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Reflexivas com Migrantes Latino-Americanos no Japão**

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Marita Ibañez Sandoval



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WALKING TOGETHER: SENSE/THINKING PHOTOWALKS WITH LATIN AMERICAN MIGRANTS IN JAPAN

Marita Ibañez Sandoval

Institute of Art and Design, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Japan

ABSTRACT

This article investigates how collective photowalks with Latin American migrants in Jōsō, Japan, activate multisensory and relational modes of perceiving the urban-rural environment. Sensibility is conceptualized as embodied, situated, and deeply intertwined with the histories and everyday practices of migrants. Rather than centering exclusively on photographic images, the analysis focuses on the perceptual, conversational, and affective processes that emerge during group walks, such as negotiating routes, pausing at multilingual signs, observing storefront textures, sharing memories, and commenting on seasonal atmospheres. This study is grounded in a practice-led visual methodology developed through extensive fieldwork and ongoing collaboration with Latin American migrant communities in Jōsō. From 2021 to 2023, both solo and collective photowalks were conducted with migrants from Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and Paraguay. The adoption of analog photography decelerated the image-making process, emphasizing attentiveness, embodied rhythms, and the temporalities of waiting. Walking functioned as a site of shared perception, supporting participants to contribute diverse linguistic, cultural, and sensory repertoires that reshaped interpretations and discussions of the landscape. The article contends that collective photowalks foster situated, co-created modes of perceiving place. These practices demonstrate how migrant communities inhabit, negotiate, and reinterpret Japanese landscapes through multisensory encounters that extend beyond visual representation.

KEYWORDS

photowalks, multisensory sensibility, Latin American migrants, participatory visual methods, landscape

CAMINHAR EM CONJUNTO: FOTOCAMINHADAS SENSORIAIS/ REFLEXIVAS COM MIGRANTES LATINO-AMERICANOS NO JAPÃO

RESUMO

Este artigo examina como fotocaminhadas coletivas com migrantes latino-americanos em Jōsō, no Japão, promovem modos multissensoriais e relacionais de percepção do ambiente urbano-rural. A percepção sensível é vista como integrada, situada e fortemente ligada às histórias e práticas cotidianas dos migrantes. A análise não se limita às imagens fotográficas, focando-se nos processos perceptivos, conversacionais e afetivos que surgem durante as caminhadas coletivas, que incluem a negociação de percursos, as pausas junto a sinalética multilíngue, a observação das texturas das montras, a partilha de memórias e as observações sobre as atmosferas sazonais. O estudo assenta numa metodologia visual orientada pela prática, desenvolvida a partir de trabalho de campo extensivo e na colaboração contínua com comunidades migrantes latino-americanas em Jōsō. Entre 2021 e 2023, foram realizadas fotocaminhadas individuais e coletivas com migrantes provenientes do Brasil, Peru, México, Equador e Paraguai. A adoção da fotografia analógica desacelerou o processo de produção de imagens, acentuando a atenção, os ritmos incorporados e as temporalidades da espera. O ato de caminhar funcionou como um espaço de percepção partilhada, permitindo aos participantes mobilizar repertórios linguísticos, culturais e sensoriais diversos, que reconfiguraram as interpretações e as discussões da paisagem. Sustenta-se que as fotocaminhadas coletivas promovem modos situados e cocriados de perceber o lugar. Estas práticas

evidenciam como as comunidades migrantes habitam, negociam e reinterpretem as paisagens japonesas através de encontros multissensoriais que ultrapassam a representação visual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

fotocaminhadas, sensibilidade multissensorial, migrantes latino-americanos, métodos visuais participativos, paisagem

INTRODUCTION

In Mitsukaidō, a district of the city of Jōsō in Ibaraki prefecture, Japan, a sign is affixed to the wall of a commercial building (Figure 1). The sign, signed by the Total Staff Corporation, announces in Portuguese and Japanese — “TEMOS EMPREGO! 仕事があります!” — meaning “we have jobs”. Encountering Portuguese in this setting, far from Japan’s major urban centers, immediately raises questions. Multilingual signage in Japan typically includes English and, occasionally, Mandarin, but in rural or industrial settings far from big cities such as Tokyo or Osaka, it is rare; in these areas, Portuguese indicates a different presence. Who is this promise of employment addressed to? Why Portuguese, and what does its visibility reveal about the social landscape of the Mitsukaidō area?



