylum reception center in Belgium. The findings highlight both the possibilities and limits of participatory art-based research in institutional contexts and contribute to debates on art-based methodology, child-centered research, and ethical approaches to knowledge production in contexts of mobility.

Key words: *Participatory Art-Based Research; Mobile Youth; Asylum Apparatus,; Artistic Practice*

Acknowledgments

This is
for all the ones who struggle to express what they feel
and for those grasping for words that cannot yet be spoken
for all the ones who resent this game whose rules we never agreed to
For the hope that one day we may learn what to do with all this anger
for all the ones who continue to fight

This is
especially
and most importantly
for the brave artists
who trusted me with their presence, their voices, their time
for everyone at the center
who made space to let this happen;
thank you for the energy you carry into your everyday work
for the support, advice, and time from Elsa Mescoli
who guided this work with attention and care

This is
for my privilege, which has nothing to do with anything I've ever done;
for my passport,
my nationality,
my education,
my financial stability,
my skin colour,
my gender,
my liberty
for everything that gives me the capacity to join the fight

This is
for my close ones
the ones from back home, and from my home far away from home
you bring me love, warmth, support
Dankä mami kim tessa,
et mes ami·e·s, je vous remercie infiniment
and a grateful cheer to everyone from the cohort

These next 61 pages are more than just a master's thesis
they carry the traces of what shaped who I am
this work did not begin with me; it is hold by many hands
thank you to everyone who walked with me
along the way

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1 Introduction

Engaging in research with adolescents living within the asylum apparatus raises fundamental epistemological, methodological, and ethical questions, particularly regarding whose forms of expression are recognised as legitimate and how knowledge about lived experiences is produced (Akesson et al., 2014; Due et al., 2014; Lenette, 2019; Veale, 2005). In response to these concerns, art-based and participatory methodologies have gained attention for their potential to engage with lived experiences beyond verbal articulation alone, foregrounding relational, sensory, and embodied modes of meaning-making (Casey & Murray, 2022; Coemans & Hannes, 2017; Finley, 2008, 2018). Scholars working with art-based research methodologies suggest that creative practices involving images, materials, sounds, or movement can evoke and express forms of non-verbal knowledge that may otherwise remain inaccessible (Coemans & Hannes, 2017). At the same time, the participatory orientation of such approaches has been associated with principles of reciprocity and mutual learning, positioning minors as active collaborators within the research process (Veale, 2005).

Especially in research with children and adolescents, participatory art-based approaches have been argued to offer insights into how young people perceive and make sense of their worlds (Ball, 2020). By challenging adult-centric assumptions about expertise and expression (Akesson et al., 2014), and placing young people at the center of research processes (Due et al., 2014), such practices may open spaces for agency and recognition (Damery & Mescoli, 2019). At the same time, critical scholarship emphasises that participatory and creative methods do not operate outside relations of power and therefore require careful attention to contextual constraints (Riaño, 2012). Artistic modalities have also been highlighted for their potential to navigate linguistic barriers, which is particularly relevant for mobile youth living in social and institutional environments where verbal expression may not yet be fully accessible (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017).

In this context, this study examines the ways in which participatory art-based projects can create spaces in which mobile youth express and make sense of their lived experiences. Participatory art projects are approached here as situated and relational practices whose effects must be examined empirically (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Rather than evaluating outcomes or impacts, the study attends to the conditions under which participatory artistic spaces emerge, persist, or remain fragile. The analytical focus lies on participation as situated process and stays attentive to diverse modes of engagement that extend beyond artistic outputs or coherent narratives. Empirically, the thesis draws on participatory artistic ateliers conducted with

unaccompanied adolescents living in an asylum reception center in Belgium. The ateliers employed a range of artistic modalities identified in previous research as potentially relevant in multilingual and transitional contexts (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Lenette, 2019). Throughout the fieldwork process, these ateliers were approached as relational spaces designed to allow meaning-making to take shape through interaction, shared presence, and engagement with materials. Methodologically and epistemologically, the study contributes to ongoing debates on art-based inquiry, child-centered research, and ethical and decentralising approaches to knowledge production in contexts of mobility and foregrounds reflexivity, co-creation, and attentiveness to power asymmetries within research encounters (Finley, 2008, 2018; Riaño, 2012; Spencer et al., 2014).

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 addresses key terminology used throughout the study and foregrounds. Chapter 3 situates the research within relevant theoretical frameworks, engaging with literature on art-based research, participation, power, and decentralising approaches in research with mobile youth. Chapter 4 presents the methodological framework by describing the research context and setting, analytical orientation, reflexivity, positionality, ethical considerations, and methodological constraints. Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings, focusing on participation as situated practice, everyday life within the reception center, and emerging expressive orientations. Chapter 6, which discusses these findings in dialogue with the theoretical framework and Chapter 7 concludes by highlighting the study's key insights, limitations, and contributions.

2 Terminology

Within the course of this paper, terminology is approached as a methodological and ethical concern rather than a neutral descriptive choice. As critical mobility scholars have repeatedly emphasized, analytical categories are not objective labels but socially negotiated constructs that carry specific histories, assumptions, and political implications. Terminology therefore actively participates in the production of knowledge and can reproduce or challenge dominant ways of seeing and governing mobility. Reflexive engagement with categories is thus necessary, as the terms used to describe people on the move are embedded in broader regimes of classification that shape how mobility is understood, regulated, and normalized (Borrelli & Ruedin, 2024; Dahinden et al., 2021; Genova & Zontini, 2023).

Within mobility research, the use of categories such as migrant is deeply entangled with nation-state logics of governance. It is argued that the category of "migrant" is normatively and politically charged, often constructed as racialized, illegalized, or subordinate, and framed as a problem requiring state control. Using such terminology uncritically risks reproducing hegemonic power structures that are historically rooted in colonialism, dispossession, and appropriation (Dahinden, 2016; Wyss & Dahinden, 2022). Mobility research itself is not external to these dynamics, as Dahinden (2016, p. 2210) notes:

> *Migration research is therefore not only an essential part of this institutionalized migration apparatus, but also causally articulated through this paradigm of normalized difference. The 'difference' between migration and nonmigration is ultimately the raison d'être of migration research.*

These critiques are closely linked to debates on methodological nationalism, which highlight how nation-state frameworks continue to structure research designs and analytical assumptions, often treating mobility as deviation rather than as a constitutive feature of social life (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Against this backdrop, Wyss and Dahinden (2022) call for a critical disentangling of mobilities in order to "render visible the manifold categorisation processes that govern people on the move, depending on the ways in which they are classed, gendered, racialized and migranticized" (p. 4). Such an approach acknowledges that legal status and global racializing hierarchies profoundly shape the ease, legitimacy, and consequences of mobility. Following this line of argument, this thesis adopts *mobility* rather than *migration* as central analytical lens. This shift aims to move beyond assumptions of spatial fixity and exceptionalism, and to foreground human movement as a normal dimension of social life (Raghuram et al., 2024; Wyss & Dahinden, 2022).

In line with this perspective, I seek to avoid reproducing politicized, nation-state-based categorizations that define people primarily through administrative labels and legal status. Although the individuals involved in this research are officially categorized as "asylum seekers" (*demandeurs d'asile)* and "unaccompanied minors" (*mineurs étrangers non-accompangés)* (Direction générale de l'Office des étrangers, 2025), and although access to the field was mediated through a state-run reception center, I refrain from using these terms as primary descriptors. Instead, I refer to participants as *children, minors, adolescents, teenagers,* or *youth*. These age-based terms feel more appropriate as they foreground personhood and everyday life without reducing individuals to their legal status or mobility experiences. In contexts where it is analytically relevant to address experiences related to mobility, I use the term *individuals with mobility experience* or *mobile people*. This wording is intended to emphasize experience rather than identity, and to avoid treating mobility as the one defining or singular characteristic.

While I refrain from defining individuals through administrative categories, the institutional context in which their everyday lives unfold remains analytically central. For this reason, the research is framed within what I refer to as the *asylum apparatus*. Adapting Mellquist's (2016) theorization (which follows Murray's (2016) conceptualization of the *refugee apparatus*), the asylum apparatus is understood as a nationalistic system of institutions, authorities, and procedures that govern, categorize, and regulate the lives of people within the asylum process. This concept allows attention to how young people's everyday lives unfold in relation to the institutional power dynamics and mechanisms of control that structure their participation, movement, and presence within the asylum system (Mellquist, 2016; Murray, 2016).

Finally, I use the term *participants* to refer to the individuals involved in the study, while remaining attentive to the power relations embedded in researcher-participant dynamics. Although the term is often treated as neutral, critical and decolonial scholarship reminds us that participation in research always unfolds within asymmetrical structures shaped by long-standing histories of inequality and knowledge extraction (Leavy, 2014; Lenette, 2019). Alternative terms, such as "Knowledge Holders" (Lenette, 2019, p. 1), have been proposed to foreground participants' agency and experiential expertise. Although this terminology usefully challenges problematic framings, it may also risk overstating epistemic symmetry in research contexts where the design, framing, analytical authority ultimately remain with the researcher. Participation in the project was relational and situated, but not fully co-constitutive of the research process: Participants exercised agency in how they engaged with materials, shared narratives, or when they remain silent or withdraw from certain activities. They, however, did not participate in defining the research questions or analytical categories. The term *participants* is

therefore retained to reflect this partial involvement, without obscuring existing asymmetries. Its use is accompanied by a reflexive commitment to transparency, informed consent, and an understanding of participants as active contributors to knowledge production.

3 Theoretical Foundations

This theoretical framework is grounded in the empirical context of the study, which explores how unaccompanied minors with mobility experiences engage in participatory art-based research settings. Working with adolescents navigating mobility and the conditions of the asylum apparatus raises specific questions about agency, voice, temporality, and the conditions under which experiences can be expressed, mediated, and withheld (Due et al., 2014). The theories mobilised in this chapter are introduced as conceptual tools for thinking through the complexities of youth, mobility, and meaning-making in contexts shaped by structural constraint. The chapter begins by outlining broader theoretical debates relevant to participatory art-based research methodologies, and narrative expression, before progressively narrowing its focus toward mobility research and the lived realities of unaccompanied minors. In doing so, the framework establishes a conceptual grounding that informs both the methodological choices and the analytical perspectives developed in the subsequent chapters.

3.1 Situating the Research: From Qualitative Inquiry to Participatory-Creative Approaches

There are many valid ways to produce knowledge and the selection of the specific approach depends on purpose, context, and ethical orientation. Qualitative inquiry, grounded in ontology, epistemology, and axiology, interrogates how reality can be understood and how knowledge is produced. Consequently, it is crucial not only to clarify *how* research is conducted but also *why* it is done in a particular way (Spencer et al., 2014). Such philosophical foundations have opened space for more experimental, creative forms of inquiry that seek to grasp the depth and texture of lived experiences (Brinkmann et al., 2014; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Moralli, 2024; Spencer et al., 2014).

Qualitative research approaches in social sciences have evolved into a plural and reflexive field that resists static or monolithic definitions. Shaped by social, cultural, material, theoretical, and technological transformations, it increasingly emphasises multiplicity, dialogue, and situated knowledge (Brinkmann et al., 2014; Spencer et al., 2014). Within this evolving landscape, visual and creative methods have gained prominence, particularly as researchers increasingly questioned extractive research practices and hierarchical knowledge production. The so-called *participatory turn* reflects a broader shift toward involving participants more actively in research processes, including production, interpretation and dissemination of material (Moralli, 2024). This turn has been influenced by post-structuralist critiques of universal truth claims, feminist emphases on embodiment, affect, and care and post-colonial challenges to Western

epistemologies. Further, with the *community turn* emerging in the arts, socially engaged and collaborative practices have been foregrounded (Casey & Murray, 2022; Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Moralli, 2024).

Art-based research can be understood as alternative form of knowledge production, embracing ambiguity, imagination, senses, embodiment and emotion as valid and necessary sources of understanding (Casey & Murray, 2022; Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Finley, 2008). This is based upon the argumentation that art can offer a language beyond words, revealing insights into lived realities that go beyond verbal articulation (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Previous studies argue that, ontologically, art-based research acknowledges intersubjective and co-creates realities; while epistemologically, art becomes a means of witnessing and embodying experience, translating sensorial and affective realities into meaning-making (Ball, 2020; Chilton & Leavy, 2014).

Art-based research inherently emerges from the connection of science and art as a transdisciplinary field (Finley, 2008). As O'Donoghue (2009) argues, considering how artistic processes can generate knowledge – and how they diverge from conventional academic frameworks – helps clarify what connects and distinguishes art, research, and arts-based research. While the internal logic of artistic practice differs from that of academic research, reflecting on their intersections and divergences reveals productive tensions (O'Donoghue, 2009). (Casey & Murray, 2022; Gupta & Zieske, 2024). McNiff (2008, p.34) describes it as follows: "science tends to reduce experience to core principles while art amplifies and expands, and I see the two [modes of knowing] as complementary within the total complex of knowing". A critical examination of how art operates within specific cultural and institutional contexts is therefore essential for understanding the epistemic conditions under which artistic knowledge is produced (Casey & Murray, 2022; Gupta & Zieske, 2024). Art-based research is not a fixed or uniform methodology, but a flexible constellation of epistemic commitments (Casey & Murray, 2022; Gupta & Zieske, 2024). Developed transdisciplinarily, art-based research may bridge artistic and social scientific standpoints (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Huss & Cwikel, 2005), mobilising affect, senses, and imagination as a way of knowing and responding to the world (Finley, 2008).

Casey and Murray (2022) distinguish three modes of art-based research that vary according to the embeddedness of artistic practice within inquiry: (1) *Arts-informed research* employs artistic elements alongside conventional qualitative methods, primarily valuing artworks as

interpretative data[1]. (2) *Arts-based methods* position creative practice at the core of one or more research stages – for instance through performance, visual art, or creative writing – as ways of gathering, analyzing, or representing data. Finally, (3) *art as methodology* represents a more transformative approach, in which the artistic process itself constitutes the inquiry, emphasizing collaboration, participation, reflexivity, relationality, and process over product (Casey & Murray, 2022; Chilton & Leavy, 2014)[2]. Participatory arts-based approaches further understand knowledge as emerging through collective aesthetic processes that are dialogical, situated, and embedded in everyday contexts, foregrounding co-creation and collaboration as central to the research inquiry (Casey & Murray, 2022). This study draws on participatory art-based research methodology and is therefore situated within the third mode – art as methodology –, foregrounding the artistic process as the core of the research inquiry.

