



Division of Arts, Health & Society Division  
The European Graduate School  
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# Art as a Bridge?

## How Art-Making Sparks Play and Fosters Inclusion for Refugee Children and Youth

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## Disclaimer

To protect the privacy and dignity of participants, all identifying details have been removed. The artworks and stories presented here are shared with care and permission. These slides are intended for personal reference only; please refrain from sharing or distributing them further.

# Journey through Today's Talk

## Understanding the Ground

- The Reality of Displacement
- The Nature of Play

## The Approach: How We Work

- Expressive Arts Therapy: Foundations & Principles
- Participants & Setting

## What Emerges: Insights & Implications

- Voices from the Sessions & Learnings
- Art as a Space for Play, Healing & Becoming
- Implications for Inclusion Work with Refugee Children and Youth



“Monster” - artwork by a session participant

# Life in Limbo: The Reality of Displacement

## Social & Cultural Challenges

- Social isolation
- Language barriers
- Cultural adjustment & stigmatization
- Identity & sense of belonging

## Practical & Legal Challenges

- Interrupted education & limited career options
- Limited access to resources, adequate healthcare & support services
- Legal & administrative challenges

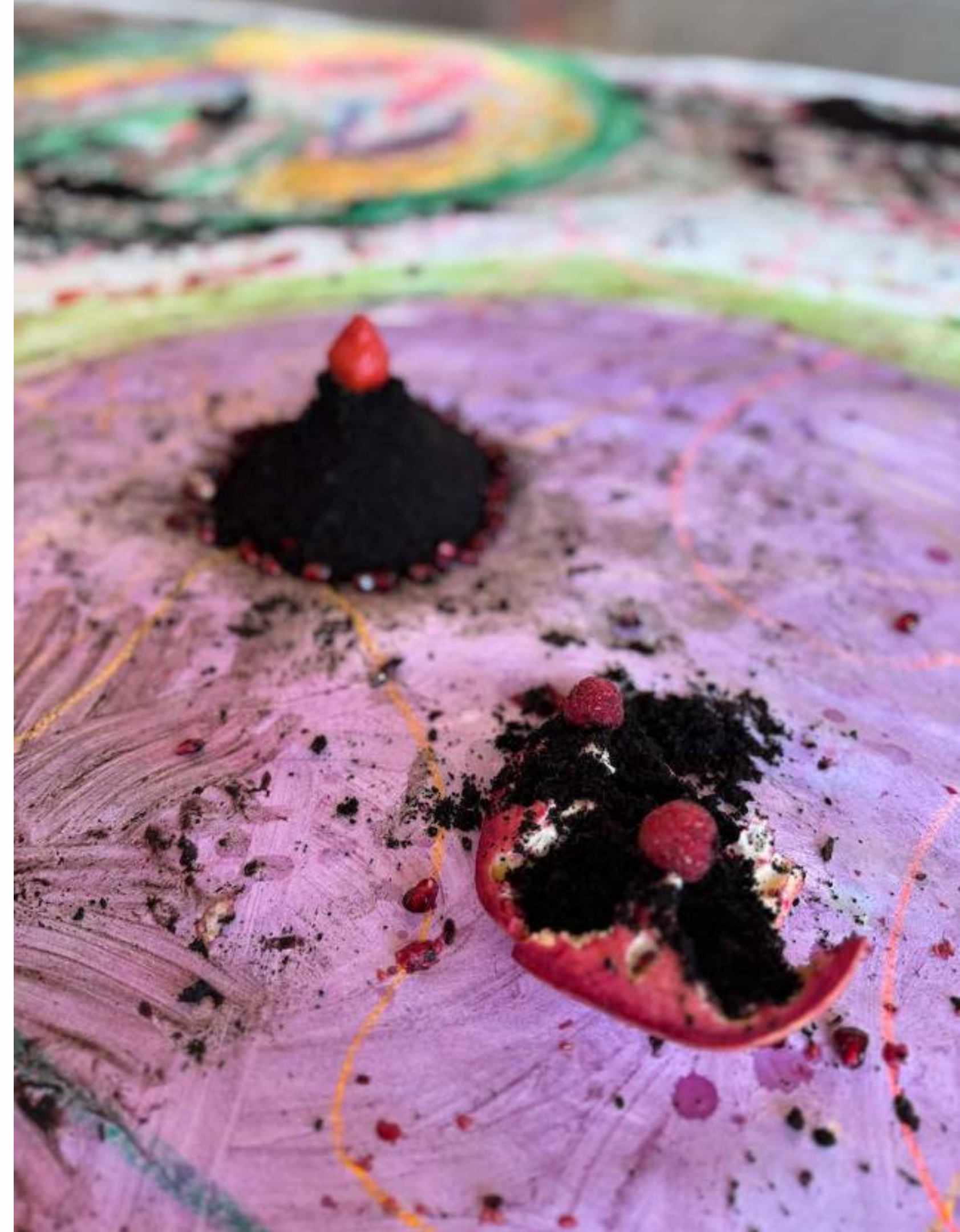
## Mental, Emotional & Experiential Challenges

- Trauma & mental health challenges
- Family separation & instability
- Living in the liminal/unknown; ambiguous loss & grief

