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# Minna's Gift : A Case Study of Art therapy with a 16 year-old Adolescent in Residential Care

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### Abstract

The case study is a well-established methodology in psychotherapy, providing a means to articulate the therapist's explorations, questions, insights, reflections, and formulations. It enables in-depth dialogue within the professional community through the sharing of session material, while also supporting the therapist's ongoing process of conceptualising and understanding the client's psychological experience. This case study arises from my wish to explore more deeply the phenomenon of gift-giving of my teenage client, Minna, who lives in a residential care facility and consistently gives her artworks as gifts to others, including her parents and the care staff. In this paper, I document Minna's art therapy process alongside my own reflections, developing thoughts, and formulations, which I situate within a psychodynamic framework and relevant literature. Writing Minna's case serves not only as a method of thinking, but also as a way of moving closer to her experience and opening dialogue within the art therapy professional community.

### Key words

Art Therapy, Adolescence, Residential care, Object Relations Theory, Gift-giving, Trauma, Exhibition

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## **Introduction**

This case study examines a year of art therapy sessions with 16-year-old Minna in a residential care facility in a large German city. It explores gift-giving within an art therapy framework, as well as Minna's relationship with her own artwork.

Psychological perspectives on gift-giving provide a valuable framework for understanding why patients may offer gifts to their therapists. Although still under-researched, the topic is gaining attention, with emerging discussions exploring its psychodynamic, ethical, and intercultural dimensions. In my role as an art therapist in a residential care setting, I worked with Minna—an adolescent who, despite being deeply engaged in the therapeutic process, compulsively gave away her artwork not to her therapist, but to those around her, from family members to staff. This pattern left us with limited opportunities to reflect on her art-making process within therapy. Paradoxically, this very impulse may have pointed to the core of our therapeutic work. While the act of clients giving away their artwork is not uncommon, there is limited literature addressing its therapeutic implications. Responses to this phenomenon vary widely, shaped by factors such as the client's age, therapeutic context, and the therapist's orientation. Finding an attuned therapeutic relationship remains a challenge. Through this case study, I aim to encourage reflection on this issue and offer deeper insight into Minna's compelling drive to give and to create.

## **Literature Review: Gift-giving in the light of child development**

In *The Gift* (1925), Marcel Mauss conceptualises gift-giving as a “total social fact”—involving intertwined obligations such as giving, receiving, and reciprocating. He emphasises the role of gifts in fostering relationships and connecting individuals within systems of mutual dependence, recognition, and symbolic exchange. In the field of psychoanalysis, particular attention is given to the underlying motivations for gift-giving, especially in terms of unconscious dynamics, transference, and relational meaning. In Freud's theory of infantile sexuality, the anal phase is marked by the child's focus on bowel control and the associated sensations of holding in or releasing. This phase is not only significant for ego development and emerging autonomy, but also introduces the first form of symbolic giving: the act of offering the faeces as a gift to the parents and this the attempt at both mastery and

relational exchange (Freud, 1961). In his informative paper about gift-giving in therapy and its possible healing aspects, Evans (2005) revisits early contributions, such as those of Anna Freud, who suggested that children's gift-giving may support the development of ego-related functions. Similarly, Susan Sutherland Isaacs argued that for children, the gift and the act of giving are equated directly with love itself (Evans, 2005).

The giving of gifts by a patient to a therapist can be understood as being motivated both consciously and unconsciously. Evans draws on thinkers like Kritzberg, who interpret such gestures as a wish for the therapist to become a "real" object—someone who partakes in the patient's everyday reality and pleasures. Here, the gift is understood symbolically, as a condensation of meaning to be interpreted within the therapeutic frame. For Stein (cited in Evans, 2005), the gift occupies an intermediate position between dream fragments and enactments—serving as a form of magical thinking or symbolic action. In contrast, scholars such as Spandler (2000) emphasize that gift-giving in therapy—and its psychodynamic significance—is shaped not only by personal motivations but also by broader social structures, including class, race, and gender. Despite extensive research on gift-giving in other disciplines, therapists often overlook these cultural dimensions, likely due to the dominance of white, Western perspectives in the field. Historically, gifts have been gendered and often feminized; while commonly viewed as altruistic, they are also regulated by social norms. Within the therapeutic context, the act of giving a gift can reveal the influence of cultural, economic, and class factors, surfacing complex questions around value, identity, and the potential transformation of care into a transactional exchange (Spandler, 2000).

From another perspective, Meares and Anderson (1993) argues that offering or participating in an exchange is integral to constructing the self during early childhood. They consider how exchanges involving the symbolic, in the form of a gift, might create an 'intimate space' in which the child begins to distinguish between inner and outer worlds, thereby developing relational autonomy. Working with patients with borderline personality disorder, the act of gifting can be understood as a progression in the building of the therapeutic relationship, in their specific case in

allowing the development of intimacy in the therapy relationship as opposed to relationships characterized by non-intimate attachment. (Meares & Anderson, 1993).

