Title : **Power-from-Within: Somatically integrated Art Therapy with an LGBTQIA+ Teenager**

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Abstract

The integration of somatic approaches in art therapy can counter the trauma of microaggressions. By adopting a power-from-within stance, art therapists can facilitate sessions for clients to affirm their LGBTQIA+ identities while resisting the impact of discrimination. This article, co-written by an art therapist and client, provides lived experience examples of somatic art therapy: Somatic Experiencing® integrated with body tracing, and sensorimotor art therapy (the Clay Field®). The authors concur that somatically integrated art therapy has helped replace automized behavioral patterns based on fear with behavioral choices that emerged from a place of safety. Implications for therapeutic alliance and power dynamics within art therapy sessions are explored as tenets of body-based self-reflection.

Keywords: cultural humility, LGBTQIA+, sensorimotor art therapy, somatic art therapy, therapeutic alliance

Power-from-Within: Somatically integrated Art Therapy with an LGBTQIA+ Teenager

"I sought help because I was overwhelmed by anxiety. This article reflects my learning to relinquish control and my realization that therapy isn't about eliminating problems but making them manageable. It's always going to be a work-in-progress because social pressures continually act as a counter-force. This is specifically true for people like me who don't conform to mainstream identities. I've realized that being well means being able to stay with the bad as well as the good." (Luna, co-author)

In the simple phrase, "being well means being able to stay with the bad as well as the good," Luna describes her learned ability to tolerate helplessness when she encounters uncontrollable external events, a shift that is enabling her to "relinquish control" and calm her anxiety. In this article we explore how the integration of somatic techniques in art therapy has been essential in this process. Somatically, helplessness communicates danger and triggers threat responses. We explore how power-from-within is helping Luna shift from helplessness to powerfulness and from danger to safety, independently of external events, countering microaggressions suffered in her everyday life as a lesbian.

Anti-Oppressive Writing

Mohanty (2003) and Stone-Mediatore (1998) draw attention to the myth of objectivity, exploited to expunge lived experiences from academic writing, discrediting them as subjective, personal stories: the centre of our work as therapists. This article actively seeks an alternative form of writing that alters academic norms of power. Practice description and theoretical framework are interwoven to emphasize the authority of lived experience. Springham and Xenophontes (2021) describe *coproduction* to delineate the active participation of the service user, referred to as *lived-experience author* to create a more equal power dynamic. The art therapist's intention is that Luna is no longer someone she is writing *about*, but someone she is writing *with*. Throughout this article, we emphasize Luna's voice with italics.

For context, Luna (pseudonym) lives in North Italy where she was born. She was 17 when her parents contacted Rebecca, seeking an LGBTQIA+ art therapist for their daughter who had come out several years back. Luna was suffering from social anxiety. Her parents were unsure how far aspects of her difficulties could be linked to her lesbian identity as they could not identify specific oppressive experiences in her life. However, they were confident that their daughter could benefit from the sense of recognition that a matched therapist-client identity could offer. Rebecca's studio is in Bologna, some distance from their town. We agreed on a hybrid approach (on-line / in person), which was also necessary due to the pandemic.

When we began working on this article, we had had weekly one-hour sessions for approximately 9 months. Luna is proficient in English and we read and discussed the drafts of this article together. Luna offers, "*Contributing to this article has been really stimulating. The process of reflecting with Rebecca on the key issues discussed here has helped me realize how much progress I've made. More importantly still, this greater distance has added a third perspective with new clarity and insights. I had already lived the process from inside, and then evaluated it within the setting. This has allowed me further reflection from outside.*"

Generating Power-from-Within

In terms of power dynamics, Hoagland (1988) proposes *power-from-within* as a counterforce to *power-over*, the kind of power displayed in patriarchy that depends upon the control of an external other, subtracting the latter's power for the former's gain (eg. man-woman, white-black, heterosexual-LGBTQIA+).[1] Therefore, power-over is not inherent but can be lost if the subjugated rebel. This links power-over to chronic anxiety and an inherent sense of danger in the body since threat is ever imminent. For this reason, it requires a high energy investment to maintain.

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[1] Haines (2019) describes a similar quality using the term "*power-with*", emphasizing its somatic nature and its potential to heal trauma caused by social injustice.

