

# Mapping Experience Through Art-Based Research

*Maria Letsiou*, Adjunct Assistant Professor  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

## Abstract

In this visual essay, I focus on the possibilities in contemporary art that open up new approaches in art-based research. Aesthetic mapping and the creative strategy of the conceptual collage were used to investigate the lived experience, including interrelationships with locations and teaching practices. Aesthetic mapping was used as a method of documentation of a living inquiry that uncovers my relationships with places and people. A conceptual collage of notions and images was used to produce meanings for that experience. Visual material was generated through the collection and transformation of images related to place. Part of this visual material stems from a teaching project that took place in a village in northern Greece.

**Keywords:** conceptual collage, contemporary art, art-based research methodology, art education

## Bio

**Maria Letsiou** (Ph.D.) is a visual artist and art education researcher. She is an adjunct assistant professor in the School of Early Childhood Education at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. As a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at UIUC's School of Art and Design in the United States (2015), she conducted research on learning through video production. Her research interests include young people's unsolicited creative practices on social media, art-based research, and a/r/tography. She is a practitioner and a researcher in both the public school and art studio settings.

## Mapping Experience Through Art-Based Research

The practice of visual arts as inquiry has transformed qualitative research, and researchers have adapted the nonverbal methods of gathering, analyzing, and presenting data (Eisner, 1976, 2003; McNiff, 1998; Irwin & Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2008). Eisner's (1976, 2003) research on educational connoisseurship has significantly contributed to art-based research. He recognized ten dimensions in which the scientific and artistic approaches to research differ. I focus on two of the dimensions: the form of representation and the role of form. Eisner (1976, 2003) argued the artistic form of representation enables researchers to benefit from their idiosyncratic perspectives and conveys meaning in nonliteral ways. The role of form places significance on the way data are presented. The essential content in this visual essay is comprised of visual format and images. Consequently, conclusions are drawn through the meaning-making process triggered by the images. This study aligns with the premise that the art-based research methodology offers unique approaches to the creation of new knowledge that cannot be replaced by other research methods.

As a visual artist, my main concern is the investigation of how different processes during the creative practice lead to multiple decisions. I am particularly intrigued by the ways in which contemporary creative strategies produce meaning. For instance, conceptual collages and the recontextualization of images are powerful strategies.

The practice of artistic collages originated with modern art. Modern artists used different materials other than pigment or clay, rather they still used cut images and other remnants as art materials. In contrast, the contemporary strategy of conceptual collages digs underneath the implied meanings of images and objects to draw peculiar connections that contribute to the meaning of art practice. For instance, emphasis on the process of production, the reconceptualization of images, and peculiar juxtapositions are used to address the postmodern web of ideas. These ideas include a critique of the taken-for-granted assumption about the notion of art (Barrett, 2011). For instance, several painting styles have been used to depict images that are not usually correlated with those styles (Marshall, 2008). Moreover, artists create unusual juxtapositions of images and notions, such as identity issues, history

to other intentions. The art series (see appendix) I present in this visual essay is comprised of conceptual collages of notions related to place.

My current artistic research is focused on topics that emerged from my interrelationship with place. Moreover, I have experimented with the aesthetic mapping process—a method used by some avant-garde artists to investigate social, political, and aesthetic issues (O'Rourke, 2013). Movement through space entered the art world as a way of searching how space, as a territory of investigation, may inform practice (O'Rourke, 2013). Mapping as a metaphor or art craft is one of many practices (such as photography and notes) that artists have used to document actions in urban settings.

I use imaginary maps and other art crafts that usually depict aspects of a location (e.g., postcards) as a method of documenting a living inquiry. I determine living inquiry to be the process that is settled into the space among the roles of an artist, researcher, and teacher. Irwin and de Cosson (2004) argue that the living inquiry perspective is an adequate lens to reconsider practices in the context of the mutual interrelationships of the roles.