3.2 Participation, Power, and Decolonial Ethics

Historically, art-based research was marginalized within academia, often dismissed as soft or less academic. Early practitioners – frequently women, Indigenous scholars, and people of color – challenged dominant knowledge systems by asserting legitimacy of embodied, affective, and experiential knowing (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Built on respect for Indigenous knowledge and anti-paternalist, anti-colonial principles, art-based research critiques practices in which researchers interpret or represent others' experiences without their active involvement (Finley, 2008). Because knowledge is always produced within dominant cultural and institutional structures, researchers bear the responsibility on reflecting how methodological choices amplify certain voices while potentially silencing others. Participatory and art-based approaches do not eliminate such power asymmetries, but they may enable more reflexive engagement with them through commitments to care, accountability, reciprocity, and relational ethics. These concerns resonate with broader debates within qualitative inquiry about the political and ethical implications of research practice (Singer et al., 2023). Denzin and Lincoln (2018), for instance, conceptualize the qualitative researcher as a *bricoleur* who assembles diverse tools and representations in response to complex social realities. Within this framing, research becomes less a search for fixed truths and more an ethical, interpretative practice grounded in creativity

[1] Alternatively, *research-based art* refers to artistic works directly informed by academic inquiry, in which artists use research to investigate a phenomenon and create art that explores, expresses, or reinterprets it. The key point is that the artwork emerges from the research process itself, making the art a form of inquiry and placing it in close dialogue with art-based research (Brinkmann et al., 2019; Trent & Cho, 2014).

[2] Elements of the conceptual framing of arts-based research were first developed in an unpublished seminar paper (Heiniger, 2025). The present thesis revises and substantially extends this work through original fieldwork and a distinct analytical focus.

and connection. Art-based inquiry embodies these commitments by reconnecting *reason* and *emotion* and challenging text-centered traditions of knowledge production. From this perspective, participation is not merely a methodological choice, but an ethical stance (Singer et al., 2023). Such concerns can also be perceived through a political lens, raising questions about whose knowledge is valued, how authority is distributed, and how research can resist reproducing dominant epistemic hierarchies (Finley, 2008, 2018).

Participatory art-based research further aligns closely with decolonial efforts to challenge such hierarchical systems of knowledge production. Social science research has long been entangled with power relations that position researcher as *experts* and participants as *objects* of study, often privileging Western epistemologies while marginalising other ways of knowing. Postcolonial critiques of *Othering, Ethnocentrism* and *Orientalism* have demonstrated how such dynamics reproduce colonial modes of representation, framing the 'West' as rational and authoritative while others are seen as dependent or deficient. From this perspective, decolonializing and decentralising research requires interrogating not only *what* knowledge is generated, but also *how, by whom,* and *for whom* it is produced (Riaño, 2012). Riaño (2012) argues that methodological approaches grounded in reciprocity and co-determination are necessary for counteracting these imbalances. Conventional research often maintain one-sided authority, reinforcing social injustice and limiting the diversity of knowledges that become recognised as legitimate. A decolonial approach instead seeks to redistribute epistemic authority by fostering shared authorship and mutual benefit between researchers and participants. Language itself plays a central role in this process: the distinction between 'the researcher' and 'the researched' already implies a unidirectional flow, positioning academic knowledge as superior while reducing participants to passive sources of data (Riaño, 2012). In this sense, co-participation functions not only as a method, but also as an ethics of reciprocity, where knowing and creating are shared acts rather than privileges (Riaño, 2012).

A decolonial lens further requires attention to how mobile people's experiences are narrated and represented. In mobility contexts, stories are rarely linear or complete, but are shaped by histories of power, structural inequality, and postcolonial continuities. As Kirndörfer and Hiller (2023) and Moralli (2024) note, mobile individuals are often expected to conform to Western narrative conventions of coherence, authenticity, and intelligibility demanded by institutions, media, or academia. Such expectations function within the frame of representational control, reducing complex lives to narratives of flight or victimhood. From a decolonial standpoint, resisting these narrative constraints is essential to enabling alternative, self-defined modes of expression (Kirndörfer & Hiller, 2023). Decolonial knowledge production also involves creating

dialogical spaces in which participants can express reflections without fear of consequence and contribute meaningfully to shared interpretation. Riaño (2012) emphasises the importance of co-developing research goals, analytical perspectives, and modes of dissemination so that knowledge is not merely extracted but collaboratively produced. While structural asymmetries may always persist, participatory and creative approaches can potentially and partially decentralise these processes by redistributing analytical space and valuing situated knowledge.

One illustrative example of such decentralist practice is the MINGA method, inspired by the ancestral Andean concept of *minga*, "a pre-Columbian practice of collective work in which there is no economic exchange but which is instead done for the purpose of mutual benefit" (Riaño, 2012, p. 9). Adapted into a research framework, MINGA foregrounds collective reflection, solidarity, and the co-production of knowledge (Riaño, 2012). Although not applied directly in this study, its underlying principles resonate with the present project's emphasis on reciprocity, trust, and shared meaning-making. In particular, the use of artistic and visual media as shared communicative spaces highlights how participation can extend beyond linguistic proficiency and enable more inclusive forms of engagement. These commitments align with Finley's (2018) articulation of critical art-based research as a performative and ethically engaged methodology oriented toward social justice and transformation. Taken together, decolonial and participatory perspective converge in their demand to redistribute epistemic authority, recognise multiple forms of knowing, and create conditions in which participants can shape how their experiences are expressed and interpreted. In this project, these principles inform both the design of the artistic ateliers and the interpretive stance adopted throughout the analysis. That way, it seeks to ensure that knowledge emerges *with* participants rather than *about* them, which is particularly salient in research with mobile individuals. For unaccompanied adolescents living within the asylum apparatus, these commitments become especially relevant as they shape the concrete conditions under which participation and expression become possible.

3.3 Participatory Art-Based Research in Mobility Contexts: Working with Mobile Youth

Research in contexts of mobility has increasingly turned to participatory arts-based approaches in response to the limits of conventional qualitative methods, capturing the affective, embodied, and culturally situated dimensions of mobility. Experiences of mobility are often fragmented, emotionally charged, and difficult to articulate through linear or language-based narratives alone. Creative and participatory practices therefore offer valuable methodological possibilities for engaging with emotional, symbolic, material, and relational aspects of lived

experience that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Lenette, 2019; Moralli, 2024). The connection between mobility and artistic expression is longstanding: mobile individuals have historically drawn on creative practices to narrate rupture, sustain cultural continuity, or articulate belonging. Contemporary participatory arts projects continue this tradition by functioning as bottom-up spaces of visibility and recognition, enabling mobile people to assert agency and autonomy (Damery & Mescoli, 2019; Martiniello & Mescoli, 2024; McKay & Bradley, 2016). Artistic modalities such as music, drawing, photography, or movement can further transcend linguistic barriers, which can be particularly relevant for individuals navigating new social and institutional environments where verbal expression may not (yet) be accessible (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017). Participatory art-based approaches extend these possibilities by foregrounding collaborative creation and shared meaning-making. Rather than positioning participants as sources of extractable data, participatory methodologies seek to generate knowledge through collective expression, reflection and dialogue (Veale, 2005). As boundaries between researcher and participant blur, power hierarchies may soften, enabling collective agency and shared authorship (Casey & Murray, 2022; Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Huss and Cwikel (2005, p. 47) describe such approaches as practices that "[aim] to connect and empower by creating something together with the research participants rather than the classic research orientation that takes information away from them".

When working with mobile children and adolescents, participatory commitments become inseparable from ethical considerations. Research with minors requires approaches that are child-sensitive, flexible, and grounded in young people's own terms of engagement. Participatory and multimodal methods invite children and adolescents to communicate through diverse expressive channels, acknowledging that meaning-making does not occur solely through speech or writing. Such approaches align with scholarship that positions children as competent social actors capable of offering meaningful insights into their own lives (Akesson et al., 2014; Due et al., 2014). In practice, this entails co-defining ground rules, offering multiple modes of expression, enabling participant-led choices about pacing and visibility, and allowing participants to engage at varying levels of intensity, thereby respecting autonomy and emotional boundaries (Smets, 2024). Art-based participatory approaches can further generate insights into how young people perceive and make sense of their worlds, precisely because they engage imagination, materiality, and embodied from of knowing (Ball, 2020). Their participatory orientation reinforces principles of reciprocity, non-hierarchy, and mutual learning (Veale, 2005), positioning minors not as passive subjects but as co-creators within the research process. By challenging adult-centric assumptions about expertise and expression, such approaches open spaces for agency and

empowerment (Akesson et al., 2014). Creative activities with minors have also been shown to support imaginative and cognitive development, while providing safe spaces for reflection, sharing, and relational connection through collaborative expression (Chayder, 2019). Granting young participants control over creative processes and narrative choices may further support emotional processing and reinforce a sense of self-worth, particularly in contexts marked by mobility and uncertainty (Akesson et al., 2014; Vecchio et al., 2017).

Within mobility research, participatory and visual approaches have been shown to support the expression of affective and embodied experiences that resist verbal articulation. Creative methods, such as drawing and clay, can mediate tacit, emotional, and subconscious forms of knowledge, countering simplified or pathologizing narratives of migration by validating participants' subjective ways of knowing (Ball, 2020; Smets, 2024). For mobile youth, whose lives are often shaped by ongoing negotiations of identity and belonging across physical, linguistic, and cultural borders, art-based approaches offer a means of engaging with translocal and transformative experiences (Vecchio et al., 2017). Such lives can be understood as unfolding across interconnected localities, where place is relational and continuously produced through mobility and practice (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Huss & Cwikel, 2005). Participatory visual methods are particularly suited to these liminal and hybrid spaces, allowing room for ambiguity, multiplicity, and forms of knowledge that do not fit fixed categories (Vecchio et al., 2017). A central ethical and methodological concept informing this work is Akesson et al.'s (2014, p.78) notion of "productive unknowing". This stance foregrounds the limits of adult understanding and acknowledges that adults may not fully grasp the social worlds of children. Productive unknowing calls for openness, receptivity, and recognition of what cannot be assumed or pre-known. In art-based research with mobile youth, this orientation encourages researchers to treat findings as provisional rather than definitive, and to avoid imposing fixed interpretations or adult-centered assumptions. It further seeks to recognise participants' right to decide what to share, how deeply to engage, and how their contributions are represented and disseminated. Findings are thus approached as provisional and situated, rather than definitive accounts (Akesson et al., 2014).

This present study aligns with *art as a methodology*, as described by Casey and Murray (2022), which foregrounds creative process over artistic outcome. In this work, artistic practices are not approached as tools for extracting data, but as relational and embodied spaces in which meaning emerges collaboratively through interactions, material engagement, and shared presence (Lenette, 2019; Riaño, 2012). Participation, reflexivity, and processual engagement therefore constitute core elements of the research design. Taken together, the theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter inform how participatory art-based research was conceptualized not

only as a methodological choice, but as an epistemological stance attentive to agency, narrative, and situated meaning-making in contexts of mobility. These orientations directly shaped the design and facilitation of the artistic ateliers with unaccompanied minors developed for this project. Multimodality, child-centeredness, dialogical interpretation, and productive unknowing guided how each artistic medium was introduced and adapted to participants' interests, energy levels, and comfort with expression. The following sections turn to the concrete methodological framework of the study, outlining the specific methods employed and reflecting on how these theoretical and ethical commitments were enacted throughout the research process.

4 Methodological Framework

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter details how the study's epistemological and ethical commitments were translated into the concrete research design. It outlines the fieldwork context, the participatory art-based methods employed, the analytical framework guiding interpretation, and the reflexive and ethical considerations that shaped the research process. Rather than presenting methodology as a linear procedure, the chapter foregrounds the situated and relational character of research conducted with unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (MENA[3]) in a reception-center setting.

4.1 Fieldwork Context and Research Setting

The Belgian Immigration Office (l'Office des Etrangers) legally defines MENA (*Mineurs Etrangers Non-Accompagnés)* as persons (1) younger than 18 years old, (2) not accompanied by a person exercising parental authority or guardianship, (3) being a national of a non-member-country of the European Economic Area, and (4) who have lodged an application for international protection. The Belgian state accommodates around four thousand MENA in total (Office des Etrangers, Statistics of 2024), which are dispersed in different accommodations all over the country (Direction générale de l'Office des étrangers, 2025). In Belgium, the reception process for unaccompanied minors is divided into three phases: first, they are placed in an Orientation and Observation Center for two to four weeks, where their social, medical, and psychological conditions are assessed. They are then transferred to a collective accommodation with group structures – the so-called the second phase –, which focuses on stabilisation within a collective reception facility. Here, adolescents live in supervised independent groups, receive schooling and other support, and are gradually prepared for greater autonomy. Once the application for international protection has been accepted, they are referred to the third phase of reception in which they are given necessary support, but live much more independently (Fedasil, 2025). The reception center in which this project took place belongs to the second phase of the Belgian reception process for asylum seekers and provides collective accommodation in group structures (Croix-Rouge de Belgique, 2025b; Fedasil, 2025). The center was established to accommodate individuals (families, single adults, and MENA) whose applications for international protection are under examination by the Belgian authorities. Lengths of stay in a reception center of the second phase can range up to two years, with an average duration of

[3] Within the next pages, when mentioning the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, the official Belgian term MENA for Mineurs Etrangers Non-Accompagnés is used (Direction générale de l'Office des étrangers, 2025).

around three hundred days (CGRA - Commissariat général aux réfugiés et aux apatrides, 2025). At the time of the fieldwork, the center hosted around 20 MENA aged between fifteen and eighteen, whose stay in Belgium ranged from several weeks to over a year[4].

Within the context of this study, I refrain from describing the participants in terms of ethnicity, nationality, or country of origin. As pointed out in Chapter 2, such categories are closely linked to processes of migranticization and ethnicization, which risk reproducing normative and hierarchical distinctions in mobility research. While references to origin, ethnicity or nationality could offer additional analytical insight, particularly from an intersectional perspective, I deliberatively chose not to use these characteristics as primary analytical categories. This decision aims to avoid further normalizing ethnicity-based differentiation among people with mobility experiences (Dahinden, 2016; Wyss & Dahinden, 2022). Instead, participants are analytically situated through their shared condition as minors with mobility experiences living in a Belgian state-governed reception center (*centre d'accueil),* and as individuals categorised as unaccompanied minors asylum seekers (MENA) under Belgian asylum law. This positioning allows attention to institutional conditions and everyday experiences without reducing participants to fixed identity categories.

The participant group was gender-homogenous, consisting exclusively of adolescents who identify or were identified as male. This composition reflects the demographic reality of the reception center during the fieldwork, as the center only accommodates MENA who are read as male. The gender makeup was therefore not a result of a specific sampling strategy, but a representation of the reality based on the institutional and structural arrangements within the Belgian reception system. This gender homogeneity constitutes a limitation to the study, as experiences of mobility, institutionalisation, and participation may be shaped by gendered social positions and expectations. Including participants of other genders may have likely revealed different forms of expression and negotiation within participatory art-based spaces. At the same time, focusing on a group of male-read adolescents enabled a situated and context-specific analysis, allowing for in-depth engagement with a particular group under specific conditions, while remaining attentive to the limits of generalization.

