

## articles

# Affect Regulation, Mirror Neurons, and the Third Hand: Formulating Mindful Empathic Art Interventions

Michael Franklin, Boulder, CO

### Abstract

*Visual empathy through empathic art interventions are discussed in this article with respect to attachment theory; recent research on the mirror neuron system; art, empathy, and mindfulness; and an artistic strategy for crafting third-hand interventions (Kramer, 1986). A case vignette demonstrates the art therapist's applied use of visual art responses that help to organize complex information and reflect back the emotional center of a client's communications. With careful attunement, art therapists can develop unique, aesthetic forms of empathic resonance that will help clients feel deeply seen and develop empathy for themselves and compassion for others.*

### Introduction

Empathic art interventions can be understood through the lenses of attachment theory, recent neuroscience research on the mirror neuron system, and mindfulness-based meditation. Art therapists have discussed the value of the therapist's post-session response art (Fish, 2008; Moon, 1999) as well as drawing alongside clients within a session (Haeseler, 1989). The focus of this paper is a specific form of empathically attuned art made within a session through "third-hand" strategies (Kramer, 1986), which help clients regulate their emotions and develop interpersonal relatedness.

Of particular importance to theories of attachment, art, and empathy is the discovery of the mirror neuron system (Gallese, 2003; Gallese, Keysers, & Rizzolatti, 2004). Recent research has suggested that an evolved neural mirror mechanism in humans and primates allows an embodied "as if" understanding between the observer and the observed, which accesses the mind and feeling states of others (Gallese, 2008). An emerging understanding of neurological mirroring structures points toward "the first unifying perspective of the neural basis of social cognition"

(Gallese et al., 2004, p. 401). However, long before the discovery of the mirror neuron system, researchers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were studying the relationship between empathy and art (Mallgrave & Ikononou, 1994; Titchener, 1909).

### Historical Antecedents of Empathy and Art

Jahoda (2005) outlined a historical review of art, sympathy, and empathy in his analysis of the research conducted by Robert Vischer, Theodore Lipps, Edward Titchener, and Vernon Lee. Lipps anticipated the Gestalt theory of isomorphism (Arnheim, 1966) by recognizing the similarity between how a listener perceived structural patterns in music and how a listener experienced the music's emotional effects. He noticed a similar phenomenon when viewing objects. Lipps's observations addressed "sympathetic empathy," which Arnheim (1966) discussed as a form of "resonance based on isomorphism" present in the arts (p. 66). This intriguing observation correlates with ideas found in attachment theory such as intersubjectivity and emerging research on mirror neurons. In attachment theory, intersubjectivity is defined as the sharing of subjective states with another person through emotional attunement. Similarly, an artist attunes to his or her subject by empathically feeling into the phenomenological object.

Lipps was a prominent theorist who influenced early psychoanalytic thinking as well as phenomenology. He considered how artworks, through their contemplation, might enter and fuse with various states in the observer (Jahoda, 2005), or "transport" the observer into an image. This quality of transfer, or emotional projection, is related to aesthetic imitation and aesthetic *einfihlung* (Lee, 1912), which means to instinctually feel and intentionally project oneself within or into something outside one's self.

This intersubjective projection into the state of another person or work of art is enabled by the flexible dimensionality of the imagery itself. Lipps's colleague Lee (1912) noticed, for example, that a person could subjectively relate to visual forms in art despite the fact that they exist as inert forms. The intersubjective perceptions of the viewer conjugate meaning as the visual forms and content are contemplated.

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**Editor's Note:** Michael Franklin, PhD, ATR-BC, is a Professor in the Transpersonal Counseling Psychology Department and Director of the Graduate Art Therapy Program of Naropa University in Boulder, CO. Material from this article was presented at the 2006 Annual Conference of the American Art Therapy Association. Correspondence may be addressed to the author at [michaelf@naropa.edu](mailto:michaelf@naropa.edu)

According to Jahoda (2005), Lipps recognized that there are ways of knowing beyond what the senses communicate. Emotions cannot be accessed through the senses in the way smell or taste reach awareness; rather, we come to know another's emotion by allowing it to become born within ourselves. Thus, at its core, empathy is instinctually an intersubjective, imaginal practice of entering the world of another. This awareness can be correlated with what is now known about the mirror neuron system; that is, carefully observed actions—such as those seen in another person creating art—will instinctually fuse with the observer at subtle neural levels (Gallese, 2008; Gallese et al., 2004). For Lipps, this progression of events happened through a process of aesthetic imitation. In addition, he noticed that he could feel within himself what was active in the observed other.