**lacking the  
range of play**

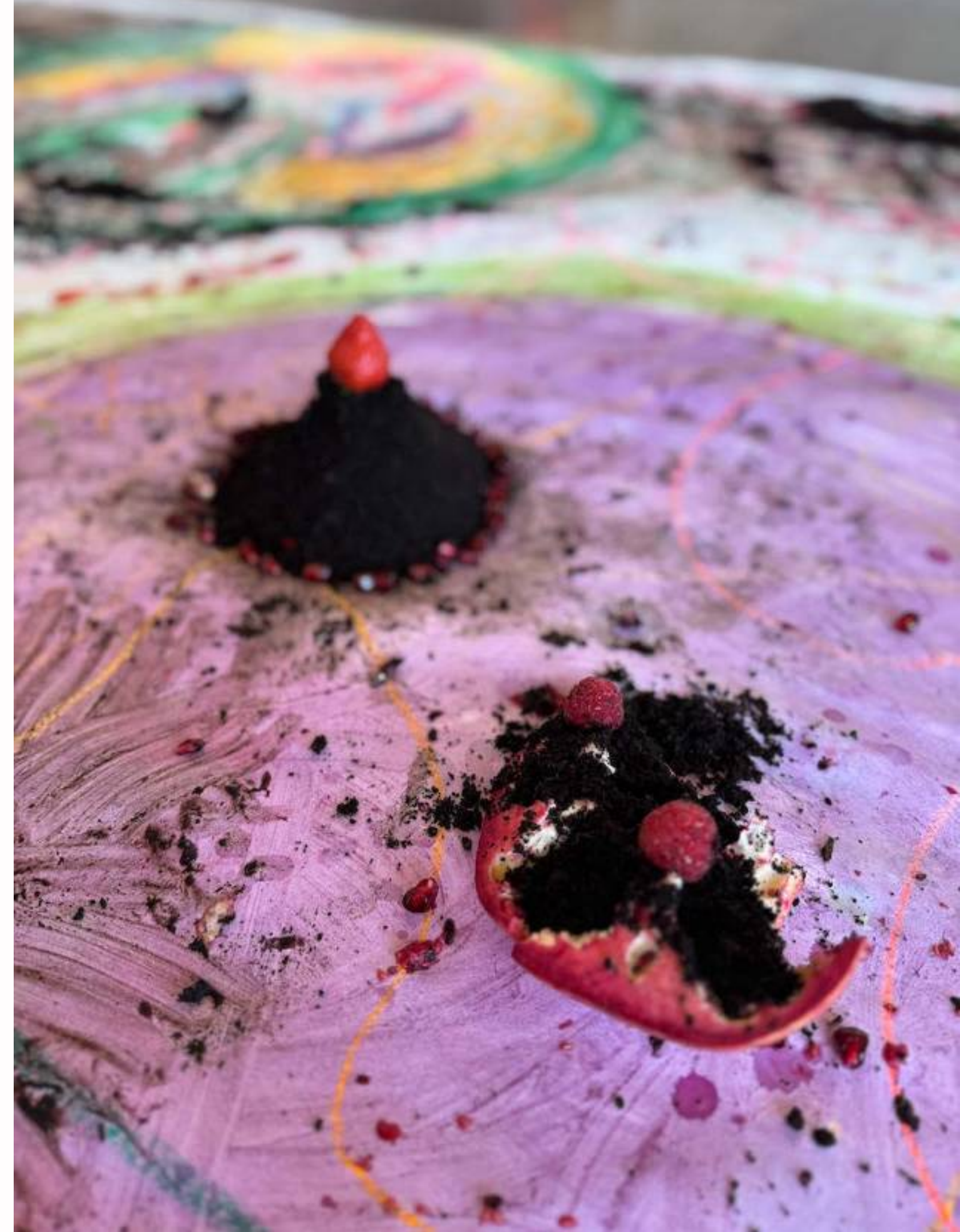
“It is in playing and only in play that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.

— Winnicott (1971), *Playing and Reality*



“We suffer when there’s no play-space, no gap between what we are and what we can.”

— Knill, Levine & Levine (2005), p. 71



# Play, *Spielen*

- “Spilan”: to move back and forth, to engage in a state of flow
- **Surrendering (letting come) vs. influencing (doing)**
- Self-directed, unpredictable, purposeless - “the process is the outcome”
- Not static—it’s a dialogue, a dance between self and other.
- Play brings things into relation
- It has a function: **risk-taking** → **familiarize with “what I can”** → **satisfying**
- The mind at play is alert and engaged, yet at ease.

*How to re-ignite play/ expand the range of play?*



photo source: Tónstofa Valgerðar

# Expressive Arts Therapy

- A holistic, multimodal, and **resource-oriented** therapeutic approach rooted in the belief that every individual is inherently creative and capable of bringing something new into existence, regardless of artistic training (**low skill, high sensitivity**)
- Grounded in “**poiesis**” (ancient Greek: “to make” or “to create”)—making as a way of knowing
- **Salutogenesis**: emphasizes resources supporting health rather than causes of illness (adaptive coping mechanisms vs. symptoms)



