To Rest Assured: A Study of Artistic Development

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Abstract

This article concerns artistic development within the context of a Master of Fine Arts program in visual arts in Sweden, and presents an empirical study based on repeated interviews with a group of art students. The aim is to contribute to our present understanding of artistic development by focusing on changes in the relation between the student and his/her artistic work as part of their artistic development. The study describes and analyzes the character of these changes, within the theoretical frame of phenomenographic research on learning. The notion of 'resting assured' is used to describe the main characteristic of the qualitative change found in the relation between the student and his/her artistic work. To 'rest assured' refers to a state of trust in their own ability that the students develop. Findings are discussed from an educational theoretical perspective, emphasizing the connection between self-direction and resting assured.

Introduction

This article concerns learning in visual art practice within the context of a Master of Fine Arts program in visual arts, more specifically treating the issue of the students' 'artistic development'. Artistic development is certainly the most essential part of the goals and aims of graduate studio education (cf. the presentation of the Swedish programs in visual art below). However, it is commonly associated with children's artistic growth and learning, and rarely investigated and discussed relating to adults in the context of higher education. There are several reasons behind this incongruity. One is that the actions of the artist still suffer from the romantic legacy of ineffability (Diffey, 2004; Edström, 2006; Eisner, 2002, 2003; Singerman, 1999). Another reason is that the practices of the fine arts, such as the theatre, music, visual arts etc., tend to be grouped together because of their assumed similarities. This assumption can cause confusion, and difficulties in approaching artistic development, since a closer look reveals quite the reverse. In fact there are significant differences between the fine arts that affect various aspects of learning, including artistic development, within the arts (Edström, 1998, 2006).

Some practices within the fine arts, e.g. theatre and music, are generally of an interpretive character, while others, like the visual arts, are characterized by works of art that are originally created by the practitioners. This is a difference that is crucial to the understanding of learning from an educational perspective. Also, practices of theatre and music have developed educational theories pertaining to the discipline, while there has been no real corresponding development within the visual arts. This turns the field of learning in visual art practice into an area of research that, from an educational theoretical perspective, is relatively undeveloped. The lack of educational reference frames for learning within the visual arts leaves the teachers with very little besides concepts such as master-apprentice to consider. This is problematic, because the notion of master and apprentice is hardly relevant to present-day art education. The process of becoming an artist is much more complex today than it was, say, in medieval times, when apprenticeship was extensively practiced (cf. Riley, 2007; Singerman, 1999; Sullivan, 1996, 2005). The heart of an apprenticeship is necessarily the master's practice, since the apprentice learns the profession through participating in the master's activities. In the context of contemporary art education, quite the reverse is true. The student's practice is the centre of the teacher's activity, a fact that makes the model of master-apprentice difficult to apply, and brings to the fore the need for alternative educational references that apply to learning of visual art practice of today (Edström, 1998, 2006).

The content of visual art practice education has been subject to debate from time to time, and desired content and learning outcomes have often been discussed from an ideological point of view (e.g. Danvers, 2003; Mottram & Whale, 2001; Riley, 2007; Singerman,

1999). Another way of contributing to the debate is to begin at the other end, and find out empirically which qualities art students actually develop during their studies. This article wishes to contribute to the research in the field of learning in visual art practice by adding to our empirical understanding of artistic development, and relating these findings to relevant areas of educational research.

MFA programs emphasize artistic development as an outcome, but the notion itself is difficult to define. It seems unnecessary here to challenge those who have tried to define the concept of artistic development, nor to use existing definitions as a point of departure. A more productive task would be to empirically identify some of the qualities that art students actually develop, and to do this from a student perspective. The specified aim of this article is therefore to contribute to the overall understanding of artistic development by focusing on changes in the relation between the student and his/her artistic work as part of their artistic development, as well as describing and analyzing the character of these changes.

Phenomenographic research on learning forms the theoretical frame of this study. The roots of phenomenography go back to the early works of Marton and Svensson from 1970 (Svensson, 1997). During the 1970's, this research orientation developed through the research undertaken by Marton, Svensson and their colleagues at Gothenburg University in Sweden. The term "phenomenography" was coined by Marton in 1981, to indicate a scholarly approach that aimed at describing, analyzing and understanding people's experiences, or conceptions, of phenomena in and aspects of the world (Marton, 1981). The founding of phenomenography was influenced by gestalt theory and its interest for 'whole' qualities, as opposed to the atomistic view of e.g. behaviorism, widely recognized at the time. Phenomenology provided a source of inspiration for early phenomenography as well. As Giorgi (1999) points out, phenomenography and phenomenology are both qualitative approaches, sharing an interest in experiences of phenomena. Also, both approaches take a great interest in learning, but while phenomenography is pedagogically oriented, phenomenology assumes a psychological point of view. Describing and analyzing variations in experiences of a phenomenon is the core of phenomenography, and the categorizing of these varying ways of experiencing is the result of phenomenographic research. A phenomenological study, on the other hand, would aim at describing the essence and structure of phenomena. A phenomenographic study would start out from the data, making procedure subordinate to data, as opposed to phenomenology, which would start out from the philosophy of phenomenology, making data subordinate to phenomenological procedure (Giorgi, 1999; Svensson, 1986).

