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The Superheroes

of J. C. Holz

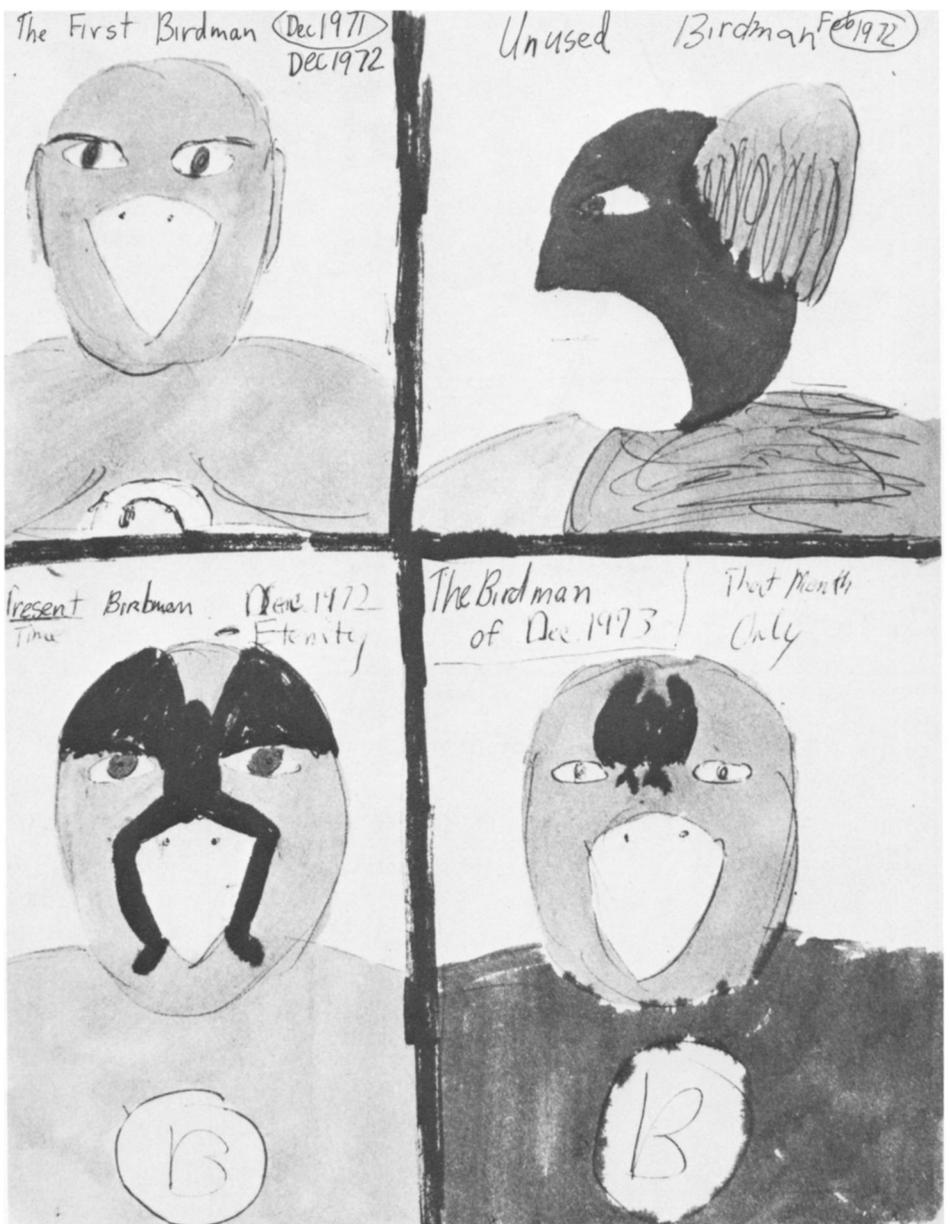
Plus an Outline of a Theory of Child Art

Brent Wilson

J.C. Holz, I should tell you first of all, did his drawings when he was ten years old, and he lives in a small Midwestern town. He, like many other young people, draws alot—sometimes several hours a day. J.C.'s thousands of drawings are mainly of superheroes and comic strips. I should add that he has given me permission to reproduce and write about his work. Actually, what I want to do is to outline a theory explaining why young people such as J.C. make drawings, and as I told J.C., the theory would be much more interesting if it were illustrated with his drawings and comments about them. My work is in the left column and J.C.'s in the right. As you will see, J.C. had more fun with his side than I did with mine. Perhaps his side will help to make mine palatable.¹

Franz Cizek, School Art and Play Art

Franz Cizek, called the father of child art, in 1885 in Vienna watched small boys make chalk drawings on a board



J.C.'s Side

"I have created over 200 superheroes. It took me all summer,

when we lived in an apartment, and I didn't have much to do."