# Expressive Arts Therapy

music / sound 🥁

poetry ✍️

intermodality

visual art 🎨

theater 🎭

movement 🧑

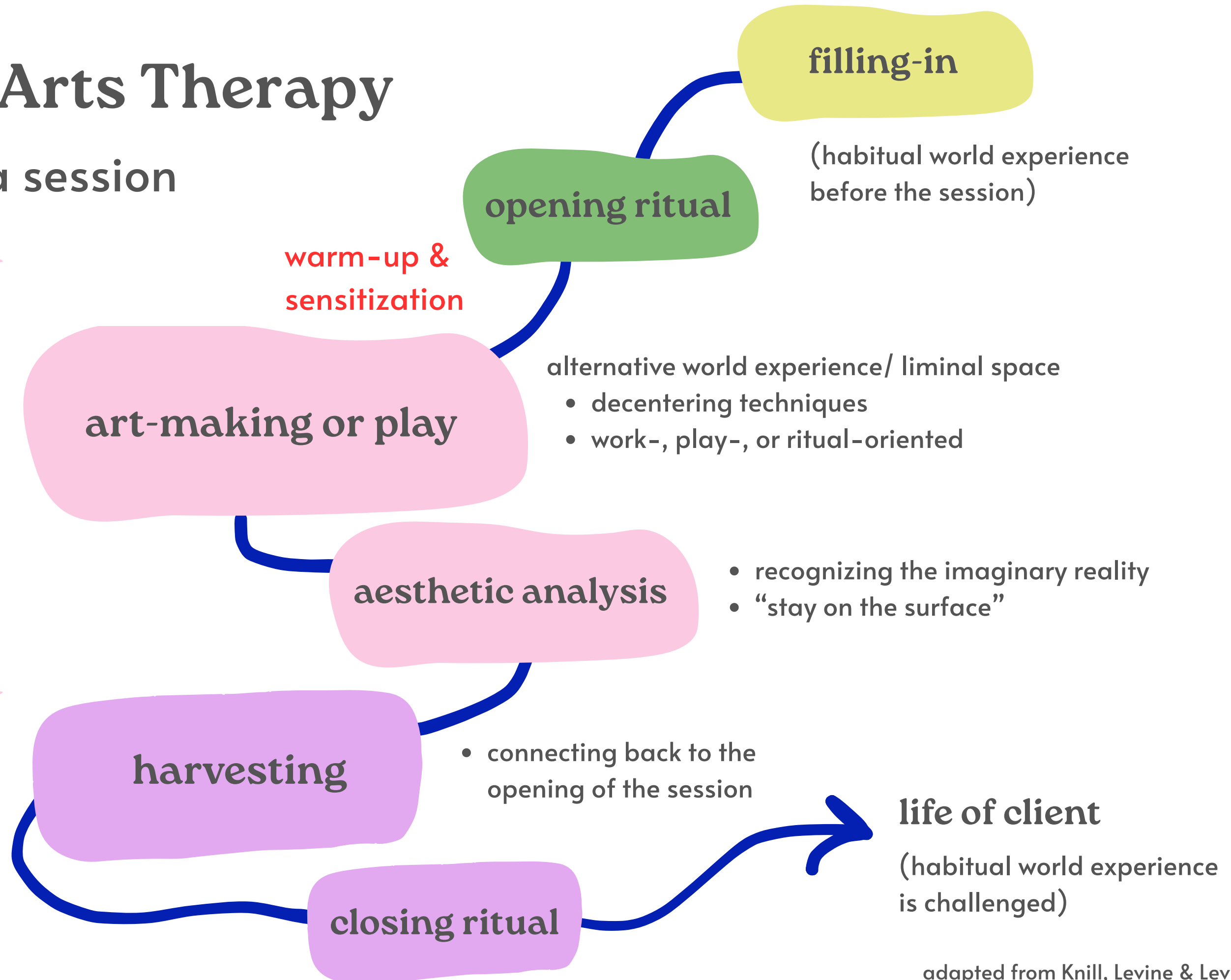
nature-based  
exploration 🌲



# Expressive Arts Therapy

## Architecture of a session

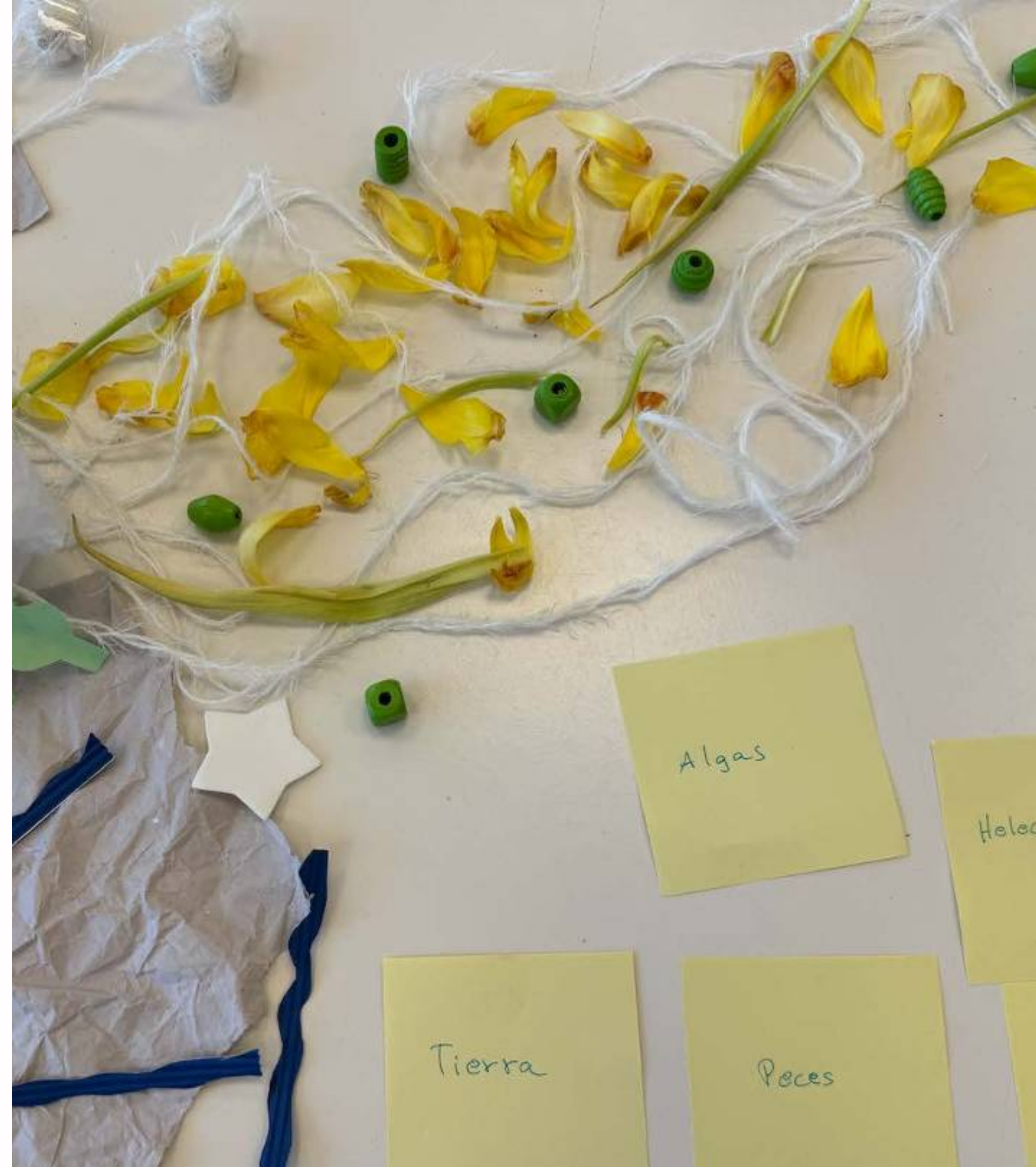
decentering



# Being with What Is:

A **Phenomenological** gaze into experience and presence

- **Aesthetic analysis:** describe details in the artwork without jumping into interpretation (stay on the surface, allowing new perspectives to emerge)
- Advocate for “**how**” and “**what**” **questions** rather than “**why**” questions to stay closer to the participants’ lived experience