The phenomenographic tradition has grown considerably over the years, and today it is often used in educational research, especially in relation to higher education (e.g. Booth

& Ingerman, 2002; Bowden, 2004; Bowden & Marton, 1998; Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003; Svensson, 1976, 1989). It may be noted that the present study does not use phenomenography in the strict sense defined by Marton (1981), because conceptions are not the actual study objects. Instead, the general approach of phenomenography is used as a research tool, in order to gain access to qualities of the learner's relation to his/her artistic work. A phenomenographic perspective on learning is seen by the author as a strong alternative to the more common constructionist view, especially in a context, like visual arts practice, that is characterized by creating something new (Edström, 2006).

From a phenomenographical perspective, a person's experience of a phenomenon is understood as an 'internal relation' between the experiencing subject and the object experienced. Consequently, learning is defined as a qualitative change in the relation between the subject and the experienced object (Johansson, Marton & Svensson, 1985; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton, Dahlgren, Svensson & Säljö, 1977; Svensson, 1984, 1997). A constructional perspective on learning has certain limitations when it comes to explaining the creation of the new and unseen (Edström, 2006; cf. Nielsen, 2006). To put it very briefly, two of the dominant constructionist perspectives on learning, the cognitive and the sociocultural schools, both have what Marton and Booth (1997) call a 'paradoxical' understanding of the development of knowledge. The essence of the paradox is that the learner is required to have knowledge in advance of something that is new, and thus unknown. This paradox is intimately related to the dualism inside - outside the human mind, which is embraced by the cognitive as well as the sociocultural view of knowledge (for a more extensive critique, see Edström, 2006; Efland, 2002; Marton, 1995; Marton & Booth, 1997). The phenomenographic perspective on learning, on the other hand, focuses on changes in the relation between subject and object in describing knowledge development, thereby eliminating the paradox of the dualistic view of knowledge.

Method

The study presented here is based on an empirical investigation that was carried out in the period 2001-2007. A group of students at a MFA program in visual arts in Sweden were interviewed during their five-year long education. There are five corresponding programs in visual art practice in Sweden, and a look at the programs outlines some major qualities that may be summed up as follows:

      1. Artistic development, with a focus on independence and maturity as desired qualities in the student's artwork.

      2. Development of the ability to critically analyze, debate and reflect over artistic representations (own/other's).

3. Increased theoretical awareness in relation to the student's own artistic work, as well as a wider art context.
4. Development of an independent working process, where students manage to pursue their own projects from start to finish.

Although this is not a hierarchical listing, artistic development is the most essential quality emphasized in the five programs. On the whole, the five programs have more or less the same structure (cf. Edling & Görts, 2003). Each student is assigned a studio of his or her own, and the education is characterized by freedom of choice, which in turn requires a great deal of self-direction from the students. The programs offer both practical and theoretical courses. The curriculum and course content offered may vary somewhat between the five programs, but when it comes to the emphasis they place on the student's own work, they are comparable. Some of the programs may have an explicit profile, but even so, they all share the same core aims and goals.

The methodological assumptions embraced by phenomenography have been described as follows: "The most central characteristics are the explorative character of the data collection and the contextual analytic character of the treatment of data" (Svensson, 1997, p. 169). Interviews are commonly used in phenomenographic research, and were used in the present study as well. The students were interviewed at the end of their first year of the program in spring 2002, in fall/winter 2004-2005, and just before graduation in spring 2006 (students who took a sabbatical year were interviewed during the spring term 2007). The initial group of students consisted of 7 men and 4 women aged 21-25 at the time of the first interview in 2001. The interviews were open, with questions serving as a starting point for a conversation. The students were then encouraged to elaborate on the themes introduced. The themes of the first interview were chosen with the aim to cover as many aspects as possible of the students' past and present experiences of art education, in order to facilitate the identification of special areas of interest for the following interviews. Based on this foundation, the main focus of the second interview was the students' artistic work, and the main focus of the third was their experiences in the MFA program as a whole, along with the question of preparing for a future as an artist. Although the interviews had a specific focus, they were still of an open and explorative nature and the students were invited to develop their lines of thought beyond the preset theme.

The present study is primarily based on the second set of interviews from 2004-05 (thus two students, who left the program after the first year, are not part of the study). In particular, the part of the interview material is used where the students were asked to reflect upon their relation to their work, within the time perspective of their experiences of the MFA program up to that point. More specifically, they were asked if they had experienced any changes in their relation to their own work, if they could describe the

nature of these changes, and if they themselves related these changes to something specific. Furthermore, they were asked about their way of working, and if they had experienced changes in this. They were requested to describe the nature of any changes in their way of working, and if they themselves related these changes to something specific. If the answer was no to any of the questions about changes, the student was asked again later in the interview, unless they brought it up themselves, implicitly or explicitly.

Material from the first interview was included in the analysis only when a more complete picture of the students' previous experiences of art education was needed. During the first interview, the students were asked to reflect upon their experiences of art education so far, including preparatory art school. Consequently, when a student referred to preparatory art school experiences during the second interview, the material from the first interview was included in the analysis. The author carried out the interviews. A typical interview lasted about one hour and took place at the school. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. As all the interviews were in Swedish, the extracts from the interviews presented in this article have been translated into English by the author.