1936, p. 12). Whether he recognized it or not, it was the playlike aspect that made drawing so captivating. When Cizek established his Juvenile Art Class in Vienna in 1897, he attempted to incorporate a playful, spontaneous element into his classroom. His method was to reduce adult influence to a minimum. As he said: "The child who is not influenced has the strong type of art. Therefore the child from three to nine or ten years of age should be encouraged to make what he feels fence. Sometimes, when space was short, they fought one another for drawing territory. From this Cizek concluded that drawing was tremendously important to young people (Viola,

he must 'bring out of himself' (Viola, 1936, p. 29)." He even went so far as to maintain that a rich environment was "as a rule destructive to what was creative in the child (Viola, 1936, p. 20)." He gave children big paper, large brushes, juicy tempera paint, and soft clay, and in subtle ways suggested the subject matter, such as playing in the snow or jumping rope. He thus observed young people advancing through developmental stages, but once his Juvenile Art Class had begun, the child art Cizek observed was done under his influence in circumstances he controlled so completely, albeit unknowingly. Consequently the child art produced was the result of Cizek's ex-

pectations about how child art should look. Thus Cizek taught us how child art should look, and to this day the same self-fulfilling prophecy is in force. We give children materials and ideas and encourage them to make art in the ways we think they should with the subject matter we believe appropriate, and, sure enough, the work comes out looking just the way we knew it would and the way we—and Cizek—wanted it.²

There is another type of child art, related certainly to the kind Cizek first saw on the fence. This art has seldom been allowed into our highly controlled art classes. It is the spontaneous *play art* of young people—J.C.'s type of art. It has little of the polished lushness of art classroom art, but once one learns to look at tatty little drawings done in ball point on lined paper, a whole world of excitement unfolds. From play art we can learn why young people make art in the first place and why some keep on making it while others stop. We may even begin to understand the complex process of art learning, which, incidentally, takes place mainly outside of art classrooms.

Boredom, Tensions, Homeostasis and J.C.'s Art

There are many possible explanations for why J.C. spends so much of each day on his drawings and why he draws the things he does. Freudian psychoanalytic theory would point to unconscious needs and drives, and their emergence through expression of repression, sublimation, and vicarious fantasy gratification. The Jungians would emphasize motifs, formal elements, and especially J.C.'s themes relating to the archetypal oppositions of complexity and order, good and evil, and birth, death and rebirth. Social psychologists might point to the motivating reinforcement from his peers because they praise his drawings. Anthropologists might indicate that his work is merely modeled on a highly integrated American art form—the comic book. Each of these positions could help in explaining why J.C. draws as he does. However, there is one theory that allows for the inclusion of points from several of these positions, and, more importantly, it is consistent with observations made about J.C.'s work.

The homeostatic model of motivation assumes that there are optimal conditions for existence and survival, establishing an equilibrium between the overly boring and the overly stimulating. (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972). In an individual's existence, that which was once highly stimulating when experienced often enough becomes redundant; thus new and more highly stimulating experiences are sought. We all live, some more than others, to be stimulated, to receive pleasure, to be surprised, and to know

the unknown; we go to great ends to continue our amusement through novel experiences. Platt (1959) has gone so far as to call this the fifth need of man.

J.C.'s drawing seems motivated by a strong predisposition for fantasy and an acute need for non-redundant stimulation and excitement or, as seen from the negative side, a strong drive to avoid boredom. He is also an activist, as he has discovered the greater exhilaration of producing his own non-redundant experiences rather than more passively experiencing the productions of others.

In J.C.'s case, it would seem that boredom is the primary triggering factor and, once activated, a shotgun blast of repressed and ungratified wishes are imaginarily fulfilled through sublimation, identification, and projection.

Kreitler and Kreitler (1972) maintain that art experience is motivated by tensions which exist prior to its onset, but triggered through the production of new tensions by the work of art. (It should be indicated that the Kreitlers' ideas relate only to the experiencing of art, but they seem equally applicable to the art-making activities of young people.)

