

## **Placing Artistic Work in Perspective**

### **Artistic Research at Valand Around the Turn of the 1990s**

In *A Disarranged Playing Board. Art in Gothenburg During the 1980s and 1990s*. Eds. Kristoffer Arvidsson & Jeff Werner Gothenburg 2010

#### *A college of fine arts of its time*

Lively contact with the art world has become an increasingly important component of Swedish fine arts education over the past century. The origin is to be found in the late 19th century and the Opponents' rebellion against the Royal Academy of Fine Arts' education. The role of the Valand School of Fine Arts in this writing of history is well known and has become part of the school's self-image. What is perhaps less well known is that the 20th-century reforms at the Royal University College of Fine Arts also came to be characterized by this ideal. Colleges of fine arts changed thus from unworldly and independent institutions preserving seemingly immovable norms into institutions opening themselves increasingly to the art world. In the second half of the 20th century, in particular, they became increasingly sensitive to changes and renegotiations and more attentive to the pivotal art currently on the scene. Fixed-term posts, which ensured the opportunity for constant new recruitment of leading artists as teachers, were an important tool in this. (1)

These times of change in the art world thus left their mark on fine arts education after the first decades of the 20th century. This was also true of Valand in the 1980s. With the benefit of hindsight, the list of the decade's teachers and students is sufficient to sense the postmodern renegotiations of the time and the generational change involved. Several contributions in this issue of *Skiascope* show that the students carefully followed theoretical developments and created art that was theoretically oriented already early in the decade, art that tested new practices and media, and that questioned traditionally defined work concepts, genres, and values. The teaching staff, for their part did not oppose this, but neither did they address the students' concerns. The students found this passivity frustrating, but for those with resolve (and courage), this absence of engagement by the teaching staff provided freedom and a space for their own initiatives. The artistic generations were thus perplexed by each other, as elsewhere in the Swedish art world. When the school invited people to a debate in 1986, Olle Granath (b. 1940) complained about what he viewed as the poor quality of contemporary painting, which Ernst Billgren (b. 1957), then a student at the school, considered to be a sign of a necessary relaxation of ideas of right and wrong, good taste, and a normative quality concept. (2)

#### *A pioneering college of fine arts*

Towards the end of the decade, when the new art had consolidated its position to a greater extent, Valand also began to break new ground. A three-year graduate visual arts course was established on a trial basis for the first time in Sweden. What was

particularly interesting, in the light of the later history of artistic research at Swedish universities and colleges, was the clearly expressed intent of focusing on artistic work and artistic quality. The intention was not that participants should carry out research in an academic sense of the word. The course was to be individually tailored and based on the projects planned by the individual artists, with minimal outward formalities and maximal flexibility. The common elements that brought the participants together were theoretical seminars and discussions in each other's studios. At the end of the course, there was to be a presentation of works of art and a written report on the artistic process. The course was also regarded by participants as fertile context for those wanting 'to drive their issues further', 'to put their work in perspective', 'to have an opportunity for discussion and stimulation', and 'to make changes in their art'. It was a course that thus seemed to provide an opportunity to combine reflection and artistic work, which was difficult to achieve alone in the studio.(3)

### *The University of Gothenburg – a space of possibilities*

It was an explicit intention of the initiators that the art should not be 'turned into an academic discipline'. Neither did the university have any such expectations. Funds for artistic research had been established at Swedish colleges of fine arts in connection with the 1977 university reform. The University of Gothenburg was very positive about developing such forms of knowledge and competence development and this had management support; the head of administration, Lars Gurmund (1918–1999), formulated strong support for the autonomy of fine arts programmes and the need for specific educational forms at the graduate level as well. (4) Many of the artistically active, particularly in the field of music, also had an open, inquisitive, and fearless attitude toward encounters with academic methods and theories.(5) In the 1980s, the university thus showed strong confidence in the development potential of artistic research. This early institutional union of art and scholarship therefore created a space of possibilities for the course's inception, where individual talents and interests could be transformed into practices in an institutional framework and, most importantly, provided with financial resources.

