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Gestalt Art Therapy in Groups

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Art as an ongoing process of experiencing one's experiences—not peripherally, but right there in the thick of it? And it's not only those glorious moments, if by glorious one were to mean moments of ecstasy: . . . But what about the times of despair, when all seems lost and meaningless? Isn't celebrating these times in acts art too?

PAULUS BEHRENSON (1972, p. 150)

The focus of Gestalt art therapy is the search for self, not the search for art talent. In this process, achievement and productivity are of no concern. Past art training and technical ability are irrelevant; in fact, many of the participants have never used or even seen some of the art supplies or sculpture tools provided. There have been in the same workshop professional artists as well as people who thought of themselves as being without any creative ability whatsoever: The experience has been meaningful to both groups. When instruction is necessary—and it is surprising how little is needed—it is provided as a natural part of the group experience.

Because of the setting, people easily slip into using material they might otherwise approach with hesitancy and fear. The group itself provides an environment that is supportive, reducing the anxiety of taking a risk in an art medium, whether it is unknown or familiar. Judging or comparing one's works becomes irrelevant. By avoiding these two traps the individual is then freer to begin creating something unique to her/himself.

For example, in a recent group a young woman who had been having difficulty in painting became aware that she started off free and capable of communicating directly with her work; then after a while she would

become blocked. With the help of the group she was able to recognize that, at a particular point in creating, she began to be influenced by imaginary "outside opinions," her introjected parental voices, which questioned what she was doing and why she was doing it. These "outside opinions," she ascribed to her husband and boss, constant critics of her performance. They were a reflection of the introjected voice of her father, whose perpetual message was "be perfect." After she spoke of these opinions, the group expressed them, enabling her to reaffirm, first to each member and then to herself, her need, her right and her ability to produce what she wanted to produce. Once she experienced this, she was able to feel her own energy without the drain of outside opinions and was then capable of getting back into her work, with a new awareness of how she interrupts herself.

The uses of art in therapy involve the relationship between the person (organism) and her/his environment (materials) in a variety of experiments. These experiments are used in the following situations: 1) large group intensive workshops for personal growth and creative development; 2) in-depth individual or group therapy; 3) training sessions for graduate students and professional therapists. The goal of these experiments in any of the above situations is to reach that level of psychological exploration which has been previously agreed on by both client and therapist or student or leader. For example, in a training session, the experiments will instruct in the use of a therapeutic tool and will stop short of therapy. On the other hand, in a therapeutic situation, individual or group, in which the contract is clearly one of therapeutic intent, these experiments are invaluable in ferreting out the client's psychological position at that moment and in moving to deeper levels of integration of unassimilated material in Gestalt therapy terms, that is, attending to the disturbance at the contact-boundary.

It is clearly important that the level and goal of the workshop or session, including the use of these experiments, be defined beforehand. The art therapist/teacher must be aware of how easily individuals attempt to engage at a deeper level than the one previously agreed upon; therefore, the leader has the responsibility of maintaining the integrity of the original contract.

My focus in art therapy workshops is on the participants' sensitivity to inner and outer environment. With these as the parameters, group members are taken on a guided tour of self-discovery. Along the way they become involved with a multiplicity of art materials that become the

environment in ways that I design. Instead of talking about their environment, participants come face to face with how they interact with it. In essence, the materials are the tools of the experiments just as the pillow or the empty chair are the tools in other types of Gestalt groups.* There are watercolor markers and oil pastels for drawing, tissue paper for collage, metamorphic rocks for carving, plastelene and terra cotta clay for modeling, tinfoil and armature wire for free-form sculpture. These external objects become the means for exploring internal sensations and feelings. Participants can begin to make changes by experiencing this contact with the environment in the aliveness of the moment, taking in what is needed while rejecting what is not. There is group support for *not* having to interact with all the materials.

There is enough clay, paper, paints, etc., so that a wide range of choice is provided by the environment. This is contrary to the experience most of us have had in the past. In our formative years, both the bottle and the food are given to us and we do not participate in the selection; we are presented with people to relate to whether they are our kind of people or not; we are told how to behave and are rarely asked how we want to behave. As the group value for uniqueness of expression takes hold, participants feel increasingly secure in selecting by their own sense of touch, taste and smell, and connect to the fact that their senses and judgment are the only measures of what is right in the experience.