Figure 1. A bilingual job notice, TEMOS EMPREGO! 仕事があります! (we have jobs!), addressed to the Brazilian community by Total Staff Corporation. The sign is in green and yellow, the same colors of the “verde amarela”, the Brazilian flag. The image registers the public presence of the Portuguese language and its role in labor intermediation. The recurrence of such signs throughout the city underscores processes of adaptation and economic anchoring

Credits. Marita Ibañez Sandoval, 2024

Today, Jōsō combines agriculture and industry within an area of 123.64 km², with approximately half of its land dedicated to farming. As of 2024, the city has an estimated population of 59,329 residents in 23,244 households, with foreign nationals comprising 10.66% of the total population (Ibaraki Prefecture Government, 2023, 2024; Jōsō City, 2024). Like many regions of Japan, the city faces demographic challenges, including population aging and the outmigration of younger residents seeking opportunities in larger urban centers (Fondevilla, 2012).

Within this demographic composition, Latin American migrants — primarily of Brazilian and Peruvian origin — constitute one of the most significant and visible communities. Latin Americans make up 40% of Jōsō's migrant population, many of them descendants of Japanese emigrants and part of the contemporary temporary migrant workforce, also called the *dekasegi* (working away from home) workforce (Matsumoto & Okumura, 2019; Tsuda, 2004). Their presence is mainly concentrated in Mitsukaidō, where businesses, markets, and advertisements explicitly cater to Brazilian and broader Latin American publics. This community contributes to the city's cultural fabric through multilingual signage, commercial aesthetics, religious centers, food practices, and everyday interactions (Gambaro & Hoshino, 2024). Although deeply embedded in Jōsō's built environment and social life, these contributions often remain outside mainstream public discourse.

Understanding the presence of Latin American migrants in Jōsō also requires a broader historical perspective on migration between Japan and Latin American countries, particularly Brazil and Peru. These relations span from the first wave of Japanese migration after the late-19th-century opening of Japan to the South American *dekasegi* phenomenon beginning in the mid-1890s (Ocada, 2003; Shintani, 2008). Japan and Peru established diplomatic relations during the Meiji era — Japan's first official engagement with a Latin American country (Goto, 2007). Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Japan faced a demographic crisis while Brazil and Peru sought labor for their agricultural economies (Takenaka, 2004). Formal Japanese migration to Peru and Brazil began in 1899 and 1908, respectively (Adachi, 2007), generating cycles of transculturation that are visually reflected in documents such as entry visas, commemorative stamps, and hybrid photographic practices.

This visual research examines how Latin American migrants in Japan both influence and are shaped by the country's urban-rural landscape. Focusing on the dynamic expression of migrant identity, integration processes, and interactions with the city's visual communication, the study draws on Vilém Flusser's (1994/2003) philosophy of migration. Migrants are conceptualized as windows that allow locals to perceive their environment differently and as mirrors that reflect transformed local identities. Participatory visual methods form the foundation of this research. Collective and individual photowalks with Jōsō's Latin American community reveal processes of identity negotiation, landscape interaction, and the construction of home.

Findings presented here emerged from a series of photowalks conducted with Latin American migrants in Jōsō between 2021 and 2023. Routes were repeated and varied

over time, followed by photoelicitation sessions in which participants reflected on their migration experiences and discussed the images they produced. These activities provide the basis for the thematic analysis of identity, adaptation, and transformation within Jōsō's evolving landscape.

Contributing to debates in visual culture and participatory visual methodologies, this article examines photowalking as a sensorial, relational, and co-creative practice situated within migrant landscapes. Approaching photowalking as an embodied practice that engages memory, affect, and spatial negotiation, rather than treating photography as a tool for representation, it foregrounds how participants collectively make sense of their environments through walking, talking, and image-making.

Participatory photographic practices function in this study as counter-archives that unsettle dominant regimes of visibility. In the context of Latin American migration in peri-urban Japan, photowalking becomes a method for articulating hybrid visualities, vernacular epistemologies, and situated forms of belonging that resist homogenizing narratives of migration and landscape.