The course was facilitated, in particular, by the common experience of and previous meetings between two individuals: the Valand principal, Birger Boman (b. 1926), and the senior lecturer in the theory of science at the University of Gothenburg, Göran Wallén (b. 1937). They had previously cooperated in graduate architectural education at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm and had been united by their commitment to combining, integrating, and understanding practice-based knowledge in an academic context. Boman's strong defence of Valand's artistic autonomy was also crucial. He was a truculent principal, who, during his time at the school, did not waver in asserting the school's distinctive character and special needs.(6)

### *An open environment for artistic reflection*

Anyone wanting to know more about the participants and teaching staff and the type of artistic projects carried out has few sources to consult. The archives contain only

fragments of the activities, and the participants' memories vary. (7) The course was established on a trial basis, and the content and focus changed from year to year. The printed catalogue, *Documentation of Artistic Development Work*. Valand School of Fine Arts 1993 (*Dokumentation av konstnärligt utvecklingsarbete*. Konsthögskolan Valand 1993), which describes some of the participants' projects, shows a heterogeneous group of artists: Pia Hedström (b. 1960), Stefan Uhlinder (b. 1953), Lars Göran Nilsson (b. 1954), Åsa Pröjts (b. 1959), Jörgen Svensson (b. 1958), Anders Nilsson (b. 1964), Irene Westholm (b. 1953), and Bengt Olof Johansson (b. 1959). Neither is there any clear common artistic denominator at first sight of the works in the catalogue. This is also consistent with memories shared about the course. Both the principal at the time, Birger Boman, and several of the participants emphasize that applicants to the course had neither similar temperaments nor ambitions, except that they saw an opportunity for developing further dimensions in their artistic work, opportunities not available in their everyday solitary work. (8) At the same time, the question is whether it was not this common starting point that united the group. There existed no common artistic attitude, uniform output, nor shared theoretical interest. Their activities instead bear witness to a common will for deeper reflection, confidence in discussion as a tool, and an exploratory drive to integrate reflective elements into a practical artistic process. Underlying this will can be sensed a readiness to confront artistic problems arising from the postmodern renegotiations of the 1980s, which also demanded a more reflective attitude. The post-modern cannot then be simply identified as a definite concept or model, but rather as an articulation of important issues, artistic problems, and discursive thresholds that the participants were to address.

### *Postmodern theory*

According to the list of participants in the first course in the autumn term of 1989, four students were accepted. The course had been advertised at the other colleges of art in Sweden, but those who were accepted all had links to Gothenburg. Ewa Brodin, Bengt Olof Johansson, and Peter Hagdahl (b. 1956) had all recently completed their studies at Valand, while Maria Lindberg (b. 1958) was registered at the Department of Art History at the University of Gothenburg. In 1990, they were joined by three former Valand students, Lars Göran Nilsson, Jörgen Svensson, and Stefan Uhlinder, as well as Anders Nilsson from the School of Photography.

The aforementioned were then still young artists at the beginning of their careers. However, several of the seminar teachers were at the time of the first course well-known names in the forefront of postmodern theory in the Nordic region: the artist and critic Mats B (1951–2009), the artist Hein Heinsen (b. 1935), the art historian and critic Gertrud Sandqvist (b. 1955), and the art historian and critic Tom Sandqvist (b. 1954). Some of them had previously participated on occasion in the school's teaching and were much in demand. Through their colleagues in Malmö and direct contacts with the education at the Academy in Copenhagen, the students had, for example, channels to the introduction to French philosophy offered by Hein Heinsen in the 1980s. The

philosopher Staffan Carlshamre (b. 1952), who had submitted his dissertation on Jacques Derrida in 1986, was also involved in the course starting in 1990.(9)

