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## Something Happens in Room 13: Bringing Truths into the World

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### Abstract

This qualitative study looks at how an art studio run by children in crisis impacts what we can learn about art and relationships. Room 13, an art studio on school grounds managed by children ages 7-11 years old, began in Scotland in the 1980's and is now worldwide. Room 13 young artists manage the studio, raise funds, and even hire an adult studio artist. In Room 13, the children's art making is expected to be experimental and self driven. West Rise Junior School and Hareclive Primary School in England both each have a Room 13 as well as a large population of children at risk. This research study explores how art can serve such a population.

### **Something Happens in Room 13: Bringing Truths into the World**

“Goodness is a matter of habit. Like playing the flute, you get better at it the more you practice.... We become brave and generous by doing brave and generous things” (Eagleton, 2003 a, p. 135).

*My Brownie Scout leader, Mrs. Tschaepe raises three fingers and we follow suit. “On my honor, I will do my duty, to serve God and my country, and help other people everyday at all times, especially those at home. (Brownie Motto, 1950-1971, gsori.org) ” I am eight years old. I love wearing a uniform and now want official brownie scout shoes. When I speak the word “duty,” I imagine doing something distasteful without complaining. To avoid thinking about any upcoming obligations, I imagine my bedroom dresser topped with lots of official Brownie accessories like flashlights, belts, collapsible cups, and ankle socks. (Grube reflection)*

### **Getting to Being Here**

In 1994, just a few miles from Fort William, Scotland, Mel Gibson buckled his chest plate for the final shoot for Paramount Productions’ *Braveheart*. At the same time, five miles south at Caol Primary School, children were urging their artist-in-residence, Rob Fairley, to stay another term. Rob’s answer, “ Yes, if you pay me.” As a result children raised the funds necessary to continue Room 13, an art studio in a northern Scotland primary school where children ages 7-11 could make art projects of their choosing before school, during lunch, after school, and when their class work was done. Now Room 13, modeled on the Caol program, has become an international phenomenon in which children make significant decisions like the hiring of an adult artist who will challenge theories, pose philosophical questions, comment on student work, and act as a co-negotiator when ethical issues arise, and to serve as a steady presence in the room.

In the summer of 2012, I flew to England for a close look at two Room 13 programs, one in Eastbourne and the other in Bristol. My curiosity about Room 13 was peaked after reading an article by Teresa Roberts (2008) “What’s Going on in Room 13?” On two prior trips-in 2010 Fort William, Scotland and in 2011 Hareclive School in Bristol, England- I traveled to see the structure of Room 13 art studios run by children. I knew Room 13 studios allowed children a chance to determine all aspects of their art making experience and, in effect, I saw children posing their own questions, freely interacting with other children, and managing this art room like a small business. With the physical freedom to actively pursue self-determined questions, studio relationships became highly significant. For example, the children had the freedom to work with other children or not. This freedom

to be doing what you want to be doing *with* who you want to be doing it means others could choose or reject your invitation. In the physically free environment of Room 13, children experienced how to negotiate and to make friends through artmaking. In the context of the children's self-managed space, I found most decisions involved relations between oneself and others that implied mutual respect and good fun. I found the ethical interwoven in the texture of the artmaking, which led me to wonder: What happens with children during collaborative artmaking? How does such artmaking affect how the children think about each other? How do the actions of art making fold into what it means to be human?

### ***Who I Was With***

Until arriving, I was unaware how England's struggling economy had severely impacted these children. Without economic advantage, children face enormous obstacles (Greene, 1995). In general, children from low-income families are excluded from opportunities, demeaned for their "impoverished experiences," labeled as lacking, and become invisible as the tired blandness of poverty is disregarded and struggles are trivialized (Greene, 1995, p. 32). The stark experiences of children at risk can be troubling to hear and are rarely welcome in the public school classroom. Often the narratives of the poor are deemed insignificant so that this impoverished population distrusts the reality of their experiences, blame themselves for their difficulties, and are left to feel hopeless. Children need dedicated listening to their real lives to affirm the reality of their lived experiences (Freire, 1970).