Since many people have trouble conjuring up fantasies, the objects and the art produced become the objectified fantasies and thereby become the means for exploring internal sensations and feelings. Group members can then begin to explore their own inner landscape. Through Gestalt therapy, with the group as part of the process, each person can begin to experiment and take into him/herself those parts he/she heretofore has not been aware of. For example, in describing the sculpture he/she is working on, someone might become the sculpture and thereby get involved with whatever it is he/she is projecting into the stone. Or fear of hacking away at a stone may lead to fear of cracking it. Upon exploration, this may turn out to be fear of one's own vulnerability to cracking—or of one's own ability or desire to destroy. Exploring one's distaste for

* In designing experiments with stone, wire, clay and a variety of other art materials, I have relied upon my own experience over the years as a professional artist. My training as a sculptor coupled with my training as a Gestalt therapist has enabled me to design experiments which would have been impossible to invent without the foundation given by both disciplines.

the coldness of a stone may lead to a discovery of one's own denied coldness. Evolving a beautiful shape out of something that had previously lacked beauty can bring an awareness of the beauty within oneself or within others. Using these materials and Gestalt therapy techniques enables participants to begin a dialogue with those parts of themselves that they have projected. This then creates the possibility of integrating those parts into the participant's personality.

In carefully structured exercises, each person comes to grips with his own behavior as a member of the group, as well as with what emerges graphically from within, as evidenced in the artwork produced. Like other Gestalt therapists, art workshop leaders focus upon what is being expressed here-and-now. Fritz Perls (1976, p. 63) in the *Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy* says:

The goal of therapy, then, must be to give him [in this case, the group member] the means with which he can solve his present problems and any that may arise tomorrow or next year. That tool is dealing with himself and his problems with all the means presently at his command, right now. If he can become *truly aware* at every instant of himself and his actions on whatever level—fantasy, verbal, or physical—he can see how he is producing his difficulties, he can see what his present difficulties are, and he can help himself to solve them in the present, in the here-and-now. Each one he solves makes easier the solution of the next, for every solution increases his self-support.

In Gestalt art therapy groups this is done graphically, since the art materials provide a visible message that can't be wiped out. The instant of perceptual awareness leads to a most meaningful form of insight; at that moment, the group member makes his/her own discovery with clarity and impact.

The group leader does not analyze, but encourages exploration. There is no secret code known only to the leader that assigns specific analytic meaning to shapes or colors or forms. Rather, the explications of these graphic expressions must come from the group member. The question is always: "What does the work mean to you?" This is no different from the way Gestalt therapists work with dreams. James Simkin (1974, p. 87), in discussing dreams, states:

According to the Gestalt therapy framework, everything in your dreams is some aspect of yourself, and in effect when you are dream-

ing, you are writing your own script. You're saying things about yourself . . . Most therapists see the dream as a disguised message. In Gestalt therapy, the message is an existential message, a message of how you exist, the nature of your existence.

The message of the art produced is also an existential message. Each of the participants in the workshop is different and her/his spontaneous artwork will be as individual as her/his thumbprint.

Workshop leaders must constantly be on the alert so that they can keep the group from going on comparison trips. As soon as participants start comparing their creations, they lose out on what is, they lose out on the intrinsic value of the products they have fashioned, and they can be diminished by juxtaposing themselves to others viewed as either greater or lesser. The moment group members begin to compare their work with one another, somebody is sure to be not imaginative enough or not talented enough. Krishnamurti (1967, p. 8) wrote:

Most people think that learning is encouraged through comparison, whereas the contrary is the fact. Comparison brings about frustration and merely encourages envy, which is called competition. Like other forms of persuasion, comparison prevents learning and breeds fear.

In the workshop environment, differences are treasured. This releases a torrent of creative energy which is so powerful that the leaders may have difficulty in getting the group to stop for a break. There are no shoulds or should nots in the workshops—no good work or bad work—no judgments of any kind. There is only what each person creates *out of* themselves *for* themselves.



Attendance at a workshop in which one is expected to use art materials can be a frightening prospect. A voice from the past may be comparing the participant to a talented brother or sister or to the class genius; the voice tells him/her that he/she will not do well with the clay or the stone tools or the collage materials. Because of this, many people come to an art experience workshop with at least two sets, one of which is a readiness to fulfill their own worst prophecies about being uncreative and unable to work with their hands.