Vischer's work associated *einfehlung* with the perceptual appreciation of art-based stimuli through "emotional projection" (Jahoda, 2005, p. 153). Vischer observed that at higher levels of intentional perceiving, the sensory ego becomes "saturated with feeling" when projected into the focal object (p. 154). His psychological research explored how the ego can penetrate into an object as a way to bridge the notion of "otherness" (Mallgrave & Ikononou, 1994, p. 26).

At the end of his summary of these historical discussions of sympathy and empathy or *einfehlung*, Jahoda (2005) addressed the complexity of comprehending unobservable subjective processes and wrote that they could only be fully understood by "neuro-psychological studies" (p. 162). With their pioneering work on mirror neurons, researchers in neuroscience have been able to identify a "we-centric" view of empathy (Cozolino, 2002; Gallese, 2003, 2008; Gallese et al., 2004). According to Gallese (2008), we-centric experiencing seems to take place through a shared neural substrate rather than through analogy alone. Furthermore, this empathic experience is based on "embodied simulation" resulting in "as if" relational understanding (p. 771). Concerning the we-centrism of mirror neurons, Cozolino (2002) posited that the mirror neuron system might help organize and synchronize various group behaviors such as dancing. This theory supports what appears to be a connection between the empathic sensory ego described by Lipps and Vischer and the synchronizing capacity of the mirror neuron system that may be found in studio-based group art experiences.

## Social We-Centric Dimensions of Art

The more complex the social existence of mammals, the more "frontal cortical architecture" there will be (Siegel, 2007, p. 36) to support the mental evolution of cultural meaning. The brain has not changed in 40,000 years; rather, the mind, as expressed through the neural pathways of the brain, is what has evolved in the intergenerational exchange of cultural meaning (Siegel, 2007). Mind requires an embodied and relational regulatory process of "monitoring and modifying" (Siegel, 2010, p. 25). Along these lines, the embodied mind naturally fuses with the arts in the creation of culture.

Dissanayake (1992) observed that the precursors of fine arts are found in the timeless human practice of creating objects. She believed that aesthetic behavior is hard-wired into our species as a need to "make special" (p. 173). Objects are not created for their own sake but rather for communal bonding; hence, social connections are reinforced through object use during rituals conceived to support collective needs. Communal ritual becomes a galvanizing adhesive that helps culture form and evolve.

For these rituals to be enacted, physical engagement with materials and processes are needed in order to manifest the objects involved. How humans have used our hands over time is important in tracing social and neurological elements of evolution, given the fact that a significant amount of space in the brain is dedicated to the hands and to visual perception (Wilson, 1998). In his book *The Hand: How its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture*, Wilson (1998) described showing video clips of musicians with injured hands to an audience of musicians with uninjured hands. Some members of the audience had strong visceral responses. It is possible that the viewers felt a strong sense of intersubjective resonance for the injured musicians portrayed in the video, and perhaps even experienced an induced panic of the mirror neuron system. That is, the observers may have understood and even experienced the condition of the musicians' injured hands at an embodied neural level (Gallese et al., 2004) along with the intersubjective cognition of "action understanding" (observing others perform). Within this scenario, observer and observed share an understanding of each other beyond overt conjecture. Rather, an "as if" experience occurs on a neural substrate level that derives a we-centric understanding from the embodied simulation (Gallese, 2008).

This example of we-centric resonance suggests several possibilities. If it is true that the viewers' strong visceral responses to the video were a reflection of a depressing neural identification with the injuries observed in the video, then the converse is also conceivable and supports the hypothesis of this paper: Visual conditions could be designed to cultivate forms of "as if" resonance to serve empathic communication within the therapeutic relationship.