In Room 13, most children did not act as if the world had any personal regard for them. The children did not expect to be given special attention and never asked for any. The children were kind to each other and were frank about their lives. I was struck at how casually these children spoke and drew off of catastrophic personal events and what little support they had to cope with such losses. For example, when painting a cardboard box house with another, a child reported the recent death of her three-year-old cousin who fell out of a moving car. The girl opposite spoke of her father leaving the family and how upset her mother was. Other children talked of a father in prison, a mother's suicide, granny's stealing, and twin infant deaths. In my close contact with the children, I found tragic events were common; perhaps this explains the ability to speak so openly. None of the children described support systems to help cope with such losses. I wondered, do these children feel less valued because life has not taken a particular shine to them? How does this common experience among the children create identity? What comes from finding others who share a similar reality? How are relationships affected? Does the artmaking reflect those relationships? I had a month at these two schools to find out.

To study ethics or the learned caring for others, in the environment of Room 13, I used

ethnographic methods. I immersed myself in the studio, attempting to be both participant and observer. I did a lot of “deep hanging out” as Geertz (1998) described fieldwork. I spent two weeks at Room 13 Hareclive School in Bristol followed by two weeks at the West Rise Junior School in Eastbourne. Both were urban schools with 98% of the children 6-12 years old and Caucasian. Both urban schools were several miles from the city center. Most of the children lived in the neighborhood and either walked, were driven by parents, or those further away took the city bus.

I tried to be present but not the main event and spent three days a week for four weeks total in the Room 13 studios in Hareclive and West Rise. In both schools, children used the studio more heavily at lunchtime and before school, but each studio was used all six hours of the school day. I observed this ebb and flow and was present all day. The first day at each studio was a bit humiliating for me. I knew little about what adults did in a child lead studio. And as an American I was a real curiosity, rousing children to question minute details of my life. “What do you call frozen juice if you don’t call it squash?” “Have you ever had any animals enter your house?” “As a child, were you ever worried that your parents would lose their jobs?” “I’ve been in a cave before. If you live in the mountains of North Carolina, does that mean you live in a cave?”

In both Room 13’s, I found it difficult to keep track of all I was seeing. I took pictures but using the still camera was awkward. Children often asked me to help with a drippy painting. One afternoon, I never took a photo, distracted by cardboard/clay plasticine miniature shops three children had constructed. There I was listening to a child’s narrative and I would misplace the camera. Also, I discovered that the still pictures could not capture the context of the studio experience. As a solution, I turned the camera over to the children who were prolific documenters. I also used a digital movie camera and was able to record the energy in the room. On a typical day I participated in the activity, interviewed the children and the studio artists, and observed adult artists interacting with the children.

During the first two weeks, I lived with the two Hareclive adult artists at their home in Bristol. The time outside of school was often spent discussing the lives of the children, various philosophies of education, art practice, the culture of Bristol, Room 13’s relationship with the school administration and the teachers, and fund raising efforts. As we walked back and forth from home to school, I heard stories of the studio adult’s lives. Leaving Bristol for Eastbourne, I felt very connected to Bristol Room 13.

Collectively, I interviewed a head teacher, classroom teachers, assistant teachers, Room 13 adult studio artists, Room 13 children, and local arts advocates. I spent time on play grounds, in school *Oliver* rehearsals, in a school yurt (an ancient wooden round house used by

nomads in the steppes of Central Asia), a school marsh (populated by egrets and water buffalo), in teachers' lounges, auditorium assemblies, teacher workrooms, lunchrooms, gardens, school libraries, and in Room 13's.

