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Room with a View: Ethical Encounters in Room 13

Two boys were hunched over a scanner. They spoke:

"We only need the rough outline."

"Let's put it on the scanner. Now we need to plug in the scanner."

"Oh, that looks pretty cool."

"What we need to do now... I'm trying to do something... tell me if the scanner moves. Oh no... a tiny wee bit."

"Now we need to give it some flames."

"You need some people on the ground as well."

VICKY GRUBE

From a corner armchair in Room 13 at Lochside Primary School, Scotland, I observe two 9-year-old boys clutching black Sharpies and curling over a scanner. A blank sheet of paper glows on top of the screen, the boys draw for a while, look up and down at the computer screen, and draw more. The boys stop to ask the adult artist-in-residence Rob Fairley what he knows about the Falklands. There is a conversation about amphibious assault and Margaret Thatcher. I overhear words like "battleship" and "Gulf War." When the two boys return to their sketch, I step closer and see flames and billows of smoke consuming the ship's main battery. Eight pinhead-sized windows shaped like tiny scrabble tiles flank the approaching fire. I hear the boys' plans to replicate the explosion on a larger piece of paper and to use colored paints.



This art studio offers much to the children. From where I sit, Room 13 opens the door to an intersubjective space to welcome the physical, complicated, emotional, and radical that asks the question, "How are we together?"

I traveled to Scotland in the fall of 2009 to see Room 13 after reading Teresa Roberts's article "What's Going on in Room 13?" (2008). I arrived at Fort William curious about a schoolroom where children made what they wanted, posed their own questions, and ran an art room like a small business. In Room 13 children had the responsibility to maintain all aspects of the art studio. Specific decisions fell to an annually elected management team, a small group of children between the ages of 7-12. The affect among young children, working together as respected partners with the power to impact a large audience of their peers, spurred my curiosity on how the particular conditions of the children's learning in this specific location addressed ethical behavior.

Housed in two primary schools in the Highlands of Scotland about five miles from the town of Fort William, the original two Room 13s continue to flourish. In 1994 Rob Fairley was working as an artist-in-residence at Caol Primary School, and

at year's end the children asked him to stay on. Rob told me his reply: "Yes, if you pay me." The children found the necessary resources and have since continued to fundraise, to write grants, and to receive donations to support the art room.

Years after beginning Room 13 at Cao! Primary, Rob Fairley and Claire Gibb established a Room 13 in a former Junior School home economics lab at Lochyside Primary School. Like Room 13 in Cao! Lochyside offered texts, resources, and ideas that triggered complex discourse. Children seem serious about their work and are ignited by a freedom to organize their own studio encounters. The open space in Room 13 and the lack of assigned seats and a few tables allowed children to roam, cluster, stretch, hover, crane, and collapse-in short to use their bodies. The elasticity of the room rebounded with the intricacies of movement and children's freedom of choice, humming with an energy of a body that cannot be separated from the mind. In the free interaction of both, children encountered difference, experienced affect, re-interpreted questions, and created new truths.

With no constrained seating or need to ask permission to move, the body, like an aggregate of fragmented encounters, can send and receive the affects of others around them. Bergson described the body's ability to engage in an "affective openness" (Briginshaw & Chandler, 2009, p. 63), in which the senses are free to reach toward the Other. The back-and-forth of affect means the moving child can glide from reflection to dialogic encounter. While the lack of obedience to mimicking the teacher appears as chaos, a disruption, a milieu of nuance, the face-to-face encounter is crucial for ethical relationships. From a mix of unfathomable difference, authentic questions are cranked out, hurting no one. In traditional education the dominant efforts to isolate learning misses the mark. Ethical beliefs are wrapped in the other child. Together children work out what is worth preserving.

It's different in Room 13 because you don't just learn how to do art you get to tell people how you're feeling. And you get to put your feelings down on paper. (Yarker, 2009, p. 19)

Pandemonium

At noon the room began to fill with children. I noticed lightning bolts shaved into boys' hair like topiary. Many Lochyside boys wore this look with planets, waves, and stars trimmed just over their temporal lobe. Lightning bolts were the most popular. The children wore navy and white uniforms. From my Lochyside visits I found school uniforms enhance differences by making the particular more apparent. Everyone seemed relaxed except me. I was on the lookout for suspicious glances and sensitive to being avoided.