The list of course teachers and the subjects covered is sufficient to confirm that the course activities coincided with postmodernism's institutional establishment in fine arts education. Around 1990 there was a decisive change in attitude to the importance of language in graduate visual arts programmes. Seminars and courses were increasingly designed to respond to the growing interest in theory and philosophy in the art world. The need for compulsory theoretical courses and written assignments also began to be discussed. The programmes at the Royal University College of Fine Arts (which lacked such elements) were also criticized at that time by the critic Lars O. Ericsson for providing an 'anti-intellectual' education. In the middle of the decade, the influence of academics on the schools was thus marked, and philosophers, critics, and art theoreticians regularly participated in the instruction. The teachers who participated in the Valand course also continued to play significant roles in this development.(10)

### *Artistic practice as articulation and statement?*

In light of this context, the vestiges of the projects, as presented in the catalogue Documentation of Artistic Development Work. Valand School of Fine Arts 1993, reflect artistic processes that are closely connected with many of the important issues of the time. Stefan Uhlinder's, Lars Göran Nilsson's, and Åsa Pröjts' reports on their painting projects all bear direct and indirect witness to the difficulties and challenges facing anyone wanting to work with painting at a time when the abandonment of tradition appeared for many to be the only practicable route. The agenda seemed to be set by the times. Merely 'painting' was not possible. Instead, the artist had to explore 'painting as a flexible practice, which must turn away from its own internal concerns to achieve renewal'. Pröjts' manipulation of maps, Lars Göran Nilsson's installations and Uhlinder's text/praxis provide an immediate illustration of this challenge faced by painting. Uhlinder also explicitly asked how the artist, who allowed himself to doubt the 'failure' of the traditional despite the conviction of the times, could act: how could painting in its original form be made 'playable'?(11)

Both Lars Göran Nilsson's painting project and Anders Nilsson and Jörgen Svensson's project Lars Lithell's Meetings (Lars Lithells möten) point forward to practices that would later be summarized as relational aesthetics. The interest in social interaction is marked in these projects. Nilsson discusses the necessity of (and his own discomfort at) the 'interventions' he made with his paintings and objects in an inmate's cell and in a corridor at Hårlanda remand prison, in a refugee facility, and on buildings in central Gothenburg. The meetings and communication with the public are here part of the work of art. In Lars Lithell's Meetings, 55 meetings between a number of selected real individuals (both unknown and well-known people such as the politician Margot Wallström, the musician Sven-Erik Magnusson, or the actor Richard Wolff) and the fictitious Lars Lithell were arranged and documented. This project was an even more far-reaching staging, and, moreover, an exploration of possible forms for social

relationships and encounters between people, as well as the encounter between art's fictitious level and concrete reality.(12)

The vestiges of these projects are a reminder of the problems associated with postmodernism's discursive thresholds, of the different phases of the deconstruction of modernism's physical media, creative practice, exhibition venues, work concepts, genres and the values embraced by the period, and of the attempts at alternative articulations tested. In this light, the course may be understood as a space that allowed the still-young artists to test and explore aspects of their own artistic work in the midst of reality, where it was also practised. The assignment combined artistic creation with reflections on the latter through, for example, discussion and theoretical reading. If the remnants of the works in the catalogue are thus read as fragments of such reflexive processes, several of the decade's key issues may be discerned: Pia Hedström's recorded interest in cavities and empty spaces and Bengt Olof Johansson's demonstration of both presence and absence in the depicted reality immediately prompt associations with the period's language-critical issues of the conditions for interpretation and meaning. Irene Westholm's interest in using video to depict corporal experience and intense physical perception resonate with the increasing interest women artists had in the depiction of (the material) body's representation in (non-material) digital media at that time.(13)

