

THE GESTALT APPROACH to Experience, Art, and Art Therapy*

By JANIE RHYNE

Janie Rhyne, the pioneer of gestalt art therapy, bases her approach on intensive training received from Frederick Perls and other distinguished psychotherapists in the years 1965-1967. Earlier she had won widespread recognition as a designer, painter, and teacher and had also developed the therapeutic aspect of art in work with children and adults in a number of schools and hospitals. She has a master's degree from Florida State University, Tallahassee, where her studies of communication by means of graphic media led to intensive work in cultural anthropology with emphasis on the relationship between ethnology and art expression. At present she is a faculty member of the Humanistic Psychology Institute, San Francisco, and of the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is a Senior Trainer for the Gestalt Institute of San Francisco. She teaches professionals in groups and individually at these institutions and offers consultation and workshops at many others nationwide. She is the author of articles on gestalt art therapy that have appeared in journals and collections, as well as of the soon-to-be-published book from which this article is excerpted.

The word *gestalt* is German and has no exact equivalent in English. *Form*, *figure*, *pattern*, *structure*, and *configuration* are possible translations, but none is quite right, so we have adopted *gestalt* into English and bandy it about quite a bit in various contexts.

I bandy the word about in the context of the art experience. There is gestalt psychology and gestalt therapy, and there is the gestaltist's way of perceiving himself and others—a way of being, acting, and integrating experience. The premises of gestalt philosophy most relevant to the art experience seem so natural and so consistent with my attitudes that I find it hard to distinguish between what are gestalt tenets and what are my own personal apprehensions of how we human beings become and are.

Healthy children are naturally gestaltists—they live in the present, give full attention to what they are doing, do what they want to do, trust their own experiential data, and, until they are trained out of it, they know what they know with direct simplicity and accuracy.

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Most of us are not allowed to grow up naturally, to learn through experience, to add to our knowledge without losing our naive wisdom: our parents, teachers, and culture coerce us into conforming to the accepted standards of how we should feel, think, and do. With varying degrees of stubbornness we resist and then gradually put away our own individual sensibilities and accept our educators' ideas about what a person ought to be. During this process we are forced to deny much of what we know to be true about our own nature. We want approval and acceptance. Most of us, by the time we are considered adult and mature, have forgotten how to be ourselves. We remember just enough of what being ourselves feels like to be afraid of it. Our fear keeps us in a state of tension or deadness so we spend most of our lifetime performing instead of living and use most of our energy denying our fear of knowing ourselves and each other deeply and wholly.

Gestaltists offer ways to get through this wall of fear—we seek ways to recognize what we have hidden away—and to integrate our disowned parts into our total personality. We work to break through the barriers separating our authentic selves from the artificial roles we play. This isn't easy to do since we assumed these roles (probably during childhood) for defense, praise, attention, avoidance, or power.

Perhaps as children we knew we were only pretending to act in a certain way to get whatever it was we needed or wanted, but when the pretense was successful, we continued to play that game until we fooled even ourselves into believing that our phonyness was genuine.

Now we are adults, supposedly mature and functioning adequately, but with sneaking suspicions that we are not what we seem to be; that if we aren't careful, other people will see through our game—or worse yet, that we ourselves will realize how trite and shoddy is the show we put on.

When some situation in living forces our secret self-doubts out into the open, we have alternatives: we can commit suicide; we can find another self-delusion; we can continue the same boring games, knowing that we are dead; or we can begin the courageous search for finding in ourselves what is genuine. We can learn to give up falseness and grow into realness.

Some people say that change from phony-self to authentic-self can happen quickly and completely in some situations. Maybe, but I am dubious.

For me and for people with whom I share this experience of unlearning and regrowth, I find this is a process rather than a happening. We are active in the process, individually responsible for finding our various ways of re-creation of ourselves. No one way is *the* way.

For myself I choose a variety of ways, but the most effective for me is to use art materials to make images that not only allow me to rediscover some of the simple, naive wisdom of the child that I was, but also provide me with a visual imagery that evokes associations, resonances, and insights that are available to me if I just take the time to become aware of them. If I make a

Now I must define simply what I mean by the *gestalt art experience*. This drawing of my fantasies, I can see them, I can read my messages, I can learn; I can integrate my past childhood with my present and with visions of my future. I think of my expressive drawings as sources of learning serving me somewhat as my dreams do. These are different from the dreams I experience during sleep but alike in that both kinds of imagery can provide a path not only into the suppressed feelings of me as a child but also into present recognition of what I need and want now. They show how I, as a mature person, can bring all of these realizations together into the pattern of my own gestalt, whose every part is related to the total configuration that is me—past, present, future—and they show that I and my environment are ever-changing and ever-interacting.