For this study, I began researching theories about human relationships. Seigworth (2005) uses Spinoza's terminology from *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, *affectio* "the state of a body as it affects or is affected by another body" and *affectus* "a body's continuous, intensive variation in its capacity for acting" to describe the potential of interactions (p. 162). O'Sullivan (2008) felt Spinoza's ethics encompassed the conscious decision to sort through life's innumerable encounters with others and to select the best to nurture- or those interactions that allow us to flourish (O' Sullivan, 2008). Zepke (2005) further interpreted Spinoza's belief that an ethical life sifts out and constructs common theories, anticipates possibility and finds new ways of defining self. Spinoza's ethics equated with an inherent God seen in the "affectural relations of my body and ideas" versus a God who exists an external mystic (Zepke, 2005, p. 45). Hegel attacked Spinoza's interpretation of ethics, charging Spinoza with atheism. Hegel also insisted that a feeling of ever present lack is crucial to human drive and was critical of Spinoza's belief that ethical decisions are built on "an affirmative existence" (Zepke, 2005, p. 45). Years later contemporary philosopher Deleuze defended Spinoza's theories when he wrote, "absolutely nothing lacks anything" or immanently we have what we need (Zepke, 2005, p. 45).

Curious about the attraction art seemed to have for the children of Room 13, I came upon O'Sullivan's (2006) book *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari* which explained that art making could be a type of ethics, "ethicoaesthetics," because in a room of possibilities an artist deliberately assembles engaging art encounters (p. 42). I observed such encounters in Room 13. I began to see ethics through the description Deleuze applied to his theory of "becoming" or all that a life can do. Alone, a person questions, "What is this for me? What is my body able to do?" Yet, when encountering another, "What does this being together do? What am I capable of with another?" (Smith, 2012, p. 285) Our abilities, as we more or less collaborate with another, are recognized, and lead to ethical decision making. In Room 13, where art becomes a means for interacting (Smith, 2012, p. 286), ethics is present as the child shapes jovial encounters and finds another to connect theories.

In Room 13, I observed children desiring relationships with another and using art materials to begin a dialogue. The close-at-hand relationships in Room 13 gave rise to an ethic of belonging, not through imposed classroom duties but through a natural encounter with a population of disparate bodies. I saw children looking for ways to join with others in all the many layers and levels of being human.

At a table in Room 13 West Rise, young children create delicate structures by joining white

paper straws; one boy announces he will make a hotel. He continues, “Someday I will be a manager of a hotel.” Everyone’s building continues as another small boy wraps a handful of straws in a rubber band and struggles to attach this bundle to a pencil. By twisting the pencil also tucked under the rubber band, the rubber band tightens and the straws take on the look of an airplane propeller. Meanwhile, the hotel owner is cutting bits of fur fabric and placing it on the floor of his hotel. He asks the children next to him, “Now I need some blood.” There are all sorts of suggestions. A child scribbles red next to the deathbed and another wraps a frayed red ribbon around the scrap of fur. The children exchange theories about who or what is dead and why.

The boy with the propeller tries to keep the straws tightened by stabbing the pencil tip into an eraser. Bignall (2010) writes that in an encounter we do not search for our identical other but for compatible bits found in a bricolage of other lives. This immanent desire to seek the parts of “how are we alike” with another is as good as it gets. Pointing to the table of straw projects, “We’re doing kind of good stuff here,” a boy tells me. From this experience I see the being with others can “satisfy any kind of longing” (Spinoza in Nadler, 2006, p. 209).

In the context of the studio, I paid close attention to the everyday, curious about the frequency and nature of ethical decisions. I saw children collaborating and respecting one another’s different work; I heard children constructing common theories, seeing possibility and finding new ways of defining self. I experienced two schools known to be sites of troubled, at-risk children. I interviewed the West Rise head teacher on my first day and learned about the hardships of these children and their kindness to one another. The school population struggles with poverty and uncertainty. The head teacher had experienced great generosity from these families when his wife died. The entire school attended the funeral and families continued to offer their time, food and thoughts. Reminiscent of James Taylor, (see album *Sweet Baby James*), this untraditional head teacher, now a single parent of two young children embodied human understanding.

The following day a jarring experience occurred. Waiting at a city bus stop and announcing my destination, two parents from more prosperous schools urged me to change plans saying, “You want to see fine schools, not West Rise.”