#### *An important part of history*

The course thus opened up a setting for the articulation of artistic problems (and their solutions) in both theory and practice. Marked similarities can be seen with other fine arts graduate programmes, as carried on elsewhere somewhat later in the 1990s. Jan Kaila (f. 1957) describes his graduate studies at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, in 1997, in terms very reminiscent of the Valand course: 'The starting points for our studies were radical, perhaps utopian'. As at Valand, the Helsinki programme focused on individual projects. The core activities consisted of seminars centred on the works of art. 'Systematic teaching' in writing, method, and theory was lacking, 'since it was assumed that the making of explorative works of art would develop each student's individual methods for creating new knowledge'. As at Valand, the Helsinki programme assumed that the artistic process and the works of art were 'the most important part of the research'.(14) There is also reason to believe that experiences from the Valand course spread and took root. Malmö Art Academy, under Gertrud Sandqvist's leadership (previously a seminar teacher in the Valand course), started a graduate visual arts programme around 2000 in which the 'emphasis' was similarly on 'independent artistic work and . . . on achieving deeper artistic maturity'. The former Valand student Matts Leiderstam (f. 1956), a contemporary and colleague of several of the students in the Valand course, also participated in this programme as a graduate student.(15) The Valand course was also to play an important role in the continued development of artistic research at the school and provides a significant heritage.(16)

The course can thus be seen as part of the development and establishment of artistic research. Not unexpectedly, it can also be seen that the problems faced by the course were later formulated as the problems of artistic research. For the Valand course,

the key issue was the place and importance of theory in the course, and this was never satisfactorily resolved. Following the first year, there was criticism that the theoretical elements were poorly embedded in the practical work, were too abstract, and had no connection with the artistic process and the participants' needs. These theoretical elements were therefore reduced in the second course, and then stressed once again in the third course. This ambivalence to and difficulty in handling academic theory, method and outward forms are also seen in Henrik Karlsson's summary of the development, nature, and problems of graduate arts education in 2001, where he highlights the conflicts, differences, and irreconcilable views on scholarly and artistic methods as characteristic of the area's development.(17)

When the course began at the turn of the 1990s, the concept had never before been tried at a Swedish college of fine arts. It thus represented a new approach to fine arts education, which was unique at that time. The project deserves to be highlighted as a leading-edge initiative and a result of circumstances not found at any other Swedish college of fine arts. The course was provisional and had insufficient financial and other resources in those early years, and consequently never achieved any stability. At the same time, it was open, exploratory, and permissive, and succeeded in attracting artists of different types and interests. The place of artistic research at universities today does not appear as open and unbiased.

## NOTES

1. Marta Edling, *Fri konst? Bildkonstnärlig utbildning vid Konsthögskolan Valand, Kungl. Konsthögskolan och Konstfackskolan 1960-1995*, Stockholm 2010 (forthcoming).
2. Stefan Uhlinder, 'Förord,' *Dokumentation av konstnärlig utvecklingsarbete*. Valand School of Fine Arts. Gothenburg 1993; *Konsthögskolan Valand. Katalog -86*, Gothenburg 1986. Conversation with Stefan Uhlinder, 30 January 2010; Peter Hagdahl, 5 January 2010; Kristoffer Arvidsson, Marta Edling, and Annika Öhrner, interview with Ewa Brodin, 14 January 2010, Göteborg Museum of Art.
3. The only printed source originating from the course identified to date is the catalogue: *Dokumentation av konstnärligt utvecklingsarbete 1993*. Valand School of Fine Arts, Gothenburg 1993. A summary of the course and the intentions governing its organisation are also found in: Christian Wideberg, 'I ett historiskt och didaktiskt perspektiv,' *Konstlab* 2003, Gothenburg 2004. Only fragments from the course remain in the Valand School of Fine Arts archive: individual syllabuses, seminar timetables, and official letters. See specific document in the principal Birger Boman's correspondence, Valand School of Fine Arts archive E2 B:3 and Syllabuses and curricula, timetables, etc. Valand School of Fine Arts archive F2 A:2. Stefan Uhlinder, conversation with Marta Edling, 30 January 2010; Peter Hagdahl, conversation with Marta Edling, 5 January 2010; Arvidsson, Edling, Öhrner 2010.
4. Lars Gurmund, 'What is artistic development work? Introductory speech by Lars Gurmund at the University of Gothenburg's symposium at Billingeus 15-17 October 1979,'

Valand School of Fine Arts archive F6 A:2. Lars Gurmund, *Konstnärlig utbildning vid Göteborgs universitet. Kommentarer och utblickar*, Gothenburg 1983.