Definition of Terms

Recently the term *gestalt* has been applied to so many kinds of activities that it seems to have become a sort of mumbo-jumbo magic password to get some people onto a popular bandwagon. I am glad that a gestaltist approach is widely accepted now; I am sorry when it is sold by a traveling medicine man who spouts his formula as a panacea—cheap to buy, easy to take, and guaranteed to cure whatever ails you. I regret this presentation not only because it is false but also because the patented, sold-in-a-bottle, come-on pitch turns many truly thoughtful people away from seeing and knowing for themselves the genuine substance of gestalt psychology and gestalt therapy.

combination of words has become meaningful to me; I have chosen the three of them to describe a process that makes sense beyond the boundaries of any verbal definition. But I must use the words to make sense, too; each word is a symbol for many cultural and personal ideas. Too often, when we are communicating verbally, we take for granted that we are each using the same word-symbols to represent exactly the same ideas. Too often we thus miscommunicate and get hopelessly caught in semantic morasses that hide our meanings behind different usages.

Let me define what I mean by the *gestalt art experience* by discussing each word separately. The last word, *experience*, comes first, just as experience comes first in any self-involving process.

Experience, says Webster's, is "the act of living through an event or events; personal involvement in or observation of events as they occur." Each time you and I draw, paint, or model we are actively living through an event, our own experiential event. Every line you draw is uniquely yours; the ones I draw are individually mine; each of us is involved in a personal happening. As the lines and shapes emerge from our activity, we can observe how we are forming a visible graphic record of some thing or sensation that we perceive. Having recorded that perception we each have a tangible reality to use as we prefer. You can denigrate your drawing with "Oh well, it's not very good. I

never could draw, anyway." You can deny your expression with "That drawing doesn't mean anything to me." You can disown the form you've made with "It just came out that way. I didn't have anything to do with it. That's not the way I see and feel."

But your drawing *does* have a lot to do with you—with the way you see and feel and think and with the way you perceive. When you engage in an art activity, you are experiencing yourself; what you produce comes not from a depersonalized "it" but from a very personal you. Your personal art expressions deserve your attention.

Perhaps you've never known an art activity as a real experience—not since you were a child, anyway, and maybe you don't remember scribbling lines and smearing shapes on any handy surface. That was a real experience, but maybe you were punished or persuaded out of that kind of expression. And so you've forgotten that you once knew how to draw freely and experience your delight, anger, and all kinds of living rhythms without self-consciousness. If so, think of the kinds of unself-conscious things you still do—dancing, singing, arranging furniture, choosing your clothes, and all the other ways you express your personal self. And think of your dreams, both sleep-time and daytime weavings of your fantasies. All of these are events that involve you personally and that you can observe as they occur.

So that's how I use the word *experience*: dreaming, feeling, thinking, acting, expressing, and being aware at the same time that you are the person who is doing all of this.

How am I using the word *art*? I turn to Webster's again and find "human ability to make things; creativity of man as distinguished from the world of nature."

Making things is natural to man; perhaps we became human as we made things. Like our primitive ancestors, we make ourselves shelter, food, clothes, and transportation. Like the cave people, we use a lot of time and energy providing ourselves with more or less of those basics according to our experiences and perceptions of what our basic needs are. How need-satisfactions—physical, cultural, and psychological—evolve from direct survival necessities to luxurious desirables is too complex to discuss here. Very simply, all cultures and the individuals in them have needs beyond survival needs; these additional needs are often called "wants." I make no clear distinction between need and want because when I want something strongly enough, I presume that I need it.

I am presuming, then, that humans both need and want to make things—to engage in art. That desire is an inherent part of our humanity. We use that desire in many different ways, with varying degrees of facility and for various ends, but we all do it in one way or another. I believe that we want to and need to if we are seeking our fullest humanity. There are those who disagree; they say, "You are just believing that because you want to. You need some sort of idealism, so you put your faith in man's basic creative urge. You can't prove it!" I hear their arguments—sometimes smugly, thinking I know

better, sometimes with sadness, fearing that they are right. However, until some of the “if you can’t measure it, you can’t believe it” adherents can come up with a better answer, I’ll trust my own perceptions and observations. From prehistoric times until today, we have made things that didn’t exist before; we have put things and ideas together, presenting a synthesis; we have created symbols and communicated meanings.

