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Artlab

For more information about the project (in Swedish)
<http://www.valand.gu.se/application/index.html>

To the Council for the Renewal of Higher Education
REPORT ON ART LAB, COUNCIL PROJECT NO. 006/FO1

Overview

In the main, Art Lab has been conducted along the lines set out in the project application. Those of us who are involved in the project are fully satisfied with the way it has unfolded so far and the results achieved. I expand on these aspects in the section headed 'Conclusions'.

Along the way, certain formal structures have been modified in ways that have borne upon the Council Project's role vis-à-vis Art Lab overall. The most important of these has been the launching of the idea of a permanent two-year study programme based on the ideas informing Art Lab – a development to which the Council Project has been crucial. Since Art Lab will not now be wound up until the turn of the year 03/04 the present report describes a situation and activities that are still ongoing. The new two-year perspective led to pedagogically-motivated changes to planning with certain elements of the project that were scheduled for Year One being deferred to Year Two. The study programme Art Lab emerges, then, as a post-graduate programme separate from Ph.D. programmes and research conducted at Faculty level. Art Lab has the status of a continuation course – a status that allows us to continue evolving the structures for and the content of, an advanced further education option for artists, with Valand retaining the initiative as regards the shaping of the relevant research profile. For one incontrovertible fact stands out: the issues concerning the relationship between art practice and research that await resolution are legion. From the first, our aim has been to predicate the further education alternative we offer on the professional praxis of artists and the issues that their creative endeavours pose for them. Moreover, the Göteborg situation is that the Faculty generally is starved for cash, which means that at the moment research in the liberal arts remains over the horizon. However, in virtue of its study-programme status, Art Lab is able to help move that agenda on and at a later point, when the resources problem has hopefully been solved, it will be able to bring its findings into play to fertile effect. It remains to be seen, of course, to what extent Art Lab will come to impact upon or become a part of the wider research picture at the Faculty.

Art Lab's diary: Year One

Art Lab received fourteen applications, ten of which came from fully eligible applicants. Subsequent to careful scrutiny of the project descriptions and the conduct of interviews, five artists were enrolled into the scheme: Nils Agdler, Patric Nilsson, Anna Carlsson, Ulrika Friberg and Kamilla Rydahl. One consideration governing selection was that of ensuring a spread of artistic disciplines and of projects with varied thrusts. Over the course of the year, five three-day seminars/workshops have been held. By summer, each artist had been assigned a personal tutor: it was important to select tutors once the potentialities and demands of each project had been established. In September a study trip was arranged to *Dokumenta X*: staged every five years, it is perhaps the most important event in the art world. In December we organised a large-scale seminar with guests invited from Karin Becker's "sister project" at *Konstfack* and, from the Faculty, researchers with special backgrounds in research issues. Teaching staff and students from Valand also took part. Day One focused on the specific issues concerning art practice that had presented themselves in the context of Art Lab's projects. Day Two concentrated on the sharing of findings and experiences by *Konstfack* and Art Lab. In March 2003, Art Lab participated in the seminar 'Bakom Ytan' ['Beneath the Surface'] arranged by *Konstfack*, which marked the official conclusion of Council Project.

Planning and implementation of the Council Project

It was essential to us from the beginning to make sure that the students were aware of their responsibility for the development of the project. The structure and general purpose was presented but in a way that they felt comfortable to comment and take part in the further planning both in regard of the structure and the content. We had the idea of what that might be but they were to continuously deliver the answer to if it really worked. In direct connection to each seminar they took part of the planning of the next. They had also a specific responsibility of two ingredients related to their own artistic project: to find, present and argue for their choice of tutor, also including the structuring of the communication with the tutors in a way that worked out for both parts. Secondly the students had to plan and arrange one day each over the year, a day that aimed to deepen the understanding of their project within the group. This could be anything between watching films with a certain meaning to the project and sightseeing according to the logic of memory on a very personal level.

Findings

First, a presentation of the various projects.

Anna Carlsson had for a number of years been working on ways of turning song and dance numbers from Hollywood films into performance art. Assuming the producer's role, she attracted to her project a string of amateur performers from widely differing walks of life and age groups, staging shows in the most improbable venues. The inevitable limitations and flaws were something she accepted as part of her aesthetics. This embrace of the aesthetics of rough and untidy performance art was something she sought to develop further under the auspices of Art Lab, tying it into a feminist take on identity which in turn, entailed getting to grips with a broad swathe of the recent literature on gender. The artist Ann Edholm is her tutor.

Patric Nilsson works primarily with the medium of drawing, posing himself the question of what the artist is essentially "up to", and comparing his task with that of the fiction writer who speaks through the characters in his narrative. In what sense is the artist morally accountable for what the work seems to say? He approaches this question via a series of interviews with artists whose work manifests a clear stance. His tutor is the art theorist Staffan Schmidt.

Ulrika Friberg works with sculptures and objects with a focus on their spatial relationships – objects that pose high demands in terms of craftsmanship – and on the narratives that they come to embody in the course of the physical process of their fashioning. For Ulrika Friberg, the question that presents itself is that of justifying her highly wrought and individual art in a cultural climate dominated by the ideas of reduction and simplification. With the support and encouragement of her tutor, the art historian Måns Holst-Ekström, she is uncovering the roots of these diametrically opposed approaches.