The activity in Room 13 appeared to be small stories going on within a larger story. A girl sat on a tall stool, eating an egg sandwich watching two younger girls squirt paint onto paper plates. I watched children pose for each other's paintings, share dessert cakes from lunch, collaborate on drawings, and prove a sophisticated knowledge of art materials.

"You can tell Neal used acrylic paint and not oil."

"I am trying to layer these paints. Maybe I will scrape a little off."

"If you build the paint up enough it gets thick like a real thing."

Some children tidied the room and one asked, "Who gets to take the rubbish out?" Others sat on the couch and to visit with Rob. Still others, like the girl on the tall stool, daydreamed. I was neither ignored nor scrutinized.

Two girls pointed to an area on the floor. One dropped her plastic inhaler, as if to mark the spot, then the girls hurried off to gather brushes. It was curious how personal the room became for each child. The room was bustling. The floor was like a lake of silt with dusty footprints crisscrossing over dark blue tiles. The girls sat cross-legged on the floor focused on painting geometric designs. During clean up the inhaler was kicked spinning across the room, was retrieved without fuss, and in the girl's palm when she left the room.

Same Light, Different Lighting

So how were ethics entwined in the unencumbered bodies of Room 13? When a child was free to walk across the room and open a window, when two decided to clear off a counter and begin a painting, when the body was perceived as integral to learning, there was ease with difference and the lack of self-consciousness. All genders seemed comfortable working together and in their immense differences became individuated bodies, not individual bodies. On the wall behind me a young artist tacked their painted life map that read: The Meaning of Life: God, Mind, Friend, Truth, Spirit, and Identity. A 13-year-old girl showed me her latest work, five or six doorknobs attached to a 14-inch piece of wood. "Here's my doorknob project but I ran out of doorknobs: two girls rummaged the shelves for more black paint. I noticed the ethics of the children was grounded in wondering what the other could do. There was a serious recognition that other children were loaded with multiple ideas.

The physical proximity with others allowed children to experience empathy, caring, and tenderness. When bodies could move freely, they affected each other. The collaboration fueled an increase in energy and affects, or "felt experience" as described by Deleuze and Guattari (in O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 43). As distance shortened between bodies, the possibility for authentic action increased. Chance and difference questioned the preconceived beliefs about the other. This art encounter, whether the rupturing differences were fascinating or disturbing was irrelevant; the benefit of witnessing all that one could be allowed children to believe in the implausible (Nealon, 1998).

The action of experimenting with assorted media, creating new assemblages, deconstructing cultural beliefs, and juxtaposing ideas is how children explore self. In collaborative artmaking, or the co-construction of knowledge, static self-perception becomes fluid and malleable in the as-yet- unseen affects and ideas of another. Risk



far left
Franconian Master,
*Lamentation of Christ
with a Group of Donors*,
c.1515. Oil on panel,
120.5 x 97 cm.
Purchased with the aid
of the Art Fund 1998.
© National Galleries of
Scotland.

left
"What the Dog Saw"
by Debbie Turner.

taking, realizing the possible from the impossible, critical thinking, in essence, the encounter with a unique other is a "threshold for inevitable change" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 484). This phenomenon of affect, or shared felt experience, according to Spinoza (in Nadler, 2006), is ethics, in other words a pleasurable encounter for world building.

The encounter that erupts from difference causes a break of habit, and the chance "to contemplate a different future" (Van Heertum, 2010, p. 219). The encounter is rare in a traditional classroom where knowledge is pitched by the teacher and fielded by the child. Yet ethical relationships require a freedom of movement, not to assimilate the Other, but to experience an openness with the Other to learn their infinite uniqueness. Collaboration is not about "what does this mean that we are different" but "what can we do because we are different?"

Participating in an encounter, either as artist or audience does not always result in the effervescence of exquisite or even adequate ideas. But the encounter creates affects that are the heart of art and life. Art is the being together, whether an introspective engagement with materials that affects an audience or the companionship of artmaking with another person. Art exists in gallops and pauses, a duet of unbridled rhythms that emits the miraculous notion that when our body encounters another body, we are *becoming* (O'Sullivan, 2006).