In Bristol, I stayed at the home of the Hareclive School Room 13 artists-in-residence Shani and Paul and learned that Hareclive had one of the largest at risk populations in England. In Eastbourne, I stayed at two B& B’s on the coast. I traveled to West Rise daily using the city bus line. I looked at interactions in art making and how children orchestrated the collective ownership of Room 13. After reading Badiou (2001) Deleuze & Guattari (1987), O’Sullivan (2006, 2008, 2010), and Spinoza (Spinoza as cited in Nadler, 2006 & Bignall, 2010) I

imagined finding encounters or events in art making that might break routines and thrust the child into new ways of thinking (Sullivan, 2008). I did not expect to find the imagination, sympathy and self-discipline that was common when children set aside self-interest for the good of something else.

In both West Rise and Hareclive schools, Room 13 was very popular among children and their teachers. The studio environment was shaped by the children who used the walls to express their opinions.

We get freedom and fun out of Room 13.

We get artists aspecial fun in Room 13.

I thing of Room 13 is the best place for freedom and a fun place to draw.

It's a place to have fun and inyor every second.

At West Rise an eleven year old blurted outright, “When you're in Room 13 it's quite nice because you can meet different people while you're making art.” The studio artists encouraged the children to voice their opinions, which were both didactic and philosophical. “Don't pour paint down the sink!” or “At what age can you be an artist?” The studios felt like a child's clubhouse—a do it yourself place. While the adult artists valued the children's opinions, the quality and volume of children's studio work was the real measure of Room 13 success. Classroom teachers both at Hareclive and West Rise sang praises for Room 13 and found the children most often attended Room 13 were more successful in their schoolwork.

There were scores of long-term friendships at both sites. Most of the friendships began in Reception, or kindergarten, and lasted for years. Many children arrived with arms linked or moments after entering scanned the room for the one or two best friends. Interaction was intimate through bodies connecting and feelings shared. For example, two girls built a purse and worked in close proximity. They really knew each other. “I remember when you were in Reception and you had that pink coat. Why did you like that coat so much?” Past stories were told and bodies touched often. I observed this deep knowing of the other which suggested the children's desire for a committed and a stable friend.

Eagleton (2009) wrote, “on the grounds of a shared trauma a free equal and fulfilling encounter becomes possible” (p. 238). Children talked freely in Room 13. A group of girls ages 6-9 decided to make greeting cards—three girls worked on a large card for a sick friend then another began making a card for a sick teacher and a fifth girl for the deaths of her twin siblings who died as babies. As children worked on their cards, they commented about their art making decisions, “I'm putting a lot of roses on the front of this card.” They also talked about the recipient of the card. And they told stories that included fathers leaving, the

reconfiguration of “brothers and sisters,” lack of money at home, risky outdoor play, moving, deaths of close family members, and siblings with drug abuse.

There were questions they asked each other. Soon a few boys joined the activity and began drawing cars with stubby pencils. One girl asked a boy about his father in prison which the boy denied and said, “No that was my uncle. My brother was in prison.” Nearly all of the children struggled with emotional difficulties. Many children referred to reckless behavior and truancy. “I like to run out in front of a bus and see if it will stop in time,” said one boy. The children narrated their lives with surprisingly little drama. Management decisions fell to an annually elected team of children between the ages of 7-11 years old who took their individual responsibilities seriously and cherished the studios. Management maintained all aspects of the art studio from buying supplies, to overseeing relations with the school administration, and to grappling with ethical issues. For example, Room 13 Hareclive runs a school supply store with profits funding local bus trips, art supplies, and excursions beyond Bristol. When Shani, one of the adult studio artists suggested that prices were quite low, the management team stuck to their original fees, adamant about not exploiting friends.

Both teams used weekly meetings to plan fundraising, “Can we afford to buy iced lollies to sell at Sports Day? We can buy ten for a pound.” Management team meetings offered snacks and drinks, like biscuits and squash, as well as making group decisions. A topic hotly discussed was “Should we accept the 5,000 pound donation from the local Comedy Club?” If yes, the Comedy Club would have the right to make a documentary about their gift to Room 13. The children, hesitated to agree, concerned that their poverty would become the main point of the story, or that children in Room 13 lived “without a chance.” Others fretted that without control of the filming, Room 13 might appear messy, or that someone may come off as rude.