Kamilla Rydahl calls her project Archive-Conversation-Now, which is an attempt to elaborate a methodology capable of responding to a spectrum of issues revolving round the role of the artist, including the artist's contribution to society and its potential as an individual life-project. The project entails Kamilla Rydahl exploring a range of ways of working with others by letting these others 'use' her, i.e. letting them both draw upon and work with her biographical material and her experiences of learning and art practice. She chose Gunhild Stensmyr as her tutor – a curator with wide-ranging experience, having held leading positions at a number of art institutions, and espousing a classical approach to conceptions of the art object and the artist.

Nils Agdler is a photographer who has set himself the task of developing a wholly distinctive approach to the appreciation of the photographic image that draws on the notion of spheres with the viewer placed at the centre. Pursuing his key theme, Nils Agdler explores the classic photographically concept of 'the decisive moment', a notion which has wide ramifications, both in terms of formalist stances and the photograph's role as a means of capturing major historical moments. With his enthusiasm for and extensive knowledge of the field, Nils Agdler's tutor Stefan Jonsson, who writes on culture for Dagens Nyheter, has been able to provide invaluable inputs.

Seminars/ workshops

The idea of setting up a college of artists who would not otherwise have enjoyed substantive professional contact drew a positive response. The idea of a context in which one's own insights and experiences are fostered and tested was an important argument for the artists who applied for enrolment in Art Lab. Art Lab's structure, featuring spaced out but regular seminars, seeks to strike a judicious balance between the constraints of a formal context and the demands of artistic creativity. The participant artists are unanimous in their acknowledgement of the important benefits that come from applying a close focus to the projects of the others as well as from the discipline involved in having to provide accounts of their own projects to the others – continually reworking and fine-honing their descriptions. Moreover, Art Lab would seem to have confirmed the hypothesis that the professional life of the artist tends to be a solitary one. The university is apparently able to proffer an option that breaks that isolation, and the renewed confidence in continuing professional development in a formal setting to which Art Lab contributes has been an important factor in achieving results.

The five workshops have followed a pattern. One day is dedicated to the projects, with the participants turning up well supplied with fresh material and questions every time. This conduces to the gradual accumulation of a rich store of knowledge and a base of related topics peculiar to each individual project and drawn from art, literature and film, as well as links to yet other subject areas. At the outset, participants were set the task of establishing project-relevant contact with other researchers and research areas within the university. However, to date, rather than leading to actual dialogue, participants' probing in this area have pointed them in the direction of other textual sources and persons who have thus come to have a significant bearing on their projects.

Day Two of the three-day workshops involves the allocation of a modest budget to one of the participants whose remit it is to organise a full day's programme for the other members of the group. The planning and substantive design of the day must serve to elucidate and contribute to the understanding of the project of the participant hosting it. These days have tended to be imaginatively conceived, featuring surprise elements, which conduce to probing and stimulating discussions centred on the project. It is very easy to come up against a barrier when seeking to get to grips with and relate to the projects of others, and a deeper, more searching, grasp must be attainable if the individual project is to reveal its potential and engage. Day Three is given over to group discussion of aspects of the Art Lab process and its future development as well as to such practicalities as the design of the home page.

Tutors

The role of the tutor was not fully defined in advance. The idea was to allow the projects themselves to govern choice according to what was considered most apposite – and apposite in a broad sense, not simply in terms of cognitive inputs. Kamilla Rydahl, for instance, opted for a tutor whose approach was antithetically opposed to her own. The participants were actively involved in choosing their respective tutors and were themselves essentially responsible for establishing contact. Once informal agreements were in place, I contacted the individuals in question to formalise the relationship. Art Lab specified the standard scope of tutorial contact but participants have since evolved the format in collaboration with their tutors. Participants see the tutor system as a huge asset and my impression is that the tutors, in turn, have valued their connection with Art Lab. There is no doubt that the two-way enrichment between artist and tutor testifies to a potential to be tapped. To date, there has only been one opportunity for all the tutors to meet, which was in connection with the December seminar. However, the discussion on that occasion, in which I took part, was very fertile: the tutors were able to pool findings and put questions to me about the nature of their role.

Feedback to undergraduate education

Another aspect of Art Lab qua pilot project concerns the interface with undergraduate education. Initially, we had envisaged a species of mentor system according to which participants in Art Lab would be linked to students engaged with related problematic. However, discussion with Art Lab participants led to the adoption of an alternative model whereby participants would set up short duration workshops directly linked to their projects and teach within those settings. These workshops are scheduled for the spring and early autumn. We have yet to explore this idea by seeing how it works in practice. The challenges of teaching at university level combined with the opportunity to supplement the slender income that Art Lab is able to offer its participants were central to the argument. From Valand's point of view, there is a clear advantage in being able to offer students access to well thought through artistic projects that have already been thoroughly pondered and discussed in Art Lab. Consequently, we shall have no difficulty in slotting the relevant workshops into the programme schedule.