The interview material was analysed by means of contextual analysis, a methodology originally developed by Svensson (1976) in close relation with the phenomenographic orientation of Marton, Svensson and their colleagues at Gothenburg University in Sweden in the 1970's. This early development included a methodological positioning as well, in line with the epistemological assumptions of phenomenography, presented as part of the results reported by Svensson (1976). This methodology was named 'contextual analysis' and has been further developed over the years by Svensson (1976, 1985, 1986, 1997, 2005). Although closely related epistemologically, contextual analysis and phenomenography differ in some ways. One of the main differences is that contextual analysis is a general methodology that can be used on interview material within other orientations than phenomenography. Consequently, contextual analysis has no limitations concerning the object of research, while phenomenography is restricted to the study of ways of experiencing (Svensson, 2005).

Contextual analysis is characterised by a holistic view, seeing the relations between a delimited whole and its context, between the whole and its parts, as well as between the parts discerned within the whole, as fundamentally dependent of eachother: "What is meant by the analysis being contextual is that the relations involved are constructed as internal relations, which means that the different units delimited are given a meaning which is dependent on their relations" (Svensson, 2005, p. 6)". As a consequence no phenomenon can be studied outside its context. Furthermore, the aim is to "describe a phenomenon selectively and to reveal its most significant whole-characteristics […and] to develop the most significant possible description" (p. 4). To be concrete, the present

analysis was initialized by repeated readings of the transcribed interviews. Each reading was guided by the author's interest in changes from an educational perspective, and the focus was to delimit the phenomenon (the research object) in relation to its context. In the present analysis, the phenomenon was delimited to the relation between the student and his or her artistic work. The immediate context of the phenomenon was set to artistic development, seen in a broader context of studies and education. The interview material was then approached again, concentrating on the discernment of the main parts that could be considered significant in relation to the delimited wholes. In contextual analysis the delimited research object is treated as a whole, and parts are discerned within this whole. These parts, and the internal relations between parts and between parts and wholes, are central at all levels of the analysis. As a consequence of the recognition of this fundamental interdependence, the initial delimitations are continuously brought back and tried out on the material. The result of a contextual analysis consists of the meanings of the parts and relations that proved to be the most significant in the process of analysis (Svensson 1976, 1997, 2005). Most significant parts and relations are those in relation to which data concerning the research object can be grouped in the most meaningful, consistent and exhaustive way. In the presentation of the results below, the parts discerned within the delimited phenomenon are presented in Categories 1, 2 and 3, and the relations between the categories are discussed.

Results

The notion of 'resting assured' will be used to describe the changes observed in the relation between the student and his/her artistic work. The student's capacity to rest assured is visible with respect to three different aspects: To rest assured in the intimate, in the uncertain and in the work process. Findings are grouped in the following categories:

Category 1: To rest assured in the *intimate*: (Variations 1-A and 1-B).
Category 2: To rest assured in the *uncertain*.
Category 3: To rest assured in the *work process*: (Variations 3-A and 3-B).

Interview extracts are used in the presentation in order to illustrate the findings. It is to be noted that the extracts represent ways of experiencing the phenomenon. This investigation could therefore be seen as a case study, where each student's combination of qualities (described in each group) of his/her relation to and experience of his/her artistic work make up a case, and the individual constitutes the context of his/her personal way of experiencing the phenomenon. However, the aim of the present study is not to elaborate on the individual contexts, but rather to find the main characteristics of the cases, i.e. the phenomena studied. Therefore the cases are grouped according to main similarities and differences, rather than presented as individual cases.

All nine respondents are represented by quotations in Categories 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Any details that might identify the individuals have been omitted.

Category 1: To Rest Assured in the Intimate

Category 1 represents experiences of confidence and trust in the individual's own unique, artistic expression. This is here described as 'resting assured in the intimate', where 'intimate' refers to the feeling of closeness to his/her artistic work expressed by the student. This aspect of artistic development is attained at different times during the student's progress towards the MFA degree. Variation 1-A represents a previously experienced sense of alienation that seems to have delayed the development of a sense of resting assured in the intimate. Variation 1-B contains no such alienation, and thus the sense of resting assured in the intimate was attained at a relatively early stage of the education.

> *Variation 1-A.*
> 1. [Now I] feel confident working the way I do. I know I've been told at preparatory art schools that you have to choose and create a niche for yourself in some way… to give a serious impression. I know now that I don't have to. I can work my way…
> 2. It was like coming home somehow, personally. To come back to something I think I was interested in for a period, before I was a teenager… I feel very close to my own artwork. Before it was more alien to me… I was more influenced by others. I had a hard time finding what I wanted to do. In my work I tried to set out from themes that weren't really close to me, and this goes for ways of working as well.
> 3. I worked a lot in this technique before I started at the MFA program. Now I've taken it up again… I feel like I have a base now. If I want to use this technique, it's fine. I don't doubt my own knowledge or, what do you call it, my own intentions anymore… my trust in authority was a lot stronger in the beginning…
> 4. A lot of things have fallen into place. I've challenged myself and dared to get a language of my own, an expression of my own… I used to imitate a lot; I'd imitate something like what I thought art should look like. Now, I'm a real lousy imitator so it turned out pretty interesting anyway.
> 5. At preparatory art school you learn a lot of techniques and you're influenced a great deal by the teachers and their point of view, the way they look upon the world and so on. In a way you end up making their art, even if I'm the one who makes it. Now I've returned to what interests me, and it feels like a relief because all the time I used to feel like I was doing someone else's art… I feel

that what I do now, it's under the skin. What I did before was more like something I'd put on, it was outside the skin.

