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Creative and contemplative autoethnography, slow transit, and more-than-human governance in the High Tatras sub-mountain region

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Standard academic field methodologies often approach landscape observation through directive agendas, rapid transit, and extractive data collection. This essay reflects on a 10-day Culture Moves Europe artistic residency in Eastern Slovakia hosted by Machaon International, proposing a contemplative, non-directive autoethnographic methodology positioned at the intersection of biology and design. By embracing slow, multi-modal transit (a 16-hour journey from Sintra to Gánovce) and a practice of "self-extinguishment"—emptying ego-driven expectations to achieve environmental receptivity—the researcher documents how mountain topographies condition local human culture and ecological rhythms. The essay critiques the hyper-convenience of contemporary mass tourism, arguing instead that transit friction fosters deep ecological care and wandering. Furthermore, it examines local conservation efforts in the High Tatras sub-mountain area, advocating for a change from extractive eco-tourism toward regenerative models rooted in multispecies coexistence and more-than-human governance. Finally, a four-stage visual workflow (immersion, mental processing, memory-based drawing, and direct photographic rendering) is contextualised as a rigorous tool for autoethnographic visual research.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Self-extinguishment, Eco-tourism, Slow transit, High Tatras, More-than-humans, Natural landscape

Open Peer Review

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1. **Stefania Tufi**, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

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1. Introduction

Transdisciplinary inquiries operating at the intersection of biology and design frequently struggle with methodological tension (Polk, 2014; Osborne, 2015; Marseglia et al., 2026). While biological research traditionally prioritises empirical categorisation, systematic sampling, and functional analysis, design disciplines often emphasise spatial framing, aesthetic synthesis, and material intervention. When brought together in field settings, these fields risk falling into an extractive paradigm, treating the landscape merely as a repository of biological data to be catalogued or a spatial canvas to be designed and commercialised.

This essay argues for an alternative synthesis, offering a reflective practice where biological awareness and design sensitivity converge not to manipulate or quantify the environment, but to observe its underlying ecological order and cultural conditioning. By viewing living systems through a design lens, and vice versa, the researcher shifts focus from output-oriented production to continuous spatial and biological attunement. This perspective acknowledges that natural landscapes are dynamic, self-organising systems that actively shape the human cultures embedded within them (Ferreira et al., 2026b).

To explore this transdisciplinary space, this essay draws on a 10-day mobility stay in Slovakia supported by the Culture Moves Europe program and hosted by the non-governmental organisation Machaon International. Located in Gánovce. Happening within the sub-mountainous region of the High Tatras, the residency provided a structured context for examining how traditional landscapes, local heritage, and natural landscapes interface with non-interventional research methods. Rather than approaching the stay with a rigid, predefined agenda, the project examined how slow spatial immersion can inform environmental research without imposing arbitrary experimental frameworks upon the landscape.

1.1 Positionality

Autoethnographic research inherently depends on the researcher's subjective presence (Adams et al., 2017; Bala et al., 2023; Lima et al., 2026; Ferreira et al., 2026a). However, rather than foregrounding individual authority, this work adopts a posture of self-extinguishment (Table 1), tentatively defined as a deliberate, practice-based emptying of ego, predefined expectations, and the urgency to perform rapid academic output.

In field research, directive approaches can blind the observer to subtle ecological interactions by forcing observations into pre-existing conceptual buckets inside disciplinary siloes. The self-extinguishment practice counteracts this bias through a clear operational sequence:

- Contemplative full-mode: The practitioner refrains from dictating what should occur or what data ought to be gathered, allowing environmental phenomena to present themselves naturally.
- Depletion of comparative judgment: The observer suspends the impulse to evaluate the observed landscape against baseline familiarity or ideal ecological states, accepting the environment as a self-sufficient reality.
- Receptive attunement: Time and landscape are permitted to insert thoughts, resonances, and observations directly into the practitioner's cognitive process.

