



# PERCEPTIONS



## Visualising Migration Through Drawing & Collage



## Location

Swansea City of Sanctuary's 'Home Away From Home' Exhibition, Grand Multicultural Hub, Swansea (21st March – 7th April 2022)



## Contributors

Swansea University, Izzy Coombs, Amanda Roberts, University of Wales Trinity St. David



## Audience

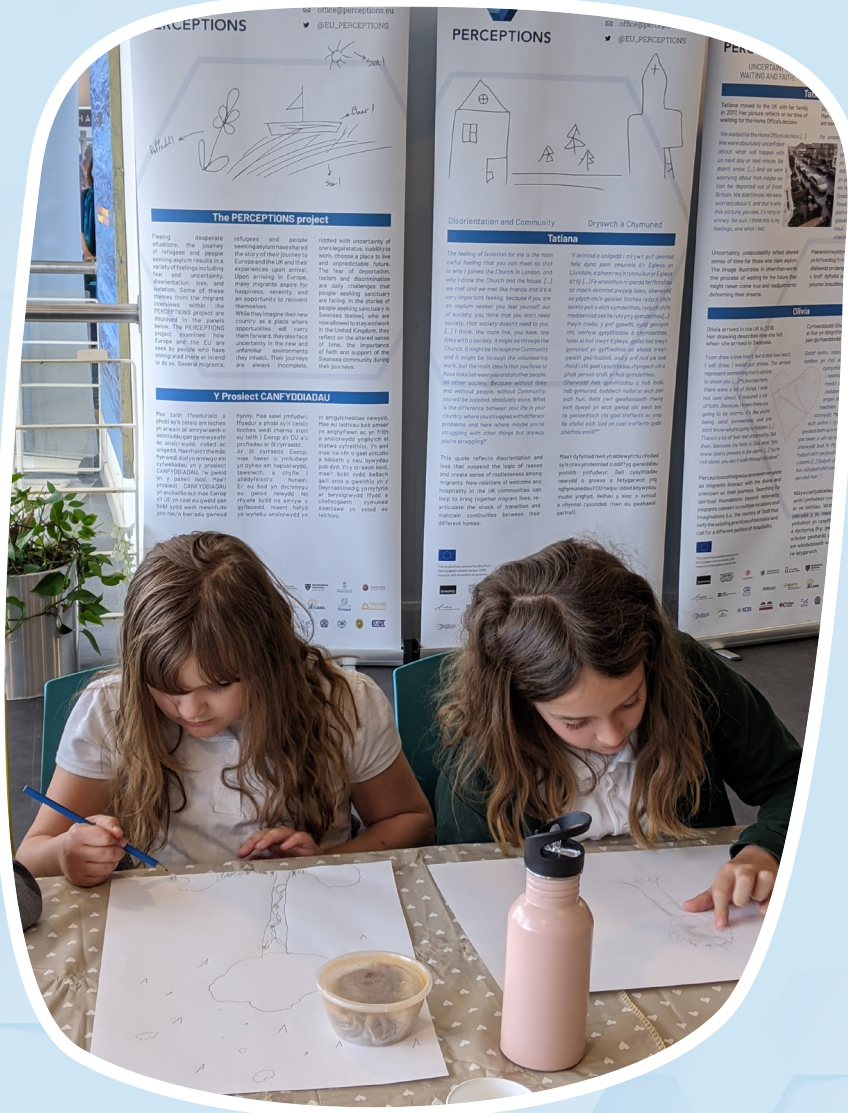
This activity involved around 250 children (8+) from four different schools in Swansea. The outputs of the activity will also be shared online with the general public and will also be available to other users, including first-line practitioners, CSOs and migrant organisations.