The discourse used to describe these experiences is strong, and one may surmise that this phase represents an important turn in these students' artistic development. There are descriptions of what the change resulted in - e.g. "close to my own artwork", "under the skin", "an expression of my own" - as well as descriptions of a preceding state - e.g. "alien to me", "imitate", "like something I'd put on". There are elements of accepting and embracing in this expression of resting assured in the intimate. But the extracts also express an influence of others, sometimes linked to preparatory art school, which results in an experience of alienation in the relation between the student and his/her artistic work.

> *Variation 1-B.*
> 1. [At preparatory art school] you found out what you wanted to do… To me, I'm interested in working the way I work; I'm not interested in any of the other stuff. It would be very awkward for me to do anything else.
> 2. It's difficult to get away from the core that makes you do the things you do, I don't know, I guess it's quite unconscious… the same theme in one way or the other.
> 3. I have concepts of my own that I work with... On the whole it's the same group of themes I work with.
> 4. I'm not a person who takes big steps. It builds up, like from your first year [at the MFA program] you slowly walk up the hill to your fifth year. There are no big jumps. You feel that you bring with you what you've done before.

These examples show a stable relation and there are no expressions of previous experiences of alienation in the relation between the student and his/her artistic work. The interview extracts suggest that preparatory art school experiences had an influence here as well, but compared to variation 1-A, this influence is of a different and positive kind. Since no alienation was experienced, there is no need for redirection in the development of the relation between the student and his/her artistic work - the students just continue on the course that they had already entered upon. Extracts like: "[At the preparatory art school] you found out what you wanted to do" and "You feel that you bring with you what you've done before" suggest that the sense of resting assured in the intimate may have been free to develop right from the start.

Category 2: To Rest Assured in the Uncertain
Category 2 represents experiences of resting assured in relation to the aspect of uncertainty. The presentation of this category differs from the other two by not being

subcategorized into variations. Also, the character of Category 2 is slightly different. Category 1 and Category 3 both show a development over time, which makes it possible (for the students as well as the researcher) to discern time patterns of 'before' and 'after'. No such time patterns can be discerned in Category 2. Although expressions like "In the beginning when I worked", or "I've found out", or "I've learned", imply some kind of development over time, it is not possible to be more specific based on this data alone.

The following is an overview of the interview excerpts chosen to represent Category 2:

1. There are always periods when you feel all empty and you can't think of something, although it doesn't happen to me as often now as when I started the MFA program. And at the same time you've learned that it'll pass, it's not that big a deal anymore.

2. Sometimes you get really depressed when you don't come up with something and you sit there struggling… You can't do that, you're not a machine expected to spit out things.

3. Often when you work it's like you're in a curve, sometimes you're down and you don't get much done. Then you read some literature and try to come back to an old idea of yours, and then you arrive at the new piece and then you exhibit…

4. I've learned to just do something without a specific aim from the start, and let it change on the way… It can be tough to sit down and work when you feel you don't have any... if you're paralyzed and then you think that 'I'll just do something, anything, whatever', it usually still leads to something.

5. And still you feel you can't come up with anything... And if you can only understand this, that you are on good terms with your way of working, then I guess it's ok… You're working with something and all the time new ideas keep popping up, which often results in that your initial work changed into something totally different than what you expected it to be in the end.

6. At the same time, I want to work in this technique, that's my starting point. It's still my starting point but now I'm more, I can play a bit more with what it is… Well it goes up and it goes down, some periods you may feel that you can't come up with that many new ideas; you picture yourself having a steady stream of ideas. Sometimes maybe it ceases a bit… Generally you have something to do irrespective.

7. In the beginning when I worked I wanted to be sure of what I was doing before I did it… Now at least I've allowed myself to kind of start doing things, without being so sure of what I'm getting at, just because I've taken an interest in something, and letting the words come later.

8. I've found out that usually it's better to try to finish something and then… you don't have to criticize all the time. It tends to disturb more than it helps.

> 9. You're so uncertain of everything, that's kind of part of it all… The stuff you do and that flows out in every direction and, like you don't know what, and you think it's fun...

The fact that this category has not been divided into subcategories does not mean that no variations can be observed. Six quotations, excerpts 1-6 above, show a kind of uncertainty closely related to performance (e.g. "you feel all empty and you can't think of something", "some periods you may feel that you can't come up with that many new ideas, you picture yourself having a steady stream of ideas"). Such uncertainty can have a paralyzing effect on the process as a whole, but if one starts working with something, the state of uncertainty will pass ("just do something, anything, whatever, it usually still leads to something"). The uncertainty is also cyclic in nature ("you've learned that it'll pass", "it's like you're in a curve"), and therefore it holds qualities of recognition and acceptance, since the student has been through the process before and knows what it's like. Most readers are likely to recognize this phase that occurs in the very beginning of any creative process, such as writing a text. The way the students handle this by doing "something, anything, whatever" is similar to what Larsson (2000) describes as 'warming up', somewhat like athletes before a race. This initial uncertainty is not considered specific to artistic practice and will therefore not be further discussed.

