

“It smells of wildness, trouble, a good fight”.

On experimental art and artistic education in the 1960s.

Who is offside today?

In the art world of the 1960s, a work of art could be a process, a social event, or be composed of sound. And even if it was an object, it was not necessarily an aesthetically pleasing one. It could consist of assembled scrap, be a toilet made out of soft plastic, or a poster. The anarchic tradition of Modernism from the early avant-garde was the starting point for many of these artists, but for others it was also the target. The demand for departure from all known parameters was for them uncompromising, and it was important to, as Allan Kaprow put it in the March issue of *Art News* in 1966, supervise oneself. The risk of having a relapse and fall into the artistic tradition was just as great for an artist as it was for an old heroin addict. The truly experimental artist's departure was brutal, wild and smelled of trouble. Kaprow could find few examples of such art in the contemporary scene.

In Sweden, Folke Edwards reported on Kaprow's article in the periodical *Paletten*, no. 2 1966. Edwards agreed with Kaprow's diagnosis: the contemporary radicalism was to a great extent “a radicalism for shows, adjusted to the conventions of the modern tradition” and Edwards forwarded Kaprow's request for a genuinely experimental art to the readers in the Swedish art life: “Who is offside today?” Edwards asked.

It was a fact that the Swedish art life had experienced the contemporary turbulence already in the beginning of the '60s, but a quick browse through these years' issues of *Paletten* and *Konstrevyn* is enough to establish that the art concept in its conventional form had its defenders. Rabbe Enckell's speech at the festival day of the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in May 1962, which ignited the so-called great art debate, was merely one of many examples of the conservative resistance. Pop art and happenings were not the only things to provoke, however, but also the far more modest renegotiations of the concept of art that, e.g. found objects, action painting and assemblage represented. A common basis for concern was the contemporary art's lack of interest for giving the work visual *form*. In articles in the periodical *Paletten* in 1962, one could see how that which was found, random and informal was considered disquieting, the application of paint without purpose, and the absence of calibrated form made the connection to creative intention far too abstract.

Much of the contemporary art was far more radical, however. Öyvind Fahlström and Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd were some of the artists who more aggressively pushed the boundaries of art. In 1963, Reuterswärd auctioned a pike in a happening similar to a language game entitled “Diktuppläsning”, and in 1966, at the Venice Biennale, Fahlström exhibited the piece “Dr. Schweizer's Last Mission”, which with its fragmented form challenged the concept of painting. This “open” and experimental art (that Edwards hence did not find innovative enough) came to be well integrated in the art life during the '60s and worked within an institutional framework comprising several active galleries and periodicals with the Museum of Modern Art at the centre.

Too much of the old routine

This profound renegotiation of the concept of art and work challenged the methods of artistic education. What place could the study of anatomy and models be given in an education that observed the new tendencies? On what foundation could the relation between teacher and student be built, if the student did not want to work with model studies and form/colour? Herbert Read wrote in the book *A Letter to a Young Painter* in 1963:

Tradition, which always had some obvious relevance to the *craft* of an art like painting, was abandoned /.../: the modern artist has nothing to learn: he ‘envelops’ his psyche in any material that comes to hand - rubbish, waste-paper, plaster, metal sheets or wires – anything will serve his purposes.¹

Working methods and materials that, for a long time, had been considered to be natural elements of the artistic education were now perceived by many people as being irrelevant. But what alternative education was going to replace it? And what education could there be for those students wanting to work with found objects, happenings and chance as their lodestar?

The challenge was felt by art programmes internationally. This is clear from a letter, written in October 1962 from the UNESCO organisation Association Internationale des Arts Plastiques (AIAP), addressed to art schools world wide. In Sweden it was handled by Lennart Rodhe, professor at the Royal College of Fine Arts in Stockholm. The letter was prompted by the wish to conduct “a critical enquiry of the teaching methods of fine art education in different countries”, and the investigation was motivated by a debate beginning to flourish in art schools around the world. The “traditional art school education” had come to face increasing criticism, and at AIAP they were in agreement that there was still “too much of the old routine”. However, they also felt that there had developed “a tendency towards modern ‘tricks’ or shortcuts” which had led to the circumvention of “absolutely necessary education”, and that many young artists had “gone astray”. Thus it was time to evaluate and reassess the foundation of the fine art education.

At the Royal College of Fine Arts in Stockholm, some of Sweden’s most established painters and sculptors were working as professors, including in addition to Rodhe, Evert Lundqvist and Arne Jones. They all ran model studios, and the students were studying anatomy and perspective drawing throughout the decade. By the early ‘60s, however, many people had started to question this order. When the letter containing the enquiry reached Lennart Rodhe in October 1962, the debate was running high within the Royal College of Fine Arts. At the meeting of the teachers’ council in November 1962, it was announced that an upcoming general debate would be held, since there had been recurring complaints and criticism throughout the past year from students and teachers alike. The discontent was manifested by a heterogeneous multitude of voices, interested in different changes, but where there was still a uniform basis for the criticism: the situation in the contemporary arts demanded a change of the education at the school.