## Purpose/Aim

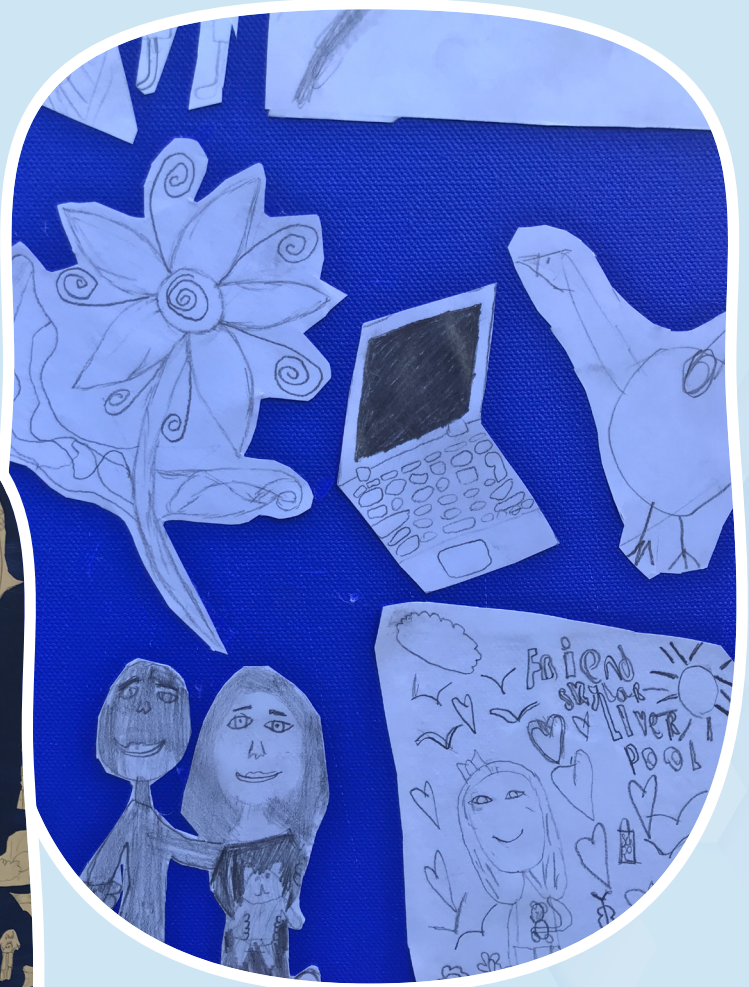
Created by art-practitioner, Izzy Coombs, the purpose of this workshop was to open up the participant's (children's) creativity and means of expression when dealing with complicated abstract concepts that arose as themes from the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews. Two abstract concepts, *hope* and *uncertainty* (others can be chosen), were explored during the workshop through a take on the equally abstract artistic method of Papier découpé (cut paper collage), developed by Henri Matisse, utilising more drawing instead of solely cut-out paper shapes. Through this method, the workshop displayed the participant's journey of learning to express their perceptions of *hope* and *uncertainty*, therefore, improving their ability to tackle hard to grasp concepts that arise from migration itself.





## Description of the Activity

Using a more drawing-rich take on abstract artist Henri Matisse's, *Papier découpé*, the participants expressed their perceptions of the abstract concepts, hope and uncertainty (from the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews) by manifesting their ideas onto white paper that was cut out and placed onto a solid blue board. Thus, the output of this activity was a physical, abstract collage that represents the participant's perceptions of the abstract metanarratives of *hope* and *uncertainty*.