## Attachment Theory, Affect Regulation, and Empathic Art

Early attachment theory is generally based on the work of René Spitz, John Bowlby, and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby's (1980) work was derived from diverse theories in psychoanalysis, ethology, cognitive psychology, and developmental psychology. His formulation of attachment theory emphasized the dynamics of responsive care giving. The responsive relationship supports healthy development by containing affective states and promoting the discrimination that is needed to maintain proximity to attachment figures. Attachment bonds, according to Bowlby, are active throughout the life cycle and serve biological and psychological regulation needs. Because potent emotions may "arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of attachment relationships" (1980, p. 40), it is

important to regulate these affective states in order to foster secure attachment. As this paper suggests, creating art helps to modulate these concomitant emotions.

More recently, attachment theory has become a primary lens for understanding the psychobiological dimensions of human behavior throughout development. Schore (2000, 2003; Schore & Schore, 2008) addressed how a productive therapeutic relationship based in attunement is similar to the affective synchrony that occurs between infants and their caregivers. Analogous to a good parent, the therapist adjusts to shifting, intersubjective exchanges of attunement, misattunement, and re-attunement that form the basis of the therapeutic alliance. The result is a relationship that aims to regulate arousal states through empathic tracking. Schore (2003) explained that “a state of resonance exists when the therapist’s subjectivity is empathically attuned to the patient’s inner state” (p. 51). He believed that this resonance “interactively amplifies, in both intensity and duration, the affective state in both members of the dyad” (p. 51). As such, it is a significant variable in brain organization and central nervous system regulatory processes needed for healthy relationships.

Artists use intersubjective empathic attunement when cultivating subjective and objective understandings of a subject. In both good portraiture and mural work, for example, the artist searches for aesthetically honest, accurate forms to hold fluctuating emotional states. The artist who specializes in portraiture must translate into a single image the layers of the subject’s history worn on the landscape of the body and face. By looking closely at and rendering another’s face, artists see, feel, and imagine into the origins from which these expressions originated. Some mural artists practice a similar attunement on the collective level by creating a cultural portrait that successfully locates and renders the emotional center of the community.

Theories of attachment generally view instinctive social behavior as serving biological and evolutionary survival functions (Cozolino, 2006; Siegel, 2007, 2010). Because infancy is preverbal, most attachment communication takes place through gesture, touch, voice tone, scent, and gaze (Schore, 2003). These sensory pathways, it seems, lay down a template for multisensory and potentially aesthetic forms of regulation. Sustained mutual eye gazing, for example, helps an infant organize and regulate affects whenever a sensitive caregiver thoughtfully appraises and responds to the infant’s nonverbal expressive communication. Sustained mutual gazing between caregiver and infant, in fact, is one of the ways our social neurological embodied systems unfold and learn to receive and evaluate the “intention of the other” (Cozolino, 2002, p. 175). This relational, sensory engagement may also contribute to a child’s emerging aesthetic sensibility.

Attunement helps to build a healthy sense of self in a child. Later in life, this same process may be used to repair damaged object relations from early attachment failures (Hamilton, 1989). Kohut’s contribution to psychotherapy advised treating attachment failures with empathic methods calculated to regenerate relational connection (Elson, 1987). Empathic uses of art were pioneered in art therapy

by Kramer’s (1986) concept of the third hand and Lachman-Chapin’s (1983, 2001) in-session, interactive art-based technique. Their work has led the way in forging art-based methods for addressing relational deficits.

Kramer’s (1971) considerations of sublimation and use of art materials demonstrated how art regulates affect. She addressed a continuum of transformative effects, from displaced catharsis or chaotic discharge to formed expressions that can evoke attuned emotions in the viewer. Kramer believed that by understanding the process of moving visual chaos from its unformed state into form, we may comprehend the difference between “displacement art,” which is merely visual chaotic discharge, and “formed expressions” that display successful sublimation. Formed expressions also have degrees of regression inherent in how they are created (Kramer, 1971). Kramer posited that such regression is related to the artist’s need to maintain access to emotionally charged material in order to further integrate it into art expression.