Unlike power-over, power-from-within nurtures safety as an inherent sensation that can be cultivated independent of external events. Perry (1999) confirms the body's innate autonomous ability to do so, drawing attention to how people will instinctively adopt the fetal position to retrieve motor/vestibular and state memories of warmth, safety and calm. The neurological consequences of intero-perceived safety include optimizing communication between cortical, limbic and lower parts of the brain leading to clarity of thought and decision-making (Perry, 1997) and promoting the emergence, tolerance and expression of emotions (Selvam, 2022). Physiologically, the amount of available energy increases thanks to the deactivation of threat-responsive energy-consuming activities such as hyper-vigilance and muscle tension (Perry, 1997; Levine, 1997). One of my service users describes this sensation as "strength in relaxation." Luna describes it as, "*trusting your sensations and the colors you feel you need without trying to understand why. At first I didn't think it could lead to anything. But now it's bringing me exactly what I need. Something just clicks, as if it is resolved. The less effort you put in, the more you get back.*"

Without the internal feeling of safety provided by power-from-within, a person threatened by external power-over dynamics may well adopt power-over dynamics themselves in an attempt to assert agency and regain a sense of control over their lives. Perry (2014) explains how control offers an antidote to trauma's unpredictability while lack of control is anxiety-inducing since it re-enforces the helplessness experienced during trauma. However, as Luna has experienced, this strategy is short-term. As soon as it is applied to circumstances beyond one's control, power-over becomes anxiety-inducing in the wake of failure. Since it is also activated by anxiety, Luna found herself in a self-perpetuating cycle: "*My anxiety had become unmanageable. Thanks to art therapy, I now realize I was trying to manage anxiety with anxiety, but this generated more anxiety. I needed to control everything and everyone around me. I still do to a lesser extent as it's not something that disappears overnight. But the turning point came when I realized this was the cause of the problem,*

not the solution as I'd previously thought. Control is an illusion that inevitably leads to frustration and anxiety as other people and external events cannot be controlled. My attempts have ended up hurting myself and others."

Understanding control in terms of power-over exposes its conflict with innate body patterns. In somatic terms, control equates to anxiety since it may be expressed through exertion, tension, muscle contraction, holding ones' breath, hyper-vigilance and freezing (the body's attempt to control hyper-activation that has become overwhelming). These are all autonomic threat responses activated by the limbic system and brainstem (Perry, 1997). Importantly, these responses function not only as reactions but also as communications. Subsequent to the response, the neocortex will receive the conscious communication of danger. On the contrary, the body responds to safety through relaxation, slower and deeper breathing and reduced vigilance of external stimuli. However, such a state becomes anxiety-inducing if danger is associated with the unexpected or has invaded otherwise safe environments such as the home or social sphere. Healing anxiety therefore requires restoring trust in the body, a process that is central to many somatic techniques. For example, Somatic Experiencing® (Levine, 1997) emphasizes that trauma is not in the event but in our nervous system; somatically unprocessed trauma leaves the nervous system in a state of alert that predisposes disregulation in terms of hypo- or hyper-arousal (Levine, 1997; Elbrecht, 2013)

In support of these ideas, art therapy offers two diametrical approaches: top-down and bottom-up (Lusebrink & Hinz, 2016). In somatic terms, these approaches overlap with power-over and power-from-within. *Top-down* refers to a process that begins cognitively/symbolically so that there is conscious control of the process through cortical modulation, in primis the executive functioning of the frontal lobe. Typically, there will be a pre-defined objective. In its purest form, the process is linear and the result may be judged according to how closely the finished product fulfills the original criteria. *Bottom-up* refers to a process that begins kinesthetically and sensorially. There is no pre-determined objective, hence no right or wrong. The individual follows their

impulses and the neo-cortex relaxes its control over the limbic system and brainstem. It is a path of discovery that neither art therapist nor user can predict and hence it is important that the art therapist has processed their own areas of helplessness in the unknown. Luna reflects, *"With Rebecca, I'm learning how to 'go with the flow', trust the process. It seems completely nonsensical but you do actually obtain all the things that you were trying to get but failing to when you tried to control them."*

Dissipating Power-Over : LGBTQIA+ Identity and Microaggressions

"When I started art therapy, I'd already come out to my parents and they were great about it. But I wasn't. I felt like an alien. For many years, I was the only LGBTQIA+ identified person in my class. It was a really isolating experience. I felt like there was something inherently wrong with me because although I tried really hard to respond appropriately, I felt out of sink with the straight girls.

