23. The Arts Classroom

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Introduction

The school is a modernist building on the edge of a former country estate, some fifteen minutes walking from the town center. Its grounds are separated from the street by four-foot-high hedges. It is exam time, the premises are quiet, and pupils walk the corridors talking only in suppressed whispers. Turning left from the entrance, my guide leads me to a semi-detached wing of the building that houses the visual arts and gymnastics classrooms. This annex used to be a swimming pool, its dark-brown tiled staircases and corridors reminding me of a long-forgotten past. We have taken a dead-end turn: pupils only come here with a specific purpose, there is none of the regular traffic in these corridors, no pupils looking at their phones seated on benches. A series of doors—locked and without any sign of a function; are they former dressing rooms? Showers?—have been spray-painted with Super Mario in a run, jumping from one door to the next (fig. 1).

The smell of school paint, that distinct odor that is not quite acrylic, mixed with the scent of sawdust washes toward me even before I enter the classroom. At first, all I see are artworks: statues, paintings, a desk chair with a seat consisting of large spikes, their aggressive feel compensated by two angel wings protruding from the back. The chair stands next to a mobile whiteboard that seems beyond cleaning after years of student graffiti. The walls and the doors of cupboards have received a similar treatment with a mixture of figures, abstract lines, obscenities, and political messages. The result is a messy whole of shapes and colors that are simultaneously ugly and intriguing. It invites one to look for details, make connections, take up a bucket, and clean up the mess. A rumble from above gives the feeling that the room is alive. The gym, one floor up, creates a permanent soundscape of a-rhythmic pounding.

The classroom is a maze. My walking becomes a staggering movement, trying not to step on anything. The profusion of colors and materials draws my eyes everywhere at once, further slowing my pace. Is that a…? Is that thing hanging upside down? Surfaces challenge me to decipher their writing; faceless statues stare at me, questioning, thought-provoking, maybe welcoming. Carefully navigating the meandering paths through the classroom, I am forced to focus on every detail of shape,

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color, texture, and smell. All objects are unique, even the tools, each broken or bent in their own way. In a state of decomposition, artworks tell a story of their afterlife, their makers having left the school long ago.

Post-Qualitative Inquiry

This chapter takes an approach that has recently emerged in the humanities and social sciences: Post-Qualitative Inquiry (PQI). The relation between PQI and other qualitative research (I will explain the use of the term inquiry below) is slightly problematic. While taking a turn from traditional approaches, many seek to remain within the broad domain of the social sciences. David Roussel, who has tried to carve out a niche within PQI that he calls "immersive cartography," writes that "Perhaps it is immersive cartography's continued attention to the wildness of data, to its mutant proliferation through lively experimentation, that maintains its most overt connection with what might be termed a "social science" (80).

PQI tries to break away from traditional western notions of science and research. Elizabeth St. Pierre, one of the most outspoken advocates of PQI, stresses that earlier qualitative research has never been able to break out of the confines of positivist, quantitative norms and values. For St. Pierre, PQI needs to rid qualitative research of this burden (Lather and St. Pierre; St. Pierre, "Post Qualitative Inquiry"). The PQI perspective is ecological in the sense that Ingold ("Materials") uses the term to foreground the processual and interactive aspect of engaging with the world and materiality. Le Grange calls this the "(re)turn to realism(s):" "a return to critical realism; a turn to speculative realism and matter-realism (new materialism) because existing philosophies (phenomenology, critical theory and poststructuralism) are no longer adequate for responding to current challenges" (4).

PQI scholars prefer the term inquiry to method(ology), to stress the unfolding of research while it is taking place. Research is performative (Le Grange 8), and method is refused (St. Pierre, "Post Qualitative Inquiry") in order to overcome the "language/material binary" (St. Pierre, "The Posts" 650). This line of thought is akin to many elements of philosophies of the South (Ubuntu) and East (Taoism, 道家). By recognizing this connection and provincializing Western thought, Wu et al. argue, we can become aware of the value of the paradoxical thinking of Taoism and the need to see all aspects of research (writing, thinking, observing, and philosophizing) as one. The same is true for Ubuntu, which has been described as "philosopraxis" (Wu et al. 516) and a "generous ontology" (Forster), namely one that allows for both objective and subjective, individual and collective perspectives.

Thus, I have let myself be guided by the materials in the arts classroom, letting the structure of the research follow the connections that unfolded before me, listen-

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ing to what it told me through its texture, smell, and color. It is an open and, for me, a first exploration in "un/doing" research (Wu et al. 515).

The Arts Classroom

The classroom is square-shaped, with slit-like windows high up the walls. What happens here stays here, it seems to say. For the pupils, the room is a free zone where school rules do not apply. Amid their own graffiti (and that of their predecessors), they sit listening to a radio at high volume. They do their schoolwork, but also walk in and out as they please. The three adjacent arts classrooms invite similar un-school-like behavior: the materials a pupil might be looking for could be anywhere in this outburst of raw materials and artworks (fig. 2). They might want to store their unfinished project on one of the stuffed shelves in a forgotten corner or in the storeroom that is officially forbidden to them, but which is never locked and thus claimed as their territory.

The footloose behavior is the result of the studio atmosphere in the rooms. This is further reinforced by the fact that one of the teachers uses his classroom as his own studio, not just after hours but during classes. The statue he is currently working on has a prominent place in front of the classroom. It is impossible to work according to plan, not least as any kind of material one might want to work with will be hard to find. Even if it can be found, it will be oddly shaped, bent, or part of another piece. While searching for one thing, a pupil will find another. Thus, the stuff in the classroom dictates what is being made and what it can be made with. Who, then, is the artist? It is the materials just as much as the pupils or the teacher; that much is clear.

