

Art Therapy in a Public School*

By ROBERT WOLF

Mr. Wolf was awarded the degree of Master of Professional Studies in Creativity Development and Art Therapy by Pratt Institute in 1972. Currently he is Director of Art Therapy Services at the Henry Street School for emotionally disturbed adolescents in New York City, where he also supervises students from the Pratt training program. Active in both the American and the New York Art Therapy Associations, he is vice chairman of the latter. Before setting up the project on which this paper is based, he had already taught art in the New York City public school system for three years.

For the past four years I have been teaching art on the elementary school level in a disadvantaged area of New York City. Many of the children reflect their deprivation in various kinds of emotional disturbances. Along with the disruptive children found throughout the school there are many shy, withdrawn children who are often overlooked. Their passive facade actually hides severe emotional problems that build up and eventually erupt. From the start I wanted most to work with these children but my first attempts met with repeated frustration.

Nevertheless I found that through art I could communicate with many children despite barriers of language and culture. My curiosity about the relationship between creative expression and emotional growth eventually led me into the art therapy training program at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn. Through my studies there I became better prepared to deal with the problems of an alien environment that had previously seemed too formidable.

With the cooperation of my school principal and my supervisors at Pratt, I was able to set up an art therapy workshop within the school. Certain children with emotional problems were taken out of their classrooms for several hours each week for individual sessions. I encouraged art expression and offered therapeutic guidance.

An Illustrative Case

Anthony's story provides an example of what this program was able to accomplish in a few short months of experimental operation.

Anthony is a seven-year-old black child who lives with his mother and infant sister in an impoverished area of Brownsville, a black ghetto in

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Brooklyn. His father left home and has been replaced by a series of boy-friends. Anthony has an aunt of whom he is very fond and who shows her concern about him by coming to school to ask about his progress. Anthony's real mother has been in and out of State mental hospitals, and as a result of her own problems is unable to meet many of his physical and emotional needs.

Anthony's classroom teacher described him as a quiet child who spoke only when directly spoken to. His responses were short and direct, but he gave the impression of holding back, of being unable or unwilling to attempt any unnecessary communication. The child seemed like an iceberg. He chose to share with no one the thoughts or feelings locked up inside him.

After he had been in class for a while he began to walk aimlessly around the room whenever he felt restless. One day I noticed a crayon drawing of a tree that Anthony had made in his classroom without any prompting (Figure 1).

The tree seems to be split in half, and each half is made up of jagged shapes that seem to say "stay away from me." Yet there is strength in the line and the use of color. I decided to administer some projective tests I had learned about in my graduate work and compare his first drawing with them.



① Figure 1

Figure 2 ANTHONY 2-19



(2)

Figure 2 shows Anthony's response to the Achromatic HTP (House-Tree-Person test).

Anthony began immediately and enthusiastically, as though he enjoyed the structure of the test and used it as an excuse to express himself.

The woman in the drawing is tall and thin, which I interpreted as indicating his weak ego, leading one to expect generally poor control of emotions. Lack of shoulders suggests his feeling of inferiority, the absence of arms his inability to manipulate his environment. Weak legs in a wide stance and shown by a single line point to feelings of insecurity.

The zigzag shape of the tree, like the earlier one, gives the feeling that he stands off and will not allow anyone to get too close; this could possibly point to a pre-schizophrenic development. Because of his apparent inability to get satisfaction from the environment, it seemed that he might turn to his fantasy world to fulfill his needs.

The house, with only its roof visible, reinforces my feeling that Anthony's fantasies are excessively active. The center window or door is too high and too small for anyone to enter. Perhaps he felt his fantasies were too wild and dangerous to share with the outside world. The split between reality and fantasy seems to be increasing. If he is not able to get more of his needs satisfied, he will probably continue to withdraw into his world of fantasy.

I saw it as my job to teach Anthony to start expressing himself verbally, which would allow him both to communicate his fantasies and to express his needs in a way that might more easily lead to their fulfillment.

At this time I discussed my findings with Anthony's classroom teacher.

We then worked together, meeting every other week to carefully evaluate his progress and to plan the direction of his therapy. The few times we reached an impasse I would meet with a faculty advisor from Pratt and seek clarification. Thus it was possible to call on trained psychologists and psychoanalysts and to use their professional experience and knowledge for persons in our society who very rarely can afford such help.

I left Anthony free to determine the direction our sessions would take. He would come into my office, look around, and then select whatever material he wanted to work with on any particular day. Because our relationship had developed enough so that he felt more at ease with me, Anthony began to communicate more easily. I wanted this communication to evolve in whatever way was most natural to him.

At first he was a little overwhelmed by this freedom, possibly because he mistook it for the indifference shown him at home. But my encouragement and acceptance soon made him realize that this was not the same.

The first series of drawings he did in our therapy sessions had the same subjects as the earlier diagnostic material. This was quite understandable. Possibly for the first time ever, he had expressed some part of himself creatively and had had his work accepted. He now felt most secure drawing the figures that had earned approval earlier, as we see in Figure 3.