"Owning my LGBTQIA+ identity scares me. It's not something that's simply 'done' or can ever be completed. It is connected to letting go and not caring about the judgment of others. What scares me most is conforming to a label. I've been shutting myself in boxes for a long time. Thanks to art therapy, I've finally broken free. I finally feel like I've found myself. I can't bear the thought of losing that to another box. I've had people ask me, "So does that mean you a lesbian?" I would like to answer, "Noooo!" Not because I'm not, but why do you have to ask me? I didn't ask you, "Ah! So, you're straight?" This label is a very hot label. I want to be free to be myself. I don't want to get burnt."

With these reflections, Luna is describing the toll that microaggressions have had on her well-being. Microaggressions create consequences of the same gravity as those provoked by outright aggressive attacks (Sue, 2010; Nadal, 2018); consequences that are somatic as well as psychological (Caldwell & Leighton, 2018). Microaggressive trauma has similarities with complex trauma in terms of how the consequences lie in its repetitive and pervasive nature. While complex

trauma most often occurs within the relationship with caregivers, microaggressive trauma finds its roots in the relationship between the individual and society. During adolescence, society assumes many of the primary caregivers' functions in terms of identity affirmation and self-confirmation: needs that mainstream society fails to meet for LGBTQIA+ youth (Yip & Chan, 2021). Furthermore, the invisible nature of implicit bias means "people who experience PTSD are taught that external reasons are the causes for their mental illness, people who face discrimination are taught that internal reasons are why they are suffering" (Nadal, 2018 p. 13). The victim is made responsible and tends to report shame not anger for the injustice suffered (Scheer et. al, 2020). Hence, the primary step towards treating microaggressive trauma is its validation. In therapy, somatic approaches have been beneficial for LGBTQIA+ clients (Briggs et. al, 2018).

Microaggressions are an expression of power-over. Luna describes how nurturing her power-from-within generated new behavioral patterns that spontaneously brought power-from-within into her relational dynamics. As an example, Luna reminisces, *"Just the other week, something special happened with my best friend. I surprised myself by behaving differently and now I feel more connected with her. We were having a heart-to-heart. Normally I would have said: "Have you tried..?" Or "Perhaps you could…". Instead, without thinking, I just said one word, "Why?" I meant: why do you feel the way you do? And she told me. It was that simple. Right there and then I finally understood what she'd been going through.*

"I represented it in our art therapy session using a funfair ride (Figure 1). There's a famous theme park near my house and there's a big dipper that's made up of a double track. The trains go side by side on parallel rails. But then suddenly they divide and it's chaos. They go all over the place: towards each other, away from each other, in every direction. You think you're going to crash into each other but then the other train disappears out of sight.

"This seems to me to be a good metaphor for these two distinct ways of relating. When you try to control the other's problems and tell them what to do, it becomes an exasperating struggle.

Just when you seem close, you feel frustrated and the other disappears. I felt so insecure when I reacted like that. But when you just let go and listen, the other is simply there. And I feel so much closer and safer watching her go parallel on the rail next to mine."

Luna's description clarifies the qualities, emotions and states evoked by different ways of relating. Power-over is "an exasperating struggle". Power-from-within involves feeling "closer and safer," just witnessing the other person going their own way. A therapeutic relationship based on power-from-within can be likened to what Gray (2021) defines as a *reciprocal alliance,* when the therapist acknowledges the inherent power-over of their position and works actively to redistribute this power. Reflecting on her work as an art therapist, Rebecca recounts, "I have found power-from-within useful in helping me stay with the helplessness and unknown of a non-directional approach. Whenever I need to demonstrate I am a good therapist, I can no longer connect with my user's needs. Luna likens the stress of performance to an adrenaline-rich fun-fair ride. Having to perform requires effort. I tense, creating constriction in the body. I find myself frustrated when my user doesn't respond in the way I expected. I find myself irritable when I meet their resistance. A good therapist requires a good client. And this means my client must perform for me too. When I am connected with my power-from-within with no expectations of myself or the other, my thoughts are clearer. My face muscles are softer and friendlier. I am able to bring the over-activated individual safely back into the social engagement zone (Porges, 2017)."