By systematically dampening the ego, the practitioner ceases to act as an external collector of environmental facts and instead becomes an open conduit for spatial and biological inputs, increasingly accepting their natural condition of being.

2. Transit as a spatial methodology

Modern mobility and international tourism are dominated by what can be termed the "nightmare of convenience", an over-optimised travel paradigm that prioritises speed, frictionlessness, and point-to-point efficiency. By treating transit time as operational dead weight to be minimised, hyper-convenient travel severs the traveller from the spatial realities (cultural, ecological, *etc*) connecting origin and destination.

In contrast, the travel journey to Slovakia here depicted offers resistance to convenience, and treats extended, multi-modal transit as a core autoethnographic methodology. The 16-hour journey from Sintra, Portugal, to Gánovce, Slovakia (spanning cars, flights, regional buses, and long-distance trains) was structured as a deliberate practice of slowness and spatial transition:

1. Deceleration of need: Long hours in transit require the systematic slowing down of urgency, expectation, and immediate goal seeking.

Table 1. Definition of Self-Extinguishment.

Definition — **Self-Extinguishment** A contemplative autoethnographic practice wherein the practitioner deliberately sets aside personal agendas, theoretical projections, and directive goals, adopting a posture of total receptivity to incoming natural, spatial, and cultural phenomena. Grounded in an act of resistance against an industry and academic paradigm that continuously suffocates creativity by rewarding standardised success patterns, self-extinguishment serves as a deliberate refusal of the compulsion to constantly produce, build, or "do more". Operating from the premise that humans have already done too much and that nature itself is enough, the practice rejects the illusion of endless accumulation (e.g., more objects, more design, more art, more study) in favor of emptying the self down to a zeroed sum of being. By deliberately burning away personal ambition, individual desire, and comparative judgment, the practitioner resists becoming an instrument of power or market perpetuation. Instead, self-extinguishment allows the practitioner to melt into a place of non-reality and fluid entanglement with the natural landscape, transforming field research from an act of extraction or performance into a quiet, receptive act of living and presence.

2. Reframing friction: Physical transitions (such as five continuous hours aboard a single train) force an internal cognitive shift, clearing mental noise and preparing the practitioner for deep field reception.

3. Wandering into wondering: Reclaiming transit friction transforms passive transit into an active spatial journey. Wandering across geographic thresholds cultivates a profound capacity for wondering, instilling an ethics of care for the planet, the self, and the past, present, and future beings of a place.

Far from being a logistical obstacle, slow transit serves as an essential cognitive airlock. It works as an extended threshold during which the practitioner sheds regional baselines and enters the field state fully attuned.

3. Environmental perception

Human perception of space is inevitably calibrated by geographic baselines. For a person whose primary spatial orientation is shaped by the dynamic environments of Sintra (~528 m maximum altitude) in Portugal, environmental perception is anchored in coastal dynamics, where liquid horizons, tidal shifts, and coastal cliff structures dictate atmospheric awareness. Shifting from this maritime baseline to the landlocked, sub-mountainous region of Gánovce in Eastern Slovakia (1,268 m of average altitude in the High Tatras) required a fundamental recalibration of perceptual scale.

Unlike the fluid openness of the coast, where the presence of water continuously draws the eye outward, the High Tatras sub-mountain area presents a looming, vertical presence that defines both physical boundaries and cultural rhythms. The mountain landscape acts as an active conditioning force, subtly and prominently shaping human settlement, spatial habits, and daily life:

- Topographic conditioning: Observing how daily routines, architectural placement, and local mobility in Eastern Slovakia are directly structured by mountain weather patterns, wind corridors, and high-altitude topography.

- Alertness to subtle influence: By operating in a "contemplative full-mode" the practitioner remains alert to both macro-scale topographical constraints and minimal, abstract environmental shifts (e.g., cloud formations cresting the peaks, atmospheric stillness, temperature drops sweeping through the sub-mountain valleys).