The second kind of uncertainty, on the other hand, is more of a distinguishing feature of artistic work in itself. This uncertainty is present in interview excerpts 4-9 above (e.g. "do something without a specific aim from the start, and let it change on the way", "I've allowed myself to kind of start doing things, without being so sure of what I'm getting at", "You're so uncertain of everything, that's kind of part of it all"). This uncertainty is present all through the working process. It doesn't go away once you start working, which means that one has no option but to learn to cope with it. Therefore the notion of 'resting assured' with respect to Category 2 can be described as feeling confident and at ease with the uncertain.

Category 3: To Rest Assured in the Work Process
Category 3 represents experiences of resting assured connected to the work process itself. For some, a sense of resting assured in the work process was attained relatively recently during their MFA studies (3-A). Other students brought this with them from self-directed preparatory art studies, and only made minor adjustments in their ways of working after starting the MFA program (3-B). This time perspective is equivalent to Category 1; a fact that opens for comparisons between these two categories.

Variation 3-A.

   1. I start out with a thought and then I choose a material from that. Though I have started to work the other way around, to choose a material that I find interesting and then I try to think of why I do that… It's all up to myself really. I can be lazy, that's a trap as well. You'd need a whip sometimes, I know I do.

   2. When you work and something's not going your way it tends to be a bit tough at first but usually it's something that… everything doesn't collapse anymore.

   3. I've found a distribution of work. A functioning way to work. It's taken all the time up to now.

   4. That's what's been most difficult, to kind of keep up your working pace… It's difficult to keep up your pace yourself but you have to, and it's a good thing as well to be made to feel what it's like since that's what it's like I suppose, to work as an artist.

   5. So, it's still the same though maybe more discipline now than before. Like getting started, I set up more deadlines for myself now; this has to be finished by a certain date, to make it work…

These five extracts illustrate the experience of resting assured in the work process as a relatively recently attained aspect of their artistic development. The extracts indicate that the students had to put quite some time and effort into attaining this capacity. Several extracts mention self-discipline in various ways - e.g. 'distribution of work', 'keep up your working pace', 'deadlines' – and it should be noted that self-discipline is an important element of self-direction (cf. 3-B).

Variation 3-B.

   1. I work exactly the same now as before [the MFA program]… I've always worked like that, I think, it's not that different. I try to allow myself not to work, that's something new, that I don't have to work and may take some time off and think of other things.

   2. In my work there's been no difference at all [comparing MFA program with preparatory art school]… it was pretty much the same as here, a great deal of freedom… I think I can say that I learned to take responsibility for my own time at the preparatory art school. I think I would have had a problem with that if I had started directly at the MFA program.

   3. Yes, the working process, I know what it means. Since I've started at an art school with a similar structure before, I know what it's like… I get more done now than during my first year. My process is more fluent now, but still it can become even more fluent.

> 4. Yes I think my working routine was founded during those years [at preparatory art school]… In that way, my process is very much the same. I work very studio based, I have got to be in the studio.

These four extracts also illustrate an experience of resting assured in the work process. However, these students brought a well functioning process with them when they started the MFA program. Since no major adjustments were necessary, it may be assumed that their previous experiences of art education demanded a similar degree of self-direction from the students as the MFA program. As mentioned before, the Swedish MFA programs in visual art are characterized by a high degree of freedom of choice, which in turn requires a great deal of self-direction from the students. A student trained in self-direction at preparatory level is likely to just keep on working the way he/she is used to. This conclusion is supported by the extracts: e.g. "the same as here, a great deal of freedom" and "art school with a similar structure".

Comparing Categories
As shown above, Category 2 differs in some ways from the other two categories, and some clarifications concerning its nature should therefore be made. The notion of uncertainty can be understood, on the one hand, as an aspect of artistic development or, on the other hand, as a quality of the work process itself, an understanding which is also described in Category 3. Interpreting uncertainty as a quality of the work process argues against presenting uncertainty as a category of its own, but this would mean neglecting part of its meaning and not doing full justice to the results. The notion of uncertainty is recognized by Eisner, who emphasizes the ability to handle uncertainty as something that is developed in artistic practice (Eisner, 1998, 2003, 2004). Eisner's way of reasoning is in line with understanding 'resting assured in the uncertain' as an aspect of artistic development in its own right, and therefore presenting uncertainty in a separate category.

Turning to Categories 1 and 3, the fact that they share the same time perspective - attaining a sense of resting assured in the intimate and the work process either before or during the MFA program - suggests relating them to each other. Comparing the two categories, there is a clear connection between, on the one hand, variations 1-A and 3-A and, on the other hand, variations 1-B and 3-B. Four out of five of the students represented in 1-A and 3-A are the same, while three out of four of the students in variations 1-B and 3-B coincide. Put in a less abstract way, four out of the five students who experienced alienation before attaining a sense of resting assured in the intimate, also had to put in time and effort before they were able to rest assured in the work process. They attained both of these states during the MFA program. The four remaining students had never experienced alienation, and the results suggest that they were free to develop towards a sense of resting assured in the intimate right from the start. Three of

these also had attained the ability to rest assured in the work process already before they started the MFA program. Along with the shared time perspective, this result indicates that there is a connection between the qualities of alienation and self-direction.