5. Edling 2010.

6. Birger Boman, conversation with Marta Edling, 30 April 2002 and 5 February 2010. Cf. Christian Wideberg, 'I ett historiskt och didaktiskt perspektiv,' *Konstlab* 2003, Gothenburg 2004; Göran Wallén, 'Konst, vetenskap och utvecklingsarbete,' *Tidskrift för arkitekturforskning* no. 3 1990; Edling 2010.

7. See Note 3.

8. Uhlinder 2010; Hagdahl 2010; Boman 2010; Arvidsson, Edling, Öhrner 2010.

9. See archive material in Valand School of Fine Arts archive E2 B:3.

10. Edling 2010. Lars O Ericsson, 'Krisen på Konsthögskolan är djup,' *Dagens Nyheter* 23 December 1993. For the debate created by Ericsson, see: Ann Edholm, Stina Ekman, Sivert Lindblom, Harald Lyth, and Kjell Strandqvist, 'Ingen kris på konsthögskolan,' *Dagens Nyheter* 19 December 1993 and 'Var finns krisen,' *Dagens Nyheter* 30 December 1993; Lars O Ericsson, 'Konsten är inte tidlös,' *Dagens Nyheter* 30 December 1993; Anders Jansson, 'Maktstriden förändrar inte Mejan,' *Dagens Nyheter* 31 December 1993.

11. David Neuman and Bo Nilsson, 'Förord,' *Måleri – det utvidgade fältet*, Stockholm and Malmö 1996. Stefan Uhlinder, 'Förord,' *Dokumentation av konstnärligt utvecklingsarbete*. Valand School of Fine Arts, Gothenburg 1993.

12. The project was presented in *Tidskriften 90-tal* no. 11 1994 and was accompanied by Lars O Ericsson's text 'Bortom äkthet och falskhet' and Magnus Bærtås' 'Den anonyme fotografen. Om vardaglig fotografi omvandlad till konst.'

13. Charlotte Bydler, 'Markerat kroppslig. Om fysiska möten med digital konst,' *Från modernism till samtidskonst. Svenska kvinnliga konstnärer*, red. Yvonne Eriksson och Anette Göthlund, Lund 2003.

14. Jan Kaila, 'Begärets dunkla mål,' *Yliopistollinen akatemia – Kuvataideakatemia 160 vuotta. Konstakademien som universitet – Bildkonstakademin 160 år. Art Academy as University – Finnish Academy of Fine Arts 160 years*, Helsinki 2008.

15. Matts Leiderstam, 'Efter avhandlingen – i 'fri konst',' *Autonomi och egenart. Konstnärlig forskning söker identitet*. Årsbok KFoU 2008 Swedish Research Council, Stockholm 2009.

16. Bengt Olof Johansson, 'Förord. Eketorp 2004-02-02,' *Konstlab* 2003, Gothenburg 2004; Christian Wideberg, 'I ett historiskt och didaktiskt perspektiv,' *Konstlab* 2003, Gothenburg 2004.

17. Henrik Karlsson, *Handtag, famntag klapp eller kyss. Konstnärlig forskarutbildning i Sverige. Sister skrifter 4*. Stockholm 2001, pp. 22–54.

18. A text summarizing much of the dilemma of international artistic research at universities today is Henk Borgdorff's text 'Artistic Research and Academia: an Uneasy Relationship,' *Autonomi och egenart. Konstnärlig forskning söker identitet*. Årsbok KFoU 2008 Swedish Research Council, Stockholm 2009.