Collaboration with Konstfack's Council Project

Throughout the year Karin Becker and I have maintained regular contact. At the December seminar, all persons involved in the projects had the opportunity to meet and compare notes. The differences between the orientations of two projects soon became very clear and gave rise to lively discussion. Art Lab's starting assumption was that practising artists are seriously engaged in a professional endeavour, which, given a measure of refocusing and the addition of certain adjuncts, assimilates to research in the fine arts. Konstfack, by contrast, has concentrated on the question of what demands should be made of undergraduate education if it is to serve as an adequate preparation for postgraduate studies.

Konstfack performed a valuable service by highlighting the difficulties Art Lab faces in identifying methods by which artistic processes might be properly documented. This led to my involving Christian Wideberg in Art Lab's work. He has previously written a bachelor's thesis on didactics and art education with special reference to Valand. In the course of 2003, he will be conducting a series of interviews on separate occasions with Art Lab's participants with the aim of charting the profile of the creative process as experienced by each.

Conclusions

One of the comments offered in response to Art Lab's project application expressed certain reservations about the aims of the project and the framing of decisive success criteria. It is probably true to say that the requisite analysis for the framing of such criteria has never been carried out. Here I sense that I come up against a cultural divide that cannot easily be ignored. An artist myself, I am part of the culture that requires my being able to vouch for the serious purport of a project in the same way as the artist is accountable for the work she creates (other points of comparison aside). Attempts to formulate objective criteria are of valid interest only when such can be generalised. Moreover, in Art Lab we have set our sights somewhat higher. The combination of accountability and trust opens up for a different level of integrity, at which art is of fundamental interest qua art, and it is at that level that Art Lab seeks its *raison d'être*. Indeed, it would be alien to me to deploy the type of argument the commentator is after. Paradigmatically, then, this represents the kind of clash we are likely to encounter in seeking to insinuate art practice into the established world of research. Rather, the key questions are: Is Art Lab capable of generating interesting art and fresh knowledge? Or is the project simply about making art accessible in an alternative context? Is Art Lab able to evolve a form, which would make it a free-standing educational option? Which is to say – is it capable, qua art education programme, of acquiring a defining structure that is constitutive of its status as a programme regardless of the particular composition of those enrolled in it or those running it? In response to this last question, suffice it to say that it is naturally our goal that Art Lab should achieve that status and the signs are that the relevant contours are already beginning to emerge. Attempts to answer the other questions would be premature.

From the teaching perspective, there are a number of instruments that need to be developed and refined precisely to this end. One such a line of enquiry concerns how workshop discussions might be documented and the material returned to the participants for meshing into the creative process. Here Christian Wideberg's interviews with the participants have already proved their worth in the cognitive process. Another focus concerns the configuration of the tutor's role and his or her connection to Art Lab overall. The reciprocity that manifests itself as a feature of the relationship is a potential worthy of more explicit incorporation. It calls for the allocation of more resources targeted at tapping the findings of the tutors engaged with Art Lab. The most interesting and "soft-edged" finding relates to the impact of the interpersonal on the quality of the learning experience. Hitherto the "method" deployed has been to ensure that the group enjoys ample opportunity for informal interaction. Perhaps that suffices, but personally I should want to probe deeper into the subtleties of the human dimension: the blind spots, for example, whose existence is universally acknowledged but which are never formally recognised as influential and important factors in what makes for a congenial learning situation.

Another tack needing pursuing concerns the difficulties we encounter when seeking to forge contacts with other subject areas. Setting up a home page and disseminating information does not do it. Nor is it enough to be pro-active and go out with the intention of establishing personal contacts. Perhaps the problem calls for a long-term approach. A well-designed presentation that does more than highlight the artistic aspects of the projects Art Lab generates is essential to the working up of new networks across a wide range of scholarly disciplines. Our proximity to the Faculty of Fine and applied Arts ought to facilitate the forging of such networks.

The final thread I shall take up here concerns how a participant's reflections on his or her project might be developed so as to amount to more than an appendage to the artwork itself. Within Art Lab, we have discussed what might prove to be effective options: one such might be to write an article based on the individual project, and geared to the sort of venue targeted.

The future

An account is due to be published of Art Lab project's first run as a higher education programme. Along with accounts of the individual projects, it will contain tutorial comments, a detailed assessment as well as a historical sketch of the ideas and pedagogical pilots on which Art Lab is based, going back to the 1977 higher education reform. Recalling previous efforts in this area is important for the ongoing discussion about research in art practice.

On the initiative of the participants, the publication will be released to coincide with a group exhibition in spring 2004. While not itself part of the programme, the show is patently a spin-off from the Art Lab projects.

A change to admissions policy which springs directly from the findings we have chalked up to date will come the next round of enrolments. Art Lab will then seek to expand its range of intake by also inviting applications from candidates with backgrounds other than training in the fine arts. This policy change will serve to broaden the range of qualifications within the group as a whole and will enable us to assess the extent to which the knowledge culture acquired in the course of fine arts training affects outcomes.

Bengt Olof Johansson
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