Management team elections were serious business. At a spring team meeting, the eleven-year-old managing director reminded the officers, “Do not vote for someone just because they are your friend.” And yet, the election to a highly prized management role went to a thin, shy boy who was new to the school. “He needs friends and being on the management team will help him get to know people,” explained the children. When the ten year-old treasurer was caught stealing from the money box, the management team met with the boy and said, “You cannot be treasurer anymore but we still want you to come to Room 13 as often as you can.” Hand printed dictums like, “If you come into Room 13 can you keep the rules?” played a backseat to a patience for the precariousness of each other’s situated lives.

### ***Hareclive***

By 9 a.m. Shani, Paul and I have arrived to Hareclive Primary School in Hartcliffe, an outlying area of Bristol, England. Though Bristol is the second wealthiest city in England the majority of Hartcliffe families are large and very poor. Parents have not graduated from secondary schools, are single and either unemployed or hold minimum wage jobs. Hartcliffe has the highest percentage of poor and unemployed in Bristol. As in most UK schools, entering the building involves a parrying with buzzers, signing in and wearing an ID badge. Inside, I meet the office staff, sign in, follow Shani and Paul down corridors and then outside the building across a small-enclosed patch of blacktop where a glass door of a small trapezoidal building needs its electronic lock swiped before we can enter Room 13 Hareclive.

The first order of business is to drag the two Mac computers from locked closets. A fifteen-year-old Mac desktop and newer printer are locked in a small storage room within Room 13. The second computer, recently purchased, is kept in a secure cabinet in the teachers' storeroom back inside the main school building. This need for security seems extreme. Yet, last year the school was vandalized. Every school window was smashed except the glass panels of Room 13. Theft and vandalism were persistent issues at this school. The likely occurrence of theft and vandalism was assumed. Today, when I drop two new iridescent orange erasers stamped Tate Gallery into the cup of studio "rubbers," or erasers, Paul tells me they will be stolen instantly.

The children arrive wearing uniforms made from a synthetic material that is dreary and cheap. One boy wears a stocking cap emblazoned with 52 Tozzland, of which I never learned the reference. Some children wear winter coats over their uniforms. Children begin unpacking and arranging boxes of school supplies onto a folding table. "We are setting up to sell supplies for Room 13," the managing director tells me, "Paul shops at stores and buys pencils and toys for us to sell." Prices are written on small cards. Coins from the moneybox are stacked in amounts equal to a pound. The money is slowly counted and re-counted. I am told, "The rubber racecars are very popular." I notice a hand lettered sign taped to the table.

Please Do Not Break These Rules:

Line up in two lines

Do not line up if you haven't got any money to buy anything Respect shopkeepers

Check your change

If these rules are broken, go to the back of the line

Two seven-year-old girls stand side by side each with a tube of wet glue. Together the girls squeeze strands onto the flattened perimeter of a polyurethane window, "We have been best friends since Reception but our moms don't know each other," says one. "I like Charlie

because she helps me think of ideas,” says the other. The molded plastic cup that once encased a piece of merchandise onto a cardboard backing is now glued flush onto a painting. All surfaces are soaked with bright tempera. A piece of yarn knotted to a handmade envelope is attached to the corner of the painting and contains a pair of scissors and a pencil. The girls’ hands and coat sleeves are spotted with paint. The girls explain how the supplies in the envelope can be used with the pencils that they glued inside the plastic cup before they covered it all in paint. I began to ask how anyone could use pencils glued under painted polypropylene, when a first year boy crawls under a table retrieving a plastic facemask built of masking tape, molded packaging and cardboard tubes. Holding the soda bottle goggles up to his face he asks, “How do you like my camera?” I see two small eyeballs peering out through plastic peepholes. The next day pre-teen managing director, Lauren will tell me about this six year old, “Mike, you know who made the plastic camera, always inspires me. I like having him around when I paint.”