The produced and curated art objects are the result of a creative investigation of the meaning that may be generated from the collected items in a city. Art production is a metaphor for the mundane, everyday experience as a meaningful act. This investigation is founded on the mapping process adopted by Situationist International (Miles & Libersat, 2016; O'Rourke, 2013), which is an avant-garde movement that investigated notions of space and mobility within urban spaces. These practices inspired me, so I created aesthetic maps that depicted my subjective relationship with places I encountered when I walked or wandered through the city. The premise that life should be encounter as art is the foundation of Situationist International's actions. Drifting into urban space as a behavior enables the participants to encounter everyday experiences within the city as emotional journeys driven by subjective interpretations. I am attracted to the way people's everyday activities may be rendered through an artistic stance.

During my wandering, I collected visual materials (e.g., photographs and objects) and then transformed them into images that reflected my idiosyncratic relationship with a place. In particular, I created aesthetic mapping of the traits that triggered specific emotions. The art objects were metaphors of the items used in the tourism culture (e.g., maps, postcards, and souvenirs).

These objects typically embody the tourist's gaze over particular monuments and spectacles, but in artistic research, they are used as signs of urban settings.

In this essay, I adapt the same tactic of creation, but the material I use is derived from a teaching project I conducted in a junior high school located in the village of Kolchiko in the district of Thessaloniki in Greece during the 2015–2016 academic year. I employed the aesthetic mapping perspective during the teaching project, so the aesthetic mapping was composed of art objects and images created by the students. The junior high school students investigated their location using videos, paintings, photographs, and other media. This teaching project embodied the art-based research model in the art classroom because it entailed experiential and inquiry-based learning with a definite purpose and topic (Marshall & D'Adamo, 2011).

I introduced my students (13–14 years of age) to the topic of exploration of place. I asked them to narrate stories from their everyday lives that took place during activities such as games, adventures in nature, wandering in urban spaces, and interacting with local historical monuments and buildings. Then, I organized a field trip during which students drifted through known routes of the village. Their task was to narrate stories from their lives that connect with specific places and exchange this information with their peers. The activities were recorded through the students' photography and videography. New media, as a documentation of the action, offered students the opportunity to reconsider the usual and mundane use of smartphones. In addition, video as an artistic medium provided the students with the opportunity to experiment with the new media. Later, students experimented with editing techniques to communicate meaning from the field trip. I introduced them to ways in which montages communicate meaning through cuts and camera angles.

This art-based presentation includes images of the teaching project and art crafts that I merged into images that represent tourist objects, such as maps and postcards. My purpose is to offer a subjective representation of the place and my interrelationship with it through living inquiry. The art crafts were created from found vintage paper crafts. This series presents the process of transforming paper crafts by refusing to follow given instructions. I have combined these images with photographs of locations I was involved with during the teaching project. The juxtaposition of these images—artwork with photographs and video stills—was determined using the conceptual connections derived from the denoted and connoted meanings. For instance, the

topics include rural life and domestic art. I have correlated images of artwork and photographs using devices such as visual metaphors and conceptual connections that focus on the topics and art media.

## Conclusion

My story shows the transformative power of the art-based research methodology when the multiple roles of the teacher, artist, and researcher are interchangeably implied. The creative strategy of the conceptual collage reveals the potential of multiple and ambiguous meanings in art practice in the context of art-based research. The focus of my art investigation (i.e., the location) facilitates the transformation of mundane actions into significant material. In this case, every day, mundane experiences may be transformed into a meaningful, creative, and critical activities through the practice of psychogeography. The mapping process is used as both an artist practice and teaching content. Therefore, the potential implementation of drifting around urban environments into the context of art learning is delineated.

## References

- Barrett T. (2011). *Making art: Form and meaning*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Eisner, E. (1976). Educational connoisseurship and criticism: Their form and functions in educational evaluation. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 10, 135–150.
- Eisner, E. (2003). Educational connoisseurship and educational criticism: An art-based approach to educational evaluation. In T. Kellaghan & D. L. Stufflebeam (Eds.), *International handbook of educational evaluation* (pp. 153–166). New York, NY: Springer.
- Irwin, R. L., & de Cosson, A. (Eds.). (2004). *A/r/tography: Rendering self through art-based living inquiry*. Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.
- Leavy, P. (2008). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Marshall, J. (2008). Visible thinking: Using contemporary art to teach conceptual skills. *Art Education*, 61(2), 38–45.
- Marshall, J., & D'Adamo, K. (2011). Research in the classroom: A new paradigm in art education. *Art Education*, 64(5), 12–18.