One way to reduce this anxiety about doing well is not to request the group to make anything. Instead, each new art experience is introduced

as a happening. The group becomes involved with the material in a non-threatening situation that leads naturally into the creative process.

For example, the group leader can start a session by tossing into the air hundreds of sheets of tissue paper while appropriate background music adds to the playful mood. The tissues are irresistible and before long the group members join the leader in keeping as many of the lightweight sheets in the air as possible. With the room flooded with color, joyful pandemonium takes over. Tissues are rolled into balls and flung at the nearest convenient human target. The excitement of the moment can free people to fashion bizarre costumes and headdresses. People may disappear under colorful mounds of tissue paper or simply lie on the floor looking up at the sheets drifting down upon them. The group is literally inside the material. This "encounter" with tissue paper becomes a lively experience for each participant.

The interaction with material may go on for 30 or 40 minutes. Finally, the group leader places large sheets of white drawing paper on the floor in the midst of the tissue debris. Alongside each sheet of drawing paper (one for each group member), a paint brush and a container holding a diluted mixture of acrylic polymer gel are placed. The leader then demonstrates how easily the tissues can be ripped into odd-shaped pieces and affixed to the sheets when the translucent gel is applied. Nobody is told how to *make* a collage. The simple demonstration speaks for itself and the group members who have been intimately involved with the tissue paper move naturally into creating their own individual collages.

Another example of how to involve the group with the art material is in the introduction of the plastelene clay experience. Plastelene is used because it requires human warmth and energy to be changed from a rigid block to a consistency that is easily molded into any shape desired.

The experiment begins with the leader asking the participants to select a block of plastelene in a color of their choice. There is no mention of creating anything. The only instruction is to soften the block in any way they can—by twisting, pounding, stomping, or simply by squeezing it in their hands and allowing body heat to do the job. As they do so they create energy in their hands similar to the way one does in massage. Next they are asked to find a partner with whom they will sit face to face with palms extended toward the partner's palms (but not touching). They can now sense the field of energy between them; this is a powerful way of making them aware of their own energy. Finally, they place their palms

above their own skin and contact this energy. People who are depressed or out of touch with their vitality are people who cannot contact their own energy. This exercise gives them a beginning awareness of how to do so.

The group is then invited to let loose with any sounds they care to make while dealing with the clay. They can imagine the block is a brother, a sister, a teacher, a parent, or any other convenient target for their feelings. Screams, shouts, and curses fill the room as each participant works with the resistant plastelene. Gradually the noise level subsides as the clay responds to the warmth of the hands and the vigorous pummeling.

When the plastelene is pliant, the leader suggests that each group member let a form emerge. In essence, they are asked to place their trust in their own hands or in their own organism that something will happen without any sense of having to do anything. The participant is fully available to himself without draining off his energies in the usual concern about how well something is going to turn out.

Whether the medium is tissue paper, plastelene, stone, wire or any other substance, the experiment begins by getting people involved with the material. Once this has happened, the group is encouraged to use the material in response to a challenge presented by the leader.

Much of the process outlined in the following experiments is the same as in other forms of Gestalt therapy. The techniques are different, but the philosophy, the goals, and the results are the same. Creative process often evokes fears, such as those of not knowing, of risking, of the taking of new spaces, of the unexpected accident—in short, all the introjects that prevent us from further growth and from contacting our excitement. The group process enables the members to experience their introjected voices, with the possibility of working them through.

I. EXPERIENCE WITH STONE

The sculptor's idea must meet the stone's will, for stone cannot be forced; if it is forced, it will get even with the sculptor by fracturing into many pieces (Rapp, 1969, p. 30).

The Challenge: Carve your own stone sculpture.

Materials Used: An assortment of stones, safety glasses, bush hammers, rasps, silicone, sandpapers and mineral oil.

Stone-carving offers the most here-and-now experience of all art media. If we violate the stone by not listening to what it is saying, then we get the same result as when we "push the river" rather than go with where we are in our own life.