Access to the field was obtained through my engagement as a volunteer with the *Croix-Rouge de Belgique*, the organisation mandated by the Belgian government to provide accommodation and support to applicants for international protection (Croix-Rouge de Belgique, 2025a). During

[4] To safeguard participants' confidentiality, I refrain from providing any information that might reveal the specific center where fieldwork was conducted, nor do I include identifying details about the MENA or the staff, ensuring that no individual can be personally recognised.

two initial preparatory meetings with volunteer coordinators and staff members of the MENA team, we discussed goals, structure, and feasibility of offering artistic ateliers as part of proposed activities in the center. The team responded positively to my wish to link the ateliers to my thesis and allowed me to use the atelier experiences as part of my thesis. Before beginning the volunteer position, I completed the required administrative documents of identification, a volunteer code of ethics, and an extract from the criminal record, which is mandatory when working with minors. The bureaucratic processes unfolded slowly and approximately two months passed between my initial application and the first activity. Through my volunteer role, I entered the field from within everyday institutional routines, rather than as external researcher, which enabled a gradual and situated form of engagement. I spent the first weeks familiarising myself with the teenagers, the social workers, and the rhythms of everyday life at the center. The MENA-team welcomed me warmly and invited me to communal activities – such as a joint dinner, an intergenerational game afternoon in a retirement home, and a pumpkin curving activity – which allowed for informal encounters and eased my integration into the environment. Consistent with participatory research approaches with minors, I intentionally allocated time to build rapport and trust with both the adolescents and their surrounding (Due et al., 2014). Regularity proved to be essential: participating weekly in center activities before starting the ateliers helped create continuity and signalled my commitment. After this period of familiarisation, which helped me find my place, navigate my position, and working on trust-building with the MENA and the social workers, I started independently with the weekly artistic ateliers.

The artistic ateliers formed the core of this research design. Aligned with participatory art-based methodological principles, they were conceived as open, low-threshold, and pressure-free spaces. Rather than structured art classes, they served as exploratory spaces that fostered free imagination, engagement, and expression. Drawing on Due et al. (2014), who emphasize the importance of offering children multiple options in child-centered participatory methodologies to increase the likelihood that each finds a preferred communication channel, a different artistic tool or medium was introduced each week to ensure that participants could engage in ways suited to their interests and expressive preferences. To provide coherence across sessions, I introduced an overarching thematic thread – *my life in Liège*. The theme aimed to function as an open prompt through which adolescents could explore and represent aspects of their everyday realities, allowing them to choose which aspects of their lives they wished to depict, without pressuring them to revisit pre-migration experiences.

The artistic ateliers unfolded around a total of five sessions with durations between two and four hours held in the MENA communal room of the reception center during a two-month period

between September and December 2025. The room – a large, bright space with ample natural light – offered an environment that was both familiar and easily accessible, as it was located on the same floor as the adolescents' living quarters. Its proximity to their everyday routines raised methodological considerations: on the one hand, the familiarity of the space supported accessibility and reduced logistical barriers; on the other, its embeddedness within the institutional setting meant that the ateliers remained interwoven with the direct reality of their daily lives. I questioned whether the room was perceived as safe, comfortable, and separate enough for artistic creativity to unfold, or whether its closeness to their living spaces potentially limited artistic expression. Its location next to the social worker's office added another layer: although constant staff presence was helpful on an organisational level, occasional check-ins often disrupted the creative flow and free conversations. Holding the ateliers in an external location could have potentially created a calmer or more neutral space; however, it could also have introduced new barriers of accessibility, familiarity, or trust. Given the circumstances, the communal room – precisely because it was known, stable, and close – seemed to be the most practical and appropriate setting. I usually arranged the tables in a semi-circular formation to encourage openness and shared visibility, laid out materials on a central table, and played background music to create a gentle atmosphere. Meanwhile, social workers informed the teenagers about the activity and encouraged them to join. Participation was entirely voluntary, and attendance fluctuated weekly: out of approximately twenty MENA, typically two to four joined each session. Three adolescents attended regularly, while others occasionally passed by for conversations without really engaging in artistic creation. The fluid participation of the ateliers reflected the open, low-threshold nature of the methodological approach. Each atelier introduced a new creative method, yet the activities remained intentionally open-ended, allowing the participants to modify the activity according to their interests, moods, or comfort levels. Sessions usually began with a broad thematic prompt, and I encouraged participants to adapt or transform the suggested activities according to their interests and moods, emphasising that they were free to choose how, when, and to what extent they engaged. The multimodality of the ateliers aimed to enable different sensory engagement beyond representational drawing, which may have been particularly valuable for adolescents with limited artistic confidence, language barriers, or diverse expressive preferences. Aligning with ethical reflections, I repeatedly emphasized verbal consent over the extent of their engagement and sharing. These institutional, spatial, and relational contextual conditions did not only frame the research but actively shaped how participation unfolded and how meaning could be produced.

4.2 Applied Participatory Art-Based Methods

This section describes the concrete participatory art-based methods that constituted the core of the empirical work. The artistic ateliers were conceived as low-threshold, exploratory spaces in which meaning could emerge through creative engagement, interaction, and shared presence.

For two of the five ateliers, I selected drawing as an initial art-based methodological entry point. The intention behind it was to offer a low-threshold and easily accessible form of artistic expression that would allow the adolescents to ease into a creative process without feeling intimidated or overwhelmed. For the first drawing session, the participants were invited to use acrylic paint, watercolours, coloured pencils, as well as charcoal and lead pencils to create what I described as *le paysage intérieur (the inner landscape)*. They were encouraged to represent their current emotional state through colours, shapes or symbolic elements. To facilitate this rather abstract exercise, I proposed metaphors such as weather or natural imagery as possible ways of expressing emotions, while emphasizing that the goal was to connect feelings to the drawing. Beyond the act of creating, the aims of this first ateliers were to get acquainted with one another, familiarize participants with the materials and the setting of the ateliers, and to establish a sense of trust and safety. Thus, drawing functioned as an introductory practice that enabled exploration, experimentation, and confidence-building. The second drawing session took place a few weeks later and was introduced as a free drawing activity. It aimed at offering an alternative means to participants who preferred a less structured and non-thematic approach. They were given the freedom to create whatever they liked and did not get any prompts or instructions, in order to not constrain or influence their free creativity. Both of the drawing exercises were accompanied by opportunities for participants to comment on their creations, express what they wished to convey, or and describe their process. Such verbal reflection aimed at ensuring that meaning remained grounded in the participants' own interpretation than in externally imposed readings (Veale, 2005).

The use of drawing in art-based research is widely recognised as a means of enabling individuals – particularly young people – to express dimensions of their lived experience that may be difficult to articulate verbally (Veale, 2005). Drawing invites participants "to assemble what they see around them" (Chayder, 2019, p. 71), supporting imaginative and cognitive powers, and thus promoting an in-depth absorption and interpretation of stories and feelings (Chayder, 2019). As Veale (2005) notes, due to its symbolic potential, drawing often becomes meaningful very early in life. It can operate as a cultural and communicative tool that mediates emotions, memories, or views, allowing participants to externalize, represent, or make sense of their realities through

visual means. In this context, drawing was intended as an accessible means for expressing inner and outer experiences, including affective states that might otherwise remain unspoken. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that symbolism cannot be assumed to be universal: Interpretations of colours and forms vary across cultural, linguistic, and social contexts, and symbolic meanings embedded in drawings cannot be read as fixed or cross-cultural (Prosser & Burke, 2008). Moreover, drawing does not function equally for all participants. For some, it may serve as a comfortable point of entry, while for others – especially those with limited exposure to artistic materials or low confidence in their skills – it may bring forward hesitation, confusion, or frustration (Veale, 2005). Several adolescents explicitly stated that they had little or no prior experience with drawing and were unfamiliar with the materials. Some expressed uncertainty about how to use the materials, and mentioned this as a reason for not wishing to participate in the drawing exercise. These moments highlighted how access to creative expression is differently distributed and how assumptions about the universality or accessibility of drawing can unintentionally exclude participants rather than enable expression.

Clay modelling was used in the second atelier as a tactile and embodied form of expression. As Lee et al. (2024) argue, clay is a widely used tool in art therapy due to its sensory qualities, calming effects, and its ability to support emotional regulation, especially suited to adolescents experiencing transition. Recent work has shown that manipulating clay can reduce negative affect more effectively than other tools, and may thus offer a supportive medium especially for young people with experiences of displacement or trauma. As a kinetic and malleable material, clay enables participants to give form to memories, emotions, and aspirations in a tangible way, while fostering feelings of grounding, safety, and self-soothing. In a study with displaced Ukrainians in Korea (Lee et al., 2024), clay modelling helped participants articulate notions of home, safety, and future hope by shaping material collectively. In line with these insights, the clay atelier provided a grounded entry point for exploring themes connected to daily life experiences. Its tactile nature seemed particularly valuable for participants who prefer hands-on and kinaesthetic modes of expression, or who feel less comfortable with drawing as a representational practice.

The exercise proposed to the teenagers remained open-ended. Participants were invited to create two clay objects: one that reminded them of their country or city of origin, and one that reminded them of their life in Liège or Belgium. These objects could take forms of a symbol, a shape or an abstract object. The aim was to produce two forms that, together, could reflect aspects of a personal trajectory – where they come from and where they are now. Initially, the idea was to let the objects to dry and paint them in a subsequent session, thereby creating

continuity across ateliers. However, due to organisational and setting-related constraints, a follow-up clay-painting session was not possible. Before starting, participants received an introduction on how to handle air-dry clay and how textures or impressions could be created. The exercise sought to emphasize creative liberty, experimentation, and the absence of 'right' or 'wrong' results, encouraging participants to restart, reshape, or reinterpret their objects as they wished. The structure of the task allowed participants to engage emotionally and imaginatively while remaining grounded in sensory experience. The clay acted as an intermediary material through which connections to place, memory, and belonging could emerge indirectly and safely. As in the drawing ateliers, interpretation was not imposed; participants were invited – but not required – to share the meanings of their creations. In this way, the clay exercise functioned both as a creative practice and as an embodied, non-verbal pathway for exploring lived experiences.

While the different methods used structured how the research unfolded in practice, they also shaped how meaning was generated and what could be known through the research encounter. The following section therefore outline the analytical framework used to interpret the material produced through the ateliers.

4.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework, guiding the interpretation of the collected material, is structured in two parts: it first outlines the interpretive orientation shaping how meaning is understood, before detailing the analytical strategy through which the material was approached and analyzed. This aims at clarifying both how meaning is conceptualized and how the analysis was conducted.

4.3.1 Analytical Orientation

Across the ateliers, meaning-making unfolded through narrative and non-narrative forms. While storytelling constituted one important mode through which adolescents made sense of their experiences, it often appeared in fragmented, relational, and situational ways. Drawing on participatory and child-centered methodologies, storytelling is therefore understood here not as a singular or stable narrative form, but as a heterogeneous, relational, and situated process through which young people negotiate experience in context (Kirndörfer & Hiller, 2023). As a feature of everyday life, stories enable individuals to express and interpret experience. Within research, narrative approaches provide insight into the meanings people assign to their lived trajectories and illuminate human life as a historical process, psychological development, or cultural patterning (Eastmond, 2007). Importantly, narrative analysis seeks to resist homogenising notions of a singular 'mobility experience' and instead foregrounds the dynamics

of “life as lived”, “life as experienced”, and “life as told” (Eastmond, 2007, p. 249). This three-fold movement highlights how experience is always mediated by context, shaped for particular audiences, and articulated through culturally available narrative forms. Crucially, Eastmond (2007) further emphasises that narratives never offer direct or unfiltered access to experiences, but are always partial, relational, and shaped by the conditions under which they are told and shown. Furthermore, the way they are understood and interpreted relies heavily on the researcher’s positionality, assumptions, and analytical choices. In this sense, narrative analysis requires attention not only to what is expressed, but also to silence and non-narration, recognising these not as analytical absences but as meaningful forms of agency shaped by social, relational, and institutional contexts. Within this project, narrative meaning-making went beyond verbal articulation and was mediated through artistic practices and creative processes. The visual, spatial, and tactile forms used in the ateliers offered alternative pathways for articulating lived experience, everyday life, and imaginaries. Rather than producing explicit narratives of mobility, the adolescents conveyed meaning through images, symbols, textures, gestures, atmospheres, and embodied engagement. These multimodal forms of expression underpin the analytical approach adopted.

4.3.2 Analytical Strategy

The present analysis follows an inductive, multimodal, and process-oriented approach, consistent with arts-based and phenomenological research traditions and a focus on process instead of visible outcomes (Lenette, 2019). Rather than focusing on artworks as isolated objects, analysis extends to the processes through which creative practices unfolded: interactions, conversations, silences, material engagements, bodily orientations, and relational dynamics. Both the making process and the resulting artefacts were treated as situated traces of meaning-making, embedded within specific temporal, spatial, and institutional contexts (Lenette, 2019). Interpreting artistic material thus involves navigating different forms of knowledge – sociological, artistic, and everyday knowledge – as well as the examination of how they intersect to illuminate lived experience. This raises methodological questions about how experiences that are often linguistically mediated become articulated through aesthetic forms, and how such forms can be interpreted without reducing or over-generalizing their significance (Mijić & Parzer, 2022).

The analytical strategy combines process-based arts analysis with thematic and narrative sensibilities. This allows attention to both recurring patterns and situated moments of meaning-making across modalities. The framework is consistent with Casey and Murray’s (2022) experiential, process-centered art-based analysis, which positions creative practice itself as a

central analytical site. It further takes into account Trent and Cho's (2014) understanding of interpretation as a contextual and socially constructed act in which multiple perspectives and participant-informed readings coexist. The analytical database consists of detailed field notes from every atelier, reflective journaling and analytical voice memos before and after the ateliers, informal conversations with MENA and staff, observations of gestures, interactions, and engagements, notes on the spatial and relational environment of the sessions, as well as the creative artefacts themselves. There were no interviews undertaken, nor were sessions or conversations recorded.

Given the project's process-oriented orientation, artworks functioned as situated analytical support for interpretation rather than stand-alone objects of analysis. The analysis primarily consists of situated moments within and around the creative processes through which meaning was negotiated in context. Analytical interpretation does not assume that artworks transparently represent experience (Trent & Cho, 2014). Instead, it attends to context and the broader social and institutional conditions shaping reception-center life. This interpretative stance enabled a layered understanding of how young people negotiate meaning through artistic engagement and how creative processes illuminate broader dimensions of their lived trajectories.

4.4 Reflexivity and Positionality

This section situates the research epistemologically and ethically by reflecting on positionality, emotional involvement, and the conditions under which knowledge was produced. Reflexivity holds a central place in contemporary migration studies. Earlier debates focused primarily on the researcher's insider-outsider position, whereas recent scholarship has broadened this focus toward a critique of the discipline itself, interrogating how mobility and mobile individuals are constructed within research. Recent scholars critique upon the field's embeddedness in neo-colonial logics of knowledge production, methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), methodological ethnicity (Nowicka & Ryan, 2015), or the over-migranticization of social issues (Dahinden, 2016; Dahinden et al., 2021), all of which continue to shape research agendas and epistemic boundaries. Against this backdrop, the concept of *standpoint reflexivity* (Amelina, 2022) emphasises that knowledge is always produced from historically situated and often politicised positions that require explicit reflection. This also includes examining how processes of access – who grants it, under what conditions, and with which expectations – actively structure the interactions that become data, and thus influence the knowledge that is ultimately produced (Genova & Zontini, 2023). At the same time, scholarship increasingly recognises that reflexivity must also attend to the emotionality inherent in studying

mobility and displacement. Mobility is necessarily accompanied by emotions; therefore, attentiveness to the emotions of both participants and researchers must be considered part of reflexive practice. Genova and Zontini (2023) argue that the emotionality of both participants and researchers constitutes another source of knowledge co-produced within and beyond fieldwork (Genova & Zontini, 2023). Building on this, I approached emotions as meaningful social and methodological signals rather than elements to be excluded from the analysis (Genova & Zontini, 2023).