Structured as follows, this study first situates photowalking within the traditions of visual and participatory research. It then presents the empirical context and methodological framework. Next, it analyses how participants engage with landscape through photography and movement. Finally, it reflects on the methodological and epistemological implications of photowalking as a practice of sensorial and collective meaning-making.

SENTIPENSAR THE LANDSCAPE

Participatory visual methods emphasize understanding social experiences and viewpoints through active collaboration between participants and researchers in the production of visual materials (Chalfen, 2011). Rooted in the participatory action research movement initiated in the 1970s by Colombian sociologist Fals Borda, these approaches seek to bring together community-based and academic knowledge in a shared process of inquiry (Rappaport, 2020).

Fals Borda (2015) defines *sentipensar* (sense/thinking) as a term from the riverine cultures of the Colombian Caribbean that describes individuals who unite reason and emotion to confront life with an integral sensibility capable of truth-telling. *Sentipensar* denotes a relational, emotional, and reflective way of knowing grounded in popular experience (Ibarra, 2020). Being *sentipensante* means “thinking with the heart and feeling with the head” (Carvajal Medina et al., 2022, p. 604), bringing mind and heart together while remaining open to being transformed by the world.

Arturo Escobar (2020) expands on this idea, describing *sentipensar* as a mode of knowing learned from these same riverine communities, in which reason and emotion are intertwined as a way of relating to territories. Drawing on the *sentipensamiento* popularized by Fals Borda, Escobar (2020) proposes an embodied, affective, and situated practice that recognizes the agency of the worlds we inhabit and invites us to *sentipensar* with the territories, cultures, and knowledges of the peoples, rather than relying on de-contextualized development categories.

Caro Bernal (2020) shows how this orientation informs participatory action research by highlighting the importance of integrating emotions, perceptions, and the lived sensory experiences into collective processes of diagnosis and public-space planning. From this perspective, participatory methods are grounded in the premise that understanding a place requires collective sensing and thinking, through which proposals for action can emerge from within the community itself.

Pink (2011) similarly argues that multisensory perception is embodied, situated, and relational, requiring research approaches that facilitate joint sensing, movement, and interpretation. These multisensory perspectives expand participatory methods by recognizing bodily, affective, and atmospheric forms of knowledge, enabling co-sensing and co-creation during fieldwork.

PHOTOWALKING TOGETHER

Jōsō is composed of urban, rural, and industrial districts connected by Route 294, a corridor that reveals layered forms of social and cultural life. The Latin American community becomes visible along this route through multilingual signage in Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, and English, as well as commercial aesthetics that blend influences across cultures (Ibañez Sandoval, 2024). Walking plays a central role in how both migrants and researchers perceive Jōsō. Sensations experienced while moving — pace, pauses, fatigue, translation, attention, or weather — shape how places are understood (Rae et al., 2017). For migrants, sensory elements such as aromas from bakeries or Brazilian markets, the quietness of suburban streets, the heat radiating from asphalt, or the textures of façades inform how belonging is collectively navigated and felt.

Visual methods integrate photography, video, and other media into research to record social interactions, behaviors, and environments in ways that words alone may not capture (Glaw et al., 2017; Pink, 2007a). They involve participants throughout the research process and generate materials that stimulate discussion and deepen interpretation. In the social sciences, visual methods are often grouped into studying social life through image production, analyzing pre-existing visual representations, and involving social actors in creating their own images (Banks, 2001). By foregrounding visual manifestations, these approaches help bridge cultural and linguistic divides and illuminate participants' subjective perspectives (Glaw et al., 2017; Pink, 2007a).

In Jōsō, this project applied a visual methodology centered on photowalks, rephotography, photo archiving, and photomontage to examine the migratory footprint and its effects on the urban-rural landscape. Photowalks, in particular, have been used in studies of migrant communities and landscape (Mainsah & Sanchez Boe, 2019), and they are central to understanding movement, perception, and place. They combine walking as a primary mode of engaging the environment (Rae et al., 2017) with reflective analysis of the resulting images (Amato et al., 2022). This mobile method merges movement, cognition, and embodied awareness, supporting deep engagement with urban atmospheres (Pyyry, 2016).

