



## RECONCILING THE OTHER: TRAVELLING OBJECTS AND COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

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**Abstract/Izveček** A collaborative art education project involving Japan and the Czech Republic focused on the enculturation processes experienced by two teachers and their students, how immersion in visual arts can contribute to cultural understanding and the reconciliation of two pedagogical approaches to art. This project also addressed this reconciliation with the unknowable ‘Other’ through the creation of artwork, ‘travelling objects’ and collaborative teaching. Outcomes include similarities between objects from the two countries and two pedagogical approaches and suggest that participants strived to reconcile the Other, thus creating a spatial and relational intermediate space by dealing with those objects and communicating together.

**Uskladiti se z Drugim: potovalni predmeti in sodelovalno učenje**

Projekt, ki temelji na sodelovalnem učenju, je bil izveden na Japonskem in na Češkem in se osredotoča na procese inkulturacije, ki so jih izkusili učitelji in učenci, ki so v projektu sodelovali. Poudarek je na načinih, kako lahko imerzija v vizualno umetnost prispeva k razumevanju kulture, in na integraciji oz. uskladitvi dveh pristopov k poučevanju umetnosti. Projekt spodbuja uskladitev z neznanim Drugim skozi ustvarjanje umetniških del, 'potovalnih predmetov' in prek sodelovalnega učenja. Zaključimo lahko, da so se udeleženci med dejavnostmi poskušali uskladiti z Drugim in na ta način ustvarili medprostor, ki jim je omogočil iskanje podobnosti med izdelki in sporazumevanje.

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## Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas's concept of *l'Autrui* or the Other highlights the heterogeneity polarity of an 'I' and an 'Other' (Levinas, 1961). He suggests something that is 'infinitely unknowable' (Todd, 2002, p.69). The notion of the 'Other' has significance for art education (Sato, 2018) because art education initiatives have focused on inclusivity and diversity, the recognition of cultural differences, making meaningful connections between humans and the world and mediating discrete cultures (Ono, 2018, p. 45). Multiculturalism emphasises the benefits of cultural diversity (Dwivedi, 2001; Guo and Jamal, 2007) for societies and has dominated postmodern political and educational discourses until recently. Politically, multiculturalism was abandoned as a failing concept leading to parallel societies in European politics. However, intercultural and cross-cultural projects continue to resonate in art education and are aimed at cultural dialogue (Levy, 2007).

Culture is defined as a system of meanings (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Hong, Morris, Chiu and Benet-Martínez, 2000), such as language, technology, social relations, values and attitudes, shared by members of a group through learning. Cultural identity determines how people regard themselves and how they relate to the world. Understanding others is also indispensable when trying to understand oneself (Giddens, 1993). The present project, which attempts to connect two distinct cultures, must appropriately address and handle the cultural identities of both learners and instructors, along with beliefs as a potential mode of interaction with the Other.

According to Levinas, the subject 'I' appears when a body is positioned in a particular place or resting within it (Levinas, 1947). As individuals shift from their original location/place, they often encounter the Other. Such movements provide opportunities to experience Otherness and become mindful of otherwise unconscious everyday realities. The present study attended to the physical sense of place and space of the classroom and Iezaki, a teaching artist.

### *Two cultural pedagogical spaces*

This project by elementary school students and art teachers from two distinct cultures, one central European and the other east Asian, necessitated communication and collaborative work.

Both cultural pedagogical spaces evince discrete and characteristic ways of teaching, learning and knowing, stemming from distinct educational, spiritual and philosophical traditions. The Czech elementary art curriculum encompasses music and visual art in the domain of art and culture. It accentuates the perception and expression of pupils' own experiences through various visual media and communication in the broad term of interpretation and meaning-making. In the Japanese context, Art and Handicraft is a formal subject in the elementary school curriculum. Learner activities are designed as artistic expression and the interpretation of artistic works. The Japanese curriculum highlights the development of creativity in children to enrich the lives of learners. Thus, the participants in the project brought their cultural patterns to the creation of art.

*The teaching artist: a transformative experience*

Along with her quest to create art, Iezaki, who is a Japanese artist/teacher, attended weekly art classes conducted by Novotná in a Czech elementary school. As an art teacher, she was interested in Czech art education practices. Iezaki entered the local school as a researcher/observer; however, she gradually joined Novotná as a partner and teaching collaborator over eight months. After her first visit to the Czech Republic, Iezaki began travelling frequently between the two countries, her suitcase full of objects created by children and intended to expand her artistic inquiry and learning in the real-life context (Blanuša Trošelj, Peić Papak and Zuljan, 2021) into art education projects.

