Hello. My name is Alisa Ray and I trained as a community arts counsellor in 2012. I’m going to share my experience of working in different kinds of groups and how we entered the space in these various contexts. So, we re-enter a space when we returned to it after our first session, after many sessions or after breaks such as a school.

Our intention as a community arts council is to facilitate our art groups in a safe and contained manner. The container is a symbol for our creating a safe working framework for our groups. The safe container provides a structure that is familiar, reliable, and consistent. It also holds the time between sessions and allows for re-entering a space.

So, time is the underlying structure of your framework. And the group should meet at a set time and it's important to start and end the sessions on time. A routine follows on from time and a predictable routine, can help establish consistency and reliability and instil a sense of safety for participants, both adults and children. And containing elements such as familiar checking in devices, language, movements, or objects can also contribute to this working framework.

So, I've worked in the Lefika open studio program for a number of years, with both older and younger children. The number of children is currently reduced to 10 in a group because of COVID and our groups are operating in more of a closed manner. But I'm going to talk about the pre COVID days where we had 15 children attending our open studio program.

So, the children needed to return the parental guardian permission form. And then the first 15 children on the day were given entrance to the open studio. So, the routine that you see set up here is the anchor that holds a fluid group of children. Children re-enter the open studio space within a term and within a year. Each term indicates a new beginning and each end of term an ending more as a structural feature of the space, than necessarily a beginning and an ending for each child. Time of the groups have been consistent starting at three in the afternoon and ending at 16:30 on the same weekday during school terms and taking place in the same space.

Calendars that are visible in the room are created and referred to each session, so that the children know how many sessions they'll have in the term and routines are firmly established. There's an eating time from 2:30 to 3:00 PM in the common area and an eating time in the studio from 16:15 to 16:30. The sessions, follow familiar patterns of checking in with emoji cards that's a consistent object in the space. And there's a creating time, there's a sharing time, tidying up time. It's always interesting how children who've been coming to Lefika for a while appear more at ease in the space. I noticed that they're more prone to experiment with art materials and they're more comfortable in their creative expression. And I'm convinced that this is because of the predictable, reliable manner in which Lefika functions.

So Lefika’s checking in cards. They have become part of Lefika’s standard checking in process. The children are encouraged to put words to their emotions they're feeling. This strengthens emotional regulation and also provides the children who do not want to talk with an option of picking a card and just showing the group a feeling. So, this is a nonthreatening option that adds to the sense of containment.

Then I'm going to share with you a different kind of re-entering. So, this is a children's home that I worked in for eight years until COVID came. We also followed set times and also worked according to the school terms. But in this instance, the work took place in a children's home. So, the children were under six years of age, and it was an open group in the sense that every now and again child would be adopted and leave the home permanently. And this would open up the space for a new child to come to the home. This presents its own form of challenges in creating a safe working space. To demarcate an art counselling area, we made use of a familiar tablecloth. The tablecloth was used as a symbol, and it became a ritual. When we put the tablecloth over their eating space, it was changed into our art counselling space. Given the nature of a children's home, the abandonment wounds and the desires of the children to have a mother, it was very important to keep our role as community art counsellors clear in that space.

We did not want to create any expectations of being something we were not. When a child called me mama, I would acknowledge their desire, but also tell them that as much as they want me to be their mama, I was there to do art with them. My colleagues and myself became known as the art ladies. Hello ladies was the greeting was the greeting the little ones would give us when we arrived at our session. We maintained this art lady role by providing the children with art and only art. Even if the children wanted to drink some water, we would send them to their caregivers for that. We did not help in the bathroom or in the bedroom or the kitchen.

We were there to provide art and not set up any other expectations. This was not always easy to do. But it created a sense of safety in terms of not adding to rejection or disappointment. Um, the children's home also provides an example of what kind of routine activities can be done with very young children.

So, our check-in was usually a movement check-in. We would dance to a familiar piece of music in an unstructured way. We would then do some angel breathing. Before starting the creative activities. So, the children as they're breathing, they're lifted up like an angel and as they breathe out their arms are let down. Breathing was an essential aid in calming the children.

We also use blank drawing books to mark the beginning of each term and the arrival of a new child in the group. These were important also because I took the books with me home. I brought them back each session, but the children liked like me to keep their books. And it was a kind of a transitional object in that they knew I was thinking of them when I was away from them.

And then we also had a beaded chicken that was part of the art materials. And this was a very important, consistent object in the space. So, I remember when I forgot the chicken the one week and how much trouble I got into for that. It became a whole topic for us to explore. Was the chicken sick? Did chicken get adopted? or could the children accept that I was forgetful, and not perfect and could make mistakes?

Then I'm going to share a project that I did in on the streets of Melville. Um, it's a project with displaced persons and every Tuesday morning we would meet outside the charity shop and run an art project. So, I had support from the charity shop and also from a church group who would meet just before our project began. And this was very much an open group, quite literally, so people that were just passing by sometimes joined the project. But after some time, we did get regular participants, so much so that one of them was supported by the church and sent to rehab.

So, there were various art activities that I tried out with this project. But when it became more established, if I think back, it was actually the use of a certain art material that held this project together. It was one week we tried using chalk around the pavement of the charity shop. And the act of using chalk in this public space gave people that were not usually seen an opportunity for some recognition in the community. And the chalk also left a presence. So, it's not your permanent material, but you can still see the chalk for some time on the pavement. Um, and in this instance, the re-entering of the space besides the regular time format and the routine of providing participants with food and tea, before we started. It was held together by the kind of art material we were using.

For me there was a joy and an alive ness in transforming this public space into an art space. It seemed to me that the gaze of the community eye could be transformed from one that regarded displaced people with contempt to one that gave acceptance and admiration.