This morning I sit at a round table and begin a drawing. Three children join me. I teach them how to fold their paper into fourths, and direct them to draw a head(s) of any kind above the first fold, then pass their paper to the left for the next person to draw shoulders and arms (or wings, claws, flippers or...) below the second fold. We are drawing the exquisite corpse. The tabletop is layered with a dozen paper accordion monsters. The children are laughing, and more children have arrived. One of the drawers, a thin overwrought, anxious girl wearing a soiled pink coat pleads, “Can I have these drawings?” The girl leaves the room hugging a stack. An hour later, this same girl skips into Room 13 dangling a cupcake charm from her finger. “Look what I have! A cupcake charm!” she glows. I am too preoccupied washing paintbrushes to look up; I have invented a system to clean several brushes at once, and I am on a roll. I reply, “Oh, nice. Where did you get that charm? Was it a birthday present?” A pause and then, “ Yes, it was! Can we draw some more?” As we fold paper into fourths, three girls enter the studio arm in arm. The one crying had lost her cupcake charm. After a bit, they decide to search the playground further, and leave. I lean over and whisper, “Was that charm really yours?” A pause and then quick nod, “Oh, yes it was!” Two days later the girl did come forward and the charm was quietly returned to its rightful owner.

Four boys crowd around a table to draw a game they invent and play everyday. It’s called Trayark. One boy says, “This game is educational because you start off with a million pounds, but basically you have to keep your people going back for snacks, and you have to keep track of what you have left. The character names are Wonder Waffle, Thunder Gun, Ray Gun, and Wonder Wolf. You can be shot with a Freeze gun, and you turn into a zombie.

There’s also something called a Rape train – basically zombies are chasing you in a circle while you are carrying a thunder gun. You kill them using nova gas.” Together the boys have

made a large drawing of a battle of robots. To play, a boy places his pencil on an armed robot, closes his eyes and draws an arched line across the page, randomly stops the pencil and opens his eyes. If the pencil has stopped on another's robot, it's assumed destroyed. The boys simulate gunfire, "key-rrackkeyrrack" and police sirens.

I hear about a seven year old girl who asks her mother, a prostitute, to please stay home that night, "I get afraid when I see mice eyes in the dark."

Emily and Morgan are converting a cardboard box into a house. They use lots of paint. I ask about their friendship. "We help each other," says Emily as she uses her hand to smear a pool of red paint along the side of the box. "Like when Morgan's dad left, she was so upset. But I was there for her, and now she's all right, aren't you Morgan?" Morgan nods. "You get to see your dad sometimes, don't you?" Morgan nods again.

Emily continues, squeezing yellow paint into a plastic cup, using her forearm to push her long blonde hair back from her face. "Did you hear on the news about that two-year old who fell out of a car and died?" Emily told me the child was her cousin Levi. Her grandmother had insisted on taking him in her car while Emily's aunt, Levi's mother, picked up his older brother at school. While the grandmother's car was moving, Levi climbed out of the car seat and opened the unlocked door. Emily shrugs, "Levi was alive when his mother left and ten minutes later he was dead," and spoke as if repeating what she had heard at home.

### ***West Rise***

Like Hareclive, West Rise is populated with children of the unemployed or low wage earners. A large percentage are single parents. I was stunned to learn that the boy who built a tabletop paper straw hotel recently arrived from Bangladesh. This seemed like a huge distance to move. Children found this exotic. As the children clustered around the drawing table, they spoke of their lives. There was little reaction when a ten-year old girl explained, "I worry that I am sick a lot, and then my mom can't go to work. I think we will run out of money. And my sister, she eats all of our food! My dad left and lives in Chicago and works on airplanes," or when a child explained, "I will never be able to go to the movies. Neither of my parents have jobs. But it is good my mom doesn't work because my little brother is very sick and my mom needs to stay home with him." This school felt like a place of extremes.

I wonder if the children feel marginalized from the more affluent mainstream. The children at West Rise wear uniforms that easily tear, are sheer, pucker and seem both too binding and too floppy. No one seemed to fit in their clothes. Shoes look too worn out for the age of the wearer and suggest hand me downs. I see sleeve cuffs that are chewed.