I don’t know why we do this; I do know that we do. So I start from that assumption and find excitement in exploring how we can perceive and create and communicate better through the media of the forms that we make. So, by *art*, I mean the forms that emerge from our individual creative experiencing.

I originally used the word *gestalt* to relate my orientation in art experience to the assumptions of gestalt psychologists.

I discovered gestalt psychology after years of working in art—years that involved much experimenting and exploring and trusting in my own perceptions. My discovery of the theories of gestalt psychology was very exciting because it created a theoretical bridge between what I knew of my processes in art-making and what I perceived in other people’s art and life processes.

I had known that various schools of psychotherapy had used art as an auxiliary method for diagnosis, for expression of so-called unconscious material, for emotional release, and as occupational therapy. Not until I encountered gestalt psychology did I find support for my belief that the art experience could be a primary, direct, conscious mode of acting out that often integrated fantasy and reality into actuality immediately and constructively.

Basically, “gestalt psychology originated as a theory of perception that included the inter-relationships between the form of the object and the processes of the perceiver. . . . Gestalt thinking emphasized ‘leaps’ of insight, closure, figure-ground characteristics, fluidity of perceptual processes, and the perceiver as an active participant in his perceptions rather than a passive recipient of the qualities of form.”¹

Not until I met Fritz Perls in 1965 did I learn that he had applied some concepts of gestalt psychology in formulating a practice of gestalt therapy in a way that paralleled my own applications of gestalt psychology theories in the kind of art-experience work I was doing. In training and working with Perls and other gestaltists, I learned more about how they did what they did: they were finding ways to facilitate therapeutic growth by showing people how to get out into the open feelings that had been walled off inside themselves, or to make explicit what had been implicit.

I realized that I was doing that, too—using art media as a bridge between inner and outer realities, encouraging people to create their own visual art-forms and to use these as messages they send to themselves. Made visible, the

¹ Joen Fagan and Irma Lee Shepherd, eds., *Gestalt Therapy Now*. Palo Alto, Calif., Science and Behavior Books, 1970.

messages can be perceived by their maker; since sender and receiver are the same person, the chances of perceiving a whole pattern—a gestalt—are worth betting on.

The kinship between gestalt theories of perception and their applications in art experience is obvious to me. The psychologist speaks of perceiving whole configurations as being more than the sum of the parts that make up that whole. The artist knows that it is the relationship of the parts within the whole of any art form that create the meaningful effect; looking at each part separately gives an entirely different impression from perceiving the patterned whole. The gestalt psychologist says that we tend to see similar shapes, lines, and colors as belonging together, so we perceive them as creating a visual group and thus form a figure that stands out in awareness from a less figural background. We tend to perceive continuity in lines and shapes even when there are gaps in the actual visual material that we see; we naturally seek to make wholes out of parts. We feel frustrated when we see things that seem incomplete. When we look at a form that is almost a circle, we tend to perceive a complete circle—that is, our perceptions tend to complete a shape, thus creating closure of that form.

These principles of gestalt perception become easily comprehensible when we experience their application in the process of creating our own art forms. Experientially we can perceive immediately that a number of colored shapes seen as unrelated parts have little effect; if we put them together into an integrated composition, we see a whole that is obviously greater than the sum of the parts. Similarly, when we represent imagery with graphic media, we naturally create figures and backgrounds. In using art media we discover, too, our own tendency toward completing wholes and effecting closure of unfinished parts of wholes. We become aware of the patterns within the configuration, too. We recognize that we are visually selective, since we are more likely to perceive clearly some forms than others. In the art experience, we gain insight into how we perceive generally and how our perceptions are influenced by our individual personalities.

The way we perceive visually is directly related to how we think and feel; the correlation becomes apparent when we represent our perceptions with art materials. The central figures we depict emerge from a diffuse background and give us clues as to what is central in our lives. The way we use lines, shapes, and colors in relationship to each other and to the space we put them in indicates something about how we pattern our lives. The structure or the lack of it in our forms is related to our behavior in living situations.

Realizing how we use our visual perception in creating art forms can give us new insights into how we can use our perceptiveness to create more integrated lives.

So, *gestalt*, as I use it here, means the ability to perceive whole configura-

tions—to perceive your personality as a totality of many parts that together make up the reality of you.

Gestalt art experience, then, is the complex personal you making art forms, being involved in the forms you are creating as events, observing what you do, and, it is to be hoped, perceiving through your graphic productions not only yourself as you are now, but also alternate ways that are available to you for creating yourself as you would like to be.