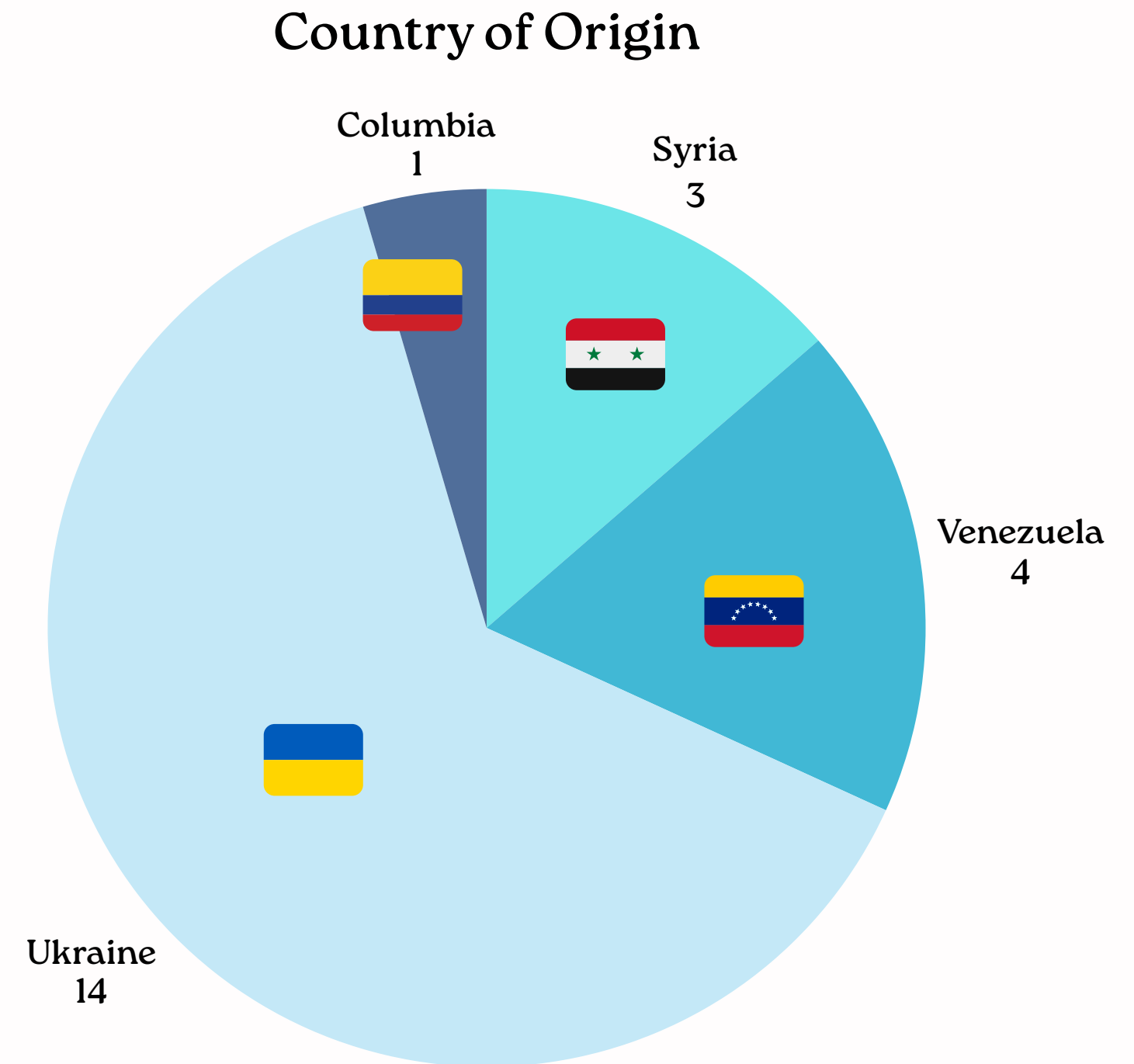


# Expressive Arts for Social Justice, Systems Change, and the Restoration of Dignity

## Participant demographics

- Total participants: 22 (including dropouts\*)
- Refugees & asylum seekers
- Age range: 20–65 years
- Gender: 21 female; 1 male
- January 2024 - June 2025 (bi-weekly)
- Location: Andrými & Vitatorg (Reykjavík)
- Group-based expressive arts therapy
- Support resilience and expression, prevent emotional stagnation, foster connection and belonging

\*Reasons of dropouts:  
deportation, illness, work, conflicting activities...



breathe, spirit,  
opposition

space

**andrými**

[ ]

“a space to breathe”

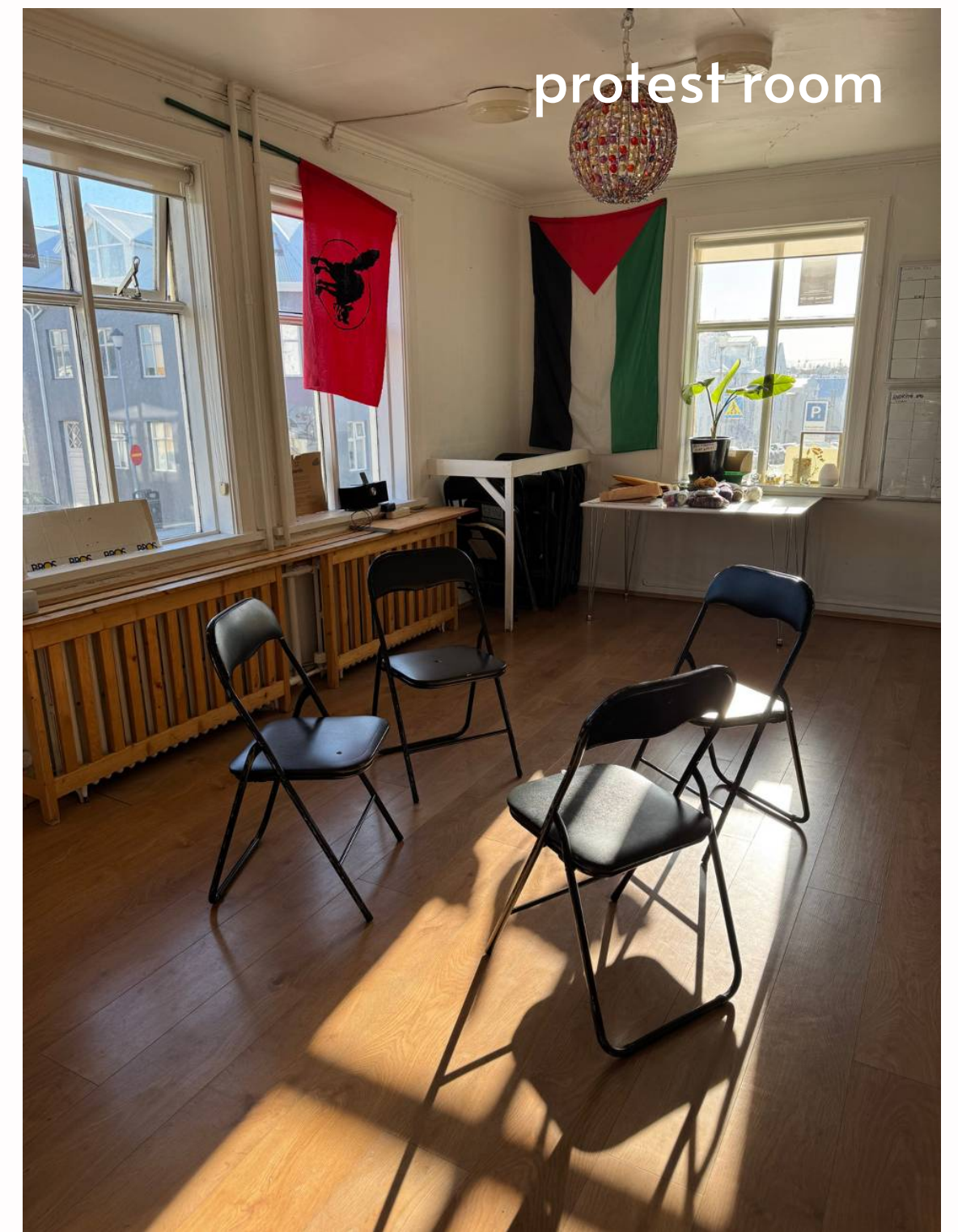


photo source: Reykjavik Grapevine



anarchist bookstore

photo source: Reykjavik Grapevine



protest room

# Vitatorg

“Lighthouse Square”

nursing home, community center  
in Reykjavik



photo source: reykjavik.is

# What Does a Session Look Like?

- Opening ritual
- Check-in
- **Tending to the body:**  
somatic practices, breath work, movement
- Decentering (art invitation, play, imagination)
- Aesthetic analysis
- Harvesting
- Closing ritual





# Radical Imagination

radical: "radix", roots

Radical imagination is not about dreaming of different futures. It's about bringing those possibilities back from the future to work on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity.