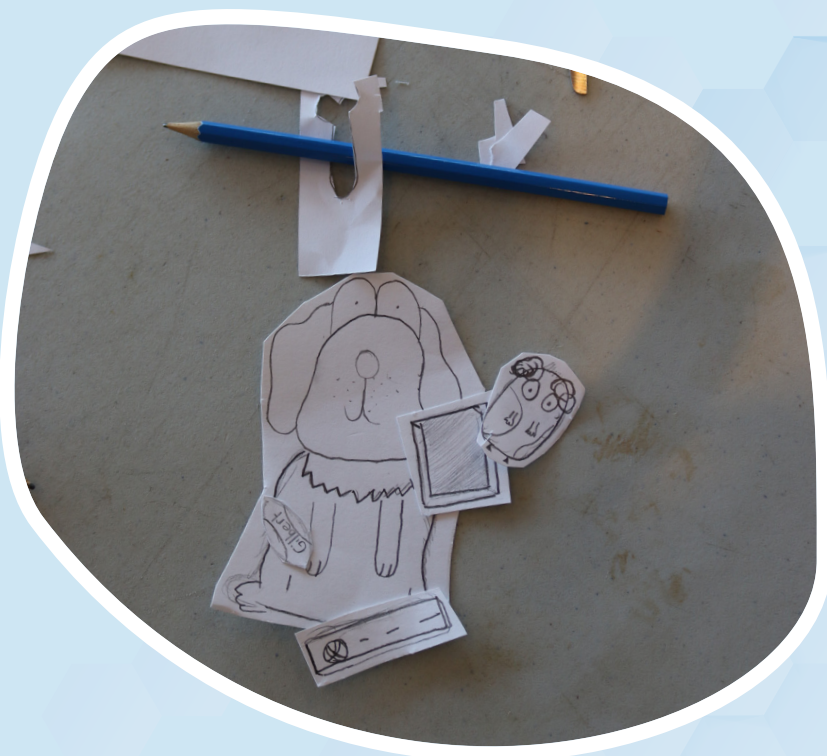


## Techniques

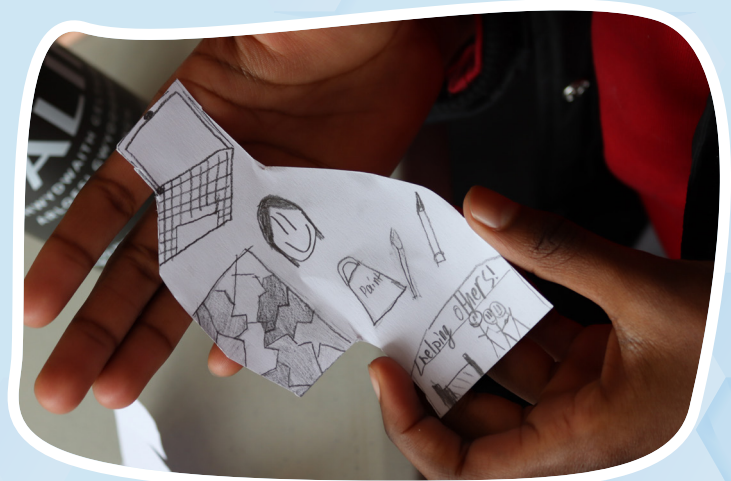
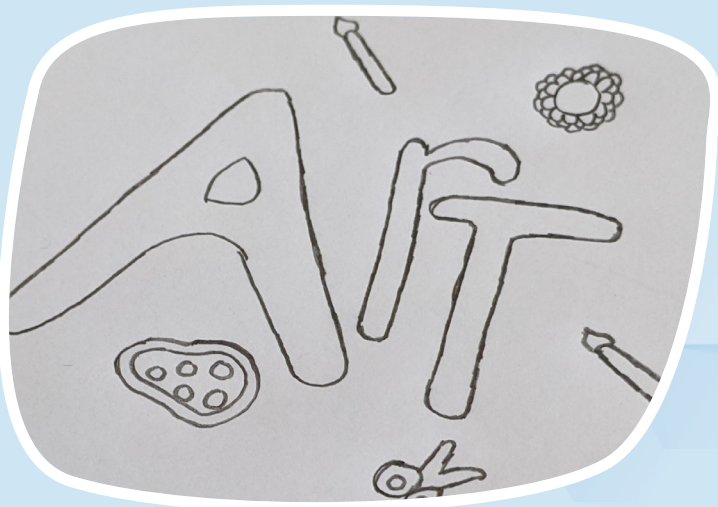
*The activity progressed in three stages:*

**Stage 1 - preparation:** The artist was introduced to the extracts from migrant PERCEPTIONS interviews, which focused on the themes of hope and uncertainty. She reflected on different ways of introducing these abstract concepts to the children and finding appropriate expression methods in drawing. The artist focused on the abstract yet tactile technique used by Henri Matisse and encouraged children to work with their hands, using drawing as an emotive device. The idea was to make drawing similar to a children's play, where the children can be excited about both the process of making images as well as the *result*.

**Stage 2 – drawing:** As a conversation starter, children were asked to reflect on several questions related to hope, uncertainty and migration, such as "Have you ever been lost and what happened to you?", "What happened when you were found?", "Have you ever been in a place where people couldn't understand what you were saying", "How did this make you feel?", "What things made you feel better/hopeful in this situation?", "Why did you feel hopeful"? Children were encouraged to explore a different world (wishful thinking), consider wishful images (from fiction, fairy tales) and reflect on positive experiences (joy, happiness, friendship), allowing the concepts of hope and uncertainty to take on different consistencies on paper. Children also reflected on the feelings of loss (often related to their pets) and uncertainty in relationships with people and unfamiliar places. Drawing with pencils on canvas helped children tell their story without words.