- Baseline displacement without judgment: Rather than attempting to decipher or evaluate the mountain landscape through a comparative coastal lens, the practice of self-extinguishment enables the observer to suspend judgment. The High Tatras environment is accepted on its own terms, not as a contrast to be measured against maritime familiarity, but as a self-contained, dominant ecological actor.

4. Towards regenerative eco-tourism & more-than-human governance

Contemporary eco-tourism frequently operates as a commodified extension of consumer culture, repackaging pristine natural landscapes into digestible, friction-free entertainment for mass pleasure. Based on field observations and interactions with host organization Machaon International in Gánovce, this section critiques standard mass-market tourism frameworks and advocates for a transition toward regenerative eco-tourism (Stronza et al., 2019; Araya López, 2021; Agius et al., 2025; Oláh et al., 2025; Bombico and Garcia, 2026; Sales, 2026; Civantos et al., 2026.

4.1 De-commodifying the tourist experience

Rather than treating nature as an entertainment asset or leveraging ecological beauty for speculative real estate development and resort expansion, organisations like Machaon International focus on preserving and disseminating traditional landscape values. So, it is informally consensual that true eco-tourism must resist the compulsion to build high-capacity infrastructure or optimise access for mass entry. One way of doing this is to insert physical travel barriers and maintain slow transit options that naturally filters out passive consumerism, while attracting visitors who possess the patience, care, and intentionality required to engage respectfully with natural and often fragile ecosystems.

4.2 More-than-human governance

Moving beyond human-centric decision-making requires integrating ecological agency directly into regional planning (Clarke et al., 2019; Light, 2024). In practice, local sustainable development must balance power across multi-stakeholder networks (including business owners, municipal authorities, and residents) while formally extending representation to the non-human realm by potentiating representation, agency, and immersion:

- Ecological representation: Granting natural systems (forests, mountain corridors, watersheds) a symbolic or legal voice at regional decision-making tables.
- Reclaiming agency: Allowing natural processes and ecological boundaries to dictate development limits rather than subordinating landscape integrity to commercial growth.
- Residency as immersion: Positioning artistic and research residencies not as consumer entertainment, but as slow, non-extractive frameworks for deep cultural immersion, local memory preservation, and multispecies coexistence.

5. The four-stage visual process

The synthesis of this autoethnographic practice can be formalised as a sequential, four-stage visual and cognitive process (Table 2). Rather than treating field research as an exercise in immediate data gathering or rapid spatial intervention, this process outlines how a practitioner systematically transitions from the habits of hyper-convenient consumption to a state of deep, non-extractive environmental attunement.

5.1 The four-stage process

The Four-Stage process is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Detail of the Four-stage process.

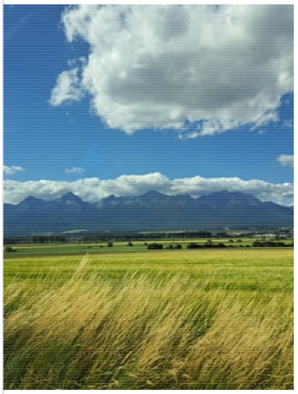
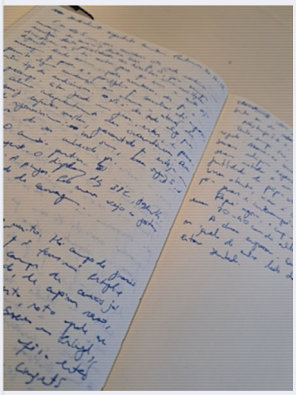
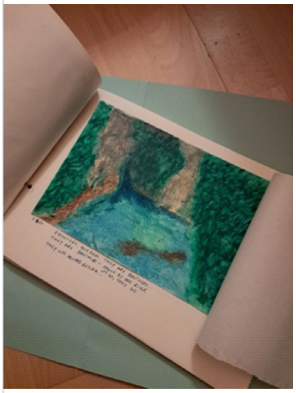
Stage #	Naming	Detail
1	Slow Transit: Cognitive Airlock	The process begins by deliberately rejecting hyper-convenient, frictionless travel. The extended multi-modal journey functions as a cognitive airlock, decelerating mental urgency, shedding external project deadlines, and forcing the practitioner into an intentional, reflective state before entering the study area.
2	Self-Extinguishment: Epistemic Reset	Upon arrival, the practitioner executes a conscious emptying of personal ambition, theoretical projections, and the urge to produce immediate outputs. Grounded in the premise that nature is already complete, this stage zeroes the ego and establishes a posture of total non-directive receptivity.
3	Spatial Attunement (Baseline Displacement): Perceptual Recalibration	With personal agendas suspended, the practitioner recalibrates perceptual baselines to the local environment. Moving from a coastal orientation (Sintra) to a sub-mountainous landscape (High Tatras area), the observer accepts the vertical topography and local rhythms on their own terms, free from comparative judgment.
4	Regenerative Practice & Governance: Ethical Re-orientation	In the final stage, receptive observation translates into ethical action. Starting with humble artistic outputs, it pivots away from extractive documentation or speculative design, aligning instead with local preservation efforts (Machaon International) and, potentially, more-than-human governance models that respect non-human agency.