The students themselves relate the alienation they experienced to the strong influence of others. Clearly, it is contradictory to practice artistic work under the strong influence of others, while simultaneously aiming for a high degree of self-direction. Therefore, findings suggest that self-direction is a way to a) attain a sense of resting assured in the intimate and in the work process, and b) attain these aspects of artistic development early in the process of becoming an artist, without any experience of alienation.

Comparing 1-A and 3-A, there was a divergence in one student, who experienced a kind of alienation on the way towards resting assured in the intimate, but who was still able to rest assured in the work process from the start of the MFA program (1-A combined with 3-B). Similarly, comparing 1-B to 3-B, one of the students already expressed a sense of resting assured in the intimate when starting the MFA program, but nevertheless had to put in time and effort before learning how to rest assured in the work process (1-B combined with 3-A). Consulting the material to find more about these two students' experiences of preparatory art school education, the following details came to light: The 1-A/3-B student had relatively little experience of response from others (teachers, fellow students etc.) in combination with an extensive experience of self-direction, while the 1-B/3-A student had relatively extensive experience of response from others, combined with little self-direction. These results confirm the importance of self-direction, which is also seen in the main part of the findings. In addition, it strengthens the differences that can be observed between Category 1 and Category 3. Finally, it raises questions concerning the role of the response from others, and the quality of this response.

To sum up, the fact remains that Category 2 is not comparable to Categories 1 and 3, due to a different time perspective. There are no indications in the results presented in this study that self-direction affects the process of learning to rest assured in the uncertain, and the question arises if resting assured in the uncertain simply develops along with the growing experience of repeatedly going through the process of art making. However, the indications of one or the other are weak, and further studies will be necessary in order to be more precise about possible relations between self-direction and uncertainty.

Discussion

The analysis has brought three themes to the fore that will be elaborated and discussed in the context of art education from an educational theoretical perspective. The first is the character of self-direction; the second is the notion of uncertainty, while the third

concerns previous experiences of art education. When studying self-direction within the context of learning in higher education, the widely used concept of 'self-directed learning' can hardly be avoided. Self-direction as such is nothing new to learning in visual art practice. As Williams (2000) observed, "The nature of art is often solitary and individual, and as a result artists tend naturally toward self directed methods of learning. Art practice itself provides a useful and most innovative model for self directed learning" (p. 1). While the connection between art and self-direction is certainly evident in practice, a thorough database search for research on self-directed learning and visual art practice provided the present author with only Williams' paper - a fact that calls for a brief introduction of the concept.

The roots of the concept of self-directed, or self-regulated, learning go back to an interest in adult learning projects that started to develop in the beginning of the 1960s. Now classic books, such as *The Inquiring Mind* by Houle from 1961 along with *The Adult's Learning Projects* by Tough from 1971, can be seen as catalysts for a rapidly growing interest in this area at that time (Brockett et al, 2000; Silén, 2000). Today, self-directed learning is a vast area of research, branching off in several directions. The phenomenon has been subject to a number of designations and interpretations: a complex of problems discussed by Borgström (1988), Candy (1991), Boekaerts (1999), Boekaerts, Pintrich and Zeidner (2000), Bokaerts and Corno (2005) and others. The field of research is clearly dominated by a psychological perspective. From an educational research perspective, Candy (1991) and Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998) have contributed considerably, by thoroughly examining the phenomenon of self-directed learning (Candy), and relating self-directed learning to an andragogical context (Knowles, Holton & Swanson). The Swedish contributions by Borgström (1988) and Silén (2000) also deserve acknowledgement. Many attempts have been made to define self-directed learning. Borgström listed 13 different definitions back in 1988, and many more have appeared since then. Two examples, close to the present author's standpoint, are Candy (1991) and Silén (2000) that define self-directed learning as context dependent. Silén goes the whole way, and makes the definition of the concept of self-directed learning part of the result. Instead of emphasizing 'self', she focuses on aspects of interaction as "fundamental for responsibility and independence" (Silén, 2000 p. 288) in the problem-based learning of her study, and thereby also distances herself from the psychological dominance within the field of research. Much like Silén (2000), who found it necessary to redefine self-directed learning within the context of her study, the present author sees a need to understand self-directed learning within the specific context of this study. As a consequence, throughout the rest of the article the notion of 'self-direction' will therefore be used to designate learning in this particular context.