Art therapy situated in a bottom-up approach sustained by power-from-within helped Luna counter microaggressions by channeling her creative choices into personal agency. Luna describes, *"You have to begin by not knowing where you're going and trusting the process. I think that my difficulty was precisely this. So long as you are trying to control the process and using reason to represent your needs, there'll be something missing in the final art object. I've learnt to choose a color, and see where it takes me. I've learnt that I don't have to choose yellow for the sun. I don't have to conform. It's better for me to choose blue. This is the hardest step ever. Especially when it's*

not art but real life. But now I'm doing it in art, I find I can apply it to everyday life. I've been listening to what I thought others wanted for too long. But now I'm finally realizing that it only really makes a difference to <u>me</u>. Anything can become an excuse to judge. But to get there, first of all, I've had to learn to listen to that feeling that <u>my</u> sun is blue, even if it goes against all rational logic."

Nurturing Power-from-Within with Body Tracing

Maintaining power-from-within requires constant monitoring. It requires awareness of one's bodily sensations and a well-developed ability to self-regulate. Unprocessed stress activates a threat response which socially may be expressed as judgement, paternalism, intolerance, criticism, imposition of one's views or any other form of power-over. As such, power-from-within can be a useful tool in preventing and healing microaggressions in the therapeutic space.

Working with chronic anxiety can leave the art therapist in a double bind. Luna confirms how anxiety generates more anxiety. She also confirms how the initial experience of letting go is itself anxiety-generating. Somatic approaches can be useful in breaking this cycle. By creating awareness in Luna of how her body feels, she became able to distinguish the pleasant sensations from the anxiety they generated. Little by little, this cognitive recognition enabled her to identify relaxation as an ally in her well-being, despite its being coupled with anxiety. Before feeling safe could actually feel safe, Luna passed through phases of wanting-to-want-to-feel-safe.

We have used body tracings (see Della Cagnoletta's protocol in Hetherington et al., 2021) to help Luna integrate feelings of safety with how she perceives herself in terms of body-image and identity. Here, Somatic Experiencing® (SE) techniques have been fundamental in enabling her to fill her body's outline. Standing before the empty silhouette, she felt helpless and became immobile. Helplessness in her inability to perceive the internal state of her body merged with helplessness associated with her identity archived in memories of microaggressions. Rebecca guided her step by step with questions such as: "If helplessness had a color, what would it be? Where can you feel that

color now in your body?" And "What is the opposite of helplessness? [Powerfulness.] What color is powerful? [Orange.] Which parts of your body can feel orange right now?"

Luna explains the importance of this work (Figure 2), "*The body tracings are the most difficult pieces I've done, but for this reason, also the most rewarding. It's so complicated to find the right color, shape and form. The process made me realize that I didn't know what was going on inside me, and so I couldn't just put it out there on paper. But once it was out there, I knew whether or not it resonated inside, and so creating the body tracing became a means to discover my inside, and bring it from outside in.*"

"*I've become more aware of how trying to exert control weighs my body down. I feel it in the tightening of my shoulders. My whole body closes up, like it's stuck in a narrow place. It's like there's too many and too much of each emotion. They become these huge things, an expanding sphere, a tornado whirling in all directions.*

"*Thanks to somatic art therapy I'm learning that when I admit defeat, the weight just disappears off my shoulders. Poof! It's gone. Atlas suddenly realizes that the sky can stay up on its own. I feel my neck straightening, my shoulders rising as they open up again, my head becoming lighter and there may well be emotional reactions. Often I cry or I find myself trembling but not in a bad or scary way. It's a trembling that releases pent up emotions. Afterwards, I'm able to concentrate on one thing at a time again. My arms and legs move freely. My chest feels light again.*"

"*We worked a lot exploring how my drawings and images resonated inside me, in my body. It was fundamental. This process has helped me connect with the true me and express her. Putting my body in harmony with who I am and what I want is amazing. My self-esteem has increased.*"