### **On the formation of symbols: from the gift to the artworks**

These studies provide a useful overview of clients' gift-giving to their therapists. In art therapy, however, gift-giving may take different forms. In my case study, my client frequently created artworks and offered them as gifts to others. I was unable to find existing literature in art therapy or psychotherapy that addresses this particular phenomenon. However I found it helpful to draw on object relations theory to reflect on Minna and her creative process of art making, as a way of exploring the meanings behind her acts of giving. As Dannecker notes, psychoanalytic drive theory has proven insufficient when working with patients presenting with ego weakness, when shaped by developmental trauma as we might encounter in working with children and adolescents. She highlights the relevance of object relations theory and the role of art, both of which are grounded in shared structural principles: interpersonal relationships and artistic creation are similarly shaped by the dynamic interplay between closeness and distance (Dannecker, 2010).

Interestingly, many definitions of the symbol—a central concern of artistic expression—emphasise this very tension. In *Symbolization and Creativity*, Susan Deri argues that the symbol does not merely represent, but enacts the presence of what is absent—a dynamic at the heart of both artistic creation and psychic transformation (1984). Etymologically, the term originates from ancient Greek, where the *symbolon* referred to a physical object broken into two parts and shared between individuals, later serving as a token of recognition and authenticity (Deri, 1984). As Deri puts it, “Symbols arise from the wish to bridge over something or somebody in another realm; to reach what is directly unreachable.” (Deri, 1984, p.46). Psychologically, this notion encapsulates key dimensions of the artistic process: the experience of fragmentation of the self, and the ongoing search for re-integration and meaning through symbolic representation. According to Ehrenzweig (1984), drawing on Kleinian psychoanalytic theory, the artistic process unfolds through distinct psychological stages. In the initial schizoid phase, the artist projects fragmented aspects of the ego into the work, reflecting a state of internal division.

This is followed by a manic phase, in which the artist's attention withdraws from these individual elements, allowing for an unconscious perception of the work as a unified whole. In the final, depressive stage, the ego is re-integrated through secondary processes, enabling the artist to reclaim and re-own the symbolic image – a process that may contribute to the strengthening of ego functions.

Segal (1981) offers a parallel developmental perspective, suggesting that the child's wish to repair and restore the loved object forms the basis for later symbolic and creative capacities. Through the cyclical experience of losing and recovering the internal good object, the ego is gradually enriched. This dynamic enables the individual to tolerate the coexistence of aggression and love, and to manage guilt through creative reparation. Similarly, the artist attempts to mourn the loss of symbiotic love, and through creative work, reconstruct an internal world from psychic fragments (Segal, 1981).

The following case study explores an evolution in Minna's relationship with her art. In light of her experience of trauma and loss, I will examine her compulsive need to give her work away as gifts, proposing that this behaviour could be a search for unity through fragmentation. I will then reflected on whether continuous artistic practice in art therapy might have enabled her to experience unity through the practice of art.

## **A Case Study**

### ***Institution, clientele and indication for art therapy***

This case study is based on an art therapy pilot project in an intensive residential educational community in Germany, where I undertook my first post as an art therapist after qualifying. The community can accommodate up to eight young people, aged between 6 and 18. The children cared for here may stay for a period of time to receive educational and living support until their family situation stabilises or until they are able to live independently. Some of the young people remained in contact with their families, while others did not. The community was staffed by five educators working in 24-hour shifts, a housekeeper, and myself.

I converted a small, bright room into an art therapy studio that could be securely locked. All young people were offered the opportunity to attend art therapy, with individual sessions held weekly and group sessions conducted monthly. Working with clients over several years offers unique opportunities—such as allowing the process to unfold at its own pace, building a deeper therapeutic relationship, observing long-term developments, and recognising recurring themes or patterns. At the same time, it presents specific challenges, including the risk of losing critical distance and the ongoing need to maintain clear therapeutic boundaries—particularly when working on-site in a residential care facility, where only a few walls separate the client's room from the art therapy studio.

I am aware of how my intersectionality, positionality, and training may have influenced my way of working and the therapeutic relationship with clients in the context of therapy. I am a white French woman in my thirties, living and working in Germany. I trained in psychodynamic art therapy, with a background in the visual arts. My ongoing artistic practice also informs my therapeutic work.

### ***Minna***

Minna is a 16-year-old white German young woman. Since she was 13, she has been in several youth welfare institutions with her sister Leni, who is two-years older. Minna had previously lived with her siblings and mother. Her parents were separated, but they maintained contact with their father. At the age of 13, Minna entered care after becoming the victim of a violent attack by an older brother at home. In addition, her school reported concerns to child protection services due to signs of neglect and her increasingly withdrawn behaviour at school. She was placed in residential care alongside her sister, with whom she shared a symbiotic relationship at the time. Contact with both parents was encouraged.