# Befriending the World

Re-write the story, create a world you long for

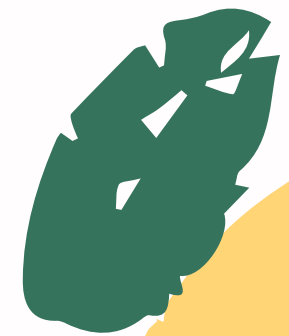
“The Village” — an aesthetic response to a dialogue among fantastical beings exploring coexistence in this world.



playing with imagination

“This is a world without conditions — where everyone offers a helping hand, where children are nurtured by their communities, and butterflies spread love.”





# Hope in the Liminal

# Dreams and Longings

Envision your life. What's waiting for you 5 years from now?



“getting kennitala”

“a family trip”

“enrolled in the university”

“love”

“my husband is here with us”

“We are together.  
We are happy.”

“marriage”

“have a job and  
stable income”

“learn guitar &  
start a band”

“have my  
own house”

“peace”

“build a forest  
school in Ukraine”



Crafting a Map, Journeying  
into the Future, Weaving  
Dreams Together

# Sensory Journey

A dance with the present, a dialogue with the earth



playing with the senses





## A Home in the Heart of the Forest

It is a house where there is safety, comfort, tranquility, and stability, far away from everything, in an abandoned forest.

Perhaps there is only one path of light leading to this home, and within it, a door that takes you to another world.

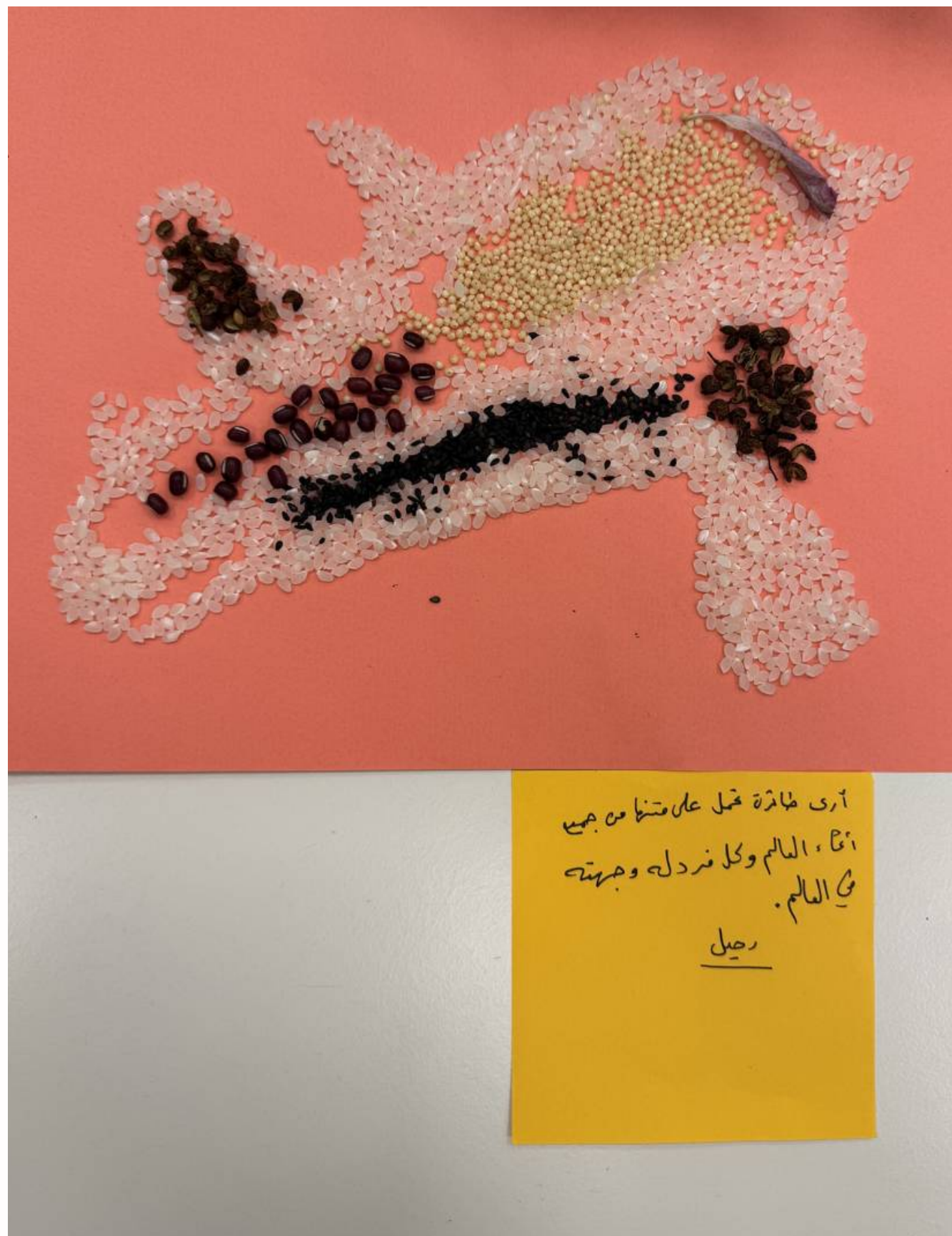
(translated from Arabic)



## A Flying Car

Roads lead to the unknown.  
A way out to explore more and more.  
A new path to grow.

\*Amid the heartbreak of potential deportation and family separation, these poems by two sisters carry both strength and a resilient spark of hope.