My decision to work with unaccompanied minors through art-based approaches is grounded in this reflexive and emotional orientation. Throughout the research process, fear, uncertainty, and self-doubt accompanied my work, particularly concerns about unintentionally causing harm, reproducing extractive dynamics, or misinterpreting the adolescents' experiences. These concerns prompted recurring questions: *From where do I derive the right to conduct such research? What authorises me to enter people's experiential worlds, to ask questions, and to transform aspects of their lives into academic knowledge? What benefits do the participants gain, and what risks might participation entail?* Rather than suppressing these doubts, I treated them as part of my methodological compass, shaping how I approached care, pacing, and attentiveness in the field. These reflections resonate with Jacobsen and Landau's (2003) description of ethical dilemmas in mobility research as "dual imperative" (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003, p. 2). They argue that researchers find themselves under a lot of pressure of meeting academic expectations, while simultaneously ensuring that the produced knowledge safeguards the integrity of those they work with. Striving to 'do no harm' is difficult to define and control (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003), and Akesson et al. (2014, p. 85) go as far as to argue that researchers "have a responsibility to do least harm and most good". While I find the notion of *least harm* deeply challenging – especially when working with mobile youth –, I also to acknowledge that "there is no single, 'best' way to ensure that refugee-centered research is ethically and scientifically sound" (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003, p. 19). This recognition prompted me to reflect not only on whether research on sensitive mobility-related topics should take place at all, but more importantly on how such research can be conducted in the most careful and ethically responsive way possible.

My discomfort with conventional qualitative methods – which for me often feel very extractive or insufficiently attuned to the lived realities of mobile populations – motivated my turn toward participatory, art-based approaches. Central to this decision was the explicit intention to experiment with creative methods in order to explore whether they bring forward other forms of expression and knowledge, which might not emerge through verbal language-based research

techniques. Working with materials, textures, colours and gestures rather than direct verbal disclosure allowed for a mode of engagement grounded in empathy, attentiveness, and shared presence. This experimental stance required openness to being unsettled and "a willingness to be proven wrong" (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003, p. 19). I turn towards Jacobsen and Landau's (2003), which argue that researchers often approach the field with preconceived expectations, seeking to find proof to a phenomenon whose explanation they have already made up in their head. Realizing that the adolescents' engagement and creations during the ateliers unfolded very differently from what I had expected, had led to a confrontation with my own preconceived research expectations, as will be explained further in Chapter 5.

Moreover, following Genova and Zontini (2023, p. 1501), who argue that "objectivity is achieved through reflexivity", I approached my own positionality as constitutive components of knowledge production. This reflexive stance requires necessarily acknowledging how my own background, identity, and mobility shaped the encounters during fieldwork. As a relatively recently arrived person in Belgium, I shared certain affective resonances with the adolescents, such as feelings of foreignness, linguistic struggles, and moments of being overwhelmed or isolated when navigating unfamiliar systems. At the same time, these similarities were overshadowed by profound structural differences. My own mobility comes from a very privileged position of security, stability and freedom of movement, enabled by the strength of my passport and my socio-economic background. By recognising both proximity and distance, I hope to have approached research encounters with greater empathy and attentiveness, while remaining aware that the hierarchies inherent in our respective positions could neither be ignored nor collapsed.

My interest in art-based research is also rooted in personal experience. I am neither a trained artist nor did I have previous experiences in animating artistic ateliers. My engagement was motivated by a willingness to step *outside my comfort zone* rather than by artistic expertise. Early encounters with art therapy as a child and later as a young adult taught me that creativity does not require mastery, and that forms of expression can emerge precisely at moments when language falls short. When I moved abroad and found myself in a context where I had to navigate linguistic and emotional dislocation myself, I returned to art-based practices as a way of processing uncertainty and hardships. This experience strengthened my belief that artistic expression can mediate emotion and relationality. Consequently, they shaped my methodological orientation toward child-centered and participatory practices that emphasize shared spaces of exploration, play, and gentle expression under low-pressure conditions that avoid intrusive questioning and interpretive imposition.

Finally, as Finley (2008) argues, participatory art-based research does not necessarily require the researcher to adopt a role of expert artist or expert sociologist. Instead the arts-based researcher can become a *facilitator* – someone who supports and accompanies expression without claiming artistic or analytical superiority (Finley, 2008, p. 76). This stance resonates with my 'non-artist-researcher'-identity. What I brought instead were several years of experience working with people navigating mobility and asylum systems outside of the academic world – an experience which I believe trained my awareness of the emotional, legal, and social complexities they might face. My positionality in the field was shaped by my role as a volunteer rather than as an institutional representative or external researcher. Entering the field in this capacity allowed me to participate in everyday activities and to build relationships gradually, which may have softened certain hierarchical dynamics and facilitated trust-building. At the same time, I remained reflexive that this role did not dissolve power asymmetries but reconfigured them. Despite the collaborative intent of the ateliers, I set the methodological frame, proposed activities, prepared materials, and structured the sessions – all of which entail forms of power and influence. Rather than assuming these dynamics could be dissolved, I tried to approach them as realities to be navigated transparently and with care. I consistently encouraged participants to modify, resist, or reinterpret my suggestions, and stepped back whenever my influence risked overshadowing their creative autonomy.

Taken together, reflexivity functioned as ongoing attentiveness to how relationships, emotions, and power were negotiated in practice. Rather than offering definitive resolutions, these reflections sensitized to moments of hesitation, discomfort, or silence, and informed how I adjusted my presence, methods, and expectations in response. In this sense, reflexivity did not resolve around ethical tensions but rendered them visible and actionable, shaping how care and responsibility were enacted in situations. The following section builds on this orientation by outlining the ethical and practical considerations that guided the research, particularly with regard to consent, emotional well-being, and trauma-sensitive engagement with minors in contexts of mobility.

4.5 Ethical and Practical Considerations

Working with mobile youth in participatory art-based settings raises specific ethical and practical challenges. Despite the potential of participatory art-based methodologies, they are not universally suitable (Veale, 2005). I take up the argumentation of Veale (2005), who argues that some children – particularly those from diverse linguistic or cultural backgrounds, or who may experience social anxiety – may feel more comfortable engaging in one-to-one settings. This

became evident during the ateliers, as participants who engaged most consistently were often quieter and more introverted, preferring to work individually rather than actively participate in group works. Group formats can risk unequal participation or producing a false sense of consensus, especially in situations marked by differing language competencies or level of comfort with artistic expression. Adolescents with stronger French skills tended to dominate verbal exchanges, while others remained largely silent, self-focused, expressing themselves primarily through non-verbal means. Similarly, participants who shared a common native language often formed subgroups, engaging in parallel conversations that excluded the others. These dynamics revealed how group-based settings can reproduce forms of inclusion and exclusion structured not only by language proficiency but also by personality traits such as intro- or extroversion.

Further, maintaining ongoing consent, respecting fluctuating comfort levels, and offering flexible modes of engagement are essential in participatory research with children (Veale, 2005). Akesson et al. (2014) caution that producing visual or symbolic materials can lead to unwanted exposure, particularly if artworks are interpreted, circulated, or displayed without sufficient contextualisation. Researchers therefore carry a responsibility to communicate aims, limits, and potential impacts transparently, and to avoid creating false expectations or promises (Akesson et al., 2014). Participatory art-based research must remain grounded in honesty, care, and accountability, to ensure that empowerment does not compromise psychological safety (Akesson et al., 2014; Veale, 2005). These concerns intersect closely with trauma-informed considerations. Ethical practice is enacted not only through formal procedures, but also through pacing, tone, and presence, making attentiveness to psychological and emotional safety particularly important when working with minors navigating displacement and asylum. Although creative practices are often framed as less threatening modes of expression in psychology and education (Annous et al., 2022), they can nonetheless evoke uncomfortable or painful memories, raising questions about the researcher's ability to hold such moments safely (Casey & Murray, 2022; Lenette, 2019). For this reason, scholars emphasize trauma-informed principles that foreground both psychological and physical safety. At the same time, critical perspectives warn that trauma-informed frameworks may unintentionally assume the presence of trauma and thus risk contributing to processes of victimization or vulnerabilization (Diab & Al-Azzeh, 2024). In this project, trauma-sensitivity was therefore approached as ethical attentiveness rather than a presumption about participants' past experiences. In practice, this meant refraining from initiating questions or activities that explicitly addressed mobility journeys or pre-migration experiences. When such topics emerged spontaneously, I sought to ensure that participants

retained full autonomy over what, how much, and whether they wished to share, without pressure to elaborate. I sought to ensure participants' emotional comfort and security through both verbal and non-verbal cues, and reminded them throughout the process that they were free to disengage at any time The presence of a team of trained social workers, who were always only a few steps away, provided an additional layer of support, ensuring that professional follow-up was available should any discomfort arise (Denov et al., 2012; Vecchio et al., 2017). At the same time, I remain attentive to the limits of this arrangement, as continuous psychological monitoring during or after the sessions was not possible and therefore constituted an important constraint of the research context.

4.6 Methodological Constraints and Limitations

Beyond ethical considerations, the research process was shaped by a range of structural, methodological, and epistemic limitations that call for explicit reflection. Importantly, many of these challenges are not unique to art-based research, but echo long-standing debates in qualitative inquiry around interpretation, subjectivity, and representation. Art-based methods often render these issues more visible rather than introducing them anew. The limitations discussed in this section are therefore not framed as deficiencies of participatory art-based research, but as methodological conditions that shape how knowledge is produced, interpreted, and bounded. Questions of interpretation, validity, and generalizability are not unique to art-based approaches, but resonate with long-standing debates in qualitative inquiry (Casey & Murray, 2022). Making these conditions explicit is central to methodological transparency and analytical rigor, situating the study's limitations as part of a broader commitment to reflexivity and methodological clarity.

4.6.1 Interpretation, Validity, and Ambiguity of Art-Based Research Methodology

Arts-based research methodologies are widely recognised for their capacity to engage emotional, affective, and embodied dimensions of lived experiences. At the same time, such approaches require careful attention to interpretation in order to avoid romanticized readings of creative expression. While research findings of art-based research might often be quite ambiguous in the meanings they offer, they allow interpretive openness that must be carefully navigated to remain aligned with the research aims and ethical commitments. It is true that art-based research leaves parts of the interpretation of research findings open to the reader of the researcher, but this is in line with the goal that art-based research does not have to fulfill the need to answer questions or offer final meanings, but rather to provoke questioning, deepen

engagement, or open debates (Chamberlain et al., 2018). The methodological legitimacy of art-based research continues to be questioned within academia (Burge et al., 2016; Casey & Murray, 2022; Leavy, 2020; Lenette, 2019). Critiques often focus on issues of validity, researcher competence, and the interpretative nature of artistic data, as art-based researchers often privilege a richness and depth of unique, individual cases (Siegesmund, 2014).

Moreover, a common concern relates participants' unfamiliarity with artistic materials, comparable to concerns in interview-based research when participants are unfamiliar with academic language, abstract questioning, or research settings, reflecting broader issues of accessibility in qualitative inquiry. As Burge et al. (2016) note, some individuals may feel alienated or insecure when asked to create art, which can influence the depth or authenticity of their engagement. On the researcher's side, question arise regarding artistic expertise: *Does the researcher need to master artistic conventions before using art-based methods?* Casey and Murray (2022) argue that expectations on the artistic outcomes rely on elitist and historically situated assumptions about what is considered as 'good' or 'meaningful' art. Although art-based research is not concerned with the aesthetic accomplishment but with the creative process as a mode of inquiry into sociocultural experience, the critique exposes an important tension between artistic traditions and research aims. At the same time, scholars such as O'Donoghue (2009) highlight that art-making does not occur in a vacuum: artistic practices are shaped by social, cultural, and institutional conditions that determine who has access to artistic knowledge and whose work is recognised as art. Art practice is a profound form of human engagement through which individuals explore personal, social, and cultural issues, yet it is also embedded within classificatory systems that privilege certain forms of expression over others. Moreover, visual and symbolic language can be interpreted and translated differently depending on the cultural backgrounds of participants, researchers, and audiences. Cultural and semiotic variability thus makes visual data inherently unstable – colors, gestures or motifs may have radically different meanings across cultures. In Western-rooted frameworks, the risk of over- and mis-interpretation of symbolic forms persists (Leavy, 2020; Lenette, 2019) and is a condition that requires reflexive and context-sensitive interpretation rather than definitive coding. As Bourdieu (as cited in O'Donoghue 2009) reminds us, the work of art and artistic practice exists through collective recognition in specific social contexts, and access to such recognition is unevenly distributed. Reflecting on how art and art-based research intersect and diverge therefore helps clarify what each can offer. While their internal logics are distinct, both invite alternative ways of knowing and open up possibilities for engaging with and inquiring into social worlds (O'Donoghue, 2009).

Further, concerns about rigor and validity remain widespread (Morris & Paris, 2022). The traditional qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability and transferability do not neatly translate into the artistic domain. Credibility, for instance, generally requires that participants confirm whether the researcher's interpretation matches their experience. Yet, when meanings are expressed visually or symbolically, it is difficult to translate the interpretations of the creators into analytical outcomes. I ask myself: *Is it possible within my research context to reasonably confirm whether an interpretation aligns with their intended meaning?* Usually, forms of validation are used to verify the accuracy of the researcher's representations. Yet, when working with young people who express their insights primarily through creative forms rather than in verbal or textual dialogue, such verification can become complicated. This raises the question of whether creative expression can be *fact-checked* in the same way as verbal accounts, and whether such expectations are appropriate within this research context. Due et al. (2014) argue that children may be less involved in the interpretation of meaning during the analysis process, even if they are consistently given the opportunity to explain responses. The possibility that interpretations diverge from participants' intended meanings remains an inherent condition of qualitative research and cannot be fully eliminated, regardless of the method. Art-based data are often critiqued due to way interpretation depends heavily on the researcher's positionality. After Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that the participant's creations are deeply personal and embodied, while researchers approach them more through theoretical and methodological frameworks. Negotiating these different perspectives requires reflexivity and transparency rather than claims of neutrality (Morris & Paris, 2022). Lastly, the lack of generalizability is a frequently cited limitation. Because art-based processes are very individual and subjective, outputs are not comparable in a conventional sense (Morris & Paris, 2022). Yet, scholars may argue that generalizability is not necessarily an appropriate measure for art-based research; instead, criteria such as trustworthiness, reflexivity, ethical care, and transparency better capture its epistemic aims (Casey & Murray, 2022; Leavy, 2020).