### Mindfulness and Intrapersonal Attunement

In addition to art practice, meditation helps to mollify the ever-shifting tides of the thinking mind and the resulting affect that is often in need of regulation. The practice of mindfulness meditation creates capacity for awareness, attention or concentration, presence, attendance, and equanimity. Mindfulness cultivates present-focused, moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness. Siegel (2007, 2010) viewed mindfulness as the turning inward of attachment/attunement principles. He related mindfulness to intrapersonal attunement, whereas empathy or empathetic communication is related to interpersonal attunement. Mindfulness on the part of the therapist, for example, supports the development of an attuned relationship because it helps clear the intersubjective field of unrelated cognitive debris. It also offers a way to empathize with suffering by “surrendering” the need to reject suffering, thereby releasing forms of inner oppression (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005, p. 63). This resulting awareness helps the therapist monitor countertransference and remain more available to the client.

Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, and Toney (2006) conducted a study that identified five clustering factors of mindfulness: (a) acting without reactivity to inner experience; (b) observing, noticing, and attending to sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings; (c) acting with awareness, automatic pilot, concentration, and nondistractedness; (d) describing and labeling with words; and (e) nonjudging experience (pp. 34–35). These factors are essential for presence and attunement and are implicated in how the mind and body can be trained to stay focused on the present moment and avoid cognitive distortions or possibly mirror neuron system intrusions that may influence the therapeutic relationship.

### Mirror Neurons, the Third Hand, and Empathy

From the history of the atelier in Western art, we know that the relationship between master and apprentice was



based on the transmission of specific skills. The novice trainee internalized an entire craft by carefully observing the master. In time and with watchful supervision, the apprentice eventually individuated from this primary relationship and became a skilled professional. What forms of “embodied simulation” (Gallese, 2008, p. 773) were being laid down as the apprentice observed and scrutinized the work of the master? One answer can be found in the discovery of mirror neurons and their potential impact in therapy (Rothschild, 2004).

According to Gallese (2003, 2008), mirror neurons were first discovered in the F-5 premotor cortex region of the macaque monkey’s brain. In this area audio-visuomotor neurons discharge when a macaque watches an explicit action performed by another of the same species. The same neurons discharge when the monkey performs a comparable action. From these and other experiments, Gallese and his colleagues theorized that when humans see or hear another person performing a specific action, the same motor circuits are simultaneously activated in their bodies. It is not necessary to physically replicate what is observed or heard to have this effect; our motor systems engage as if the action had been replicated. Gallese (2003) stated that this “implicit, automatic and unconscious process of embodied simulation enables the observer to use his [or] her resources to penetrate the world of another without the need of explicitly theorizing about it” (p. 174).

Almost a century earlier, Lipps offered an analogous perspective of somatic empathy and the possible connection between aesthetic *einfihlung* and the mirror neuron system:

In a word, I am now with my feeling of activity totally in the moving figure. I am also spatially, insofar as there can be question of a spatial extension of the ego, in the place of that figure. I am transported into it. As far as my consciousness is concerned, I am totally identical with it. While I feel myself active within the perceived figure...that is aesthetic imitation, and it is at the same time aesthetic *Einfühlung*. (as cited in Jahoda, 2005, p. 155)

This connection between the mirror neuron system and aesthetic *einfihlung* contributes to the question of whether an art therapist should create art during a session. Research on mirror neurons supports the idea that it is helpful for clients to observe the art therapist modeling an art process. Art therapy clients may store technical information and methods through observation and imitation. Art skills are often accelerated by observing a skilled artist mix colors, draw in three dimensions, or sculpt a figure. Teaching art usually includes demonstrations of technique. When Kramer (1979) suggested that the art therapist should be an artist, therapist, and teacher at once, she was drawing on her own artistic training that was strongly tied to apprenticeship-based instruction. This background allowed her to function as a competent observing and auxiliary ego, which she described as being an adept third ear and third hand (Kramer, 1986). In this role, one can implicitly listen and hear what is beneath another’s verbalized, explicit thoughts (Schore & Schore, 2008).