- McNiff, S. (1998). *Art-based research*. London, England: Jessica Kingsley.
- Miles, A. P., & Libersat, U. J. (2016). ROAM: Walking, mapping, and play: Wanderings in art and art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 57(4), 341–357.
- O'Rourke, K. (2013). *Walking and mapping: Artist as cartographers*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

# Appendix

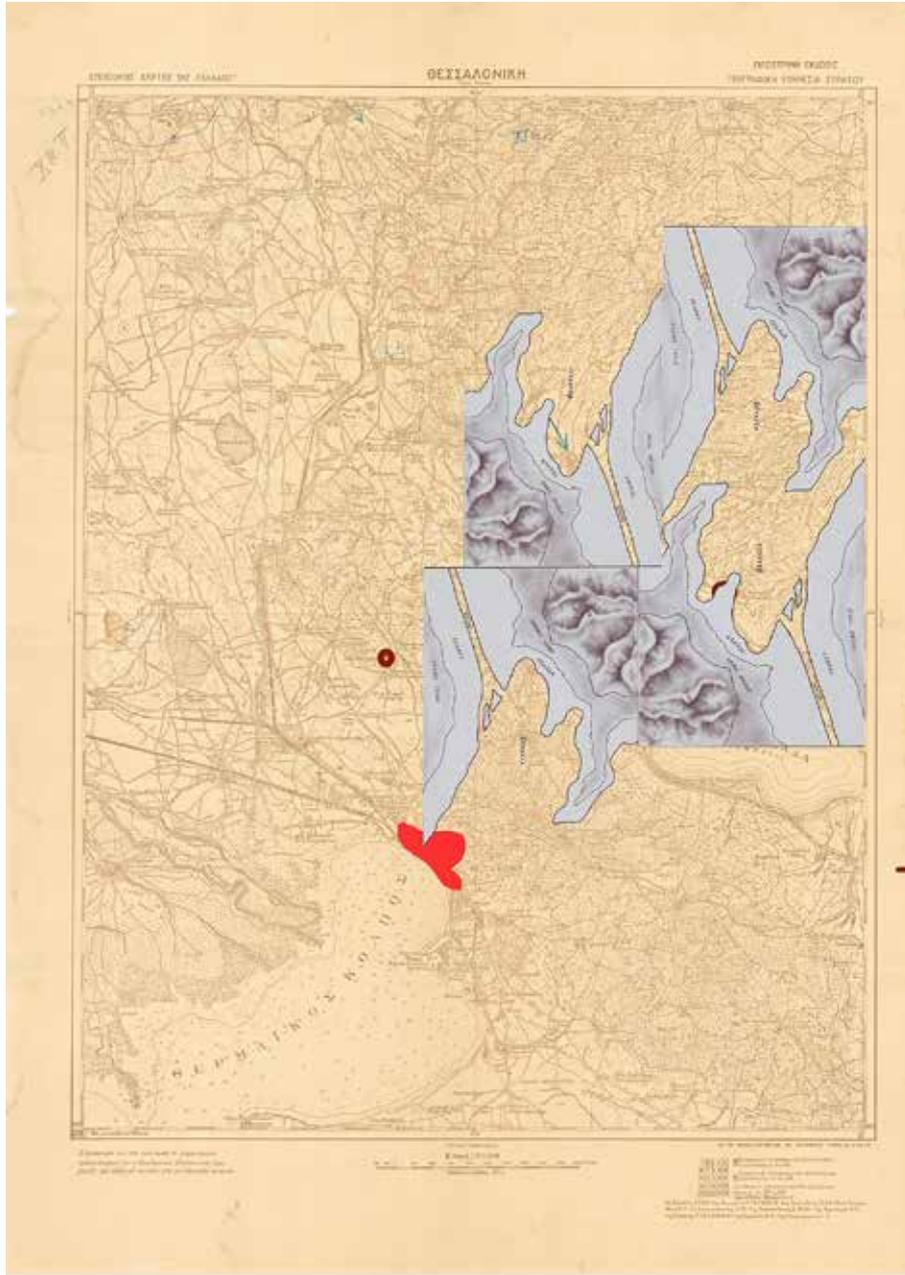


Figure 1. *My map.* I create a digital collage with an early 20th century military map from the area of Thessaloniki and parts of a vintage paper craft.