In sum, participatory art-based research is characterized by fluidity, interpretive openness, and situated knowledge production, which challenge conventional expectations of academic rigor. Rather than signalling weakness, these characteristics call for alternative evaluative criteria grounded in reflexivity, ethical care, and transparency. While art-based research is sometimes romanticized as inherently authentic or emancipatory, such assumptions risk obscuring the methodological work required to produce credible and responsible knowledge. Acknowledging both the possibilities and the limits of art-based inquiry therefore allowed for a balanced

understanding that neither idealizes nor dismisses its epistemic contribution, but situates it as a rigorous and valuable approach within qualitative research traditions (Siegesmund, 2014).

4.6.2 Researcher's Linguistic Limitations

A central methodological limitation of this project concerns the role of language. While English was chosen as the academic language of dissemination, practically all interactions during the fieldwork and in the ateliers took place in French, resulting in a research process conducted across two languages, neither of which is my native tongue. This choice reflects the hierarchy of languages within academia and the continued dominance of English as the preferred means for scholarly production and circulation (Holmes et al., 2013). As Holmes et al. (2013) argue, such linguistic hierarchies reproduce forms of linguistic imperialism and highlight the need for the decentralisation of academic language practices. This hierarchy is evident within my own bibliography, which is overwhelmingly composed of English-language sources written largely by scholars based in Europe or North America – a pattern that reflects not only broader structural inequalities but also my own tendency toward convenience when conducting literature research in a single language. Despite the prevalence of multilingual research sites, especially in mobility studies, there remains limited guidelines on how to conduct research multilingually, and the multilingual realities of fieldwork and research processes are often normalized rather than critically examined or reflected upon (Holmes et al., 2013). Within my research, engaging in several languages required constant switching, at times resulting in partial comprehension or misunderstandings, while simultaneously having to develop an academic self in a monolingual register distinct from both the language of fieldwork and my native tongue. Such conditions raise complex issues of navigating intercultural communication (with the participants and myself), as well as the inevitable losses that accompany process of translation and interpretation (Holmes et al., 2013). Evidently, the language dynamics with participants during the fieldwork implied further complex dynamics, which will be analyzed in a later section in this thesis' analytical part.

4.7 Use of Artificial Intelligence

In order to ensure transparency, I want to state that throughout the writing process I made selective use of AI-assisted writing tools to support rephrasing, improving clarity and academic tone, refining the structure and the *fil rouge* of the thesis. This use was strictly limited to stylistic and organisational support, including rephrasing sentences, improving coherence, and helping me untangle the order of sections. Any AI suggestions were reviewed critically and only

incorporated when consistent with my own intended meaning. The research design, analysis, arguments, and conceptual choices presented in this thesis are entirely my own[5].

[5] This is in line with the ULiège Charter for the use of generative artificial intelligence in academic work (ULiège, 2023).

5 Findings

This chapter presents the analytical insights that emerged from the participatory art-based ateliers conducted in the reception center, which unfolded as contextual entry points into understanding how unaccompanied adolescents navigate their everyday realities within the asylum apparatus. The analysis attends to the creative processes, interactions, and narrative moments through which meaning was negotiated, while remaining attentive to silence, withdrawal, and absence as meaningful forms of engagement.

The chapter unfolds across three interconnected analytical movements. The first part, *Participation within Field Realities,* examines how the art-based methodology was enacted in practice, foregrounding the tensions between methodological aims and field reality. The second part, *Beyond Artistic Ateliers: Revealing Reception-Center Daily Life,* turns to how everyday life in the reception center surfaced through creative engagement, highlighting daily routines, forms of resistance, and narrative agency. The third part, *Understanding Expressive Orientations within the Atelier Space,* explores how future and aspirations emerged as central expressive horizons, often displacing mobility as the dominant narrative reference point. These analyses trace how meaning was co-constructed within the ateliers.

5.1 Participation within Field Realities

While the theoretical framework outlined art-based research methodology's potential for participatory, dialogical, and multimodal co-creation, the ateliers revealed frictions between methodological aspirations and practical limitations. These tensions illuminate how participation, expression, and relationality are shaped in dynamic and structurally complex environments of asylum reception centers. Entering the field, I held an admittedly enthusiastic belief in the possibilities of participatory art-based methods to foster dialogue, inclusion, and safe expression. I imagined that creative tools would naturally lower barriers, encourage conversation, and open space for self-representation. Yet, the field reality showed me different sorts of limits to these expectations. Participation did not necessarily produce dialogue, co-presence did not guarantee collaboration, and artistic creation did not automatically translate into narrative openness. Rather than dismissing these tensions as methodological shortcomings, they pushed me to confront the idealisation of art-based research methodologies in participatory discourses, which is in line with Coemans and Hannes' (2017) insistence that participatory art-based methods must be critically analyzed rather than celebrated unconditionally. The ateliers demonstrated that participation is not naturally empowering, nor is art a universal language that

dissolves barriers. Instead, participation became a situated, uneven, and often fragile practice – responsive to mood, trust, language, institutional rhythms or personal histories. The following sub-chapters trace how this played out in practice: how slow beginnings, discontinuous attendance, and institutional time shaped the work, how collaboration sometimes remained aspirational, and how language, group dynamics, and material structured what forms of expression could become possible.

5.1.1 Facilitating Art-Based Participation: A Slow Learning Curve

Time was a central factor in shaping the way the ateliers took place. Much of the fieldwork period was shaped by procedural delays, administrative requirements, and the gradual process of building familiarity and trust with both the adolescents and the social world of the center. As previous scholars have noted, in comparison with other, more conventional qualitative methodologies, art-based inquiries often require extended timeframes, training, and a longer acclimatization period to creative processes for both researchers and participants (Coemans & Hannes, 2017). In this case, the challenge was compounded by the fact that it was my first experience facilitating artistic ateliers and navigating adolescents' group dynamics within an institutional setting. Assuming the role of a researcher in this context felt unfamiliar at times. The initial ateliers were as much about *my own* learning – regarding materials, boundaries, atmospheres, expectations – as they were about the adolescents' creative engagement. This became particularly visible in relation to expectations of free creation. As I noted in my field notes:

> *I realized that, for me [personally], free creation was something that I had learnt over the course of several years; not being bound to aesthetic expectations and set imagines in my head, but to let the body guide the creative process, is something that needs time, and certainly a lot of confidence. Thus, having the expectation that the teenagers could let go of aesthetic expectations within just a few sessions, was maybe a tad irrational* [Field Notes 05.10.25][6].

This reflection highlights that free creation is not a neutral or immediately accessible starting point, but a learned disposition that develops through prolonged exposure, practice, and growing confidence. It also underscores how temporal constraints shaped not only the adolescents' engagement, but my own assumptions about what could reasonably be expected within the limited duration of the ateliers. This further shaped what as possible and what had to be abandoned, foregrounding that art-based inquiry cannot be separated from the temporal and institutional structures in which it unfolds.

[6] For better readability, all field notes originally written in languages other than English have been translated into English.

> *I am not a social worker, nor I am not trained to work with adolescents. I am also not an artist, nor someone used to guiding art-making. And I keep asking myself: how much of me needs to be an artist and/or a social worker, in order to sit with children and create? To witness artistic processes, must I first master them? I believe the answer is no, but it means that I move much more slowly, because I first need to get used to the tools and methods myself, getting more comfortable and confident with doing arts with others, learning carefully step by step every move on the way* [Field Notes 10.09.25].

This reflections speaks to my positionality as 'non-artist-researcher', as discussed in Chapter 4.4. Despite extensive engagement with literature and practical guidelines on facilitating artistic ateliers with minors, the lack of formal artistic or pedagogical training was still present in practice. Yet, this may have opened a different relational dynamic. While remaining transparent about my skills and limitations, it allowed a space for reciprocal learning processes between myself and the adolescents to emerge. Rather that positioning myself as an expert guiding artistic production, I learned alongside them, and they, in turn, shaped the direction and pace of the ateliers. In this sense, the absence of mastery did not simply constitute a limitation, but also enabled moments of horizontality, where participation unfolded through shared experimentation within the constraints of the available sources, skills, and the institutional context.

5.1.2 Continuity and Collaboration: Following the Center's Rhythms

Because participation in the ateliers was entirely voluntary – an intentional choice to maintain openness and low pressure – attendance fluctuated significantly. Each week, a different constellation of adolescents participated, which made it impossible to develop the continuous collaborative activities as I had initially envisioned. Ideas for exercises such as a three week-long photo project or a collaborative collage-making session had to be abandoned. For a photography-mapping exercise I had planned to give out disposable cameras and let the adolescents capture aspects of their daily lives over the course of one week, and later connecting the images to an emotion map (after Boys Davis, 2009; Kind, 2023), while a collaging exercise was planned to serve as an embodied, tactile practice grounded in collaboration, interaction, and dialogue (after Küttel and Peterson, 2023). However, because consecutive participation and stable group compositions could not be ensured, such activity designs proved unfeasible.

> *Experimenting with different creative ideas and adapting it to the particularity and circumstances of the center's rhythm, adapting the ideas to the needs and moods of the participants every week anew… This shaped how the ateliers evolved over the weeks, learning every time anew what was feasible and possible. It showed that life in reception centers cannot always be planned; concrete planning and scheduling more than two weeks beforehand was not possible, as the reality of the*

> *center shapes the way activities are playing out. Very quickly I abandoned the idea of pre-organizing and pre-planning the activities weeks before – I had to take it week by week and day by day, which took up quite a big proportion of organizational time used to adapt to the specific context every time anew* [Field Notes 15.10.25].

This reflection illustrates how the fluctuation rhythms of the reception center disrupted linear planning and organisation based on continuity or long-term design, requiring the ateliers to be remain flexible and situational rather than follow pre-defined collaborative trajectories. This discontinuity further shaped processes of trust-building. With constantly changing participant groups, trust had to be rebuilt almost from scratch each session – not only between the adolescents and me, but among the adolescents themselves. The lack of stable group composition meant that the ateliers remained episodic encounters rather than cumulative relational processes. This fleetingness reflected the broader rhythms of reception-center life, where schedules change unpredictably, administrative obligations intervene, and everyday routines are structured around forces beyond my and the adolescents' control. In this sense, methodological instability mirrored the lived unpredictability within the walls of the center.

5.1.3 Language between Barrier and Bridge

Literature on arts-based methodologies frames art as a mode of expression that extends beyond verbal language, highlighting its capacity to facilitate communication through non-verbal, tactile, and imaginative means (Akesson et al., 2014; Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Entering the field, I therefore expected that artistic creation would ease the linguistic heterogeneity of the group and help overcome the verbal barriers inherent to a multilingual environment. The reality of the ateliers, however, revealed a more complex dynamic. The adolescents spoke a broad array of languages – several Arabic dialects, a Kurdish dialect, Turkish, French, and English – and although French functioned as the center's main language of communication, proficiency varied significantly. My own interactions alternated between French and English, languages neither fully shared by all of the participants equally. What I had underestimated is how central verbal communication remains *before, during,* and *after* artistic processes. Instructions, negotiations around activities, invitations to discuss choices, and expressions of moods all relied heavily on verbal language. Without a common linguistic denominator, meaning-making became uneven, at times exclusionary, and deeply shaped by linguistic capital. This dynamic aligns with Holmes et al.'s (2013) argument that language structures interpersonal relations, mediates access to dialogue, and shapes who becomes audible within research encounters. During the ateliers, individuals with stronger French skills inevitably steered conversations, asked questions, joked around, and sustained a discursive rhythm to which only some could contribute, while those with

less access to French language remained largely silent during verbal exchanges. In this way, language – rather than art – often determined who could participate in the dialogical and interpretive dimension of the atelier.

It became apparent that language was not only a barrier to communication, but also a key marker of belonging. The adolescents frequently initiated conversations about the difficulty of learning French and compared their linguistic skills among the group. Through these exchanges, it became apparent how closely language proficiency was tied to their self-perception, everyday struggles, and imagined futures.

> *Language seems to be an essential part of their everyday reality – the languages they speak, the ones they learn at school, the ones they have picked up during their journeys. They frequently ask me which languages I speak, how and why I learned them. These discussions show how language also structures their identities and social possibilities* [Field Notes 12.11.25].

This reflection from my field notes highlights the centrality and sensitivity of language within the adolescents' everyday lives. Their heightened awareness of linguistic competence was not merely practical, but rather existential. Language proficiency represented not only to communicate with their immediate surroundings, but also their prospects of social inclusion and their broader social horizons in their surrounding. This observation aligns with literature on linguistic integration and social inclusion, which emphasises language proficiency as key determinant of cultural self-identification, social participation, and overall well-being among mobile youth navigating processes of incorporation into wider communities (Horgan et al., 2022; Santorelli & Palladino, 2024).

However, the language skills were not only a boundary – in certain situations it served as a bridge, shaping relationships and atmosphere:

> *He told me it was a shame he did not speak better French and that this limited the depth of our conversations. Yet we laughed together about our mutual misunderstandings – the way we both spoke 'broken French'. "It's okay, sometimes we don't understand each other, but we can still have fun", he said* [Field Notes 12.11.25].

This citation shows that shared linguistic imperfection could momentarily foster relational closeness and create spaces of connection and mutual recognition to emerge despite limited verbal proficiency. At the same time, such moments remained fragile and situational, and did not erase the broader structural role of language in shaping access to dialogue, participation, and relational depth within the ateliers.

In response to these linguistic challenges, I experimented with different strategies to support communication and shared interpretation. One such attempt involved introducing written instructions in their native tongues. However, the adolescents did not take the written instructions into consideration. The format may have been perceived as school-like, rigid, and incompatible with the open, playful atmosphere I sought to cultivate for the ateliers. Rather than enhancing accessibility, the written instructions may have produced distance and formality, and at times even resistance, thereby disrupting the sense of freedom that otherwise characterized the sessions. Similarly, invitations to describe their creations with a single word or to give titles to their artworks in their native languages was not translated into practice. As I sought to move away from text-based descriptions and wanted to respect the atelier atmosphere as unforced, pressure-free space, I did not further introduce text-based prompts, instructions, or tasks. The linguistic barriers further inhibited the participatory and art-based aim of co-constructed interpretation. Throughout the ateliers, I continuously invited the adolescents to comment on their creations, explain material or symbolic choices, or situate their artworks within personal contexts. Often, however, responses were limited to statements such as "*I don't know, I just felt like it"* [Field Notes 01.10.25] or *"I don't know what I am doing, I am just doing something"* [Field Notes 05.11.25], without giving away the meaning, reflections, or intents behind the artworks.