With stone we are always pulled back into the present. If we don't take a risk, the stone doesn't move. As the piece of sculpture takes shape, new possibilities constantly reveal themselves. And there is always the chance that the next stroke of the chisel will hit a flaw in the stone and shatter the piece. When integrated into the workshop setting, a personal experience with stone-carving provides an opportunity for a person to be seen and to see himself in the process of meeting an unfamiliar challenge. There can be no automatically programmed response because the potentialities of the stone and the risks to be taken in carving are constantly changing.

The following experiment with stone is designed for people with no previous art background. The leader starts by forming the group (usually 10 to 12 members) into a circle. In the center are placed a collection of metamorphic rocks.* Ideally, they are from various parts of the world with as many minerals as possible represented. Each rock is small enough to fit in the palm of one hand. These miniature stones are not for carving but rather serve to provide the group with an introduction to the natural variety of forms in which stones are found. Each rock is a mini-landscape unique in its shape, texture and color.

The leader next explains to the group that they are going to play a game with the stones. First, all group members will have an opportunity to examine the different pieces, to feel them, taste them, smell them, get acquainted with them in any way they like. Then each person is invited to choose the stone which most closely represents where he/she is in his/her life right now.

Some people make an immediate choice while others find it hard to make a decision. Frequently, people are drawn simultaneously to two stones that are very different. When this occurs, the leader may work toward enabling these persons to deal with the polarities represented in each stone and what they evoke in them.

When all group members are satisfied that they have the rock they want, the leader moves to the next step. He/she invites the group to take

* During the formation of metamorphic rocks the minerals in the earlier sedimentary or igneous rocks may undergo recrystallization, growing into larger crystals having a different chemical composition. Heat, pressure, and movement cause the chemical action.

turns being the piece of mineral selected. This is done by describing the stone, using the words "I am" at the start of each sentence. The participants then go around the circle, with each person talking in turn.

Group members share themselves more readily when given an opportunity to project onto an object outside of themselves. For example, a young man in one group gave this description of his stone: "I am a desert stone. I am rusty, dry, porous, lifeless. I have a spot on me that shines somewhere in the middle, but it is hard to find. I am irregular and I don't stand up too well. I keep coming back to the spot. I like it. I am sad (*tears come*) that I have so little shining from me."

Each time someone slips into talking *about* the stone, the leader brings him/her back to him/herself. The others are asked to hold their reactions to what is being said until they have gone completely around the circle. Then there are 20 to 30 minutes of sharing in which group members talk about how they felt in selecting their stones and how they perceived one another being the stones.

In this way, the participants begin to get to know each other and become involved with the mineral collection, experiencing how alive and fascinating stones can be. The leader now asks them to move to the other side of the room where a selection of the stones to be carved have been placed on a table. These are usually small boulders in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors, weighing six to eight pounds, not unlike the weight of a newborn baby. There might be Italian alabaster, Pakistani steatite, African Wonderstone, pink alabaster from Colorado, and other metamorphic rocks with the special qualities which make them suitable for carving.

Group members are then asked to consider the commitments they are prepared to make before deciding what size stone they want to carve. They are encouraged to go with their feelings in choosing a stone, rather than getting involved in what they may or may not know about its geological makeup. When a person who selects a resistant stone with sharp edges is visually confronted with someone else selecting a softer, more easily carved stone, attitudes about the need to do things the hard way or the easy way can be explored. And by having to choose one stone and see the process through, members are able to explore feelings about commitment.

The leader next introduces the group to the fun of immersing the stones in a bucket of water and seeing how the color and natural markings within the stone are intensified. What they are seeing is the life

within the stone that their energy will soon release. The coloring of the stone when wet serves as a preview of what will happen after sanding and oiling of the finished piece on completion. Participants are then invited to tell other people the secrets that have emerged when the stone got wet. The projection of these secrets onto the stone are an integral part of the process of self-exploration.

Once group members have selected the stones they want, the leader sets them up with a working platform (usually a pile of telephone books), a pair of safety glasses and a stone-carving tool called a bush hammer. The bush hammer serves two purposes. One side of it can be used as a pulverizer to shape the stone and the other side acts as a pick to cut into the stone. (Later in the session, additional tools are provided, as needed.)

Next, the leader provides instruction in the use of a bush hammer and states the safety rule requiring that glasses be worn at all times. He/she shows how the pick side of the bush hammer can be used to create negative space and how the pulverizing side rounds out rough edges and creates hollow areas. The relationship between positive and negative space, which is the basis of all sculpture, is explained. "To make a mountain, you create a valley." This can also be used in enabling participants to become aware of their own polarities of positives and negatives.