Renewal?

The criticism resulted in the students getting more freedom within the school to choose their teachers, and the number of workshops was increased and new techniques introduced (e.g. plastic and film). A professorship in Art Theory and History of Ideas was instituted, and the critic Ulf Linde, who attracted a lot of attention at the time, received the position. His teaching quickly became very popular as it was directly connected with the current themes of the time. Traditional subjects such as anatomy and perspective drawing were kept, however, even though titles and content were updated.

It is also notable that the number of modelling hours decreased throughout the decade, even though the model studies were maintained. The studies changed, however, as the students started to work more and more with their own works in the collective studio. The studio

¹ Herbert Read *A Letter to a Young Painter* Horizon Press New York 1962, s. 266-267.

practice thus remained as the foundation of the studies, but studying the model was no longer a common point of reference for many students. What many of them worked on, either individually or in groups, was first and foremost their own works.

The ambition to update the education can also be seen in the recruitment to the artistic professorships at the Royal College of Fine Arts. When Torsten Andersson left his chair as a result of the previously mentioned conflicts at the school, Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd was appointed as a professor in 1965. Öyvind Fahlström was, interestingly enough, also a name mentioned in the discussions preceding the advertisement of the position. Per Olov Ultvedt assumed his position as a professor in 1968. There were also individuals among the students who, already during their time at the college, presented works with immediate connection to the front lines of art. The newspaper *Stockholmstidningen* reported that the student exhibition of 1964 contained “pop art”, and one could read in *Dagens Nyheter* that John E Franzén exhibited his home-built motorcycle at the student exhibition of 1966. At the opening of the student exhibition of 1968, Kjartan Slettermark, a student at the school, performed “a game of shapes” which was reproduced in a photo in the yearbook of the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Art.

Thus it was not strange that the importance of the tradition-bound and practice-based model studies was questioned as the foundation of the education in the 1960s. Öyvind Fahlström’s diagnosis of the contemporary art’s break with tradition in the periodical *Rondo* in 1961 is one of many testimonies of how radically the contemporary renegotiation of the art concept must be understood. That the traditional study of the human body lost its position as the core of the education in such a context was logical and necessary at any college with the ambition to be relevant in its time.

Education on a practical-aesthetic or theoretical-philosophical basis

This 1960s break and confrontation with the traditionally Modernist concept of art has in the North American context in the USA been linked to the ever expanding integration in the universities from the late 1940s until the middle of the ‘60s. In the book *Art Subject. Making Artists in the American University* (1999), Howard Singerman presented the idea that the linguistic and theoretical orientation of the university education, and expectations of the production of knowledge, came to destroy the preconditions for an art resting only in the visual, the practical and the tacit. The very nature of the university system tore the studio practice apart. The practice-based artistic creation’s need for continuity, concentration, and long stretches of uninterrupted time was literally chopped up into a system of courses, presentations and seminars. Art was divided into Theory and Practice, and language became the bearing tool and uniting link. The opportunity for the development of conceptual art and minimalism was a fact, and the foundation of the visual and the tacit was lost.

Kaprow’s 1966 article in *Art News* seems to confirm Singerman’s theory. For Kaprow, the experimental and truly innovative artist’s questions are philosophical, not aesthetical. The ability to step outside of all known parameters and ask the fundamental question about what art is and can be, was first and foremost an intellectual approach. Such experimental reflection could only be won through “methodological thought and operations”, and it was at the universities that this condition was met: “The university training which the majority of artists receive today gives them the reasons for doubting art, and the means for both destroying it and recreating it. Experimentation is a philosophical affair; but its outcome may be explosive”.

However, it is obvious that this problematisation of the concept of art was also felt in Europe and that it also there led to the undermining of practice-based study of models in collective studios. The de-visualisation and intellectualisation of the American contemporary art in the 1960s, in favour of an art based more and more on idea and process, cannot have been caused by its presence at the universities alone. On the other hand, there are good reasons to believe that it benefitted from these conditions. Singerman's idea is thus interesting in the sense that it illustrates how important the difference between the university-related and art academy-based artistic education was. In Sweden, the basic foundation of the education was undisturbed, despite all the renewal. In the decades following the '60s, the students were still being fostered in the traditional context that Kaprow criticised. The fact that certain individuals within the education programmes represented deviating perspectives did not change anything at heart. The schooling of the artist continued to be understood within the frame of studio practice. The theoretical component remained an addition, to take or leave, in what was essentially practical work. There was no systematic intellectual schooling that led anywhere else. A theoretical artistic education of the kind Kaprow described in 1966 took more than 30 years to introduce in Sweden. On the other hand, it was then quickly established. At the basic level of education, schools such as the Malmö Art Academy and the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design introduced fine art education programmes with integrated theory around 1995, at which time both Gothenburg and Lund University applied for starting fine art education PhD programmes. It was thus not until after the postmodern shift that there seemed to be reason for the artistic education in Sweden to fully respond to the challenge initiated by the renegotiation of the art concept in the 1960s.