The gap between the methodological aspiration of dialogue-based co-interpretation and the field reality of minimal verbalization, silence and performative reluctance revealed that linguistic equivalency is not an optional complement to arts-based methods, but a structural condition shaping their possibilities. The ateliers thus became spaces where linguistic boundaries were not dissolved by art, but rather highlighted, negotiated, and inhabited. My difficulty in overcoming these barriers should therefore not be read solely as a methodological shortcoming, but as holding heuristic value, offering insight into the art-based research process itself. This insight resonates with Due et al.'s (2014) discussion of interpretation and adult-centric assumptions in research with children. They emphasize the importance of creating opportunities for minors to interpret their own creations, while simultaneously cautioning that children may be less involved in interpretive processes during analysis, even when participatory intentions are present. This tension was also evident in my research. Despite repeated invitations to explain, contextualize, or reflect on their creative choices, verbal co-interpretation often remained limited – not due to a lack of meaning, but perhaps because linguistic insecurity or abstract verbal demands constrained how interpretation could be articulated. In this sense, language emerged as one of the most decisive elements structuring participation, relationality, and interpretation during the

artistic process, underscoring that arts-based methodologies do not automatically overcome linguistic barriers.

5.1.4 A Mosaic of Presences: Group Dynamics in the Ateliers

Group dynamics constituted another central dimension of how the ateliers unfolded. While I initially assumed that shared living spaces and daily routines would translate into familiarity and ease among the participants, the ateliers revealed a different reality. Despite sharing a common living space, many participants did not appear to know each other particularly well. Rather than unfolding within a cohesive peer group, the ateliers seemed to have brought together a loose assemblage of individuals connected more by circumstance than by affinity. One recurring pattern was the formation of linguistic and ethnic clusters. Adolescents tended to group among others who shared their language and ethnic background, creating small pockets of interaction that often remained closed to those outside the group. Conversations in their native languages took place in private bubbles; while these exchanges seemed to provide comfort, familiarity, and ease within subgroups, they simultaneously constrained collective activities and limited cross-linguistic interactions. This observation resonates with existing literature on unaccompanied minors' social networks, which highlights the importance of ethnic and linguistic peer grouping (Behrendt et al., 2022). As Behrendt et al. (2022) show, clustering within shared cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds offers young people continuity, recognition, and a sense of belonging, and often becomes the basis of the building of social networks.

Participation within the ateliers also varied according to perceived personality traits. The sessions consistently attracted adolescents with quieter, more introverted dispositions – those who, according to social workers, often struggled to express themselves in larger group settings. Within the atelier space, however, these adolescents appeared to flourish, not necessarily through verbal interaction, but through artistic engagement. The calm, structured atmosphere of the creative space may have allowed them to work without interruption or competition. This contrast became particularly visible on the rare occasions when more extroverted adolescents joined the ateliers. Their presence quickly filled the room with noise and movement, subtly reshaping the atmosphere and often pushing quieter participants into the background, where their presence became less visible. These shifts in atmosphere did not depend on perceived personality alone, but were further shaped by who was present in the room and the institutional roles they embodied. The presence of social workers introduced another layer to the dynamics. Their presence, even if minimal, altered the atmosphere of the room each time they entered. Adolescents tended to speak less, engage more discreetly, or appear more self-conscious. Once

the social workers stepped out, however, their bodies relaxed, conversations emerged more naturally, and the atmosphere softened. In this sense, the atelier functioned as a liminal space – neither fully inside nor outside institutional structures – allowing relational dynamics to unfold differently.

Despite several attempts to introduce group exercises and ensure collaborative practices, most adolescents gravitated toward individual work. Most times, they ignored group instructions and began their own creative process in their own rhythm – perhaps a subtle but meaningful expression of agency. Certain individual dynamics stood out: One participant, introverted and sharing a different linguistic background that all the other participants, would routinely enter the room, observe quietly for a few minutes, then put on his headphones and immerse himself in drawing. He rarely engaged with my thematic suggestions and instead followed his own creative impulse. His body language – perceived as silent absorption, controlled movements, and full concentration – made visible how art-making functioned for him as a private, interior practice rather than a social or dialogical one.

While the ateliers often characterized by parallel, individual creative processes, this did not prevent moments of shared engagement from emerging. Yet, the few moments of collaboration always came from the adolescents themselves, not as an answer to my propositions. For instance, two participants, which both stated being insecure about their drawing abilities, decided to work together on one occasion:

> *They explained that they did not feel confident drawing alone and preferred to collaborate. Watching them synchronously draw and paint a shared image of an island – one using wax crayons, the other acrylic paint – was very touching. Their movements intertwined naturally, without negotiation or hesitation* [Field Notes 30.11.25].

Figure 1: Free Drawing – Island with Palm Trees 30.11.25

Figure 1 shows the outcome of this spontaneous collaboration between two teenagers during a free drawing exercise. The drawing was initially started individually by one participant. When he expressed how difficult he found it to draw the island with palm trees, surrounded by the ocean, birds, and a sunset, the adolescent seated next to him spontaneously joined the process and began contributing to the artwork. These moments were small but significant. They revealed that collaboration cannot be imposed, but may emerge organically when participants find mutual comfort and ease.

Humour also played a subtle but important role in shaping group dynamics. During the clay exercise, shared laughter emerged around forms that did not turn out as intended – pieces falling apart or objects becoming distorted. These shared ‘mistakes’ generated moments of companionship and lightness, much like moments of shared linguistic struggle described earlier. Such instances softened the boundaries between all participants, contributing to an atmosphere in which imperfection was not only acceptable, but generative.

Across these dynamics, the atelier thus appeared less as a collective creative space and more as a mosaic of concurrent, overlapping, and sometimes disconnected micro-worlds: individual absorptions, linguistic and ethnic subgroups, relational tensions, intimate conversations, and spontaneous collaborations. Recognising the absence of a unified group atmosphere offers a more accurate understanding of what participatory art-making became in this context: a space of plural, coexisting forms of presence, each meaningful in its own right.

5.1.5 Materiality, Embodiment, and Creative Engagement

A recurring dynamic across the ateliers was the adolescents' strong orientation toward aesthetic precision and the reproduction of predefined images. Despite the repeated emphasis that the ateliers aimed not at fulfilling aesthetic expectations and instead were supposed to encourage free, open-ended creation, many participants did not let go of such expectations. They insisted on finding model images on their phones – typically templates from TikTok or Instagram[7] – and attempted to accurately reproduce them.

Figure 2 Free Drawing – Wolf's Head 30.11.25

Figure 3 Free Drawing – Christmas Tree 30.11.25

Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate one-to-one reproductions of images retrieved from the adolescents' personal online sources. Rather than serving as inspiration, these digital references functioned as direct templates, guiding the creative process toward faithful replication. This practice may suggest a strategic orientation toward control and predictability. By copying existing visual forms, adolescents may have minimized the perceived risks with free creation, particularly in relation to unfamiliar materials and the fear of making perceived 'aesthetically imperfect' creations. Many had never worked with acrylics or watercolors before. Relying on predefined images thus may have reduced uncertainty and helped adolescents manage both material unfamiliarity and insecurities around aesthetic judgement or pressures of social desirability. The creative process thus often shifted from imaginative exploration to representational accuracy. This resonates with Casey and Murray's (2022) emphasis on process-centered art-based approaches: creative practice is shaped not only by expressive intention but also by materiality, technique, and embodied learning. For the adolescents, free creation was maybe not a natural

[7] TikTok and Instagram are popular, visual social media platforms. https://www.tiktok.com; https://www.instagram.com

starting point but rather an aspirational horizon requiring time, trust, and experiential grounding. These dynamics became especially visible through the contrast between painting-based activities and clay work. With painting, the aesthetic expectations appeared to have been more important. Adolescents verbalized fears of not knowing how to draw [Field Notes 01.10.25, 30.11.25], and the fact that paint cannot be easily altered seemed to make perceived aesthetic imperfections feel irreversible. In contrast, clay afforded a different temporality and affective structure. The material appears quite forgiving as it can be endlessly molded, taken apart, reassembled, and reshaped. This elasticity created room for experimentation that was less contingent on predefined images and more open to embodied improvisation.

Figure 4: Clay Sculpture – Four Figures Separated by a Wall 05.11.25

One participant exemplified this difference. Throughout a clay session, he described his creative process as "*I don't know what I'm doing, I just let my hands move"* [Field Notes 05.11.25]. His final piece – four human-like figures standing on a platform separated by a wall, as shown in Figure 4 – emerged not from a preconceived design but from an iterative, tactile process. He assured me that he worked without a predetermined idea, explaining that his sculpture "*just came like that*", but also that it did not "*carry any meaning*" [Field Notes 05.11.25].

These moments reflect an aesthetic logic rooted not in representation but in spontaneity, affect, and bodily engagement. At the end of the session, the participants explained to me that although they had never used clay as creative material before, it reminded them of their childhoods, playing with wet sand or dirt [Field Notes 05.11.25]. Rather than serving as an explanation in itself, this observation points to how the choice of medium shaped the dynamics of creation and the affordances of expression within the ateliers. Clay appeared to facilitate

immersion, flow, and a sense of freedom, whereas painting and drawing seemed to function as barriers to free engagement. This finding challenges the assumption that arts-based methods inherently promote imagination and emotional articulation. Instead, the material conditions of the activity – its tactility, reversibility, and sensory demands – and the individual accessibility of the teenagers determined the degree to which creative processes become expressive, embodied, or constrained. Recognising these dynamics enriches the analytical understanding of how art-making unfolded for these adolescents, and of the methodological conditions necessary to support non-verbal forms of meaning-making.

Across the ateliers, a consistent observation was how deeply absorbed the adolescents became during the creative process, particularly those who usually occupy quieter or more marginal positions within group settings. Contrary to their initial declarations that they "*do not like arts"* [Field Notes 12.11.25], the majority of participants ultimately engaged with notable concentration, seriousness, and curiosity. Their comments about art being not really for them [Field Notes 12.11.25] may have revealed less a disinterest and more a lack of prior exposure, or even cultural imaginaries about what is expected. Once engaged, their bodies told a different story: hunched, attentive, careful, slow and deliberate movements. My fieldnote captures this embodied transformation:

> *It's really like a bodily thing. They get into it with their whole body. They become very quiet. Very silent. And they begin to just* do. *They seem extremely appreciative of the calm and the focus it offers* [Observation 05.11.25].

The adolescents worked with a degree of focus and bodily immersion, as speech gradually diminished and tactile engagement intensified. The ateliers thus formed what might be perceived as moments of affective stillness. Emotional experience in these spaces could not be observed solely through the content of the artworks themselves, but rather through the atmospheres, silences, and bodily states that emerged in situations. This points to a further dimension of the findings: emotional expression surfaced not primarily through explicit narrative or symbolic representation, but through embodied presence, concentration, and subtle shifts in collective mood. Contrary to expectations in much art-based research literature, which often anticipates emotionally expressive or symbolically charged outputs (Genova & Zontini, 2023; Veale, 2005), emotional expression in the ateliers manifested in quieter, less legible forms. The adolescents' bodies became central mediums of expression, communicating through postures, stillness, movement, and sensory engagement. Perhaps, to a certain degree, the ateliers may be understood as spaces of temporary relief from daily routines, functioning as an alternative social environment which is neither fully institutional, nor entirely informal, but a liminal space that

enabled embodied forms to emerge. Within these embodied dynamics, fleeting emotions such as laughter, irritation, hesitation, or discomfort appeared quietly in the room. When a sculpture suddenly collapsed during and a participant burst into laughter, the moment created a shared emotional landscape that had little to do with the artistic task itself. Such micro-interactions exemplify what Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) describe as the emotion work embedded in everyday social practice: emotion not as inner, private essence, but as something enacted relationally.

Only a part of the adolescents engaged directly with the artistic materials, yet this did not preclude meaningful participation. One participant, for instance, refused almost all invitations to participate, yet, attended all ateliers, sat and discussed with us.

> *For him, the atelier may be less a creative space and more a space for connection. He chooses to be there even without doing art, showing that the atelier might offer something beyond the activity itself: a moment of being-with-others, of talking freely, of being giving a space in a calm environment* [Field Notes 12.11.25].

As this field note shows, his participation resided not in creative production but in social presence. The atelier may have provided him with a contained, calm environment for connection, humor, and verbal expression. This dynamic broadens the analytical understanding of what *participation* means within art-based research. Engagement cannot be measured solely through artistic creation; rather, the atelier's value emerged through the multiplicity of ways that adolescents inhabited the space – through silence, conversation, observation, humor, or creative absorption. These diverse forms of presence illustrate that the ateliers operated as relational microcosms, where artistic creation was only one modality among several. Taken together, these observations highlight that the ateliers were not simply methodological instruments but *social spaces* shaped by the institutional context, my role as guiding presence, material conditions, intersubjective dynamics, and structural constraints of life in a reception center. They created openings for trust, introspection, distraction, and connection – openings that were contingent, and deeply embedded in the rhythms of the adolescents' everyday lives.

The findings from Chapter 5.1 demonstrate that art-based participation in the context of reception center unfolded as a slow, fragile, and highly situated process. Rather than following linear trajectories of collaboration, expression, or collective meaning-making, the ateliers were shaped by temporal constraints, fluctuation participation, linguistic dynamics, institutional rhythms, and varying access to artistic expression. Expectations commonly associated with art-based methodologies – such as free creation flow, emotional articulation, and dialogical co-interpretation – could not be assumed as given, but emerged unevenly, partially, or not at all. This reveals how participation took form through adaptation, bodily engagement, presence, and

relational negotiation within the circumstances of the given environment. The ateliers functioned less as stable collective projects and more as momentary spaces of encounters, where adolescents engaged in diverse ways: through making, observing, talking, remaining silent, or simply being present. Recognising these plural and situated modes of participation allows for a more nuanced understanding of what art-based research can offer in institutional settings, and underscores the importance of attending to time, materiality, language, and positionality as conditions of participatory practice.

5.2 Beyond Artistic Ateliers: Revealing Reception-Center Daily Life

The second part of this analysis exposes what the artistic ateliers unfolded about everyday reality in the reception center, highlighting how the adolescents' capacity for expression, engagement, and presence has been formed through institutional rhythms. Although the ateliers were designed as creative and expressive spaces, much of what I ultimately learned about the adolescents' lived realities emerged not through the artistic processes and productions themselves, but through the conditions surrounding it: the rhythms and disruptions of daily life in the center, the institutional pressures that shaped attendance, and the informal conversations that unfolded around the activities. In this sense, the ateliers functioned less as access points to the adolescents' inner worlds through creative expression, and more as situated sites through which the structural and affective complexities of reception-center life became visible.

In my early encounters within the center, it became clear to me that it operated within a state of structural instability – not in a colloquial sense of disorganisation or chaos, but as a condition built into the asylum apparatus itself. This system appeared characterized by unpredictable schedules, sudden administrative demands, limited resources, and rigid hierarchies of urgency and necessity. The adolescents' daily lives seemed shaped primarily by external agendas rather than their own: medical appointments, meetings with legal tutors, preparation for asylum interviews, bureaucratic follow-ups, or logistical necessities. A social worker explained that once school hours ended, adolescents' afternoons rapidly filled with obligations, while leisure time occupied merely the fragmented margins that remained. Their prioritization of activities to follow was not a sign of indifference, but a practical necessity reflecting the conditions of their everyday lives. Participation in the ateliers was always conditional, dependent on the temporary loosening of institutional, legal, or material pressures. (Non-)participation could thus not be understood solely as a matter of motivation; it was a matter of capacity, and a reminder that creative engagement cannot be abstracted from the constraints of everyday life.