Not limited to art making, somatic techniques from SE were useful in verbal exchanges in preparation for art-making to facilitate Luna's connection with her power-from-within. Rebecca used SE to titrate Luna's narrations of anxiety-provoking incidents, asking her to pause and notice

what was happening in her body as she talked. These moments allow us to extract a sensation, image, movement, emotion or thought that becomes the starting point of an artwork. Sometimes, Rebecca has verbally mirrored her body's involuntary behavior, especially positive signs of shifts to safety (exhales, straightening back, face muscles relaxing etc), which can lead to a new artwork.

Nurturing Power-from-Within with Clay Field

The clay field, created by Deuser (2020), consists in a wooden box filled with approximately 12 kg of clay. The person follows the impulses in their hands with their eyes closed. Deuser (2020) explains the potency of this haptic approach in terms of the immediacy of touch; a hand cannot not-respond because it either stays and receives more of the stimuli or leaves and removes itself. The body is required to take a position – is the matter good or bad? Is it me or not-me? In sensorimotor terms, haptics is inherently empowering as it requires agency through movement, while sight is inherently helpless, as it requires immobility and distance. Elbrecht (2013), Deuser's student, integrated her own training in art therapy and SE with the clay field to define its potential as a sensorimotor art therapy technique for trauma.

Rebecca introduced the Clay Field® after several months of somatically-integrated art therapy with the objective of providing a lived experience of interaction guided by power-from-within. Gradually, the cortex relinquished its control and Luna learned to follow the impulses in her hands, allowing herself to feel the sensation of safety this generated in her body and the consequent attribution of trust.

"*Our work with the clay field really helped me look inside myself and express what I found. It taught me how to stop controlling my hands and trust them. It cured my 'artist's block'. I realized that up until that moment I'd felt incapable. Now I find self-expression liberating and satisfying.*

"*I remember my first time in front of the clay field. I had this large mass of rectangular clay in front of me and I was completely lost. I kept asking Rebecca, "What am I supposed to do?" And*

she replied, "Follow your hands. Trust their instinct." And I thought to myself, "That's all very well but if they don't want to do anything, what can I do then?"

"But it's always the first step that's the most difficult, and bewildered as I was, I started doing something, and then I discovered Rebecca was right. Each movement opened up another sensation and a new impulse for another movement. It's incredible. I feel it has reconnected me with impulses I was made to control as a child. Finally someone says, "Do whatever you want!"

"My first reaction was total panic! Then I realized I <u>can</u> rely on what I'd like to do: on what feels good. It's as simple as that. Just like children do. They start touching, exploring, digging. My instinct was to start flattening the surface. All the bumps and unevenness bothered me. Once it was flattened, I stuck my finger in it, right in the centre. Like a kid would do. And from that gesture, I realized it was about creating a time and a space for <u>me</u>" (Figure 3).

Luna describes how difficult but rewarding it was to give up power-over the clay and perceive the neural feedback coming from her hands. This process enables her to reconnect with motor memories from childhood that she now reinstates as safe behavioral patterns. At the end of the aforementioned session, the following phrase emerged from her sense of helplessness, *"I'm human."* This assertion represents permission to be fragile, a fragility that is bearable only if she can feel the support of her power-from-within, continually communicating safety even when nothing seems to make sense.

Expanding Power-from-Within into the Therapeutic Alliance

"Knowing Rebecca was a lesbian definitely helped me feel understood right from the beginning. It helped me feel safe when I wanted to share anything connected to that topic. However empathic or informed an ally can be, it's different knowing someone has lived the same perspective. Snapshots have a different quality when you've visited the place in question, however diverse our individual experiences of that place may be."

Alongside the value of the somatic approaches described, we also understand that our shared identities in the LGBTQIA+ community may have played a role. There has been some debate about the importance (or not) of client-therapist matching and its (im)possibility in intersectional terms (Freeman-Coppadge & Langroudi, 2021). Ertl et al. (2019) conclude that what counts most is the therapist's multicultural competence. Luna confirms that due to the invisibility of the microaggressive trauma she's suffered, Rebecca's lesbian identity provided a safe harbor from which to depart. Rebecca confirms the sense of a special alliance due to this shared identity, while also aware that this sensation requires careful professional monitoring. In self-reflection, Rebecca questions whether her own lesbian identity and childhood experience in the 1980s could have made her less attentive to Luna's microaggressive trauma due to improved legal and social rights. Luna does not believe so.