Kramer’s work supports the view that an art therapist functions as an auxiliary ego ready to respond to the client

with symbolically accurate and developmentally appropriate art-based interventions. For Kramer (1986), these third-hand interventions arise out of the ability to carry on a visual dialogue with the client as well as offer assistance when the art process derails. Kramer emphatically stated that all third-hand interventions should be offered in the least intrusive way so as not to distort meaning or impose content on the client. Adjusting and attuning one’s artistic style to the client’s visual “handwriting” and artistic development is essential for effective visual empathy (Kramer, 1986). Furthermore, the therapist’s artistic responses should not be personal but rather should be carefully attuned to the clients’ needs. Because the intervention is dictated by developmental, cognitive, cultural, and psychosocial needs, the art therapist’s artistic ability must be skillfully subordinated to reduce artistic intimidation for the client.

## Defining and Formulating Empathic Art Responses

Research on mirror neurons inspires a fresh look at our ideas of empathic art. The foundation for this reexamination can be found, in part, in Arnheim’s (1966) pioneering research on isomorphism as it relates to Lipps’s work on art and empathy. With isomorphism, there is a similarity in organization between inner emotional states and their expression in outer visual structures of art (Arnheim, 1966). Arnheim also perceived expression and perception to be intimately related: Expression is a way of “perceiving with imagination” (1966, p. 64). This view considers affect to exist in the actual object of perception. Empathy is one way to locate and explore what is emotionally alive in visual imagery. Such attuned understanding gathers information on another’s internal life; empathic responses are the successful communication of this information reflected back to the self (Book, 1988). Empathetic awareness results from conscious and preconscious material filtered through a therapist’s personal inventory of the client’s many cues. Crafting these data into empathic art expressions is a strategy that can enhance the therapeutic alliance by reflecting internalized, embodied, resonant material back to the client.

The layered elements that form visual empathic responses ultimately unfold in a quick succession of subtle, albeit informed, intuitions that result from education, clinical training, and overall life experience. Because these informed intuitions emerge as automatic thoughts, it may be helpful to describe the process of their emergence, as follows.

The progression of empathic insight and response begins with a contemplative mindful lens, in which the art therapist’s intention should be to slow down and remain present without judgment (Franklin, 1990). This initial phase attempts a neutral posture, suspending the habit of judging, categorizing, explaining, or knowing. The goal is to be mindfully present to presenting imagery and behavior, bracketing out points of bias or impulsive interpretations that might contaminate a fresh, beginner’s mind. The desired attitude is that of meeting a stranger for the first time with a welcoming, unconditional presence.

Next, the therapist aims to receive the ongoing, multiple communications of the client—including verbal, visual, behavioral, and somatic cues—within the therapist's own body. It is also important to observe facial expressions and nonverbal patterns unfolding in the environment (Schoore & Schoore, 2008). Being mindfully receptive to this relational field will cultivate an intrapersonal tolerance for the ambiguous, layered information emerging in the session.

The therapist then directs his or her efforts toward becoming phenomenologically aware of the primary core formal elements that comprise these verbal, visual, behavioral, and somatic cues. The therapist must check transference and countertransference reactions and sort out related and unrelated personal identifications with the art and other expressions presented. Given the likelihood that the therapist's mirror neuron system has been activated, somatic cues can be used as sources of information to monitor. The therapist filters all of this information by omitting irrelevant material and distilling the primary data into the core content to be communicated. The core content becomes the consolidated emotional center of all verbal, visual, and somatic communications (Sobol & Williams, 2001).

This core material is sifted further when the art therapist aligns it with similarities in his or her personal history that are based in resonance rather than over identification. As with the difference between empathy (feeling within) and sympathy (feeling for), the therapist carefully monitors the potential for merger through projective identification. At this point countertransference becomes available as a form of sublimated empathy.