Minna and Leni moved to the residential community where I worked when Minna was 16. She had previously been recommended trauma therapy and had completed a course of behavioural therapy to address anxiety, panic attacks, self-harm, enuresis, and obesity. However, she resisted and refused to engage in trauma therapy. Given her existing interest in art, art therapy proved to be a more suitable

option, therefore she was referred to me. Educators in the institution described Minna as a driving force within the group, although she appeared shy when faced with unfamiliar environments and people.

### **Case History**

I worked with Minna for two and a half years, providing weekly one-hour individual sessions and monthly group therapy sessions, with breaks during school holidays. This paper focuses on the first year of our work together in art therapy. Minna gave permission for this case study, and all identifiable information has been altered.

In this section, I will provide a chronological account of the first year of both individual and group art therapy sessions with Minna, focusing on her developmental progress through the lens of her artistic production. I will trace the evolution of her work from non-figurative to figurative forms, and from pieces created as gifts to works that exist autonomously as art. This exploration will be interwoven with my own reflections as a newly qualified art therapist, as I begin to navigate my professional role and emerging therapeutic identity.

### ***Framing: The Initial Meeting and the First Session***

I met Minna on my first day of work when I was setting up the new art therapy room. Minna, found at this occasion a heavy catalogue of art supplies. As I was on my way out, I saw that she'd held on to the catalogue and was absorbed in the images of pigments and paints. According to the educators, she studied them intensively the following week. I was not told of her thoughts and ideas as she leafed through the catalogue. However, I wonder whether the art therapy had already begun at that moment, as she became immersed in the catalogue—perhaps engaging with it as an initial object of connection.

In our first one-to-one session, Minna's desire to express herself artistically was clear. She told me about all the materials she had seen in the catalogue, asking, "Do you have that much here?" From this first question and initial contact, I sensed hope, expectation, and need— but also an offer of a relationship. Would I be able to live up to the catalogue's promises? Although Minna wished to experiment with various

materials, she ultimately chose to work on a wall that had been prepared for drawing while standing. She hung a large sheet of paper and asked if she could throw paint at it. She had a lot of fun with the colour gradients and remained very controlled during the process. Throughout, she spoke about all her ideas and shared her enthusiasm with me. As the session drew to a close, Minna suddenly left the room. She soon returned with other young people and an educator, proudly showing them what she had created, leaving me unable to react. Although I initially felt caught off guard, I came to see this act as her way of implicitly opening the space to others. The moment felt like an inauguration.

### ***Approaching and establishing an art therapy framework***

In her second individual session, Minna chose to work with soapstone, a material unfamiliar to her, which she continued over several sessions. As she worked, she spoke extensively, with fear and horror running like a red thread through her stories. She first described her fear of the dark and of children being abducted, then recounted her own experience of violence in childhood. From there, she spoke about how she and her sister came into the care of the child welfare services and the complex relationship she had with her parents. Finally, her story shifted to her love of animals, the destruction of nature, and the plight of polar bears losing their homes to global warming.

By this point, she had decided on her subject of her sculpture: a small rabbit, roughly the size of her hand, which she began to shape from the white stone. Yet the more she talked, the harder it became for her to continue the work. She gradually lost her enthusiasm and could no longer see the motif in the material. I tried to strike a balance between allowing her need to speak and be heard, and offering stabilising interventions to bring her back to the present. I suggested she draw the rabbit she had envisioned first on paper and later directly on the stone, to capture it. This helped briefly, but as soon as she came into contact with the stone again, she sank back into frustration and despair.

Although my attempts to refocus her on the material and the experience of forming were somewhat calming, Minna repeatedly lost her sense of the stone's three-



dimensionality. Her narrative became increasingly fragmented and marked by anxiety. Together, we decided to wrap the unfinished rabbit in a piece of felt (*fig.1*) at the end of each session. She placed the small parcel on a shelf, but by the fourth session, she no longer wished to continue with it. At the time of writing, two years later, the rabbit remains in the art therapy room as she left it: visible to all, yet tied up and covered.



Fig. 1. *Untitled* by Minna. Fabric, Soapstone, Rubber

***Reflection: The role of artistic materials in Minna's initial therapeutic process***

My first contact with Minna was marked by vitality and expectation. She worked fearlessly in the studio, using large quantities of paint and embracing the experience. As she threw paint onto and beside the sheet of paper, I saw a regressive desire for boundlessness and omnipotence. The end result didn't really matter. By inviting others to witness this process, Minna may have sought further validation from the

group, which accepted her unreservedly. I also wonder whether she was testing how much the frame of art therapy could contain.

In the second session, soapstone is a material very different from the regressive and transgressive qualities of paint throwing. At first, she appeared unsettled by the negative technique. The release of energy she had so enjoyed when throwing paint—an affirmation of her vitality—now had to be channelled differently. Working with stone required secondary processes such as the principle of reality and anticipation, which could not be balanced with Minna's creative impulses. As she projected her inner images onto the stone, her imagination was constrained by its form, and her narrative became marked by helplessness and disorientation.