That's how I describe the work I do now. When I began doing this sort of thing as a child, I didn't call it work, and I gave no name to my activities. I just did what came naturally.

An Illustrative Example

Sharon is living on many levels all at once; I marvel that she can move about in the everyday world practically and effectively while carrying on such a lot of symbolic activity in her inner life. Tiny and delicate physically, she is inclined to be quiet and still. Only her shining, expressive eyes move about quickly, and she tilts her head from side to side as if she wants to see things from many angles. When she feels shy and fearful, Sharon's whole bearing becomes that of a little girl, on the verge of but never quite giving up her held-back tears. When she has that look I see the child who learned to go into her closet and be alone rather than ask for any sort of open emotional expression with her parents. Her mother says that Sharon was an obnoxious child whom she has never understood; her father, a quiet, bookish man, dramatically taught Sharon that the best thing to do with bad feelings was to bury them underground: in a planned ceremony the two went out one evening, dug a hole in the ground, and six-year-old Sharon was told to bury her temper and never let it show again.

Sharon learned her lesson well; her conscious suppression gradually became habitual and her outward behavior fit into the family's pattern of keeping out of sight anything that might be disturbing. In her aloneness, Sharon created a fantasy-companion, as many children do, but Sharon's companion was a machine, about which she writes:

When I was a child I had a machine, smooth, well-honed, slick, and a constant source of a noise in my head. The sound was like grease running through several cylinders of very smooth steel. The noise was high-pitched and relentless. It was a vivid experience for many years. I remember being alone. I felt the aloneness, and the machine would take up all the space in my head, drowning out the everyday sounds, the everyday feelings, providing a transition into unreality as the house got quieter and quieter. The feeling of sliding through all those unending cylinders, being flattened and changing form from bone to liquid, from empty quiet to a roaring silence, from being me to being a substance rolling through a vast process. I would lie on a bed in a room and not recognize my surroundings. A heaviness and flatness would seem to overcome me and everything looked unreal and strange. I would

try to break the feeling by getting up and going out of the house. I would see the outside and the trees and I would concentrate on looking at them until I would reach some kind of balance. I would watch the sky and pretend there was a noise coming from the space until I could hear that sound instead of the roaring in my head. As the sky sound would increase I would recognize familiar things, the house and me and where I was sitting and it would all be over.

Sharon went to college, painted, went to a New York art school on a scholarship, and worked for the New York State Council of the Arts. Her inventive techniques for three-dimensional print-making brought her success but not much happiness. She tried psychotherapy; that didn't seem to help. Her prints were in galleries, and she was in limbo. She took LSD and was shocked out of lethargy; on the drug she felt transported beyond all individuality and felt ecstasy in belonging with all-beingness. She saw joys in non-ego-involvement and envisioned wondrous release in non-being. But she was frightened, too; when she saw herself in a mirror, Sharon saw only translucency. Was that what she wanted—to lose her identity in cosmic unity before she'd ever lived here on this earth? Sharon didn't know. She and a new husband, who was little more than another body in lostness, began wandering. John drove the car; Sharon sat and passively watched the world go by. "It" was "out there, fascinating" but none of "it" was here.

Back in San Francisco, Sharon functioned on a sort of minimal level, limiting herself to superficial involvements. But when her father developed terminal cancer, she chose to be with him during the long months of his dying. At his request, Sharon and her father together did what they could to help him express his buried feelings; he grieved that he had repressed so much of himself and hoped that Sharon would live more freely. After her father died, though, she felt more deadened than ever and could not involve herself deeply in art or anything else.

Sharon realized how much she had cut off her creativity when she saw in a stranger's home a three-dimensional print that she'd made two years before and now could not recognize or remember as her own creation. Shortly afterwards she began coming to art therapy groups and then to weekly private sessions with me.

For the first year, Sharon resisted expressing herself with art forms; given a large sheet of paper, she would draw tiny, delicate decorations in one corner and was inarticulate about them. Six months ago Sharon told me that she was "making little things" at home; she "enjoyed tinkering," she said. She made gifts for people, grew potted plants, decorated her apartment for Christmas—small things, but all of her own creation. She brought small, neat, black and white collages to our sessions, discussing how she was beginning to discover elements in them that related to her individuality. A month ago she brought the four forms shown in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4.