Pierre Bourdieu's conception of cultural habitus (Bourdieu, 2010) is significant in this context. This generative principle distinguishes practical activities and principles of classification, seeing and differentiation. Raney (1999) lists cultural habitus as one aspect of visual literacy. Iezaki's objects should also be interpreted from the standpoint of cultural inclusion. The objects look like nests and render her place or the appearance of her position in relation to her existential signification of two cultures. One of these sculptures seems to symbolise her feelings of isolation during her first stay in the Czech Republic. The object represents a sense of intimidation or distrust. This sculpture is a nest of thousands of sharp, translucent paper parts assembled to form a fragile structure (Figure 1). The second installation was created in Japan, and the loss of spines and the decreased sense of vigilance in the rounded, windowed objects symbolises a very different relationship (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Sculpture Made of Paper ©Iezaki. M Figure 2: Sculptures in Wood and Iron  
© Iezaki. M

*Collaborative teaching: encountering the Other*

Collaborative teaching is an example of interfacing with the Other in a pedagogical context. Sometimes called cooperative teaching or team teaching, collaborative teaching requires educators working in tandem to lead, instruct and mentor groups of students. Letterman and Dugan (2004) posit the benefits of collaborative teaching that involves participants from discrete cultural backgrounds as facilitation of diversity. Conversely, because of this diversity, team teaching can reveal difficulties such as disputes between members. Nonetheless, the experience of resolving such challenges can make collaborative teaching and learning experiences even more valuable (Eisen, 2000). In a bilateral collaboration between the Czech Republic and Japan, Fulková, Tipton and Ishikawa (2009) explored intermediate spaces through art and gallery education, and incorporating the art process in co-education could contribute to those conflict resolutions. Hakkarainen and Paavola (2007) emphasise the nonlinearity and irregularity of collaborative learning. The willingness and ability to negotiate a compromise through communication are pivotal concepts in collaborative learning. Most importantly, the building of a collaborative team gives students additional opportunities to connect with the curricular content.

## **The research**

### *Aim and research questions*

The study describes and analyses the process applied to an art education project and the results of the endeavour. It is linked to an intercultural art project that emphasises encountering Others and the effect of location/place embodied in such experiences. The project focused on cultural education and artistic creation and was conducted in the Czech Republic between November 2019 and January 2020. The study is intended to answer these research questions:

1. How can a common educational art project reconcile two culturally different pedagogical approaches?
2. How can intercultural discovery contribute to the acceptance of different perspectives?

The research delves into an enquiry about the psychological and physical transformation of an 'I' in response to the Other. The travelling objects as the alternative of 'I' made by Czech and Japanese pupils and art teachers' and their students' voices or actions related to artistic learning constitute the fundamental research data.

## **Methods**

The present study used mixed and arts-based qualitative research methods. The authors subscribe to action research, where practices and reflections are cyclically repeated for the attainment of superior knowledge. The a/r/tographical approach related to arts-based research (Barone and Eisner, 2012) was partially employed, since artistic elements of art work by the Japanese art teacher guided the intercultural art education project. A/r/tography as a research methodology transforms the traditional separation of theory and practice and encourages the opening of interstitial spaces because of its rhizomatic nature. A/r/tographers flow in dynamic momentum between discrete roles to 'inform, enhance, evoke and/or provoke one another' (Irwin and Springgay, 2008, p. 25). The authors applied a/r/tographic enquiry to the development of art lessons, opening unknown and unlabelled interstitial spaces that introduce new awareness.

Every lesson was video recorded, and the teacher's discussions were also audiotaped. In aggregate, the researchers obtained seven video recordings and five audio recordings, which represented 21 hours of recordings.

Afterward, transcripts of the conversations and teachers' written reflections were acquired for analysis, and a qualitative coding procedure was applied (Sato, 2008). Other pedagogical documentation in the form of shared online portfolios (Novotná, 2019) containing visual data were also acquired, and the visual data were analysed complementary to the text. The approach is called triangulation, and it collects and analyses multiple types of data (Sato, 2008).

The themes that appear in the following discussion section were formulated to answer the research questions through a hermeneutic analysis of the picked-up voices and practices of participants, while examining them across all parts of the multiple data of codes, primary transcriptions and visual records. The findings were subsequently verified in several discussions, using records from specific learning situations.