## Departure

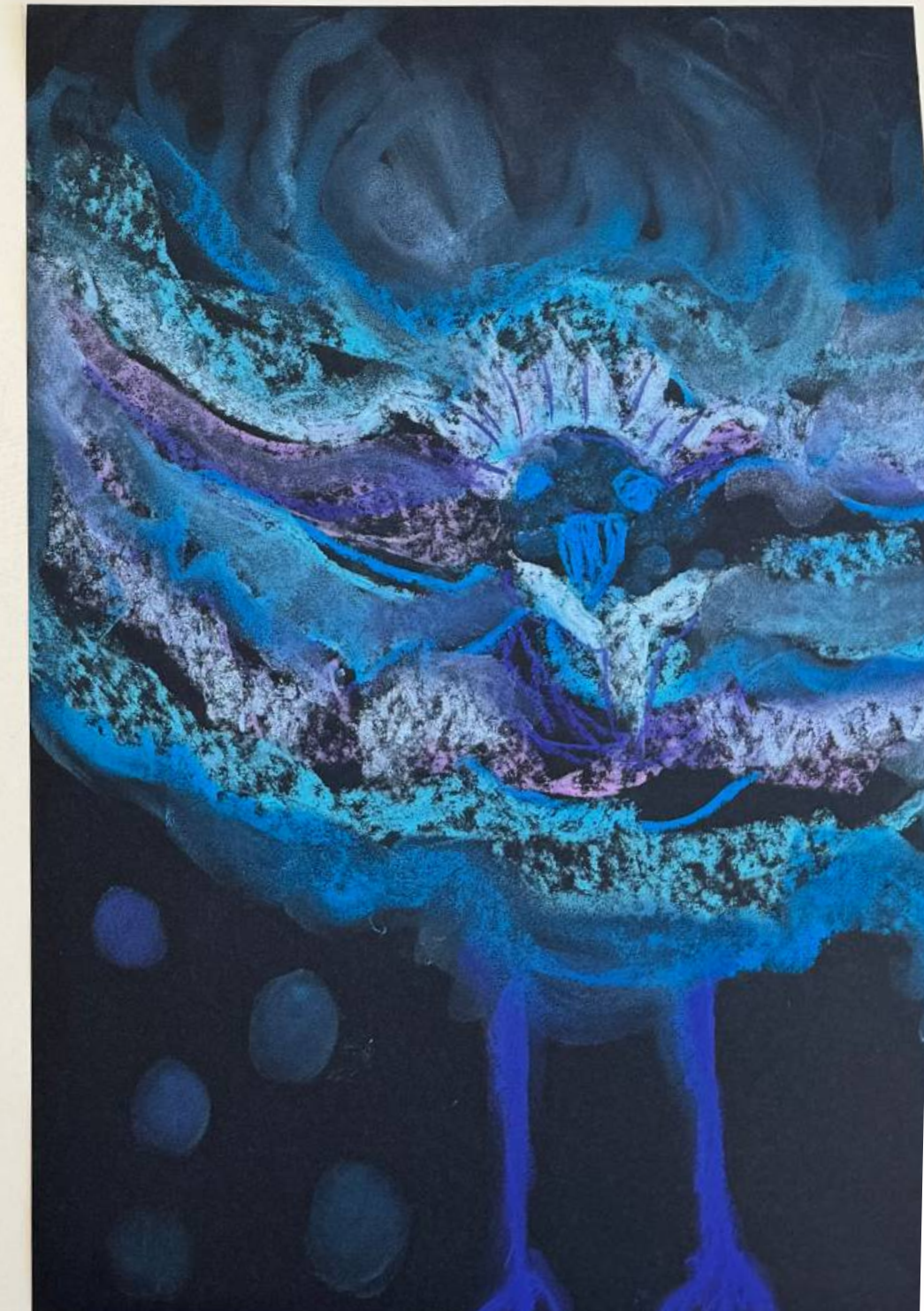
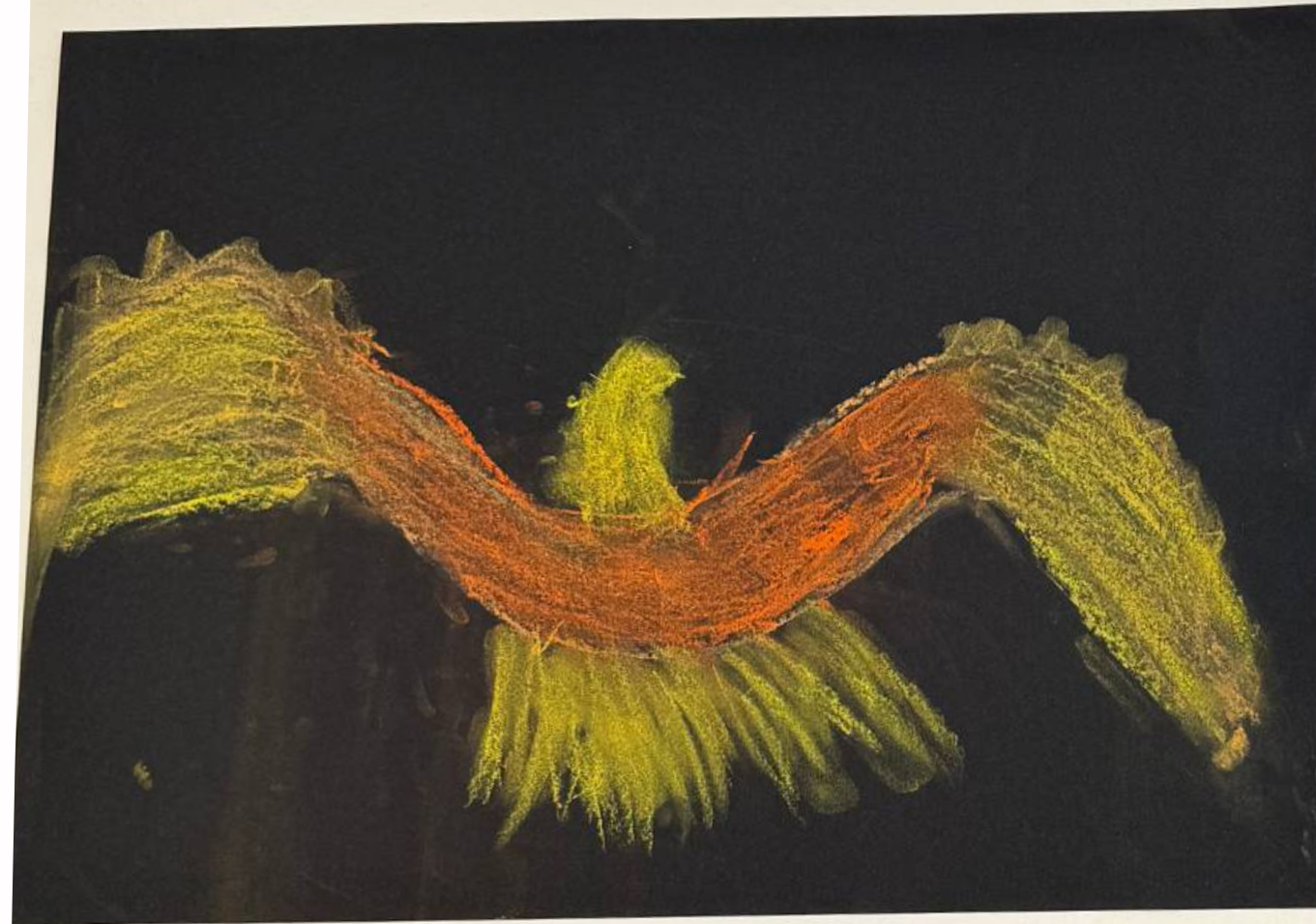
The sky soars high,  
and within its ribs,  
my heart beats.