The children did not seem self-conscious about their appearance, but, were very aware about

popular culture, a frequent conversation on the playground. One girl spoke as a social critic complaining of a television program, “Oh she’s a yummy mummy,” or what West Rise children called middle class and affluent parents who give their children fancy extra curricular activities. “Have you seen the Simpsons?” “Why ask her that? She’s from America like the Simpsons.” “My brothers and I were on Supernanny!” says one. I ask if the Nanny came to his house? “Yes, yes,” the boy assures me. I am impressed that this boy has been on British television. I ask him more questions about his parents’ reactions to the Nanny’s complaints. Another whispers, “He was not on Supernanny. Not really. He always makes things up.”

In Room 13, children turned ideas into sculptures, inventions and sentimental prose. I heard quick high voices giving ideas to another, ready to share a project and I was reminded of Deleuze and Guattari’s term, “ethicoaesthetics,” or in a room of possibilities an artist deliberately sorts together engaging art encounters (O’Sullivan, 2006, p. 42). The ethical seemed to come from two people each with their own feelings and energy, who had the time and the room to listen to each other. Children actively co-constructed theories about art making turning tabletops into sites for Styrofoam ice villages. The children made predictions. “Glue only holds something if you can wait awhile.” “Two people can never make the exact same thing.” Sharing cans of markers, two friends wrote ballads, or story songs to teachers and greetings to mothers. I observed rich relationships of great faithfulness. Conceived casually, unsystematically, indirectly, and in partnerships, shared ideas were the driving forces in the room. In these collaborations, I saw self-interest set aside to assure others will stay and play.

Two girls eating ham sandwiches rub their fingers with their free hands on a palette of raised dried pools of acrylic paint, pinch the yellow nipple of one, then like nude skaters on a pond their fingers make tiny spirals across the surface. Another pair of girls draws curlicues on a 10” X 15” red orange painting; one uses a black sharpie and the other with a turquoise pencil explains, “I’m drawing my shapes out first. Then, I will go over them with a sharpie, (pointing to the marks on the other’s side of the canvas) that’s her bit and that’s my bit. She’s got loads of patterns and words on her side. We started this last week and did a sunset canvas before.” A third pair paint like pointillists wordlessly agreeing on their identical dots and tell me, “ We just do this. We don’t know who did what.” A nine-year-old stands at a 26-inch Mac screen, scrolling through innumerable saved QuickTime movies. “If it’s okay with all of us, we’re going to make one of those...I mean if anyone could help.”

### ***Art as a Means to Share Lives***

“Give me your cold seas, I will warm them in mine.” Giorgio de Chirico.

Why is art such a pearl for this oyster? Greene (1995) finds art practice to be a plunge into the unexpected that allows for the breaking of habits to promote imaginative solutions. If art has this potential for rustling us out of ourselves, we will find lives with deeper possibilities. Art is not used to grasp the meaning of our experiences, but to immerse into the “what if.” Zepke (2005) finds art through Spinoza’s Ethics—a freeing from serving as of photo documentation to soar as “expressive existence” (p. 75). Imitation of reality is not the point of art making. Langer (1953) explains that art is more than an assortment or arrangement of things but “is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling”(p. 40). The purpose of artistic expression is not to communicate the artists opinions with another. In art making children explore raw materials, sentiment and truth to show another what feeling looks like. Badiou (1999) believes art disrupts static truth and is a place where “something might happen” (p. 84).

Children are often underestimated in their ability to take initiative for their own learning. Shaped by public reaction, the lives of the poor are seen as self-determined borne as a natural consequence from past decisions that were self-indulgent or reckless. This population is rarely thought to have feasible, innovative solutions for their own survival. Low-income children who have been categorized as poor are seen as having little promise. Difference is always seen as a lack. In such classrooms, socio-ethical duties are posted on classroom bulletin boards that point to blame, judgment, obligation, and duty. Common rules have been displayed on classroom walls for years. Relationships among children and teens are circumspect and policed. The belief that teachers must be ethical watchdogs, on alert for miscreants is an “impoverished view of ethics” (Eagleton, 2009, p. 309).