### *Participants*

The collaborating teachers functioned in distinct roles. The Japanese art teacher Iezaki participated in all classroom instruction undertaken in both countries, while the Czech art teacher Novotná engaged in the Czech classroom instruction. In Japanese elementary school, a Japanese teacher, Mihoko Miyazaki, is engaged as an instructor for Japanese classes. The art educators designed these collaborative lessons together, and Iezaki and Novotná developed those lessons in the Czech school based on the Czech elementary art education curriculum and the experimental issues of interaction with the Other by exploring meaningful places or spaces between two cultural spheres triggered by the artistic work of the Japanese teaching artist. Both art teachers communicated in English, and the Czech teacher translated the Japanese teacher's English into Czech for students. Iezaki also played the role of a cultural mediator, travelling between the two countries with lesson plans, art objects created by students, and information. Both teachers took on the multi-layered roles of researchers and teachers during the project.

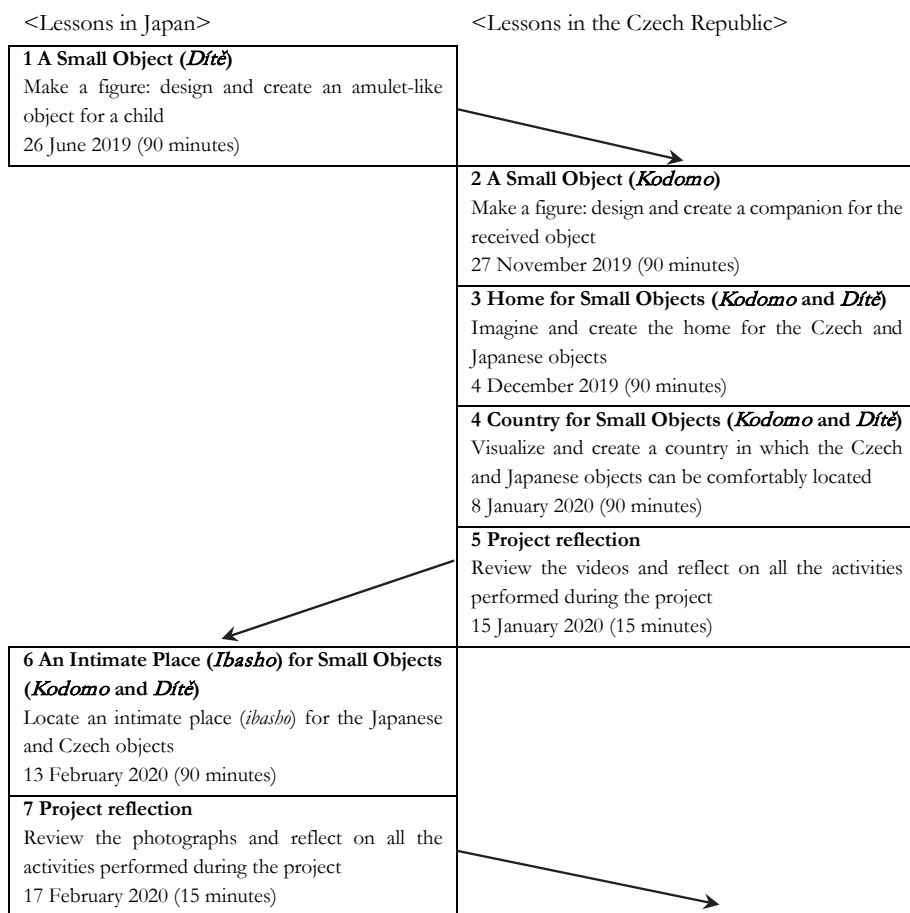
The participants in this case study comprised 20–25 pupils of a Czech Republic public elementary school in Prague and 25 corresponding students from a public elementary school in Niigata, Japan. All the participating students in both countries were aged between eight and ten. This age range is wider because of the long project duration of seven art lessons lasting 37 weeks. Also, the number of pupils changed several times during the project for contingent reasons, such as the transfer or migration of families, and so on.