Themes emerged: the kidnapping of a child, a polar bear stranded on thinning ice, and her brother's violent outbursts that had forced the loss of their home. These stories conveyed a sense of threat. Meanwhile, the transition from two to three dimensions in shaping the rabbit became increasingly difficult. Given Minna's traumatic experiences, which she expressed both verbally and through her struggle with the material, it seems understandable that the pressure to maintain an alteration between primary and secondary processes may have been too great. Minna's projection of the rabbit could not be carved from the stone and remained frozen. To me, the wrapping seemed like an attempt to restore unity to the object against self-fragmentation, as I experienced in her diffuse stories during the creative process.

### **Gift-giving as a Way of Coping with Loss**

#### ***Negotiating autonomy and connection: Familial expectations and emotional resistance in the making of gifts***

In the last week before Christmas, Minna asked whether she and her sister, Leni, could attend art therapy together to make presents for their parents. As we discussed their plan, it became clear how much pressure both sisters felt to create personal and impressive gifts for their parents.

I had mixed feelings about this project, partly because of the number of similar requests from other clients. Although the art therapy creations addressed relevant

issues in terms of context and the youngsters' representations of their relationships with their families, there was little willingness to discuss feelings and emotions due to high levels of resistance. However, many of these artworks expressed the adolescents' desire for reunion and reconciliation with their relatives. I therefore decided to view the production of the gifts as a legitimate phenomenon and accompany this process openly.

The staff team had described Leni as lacking motivation in her daily life. In our art therapy sessions, however, I found her to be enthusiastic and full of energy. She had imagined that she and Minna would share the experience of throwing paint together, as Minna had done a few weeks earlier, and then present the resulting painting to their parents as a gift. Yet it was only in the art therapy room that Minna dared to tell Leni she actually wanted to paint her own canvas for their mother. This created a lot of tension between them. Leni struggled to accept her sister's wish and began energetically throwing paint at a sheet of paper pinned to the wall beside Minna's canvas. Her splashes came dangerously close to Minna's work, prompting me to intervene several times. Meanwhile, Minna painted her canvas pink. Initially, I was overwhelmed by how opaque the picture was. However, she managed to restore dimensionality by using white, which I think gave the painting some breathing space.

As time went on, Leni continued to complain about Minna's refusal to create a joint painting, seeking Minna's attention either verbally or by painting too close to her. At one point, Minna herself became lost in the boundlessness of her picture, feeling both frustrated and uncertain. However, the rhythmic, rocking movements of her hands in direct contact with the canvas seemed to reassure her, and she was able to extract a landscape from the abstract painting. Although she described it as expressing beauty and tranquility, to me it appeared restless—perhaps reflecting the tense dynamics between the sisters in the room or Minna's own inner conflicts concerning her parents.

Nevertheless, by adding a horizon line and stereotypical bird shapes, she regained a sense of control and clarity (*fig. 2*). Minna was pleased with her painting. Leni also found peace and acceptance during our image review, embracing her own work of

art. When they returned from holiday, Minna told me about the difficulties she had experienced with her parents. The sisters had encountered their mother's indifference toward the gifts they had given her. While Leni appeared less affected, Minna's deep disappointment was evident. I felt relatively powerless throughout the whole process, and my own entanglement in the family dynamic left me with a lingering sense of bitterness.



Fig.2. *Untitled* by Minna. Acrylic paint

***Reflection: Fusion, separation and the gift***

I observed in both sisters a primordial desire for fusion, each driven by the wish to give. Both shared high ambitions for the gift to their parents, yet both also struggled with boundlessness—both in their artwork and in their relationship. Leni's paint repeatedly landed beyond the edges of the paper, nearly striking Minna's work. On the other hand, Minna felt lost within an endless landscape.

While Leni was hoping for a common, symbiotic and rhythmic picture, Minna's desire for autonomy found its expression. Through art therapy, Minna may have been seeking to free herself from an entanglement that constrained her development, while also pursuing her need to be seen and recognised by her idealised parents. At times, she was overwhelmed by the boundlessness of the landscape and by the conflictual dynamics in the room. It was through the direct contact of her hands with the canvas—feeling its edges and shaping an image—that she was able to regain orientation in the process and anchor herself in the here and now. Minna found further direction in the abstract picture by adding a horizon line and birds. Yet I was left wondering: where these birds could land at all if they did not integrate into the pink background and disappear?

The experience of emotional attunement to the gift of a painting—something Minna had clearly longed for from her parents—was, unfortunately, marked by renewed disappointment, which I strongly felt in the countertransference. I found myself in an unfavorable triangle from which I was excluded, between the two sisters, the transitional objects in the form of gifts, and their absent, unreachable parents. Similar situations recurred later: for example, when Minna gave away her artwork to educators or peers who were leaving, despite promises of continued contact that could not, or would not, be kept. I was willing to support her reparative efforts, yet I increasingly felt I was also supporting her compulsion to repeat experiences of misattunement and disappointment. However, at some point something else happened.