It takes my soul and flies—  
oh, how joy I feel when it returns to me,  
carrying my soul back once more.

(translated from Arabic)

\*Written by the mother of two daughters facing deportation, the poem captures the weight of grief and loss, while holding a tender hope for the day she might embrace her children again.

**Working with seasons:  
Listening to the messages  
of migrant birds**

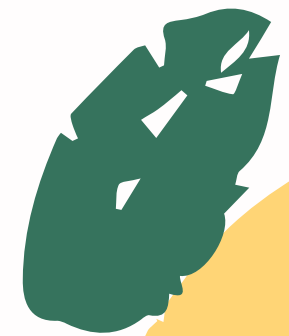




dialogue with nature

“This is a bird that has  
been silenced for too  
long.”

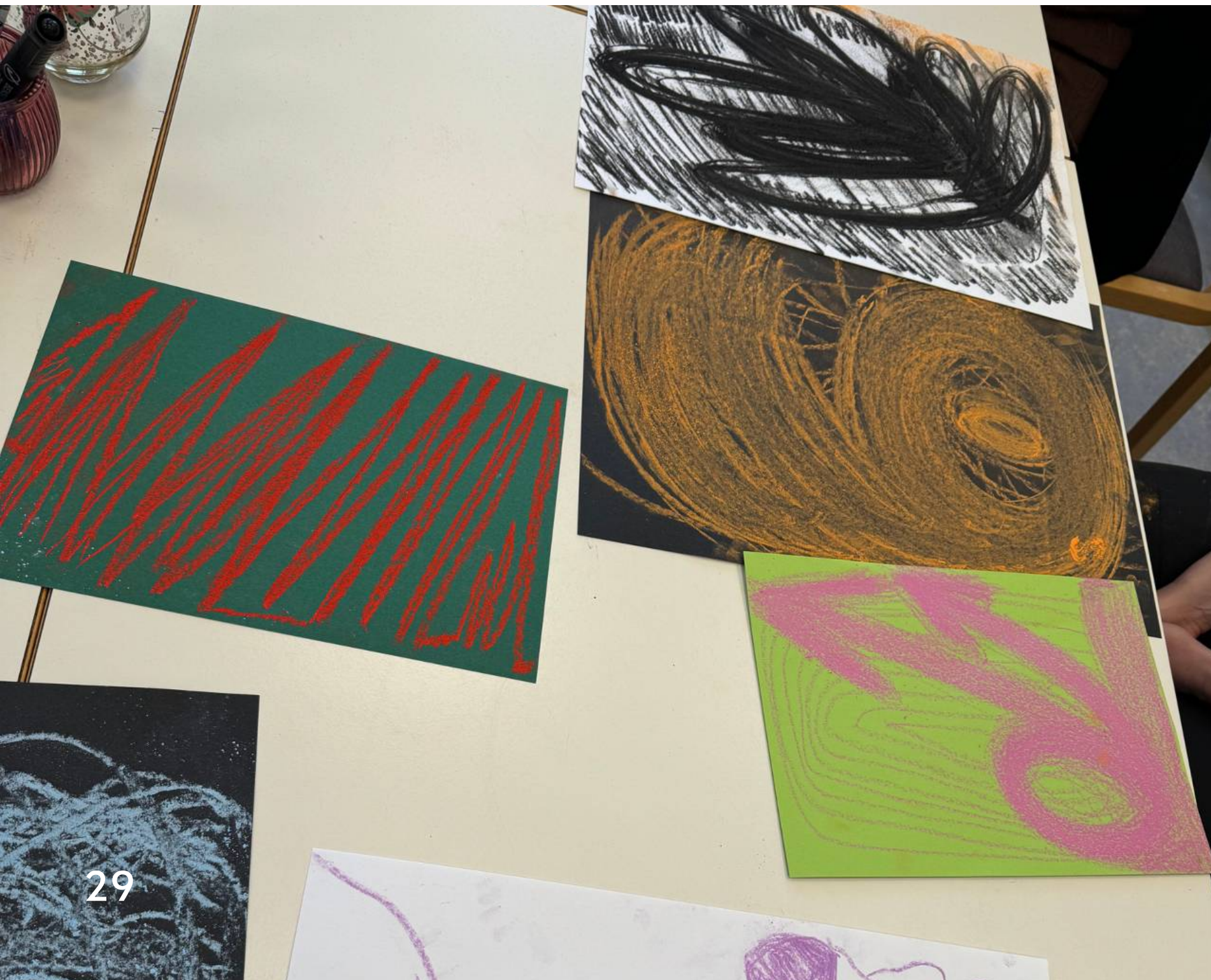
‘Listen to your feelings,’  
she said. ‘Don’t judge.’”



# Art Empowers

“This is my strength.”

Recognizing her inner strengths during a draw-to-music session, a Ukrainian participant went on to create an art therapy group for Ukrainian children—**reclaiming purpose and meaning** through her skills as a child psychologist.



“When you can, help.”

A Venezuelan participant, a regular in our group, often shares reflections such as “**offering a helping hand**,” reflecting her desire to be of service to society. She has turned her care and empathy into action, volunteering with nonprofits that support refugees and migrant families, providing translation assistance, and fostering connection and hope within her community.



collective installation



story telling

# What Art-Making Makes Possible

- Embodied presence
- Agency and dignity (“I can help”; refuse to be silenced)
- Connection and belonging through shared identities
- Transformation, hope, and empowerment (radical imagination: “a home is waiting for me”)
- Gratitude and readiness to engage (enrolled in university, finding their place to be of service...)
- Cultural continuity and renewal
- Nature as a healing space



# Between Silence and Song:

## Art-making as a Space for Play, Healing, and Becoming

- A **nonverbal outlet** for emotions or experiences that no words can describe
- A container to hold the difficult through beauty
- Imagination opens limitless possibilities for a **greater range of play**
- Making as a way to **witness, make sense of, and integrate experience**
- Decentering through flow — freeing from habitual thought and **reconnecting with the present**
- Entering the liminal space — connecting the soul
- Art-making as **self-knowledge** and **resource discovery** — recognizing personal strengths that can support adaptation in a new context