Rebecca's concerns are supported by Trottier and Williams (2019) who write:

Just because I am trying to be wildly mindful, it does not exempt me from perpetuating systems of oppression, It does not exempt me from having hetero and cisnormative tendencies seep into my language and into the materials I am using. It is imperative that I own and recognize the inevitability that I will microaggress. (p. 38)

The risk of working counter to the client remains despite a shared identity, as identities may be lived very differently. Furthermore, each identity within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum is distinct (Hetherington et al., 2021). This umbrella term brings the risk of misrecognition of the differences to which Zappa (2017) draws attention regarding the invisibility of transgender experiences.

Rebecca modeled a willingness to self-reflect and seek out her own implicit bias that could impede the therapeutic alliance. This stance is important because a key problem with microaggressions is that they are by definition invisible to the aggressor who normally purports to mean well. The subdolent nature of microaggression is evident in an exchange Rebecca had with a heterosexual colleague. The colleague shared her intake procedure of asking potential clients if they

metaphorically felt "comfortable in her armchair," explaining that feeling safe was a prerequisite for successful therapy. If they did not, the colleague would refer them to someone else. Rebecca's initial reaction was to agree that such an approach was important. However, upon further reflection, she felt a familiar tightening in her chest and grip in her belly. The colleague was unwittingly reproposing lived dynamics: heterosexual society cannot change to meet your needs. The implicit message is, "If you feel safe: great! If you don't, go somewhere else." What is missing is the therapist's being open to the possibility that they themselves might change and work towards rectifying whatever aspect of the setting has contributed to their potential client's not feeling comfortable. To be an ally (a person from the dominant group who expressly wishes to support the minority group), one must be consistently ready to call oneself into question. Failure to recognize privilege within an intersectional approach easily leads to blindspots regarding an LGBTQIA+ person's potential lived experiences.

Being an ally therefore depends upon the ability to self-reflect, which in turn depends upon the therapist's ability to self-regulate, and evoke somatic safety i.e. power-from-within. A regulated nervous system is a pre-requisite for reflection (Perry, 1997), but (self-) criticism necessarily triggers threat responses (somatically) and defense mechanisms (psychologically) that block this process. Attention to somatic markers indicating safety or stress, both for the art therapist and the client, becomes important for the recognition of oppressive power dynamics.

Power-from-within further contributes to an anti-oppressive therapeutic alliance because the nervous system attunes to the states of other nervous systems present in the same environment (Levine, 1997; Porges, 2017). Power-over activates anxiety and threat responses in others while power-from-within increases the others' somatic safety. When a microaggression is made visible, power-from-within contributes to a sense of safety that allows space for humility, countering defensive reactions to a perceived attack. Precisely because the threat response is an embodied response, somatic training is an invaluable additional tool, enabling the art therapist to recognize

their discomfort, locate it in their body and intercept the defense mechanisms that are otherwise autonomically triggered. A core tenet of cultural humility requires art therapists to shift their power to meet clients on equal terms (Jackson, 2020). To do this, fear must be transformed into curiosity; judgment into exploration. Even when the therapist fails to meet those needs but demonstrates their availability to work with the client in resolving this, they open a space for a reparative lived experience.

Conclusion

"I've discovered that my body is me, and if I let it take part in my exploration of who I am, then I do see myself reflected in it." The body is *always* present regardless of the therapy technique employed and as such all change can and must occur within it. Luna explains how her ability to trust herself and others, relinquishing dynamics of control, develops hand in hand with her somatic felt sense. We attribute Luna's capacity to her increased connection with her power-from-within, a feeling of safety within the body independent of external events. Her testimonies throughout this article demonstrate how an integrated somatic approach to art therapy that nurtures power-from-within can provide our users with lived experiences in which their identity value is not a luxury to be fought after but a right to be built upon.