However, this free state on the fringes of the school is under constant threat from the system. Cleaning staff must regularly be denied entrance, lest they remove stuff and bring order. Sometimes, however, the pressure becomes too strong. Just before my visit, the exam pieces were on display, to be judged by external examiners. One of the three art classrooms had to be brought into a presentable state for this; an annual ritual wherein the art teachers grudgingly allow normalcy into their domain. Now, only a few days later, the works are still standing on the tables, but kipple has already started to take over. The exam objects have become gatherings of materials as they evolve or disintegrate into new objects. Some works have toppled, cards with captions are lying on the floor, and tools and materials are returning to the tables. Pretty soon, some of the artworks will have merged with other objects to engage in new assemblages.

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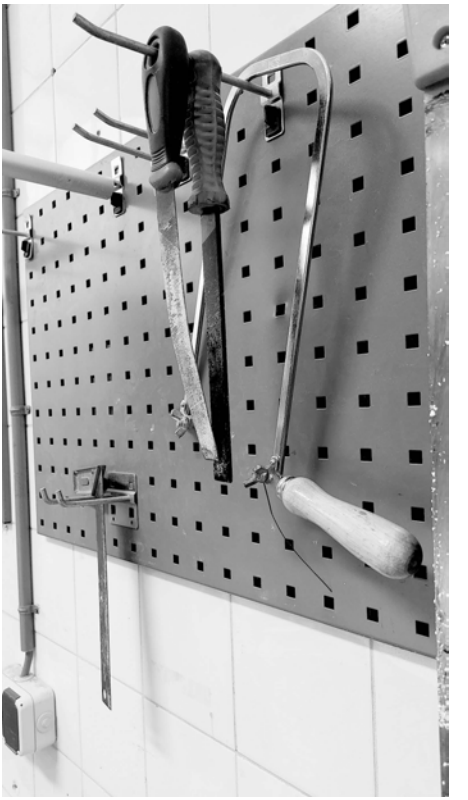

Fig. 2: Bent and incomplete tools in arts classroom of school 1. Photograph by the author.

Another school, on a sunny day, located right outside the city, next to a regional highway along which cars and trucks roll night and day, creating a monotonous buzz. After passing through the gate, a brick wall blocks the traffic noise, and I enter arcadia: trees, fields, ponds, and birds—lots of birds. The school building is only a decade old and thus still recognizable as a school. It breathes peace and quiet. The entrance curves into the building, luring me inside. As I step in, I notice a large poster on my left spelling the rules of proper behavior with the school's name as an acronym. I walk into a spacious hall with an open stairway that allows a view outside through the glass wall beyond, showing lush green nature. To the right, an open space invites me to sit, whereupon the janitor welcomes me and, after hearing of my quest, guides me to the arts classroom. From the corridor, nothing distinguishes it

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from the other classrooms: the same wooden door, the same side window with the same translucent lilac strip showing the room number.

Fig. 3: Storeroom in school 2. Photograph by the author.

I enter an open, orderly room smelling of linoleum and soap. Two walls have windows from floor to ceiling, again revealing the nature outside. The natural light shines on rows of white tables still being cleaned by the pupils who have just finished the final class of the day. Others are washing their materials in one of the sinks. Cleansed materials are then put in their proper places. Linocuts sit in the drying racks, paint with the paint, paper with the paper, and spoons with the spoons. One of the spoons was bent double as a prank by one of the classmates and is immediately restored to its proper form. As I tour the room, I pass cupboards and drawers

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labeled with their contents. The storeroom is open, with a yellow sign "entry to the storeroom for teachers only" on the steel sliding door (fig. 3). No pupils enter. Above my head, an electrical conduit circles the room, with fold-out arms with sockets. The gutter itself is used as a display for a row of artworks.

Everything in the classroom seems to have been arranged by its material properties—glass, paint, paper, wood, and metal. Pots are kept on shelves by size, and tools hang neatly on a board, ordered by shape and size. I only touch cupboard doors and tables for fear of disturbing something so deliberately arranged. However, the neatness of the classroom does not make it sterile. There is a pot of tea with paper cups on one of the tables for the pupils that took the class this late in the day. The artworks all have a happy, colorful character. The linocuts are all inspired by a poem, most of them of a flower. In the far corner of the classroom, a series of painted portraits stand in a row. They are all the same size: canvas on a wooden frame, with remarkably similar portraits in school paint and bright colors. Friendly faces, each of them.

Coda

Faceless statues in creative chaos. Friendly, familiar faces in a neat and orderly classroom. One can feel a correlation, but is there causality? Do the things in the classroom influence the pupils' work, or is it a result of the pedagogy? My feeling is that it is dialogical, at the very least. A conversation between the wood, the paint, the paper, the tools, the teacher, the pupils, and the curriculum. Embodying different relations to materials, the two classrooms teach different ways of engaging with materials, allowing them to be alive or seeking to contain or constrain them. Illustrating Ingold's distinction between art made in correspondence with the materials and the hylomorphic imposition of form onto matter (Ingold, "Toward an Ecology" 435), the two classrooms ultimately demonstrate that the materials' use and re-use in the art classroom is not a form of recycling; instead, it is a part of life.

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