Certainly the creation of tensions is one of the primary features of J.C.'s work. He uses the expressive quality of line, juxtaposition of sizes and shapes, and contrasts of light and dark, as well as verticality, to create tensions; but it is the plots that are the primary producers of tension. Some of his small books show evidence of reasonably slow and careful beginnings but develop with such speed and intensity that the drawing becomes a chaotic frenzy, and the stories are full of shocks and reversals. Only J.C.'s explanations make them coherent. And then we find, in stories such as *Brenda Rex*, not only the tension factors of surprise, romance, sex, escape, destruction, and metamorphosis, but also an Oedipus theme. This is certainly a far cry from the art classroom themes of "We got our new shoes covered with mud," and "When we went to visit the farm." These themes are pale alongside the world J.C. makes in his drawings.

Play and Art

J.C. doesn't think of himself as an artist. Perhaps some day he will become one, but for the present, art for him is a form of play. My simplified working definition is that play is arousal-seeking behavior. Play is caused by the need to generate interaction with the environment or to raise one's level of arousal (or level of interest and stimulation) toward the optimal (Ellis, 1973, p. 111). Motivated by tensions existing prior to its onset, play actually fulfills its function through new tensions created in the act of playing.

Specifically, play has these



"I have a whole bunch of superheroes in my head, and I'm trying to get them out of my mind, and I cracked out a few that I had forgotten."

"Sometimes I pretend I have the powers of the heroes. This summer I pretended the Adventurer and rode my bike around with a black jacket."

characteristics:

1. It involves novelty, surprise, complexity, uncertainty, and change. It adds something to the present lacking in earlier perceptions and experiences (Sutton-Smith, 1973, p. 2).

2. It contains tensions, reversals, or "arousal jags" in which there is a building toward and a retreat from crescendoes of excitement (Berlyne, 1969, p. 838). (For example, carefully building structures of blocks and then blasting them in one swoop, or painstakingly drawing an airplane, then destroying it on paper.)

3. The usual means-ends goals are suspended. Individuals vary their play behaviors without the usual pressure to achieve particular goals (Sutton-Smith, 1973, p. 5). It is activity carried on for its own sake or for the sake of pleasure (Berlyne, 1969, p. 840).

4. Play may occur in groups or it may be solitary, but whichever is the case, it is entered into without compulsion. Even in groups there is an idiosyncratic statement of un verbalized feelings, wish fulfillment, and compensation (Sutton-Smith, 1973, p. 8).

5. Cross-cultural studies show that play incorporates the major themes of the surrounding cultural life. So, although play comes into being through seeking stimulation, it incorporates cultural traits, conflicts, and wishes and allows for a free and open modeling of these traits (Sutton-Smith, 1973, pp. 9-10).

The spontaneous art of young people is play par excellence. It is certainly one of the most flexible, potentially complex, and involving of all types of play. Play art can develop virtually anywhere, on sand and walls, on the street, and in study hall. (More novel art may be motivated by the boredom of secondary school study halls than through the carefully orchestrated "motivations" of art teachers.) It takes only a stub of a pencil and scraps of paper to make worlds without end (and destroy them), create man in any image (idealized, disfigured, mutilated, metamorphosed), realize dreams (day or otherwise), and possess what one wishes (at least for a time)—all for the price of a pencil.

Cultural Influences

When young people such as J.C. play continually at their art-making, they quickly move through something akin to developmental stages and begin absorbing or assuming the cultural traits of the art around them—comic books in J.C.'s case. Young people can move to this point without the assistance of an art teacher. A careful analysis of J.C.'s drawings and his own analysis of his work leaves one amazed at all he has learned about art through his years of studying comic books.

I asked J.C. to lend me four of his favorite comic books. He gave me:

Kamandi, The Last Boy on Earth

(Vol. 2, No. 7, July 1973);

Metal Men (Vol. 11, No. 42, Feb.-Mar. 1973);

Superboy (Vol. 26, No. 200, Jan.-Feb. 1974);

Adventure Comics (Vol. 40, No. 431, Jan.-Feb. 1974).