Acting in the role of the "third hand" or auxiliary ego, a visual narrative is then judiciously crafted. This consolidated and symbolic communication responds to what Schoore and Schoore (2008) called the "music" behind discursive language. Finally, visual intervention is offered in the least intrusive way when the therapist attunes to the client's artistic style or visual "handwriting" (Kramer, 1986). This completes the empathic art process.

To summarize, in this image- and client-centered approach, isomorphic expression from the client is answered with empathically accurate, isomorphic expression from the art therapist. In essence, the art therapist receives the affect of the client from his or her art and other layered expressions, manages initial ambiguities by skillfully filtering this material through personal yet objective identifications and associations, and offers back an artistic response. This response consolidates and communicates with clarity the emotional center of the exchanges experienced in the session.

The crafting of empathic art responses requires several additional considerations. First, it is necessary to take into account one's own unconscious processes and messages. The intersubjective exchange between client and art therapist is actually an interaction of two intermingling histories (Teicholz, 1999). The postmodern perspective is that no true objective reality exists; rather, multiple subjective realities are constructed out of personal experiences. The therapist's subjective perception is therefore crucial because it is always possible for unconscious messages to be communicated through the therapist's misattuned responses. This is

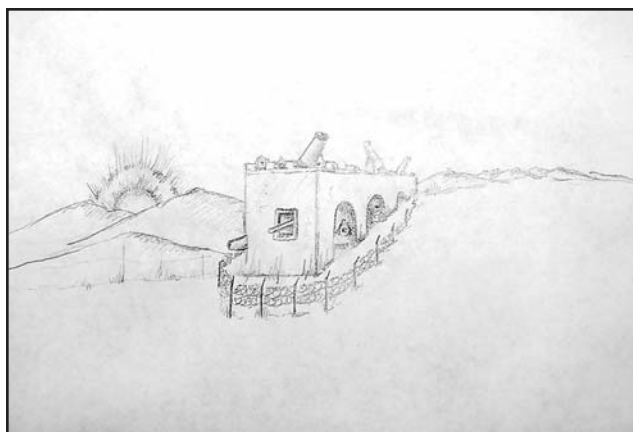


Figure 1 Fortress With Cannons and Barbed Wire

why meditation practice is an important intrapersonal strategy for cultivating awareness, attention, and intention, all of which help monitor any subtle miscues.

A second concern is that, especially for clients with a chaotic self-structure, this form of empathic exchange may become too intimate too quickly. Being seen with such clarity can be difficult to tolerate, especially if the client is not used to such contact. The timing of the message is important. Also, because empathy is ultimately an imaginal practice, mistakes are inevitable. The intersubjective exchange that results from these mistakes is an opportunity to uncover humanistic truths that live within the therapeutic relationship. Subsequent conversations depose the art therapist as expert and enliven the relational field with new possibilities for interaction.

### Art-Based Empathic Attunement in an Adolescent Group

The following vignette illustrates visual empathy, limited in this case to the therapist's in-session artwork. An art therapy group was comprised of seven male adolescents, aged 14 to 18, who were diagnosed with clinical depression and were residing in a locked inpatient unit. At the start of the 5-week group sessions, the group members manifested symptoms of depression and withdrawal. Some presented their depression with extreme lethargy, and others were withdrawn and suspicious. Given their collective diagnoses and symptoms, the group was difficult to engage with and was disdainful of the staff. I addressed this malaise through art-based empathic images crafted using third-hand strategies that targeted the emotional center of the group.

During the first session, I created an image as a means for consolidating the overall oppositional antagonism that was present in the group. I drew a well-defended fortress complete with barbed wire, thick walls, and intentionally phallic-like cannons (Figure 1). I wanted to capture the understandable resistance of the youth to hospitalization as well as their confusing search for homeostasis within their adolescent character structure. Two group members became curious about my drawing and asked questions about it, which replaced their distant stance with an animated response that indicated the image had resonated for them.