***From giving to keeping: The transformation of artistic attachment reflected in the art folder***

Over the following months, Minna attended art therapy sessions eagerly. She often arrived feeling nervous but would leave feeling more balanced. She drew landscapes, preferably with watercolours and chalk. At times her images appeared agitated, at other times calm, but they always carried a claim to beauty. Alongside her creative work, she spoke extensively about her life, her past, and her entanglements with family and peers. She also spoke of finding relief in artistic

practice.

However, Minna was unable to keep her landscape paintings in the portfolio. Instead, she preferred to give them away immediately—to educators, family members, or peers. It seemed that Minna found a sense of achievement in her artwork by giving it away to people she cared about. At the same time, I was reminded of Minna's many moves between homes and institutions, each accompanied by experiences of loss—a theme she often spoke about in our sessions. Her wish to give away cherished possessions may have reflected her need to form connections and secure a sense of belonging, perhaps also to ensure the safety of her work?

In conversation, Minna emphasised that the artwork was her property and that she should be the one to decide what to do with it. My suggestion that she keep her artworks in the portfolio—so that we might observe their evolution and explore connections between them, or even allow the works to exist autonomously beyond their function as gifts—proved ineffective. Hoping to strengthen a sense of ownership and the therapeutic process, I decided to purchase a new large folder for each adolescent. The new portfolios were received with great enthusiasm by all. In a group session, the young people decorated them individually. Minna's design, a large sunflower (*fig.3*), occupied her for more than four months, during this time she stopped giving her artwork away.

Painting the portfolio marked a turning point in Minna's artistic journey. She worked on a single large sunflower set against a black background, which she titled 'Sorgenblume'. The title plays on two German words: she replaced 'Sonne' (sun) with 'Sorgen' (sorrow). From 'Sonnenblume' (sunflower), she created 'Sorgenblume' (sorrowflower) —a word that sounds almost identical in German. She worked on her 'Sorrows flower' with great control, sometimes meditatively, but also compulsively, with a focus on precision. While she stabilised herself through this meticulous activity, her narrative once again intensified. She remembered a sunflower that a boy she liked very much had once promised her, but had kept for himself after picking it.



The sunflower she painted was oversized, frontal, and fully open. She chose a plant that appears to face the sun, as this gives it strength and life. Similarly, people were always drawn to Minna's portfolio, which became an important part of the studio. For her, the 'Sorgenblume' symbolised the disappointment of a broken promise in a relationship from years earlier. After she completed the painting, she began to filling her portfolio with new works, this time deciding not to give them away as gifts anymore.



Fig. 3. *Sorgenblume (Flower of Sorrows)* by Minna. Tempera, acrylic paint

### ***Reflection: Symbolisation and mourning***

The gifts that Minna sent out into the world may have represented a fragmented sense of self. The possible underlying desire for unity might be linked to dependence on an inaccessible other, resulting in recurrent disappointment. Moving to the *Sorgenblume* represented a turning point: she no longer expressed her longing for connection by giving actual gifts, but addressed the experience symbolically. Whereas my previous suggestion to Minna that she create pictures 'for herself' was met with incomprehension and resistance, offering her this large folder to use as a

backdrop for her artwork was successful and enabled triangular relationship on art therapy. While I intended to offer better containment by providing the group with new folders — my own form of gift? — Minna seemed to gain autonomy in shaping it artistically herself.

Minna chose the sunflower as the symbol for her portfolio. The sunflower is a plant that longs for the sun, following it throughout the day until it hangs its head in the evening as darkness falls. The sun is considered the source of life and the centre of the world, as well as a creative force. However, it is also so bright that it is impossible to look directly. With her Sorgenblume, Minna may have addressed her longing for reflection and care, with her defense mechanisms in the foreground. In fact, Minna spent weeks painting compulsively using very small brushes, a technique that didn't fit the size of her subject. As she worked on the floor, leaning her whole body very close to the picture, led her into regressive states. Her narratives were fragmented and mainly biographical, as she attempted to organise her childhood memories out loud. This sometimes caused her anxiety and uncertainty. However, the unity of the motif, her constant concentration, and the repetitiveness of her movements may have prevented her from becoming disoriented or losing her imagination this time.

According to Klein, the narcissistic illusion is a defense mechanism that becomes active at an earlier stage of development and is re-experienced through a process of regression. Fantasies of omnipotence serve as a defense against feelings of dependence, inferiority and helplessness (Kraft, 2001). Primary narcissism also arises in a 'manic' phase in opposition to the 'depressive' state. Ehrenzweig (1984) suggests that the manic phase in the creative process is a way of dealing with the projected fragmentation of the self. One could also argue that narcissism is part of the creative process, perhaps helping Minna to cope with significant inner conflicts. The art that she would stop giving away as gifts was now contained in the flower she once had longed for and been refused by the boy. The symbolisation that took place with the Sorgenblume showed how the fragmented self could be reunited with the help of specific defence mechanisms, one of which is a sense of omnipotence as a creator.