The staff's working conditions mirrored this structural strain. Many social workers described feeling overworked, stretched thin, or emotionally exhausted. High turnover, sick leave and staff shortages were not just recurrent topics in conversations with staff members, but also visible from signs of stress and fatigue on their faces [Field Notes 12.11.25, 19.11.25]. The feasibility of the ateliers depended not only on whether adolescents were free and willing to participate, but also on whether staff had the time, capacity, and institutional bandwidth to coordinate and support the sessions. In this sense, the lived constraints of both adolescents and staffs' working conditions were woven into the texture of the ateliers themselves, shaping when they could occur, who could attend, and how the space was held.

One moment especially crystallized this interdependence of institutional fragility and adolescents' capacity. One afternoon, upon arriving for an atelier, the social worker greeted me apologetically, seemingly already strained by a stressful shift. After attempting to gather participants, she returned to explain that most of the boys were asleep. She shared with me that the weekly money transfer for the residents had failed to go through the day before due to a public holiday. As a result, the adolescents were left without their weekly money and thus had been unable to buy food and eat for a whole day. Hunger and exhaustion seemed to keep the youngsters in bed the whole day. She explained me that the teenagers had to manage to live on an amount that barely covers basic subsistence and leaves no margin for leisure or unexpected needs. Thus, the delayed money transfer had serious implications on the young people's day [Field Notes 12.11.25]. This episode revealed how precarious the adolescents' basic needs were and how such precarity sometimes permeated every aspect of daily life. What I had initially framed as a simple creative activity unfolded against a backdrop of material vulnerability that overshadowed expressive possibilities.

These structural conditions also shaped daily experiences in ways that surfaced through informal conversations during the ateliers. One afternoon, for instance, a teenager told me the reason for not wanting to participate in the atelier was due to a persistent, pining pain behind his eye and temple and thus having difficulties in thinking clearly. When I asked about medical care, he explained that the ophthalmologist appointment offered by the center's partnering clinic was only available weeks away. The social worker later added that it was hard for the teenagers to get appointment with specialists, because some clinics do "*not like to work with asylum seekers*". [Field Notes 12.11.25]. This anecdote encapsulates how structural discrimination and unequal access to care shape daily life in invisibly ways.

In that sense, the ateliers revealed far more than artistic, aesthetic, or relational dynamics. They illuminated the lived conditions of the teenagers: the unpredictability of schedules, the fragility of support structures, the weight and pressure of administrative procedures, the fatigue induced by systemic precarity, and the slow diminution of adolescent normal routines. The art-making space became a site where the socio-institutional environment became legible – not through the content of artworks but through the rhythms of participation, the texture of interactions, the reasons for absence, and the stories that surfaced in the margins.

5.2.1 Absence, Resistance and Narrative Agency

Absence itself emerged as an important analytical category throughout the ateliers. On three separate occasions, I arrived for an atelier that ultimately did not take place: once due to a miscommunication among staff, and twice because no adolescent wished to participate. Although initially discouraging, these moments revealed crucial insights into agency, priorities, and the lived realities within the asylum apparatus. Rather than interpreting absence as methodological failure, I came to understand it as a form of commentary – a meaningful expression of the limits of capacity within the structural and emotional landscapes of the reception center. Adolescence is already marked by fluctuating moods, desires, and capacities; compounded by the asylum apparatus, such fluctuations might intensify. Reasons might have to do with tiredness, preoccupation, overwhelm, disinterest, or a desire for solitude. On certain days, the physical or emotional energy required to enter a leisure activity around artistic creation may have been just too great. I interpreted absence, in this sense, as a form of soft resistance – not confrontational, but reflective of the adolescents' limited capacities and their strategies for allocating scare emotional, physical, or material resources. Choosing not to attend an atelier could be understood as an assertion of control and agency within an environment where much of their daily life was externally structured. It was also a reminder that art-making, however beneficial or expressive, cannot be abstracted from the concrete material and emotional realities that shape the adolescents' life, as shown in the following citation:

> *There's always the chance or risk that the boys are not feeling 'it' today, that there are other things that have much higher priority. Today it was food and sleep. Recovery. Another time it might just be that the topic of the atelier does not speak to them. Another day it might be too cold to go out of the room, or too warm to stay inside. Once, they are adolescents, they have needs that might not match with the time and date of the atelier. And then, of course, due to their particular situation of being teenagers in the asylum process, and on top of that MENA, alone without family. They have needs that I might never be able to grasp* [Field Notes 12.11.25].

A further dimension shaping these absences – both physical and expressive – might relate to the temporal immediacy of their arrival in Belgium. Most adolescents had been in the reception center only for a few weeks or months. This recency may explain why an explicit confrontation with the momentary lived reality did not emerge readily or conscious. Perhaps they have not yet had the temporal or emotional distance required to process their situation: everything was still unfolding, still new and immediate. In this sense, non-participation or non-expression may also reflect such deferral of a postponement of engaging with experiences that have not yet sedimented into narrative form.

Importantly, another recurring pattern emerged around the question of representing post-migration experiences through art. From the outset of the research, I was interested in exploring how participatory art-making might enable mobile youth to engage with aspects of their everyday lives after arrival in the country, and how their current situations could surface through creative processes. In line with this interest, I introduced thematic prompts linked to the overarching thread – *my life in Liège* – during the ateliers that explicitly sought to connect artistic production to lived experience. I invited participants, for example, to choose a clay object representing their relationship to life in Belgium, or proposing a photographic series documenting everyday moments around the reception center. However, these prompts were met with resistance. Rather than engaging with the proposed links between art-making and everyday life in and around the center, the adolescents chose not to connect their artworks directly to their lived situations. They did not appear interested in reflecting on their post-migration realities through artistic expression. Instead, they asserted control over what was represented – selecting their own themes, following personal impulses, and drawing on imagery or ideas that mattered to them, while largely disregarding my prompts. One participant articulated this stance explicitly: *"I don't wanna think about my life and reality here. If I do arts, I just wanna do whatever I feel like, and not think about its meaning"* [Field Notes 05.11.25]. When I suggested creating a clay object connected to his life here, he built a clay house; when I proposed the photography project, he declined and stated "*that's not my thing, ask someone else to talk about their life here*" [Field Notes 05.11.2025]. Rather than interpreting such refusal as disengagement, these moment highlight how participants actively negotiated the terms of participation. By resisting the expectation that their artworks should explicitly represent their post-migration experiences, the adolescents exercised agency over what they were willing – or unwilling – to externalize through art. In doing so, they challenged the assumption that participatory art-making naturally leads to self-representation of lived realities, and instead revealed how meaning-making remained selective, self-directed, and not necessarily aligned with the researchers' analytical intentions. In this sense, the absence of

explicit narrative was itself meaningful, reflecting deliberate choices about what could be shared, withheld, or left unarticulated within the atelier context.

Yet, surprisingly, while mobility experience was rarely explicitly addressed through art, it surfaced frequently through conversation during the creative process. Spontaneous discussions emerged about countries crossed, languages learned, places that felt welcoming or hostile, or experiences along the journey. One participant, for instance, explained me in detail what places, centers, routes, organisations and encounters he went through in a particular country, while another one shared with me how his involuntary stay in a transit country helped him learning a language very quickly. Another one shared with me stories about experiences with push backs and violent authorities at borders [Field Notes 05.11.25, 12.11.25, 30.11.25]. Such conversations were selective, fragmentary, and deliberate, echoing Eastmond's (2007) insight that narratives of mobility are never given in full but negotiated relationally and contextually. Notably, such conversations occurred almost exclusively when there was just few participants present while they vanished entirely in larger groups. This supports my earlier reflection on the limitations of group settings and the potential value of one-on-one encounters – settings where personal histories can emerge without the gaze of peers.

Taken together, absence from the ateliers and avoidance of linking artistic expression directly and explicitly to mobility experiences can be understood within the same analytical frame: both constitute meaningful modes of agency in a context where agency may often be structurally limited. Refusing to attend, refusing to represent mobility, or refusing to align with prompts all reflect subtle resistances to imposed narratives and to the exceptionalization of their mobility. These gestures articulate a desire for self-determination over when and how their experiences are expressed and when they are not. This non-narration then is not silence as emptiness but silence as choice. It is a claim to narrative authorship, an assertion of boundaries, and a refusal to be reduced to migratory experience. In this sense, the adolescents' practices of deflection – whether through absence or through creative redirection – reveal their strategies of self-protection, their negotiation of identity, and their ways of reclaiming narrative agency within the environment of the reception center.

5.2.2 Resisting the Exceptionalization of Mobility

The adolescents' avoidance of mobility-themed artistic expression can be understood through the lens of de-migranticization – a framework that challenges the tendency to treat 'migrants' as a distinct social category whose identities are primarily linked to mobility (Dahinden 2016). Scholars critiques how researchers tend to "overstate the difference between migrants

and non-migrants" (Dahinden, 2016, p. 2212) positioning migrants as an "exceptional category" (Raghuram et al., 2024, p. 3) whose experiences revolve primarily around mobility. Rather than positioning migration as an exceptional rupture, mobility studies emphasize the continuity of movement across life trajectories. Further, as Wyss and Dahinden (2022) argue, there is a conceptual flaw in distinguishing migration from pre- and post-migration mobility. Mobile people often have multiple residences, circulate between them, and engage in continuous movements that do not neatly begin or end with crossing a border or entering the asylum apparatus. Mobility, in this view, is not a singular rupture, but an ongoing trajectory. The adolescents' reluctance to center mobility in their artistic productions can thus be understood as a refusal to participate in a narrative logic that isolates mobility as a defining moment of their identities, instead of viewing it as one element within broader, fluid patterns of movement and becoming. Within this perspective, the adolescents' refusal to represent mobility in their artworks takes on analytical depth. I suggest that by declining to center their creations on mobility experiences, they may have implicitly rejected being categorized as 'migrants'. This aligns closely with de-migranticization approaches: their identity work unfolded not through the reiteration of mobility narratives but through an active *refusal* to be reduced to them. Their choices revealed subjectivities in formation – grounded not in past trajectories but in aspirations, everyday interests, and relational dynamics.

Moreover, Hui's (2016) notion of the "sometimes migrants [who] dip in and out of mobility (Hui, 2016, p. 76) might be relevant here. It shows that individuals choose when mobility becomes salient in their narratives and when it does not. The adolescents exercised exactly this form of selective disclosure.

> *Maybe it is not necessarily a sign of rejecting the mobility experience that is ascribed to them, but to resist to talk about it in an activity that is supposed to take their minds off – an atelier bien-être, as a social worker always calls them. And therefore not having to respond to the task of expressing anything related to their mobility. And this might be a form of actively, although maybe unconsciously, taking over action over the representation of their own experiences* [Field Notes 02.11.25].

As this observation reflects, their choices suggested a refusal to allow their identities to be defined exclusively through mobility, displacement, or asylum status. In their everyday lives, I assume that such categorization takes place in various situations and contexts – through legal procedures, administrative meetings, linguistic challenges, and institutional structures such as the school setting. The atelier was supposed to offer a space where they could just be teenagers rather than 'asylum seekers'. I perceived this resistance not as denial of their experiences but a way of reclaiming narrative autonomy. Instead of drawing emotional maps, they drew landscapes

(see Figure 5, 6 and 7), Christmas trees (see Figure 3) or built clay houses (see Figure 8). Instead of participating in a photography project documenting their daily life in Liège, they opted for themes disconnected from the pressures of their present. Yet mobility experiences still surfaced – not through the artistic medium, but through conversation. This suggests that verbal expression, even in limited linguistic conditions, might have still felt more accessible to address mobility experiences than symbolic artistic representation. Verbal communication may have offered more control to decide what (not) to disclose and how to narrate themselves, while artistic creations did not seem a fitting tool to do so. Thus, the adolescents' avoidance of mobility in their art constitutes a subtle form of resistance to the exceptionalization of mobility. They refused to reproduce a narrative that they might believe to be expected of them, and instead asserted their right to inhabit other identities, desires, and imaginative spaces.

5.3 Understanding Expressive Orientations within the Atelier Space

The third part of the analysis focuses on the question: *If they don't express mobility experiences explicitly, then what else do their artworks express?* [Field Notes 11.11.25]. I thus shift the focus on what emerged from the art pieces themselves, analysing forms of agency through future imaginaries, emotional expression or spatial imagination. Before engaging with the following analysis, it is important to reclarify how artistic outcomes are approached within this study. The participatory art-based methodology adopted in this thesis focuses primarily on the *artistic process* rather than the final product. Creative practices are valued here as relational, affective, and embodied forms of engagement, and do not focus on the artworks as autonomous objects of analysis (Chamberlain et al., 2018). At the same time, the material outcomes of these processes inevitably form part of the empirical landscape and need to be weighed in to the analysis. This section treats the artworks as situated traces of meaning-making rather than as transparent representations of inner states or lived experience. Caution needs particularly be given to the risks of over-interpretation and the interpretative power held by the researcher when analysis artistic material (Akesson et al., 2014). As participants did not consistently verbalize the meanings, intentions, or reflections behind their creations, co-interpretation of the artworks did not happen systemically. In order to avoid imposing fixed meanings or speculative readings, the analysis in this part remains deliberatively descriptive and observant in tone. Interpretations are grounded in the artworks *as they appear,* and are read in conjunction with observations and conversational fragments emerging from the ateliers. Rather than seeking to decode latent meanings, this section asks what patterns and orientations become visible when the artistic

productions are considered together with the relational and institutional contexts in which they were created.

5.3.1 Future as Expressive Horizon

While explicit representations of mobility were largely absent from the artistic productions, another orientation emerged consistently: a turn toward the future. The future orientation invites a re-reading of the adolescents' earlier refusals to engage with themes directly linked to their mobility journeys. Rather than interpreting the absence of mobility narratives as void, the artworks draw attention to what they might have brought to surface – imagined lives, projected spaces of stability, and aspirational identities built in an elsewhere-yet-to-come. Read in this way, the prominence of future-oriented expression can be understood as an extension of the adolescents' practice of selective disclosure. If non-narration of mobility constituted a form of agency – a refusal to anchor oneself in the past or within the frame of the asylum apparatus – then future imaginaries may appear as its counterpart: a reorientation toward possibility, self-determination, and continuity, beyond the present moment.

This orientation echoed in conversations during the ateliers, where prompts about life dreams elicited vivid future projections. The responses varied, yet all shared an orientation toward betterment and restoration: climbing Mount Everest, having a family and children in order *"to give them a better childhood than the one I went through"* [Field Notes 05.11.25], achieving professional stability through work, and social incorporation into society. Notably, these aspiration were consistently situated in a time after the acquisition of legal status or even after their time in Belgium, and within the future possibilities to *"build a life"* [Field Notes 05.11.25]. The dreams carried a tone of expansive possibility, suggesting that the future functioned as a temporal horizon in which self-realisation appeared more attainable than in the present.