About six inches high, made from plastic, glass, cotton, and metal, they

are very personally Sharon's. At my suggestion, she began expressing her thoughts and feelings by writing. At first this was difficult for her, but now she pours out words, pages and pages of them. In her own way, she describes her self-trait figures:

"Aspect I"

I am obscure, unclear, non-functional, split, non-directional. I am soft and dream-like, with sharp tangents of reality and discomfort. I neither radiate nor direct. I feel helpless and static. My movement is dependent—I can be picked up, placed, and given meaning by an "other." I can also be ignored, passed over, unseen. I can be loved or unloved, unhappy or happy, observant but indecisive, a willing object. I am between a dream and a reality. Life becomes an echo.

"Aspect II"

I am definite, definitive, directed. My movement starts slowly with a spiraling to conclusions. I am unreasonable, brilliant, angry, rash, permanent, stubborn, and purposeful. I am right, tall, and impenetrable. I have no feeling, but I have logical progressions of a third sense. I reach an end, lose connections with the spiral or process or why, and I become implacable, dreamless,

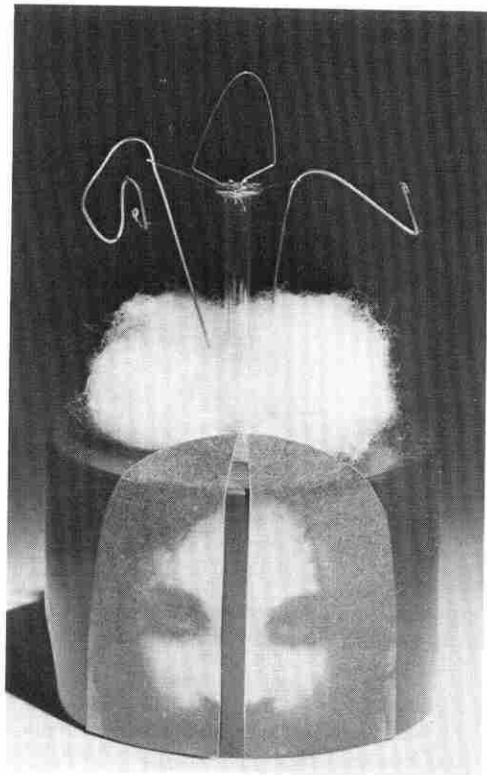
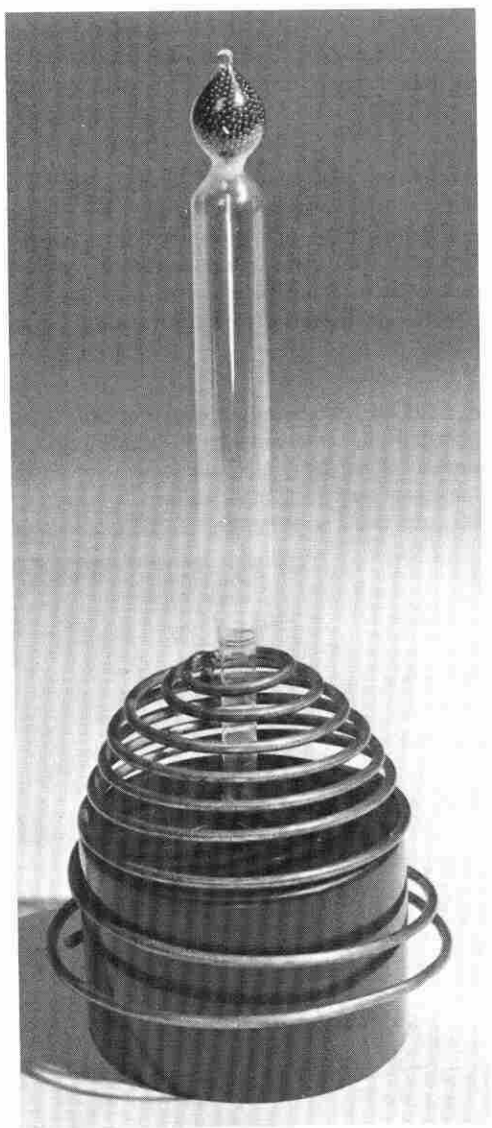


Figure 1
"Aspect I"

Figure 2
"Aspect II"



determined, and compassionless. I am not here to be loved or loving. I am here to do and to be. There is no echo, I am the voice and the conception. Brittle and breakable.

"Aspect III"

I am in balance, shorter but functioning. I can both feel and be at the same time. I combine softness with balance and brittle receptivity. I am open

to change that I can maintain in various positions. I can be delighted and graceful, useful and willing. I have a synthesis of dream and reality. I am non-linear; I can be absurd but not dismissed. I do not alarm, nor do I feel alarmed or vulnerable to breakage. I am perhaps content with the image I am.