In the specific form of learning presented here, some basic characteristics come to the fore. First of all, the individual student's artistic development is the main aim of the activities at all five Swedish Master of Fine Arts programs. The student works individually in his or her own private studio and individual supervising is the predominant form of teaching. The artistic process tends to be self-directed from start to finish. Each individual student is responsible for the initial idea and motives, as well as for the evaluation in the end. Each delimitation is up to the artist, since contemporary artwork has no restraints concerning content or form. With reference to Tremblay's personal control of "content, objectives, resources, process, and evaluation" (Tremblay 2000, p. 210), this is indeed learning with an extremely high level of personal autonomy and learner control, a form of 'supervised autodidaxy' (cf. Candy, 1994). Judging from a read through literature within the field of self-directed learning in higher education, this seems to be a learning scenario that is entirely absent. Generally, there tends to be teacher control at least in the initial and final stages of the learning process, with elements of self-direction to varying extents in between.

Bowden and Marton (1998) deal with the question of how to design a curriculum for a future that is unknown. Teaching the students current skills and knowledge works in a stable context, but since it is impossible to predict exactly what the students will need to know in the changing and flexible work contexts of today, this way of teaching has become insufficient. Bowden and Marton's suggestion is to start thinking in terms of capabilities as learning goals, i.e. the students' capabilities to act in situations that are new to them. This way of thinking about ideal learning situations is strikingly similar to the learning in visual art practice studied here:

> Students should frequently be placed in contexts in which their first task is to figure out which aspects of their knowledge are relevant to the particular situation. Having done that, they need to work out just what the problem really is. Then they need to try to solve the problem by putting together the things they know that are relevant. (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 127)

Bowden and Marton's way of thinking about developing capabilities to handle unknown situations in a future profession is attractive. After all, the practice of a professional artist corresponds to the self-directed learning situation in visual art practice in many ways (Williams, 2000). But just like most research on self-direction in higher education, Bowden and Marton (1998) presuppose teacher control in the initial and final stage of the learning process. The key to flexibility, according to them, lies in 'variation theory', a research approach that branched off from phenomenography, focusing on the experience of variation. But even though they argue in favor of experiencing variations during the learning process in order to prepare the students for various unknown situations in the future, the students are faced with a type of variation chosen by the teacher. Related to

learning in visual art practice, this way of thinking about variation and learning seems contradictory and restraining. In the visual arts, unknown situations are not something that hits an artist after finishing his or her art education. Instead, unknown and unexpected situations are intentionally sought out as part of an artist's everyday work (Danvers, 2003). In a learning situation, this would mean that "learners are encouraged to progressively extend the arena of possibilities within which they operate, not to seek enduring solutions or answers but to open up unfamiliar territory and new ideas" (Danvers, 2003, p. 50). Related to Bowden and Marton's theory of experiencing chosen variations, this may be expressed as actively seeking variations in ways of experiencing, variations that are not predetermined. This way, the act of experiencing variations truly becomes a part of learning (cf. Linder & Marshall, 2003; Silén, 2000).

The thoughts of Bowden and Marton (1998) are later elaborated in Bowden (2004), where he seems to have developed a more genuine approach towards the unexpected and unseen. He stresses the importance of showing respect for the students' various ways of seeing, instead of dismissing them as incorrect, thereby giving the students the opportunity to evaluate their experiences themselves. This modified notion of 'knowledge capability' approaches the original epistemological foundations of phenomenography (cf. Webb's critique of phenomenography in 1997a; 1997b). Also, Bowden now approaches the heart of learning in visual art practice by embracing the ability to handle the uncertain/unknown and the ability of self-direction, both brought to the fore in the present study:

> This ability to handle previously unseen, real-life situations, to make sense of them, to figure out what the relevant aspects are, to relate them to what you know and to find out what you don't know but need to use […], to define the problem and only then solve it, is what I have termed knowledge capability. (p. 40)

To further explore the relation between Bowden's notion of knowledge capability and learning in visual art practice may well be the focus of future studies. Further studies can also be undertaken when the interview material is complete, so that the MFA program can be looked upon as a whole. Especially the last year of the program actively prepares the students for working as a professional artist, and in the light of Bowden's arguments (2004), the students' learning processes at that stage should be vital objects of research.

The ability to handle the unexpected and unknown has already touched upon the second theme of the results: the notion of uncertainty. The interpretation of uncertainty as a distinguishing feature of artistic work in itself is supported by Eisner (1998, 2003, 2004). Another example of this standpoint is Danvers (2003). In outlining a process-based pedagogy for art and design within higher education, Danvers points out some key aspects of art and design practice, of which uncertainty is one (cf. Eisner, 2003, 2004).

Uncertainty and instability are regarded as positive states within the context of art and design practice, and the practitioners are used to "deal with a fundamental instability of meanings and definitions, and high levels of uncertainty in relation to knowledge and practice" (Danvers, 2003, p. 53). What Danvers describes here is uncertainty as part of art as a 'knowledge object', a term used by Booth and Ingerman (2002), among others, in their study concerning students' understanding of physics in higher education: "We have introduced the notions of study knowledge object and physics knowledge object to distinguish between making sense of the study situation in one way or another, and making sense of physics" (p. 501). Related to the present study, the equivalent of Booth and Ingerman's 'physics' (as in their notion of physics knowledge object) would be 'art'. Consequently, the quality of uncertainty may be seen as part of the art knowledge object as such.