Figure 5: Inner Landscape – Treehouse in the Ocean 01.10.25

Figure 6: Free Drawing – 13.11.25

This orientation was evident during moments of free drawing, when participants were invited to choose for themselves what they wished to depict, as illustrated in Figure 5, 6 and 7. Across these drawings, the adolescents gravitated toward imagined landscapes characterized by openness, distance, and natural elements rather that identifiable or everyday places. Figure 5 depicts a small treehouse elevated above a body of water, surrounded by rows of trees and framed by a wide horizon. Figure 6 presents a river flowing toward a setting sun, enclosed by green hills, flying birds, and palm trees, with the composition guiding the viewer's gaze toward the distance. Figure 7 extends this visual pattern through a more structured scene: a wooden pier leading toward the horizon, flanked by water and palm trees, with flying birds and a centrally positioned sun between mountainous forms.

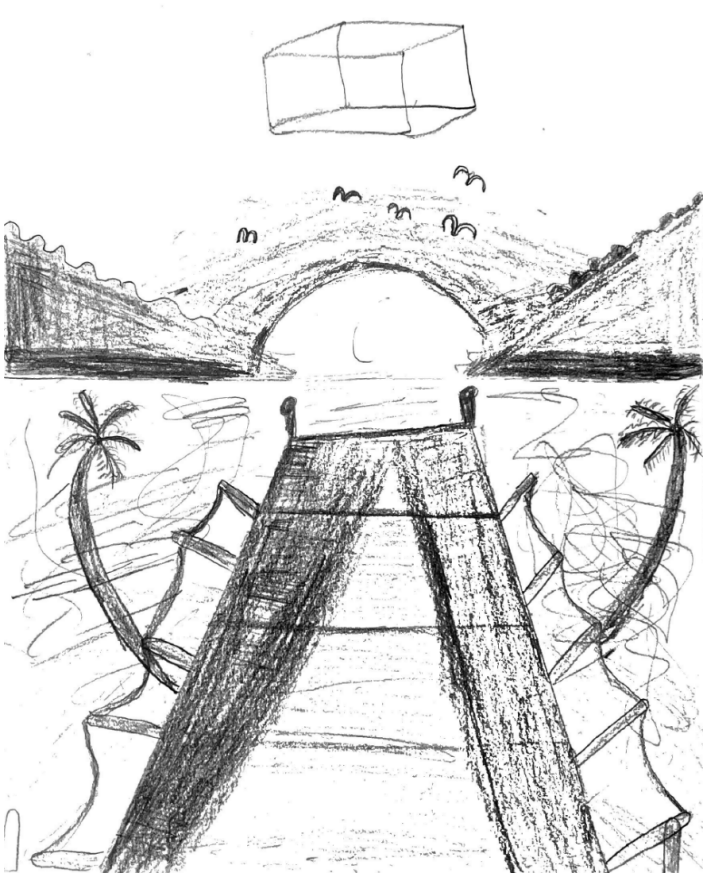

Figure 7: Inner Landscape – Pier with Sunset

Across all three images, human figures and concrete markers of daily life are notably absent. Instead, the composition emphasize horizontality, depth, and directional movement – bridges, rivers, pathways, open skies – that orient the gaze outward rather than anchoring it in the foreground. Rendered with relatively soft lines and limited detail, these scenes evoke visual harmony, stillness, and balance.

Figure 8: Free Drawing – Palm Trees and Mountains 30.11.25

Figure 9: Inner Landscape –Abstract Horizon 01.10.25

While many future-oriented imaginaries took the form of recognisable landscapes, other artworks disrupted representational clarity altogether. This shift becomes visible in more abstract compositions, such as the white-on-black landscape (Figure 8) and an abstract inner landscape (Figure 9). In the first, white palm trees, birds, and mountainous forms emerge against a dark background, producing a nocturnal or dream-like atmosphere that feels imagined. The inversion of light and dark, combined with the absence of ground-level detail, distances the scene from any specific location and instead evokes an interior or affective space. The abstract inner landscape shown in Figure 9 moves even further away from spatial reference. Composed of layered horizontal strokes in shades of blue, grey, and black, it moves away from narrative anchoring or representational reading. Here, future-oriented or spatial imaginaries may appear not as places, but as atmospheres – emerging through color, rhythm, and material gesture rather than through identifiable form. These works suggest that projection toward the future does not always crystallize into concrete images, but may also remain diffuse, affective, and unresolved.

The probably most clear and articulated depiction of future imaginary emerged during the clay activity. Although the prompt of the session was to build an object that represented their life in Belgium, he chose to model a house – his "*maison de rêve*" (dream house), as he titled it [Field Notes 05.11.25]. It takes the form of a carefully structured house, enclosed by walls and an organised interior space. Unlike the drawings, the object is more architectural. The sculpture is presented by the participant as a future home imagined for a life yet to come, rather than a reflection of present living conditions. He described it to me as a future place where he would live with his future spouse and children. The clay house thus materializes a future-oriented desire for

stability and belonging, while simultaneously leaving mobility trajectories open, revealing how imagined permanence and provisionally coexist with the adolescents' projections of life yet to come.

Figure 10: Clay Sculpture – *La maison de rêve* 05.11.25

Across sessions, I observed that when the adolescents spoke of their desires, they almost never used the present tense. Their verbal communication remained future-oriented: *my future house, my future life, my future plans*. Even when content remained vague, the temporal orientation was clear – the future appeared as a primary realm of possibility. Read alongside the artistic creations, these future imaginaries can be understood as a form of narrative agency enacted during the ateliers. Rather than functioning solely as expressions of hope, they operated as practices of resisting the suspended temporality of the asylum apparatus. Taken together, these dynamic suggest that the ateliers were not only spaces of artistic exploration, but also relational microcosms in which trust, introspection, and projected identities could emerge. Both creation and conversation are interpreted here as adolescents articulated desires that extended beyond the immediate present and outside dominant mobility narratives. The future – imagined, crafted, spoken – thus became a vital expressive horizon, enabling momentary orientations toward continuity and possibility beyond the circumstances of reception-center life.

Read through this lens, the prominence of future-oriented imaginaries in both artistic and verbal expression resonated with broader scholarship on aspirations and temporality among mobile populations. Theories on future aspirations suggest that imagining oneself in a future beyond immediate constraints constitutes a crucial dimension of belonging, particularly in contexts marked by uncertainty and suspended legal status (Frisch et al., 2025). Rather than functioning solely as expressions of hope, future orientations may be linked to self-efficacy, continuity, and the possibility of agency once structural barriers are imagined as lifted. Importantly, this does not imply that such possible futures are experienced as guaranteed or fixed, but instead, as Frisch et al. (2025) argue, envisioning them operates as a relational and temporal practice through which individuals may negotiate belonging, orientation, and meaning under conditions of constraint. Seen in this way, the adolescents' repeated turn toward future imaginaries – whether through landscapes, abstract atmospheres, or spoken aspirations – may be understood less as escapism than as situated response to the temporal limitations of the asylum apparatus. The future becomes a space where continuity, possibility, and self-determination can be provisionally articulated, even when the present remains structurally restricted.

6 Discussion and Outlook

This study set out to examine how participatory art-based research unfolds when conducted with unaccompanied adolescents living within the asylum apparatus. Rather than treating participation as a stable or achievable methodological condition, the findings point toward participation as an ongoing relational process shaped by institutional constraint and negotiated agency. Participation did not emerge simply through creation of artistic spaces, but was deeply influenced by institutional rhythms, linguistic hierarchies, interpersonal relations, trust, and atmospheres. As a result, engagement remained irregular and partial, and was often reversible than cumulative or progressive. These observations challenge idealized claims frequently associated with participatory and art-based approaches, particularly their capacity to foster empowerment or 'give voice' (Coemans & Hannes, 2017; Huss & Cwikel, 2005). In this study, art-based practices neither dissolved power asymmetries nor guaranteed inclusion, nor did they override the institutional constraints of the reception center. Instead, they rendered these conditions visible within everyday research encounters. Participation unfolded within, rather than outside of, the asylum apparatus, highlighting how deeply research practices are embedded in institutional environments. Understanding participation as situated, uneven, and context-sensitive therefore shifts the analytical focus away from empowerment as an outcome and toward participation as a process of continuous negotiation.

Importantly, engagement within the ateliers extended beyond artistic production or verbal articulation. Silence, selective presence, refusal, and moments of withdrawal emerged as central modes of involvement. Rather than interpreting these practices as disengagement, they were understood as meaningful ways through which adolescents negotiated the terms of their participation. The findings thus support a process-oriented understanding of participation that takes non-participation and limited engagement seriously as analytical phenomena. The ateliers also challenged common expectations within mobility research that position mobile people as narrators of mobility trajectories. Instead of producing coherent, mobility-centered narratives, the ateliers brought forward adolescents' everyday realities through interactions, relational dynamics, and moments of silence. The relative absence of explicit mobility storytelling can be read as a refusal to migranticized framings and research logics that privilege disclosure. Rather than equating engagement with articulation, the findings suggest that agency was often expressed through restraint – through choosing what to share, what to withhold, and when to remain silent. Read through a broader analytical lens, these findings speak to the tensions between institutional constraint and young people's capacity to act within it. While the adolescents' everyday lives were strongly shaped by the structures of the asylum apparatus,

agency did not appear as resistance *against* these structures, but as situated negotiation *within* them. Seen this way, agency becomes visible in how young people navigate research encounters on their own terms. In this sense, the findings reinforce a child-centered understanding of youth as social actors who actively negotiate research encounters. By foregrounding everyday life under institutional conditions, the ateliers revealed modes of meaning-making that move beyond exceptionalized accounts of mobility and instead emphasize relationality, presence, and negotiation.

Beyond practices of resistance, the ateliers also opened spaces for expressive orientations that moved beyond mobility as a dominant reference point. Across the sessions, adolescents articulated future-oriented aspirations that were affective, open-ended and often loosely defined. The future imaginaries did not negate the uncertainty and constraints of the asylum process, but co-existed with them as alternative ways of making sense of the presence. Attending to these expressions shifts analytical attention toward forms of imagination that are not reducible to mobility trajectories alone. Rather than anchoring meaning making in past movement, the ateliers allowed orientations toward what might be possible, desired, or hoped for. This suggests that research frameworks, which privilege mobility as the primary axis of meaning, risk overlooking how young people orient themselves toward continuity, possibility, and becoming beyond mobility.

The findings of this study were also shaped by the researcher's positionality and role within the field. Acting simultaneously as volunteer, facilitator, and non-artist researcher influenced how trust could be built and how participation unfolded. Rather than treating this positionality as a methodological shortcoming, it invites for reflection on the competencies required in art-based research – particularly the ability to facilitate process, remain reflexive, and attend to power relations embedded in research encounters (Coemans & Hannes, 2017). At the same time, this role involved a degree of authority in structuring the ateliers and framing the research process. Recognising the researcher's involvement as constitutive of knowledge production aligns with reflexive qualitative traditions and underscores that findings are not neutral representations, but situated outcomes of relational encounters. Extending Akesson et al.'s (2014) notion of *productive unknowing,* the study shows that researcher's limited access to adolescents' meaning-making is not a methodological deficit, but an ethical and epistemic condition of research with young people. Valuing non-verbal, non-narrative, and non-disclosive forms of expression challenges adult-centric expectations of articulation and invites more attentive research practices. Reflexivity thus functions not only as an ethical requirement, but as an epistemological stance that acknowledges both proximity and limitation.

This study further underscores the context-sensitive nature of participatory art-based research. Art did not function as universal language, and creative methods did not automatically generate dialogue or inclusion. Expression emerged through interaction, atmosphere, material engagement, refusal, and non-participation, demonstrating that artistic outputs cannot be meaningfully interpreted without close attention to relational and situational contexts in which they unfold. Rather than aiming for generalizability, the value of these findings lies in their capacity to illuminate how participatory research takes shape under specific institutional conditions. Acknowledging this situatedness strengthens its epistemic transparency and methodological rigor.

Based on the findings of this project, future participatory art-based research with unaccompanied adolescents in reception centers may benefit from alternative structural and methodological choices. The study indicates that art-based inquiry in institutional settings requires time, continuity, and institutional flexibility in order to foster trust, familiarity with materials, and reciprocal learning. Longer time frames could support more sustained creative processes, while working with more stable groups may allow for deeper and sequential engagement across sessions. One-to-one formats could further reduce the effects of group dynamics on participation, and including other genders could open possibilities for a more intersectional approach. Furthermore, rather than positioning art-based methods as a way to overcome language barriers, future research should engage more directly with the role of language, dialogue, and shared interpretation across all stages of the research process. Extended time frames and greater trust might also allow creative activities to move beyond institutional spaces, potentially altering how safety and expressiveness are perceived. In sum, longitudinal and embedded research designs could deepen understanding of how trust, expression, and participation evolve over time in institutional contexts and contribute further to scholarship on temporality and meaning-making among mobile youth.

Taken together, this study does not offer a model to be replicated, nor does it claim definitive answers. Instead, it offers a situated contribution that foregrounds fragility, limitation, and negotiation as central features of participatory art-based research. By questioning assumptions of empowerment, decentering mobility-centered narratives, and recognising silence, refusal, and presence as meaningful practices, the study invites further experimentation, reflexivity, and critical engagement in research with unaccompanied adolescents living within the asylum apparatus.

7 Conclusion

This thesis explores in what ways participatory art projects can create spaces in which mobile youth express and make sense of their lived experiences. Drawing on participatory art-based ateliers conducted with unaccompanied adolescents in an asylum reception center in Belgium, the study approached this question as a situated and process-oriented inquiry, attentive to the institutional, relational, and temporal conditions shaping participation. The findings suggest that participatory art projects can open spaces for expression and meaning-making, but remain inherently embedded into the specific context and conditions. Participation emerged as provisional and negotiated, shaped more by the institutional context than the methodological intent. Expression within the ateliers did not primarily take the form of coherent narratives or explicit accounts of mobility. Rather than expressing themselves primarily through narrative or disclosure, adolescents engaged through selective participation, silence, and refusal – highlighting agency as the capacity to negotiate the terms of engagement. At the same time, the ateliers allowed for expressive orientations that extended beyond mobility as a dominant frame of meaning. Future-oriented imaginaries emerged as an important dimension of meaning-making, complicating mobility-centered understandings of young people's lives. Methodologically, the study highlights the importance of reflexivity and attentiveness to the limits of knowing in research with young people. Partial access to adolescents' meaning-making is not a failure, but an ethical and epistemic condition of research in institutional contexts.

In response to the departing question, this thesis suggests that participatory art projects can create spaces for expression by offering low-pressure, relational environments in which young people can negotiate presence, engagement, and imagination on their own terms. Ultimately, this study presents participatory art-based research as a practice of attentive engagement – one that accepts fragility, limitation and uncertainty as integral to ethical inquiry with mobile youth living within institutionalized contexts of mobility.

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