The explanation of the drawing was given quickly as "a girl beating a dog with a stick while a boy watches." This was all he would say about it.

The overall quality of this drawing is different from the earlier ones. Something seems to be unfolding here, but Anthony lacks the confidence to come out and directly tell what is on his mind. The safe, dark colors do not express any of the hostility suggested in the crowded yet empty windows.

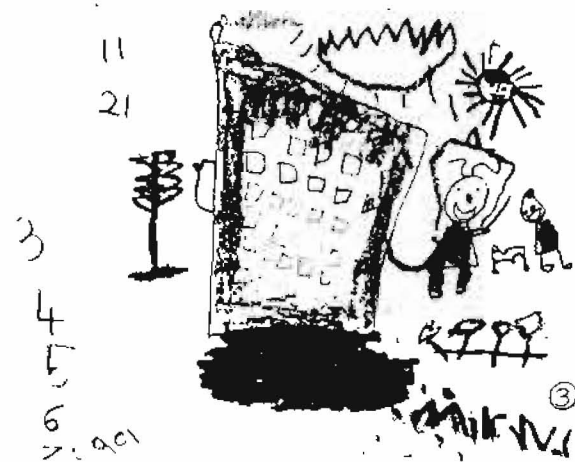
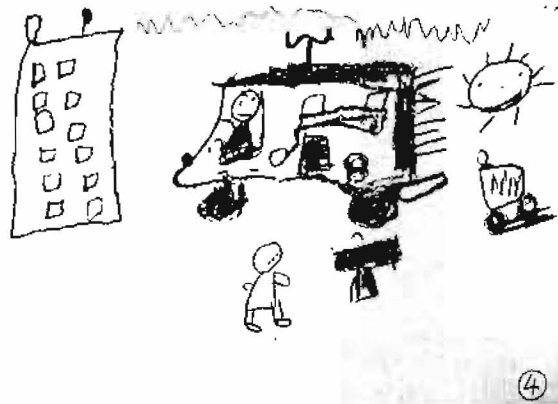


Figure 3

Figure 4



That he is actually using color to control his inner feelings is further seen in the heavy bands of color reinforcing the walls of the house.

He is trying to say "Look, everything is nice and we are all happy." (Note the smiles on people and sun.) Yet there is more. At another level, he seems to suggest quite different feelings that might be translated thus: "My world is a strange place; the house is about to fall over; there is no door on my house because it is too dangerous to let people into my world; it's raining while the sun shines; people are happily inflicting pain [smiling girl beating the dog]; and the significant people in my life [represented here, I surmise, by flowers] are not very stable and offer little support."

Figure 4 shows another change in Anthony. His ability to express his inner feelings more openly was increasing. Note the difference in the line quality, particularly of the house. The walls need no reinforcement. Cheerful reds and yellows are used for the first time.

Two separate stories seem to be told in this picture. One is concerned with the cousin of whom he has expressed envy, who had recently moved away with his mother, Anthony's favorite aunt. Anthony felt lost and rejected and wished that he too could move to a better neighborhood. The drawing can be interpreted as a vicarious satisfaction of this wish.

Second, it seems likely that Anthony graphically expressed his feelings of rivalry toward his infant sister, a subject about which he also talked to me. That he could reveal so much showed that our sessions were having a good effect.

I have no doubt that Anthony was able to sense my pleasure at his progress. This speeded the process. The more he disclosed, the happier it made me, the more he disclosed, and so forth.

All in all, Anthony seemed to be expressing underlying feelings of alienation along with a sense of being lost. It was no surprise to hear him

say that his favorite television show was "Lost in Space." This feeling of strangeness began to show up in the subject matter of Anthony's art work.

During the next session he seemed much more at ease. He immediately asked to begin, and from that moment until he had to leave, a period of about 45 minutes, he did not stop talking. He invented stories as he drew. His approach to both drawing and talking evidenced a loosening up. The following dialogue about Figure 5 is condensed from that session.

The first figures to appear he described as "a man and a boy robot fighting in a house . . . on Jupiter. I ain't goin' up there."

Why not?

"There's a radiation belt up there."

What is it like?

"Like a belt . . . it's round."

Do you like belts?

"NO. . . . That boy hits me with a belt . . . my sister make me sick . . . she pull on my hair and it hurts . . . she lazy like our aunt Vera, all she do all day is sleep." He turns back to the drawing:

"This house belongs in water . . . the submarine is catching fish with a ray gun. They have a force field on the submarine." He drew a bubble around it. "Now mother wakes up and sees the fight . . . she's gonna use her laser beam to stop them."