Despite the erratic home lives, children in Room 13 actively set up joyful encounters. The child centered pedagogy of Room 13 supports an active self-initiated art making that celebrated and embraced excess. The work of the children was large, colorful, active, and abundant. For example, three ten-year-old girls invented a four-step method to make 18-inch plus lips out of paper mache. When dry, the 3D lips were painted and glossed shiny. By the end of the week, a half dozen mouths were drying on tabletops. Different from classroom art, which is teacher directed and often limited to traditional materials like construction paper, markers, glue, and rulers, the art making in Room 13 surpassed the predictable. With time to be affected and to affect others, children constructed art sequences or multiple variations to transform the sensual pleasure of art into theories. Theories, or flexible tested ideas, about the property of materials or the ontology of the nature of art was lively and action oriented. Truths would stand the test of time or not, depending on what happened later. In the flurry of

repeated trials that were meticulous and discriminating, singular desires somehow melded into another's. Early lips were wrapped in Saran Wrap to hold their shape. This material really kept the lips tight but prevented the paper mache from drying. Lips under Saran Wrap could have mold issues. And since the lips took so long to dry, they ran the risk of being knocked off the table or collapsing into wet chunks when gently moved. Then, someone found that adding glue to the paper mache mixture negated the need for Saran Wrap. The lip artists protected each other's work, always knowing which artists made which lips, where they were drying and mindful of any construction issues. In Room 13, children were allowed to be able to do what they do, for the pleasure of doing, without goals or purpose. When children are allowed to make their decisions, they build a landscape that fosters intimacy and care for one another.

In Room 13, relationships were consensual and flexible without envy or jealousy. The children rarely apologized to each other; perhaps an apology implied a pecking order. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write about art in terms of de-territorializing or a break in habit. Art making is expansive and in this swelling it will overlap with other disciplines. Art then is not seen as a material like, oil painting, printmaking, sculpture, but as a means to make sense of the world. In Room 13, art making includes the appropriation of others' and deterritorialized, reinterpreted and re-used to answer individuals' questions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Children respect others' curiosities and expansion of materials. There were tender invitations to "draw with me." The children seemed to know, "We may not understand all about these people, but we're instinctively connected to them..." (Malle as cited in Bewes, 2010, p. 167). Art allowed children to know the differences from one another, which in turn created intimacy and a fierce desire to be ethical. I observed the joy of art making while listening to others' stories. The collaboration with another, pooling experiences, playing with possibility, lead to self-understanding or "why we act the way we do" (O'Sullivan, 2008, p. 93). This self-knowing was grounded in a room of possibilities where young artists assembled engaging art encounters (Deleuze & Guattari in O'Sullivan, 2006).

### ***It's All Of This***

A chubby boy with a buzz haircut and a loud voice dragged a chair out of Room 13 into a small courtyard. He lifted the chair onto a 21/2-foot cement cornice, climbed up, and began drawing. In minutes, a scruffy thin boy came out and sat at his feet. Bending down from his throne the hefty King yelled at the thin boy to fetch supplies and to find answers to certain questions. In turn, the King told poop jokes and drew pictures of bare rumps to the delight of the servant who was in stitches and completely enchanted with the King.

Room 13 is a place of pleasure where the child's perverse desires, unmediated by adults, might be grotesque, bawdy, and rude. There is something scary for adults in this crude horseplay; they are fearful of this freedom and try to control relationships among children to allow only "good" play. Children are given few opportunities to have transgressive pleasure. Room 13 allows the time and space for children to represent their desires, to expose their fears and to share joy with another.

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### **About the Author**

Vicky Grube is an associate professor in art education at Appalachian State University in North Carolina. As a studio artist, Grube has won two NEA's and has published three graphic narratives: *The True Story of a Hard Worker- the life of Fanny Lou Hamer*, *My Father Began Disappearing*, and *Tilted and Still Moving*. Grube researches and publishes the authentic art making of children using qualitative methodologies and has traveled to the UK on many occasions to experience the alternative art programs for children called Room 13. Grube began a Room 13 in Boone, NC in 2011. It is still going strong.

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