## The Gift of Art

### ***Approaches to reality in Minna's art***

After nine months of working together, art therapy had become a continuous space in which Minna had established her own rituals. While she had mainly painted imaginary landscapes, one day she came up with an idea: to depict reality as closely as possible, which she associated with art history. Online videos of artists painting still-life step by step caught her interest, and she discovered several Renaissance examples that impressed her. She started looking for the right painting to copy, consulting books and postcards in the art therapy room, and asking me for inspiration. I saw this as an expression of her recent self-confidence and trust in the therapeutic relationship, as well as her newfound willingness to engage with the external world. Minna's ability to create playfully was an important resource for her. In my view, however, her desire to engage with art history and the representation of reality was an important step in her development.

Her first project was a still life (*fig. 4*), which she painted based on an existing artwork. With a lot of perseverance and overcoming frustration, she proudly created her own painting.



Fig. 4 *Stilleben (Still Life)* by Minna. Acrylic paint

However, one day during this phase, Minna came to art therapy feeling very unhappy about the atmosphere in the community. When I asked about it, I found out that she had had a serious disagreement with her mother and had cut off all contact with her. Yet she was angry with the educators who were trying to support her. She was too overwhelmed emotionally to work on her ongoing project. Minna hung a picture on the wall and tried to paint a blue background, using a lot of paint. She was nervous and struggled to shape the picture. She tried to mould the colours with her fingers and hands, resisting my attempts to give her some peace and quiet. I then provided her with red paint, which, in my opinion, mirrored the intensity of her feelings. When she saw it, she looked at me, and I could only nod. She continued to work on the acrylic with great energy and both hands. Wanting to declare her painting a failure, she mixed all the colours with several large circular movements. She stopped, exhausted. We looked at the picture and saw a wave (*fig. 5*) Minna reinforced it in the painting, and peace returned. We both loved the 'fire wave', as she called it, and have often reminisced about that intense session ever since. It was an experience that strengthened our bond in the therapeutic relationship.



Fig. 5 *Feuerwelle (Wave of Fire)* by Minna. Acrylic Paint

**Reflection: Identification with the artist**

Minna's choice of painting a still life was challenging, but she was particularly tolerant of frustration and persistent. She wanted a new kind of support from me, with technical tips and artistic methods. The project was ambitious and the feeling of success it gave her boosted her confidence. I recognised her desire to master painting as a medium and her newfound interest in it as an art form. I also understood her desire to embark on a new creative process alongside her quest for identity and exploration of alternative role models.



Fig.6. Reproduction of: *Music* (1904) by Thomas Eakins. Hedda van den Beemt was the violinist, Samuel Meyers was the accompanist.

Encouraged by this success, she decided to try painting a human figure, choosing a young violinist with an accompanist in the background (*fig. 6*). Minna exerted a great deal of concentration and control over this painting, which she also enjoyed. From where I was standing in the room, I could see an artist at work, painting a young musician playing the violin. In the original painting, the accompanist's ear is illuminated, while his face and body almost fade into the background, merging with the musician's face and instrument. Together with the angle of the violin bows, this forms a triangular shape. The triangulation struck me as similar to the triangular



relationship in art therapy (Schaverien, 2000). I was behind Minna, helping her paint as a third hand, while the man in the picture supported the violinist with a third ear. She focused all her attention on the point of contact between the musician's face and his violin, a process that caused her a great deal of frustration and self-doubt. However, later, I realised Minna did not to include the second person in her version of the painting (*fig. 7*). Another challenge for her was positioning the hands on the violin and the relationship between the instrument and her body which I understand symbolically as the difficulty of controlling the medium. Minna gave up in the end and left the painting unfinished.



Fig. 7. *Untitled* by Minna. Acrylic paint

Minna seemed increasingly frustrated by the failed attempt to paint the violinist and eventually gave up on it. However she overcame this by later returning to her own pictorial vocabulary. When considering the therapeutic relationship and the intensive work carried out in art therapy, it is interesting to note that I was never personally given a gift by Minna, apart from a group painting initiated by the educators in my absence. While I interpreted this as an implicit role distribution in which I played the accompanist as an art therapist, the fact that I only noticed this very late in the process may indicate a blind spot due to my entanglement in the relationship.

### **The exhibition as a frame in the art therapy process**

While Minna was still experimenting with realist depiction in her art, a major staff change happened, which took the group several months to redefine itself. This was a topic that occupied us a lot in group therapy. Many of the young people had gone through new stages of puberty during this time, so not only did the identity of each individual have to be negotiated in relation to the changing environment, but the identity of the group too. As an art therapist, I encountered a lack of motivation and resistance from the young people. I had to rethink the therapeutic relationship and adapt it to the new situation, as well as face the demands of the upcoming youth welfare system, which theoretically ends at the age of 18. In practice, help can be extended for a few more years, but young people must be prepared for its end early on, which can be challenging for staff and young people alike. Minna found these changes particularly difficult and expressed anger towards us all. I then had the idea of organising an exhibition in an external neighbourhood centre that focuses on social work with young people. My aim was to support the need for autonomy and self-efficacy in general, while providing a framework for encounters and recognition. This idea was enthusiastically received by the group.

