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Debatte

**Visualität und Bildungsgeschichte –
nur eine historiographische Modeerscheinung?**

**Visuality and history of education –
just another historiographic fad?**

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR THE
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info@klinkhardt.de

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Marta Edling

The conspicuous presence of visual conventions: some reflections on the visual imagery in the archives of 20th century Swedish art schools

As an art historian, researching the educational history of the academies of fine art in Sweden in the twentieth century and their practice-based and vocational training, I was glad to read Inés Dussels welcome reminder of the need of a critical and reflexive historiographic use of visual sources. I found her comments on the supposed connection between temporality and pictures, and the problematic idea of a straight link between a past and its imagery, especially interesting. This was a problem that I had encountered in my research in fine arts education, trying to find visual sources documenting the historic process of changes and reform during the period.

When starting up my research on the fine arts education I had great hopes of being able to use visual documents as well as visual educational material from the archives. I wanted to come to grips with changes in the history of an educational tradition shrouded in charismatic anecdotes and with very little records in the archives of actual activities and day-to-day routines. The written documents found from the 1920s up to the 1990s told almost nothing on the daily life of the schools. Until the 1960s I could find formal regulations of the hours in the life-room (the model often sat weekday mornings between 9-12), but it was almost impossible to get a grip on what kind of other activities the students and their professors performed, and where in the school they did it, and when. There were during the whole period no official regulation of “office hours”, and up until the 1960s poor students sometimes unofficially used the facilities during the night, in order to be able to work for their living during day-time. The five year education at the school of the academy was also very liberal and individualized through the whole period, with almost no curriculum (with the exception of a few mandatory courses in art history, perspective and anatomy in the first year) and scarce supervision.

I hoped that visual documentation, in archives as well in the private keepings of former students, could offer a more direct contact with activities, that either was not recorded in written sources or, otherwise, in interviews and autobiographies, always filtered and re-presented according to the discourse of professional field. As such the construed narrative was no problem; the systematic and regular repeating of doxic beliefs were telling, but I wanted to get further and to find also traces of changes in pedagogic activities and learning processes beyond the tales of charismatic professors or the trials of lonely geniuses.

To my surprise, however, the visual documentation found in the school archives, the archives of Swedish newspaper, the archive of the Swedish fine art academy, or (rare) private albums, revealed very little of changes in artistic and practice-based pedagogy or informal learning. Instead I found the same kind of repetition of discursive figures as in the written or oral sources, but now instead in the shape of visual conventions.

The most striking one was the consistent repetition of visual representations of the life-room. There were countless photographs of students sketching in the atelier, with a naked female model and not much differed between pictures taken in the 1920s or the 1980s. I knew for a fact that the schools had developed new workshops and courses, new techniques (plastic, film), and re-organized the departments (painting, graphics, sculpture) in the 1960s. I also knew that the hours in the life-room decreased due to the higher salaries paid to models in the early 1970s, and that the students' interest began to wane in the 1960s when pop-art and happenings was introduced. I found, however, only scarce photographs documenting other activities. As results of news paper articles, or rare documentary activities in the schools, there were isolated and often arranged examples; a young girl working in the etching-department, a young man pondering an unfinished canvas in the atelier, a woman in a hurry in a dark school corridor with a line of antique casts. But there were almost no representations of the daily life in workshops, no documentation of ongoing projects, collaborations, coffee breaks, seminars, group critiques, student activities, guest lecturers, or experimental seminars. It seemed as if the life-room was the preferred format when documenting educational activities; the study of the model was a visual convention that could give the representation the right "artistic" connotation. The study of the naked model was thus one of few legible ways of rendering artistic educational practice, and a visual convention constant through time, hiding historical change.

Another consistent convention was the individual portrait. There were numerous photographs, or sketches, of individual teachers and students, always designating names, but very few group renderings. This focus on the individual, on the artist (to be, or already famous) symbolically mirrored the charismatic ideals of the professional field, but told nothing of the changes in the 1970s when a pedagogy more orientated towards collective activities with yearly group trips, student group exhibitions in the spring, introduction of seminars, or group critiques was introduced. And, interestingly enough, a similar recurrent motif, also echoing this focus on original individuals, was the photographs from the yearly festival celebrations, often with members of the court, awarding scholarships and stipends to promising students, or successful artists.

The discovery of this conspicuous presence of visual conventions in the archives, sometimes even giving a misleading impression of a status quo in the daily life and educational activities at the schools, did not make my search for visual representations a failure, but made it clear that I had to re-orient my expectations.

It was rather in details, or unintended renderings of clothing, contexts and milieus, that I found visual information either not accessible through the written and oral sources, or strikingly illuminating the importance of facts not immediately perceptible as such in other sources. The change in the clothing of the professors was for example immediately telling of the loosening of civil formalities in Swedish society and the more relaxed social interaction between students and professors in the schools. In the early 1960s the professors could still look like British gentlemen with tweed suits, or bank directors with bow ties and vests, wearing painters' smocks. Later on in the decade, their new and longer hairstyle and turtlenecks revealed the adjustment to the growing political interest among students and radicalization of the social and cultural climate in Swedish society. The news reportage 1965 on the working conditions at the school of the fine art academy in Stockholm, revealed not only the bad condition of the worn facilities, but also illustrated the lack of economic resources that haunted many students: in one scene a student accidentally was caught eating his frugal lunch:

plain boiled cauliflower. Gender boundaries were also reflected in pictures of female students neatly dressed in skirts and dresses (sometimes with household aprons) illustrating gender identities and a habitus ill suited for the later alumni reality where male networks were necessary for a successful career. Representations of students' artistic work also revealed the patriarchal structure; the often obvious similarity with the style of the supervising professor, although often orally denied in interviews, was plain to see.

I thus soon realized that I had to lay aside my own ideas of what visual documentation of educational activities should be, and to accept the existing conventional and symbolic visual order. Here, as well as in oral or written sources, it was just as important to analyze the conventions, narratives and rhetoric, as well as being able to "read between the lines".

Dr. Marta Edling, Uppsala Universitet, Historiska institutionen, Box 628, S-75126 Uppsala, marta.edling@hist.uu.se

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Aus dem Inhalt

Beiträge

- Botanik und die Zähmung weiblicher Leidenschaften: Rousseau und zeitgenössische Bildungskonzepte für Mädchen und Frauen
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Debatte

- Visualität und Bildungsgeschichte – nur eine historiographische Modeerscheinung?
Visuality and history of education – just another historiographic fad?

„Images are far from being transparent sources ... There is much to be gained in using them; they certainly bring other signs and traces of the past than written documents.“ (Inés Dussel, S. 226)

Kolumne

- Quellen der Bildungsgeschichte:
„Theorie und Praxis“ – von Außen gelesen

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“Sexual desire has been minoritized, rendered a social identity ... Imprisoned by its social recognition, homosexual desire no longer circulates secretly, certainly not on ‘pride’ day, where it caricatures itself as a distinct ‘culture.’ What if we work to discern it in studies of educational history?” (William F. Pinar)