Figure 3. *Rural Life I*. Stills from students' videos and vintage paper crafts.

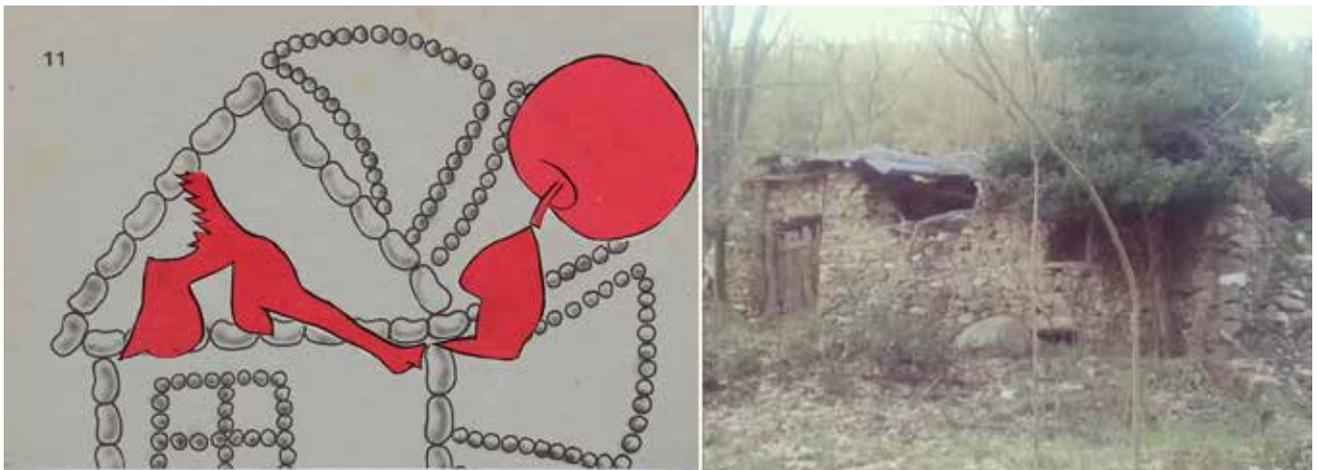


Figure 4. *The Old Mill*. Stills from students' videos and vintage paper crafts.