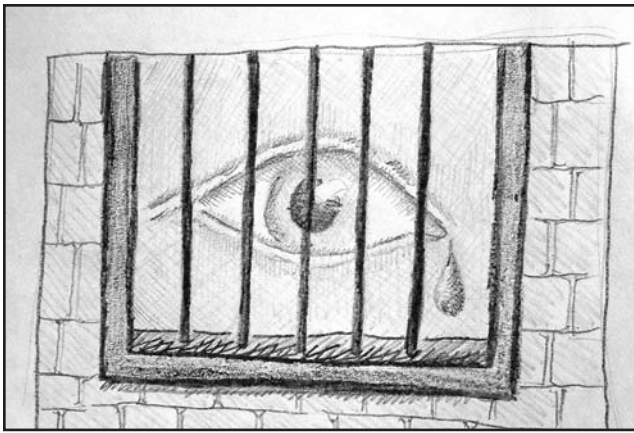


Figure 2 Eye With Tear, Behind Bars



Figure 4 Bowed, Seated Body

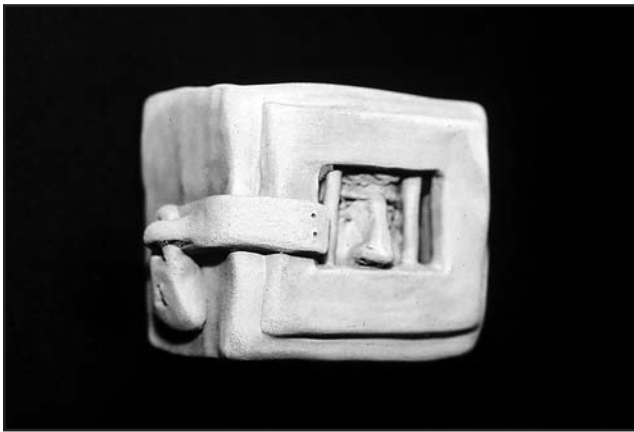


Figure 3 Face of Prisoner Behind Barred Window of Locked Door

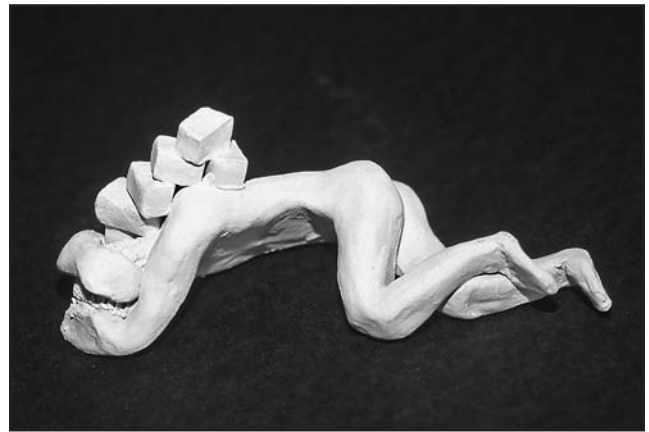


Figure 5 Prone Body With Metaphorical Burdens

Eventually, everyone chimed in with questions: Why the cannons? What's the barbed wire for? Who's in there? In an attempt to foster a cohesive group, I simply translated my drawing to them with the hope that it would consolidate some basic assumptions that were fogging our collective perceptions in that moment.

My drawing also sought an isomorphic congruence with the group (Gordon, 1978). My comments suggested the idea of a well-defended fort that was difficult to enter. In fact, trespassers were not allowed in—period! Only the people inside could decide who could get in and when. The group members affirmed the image, telling me that they liked it very much. My metaphoric communication was that I respected and valued their resistance, and my drawing served to locate a beginning that was congruent with the group's formative process.

Figures 2 and 3 began a narrative theme for the next two sessions. The challenge was to find an image that directly spoke to the group members' various forms of depression. I had noticed their eyes when we first met. The visual impact of their facial features, particularly their downcast or distant eyes, communicated deep despair. I attempted again to feel the pulse of the group and discern imagery that would have isomorphic resonance. Because they were in a locked unit with bars on all the windows, I

drew a jail cell. Behind the barred window, I drew an eye peering out into the external world (Figure 2). Attempting to speak for the metaphor and the preconscious themes alive in the room, I acknowledged the imprisonment of feelings for the person depicted behind bars and accentuated his gaze. So many eyes were looking at the adolescents during these early days of their hospitalization; by reversing this gaze, I hoped to acknowledge their right to look back and convey their perspective.