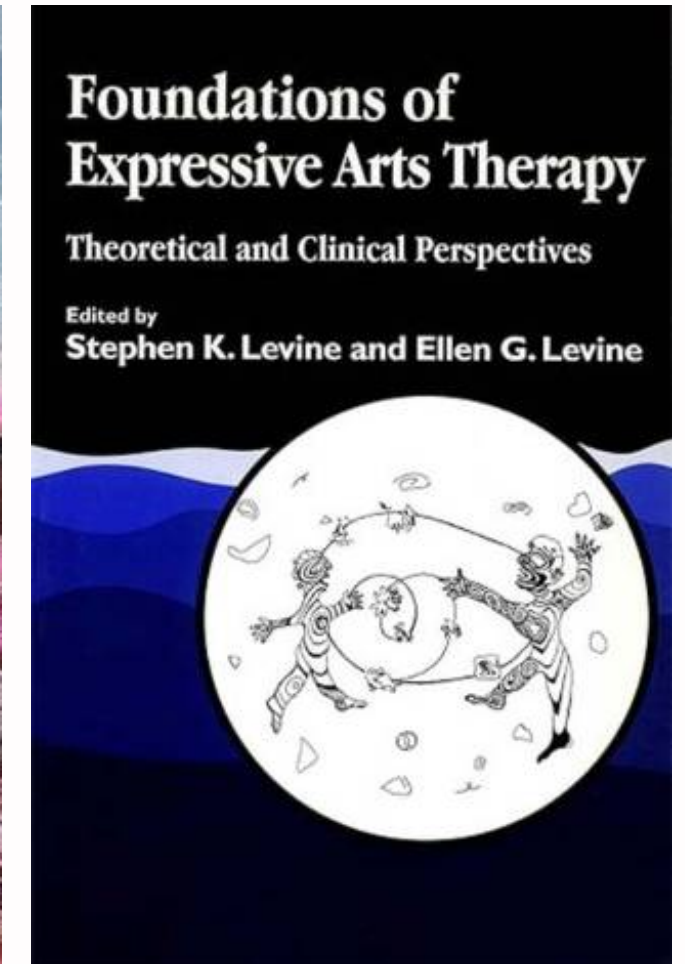
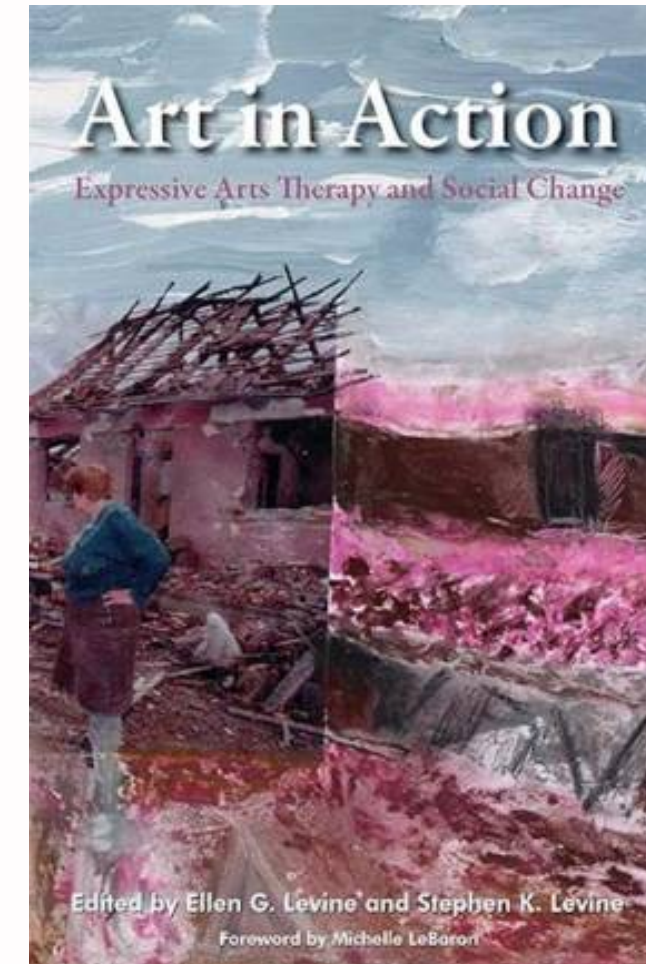
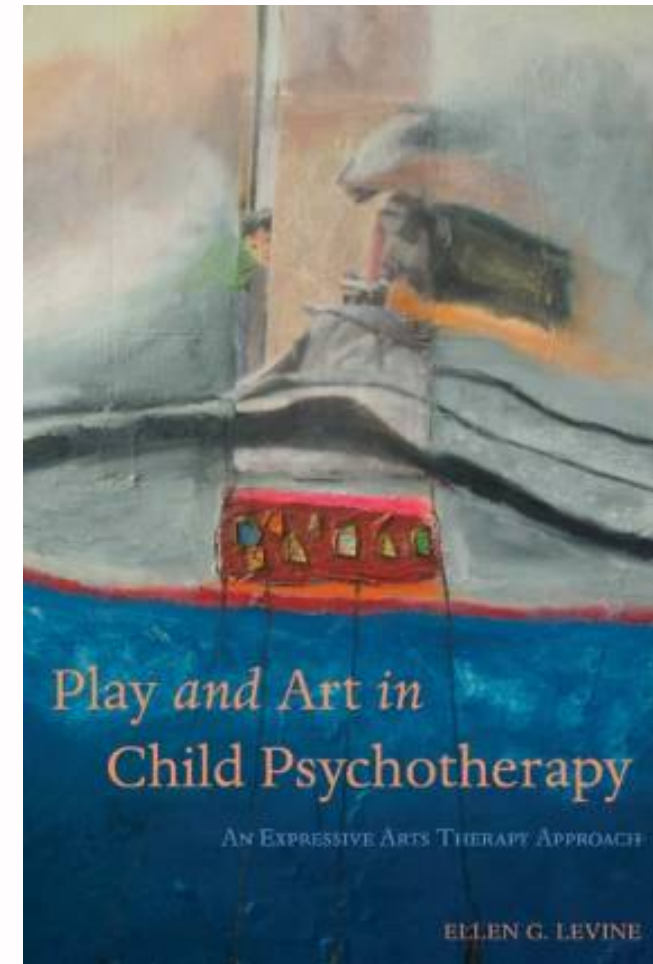
“One can feel extremely  
nourished by not having any  
demands put upon oneself to  
exist in a certain way.”

— Knill, Levine & Levine (2005)



# Nurturing the Social Soil:

## Art in Shaping an Ecology of Knowledge, Belonging, and Inclusion for Refugee Children and Youth



Health and Disability | [Full Access](#)

**A controlled early group intervention study for unaccompanied minors: Can Expressive Arts alleviate symptoms of trauma and enhance life satisfaction?**

Source of documentary: NIKUT - The Norwegian Institute of Expressive Arts Therapy

# Thank you for listening!

My heartfelt thanks to the individuals and families who generously shared their creativity, experiences, and trust, and to the partner organization and community spaces whose support made this work possible.