Almost immediately, the metallic clickety-clack of a dozen bush hammers biting into stone will be heard. The stone-carving experience has begun. Over the next six to eight hours most group members will have an experience unlike anything they have had in their lifetime. And, at the conclusion, they will have a piece of stone carved with their own hands as a visible record of their experience.

As the carvers work silently, the energy from the group begins to be communicated to them. This phenomenon of people working together, sensing the sounds, rhythms, and aliveness of the group-as-a-whole, has inspired participants to break out in song—or perhaps to weep. As the community energy touches the participants, they experience a novel contact with the environment and a sense of support for their creative endeavors emerges.

This can be compared to a very early developmental stage of a child who, sensing his/her mother's energy nearby, is comforted by her presence and therefore feels safe to create, explore, and learn. For some members this is the first time they have become aware that an important developmental process was left unfinished. For them creating has meant

isolation; the group is often a springboard toward exploring a new aspect of creativity.

The leader next circulates among the carvers, serving both as a resource for instruction and as a facilitator available to group members who want to work on what is emerging in themselves and in the stone. Although each person goes on his/her own journey, the following five aspects of the experience seem to be most meaningful to most people.

1) *The Experience of Being in a Situation That Can't Be Programmed*

As layer upon layer of the stone is peeled away, there is the revelation of what the stone is like inside. Because these are metamorphic rocks in a living stage of transition, there is no way to know what one will find. There may be a vein of marble within the alabaster, a deposit of iron oxide imbedded in the steatite, a swirling pattern resembling the knob of a tree inside the jet black African Wonderstone. And there is always the possibility of hitting an unsuspected fracture that hadn't shown itself in the stone before.

Carvers learn to appreciate the good and the bad of what their stone reveals about itself and they find that forcing the stone to be what it is not simply will not work. They find that the stone can't be programmed and that if they go with the surprises as they come along, they can make the most of the potential offered by the stone they selected. This is easily equated with the carver's own personality and life.

2) *The Experience of Being Part of a Nourishing Community*

The group sits on the ground in a circle much the way people in a primitive community do while working. There is no sense of competition among the participants. Rather, there is a great deal of support as individuals stop from time to time to share with the others where they are with their stone and what has been happening to them. The intense feeling of kinship and spontaneous sharing provides all the nourishment needed to sustain the high energy level of the group. The group process at the closure of such intimate experience often borders on the religious. Passing around each other's stones and following with one's hands another's journey is a new way to make contact. Only through working with a group can a participant experience this.

3) *The Experience of Recognizing Male-Female Qualities*

Pounding the stone with the bush hammer offers wide latitude for expressing aggressive and hostile feelings. In contrast, the sanding and polishing stage gives the group a chance to make contact with tender and sensual feelings. This can be used for direct communication with their androgynous feelings as well as with the polarities within them of love and hate. Men and women sit for hours applying successively finer grades of silicone sandpaper to the stone. Finally, with loving care, the mineral oil is rubbed into the stone with the fingers massaging, anointing, to attain the desired degree of polish.

4) *The Experience of Being Creative in a Way Never Thought Possible*

Members of a group frequently say how pleasurable it was to be given all the tools and instruction they needed without the condition that they had to do something right. Within the workshop setting, the leader is an authority figure who is saying: "Go ahead and try it. I think you're capable of what you have undertaken, and I care enough about you to take the trouble to be there with the guidance and support you need. *And I have no expectations that you have to fulfill.*"

What happens in this safe and supportive atmosphere can border on the miraculous. Although the goal of the workshop is not related in any way to aesthetic excellence, the work produced is on a level one would expect to see from professional artists with years of experience. Viewed as the first stones carved by men and women who have never had an art lesson before, the quality of work often is astonishing in its imaginative expression and technical competence.

This may be the only stone that a participant will ever carve, but he/she has seen what is possible when one's creative energies are not blocked by fears and inhibitions. It is a discovery of self with implications far beyond the limited workshop experience.

5) *The Experience of Being Able to Create Something One Can See, Touch and Take Home*

Participants leave the workshop with their own sculpture—the personal statement they have carved in stone. Often participants say that the work has taken on new meaning in the months that followed. Placed on a

mantle or upon a bedside table, the stone is viewed over and over again and the dialogue which started in the workshop continues.