The sibling rivalry again makes its appearance. He talked about how a boy hit him with a belt and in the same breath shifted his resentment onto his infant sister. Not realizing why he disliked her, he blamed her for "pulling his hair" when his real anger must focus on her stealing his mother's scant affection from him. With the topic getting too hot to handle, he retreated into the fantasy world of the drawing. The boy and the man robots were fighting. Here is possibly another rivalry, this time with some father

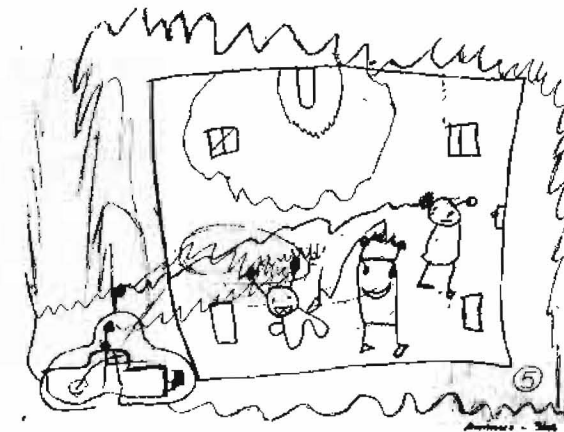


Figure 5

figure for the attention of the mother. It is interesting to note all the fantastic camouflage Anthony needs to be able to approach these dangerous emotions.

Around this time Anthony's classroom teacher reported a general change in his behavior. He began to actively defy authority and stated in no uncertain terms that he would not do any work. This obstinate behavior seemed to be the sort of testing that young children often use to find the limits of what is accepted in their environment. In light of Anthony's usually withdrawn and quiet past behavior, this was a natural manifestation of his newly acquired openness and expressiveness. He began to trust the environment we had created for him, and he felt confident enough to be able to challenge it without fear of severe repercussions.

We allowed his defiance to continue for a short while until his trust in us was strong enough to transcend any surface challenges. We wanted to be sure that Anthony felt we would still love him in spite of what he did, but we had to show him that we did expect certain things from him.

Once this level of trust had been reached, certain classroom limits were firmly established. He was required to do his school work, and he seemed to enjoy fulfilling our expectations. He had demonstrated that he was not afraid to challenge us; now he seemed to take comfort in knowing that certain types of behavior were not looked on favorably. He began to work well in class and surpassed many of his classmates, some of whom had had up to two years' head start on him in reading and in other skills.

As time passed, Anthony began to be even more open. During our art therapy sessions he produced more drawings and showed an increasing capacity to verbalize his thoughts. In fact, it became almost impossible to stop the constant flow of words. A playfulness with sounds, rhyming, and the like accompanied most of his outpouring of artwork.

Anthony said of Figure 6, "Men, yellow, carrying a TV set out of a yellow house and onto a boat . . . water is next to the house."

Are they going to get away with the TV?

"The water is very cold . . . it's ice, the boat can't move on ice. They can't take the TV away now. Cops come to stop them . . . he has a gun and says he gonna get 10 years for this. But the boat is on a rocket ship, they're gonna get away . . . but the cop gets back into the car and flies after them. A police plane catches them."

In this drawing I feel that Anthony is trying to relive some negative experience and work it out in a positive way. He had once told me that a TV had been stolen from his house. This must have been painful for him since the TV was one of his very few sources of pleasure. Because he didn't get the love he needed from his real world, he began to seek it elsewhere, in the fantasy world of television. This trauma was finally worked out when Anthony expressed in words his anger toward the men responsible by having the policeman say "He gonna get 10 years," a small price indeed for stealing Anthony's main source of enjoyment.



Figure 6

Anthony showed signs of great relief after finishing the TV picture and asked to draw another. He immediately drew a tree (Figure 7) and colored the leaves red. This was the first time that he had ever drawn a tree that was not split in half. He then decided to draw an apple hanging from the tree.

"I'm gonna eat that apple." He adds the drawing of himself. "I don't get real apples, that is why I buy *them*" [pointing to a box of hard candy that he had brought to the office with him]. Now the ladder on which the figure has been standing begins to fall. "A friendly elephant comes to help. He a big one . . . No, this ain't no elephant—this is a snake, he says 'Hi, I'm a snake. You want a apple?' The boy says yup. . . The snake says 'OK' and they both share the apple."



I asked if I could have a piece of his candy. Anthony said sure and began to draw yellow snow. He asked to come back to my office the next day.

Anthony's new way of drawing a tree represented an important change in his outlook. He has begun to accept his situation. He is now able to find some of the things he needs in his real world, which reduces his need to seek satisfaction in fantasy. In beginning to realize that his inner feelings are not as dangerous or as sinful as he feared, he no longer feels it necessary to split reality from fantasy. He has begun to realize his strengths and weaknesses. He seeks support from positive, strong father figures, suggested here by the elephant, but if others do not supply all of his needs, he now has the strength to fulfill some of them himself, as indicated by his substitution of candy for apples.

Conclusion

Because of help from people trained in art therapy, Anthony now has at least a chance of surviving the destructive forces of the ghetto. However, thousands of other children are not getting the assistance they so urgently need. One way to give it to them would be to institute in our schools therapeutic opportunities similar to the one Anthony found so useful. Probably many serious disorders much more difficult to deal with could be prevented by early intervention of this kind.