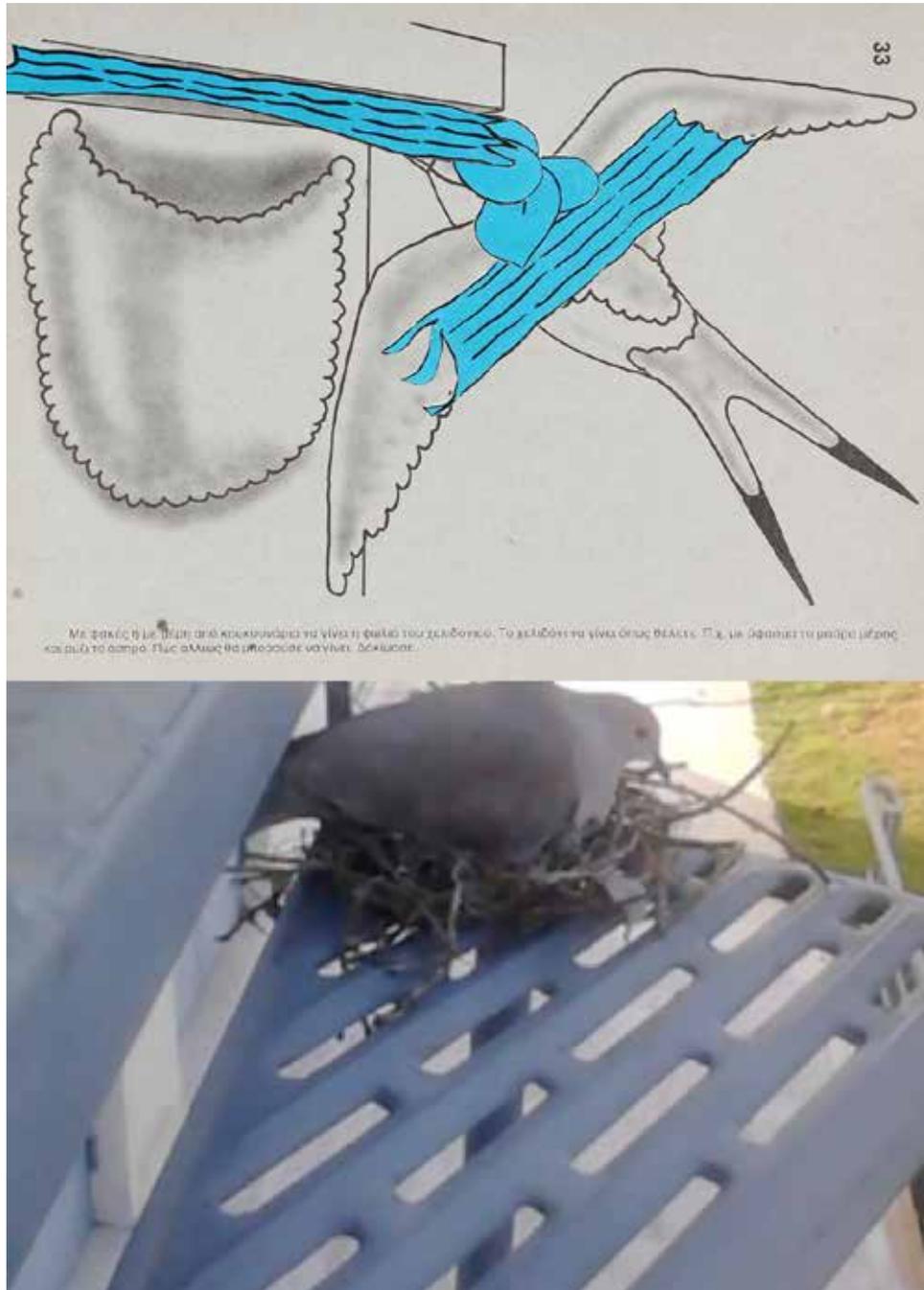


Figure 5. *Rural Life II*. Collage with vintage paper craft and still from the student's video.



Figure 6. *Clear view*. Stills from students' videos.



Figure 7. *Urban View*. Digital collage with stills from students' videos.