During an individual session with Minna, I observed once more that her portfolio contained very few remaining pieces, as she had begun gifting her work to departing staff members. This prompted me to ask what she intended to present at the forthcoming exhibition. It was a poignant moment in which the act of giving was made tangible — observed not as an abstract notion, but in this case through the very material reality of an increasingly empty folder. However, she was very enthusiastic about the project, making a great effort to create new work and retrieve some of what she had given away — including the Christmas present she had given her mother. Within a short time, her portfolio had grown considerably, containing both old and new work. Interestingly, she regarded the portfolio as an integral component of her personal process and expressed a clear desire to find a means of presenting this very process as an artwork within the context of the exhibition.

The process of choosing a title for the exhibition was fraught with conflict. A core group of participants came up with names that reflected the insults used to describe

young people in such structures: 'outsiders', 'strange' and 'abnormal'. This raised the question of what the young people actually had in common. The adolescents generally had a relatively poor perception of themselves. However, Minna was the only one to resist this self-image amidst the prevailing laughter. She gently but firmly urged the group to keep searching until they could all agree on a title that didn't devalue them in any way. They chose the title (K)ein Plan, which I think emphasises the ambivalence of this coming-of-age phase: The (K) implies a negation that you can choose to read or not: *(Not) Having a Plan* was the title for the exhibition that the group had chosen creatively together.

Shortly before the opening, Minna produced two more paintings. One depicted a moon (*fig. 8*) that had made her very unhappy and taken away her courage to exhibit, and the other was a new landscape that helped her regain strength. The new landscape featured an aurora borealis with animals depicted within it (*fig. 9*).

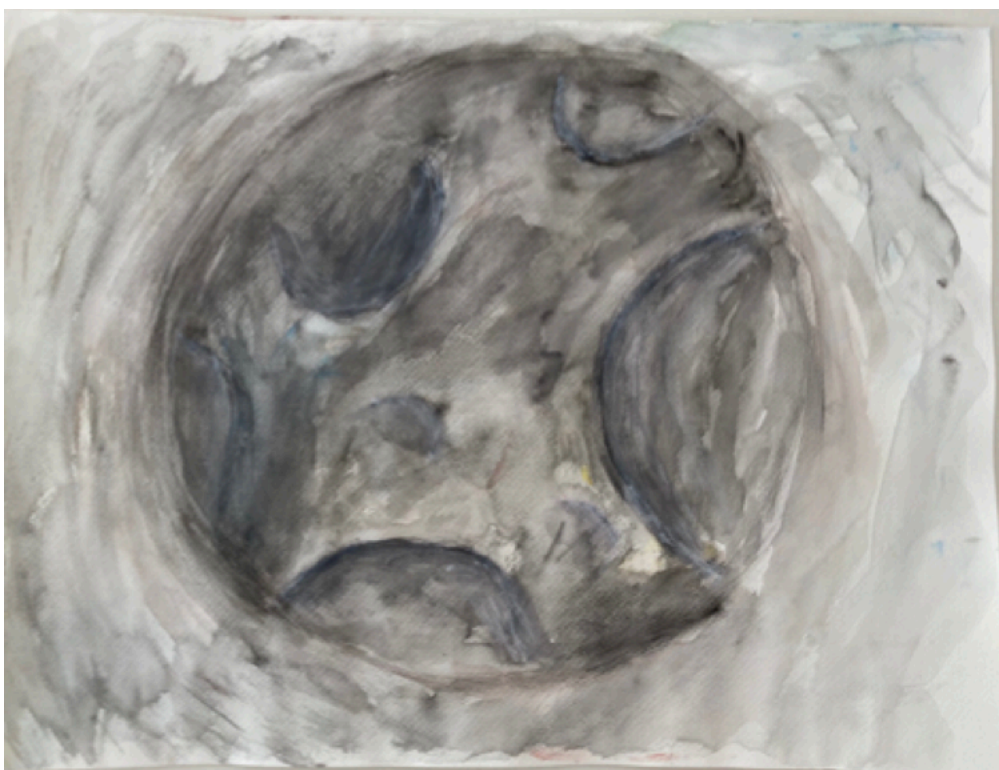


Fig. 8. *Untitled* by Minna. Water colour, water colour pencils



Fig. 9. *Untitled* by Minna. Acrylic paint

There was a lot of excitement on the day of the exhibition. Minna's portfolio was displayed slightly open in the window of the gallery where the young people were exhibiting. Some of her work flew out (*fig. 10*). Minna was particularly nervous because she had invited her entire family and was unsure who would attend. Most of them came; many had not been in the same room together for a long time and some had not seen Minna for years. This evening, she was the focus of her family's attention as Minna the artist. When I talked to Minna's relatives, they told me that artistry was in the family genes.