When vacating the Junior school home economics room, the staff left behind a beige

sewing machine, slate blackboard, a couple of utility sinks, tall blonde counters and cutting tables. Today under these tables are waist-high stacks of oversized drawing paper. The shelves stock a scattering of blue, red, and black paint. A vintage Bell & Howell video camera is mounted near the ceiling. All over the walls are children's hand-lettered reminders and truisms: "Do Not Take More Paint Than You Need;" "Sink Plugged;" and "If you are not truthful to the world about who you are and what you are, your art will stink of falseness." The walls in Room 13 display battle scene drawings and unique collage portraits, like the one made of Popsicle sticks glued horizontally like Venetian blinds. The sinks are filled with encrusted paint containers and small forests of swollen brushes are jammed upright drying in cans.

The room is a place of flux, a physical manifestation of Gilles Deleuze's (1994) philosophy, which is based on the notion that nothing in life is ever fixed. The room seems unsettled, shifting, a kind of lost and found place, bricolage from here and there, odd pieces pinioned to boards or canvas and then painted thickly. The room shouts, "We are never finished!" The physical shuffle in the room encompasses objects as well as subjects. Ideas are appropriated and discarded. Movement, fluidity, and change allow for new combinations of creative thinking, while actions are curated by an openness and connectivity to difference (O'Sullivan, 2006).

Difference can be considered as "the impossibility of sameness" (Nealon, 1998, p. 3) or associating difference to lack. The difference of coming-up-short implies a drive for approval or unquenchable desire. However, if children find value in upheaval, the breaking of habits, in the coupling of difference, then, difference is not assumed as a lack. Difference can be an action, interrogatory, humble, and energizing. Difference can be the reflective act of organizing past encounters to better understand why we make the decisions that we do.

Two girls in navy school uniforms, with long hair parted on the side, sit cross-legged in the center of the room painting geometric shapes, one clutching an inhaler. One girl folds an 11"x18" sheet of paper into 32 identical rectangles resembling the wall of an igloo. Each rectangle is then evenly outlined with a slender line of black paint and then filled in with color. The other begins on paper twice as large to draw freehand multi-sized black cubes in stacks that resemble a disorganized cereal warehouse. She then adds color to the shapes. When children are free to use the art space, to physically encounter art with others, when art is allowed to produce "happenings" or effects, difference becomes not the lack of but a resemblance of an action. The unique is not appropriated, does not appear as a representation, but as the "emergence of another world" (Porter, 2009, p. 61).



Sir Joseph Noel Paton 1821-1901. *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania*, 1849. Oil on canvas, 99 x 152 cm. Purchased by Royal Association for the Promotion of Fine Arts in Scotland 1850; transferred to the National Gallery of Scotland 1897. © National Galleries of Scotland.

Collaboration in Room 13 occurs even when both artists are not present. One girl was spraying red paint onto her own painting, finished and said, "I think this other painting over here (pointing to another's work) would look better with a stripe of red across the top." Rob Fairley cringed, thinking, "Don't, don't do that." With the flick of the wrist, the girl shot red spray paint across the top of the nearby painting. Later the other painter arrived to find her own work striped and peeped, "Oh, I like that. It really improved it."

In 2008, Room 13 was invited to exhibit work at the National Gallery of Scotland. Fairley and the management team traveled overnight to Edinburgh, returning to Fort William with a stack of museum catalogues. With reactions from peers and the studio artists the children painted their interpretation of a piece from the permanent collection. The children's paintings that flank the upper hallways of the school vary substantially in composition, materials, and style. Many children conducted tours that included informed details like the green paint stripe on the studio floor marking where "What the Dog Saw" was propped during its execution.

Difference in Interpretation: A Picture of Christ

A prominent piece entitled *A Lamentation of Christ with a Group of Donors* by Franconian Master, painted about 1515, was chosen to reproduce by 8-year-old Debbie. She titled her response to this painting "What the Dog Saw" and centered a grinning Christ with bleeding toes on a large ochre cross. It's a cheery scene with Christ, a small golden retriever at his feet, encircled by birds, angels, children, and Holstein cows. They all wear halos of glue and glitter. "What the Dog Saw" mimics the sky and billowy clouds of the original work but alters the dog breed and prominence. Both paintings have a bleeding auburn haired Christ, but the wounds in the 1515 painting are more severe.

Nine-year-old Natasha painted [her] response to a triptych, *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania* by Joseph Noel Paton (1847). Natasha titled her work "Credit Crunch City."



above
Natasha, Triptych: Second Panel,
"Credit Crunch City."

right
Child demonstrates posing for
the fairy's portrait.





Natasha, Triptych: Third Panel, "Credit Crunch City."