**Stage 3 - assembling:** Children cut out their drawings and glued them onto a blue canvas under the practitioner's supervision, each time developing innovative arrangements of fragments and offering alternative meanings of hope and uncertainty. By taking the drawings out of their original context, their intended meanings changed as they were included in the collage, making other people think differently about the unfamiliar expressions of earlier identified themes. When assembling the collage, a creative choice was made not to accompany images with text and leave blank spots on the blue background to indicate the openness and unpredictability of migration. Working through the messy patchwork of drawn fragments opened children's eyes to the fact that each arrangement of images changes the "story" of migration, highlighting that no single story was "true" and that every migration narrative can be interpreted in different ways. After the event, a recorded interview with the practitioner helped reveal the importance of arts-based approaches and visual techniques in expressing migration.





## Key Concepts

**Rethinking Abstract Concepts in Drawing** – The practitioner (Izzy Coombs) chose *hope* and *uncertainty* as the explored themes due to their prevalence throughout the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews, highlighting their importance to people “no matter where you are in the world” and the similarities in what they, especially children, hope for and are uncertain about. Through the act of drawing, the drawn line allows the participant’s perceptions to move from their abstract vision of the concept to a physical expression on paper, giving it existence in the outer world (Norman, 2003: 158). As such, drawing materially recreated a specific worldview, making abstract perceptions visible.

**Drawing as becoming and experimentation** – At the moment of its creation, a drawing is a physical manifestation of the artist’s immediate thought and perception. The drawn lines represent a choice, a here, whilst simultaneously treating the white space between lines as a neutral ground which is part of the creation but conceptually absent, an elsewhere (Norman 2003: 150-151; Berger & Berger, 2005: 143). Izzy believes that art “says more than words could ever say, because there’s little nuances that [observers] don’t know [the drawing] is doing.” The drawing takes on a life of its own after it is given life by the artist – allowing observers to infer different meanings and rethink their original understandings of migration. The line drawn by the artist is constantly unfolding beyond the artist’s will - it is becoming rather than being. “Like all forms of travel, the journey of doing a drawing seems to be full of hazards”, stresses Lord (2005:34) in highlighting the emergent nature of the process of making lines on paper. The drawing, back and forth movement, expresses the process of being carried away, similar to migration: it opens up another world where the presumed meanings are no longer transparent.

**An emotional migration through drawing** – Drawing involves expressing a different emotive and intangible knowledge, sometimes described as fingertip or craft knowledge (Gardner, 1984). The practitioner (Izzy Coombs) described the participant’s initial apprehension about drawing things that were difficult to describe in words: “the students say *I can’t draw, I just can’t draw*”. Experimenting with drawing and following spontaneous drawing decisions helped students move from one expression of migration to another, focusing on different visions of hope and uncertainty. In this way, drawing represents an “emotional journey” through the physical act of manifesting their ideas on paper. The participants take a drawn line on a journey and find their own voice in displaying complex concepts without language (Ingold, 2006: 26; Gunn, 2006: 118). The final stage in the process of making the cut-paper collage involved the assembly of different cut-out drawings, joining up different lines and trajectories. The collage questioned the existence of a single reality of migration and highlighted strange and unexpected feelings and associations linked to journeys. Each collation of fragments made apparent the often overlooked ways of expressing migration, bringing together different expressions of *hope* and *uncertainty* into a finished object.







## Impact

Drawing helped the participants **find their own voice** for displaying their understanding of hard to grasp concepts (hope and uncertainty) and feel that their wide-ranging interpretations were treated seriously. Many children (41% of participants) commented that *"drawing and cutting shapes"* was their favourite activity in the workshop, which helped them to *"enjoy different ways of learning about migrant stories"*—producing artefacts that form parts of the summer exhibition gave participants a sense of achievement and made them feel that their contribution mattered.

Visualising migration ensured a positive and inclusive experience, where young people were able **to develop empathy towards migrants** and understand their perceptions and points of view. Experimentation with unexpected interpretations of key migration themes **stimulated interactive learning** and discussion over often-overlooked perspectives. The messiness of collage reflected the uncertainty of migration and acknowledged tensions, relationships and juxtapositions between different fragments of information on cross-border movements.

Art-based activities encouraged participants to try new approaches, prompted them to reflect on unexpected feelings, emotions and perceptions, and gave them confidence in **developing new ways of thinking about migration** (76% of participants stated that drawing and collage helped them better understand the experiences of migrants).

Working with an art practitioner opened **new opportunities for creative expression**, helped them develop new skills (*"I am good at drawing but I learnt a lot of new skills"*) and supported their personal progression.



# PERCEPTIONS



This project has received funding from the European Union's H2020 Research & Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No 833870.