"Aspect IV"

I must combine my dream-observer with real-life situations. Softness can combine with sharpness and still give a pleasing feeling. I can joke about my situation because I am self-willed and not an object of a stranger's needs. I can work with my own needs and experiment with combinations of feelings. I can destroy myself when I feel I need to destroy an unworkable aspect of me. If I do it it's okay; I need the time to reach my own conclusions. I can laugh and give my experience to others 'cause I did it myself.

Sharon is now exploring her own experiences through art, with her own intelligence and imagination; recently she wrote: "I don't use my machine any longer, but I have developed a real feel for edges. I can sense an edge, or a limit, or a closing off of space and time and sound when I am in an uncomfortable situation. . . . I am trying to learn the process of expanding this space without the fear of edges, without the tendency to get lost in another, and without the need to scrap the whole picture if I can't find my place."

Sharon is finding her place: she is working for a public-service agency part time and is also acquiring a clientele for her free-lance services as a designer.

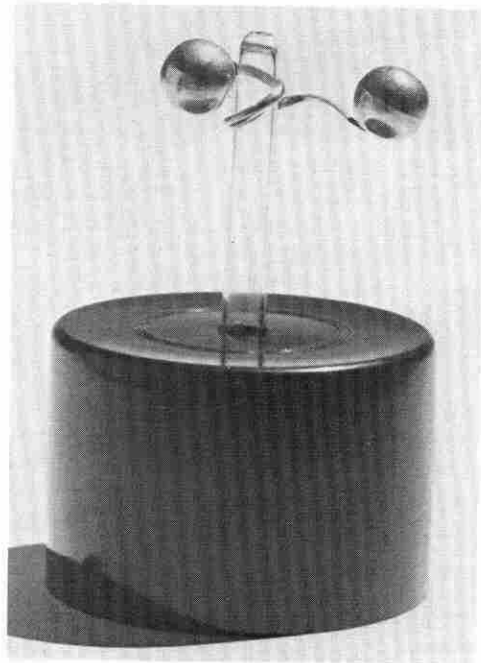


Figure 3
"Aspect III"

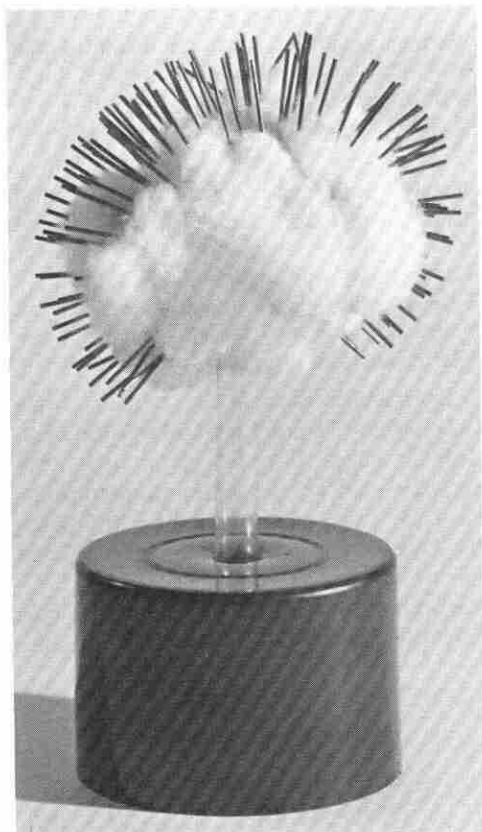


Figure 4
"Aspect IV"

She feels that she will have an agency in a few years and is excited about her possibilities. More important, Sharon is increasingly self-determining; she is realistically expanding to fit recognized spaces in her own potential.

This brief vignette is an unenclosed, open-ended image of the here-and-now awareness of a person in process. More eloquent than any words I can say are Sharon's own self-perceptions, both graphic and verbal.

Her story neither begins nor ends. As someone said:

Perhaps all stories should begin with the word "and." Perhaps they should end with the word "and," too. It would remind us that no experience ever begins: there was always something that preceded it. What really began, for us, was our awareness of something going on. At the end, the word "and" would remind us that no story ever really ends—something more will happen after. Thus, it may be said that we live in the world of *et cetera*. There is always more to start with than we can take into account. There is always more to say than we can possibly say. There is always more to end with than we can imagine.²

² "Communications," *Kaiser Aluminum News*, n.d. 3 (XXIII), 2.