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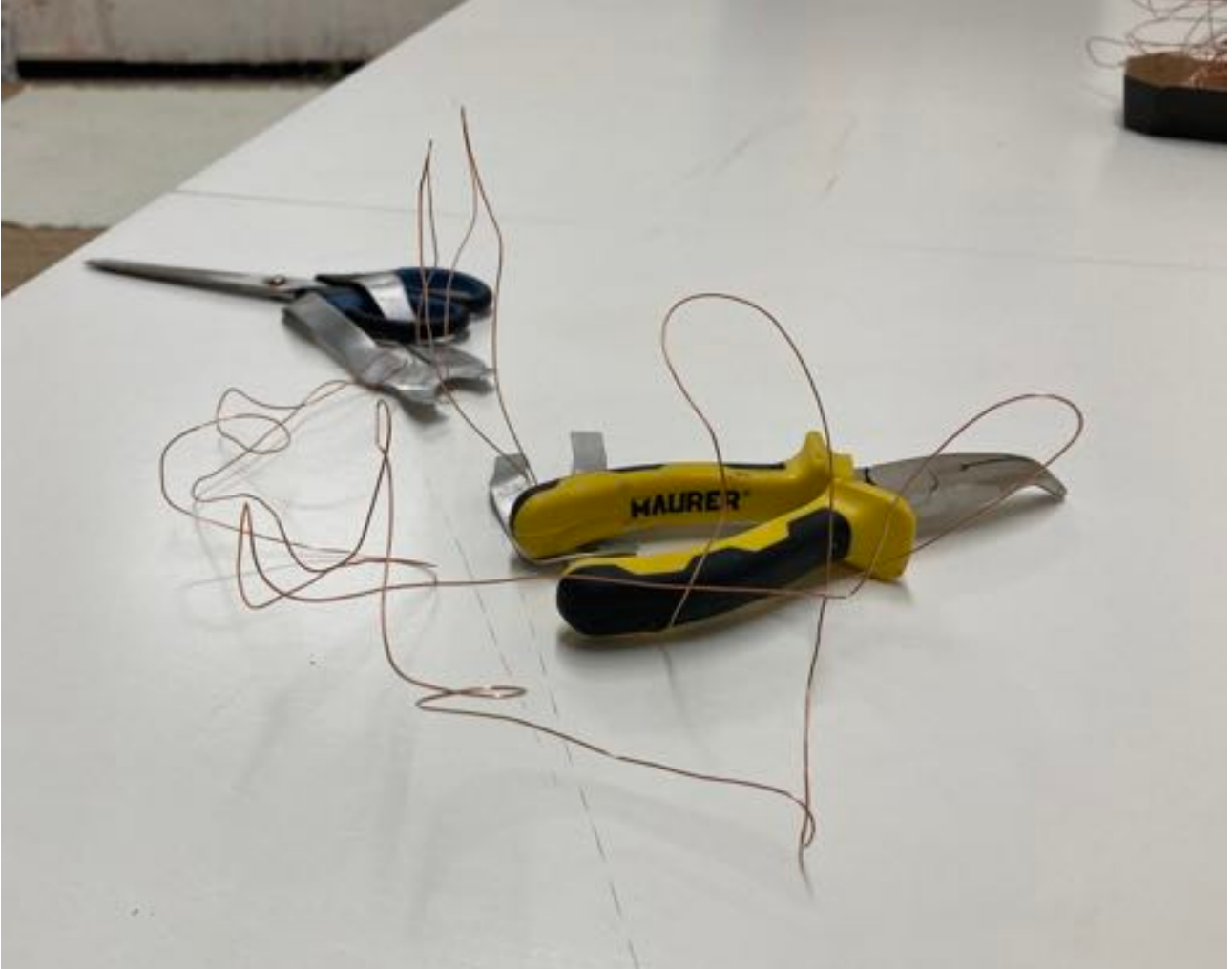
Figures

Fig. 1 : *Fun-fair ride.* Metal wire, pliers and scissors, 40 x 30 x 15 cm.

(The creative process is prevalent in the wire's dynamics).

Fig. 2 : Body tracing. Watercolour on paper, 230 x 150 cm

Fig. 3 : Clay Field. Wooden box and clay, 30 x 40 x 5 cm.