## Results

A series of lessons was implemented at the two elementary schools in Japan and the Czech Republic. The complex structure (Table 1) of the project was initiated in the Japanese school in June 2019. After experiencing the unpleasantness of being surrounded by Others through role-playing, the Japanese pupils created small objects called *Dítě* (Czech for ‘child’) and wrote accompanying letters to the Czech pupils (Step 1). These objects are related to amulets, as Read (1956) indicates, and physical sensations and an individual’s wishes permeate them. To create amulet-like objects was an approach that proposed generating an intimate interaction and a meaningful space between Czech and Japanese students through objects pervaded with their experience of ‘I’. These objects and letters then travelled from Japan to the Czech Republic. Next, the Czech pupils watched a short video documenting the art activities undertaken previously in Japan. Through this method, they could grasp the project’s logic and the unfamiliar context of the Japanese school. In their first lesson, the Czech pupils received the Japanese objects and letters. They then created their tactile answers (Step 2) to the received objects and letters. In the subsequent lesson, they wrote letters to the Japanese pupils to introduce their *Kodomo* (Japanese for ‘child’), the objects they had created, and to explain the relationships they had discovered between the two created objects. In the third step, the students created homes for both figures (Step 3). The fourth stage (Step 4) required Czech pupils to collaboratively create the scenography of an imagined country in which the houses would be located. The Czech students called this country the *Kodomo Republic*. Then, the students executed a collective performance that combined space and sound and was documented via video. The final lesson required the students to view and comment on the edited video of the performance realised in the previous class. The students exchanged their views on the entire project and agreed to send their compiled work to their counterparts in the partner school in Japan (Step 5). A month later, the Japanese pupils received the set of artefacts dispatched by the Czech pupils. The Japanese pupils were asked to find appropriate *ibasbo* (place; see Section *Ibasbo*) for the objects within their school and to photograph the objects in those places. The students then examined all the *ibasbo* photographs on the screen. Finally, they viewed the video of the Czech performance about the *Kodomo Republic* and reflected on the project as a whole (Step 6). In the following week, the students selected the best pictures from the *ibasbo* collection and consented to the return of the Czech objects along with the reflections by the Japanese students.

The Czech objects were returned in Autumn 2020 in the Japanese cultural form of a box wrapped in a cloth called *furoshiki*, and the series of lessons was over. Analysis of the documents confirmed two varying approaches to art education. One of the perspectives was embodied by the Japanese teaching artist, who emphasised spontaneity in creation along with tactile sensitivity in acting on one's environment to affect the inclusion of the 'I' and the Other. The Czech teacher accentuated the communication and participation of pupils in the classroom with a more conceptual, rational and reflective approach.

Table 1: The project scheme shows the component art tasks. The lesson steps are numbered in chronological order.





The physical aspect of handling shared objects was accentuated by the handing over of the created objects to counterparts or the Other. In the ritual action, pupils embedded small pieces of paper with secret words symbolising the essence of life into the created figures, thus positioning the alter-egos of the students. This ritual action was inspired by the soul objects enclosed in a Japanese Buddha statue, Dainichi Nyorai Zazō, in Tokyo National Museum. An x-ray survey revealed that an object representing the soul had been placed inside the sculpture by the creator. The core of life is invisible, but it exists and relates to secret actions. The Japanese teacher reflected upon the Czech teacher's reaction to her approach:

... According to her [Czech teacher], my interpretation is holistic. Or intuitive, but not intuitive... She said I needed to give it a name. What came to my mind at that time was tactile... Hand interpretation. Do not set the logic first. I am groping (Written reflection, 16 January 2020).

However, the conversation transcript showed that some students were confused about these secret actions: 'Mrs. Teacher, what do I write?' (Transcript 27. 11. 2019, III -1, 3, 6). The terms 'soul' and '*Kodomo*' were unclear for the students and thus symbolised secrets; they were intentionally treated with obscurity. The incomprehensibility confused the participating students and at the same time motivated them to guess what the objects meant for the Other. One pupil observed the received object attentively and discovered something embedded within it: 'Mrs. Teacher, you can see inside and there is something red' (Transcript 27. 11. 2019, III -1, 3, 30-34).

The Czech pupils touched the received objects and composed the fragments of the unknown culture into a tactile answer: They looked for similarities and compatibilities between their cultural constructs and the Japanese figures (online portfolio 4–11 December 2019). Similarities were noted in shape, colour, adornment and image (ex. Figure 3). One student formulated the relationship between the two figures in the following manner:

... What I did is called Bear spirit. It is made of blue, green and white colours. And that is their [Japanese *Dítě*'s] son (Czech letter 6).