The third theme of the result that needs to be elaborated is the role of previous experiences of art education, in which the issue of response from teachers and fellow students is included. Previous experiences of learning have proved to have a great influence on present learning situations, a fact that has been extensively discussed, from a phenomenographic perspective, by Prosser and Trigwell (1999): "[W]hen students enter a learning and teaching context, it evokes, or brings into awareness, understanding based upon previous learning experiences in specific learning and teaching situations" (p. 31). The student's prior experiences of learning, together with the student's perceptions of his or her situation, approaches to learning and learning outcomes are four simultaneously existing and consecutive elements to be considered when addressing a learning situation from a student perspective. Prosser and Trigwell stress that it is the student's awareness of his or her prior understanding (of subject matter as well as learning situations) that ought to be focused. They list four principles to consider in teaching situations, in order to support the student's learning:

> 1. The students enter our learning and teaching context with substantial qualitative variation in their prior experiences of learning and teaching.
> 2. These prior experiences of learning and teaching are related to specific prior situations in which those experiences occurred.
> 3. A new learning and teaching situation they find themselves in evokes certain aspects of these prior experiences, the aspects evoked being related to the congruence between the previous situation and the new situation.
> 4. The aspects evoked have a subsequent substantial impact on what and how students learn in the new situation. (p. 42)

In the present study, the experiences of art education prior to the MFA program have proved to be of importance to the students' artistic development. Previous experiences of self-direction seem to facilitate the development of a capacity to rest assured in the intimate, as well as resting assured in the work process. The students in the study show

great variation in their prior experiences of learning and teaching. Also, none of the students in the study went to the same preparatory art school, a fact that adds to the variation. The question of congruence between previous and new learning situations is raised in the results in relation to self-direction. The students who were already used to a high degree of self-direction continued working the way they were accustomed to, while the students with significant discrepancies between previous and present experiences had to put time and effort into making sense of their situation.

There are also indications of a connection between alienation and limited self-direction. The students themselves tend to attribute the alienation they experienced to the strong influence of others, which makes responses from teachers and fellow students a central part of their previous learning experience. But this part of the results also brings the limits of the present study to the fore. An extension is needed in order to understand and develop these indications more fully. The present study covers only a small part of the extensive interview material, and questions concerning responses from teachers and fellow students will most certainly be addressed in further studies.

Educational Implications

The aim of this article is to contribute to the assembled understanding of artistic development by focusing on changes in the relation between the student and his or her artistic work as part of the student's artistic development. The notion of 'resting assured' has been introduced to describe such a qualitative change, referring to the state of confidence and security students attain, a solid ground of trust in their own ability. This change is visible in relation to three aspects of the artistic work: the intimate, the uncertain and the work process. The connection between self-direction and attaining the state of resting assured is regarded as the main result of this study. The relevance of the results within a wider context is an open question. The structure of the five corresponding programs in visual art in Sweden is very similar in this respect. They all require a great deal of self-direction from the students, and they all emphasize the student's artistic development in their core aims and goals. Self-direction is also seen as crucial for artistic development in the results of the present study, which suggests that findings may be of relevance within the Swedish context of education in visual art practice more generally. However, there are no similar studies available to the author's knowledge, and the generalizability of the results therefore needs to be substantiated by further research within the field.

In the present study, previous experiences of self-direction allow students to attain the capacity to rest assured in the intimate and in the work process relatively early on their way towards an MFA degree. Findings also suggest a connection between limited self-

direction and alienation that the student may experience towards his or her artistic work, which in turn delays students' capacity to rest assured in the intimate and in the work process. The interpretation that self-direction promotes the capacity of resting assured raises issues concerning the transition from preparatory art school to higher education. The students already familiar and comfortable with self-direction save some time in their learning processes, since the detour of alienation is eliminated. There is a common understanding, among the staff as well as the students, that the first year at the MFA program can be very frustrating for the students. At the same time, there are traces left of the informal agenda that the students who are unable to handle the extreme self-direction are not fit to become artists - i.e. the school should not actively help the students too much through this process of acclimatization. There is no doubt that this 'non-interventionist' pedagogy within higher education in visual art practice may be questioned, and a more fruitful pedagogical approach might be to encourage students and teachers to reflect upon and discuss the learning situations and processes. But the aims of preparatory art education could also be questioned. If the aim is to prepare the students for an MFA in visual art practice, the high degree of self-direction required by the MFA program should be considered and students should receive adequate preparation. All in all, the process of transition from preparatory art school over to higher education is an intriguing area for future research.

A consideration of the implications of learning in visual art practice raises the question of whether abilities to rest assured – in the intimate, the uncertain and the work process – develop in a hierarchical order. The findings of this study show no such clear hierarchy. There are examples of students attaining a capacity to rest assured in the intimate and in the work process both rather early as well as relatively late. The analysis suggests that self-direction clearly facilitates the development of the ability to rest assured in the intimate and in the work process. However, the results are more limited when it comes to the development of resting assured in the uncertain, and further studies will be needed in order to develop more precise assertions regarding possible relations between self-direction and uncertainty. Altogether, the results encourage understanding the notion of resting assured as a whole, in all its complexity. It should also be born in mind that the notion of resting assured is only one of the aspects of artistic development that pertain to higher education. Future research will continue to broaden our understanding of processes of learning within the field of visual art practice in particular, as well as learning processes in general.

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