For some people, the fact of completion is in itself therapeutic. "There it is—shaped by my own hands. As permanent as the stones carved in ancient Greece and Rome. And I did it." The completed sculpture makes a statement that they can touch and see—full of stored memories from the workshop and from inside themselves. Here is lasting evidence of their ability to stretch in a direction they once doubted they could take.

II. EXPERIENCE WITH WATERCOLOR MARKERS

The Challenge: Take your own space and give yourself anything you want.

Materials Used: Several dozen watercolor markers, paint drop cloth (or bed sheets sewn together), miniature houses usually found in 5 & 10¢ stores around Christmas time (there should be at least two for each group member).

This experiment begins by spreading a 9' x 12' white drop cloth (the kind painters use to protect floors and furnishings) on the floor in the center of the room. The group is asked to join the leader at a nearby table on which is placed a collection of miniature houses.

Each house is different. Some are simple, one-story, thatched-roof huts, while others have several floors and rising towers. Group members are asked to select one or two houses that represent parts of themselves as they are now. Soon, the group is totally involved in examining the little houses and making those subliminal connections that finally lead to saying: "This house is me."

After the houses are selected, the participants are asked to remove their shoes and walk onto the drop cloth: "For the next hour this space will be your world. Walk about and become familiar with it. Find a place where you feel most comfortable and, when you are sure that it is where you want to be, sit down."

It usually takes several minutes for each person to settle into his/her own space. Then, a pile of watercolor markers in a variety of colors is placed within easy reach of each person seated on the drop cloth. (These felt-tip pens can be used to draw on a fabric surface without smearing and their bright colors dry instantly.) When everyone is ready, the leader says: "Take the space you want to claim as your own. Use a marker to outline your territory. Take as much space as you like and place your

houses anywhere you wish within the space you take. If you run into your neighbor, you will have to work it out between you. There is only one rule—no talking, please.

"Once you have your space outlined, use the markers to give yourself anything you want—a front lawn for your house, a mountain range, your own ski slope, people, a money tree, a helicopter-port—anything your imagination can visualize you can give to yourself."

For the next hour, a dozen grown-up men and women lose themselves completely in the worlds they are creating. The drop cloth is transformed into a colorful panorama, as the blank spaces are filled with drawings of fences, cars, chickens, dogs, lakes, streams, lovers, armies, watchtowers, and whatever else anyone wishes. Men and women who have not sat on the floor to draw pictures since early childhood give themselves over with childlike abandon to the task.

When each person has finished filling in his/her space, the group is asked to assemble at one corner of the drop cloth. One by one, they share with the others what they have done with their space. One man has surrounded his house with a moat, another with a fence, and yet another has been content with no encumbrances. From time to time the leader may want to work with some persons individually. By helping them take responsibility for the space they have created and for what they have put down in it, the leader helps them become more aware of the parts of themselves visible in their space. Whatever is on the drop cloth, including where they placed themselves on the sheet and how much space they have taken for themselves, is in the "now" and relevant.

When the processing is completed, participants are told that they can take their "space" home with them if they wish. Scissors are distributed and each person proceeds to cut out his/her area of the drop cloth. Usually, most people take their space with them when they leave at the close of the workshop.

III. CREATIVE GROWTH EXPERIENCE WITH ARMATURE WIRE

The Challenge: Interact with another person.

Materials Used: Armature wire stapled to a wood base (one for every two participants).

Armature wire is used by sculptors to build the skeletal frame which is the first step in creating a direct plaster sculpture. The wire is strong enough to stand up straight without any support but also soft enough to be easily bent and twisted. For this experiment, a 10-foot piece of wire is

formed into a "U" shape; the bottom of the "U" is firmly attached to a wood block measuring about 5" x 5". The result is a base from which two separate 4-foot wires rise straight up into the air.

To start the exercise, the group members are asked to pair up. When the pairs are formed, the leader places one armature wire assembly between each pair of people and says: "Using the wires you see in front of you, interact with your partner without speaking."

For the next five minutes, each person works with his/her own wire while experiencing the other person in the twosome. The partners may go their separate ways or they may become involved with one another. At an appropriate point, the leader asks the group to stop. He/she opens group communication with members about their experience. Some of the questions are: "How did you contact one another? How did you take space and give it up? Who was the leader and who the follower? Did you want to be separate or connected?"

