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## A TROJAN HORSE OF CLAY: ART THERAPY IN A RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND

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### The Institution

The Landesbildungszentrum für Blinde (LBZB) in Hanover is a state institution that offers school education and professional training for visually impaired people from the age of six to their late twenties or beyond. The term "blind" refers to people who have little or no useful vision as defined by the government disability act. This involves people who were born blind as well as people who lost their eyesight, some of them at a later stage of their lives when their careers were well under way. The institution also schools blind people with multiple disabilities and terminal illnesses such as cancer or Batten's disease, which will be discussed in more detail later. The center teaches about 240 people as day students or residents, covering the north of Germany. It provides boarding facilities for 170 people who live in small residential groups and return to their families at the weekends.

### *Art Therapy in the School for the Blind*

The Art Therapy Department caters to approximately 30 people in both individual and group sessions and two open studios per week; one art therapist is employed on a full-time basis. In the German-speaking countries, it is the only institution for the blind to offer this kind of service.

The indication for art therapy is as varied as the client group. Clients may not only have to cope with the loss of vision, but find that their friends, lovers and career plans vanish at the same time. For some, even the privacy of their own homes is lost as they live in the institution most of their time. There may be illness and the prospect of inevitable death, which is taken to art therapy to be contained and worked with by those with terminal illness. Children who have arrived as refugees from the war-struck areas of former Yugoslavia may want to come to art therapy and deal with their traumatic experiences, giving expression to and getting relief from the psychological scars that murder, starvation and the destruction of their life environment have left on them. Art therapy is a place where people can get in touch with the strong feelings all these events may have evoked in them. It is also a place where eventually they can start picking up the pieces.

When I began building up the Art Therapy Department in 1991, I realized that, in school, art teaching had been kept to a minimum. To give not only clay, but also paint to blind or partially sighted students was still regarded as a revolutionary act by quite a few staff. Walking the buildings and grounds, I noticed that out of four sculptures installed in the vast complex, the three historic ones (1845, 1914 and 1960) are placed in positions where they cannot be touched, but only looked at. To me, this is a perfect mirror of the educational attitude toward the so-called visual

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arts throughout the school's 150 years of history until very recently: denial of the relevance of artwork for blind students and limiting its availability.

I began to find out about the differences between people who had never seen and people who have a reservoir of visual memories from the time before their loss of vision. I also realized how a seeing person's idea of blindness is often dominated by the concept of the absence of seeing, of a distinct lack of something. I noticed the great impact that this negative definition of blindness as "not seeing" has in terms of how blind people are trained in the institution and what the goals are. The pressures on blind students—inflicted by their seeing family members and a world that is fascinated by and run with visual clues—seem to be enormous. Among teachers and other staff members, the vast majority are seeing people. Mobility and practical life skills are the magic words and indicate what this education aims at: to orient toward and manage in a visual world where rules are set by visual people. A student's day is tightly planned and crammed with extra training to achieve these goals of independence and thus ultimately defeat, perhaps even deny, blindness.

Art therapy is sometimes wrongly perceived by both staff and students as one of those extras where one has to "achieve." Time is needed to undo this conditioning and build up trust in the therapeutic alliance and the facilitating environment. A student once said about our sessions, "This here is like a Trojan horse—you think it is something—and then it is something completely different from what you think it is."

I like to think of art therapy as a kind of Trojan Horse; it seems like one to me, too, looking at its position as the only psychotherapeutic service available in the school. It is still often being mistaken for a crossbreed between woodwork class and practical life skills education. People can be very surprised to find that art therapy is distinct from art *teaching*, gives no marks and offers confidentiality and protection for any information disclosed in a session. It is exactly these conditions that later enable people to find their own style of work, which may be different from a seeing person's idea of an object or of an interesting shape. I also like to think of both the art therapy room and the actual artwork as bellies in which a lot of unrecognized subjects can be contained and find their way out when the time has come. Let me tell you about some of the things that have emerged from that "big belly" since.

## Cases

### *Marianne*

Marianne is a 13-year-old girl who has been blind from birth. She lives with her mother, sister and younger brother. Initially, she came to art therapy because she was showing severe anxiety in the classroom and very little learning progress, and was constantly engaged in fighting with peers in her form as well as with her class teacher. Although she said she felt victimized herself, she seemed to cling to the conflict at the same time. She displayed a considerable amount of energy to keep it alive and brought school lessons to a standstill, very much to the despair of her teacher.

### *Sandplay*

At first, Marianne often was unable to engage in art-making and spent many art therapy sessions obsessing about her classmates' bad deeds, swear words and malicious character. She would then ask, in an adult-like voice, "Now, you tell me, Mr Herrmann, can *you* understand this? As far as *I* am concerned, I cannot see how I could ever be like that. This is just not done!" Over months, her work in art therapy would involve playing in the sand box, using a distinct pattern of play she had invented: filling loads of sand into several tins, she would pick a particularly small one she had named "Tinny," whispering to it again and again with a hissing voice, "So, Tinny, you don't want to work? You *have* to work! You have got to be slaving! I'll *make* you work!" Stuffing the tin with wet sand until it could take no more, she would turn to it saying sweetly, "Well done, Tinny, *that's* my girl," empty it and start all over again. Emptying all tins by the end of the session, no trace remained of the work she had done.

### *The Clay Islands*

At the beginning of the new term, Marianne was moved to the department for children with learning difficulties. Her victim role remained in this new group of peers. In fact, it worsened continuously. However, Marianne suddenly deserted the sandplay and, after an interlude of large paintings with finger-paint, took to clay work, producing masses of "fantasy islands" covered in wiggling curls of clay erupting from either three or four outcrops on the surface. She refrained from talking about them and sometimes

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