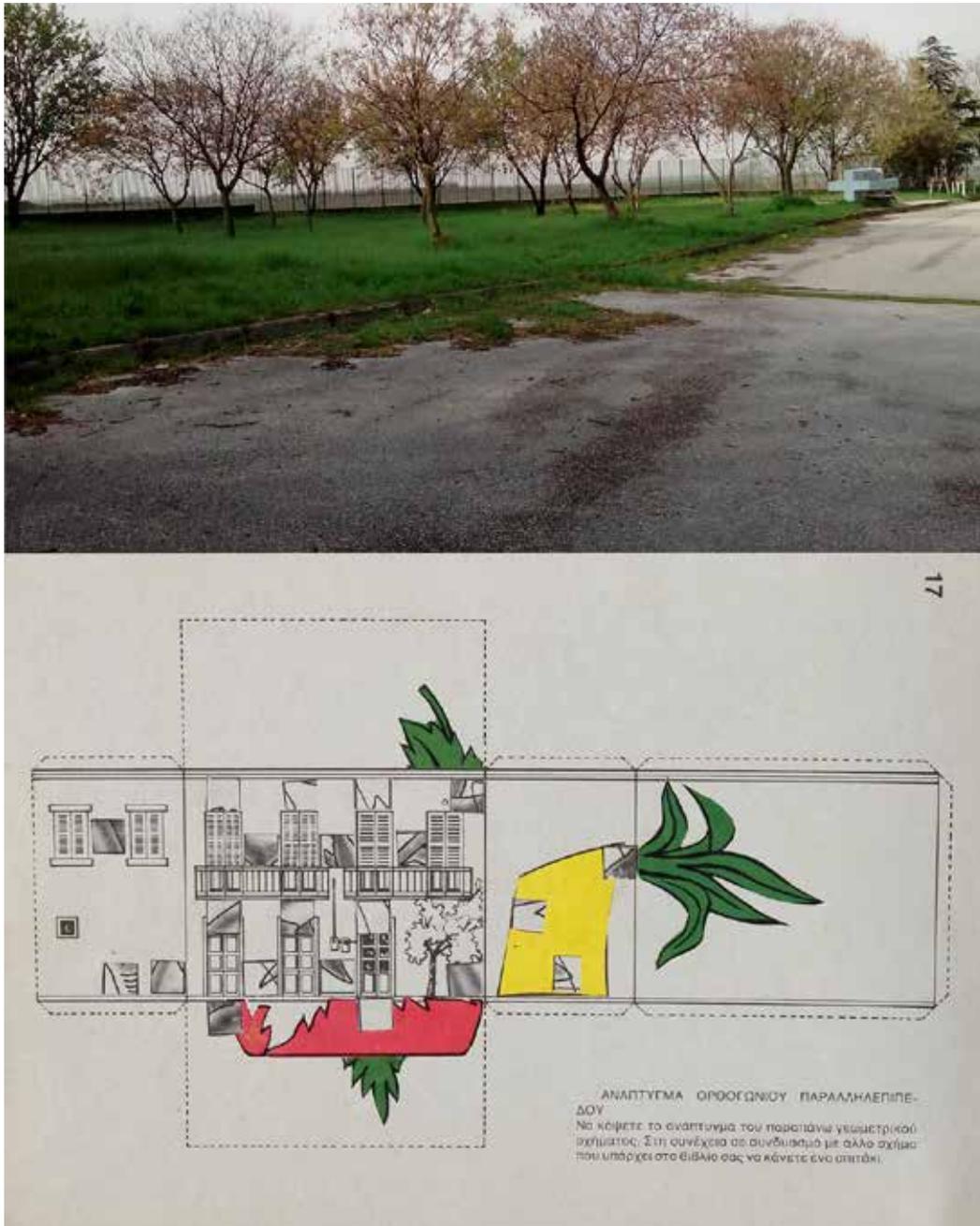


Figure 8. *School Yard*. Stills from students' videos and vintage paper crafts.



Figure 9. Household Art I. Stills from students' videos and vintage paper crafts.

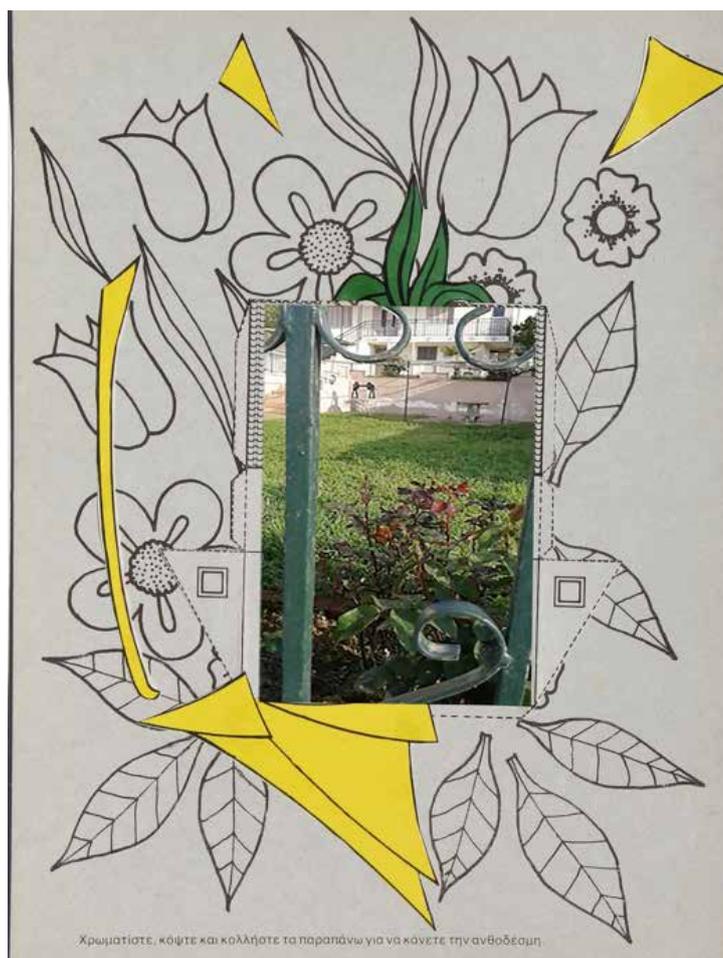


Figure 10. Household Art II. Stills from students' videos and vintage paper crafts.