Next the leader suggests changing partners. Again, after five minutes, there is a sharing session. "How was this time different? What was it about your new partner that made you behave differently? How were you the same in both experiences?"

The wire sculptures resulting from the exercise provide a graphic picture of how each person interacts with another. Persons who do the experiment four or five times with different members of the group and always find their wire (themselves) in the same characteristic position realize not only where they are but how they got themselves into the same position each time. Participants now discover the way in which they make contact, e.g., by enveloping the partner, or by moving away, or by knotting themselves up. To discover and acknowledge "where you are" makes it possible existentially to experiment with new ways of moving with the material and exploring another dimension of the self.

IV. EXPERIENCE WITH CRAYONS AND A CAKE BOX

The Challenge: Experience the inside-outside environment as a continuum.

Materials Used: Crayons in an assortment of colors, unassembled white cake box, scissors.

The leader starts by distributing the unassembled white cake boxes to the group. Before assembly, a cake box is simply a piece of flat cardboard with appendages on all four sides.

The leader indicates which side of the box will be the inside and which side will be the outside when it is assembled. Then he/she says to the group: "The inside is what is going on inside of you. The outside is what the world sees. Start drawing on the inside of the box and keep referring to the different folds and flaps as different parts of yourself. Find the child parts first. As you work on the inside, if things come up that show through to the outside, turn the box over and draw what comes through on the other side. If something starts on the inside and changes into something else on the outside, let it happen. You have scissors to cut through to the outside, if you want to."

Those are the instructions. What follows is an intensive experience in perceptual awareness. All participants become deeply involved in a graphic, multi-level conceptualization of where they are internally and externally in their life.

The box is there to be assembled or not to be assembled. For some people, the box becomes a house complete with doors and windows. Some have their boxes sealed tight. Some cover every inch of the inside and outside with pictures and symbols. Some leave large areas bare and unfinished.

For example, one man covered the inside of his box with pornographic pictures and then provided a peek-a-boo hole for viewing, contacting his voyeur, his hiding, and other secret aspects of himself.

A woman decorated the outside of her box with drawings of gaily colored Christmas gift wrappings while all the ugly things she felt about herself were inside.

Another woman remembered herself as a bratty child, sticking her tongue out at the world. She drew the big red tongue on the inside of the box and then carried it right through to the outside. She gave her box a big window so that she could "look in and see the bratty kid." What she saw when she looked into her box was not only a brat but also a fun-loving child. She felt that in allowing the brat to come out and be visible on the outside she had made direct contact with her enjoyment of her brattiness. "I don't have to be so serious all the time," she commented with considerable relief.

When everyone is finished, the leader draws a chalk circle on the floor in the middle of the room. Those who want to complete the Gestalt art experience are invited to come forward and put their boxes in the middle of the circle. The box has many parts, offering endless possibilities for work. Participants are asked to become these parts (similar to Gestalt

dreamwork). Each member, by seeing and learning about the work of the others, becomes aware that what he/she does with his/her box is unique—as unique as each member is.

As members discuss their work, one at a time, each one of them and the observers learn over and over again: "I am who I am. I invent like no other, and I am my own person making contact with my external environment as only I can." Over and over again this concept comes to consciousness like a dream put out in front of us to see.



All artwork is one's personal symbol, as well as one's communication to the other. Creative growth takes place when that communication emerges spontaneously from within the individual and there is ample opportunity to process these manifestations of the self in a meaningful way. Marston Morse, the mathematician, once said: "It is only as an artist that man knows reality" (1958, p. 381).

To experience oneself in the creative act is to experience one's own aliveness. Instead of talking about what they *can't* do, members of a group discover what they *can* do. They learn how easily skills can be mastered, when proper instruction is offered in a supportive, non-competitive environment. They experience *the pride of creation*.

Another facet of working with art materials is the chance it provides the participants to experience the power they have to explore options and to change what they have created—if it is not what they want—into what they do want. Whether working with clay, collage, or even stone, there is the opportunity to undo what has been done and to risk the unexpected by exploring new possibilities.