Rephotography — the repetition of earlier images — isolates temporal change by matching framing, tools, and atmospheric conditions (Harper, 2012; McLeod, 2019). Photovoice invites communities to identify and represent their own experiences through photography (Liebenberg, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). In this project, photomontage becomes a material and interpretive gesture: cutting, arranging, and recombining fragments mirrors the ways migration reconfigures continuity and belonging (Napolitano, 2015).

Photomedia encompasses cameras, film, video, television, phone screens, computers, and photocopiers — all grounded in the constant of light (McKenzie, 2014). Photomediation (Kuc & Zylinska, 2016) highlights the dynamism of photography today and its entanglement with other media and everyday practices. These tools supported the creation of a visual archive of migration in Jōsō.

FROM *DÉRIVE* TO PHOTOWALK

These ideas resonate with situationist practices — especially Debord’s (1956) *dérive* (drifting), an experimental, route-less walk designed to explore and transform urban space while resisting the passivity of the spectacle (Sadler, 1998). The *dérive* produces psychogeographic insights into how environments shape emotions and behaviors, offering a critical stance toward rational urban planning (Middleton, 2011). Photowalks sometimes draw from this search for spontaneity and attuned awareness, paying attention to the particular in everyday settings and making the familiar unfamiliar (Pyry, 2016, 2018). They have been used to document inhabited spaces and interactions (González Granados, 2011) and have been adopted across urban planning, geography, social analysis, and ethnography (Dobińska & Cieślikowska-Ryczko, 2020; Itou et al., 2016; Latham, 2003). Walking with a camera can register how participants experience their environment (Pink, 2007b).

Photowalks have also been studied as socio-spatial patterns beyond participatory contexts. Becker et al. (2015) show that walking while photographing produces recognizable “urban photo trails”, demonstrating how individuals navigate and visually interpret cities through recurrent patterns of attention and movement. In participatory and educational contexts, photowalks have been defined as an “arts-based methodology that involves capturing and reflecting on photos along one’s walking route” (Amato et al., 2022, p. 1493), enabling participants to observe community assets, interrogate how data represents neighborhood realities, and interpret social issues. Such practices foster deep observation, pattern recognition, comparison, and contextual reasoning (Amato et al., 2022).

Flusser’s reflections situate making sense as a creative necessity in contexts of displacement. He argues that humans are “engulfed by the waves of exile” unless they transform information into meaning — “a synonym for creation” (Flusser, 2002a, p. 104). Such transformation emerges from negotiating internal and external dialogues: “if these ‘external’ and ‘internal’ dialogues are harmonized with each other, they transform in a creative manner” (Flusser, 2002a, p. 108). Photomontage gestures — cutting, arranging, reassembling — can therefore be read as acts of creative sense-making (Falbel et al., 2023; Flusser, 1991/2014; Stern & Falbel, 2023). Flusser’s (1983) concept of the “photographic

apparatus” underscores how cameras program certain gestures, requiring users to work consciously within constraints to “play against” the system. Migration itself disrupts and recomposes networks of belonging (Flusser, 2002b, 1994/2003; Paulo, 2006), and photomontage resonates with this reconstructive process. This methodological constellation aligns with Geertz’s (2008) thick description and Deger’s (2016) thick photography, situating image-making within cultural, material, and affective processes.

TEN PHOTOWALKS (2021–2023)

Between 2021 and 2023, the project on which this work is based conducted 10 photowalks in Jōsō — four solo and six collective. Solo walks documented multilingual signage, markets, civic buildings, weather changes such as snow, winter shadows, and humid summer afternoons. Repetition of routes produced sensory memory through attentive noticing and returning, revealing walking as an embodied and perceptual practice (Pyyry, 2016).

The first collective photowalk in July 2022 marked a shift toward shared practice. A group of five Brazilian participants walked a collaboratively negotiated route, modifying it along the way due to heat, curiosity, and familiarity. Conversations comparing signage, storefront textures, food smells, and daily routines evolved into what Rae et al. (2017) describe as a context in which perception becomes a relational process. Analog photography introduced slowness — “a time to think, stop, and breathe” — which shaped the method. Participants noted the mindfulness encouraged by analog cameras and contrasted “real cameras” with disposable ones that can imply superficial engagement (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001). Development and scanning took place in the University of Tsukuba’s darkroom.