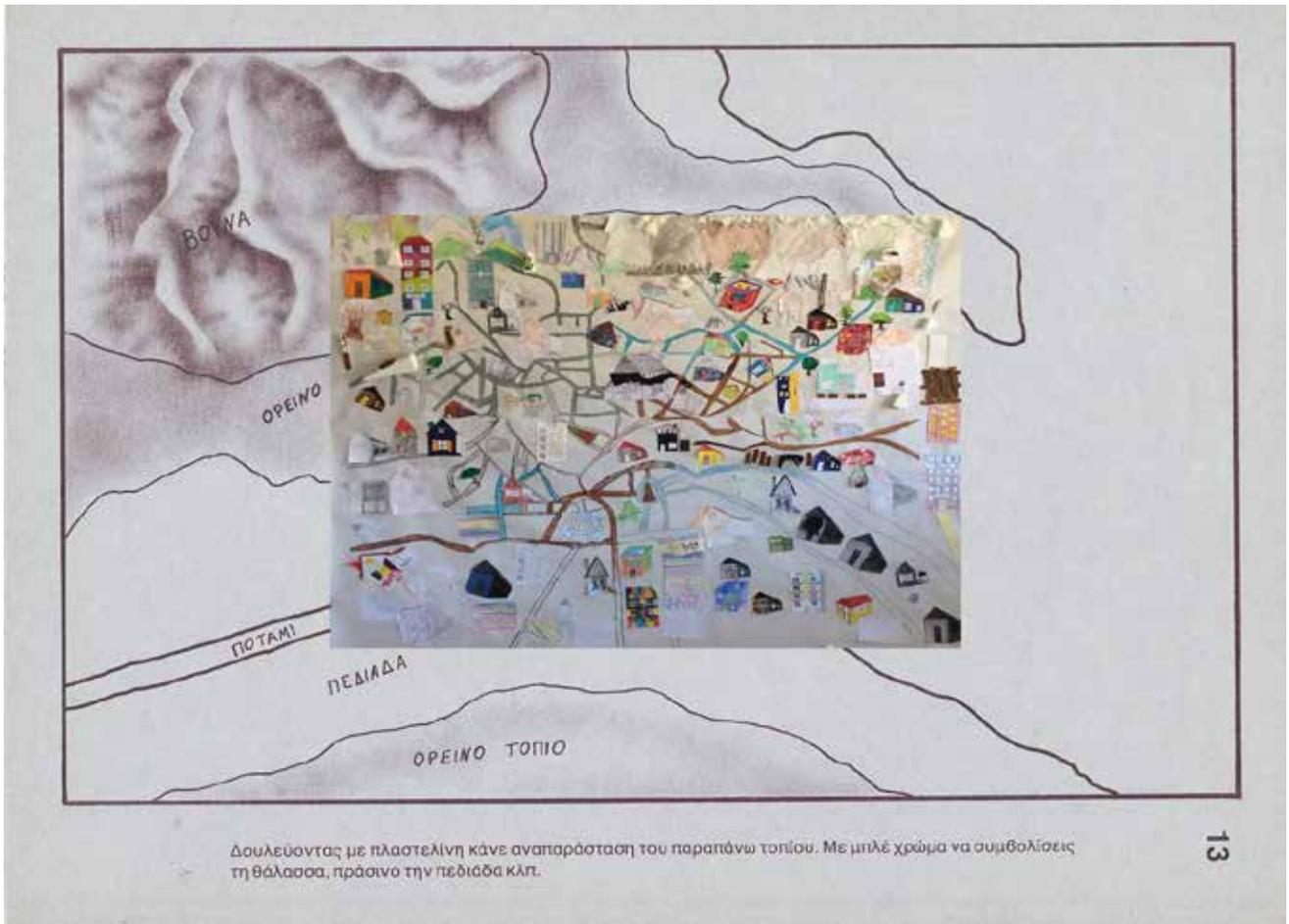


Figure 11. *Our Village*. Collage with students' artwork and vintage paper craft.



Figure 12. *The old mile*. Digital collage with student's photograph and vintage paper craft.