During the 10-day stay Stage 3 was privileged, while the Stage 1 served as a recalibration phase, and Stage 2 as a personal background from which the entire practice departed. Therefore, Stage 4 is mostly an ambition, a future plan, and was delineated according to the remaining phases and set up based on the evolving relationship with Machaon International. The Stage 4 details remain to be unfolded, heavily dependent on the local urban planning strategies for the local area.

6. Non-directive artistic explorations

To practice self-extinguishment in the field, I used three simple media during the residency. Rather than trying to capture the landscape for commercial or scientific output, these methods allowed the environment of Gánovce and the High Tatras to guide the observation.

Table 3. Artistic mediums with their examples and details.

Medium	Figure	Focus	Method	Research Function
Photo Gallery		High Tatras and sub-mountain landscape, local flora, mountain light	Observational photography	Contextual visual evidence of site attunement
Written Diary		Slow transit, window contemplation	Reflective journaling & slow observation	Perceptual baseline and qualitative proof
Drawings		Local flora, mineral springs, ambient textures	Non-intention drawing at dawn/night	Direct non-extractive visual evidence

6.1 The three field media

1. Photo gallery: A collection of observational field photos documenting the High Tatras sub-mountain area, local flora, micro-geographies, and mountain light shifts across various times of day.

2. Written diary: Personal written entries capturing reflections during the stay, and daily window contemplation, recording the physical deceleration required for spatial attunement, and capturing immediate daily reflections upon the experience.

3. Hand-painted drawings: Created *in situ* using oil pastels, pencils, and direct finger-brushing during threshold hours (dawn and night). The drawing process was governed by non-intention, letting tactile contact trace immediate forms and textures without pre-planned compositions.

6.2 Empirical evidence typology

In Table 3 it is described the three means of expression developed during the stay.

7. Implications for biology and design research

Formalising this four-stage methodology yields three primary implications for transdisciplinary research operating across biology, landscape design, and environmental humanities:

1. Redefining methodological rigor through refusal

   In traditional academic frameworks, rigor is typically measured through output volume, sampling density, or rapid material intervention. This four-stage process redefines rigor as the discipline of refusal. The deliberate choice is to refrain from over-sampling, over-designing, or imposing directives (e.g., commercial, academic) onto ecosystems.

2. Shifting from extraction to reciprocal attunement

   By enforcing Stage 1 (Slow Transit) and Stage 2 (Self-Extinguishment) prior to observation, the methodology prevents the practitioner from treating the landscape as a mere repository of data or a canvas for design. The research act shifts from an extractive harvest of biological facts to a reciprocal alignment with existing ecological dynamics.