Subsequent photowalks involved Spanish-speaking groups and families, as well as one session during typhoon conditions. Sensory engagement varied with humidity, wind, sun, shadows, or dusk light. Participants remarked on smells, soundscapes, signage legibility, and differences in commercial aesthetics; many impressions were not photographed but became part of a collective sensory archive.

Recruitment involved a Spanish- and Portuguese-language flyer advertising three analog workshops, distributed at the Brazilian market, TK Store, and local Facebook groups. Sunday sessions were preferred. Collective walks brought together migrants from Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and Paraguay. Individual photowalks enabled introspective exploration; group walks fostered cultural exchange, collaborative decision-making, and shared observation. Weather, time of day, and group dynamics shaped each experience, and routes were adapted according to participants’ preferences, reinforcing agency and co-creation. The landscape of Jōsō — urban, rural, and industrial — was traversed repeatedly, with Route 294 serving as a connective path across markets, food trucks, parks, and community spaces.

Figure 2 brings together three black-and-white photographs made by participants on different days and routes in Mitsukaidō. The images register photographic gestures, conversations, and collective movement during the workshops. Interviews afterward

suggested that such group scenes captured a shared exploratory experience of walking side by side in Japan, fixing a memory of shared exploration that contrasted with more isolated daily routines. Photowalkers often connected elements of the landscape with memories of their countries of origin. As participant J23IK (personal communication, August 6, 2023) reflected: “I started to look for structures that would pull me towards Latin America... when I found the cactus, I said ‘wow’, because it immediately pulled me to these spaces”.



Figure 2. Three photographs taken by participants during different photowalks and locations in Mitsukaidō, Jōsō

Credits. Participants J22D) and J22CR, 2023

MULTISENSORY COLLECTIVE PHOTOWALKING

Collective photowalks in Jōsō foreground multisensory and relational ways of perceiving the urban-rural landscape. Participants frequently paused before multilingual signage, translating, comparing vocabulary, and discussing legibility. These pauses often led to broader reflections about the city and participants’ relationships with their surroundings. Interviews suggested that these moments condensed a shared exploratory experience of the city. As participant J23IK (personal communication, August 8, 2023) reflected, “I really liked being able to walk around... ‘let’s get to know some of the little streets of our little town’ (...) this was an invitation for me to get to know my space”. At the same time, participants described how walking together altered their perception of the environment. As So3KA (personal communication, September 13, 2023) noted, “in Japan, I feel that the streets are very dull... they lack color... graffiti can be very beautiful

on the street”. Weather further structured how walks unfolded: moving through intense heat, pausing during rain, sensing humidity under typhoon winds, or noticing the length of shadows across asphalt altered bodily rhythm and attention. These atmospheric conditions were inseparable from memory and familiarity, revealing how sensory engagement is intertwined with the lived experiences of migration.

Participants also examined hybrid storefront aesthetics at Salon de Tiara and Sexto Sentido, focusing on color palettes, typography, textures, and cross-cultural references. These observations prompted comparisons with landscapes of origin — São Paulo, Lima, Quito, Ciudad del Este — highlighting differences in noise levels, signage visibility, commercial layouts, and walking pace. Such frictions shaped how landscapes were sensed and interpreted, demonstrating how sensory comparison becomes a mode of migratory orientation.

Across the walks, several recurring processes emerged through practice rather than formal structure. Climate, bodily pace, fatigue, and the negotiation of sidewalks activated embodied perception; multilingual conversation and collaborative noticing shaped shared interpretation (Rae et al., 2017); and the use of analog cameras introduced a particular slowness — *un tiempo para pensar, detenerse y respirar* (a time to think, stop and breathe) — that encouraged attentiveness and paced seeing. Collective movement in public space created temporary communities of perception, aligning with Pyyry’s (2016) argument that walking together produces relational and situated forms of sensing.