An analysis of these comics revealed the following characteristics (presented here as I noted them rather than in any order of importance):

Verticality—nearly every form and line is diagonal;

Value Contrast—a maximum of black/white contrast, gained mainly through light and shadow;

Movement—created by zigzag lines, flows, and radials;

Juxtaposition—of open and closed, large against small, straight against curved;

Shifting Viewpoint—there is a continual shift from the close-up to the long shot, and from the high vantage point to the low;

Action—virtually every frame includes extreme literal action of figures withering, straining, and splashing, vehicles rushing and crashing; there are explosions, shots, and the inevitable words "thwak," "blam," "screech" and "tat-tat-tat" to reinforce the action;

Frames—varying from large to small, from horizontal to vertical, from regular to jutting irregular;

Technique—mainly pen and brush with lots of crosshatching and heavy inking;

Pervasive Quality—an incredible soup of fragments, smoke, bits, balloons, and zags bordering on chaos with just enough structure to hold things together.

Themes deal mainly with the oppositions of good and evil:

Plots mainly "get the heroes or innocents in great trouble and then get them out." Good always triumphs;

Metamorphosis—characters continually change their form or are changed. There is birth, death and rebirth, cloning and disintegration;

Fantasy—animals talk, planets are visited, and people fly;

Zoomorphism—animals have human characteristics;

Futurism—machines and buildings project to the future;

Women—with the exception of the few female superheroes, they exist in what is essentially a world of men. They are sexy and wait to be rescued.

The amazing thing is that an analysis of J.C.'s comics shows the same characteristics as his favorite comics. Not every strip has each characteristic, but in the body of his work each aspect is to be found. J.C. is so well acquainted with the aspects I listed from the comic books that when he works, they emerge with easy intuition. And when called upon to explain what he has done and why, J.C. has the reasons



"I'm glad the Phantom (J.C.) started bringing things to school. It has made me lots of friends and I got to know Mr. Olson (the art teacher)." (J.C. at first had secretly put his work on the display board in the art room and signed it "The Phantom.")

"Now that the kids know about what I'm doing, sometimes they ask me to draw a picture for them."

game-like, conventional, ritualistic, and rule-governed. I have already commented on the conventional themes and materials fed to children which result in school art with the "proper" expected look. One of the primary characteristics of liminal school art is its compulsory nature. Young people through elementary and into junior high school have little or no choice regarding whether they will participate in art class activities. The obligatory element is removed somewhat for elective art classes at the junior and senior high school levels; however, once art classes are elected, conformity to implicit and explicit rules again has the force of obligation.

Art classroom art resembles games where conventional rules and (as Sutton-Smith remarks), games encapsulate play variability to serve as cultural antitheses (1973, p. 7). Art classrooms seem particularly to relate to game-like oppositions, such as win or lose and accept or reject. In effect the art teacher often says: "Do this project, and if you do it well, I'll give you praise, recognition, or a good grade." on the other hand, he says: "If you don't follow my rules, I'll reject your work, or you, or give you a poor mark."

Actually young people appear to enjoy the art classroom game, just as they enjoy most games. Indeed art classroom games are among the more stimulating of school games. When my conversations with J.C. have extended into art class time, he has been most eager to get back to class to do the projects. Those projects generally last for a single class period and are mainly process-oriented and highly teacher-structured. Although his play art seldom resembles his classroom art, he enjoys them both. However, when he is on his own, he exercises his option to produce his own novel, stimulating, "arousal jag" art. His play art falls on the liminoid side of the ludic continuum and has virtually no relation to his school art.

School art serves one function—a diversionary game-like one—for J.C., and his tension-reducing/liminoid play art serves quite another. There is no question in my mind which is the more important to J.C. J.C.'s school art will never do for him what his play art does. In school art, his art teachers will always expect him to perform to some degree in group-related, teacher-project-oriented ways, or J.C. will expect that such is the case, and his work will be affected to some degree. It certainly will not be his own to the extent that his play art is. Following the rules of the school game is not necessarily bad; people make art under all kinds of constraints, and art classroom rules are one type among many. The point is that school art for J.C. and for many other young people is very different from play art. Another point to consider



Brenda Rex

"The cover of this collector's edition shows the Swamp Monster."