Fig. 10. View of the window of the gallery. Photographer: Anaïs Héraud

***Reflection: Minnas's personal use of the exhibition frame***

When choosing a title for the exhibition, Minna was clearly resisting the group's tendency to devalue itself. She was in a productive mood, and I could sense her desire to showcase as many facets of her art as possible. As if her sunflower needed a counterpart, she came up with the idea of painting a moon (*fig. 8*), a motif which continues to be illuminated by the sun even after it has set. This painting contrasts sharply with the apparent cheerfulness of her other works. The oversized dark cracks give the picture a sense of emptiness and menace despite the energetic flow. Minna does not exploit the fluidity of watercolour here, applying the colours with a quick-drying brush. This contrasts strongly with the bright authority of the sun. It is possible that, during this fragile period of preparation for the exhibition, an expression of the 'bad object' emerged. Impressively, Minna did not allow herself to



remain divided for long. The following week, she produced a new night-time landscape (*fig.9*). Here, she found a way to create light out of darkness, depicting a polar landscape filled with small creatures. I see this painting as representing Minna's more mature self, in which she was able to draw form through integration from the division between light and darkness, or good and evil objects. In the meantime, she had partly taken her gifts back for exhibiting.

Minna decided to show those pictures she was afraid of, those she had given away and taken back, those she felt she had failed with, which flew out from the slightly opened folder. One could perhaps recognise aspects of her fragmented self in the very image of the open portfolio container: the sorrow flower, longing for recognition, from which the unfinished or unwanted drawing flies in or out... At the same time, I believe that Minna used the opportunity of the exhibition to create a form of triangulation on a social scale: she turned the space of the exhibition into a place of encounter, where the family was held without splitting up. Minna placed herself at the centre of the family, not as a source of grief or guilt, but as a capable creative self, an aspect that the family seems to have positively identified as lineage. This experience may have been fleeting and by no means magical, but it may hopefully have been a step on Minna's path to self-chosen autonomy and adulthood.

### **Closing Thoughts**

As I outlined in the literature review, a gift cannot be understood merely as an object of exchange. It carries a complex symbolic significance that goes far beyond simple reciprocity. In this case, I attempted to view Minna's act of giving not only as a gesture of relationship-building but also as an expression of an inner process—perhaps linked to experiences of abandonment and loneliness. The offering of artwork may have served as a way for Minna to come into contact with these internal themes—particularly the fear of being unseen or unacknowledged.

Creating something for another person—carrying with it the silent hope for resonance and attachment—inevitably holds the risk of disappointment. Yet within that risk also lies the potential for a symbolically experienced, direct dyadic connection. There is also sense of loneliness in artmaking and creative process.

However, being alone with one's own artistic process is a qualitatively different experience. It requires a certain degree of ego strength, as it often comes with a profound sense of solitude. As Kraft describes, such solitude can evoke feelings of helplessness, disorientation, and intense anxiety. In order to withstand this, strong psychological defences may be activated—such as the grandiose fantasies Kraft discusses—which can function as creative resources to re-establish inner coherence and enable new experiences.

For Minna, through the act of creating art for herself, she appeared to find a path toward actively confronting the feeling of loneliness and abandonment. In this way, the artistic process became a space for self-encounter and self-efficacy. The sense of solitude often emerges when one dares to do something entirely new—something arising from within that may contradict familiar inner patterns. At its core may lie the fear of failure, or of not being recognised for who one truly is.

Within this process, I saw part of my role as supporting Minna's grandiose fantasies as a psychological resource—whether by showing her images from art history or by consistently validating her ambition and creative drive. The suggestion of organising an exhibition was, ultimately, also an attempt to support and give space to this inner aspect.

In my countertransference, I occasionally found myself imagining—particularly during moments in the art therapy process when Minna was deeply absorbed in her work, her back turned to me—that I might quietly open the door, step outside, and disappear... and that Minna would not notice. Perhaps she would continue painting, undisturbed—maybe even forget that I had ever been there.

To me, this fantasy signified a possible turning point in the process: a moment in which the therapeutic presence had been sufficiently internalised, such that external accompaniment was no longer experienced as necessary.

## Conclusion

This case study followed Minna's journey in art therapy, examining the role, form, and function of her artworks, the development of our therapeutic relationship, and how the act of gift-giving influenced her movement from a fragmented sense of self toward an evolving identity, shaped through the artistic process. Writing this case study offered an opportunity to reflect on my understanding of her art therapeutic process, our relationship, and the intricate interplay between Minna's internal experiences and external challenges.

## Biography

Anaïs Héraud is an artist and art therapist based in Berlin. She holds Master's degrees in Fine Art and Art Therapy. Currently, she works in a DBT-oriented clinic at Evangelischen Krankenhaus Königin Elisabeth Herzberge. Her interdisciplinary practice explores the intersections of contemporary art, mental health, and therapeutic methodologies.

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