"I was watching the news while eating dinner. I heard about the credit crunch and I thought oh that's a good idea. The credit crunch is driving the fairies away. Oh, did you know there are 165 fairies in Paton's painting? I tried to put in one hundred. It's a polluting city off in the distance and you know when the wind blows and you hear voices? That's what it means when all these letters are flying."

I asked her, "What is that red line above Titania and the Changeling?"

"Oh, the red line is like a chart line. When the line is up, you are getting worse. Like on the end of a hospital bed. Like the costs going up *too*."

When I asked Natasha "Why did you title this painting 'Credit Crunch City'?" and she answered, "I liked the sound of the words."

When I asked, "I notice a person holding a sword in front of this tree. What do you think about violence?" She replied, "Oh, I don't like it. That's King Oberon. I think I got too messy on this tree. I don't really like violence. And don't talk about smallpox. It makes me faint." A cherubic girl joined us saying, "I can't look at eyeballs. Just the eyeball makes me sick. I posed for Natasha's Titania in her painting." She freezes into Titania's pose.

Natasha explains, "The fairies are scared (she changes her voice), 'I don't know which side to be on!' (pause) The pollution starts because they are arguing. (pause) Fairies have thin legs because they don't walk so often."

The hallway leading to Room 13 is a plethora of rich, unique, large scale, and detailed artwork suggesting ethical connections. Evidenced in the number of enthusiastic hallway tour guides and their detailed descriptions of others' work, suggests that the children do not believe in a homogenous gaze or a package of universal truths. Instead the differences trigger the question, *How are we together?* (Levinas, 1969). Unrestricted action frees all of the senses to glean alternative ways of experiencing the world. In Room 13 movement allows for the personal selection of problems, manifesting an idea into action and a physical encounter with loads of Upcoming Attractions. The whole body encounters the rupture of difference.

This Clumsy Living

In Room 13 I'm more important because outside or inside the classroom

I feel I am not there but when I'm in Room 13 I feel like I have friends.

In Room 13 I feel alive.

In Room 13 I am special and have the same rights. (Yarker, 2009, p. 14)

It was 3:00 p.m., and long shadows cross the schoolyard. The room was empty of young artists. Rob Fairley walked across the

hallway to talk to Claire Gibb, an artist who manages the Room 13 International Program. Only Natasha sat next to me, unwrapping a sandwich. Moments before, the room was busy with children moving about and working on projects. In the organized chaos of children and materials, this room of bodies entered new relations and resounded with an "ethics of joy" (Porter, 2009, p. 23). Natasha peeled a banana.

Two boys popped into the room and began break dancing. They called to Natasha who was chewing her sandwich, "There was a break dancer at assembly." The boys danced side by side twisting, jerking, wiggling up to their toes, dropping to their hands while trying to fling their legs circular like helicopter blades. They landed under each other for a micro-second then leapt up to walk like robots in slow motion, stopping for a beat to pose and to create a human pipe cleaner flex before attempting headstands. "Come and join us!" Natasha put down her sandwich and joined them for a conveyor-belt kind of strut.

This is how it was. When a person I was dining with jumped up to dance, I saw affection in the shared lives. I understood that the children had "inescapable claims on one another" (Peukert, 1981, p. 11). I wondered if school achievement was interchangeable with caring. I questioned an economy based on self-protection that heaved the burden on schools to define success through particular tests that decontextualized children, their teachers, and their families (Cannelle & Lincoln, 2010). This ethics of accountability was built on norms and rules. But what of an ethical life that valued recognition, a healthy respect for difference, intimacy, mutuality? Could an artmaking that welcomes encounters of difference act as a living force to create community?

It is dark. A few children arrived to Room 13 to look for a misplaced lunchbox and to wave goodbye. After the school day ended, I walked four miles from Lochside Primary School to my Bed and Breakfast in Corpach, Scotland, stopping once to buy a hot cheese naan at the small Indian take out. The air was

biting. Day after day the clouds pelted either freezing rain or shrouded the sky in a blanket of gray. Along the horizon the mountain Ben Nevis seemed to lean toward me. It was very dark by 4:30, and my walk home along the shores of the loch, down a pebbled path, and across several footbridges, was cold. The aluminum wrapped naan was piping hot and as I peeled back the foil edges to bite, a wonderful steam rose, moistened my cheeks and warmed me till I got home.

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