3. Re-evaluating the purpose of mobility residencies

   For funding programs (such as Culture Moves Europe) and host institutions, this model demonstrates that the highest value of a short-term field residency lies not in rushed, tangible deliverables produced under pressure, but in the long-term, structural recalibration of the practitioner's spatial ethics and perceptual capacity.

8. Conclusion

This essay has outlined a non-extractive, autoethnographic methodology for transdisciplinary field practice at the intersection of biology, landscape observation, and design. Rooted in a 10-day Culture Moves Europe residency in the sub-mountainous region the High Tatras with Machaon International, the study demonstrates how deliberate slowing and personal zeroing can fundamentally alter a person's relationship to place.

By systematically linking the physical friction of extended transit (Table 2, Stage 1) with the conscious emptying of ego and output-driven ambition (Table 2, Stage 2), the practitioner undergoes an essential epistemic reset. This enables a genuine recalibration of perceptual baselines. In this case, shifting from a Portuguese coastal orientation to a landlocked, vertical mountain reality (Table 2, Stage 3), without imposing pre-existing conceptual models or comparative judgments onto the landscape.

Ultimately, the proposed four-stage framework asserts that nature is not a canvas to be designed, nor a repository of data to be harvested for rapid academic production. Instead, field inquiry reaches its highest potential when it functions as an act of receptive attunement, aligning research (and artistic) practices with regenerative eco-tourism, local memory preservation, and more-than-human governance (Table 2, Stage 4).

For transdisciplinary practices navigating fragile ecosystems, the path forward requires less intervention and greater presence. By replacing the drive for endless accumulation with the discipline of self-extinguishment, research and practice ceases to be an instrument of extraction, being transformed into a quieter and enduring practice of ecological care and spatial responsibility.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval was not required for this manuscript, as it presents autoethnographic reflections on transdisciplinary research practice and spatial mobility, involving no interventional human subjects research or private personal data collection. *Machaon International* is referenced in its official capacity as the host organisation for the European Union *Culture Moves Europe* framework (Grant No. 2026–72526). All figures are original works generated by the author during the mobility period and are released under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY 4.0) license. Gemini (Google) was used to assist with linguistic editing, structural drafting, and journal formatting. The authors reviewed, edited, and took full responsibility for all final content.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data were created or analysed in this research.

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Stefania Tufi
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This is a fascinating article that argues against output-oriented production and extractive methodologies, and in favour of spatial and biological attunements by the researcher. It is a reflective essay based on autoethnographic, multi-media records generated through a close encounter with landscape. As a result, there is a light-touch approach towards the actual implementation of the advocated perspective, e.g. in relation to aspects such as de-commodifying the tourist experience or ecological representation. With respect to the tourist experience, it is difficult to reconcile the suggestion to introduce physical barriers with principles of inclusivity. In addition, the reader wonders how ecological representation can be accomplished, given that a type of nature's epistemology can only be understood/mediated through a human epistemology in the described context.
I appreciate the critique of the inner workings of academia and the quest for alternative methodologies, but in my view the narrative calls for a problematisation of key assertions and definitions. For example, definitions such as 'non-extractive' should be handled with care - even this paper can be considered to be 'extractive' in that it is the result of a researcher's observations (an output) on the basis of their experience of the landscape (the data), and it is shared with a community of researchers through a published text. I embrace the critique towards the marketisation of academia, but perhaps the critical gaze could include the author's own positionality as a privileged individual who is able to practise Self-Extinguishment (is this ever possible?) along the lines described in the article.
Even though the article is a valuable statement of intent, it would be interesting to propose how the practice described in the article can go beyond the individual experience and become an instrument of collective engagement.
In my view, the narrative is clear and engaging, but my stylistic preference would avoid the use of bullet points and integrate the explanations of terms and expressions into the main body of the text, in keeping with the autoethnographic approach and the use of media as outlined in the article.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: I am a sociolinguistic with specific expertise in spatial and ethnographic understandings of landscape (the Linguistic Landscape).

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.