The participating pupils from both countries loved touching and playing with the small clay figurines. One student attributed the following emotions to a figure: [when turned down], he is sad, when I put him up, he is happy. He changes his mood (Transcript 27. 11. 2020, I, 5-4)

The records provide evidence that pupils were engaged in playing with the objects as toys (Transcript 4. 12. 2019, I -3, 7, 8), holding them in their hands, moving them and uttering sounds or words as if the students embodied the objects (Author-1, 2020). Vujičić, Peić and Petrić (2020) point out the importance of movement for children's learning. Pupils showed their strong ownership of the created small intimate objects (Iezaki, 2020) (Transcript 27. 11. 2020, II, 2). The students further expressed their anxiety about their figurines travelling far away and were afraid of their potential loss.



Figure 3: *Kodomo* (centre) and *Dítě* (both sides)



Figure 4: Object Turned Up

The analysis evinced another strong approach to art education, as represented by the Czech art teacher-researcher. She adopted a method of teaching the arts discursively (Fulková 2008: 20; Kafková 2019: 81–90). This educational approach was developed at Charles University in Prague and is based on visual semiotics, visual culture studies, the knowledge and procedures of contemporary theory and the history of art. It now delves into contemporary art strategies as well as gallery and museum education. It systematically studies visual literacy, which is defined as a multi-layered competence required for visual communication and for the active creation of contemporary culture. The strategy of using the Other's vocabulary as a metaphor contributed to the uniqueness of the project. The act of interpretation redefined the activities on the basis of the voices of the students. For example, the created country where the objects from two countries resident was named the *Kodomo Republic* by one of the Czech students (Transcript 8. 1. 2020, I, 2-4). This aspect showcased the crucial role of communication in the intercultural project. The description of the Czech art teacher's voice highlighted the emphasis on communication:

Czech teacher: I accentuated [communication] ... I showed the artworks to children to teach them how to interpret, to ask what it means and why ... When we interpreted together, immediately, we communicated. Pupils must explain [what] they did understand and must say [what] they interpreted by doing (Transcript 8. 1. 2020. 4, 18-19).

In contrast, the difficulty of translating connotations encompassed by native words was also revealed (see below).

Japanese teacher: ...they [Czech children] are now more active in asking me things, even if we cannot exactly understand each other, ...but sometimes I feel as if I can understand the Czech language much better if I ask something immediately... (Transcript 8.1.2020. 3, 8).

## Discussion

### *Ibasbo: the practice of spatial and relational inclusion*

Since teachers and pupils came from different socio-cultural backgrounds, the collaboration yielded several difficulties in communication. A good understanding of the core concept of *ibasbo* (Figure 5) in the art education project was essential for collaborative learning.

The key concept of *ibasbo* resisted translation. The Japanese term encompasses the notions of ‘being’ (existence) and ‘place’ (location). This term is used quite commonly in Japan. Fujitani (2015) describes *ibasbo* as being based on the recognition that ‘I’ am in place, which is an acceptance and recognition by other people in relation to them. The spatial and relational nature of *ibasbo* overlaps with Levinas’ ‘positioning’ of the ‘I’ and with the non-symmetrical relationship between the ‘I’ and the Other. The concept of *ibasbo* also intersects with the concept of identity, which is constructed in relation to people inhabiting a specific place.

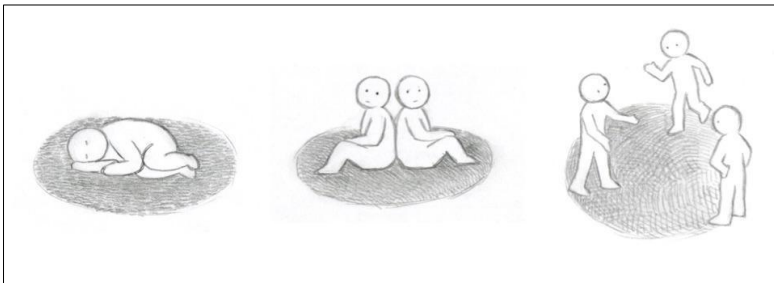


Figure 5: *Ibasbo* drawings by Iezaki. M

*Ibasbo* was experienced during the project in the movement of the actors and objects; it was also encountered in the learning process itself and all the face-to-face interactions with the Other. The *Kodomo Republic* performance created opportunities for the emergence of *ibasbo*. One boy associated the relationship with a Japanese girl through their objects with location features:

‘At first we[I] thought it would be like a pull-like jacuzzi. When I made the dolphin [his object], I thought I got a dolphin [a Japanese girl’s object] from that girl in China [Japan]’ (Transcript 8. 1. 2020, VI, 1-5).