BEYOND THE PHOTOGRAPHED

Walking revealed how migrant presence is sensed rather than merely seen. Atmospheres, pauses, smells, textures, soundscapes, and moments of mutual recognition formed part of the experiential fabric of the photowalks. Many impressions were never photographed, yet they accumulated as a shared sensory archive built through conversation and observation. Photography functioned simultaneously as documentation and as a dialogic medium through which Latin American *dekasegi* communities reflected on their relationship to the Japanese urban-rural landscape.

The collective photographic archive produced through these walks underscores the importance of participatory visual methods. Photography bridges cultures and communities, evokes memory, establishes connections, and makes visible the environmental dimensions of migration. It reveals processes of visual transculturation and the construction of shared spaces of memory, illustrating how photography exceeds its documentary function to preserve inclusive narratives that complement official records (Derrida, 1995/1996; Pinheiro, 2018). Images generated during the photowalks contribute to the making and preservation of individual and collective memory, documenting how *dekasegi* communities influence and inhabit Jōsō’s peri-urban landscape. They provide material for future research and serve as an intergenerational record of presence, belonging, and transformation (Zylinska, 2010).

Participatory visual methods — especially photowalks and photoelicitation — proved effective in fostering horizontal communication, strengthening community ties, and supporting collaborative meaning-making. These methods created spaces where participants articulated lived experiences, negotiated cultural meanings, and collectively reflected on their environments. Rather than treating photographs as isolated visual outcomes, the walks themselves foregrounded atmospheres, fatigue, weather, storefront textures, and multilingual negotiation as integral to experiencing the city. Walking together formed temporary yet meaningful communities of attention, where perception became collective, relational, and situated.

This study demonstrates that multisensory encounters fundamentally shape how migrants understand and narrate place. Through the generation of a collective archive and a lived sensory record, photowalks reveal how photography can bridge cultures, illuminate migrant experiences, and register their environmental impact. The rhythms of the city — sound, smell, temperature, textures, familiarity — became part of a shared process of co-perception and co-sensing. Migrants from Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and Paraguay recorded these cultural traces as they walked, conversed, and shared impressions, extending perception beyond the visual into the terrain of sound, atmosphere, memory, and comparison. In this sense, walking is not only a means of producing images but also of producing a shared sensibility.

PHOTOWALKING TOGETHER AS *SENTIPENSAR*

This study highlights photowalking as a practice that operates not only as a tool for visual representation but also as bodily movement, memory, affect, and dialogue. By walking and photographing together, participants enacted a situated form of sensorial inquiry, producing images that are embedded in social relations, linguistic negotiations, and affective encounters with place. These practices resonate with decolonial approaches to visibility that emphasize sensibility as historical and political, rather than universal and neutral.

However, the research also presents methodological and ethical limitations. Participation was shaped by language barriers, uneven familiarity with photographic technologies, and the constraints of time and mobility in migrants' everyday lives. Certain spaces and experiences remained unphotographed due to privacy concerns, fatigue, or perceived risks, reminding us that participatory visual methods are always partial and contingent. Furthermore, the circulation of images raises ethical questions about visibility, consent, and the potential reification of migrant identities within academic and artistic contexts.

Despite these limitations, photowalking offers a productive framework for exploring the politics of the sensible, enabling participants to co-create visual narratives that challenge dominant representations of migration and landscape. As visual cultures continue to expand across digital and embodied platforms, participatory practices such as

photowalking can contribute to alternative epistemologies and counter-archives that foreground relationality, situated knowledge, and the ongoing negotiation of belonging.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Marita Ibañez Sandoval is a Peruvian researcher and visual practitioner based in Japan. She holds a PhD in Art and a master's in Kansei Design from the University of Tsukuba, and a bachelor's in Fine Arts from the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. Her research focuses on migration, landscape, participatory visual methods, and visual literacy, with particular attention to Latin American communities in Japan. She investigates how collaborative visual practices, including photowalks and photomontage, shape experiences of belonging, memory, and spatial negotiation. Her work has been presented and exhibited in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Since 2022, she has managed the photographic studio and darkrooms at the University of Tsukuba and has over a decade of university teaching experience in Peru and Japan.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6341-7757>

Email: maritaibanez@gmail.com

Address: University of Tsukuba, School of Art and Design, Institute of Art and Design, 3-1 Amakubo, Tsukuba, Ibaraki 305-0005 Japan

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