A 19-year-old girl in one workshop had been piling layer upon layer of tissue onto the paper, working compulsively in her fear that any white paper might show through in the finished work. Later, when the group was sharing the collage experience, I asked her how much of the tissue she would dare take off her collage. Cautiously, slowly and painfully she stripped away one piece at a time. At one spot she came to the bottom layer and took the risk of lifting the tissue to expose the white, vulnerable part underneath. What she found, instead of the expected empty space, was an orange pool of color that had bled onto the paper from the tissue and entirely filled the "hole." Her catastrophic expectation of frightful emptiness was not fulfilled; in reality, there was no emptiness, and she found something unexpected. To enable her to release the energy blocked

in the fear, the leader then asked her to become this orange pool of color. In the process of becoming the orange, she was able to experience the joy of the color, and in so doing owned some of her own colorfulness.

The sculptures, the drawings, the collages, and any other artwork produced can also stimulate the group; however at this stage it takes a good deal of initiative to use someone else's work for fantasy. For example, in one group a young woman had her designs on the floor. A young man who loved the shapes and colors began stating his own fantasy, which required some minor changes in the design. The young woman was enraged, feeling violated by his fantasy. This opened the door to exploring with her important feelings that might otherwise have lain dormant.

In the process of working with art materials, group members can add to a drawing, subtract from a collage, reshape a piece of clay, take out a negative in stone, explore endless possibilities for change. There are capabilities to fill in the unfinished parts, to create a new world of their own, to go back and change what has been before. In exploring whatever alternatives present themselves, they have an opportunity to experience how comfortable or uncomfortable they feel in the new experiences they choose to create for themselves.

Over and over again in whatever art materials are used, I find visible expression of the individual's polarities. There is the light side and the dark side, the weak side and the strong side, the death side and the life side, the child side and the adult side.

The polarities projected into the artwork are witness to the two sides of the person that are in conflict with one another at the moment. The child side wants to be taken care of and the adult side has babies who need to be cared for. The man who everyone expects to lean on because of his strength is in conflict with the side of himself that is weak and wants to lean on others. When these polarities emerge graphically in the workshop, I offer an opportunity to develop a dialogue between the opposing parts. Often mixed or ambivalent feelings emerge and can be worked through.

One group member, a strapping 6' 4" powerhouse of a man, chose to carve a small fragile stone. The stone became an expression of the small delicate boy within the powerful man. As the stone took shape, he was amazed that such a lovely, intricate piece of work could be created by his big, rough hands. The other people in the workshop came up to touch and fondle his carefully polished little stone and he finally was

able to embrace his delicacy as well as his strength. At this moment the other group members personified the delicacy he had disowned, thereby encouraging him to own and integrate this side of himself. For the others, this meant also contact with their own delicacy and an opportunity to affirm or reaffirm it.

In the armature experiment, I sometimes suggest that group members work solo with both wires rather than pairing off for interaction. I recall one woman who completed her sculpture with one wire soaring off in a gentle arc while the other wire was bent over and twisted around the base and the lower portion of the free-flowing wire. It developed that the unencumbered wire represented the part of herself that yearned to reach out to people and the other wire symbolized the way she had been all her life—lonely, scared, holding down the part wanting to be free. In the dialogue that followed, the soaring part demanded in tears that the other wire be loosened "to set me free to move toward other people." This woman slowly untied the wire and reported feeling the knot in her stomach loosening at the same time. Having released the soaring wire, she turned away from the sculpture and reached out to the nearest group member. Moving from person to person, she embraced each in turn, and allowed herself to experience the outgoing part of herself.



One's art experience is one's reality, one's invention, as is one's life. The phenomenological approach to art produces the visual content that validates one's experience. I believe that all of us have the potential to reclaim what has been buried, to thaw what has been frozen, to find the excitement of play, adventure, sexuality and creativity.

Facilitating and being the inventor of art experiences, while using myself as an artist and Gestalt therapist, has outstanding rewards and it is an art work in itself. When, as a sculpture student, I first entered the Academia in Florence to see Michelangelo's "Slaves," I felt a spiritual energy that was indeed profound: Locked within this compressed stone was a vitality and life force that transcended its form. The metaphor of this experience keeps coming back to me. I believe that each of us has the capacity to create an inner and outer reality in harmony with ourselves and the world, and that we have the ability to emerge and change to new forms again and again.