One of the students formulated a significant slogan for the *Kodomo Republic*. The paraphrasing of this slogan was important because he found the meaning of the whole dynamically expanding creation and shifted the common understanding of it. On the other hand, a boy claimed, ‘I want to line the boundary [for the *Kodomo Republic*] there’ (Transcript 8. 1. 2020, III, 3).

The process of creating the scenography and the ensuing discussions about how and where to install the houses and figures may be seen as living *ibasbo*, or the materialising of social interactions. Students questioned the ownership of a space and reflected on the concept of boundaries, differentiating the inside from the outside. The sounds employed by the students in their performance to characterise the *ibasbo* constituted a significant element in the confirmation of their existence. The two teachers’ efforts to communicate over the project facing their discrete pedagogical approaches might also make living *ibasbo* in the space of co-education, sharing the elements of artistic inquiry.

The answer to the first research question (how a common educational art project can reconcile two pedagogical approaches) is that the *ibasbo* generated from the efforts of participants’ communication in the creative process reconciled the two culturally distinct pedagogical approaches.

### *Moving between cultures*

Intercultural movement comprised the focal concept of the whole project. The Czech art teacher stated that ‘the symbol of the project is your back [Iezaki’s suitcase]’ (Transcript 8. 1. 2020. 5, 18) (Figure 7). Migration was recognized as a pivotal factor in the destabilisation and reconstruction of *ibasbo*. The accent emanated from Iezaki’s personal experience of isolation and marginalisation.

Marginalisation forms a classification of acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997); it concerns the experiencing of crisis-like unsettling because of the incongruence between one's cultural orientation and the host civilisation. Marginalisation becomes a driving force towards integration, which may be defined as the establishment of an appropriate relationship between the host society and one's own culture. Inclusion is expressed as a figurative reconstruction of *ibasbo* in Iezaki's and students' artworks and the two teachers' voice descriptions:

Japanese teacher: ... [when I] first came here, I felt [that] my house was like this [pointing at the shape with thorns]. But after... becoming more collaborative together, I now feel [that] I am more rounded... (Transcript 8. 1. 2020. 1, 52).

Czech teacher: [It is] how we [teachers] work in tandem. It is the participation of teachers. It is for me very interesting... comfortable... (Transcript 8. 1. 2020. 8, 1).

The authors' answer to another research question (how intercultural discovery can contribute to the acceptance of different perspectives) is that attempting to understand the Other through verbal and nonverbal dialogue also contributed to better understanding the 'I'; then, participants could respect those different perspectives.



Figure 6: Two Teachers in the Czech Classroom



Figure 7: Iezaki's Suitcase

## Conclusion

This art education project identified two distinct pedagogical methodologies. The first emphasises communication as an aspect of the artistic process and meaning-making through classroom discussion and artistic creation. The second highlights spontaneous creation through tactile sensitivity and motivates students to act on their environment and to materialise their physical and social associations, including ambiguity. A common feature of both strategies of imparting knowledge is the element of responding to the Other.

The two divergent directions were combined and reconciled by striving for the practice of spatial and relational inclusion in the bilateral project, and the participants' communicative efforts deepened their understanding of the 'I' and the Other.

The hermeneutic analysis of the multiple data obtained from the project allows three focal deductions to be made. First, the *ibasho* theme can create authentic experiences psychologically and physically, thus connecting intimate objects and spaces in interaction with the Other. Second, the tactile sense is a viable medium of sharing: it encourages the expression and interpretation of thoughts and feelings across cultures. The sharing of tactile objects in this project created an attachment between students and their artefacts and enhanced the cohesion of meaning. Third, paradoxically, it may then manifest as the awareness of an intimate inside and allows the construction of boundaries with a contrasted outside.

It is difficult to reconcile such inner/outer conflicts or two culturally different perspectives. However, participants engaged in the creation of art through intimate objects were aware of those conflicts or different perspectives, which would direct them to respect both the 'I' and the Other and make an effort at reconciliation. Continuous communication between cultures through art and culture education could play a significant role in the cultural understanding and mutual enrichment of cultures.

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