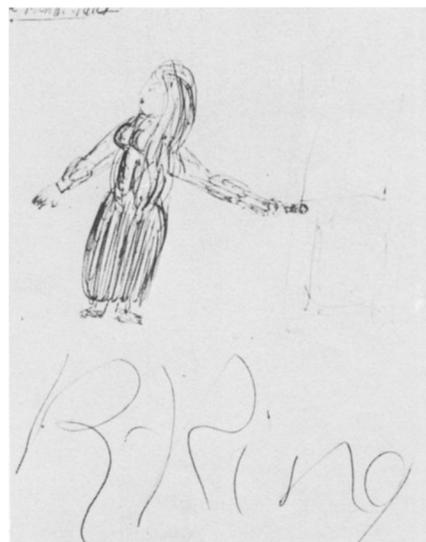
"Birdman is carrying Brenda off. He is flying."



"This shows Brenda's boy friend, Birdman, sitting between his costumes. He is well pampered."



"Down below is Brenda's father, the Swamp Monster, but Brenda doesn't know he is her father and he doesn't know either. The Swamp monster is seeking revenge. The * means: look at Birdman #4 to find out why."



"Here Brenda is answering the door as Birdman brings her a new costume."



"Birdman's heat vision is burning the Swamp Monster."

is that it's not what young people do under our control that's important; rather it's what they choose to do on their own outside school that is ultimately integrated into their life styles.

The parting thought is: How should art teachers relate these two types of art? Or should they? (I have already claimed that neither Cizek nor any of the rest of us has successfully incorporated ludic play art into art classrooms, nor will we.) But, should play art be ignored? Encouraged? Stamped out, as some teachers try to do? You supply your answer; I have mine. Thanks, J.C.

Brent Wilson is professor of art education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

NOTES

¹This is only a brief outline. If you would like the fuller "scholarly version, write, and I'll send a copy when it is completed.

²I think it is not necessarily wrong to influence children the way we do, but it is unfortunate to be unaware of the nature and extent of our influence.

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"But the Swamp Monster turns Brenda into a Horrible."



"The last page shows just her soul. But I plan to bring her back."

How J.C. Learned

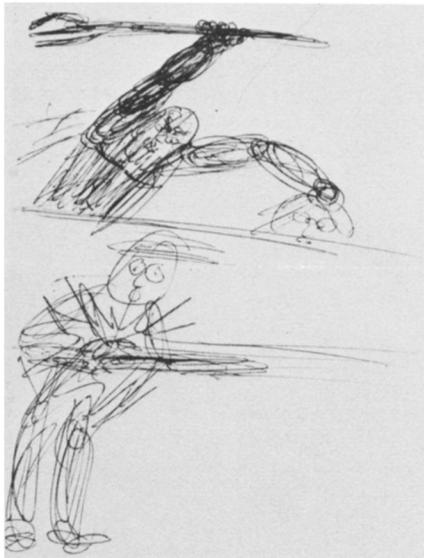
"I learned how to do these by reading comic books. I have been reading them for seven years and save most of them and trade a lot. Because I read comics I know how to do it."



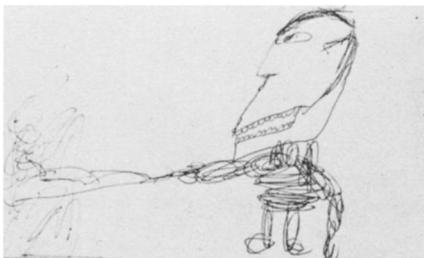
"It's hard to believe but I just think up the super-heroes and then I just think up the story as I go along."



"I always draw quickly because I have been practicing."



"When you put in the flashlines, it really gives the feeling."



"I got the idea for showing the arm's moving because I once had a magazine which showed lots of arms, done lightly to show they were moving fast."

"Sometimes in *Plop* they show squares overlapping so I thought I could use circles."



"The first ones I did were not lettered too well but now I have learned to crosshatch and draw better."

J.C.'s Comments on the Comic Books He Reads

"Jack Kirby is good. It's not his work (that is bad). It's the way they ink it. Mike Rogers is the inker. Sometimes he overdoes it. He does it on the costume too much. The smoke is okay."

"See, look here, that is all cross-hatching. It is all crosshatching. It is just too much! Look, I'll bet half the page is covered. This story wasn't very good, either. Look, he has melting hands. That's dumb, and he turns this guy into a skeleton."

"They arrange this one well. They put the bars in the right place."

J.C.'s Father Says:

"I have not seen a kid who could amuse himself with so little. If he has paper and a pencil, he can amuse himself for hours."