When the group asked about the drawing, I translated this visual metaphor and told them the figure was a man who was forgotten and alone in his cell. He had raging emotions but no one was there to listen. I then invited the group to say what they thought was going on for the imprisoned man, and their accounts were quite moving. Some related strongly to our discussion, noticing connections to themselves. This was good news; it was the kind of response that suggested an emerging identification with the image along with a shift of preconscious material breaking through into awareness. By speaking for the figure in the drawing, several group members found language that accurately reflected their own experiences. Due to this response, I decided to continue to work with this image in our next session.

The following week, I solidified the theme of the previous image by crafting it out of clay (Figure 3). Presenting



the narrative in three dimensions allowed additional spatial elements to be seen and therefore engaged with by the group. I also wanted to expose more of the prisoner's face in order to move the viewer's focus from the gaze to other elements of facial expression.

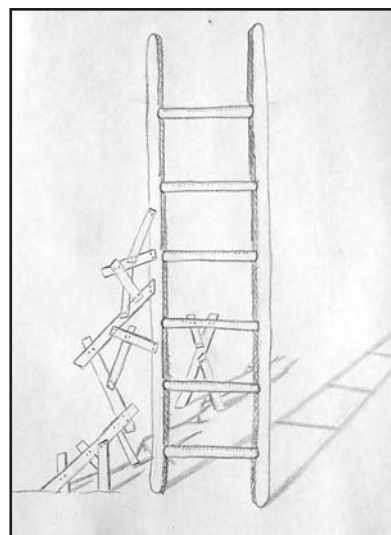
With this image, the group responded to the lock on the cell, setting in motion a rich dialogue on what was needed to unbolt the lock and liberate the figure. We came to a consensus on what could provide emotional first-aid to this isolated person in need. A new level of group participation unfolded as a direct result of the imagery presented, which sparked shared ideas on what the group members' depression felt like. The sharing of experience furthered the group's cohesion along with expanding the members' willingness to allow me entry into the layers of their emotional fortification.

My final art responses (Figures 4 and 5) attempted to address the burdens that teenagers often face with challenging interpersonal relationships, questionable societal rules, and the existential experiences of sorrow and grief. I felt that it was important to continue working in three dimensions, to show an entire body carrying metaphorical burdens that we conjointly defined. The group speculated on these symbolic problems and some acknowledged the burdens they were carrying.

During our last session, we reviewed all of the art, theirs and mine. I made one final drawing (Figure 6) about trying to climb out of depression with a shaky support system. Several of the group members commented on how well they thought I understood their situations and how much these visual responses helped them reflect and experience their own feelings. It was significant that each work was a conscious effort on my part as therapist to assess the core themes of the group, locate accurate imagery that consolidated this material, and then manifest the narratives in visual form so that they could be seen and serve as a springboard for conversation. I also helped the youth locate their own capacities for empathy for themselves and for each other, which is ultimately the desired outcome. Although a discussion of client artwork is omitted from this paper due to the fact that I no longer have access to it, my interventions overall did relate to the imagery generated from the group and were effective in identifying and communicating core emotions.

## Conclusion

The discovery of mirror neurons offers evidence for a physiologically-based theory of empathy. When integrated with the historical work of Lipps and Kramer and with mindfulness meditation, an art therapist may formulate effective empathic strategies for in-session art. As demonstrated in the case vignette, art therapists are in a unique position to build on intersubjective understanding by mindfully utilizing empathic art to receive, consolidate, and offer back expressions of deflected affect to their clients. In doing so, potentially disorganized emotions can be responded to with art and skillful verbal and visual listening. Not only will art therapy clients feel deeply seen, they may also



**Figure 6** Ladder, Climbing Out of Depression With Shaky Support

experience empathy for themselves and compassion for others. With careful attunement, art therapists can develop unique, aesthetic forms of empathic resonance. This territory presents significant opportunities for the artist within the art therapist to be active and of service to others.

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