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Aesthetic Learning Encounters
at the Old Church of Jokmokk
Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to add to the body of knowledge about what aesthetic learning encounters might be and become by investigating local events of learning in a Swedish higher education visual art course. By making visible how aesthetic learning encounters unfold in an educational practice, the aim is to improve understandings of what learning in open-ended and experimental processes might mean for a learner and for visual art education. The research material consists of one student’s portfolio from a visual art course in a teacher training programme. To create a sustainable and ethical visual art education, it seems necessary to collaborate with the students on their learning processes, and being sensitive to the student’s expectations. At the same time, what Deleuze calls the collectively shared image of thought (1968/2014) regarding what visual art learning should be and look like needs to be challenged. Doing so allows student subjectivity to expand beyond the academic fields of knowledge, which in turn helps students to access the power of being heard and trusting their own abilities to change and make changes as a collaborative process.

In Sweden, aesthetic learning processes have been established as both an academic field and a subject within teacher training programmes; they appear in school contexts at all levels in the educational system (Anderson, 2014; Björck, 2014; Burman, 2014; Hellman, 2014). Aesthetic learning processes are characterized by a process similar to the entangled root system of rhizome plants, such as crab grass, where one plant can send off root threads that creates new plants (nodes/thoughts) in unexpected places.¹ Thinking about learning as a rhizome affirms the complexity of learning, and makes pedagogical simplification visible as an after construction (Hellman, 2014). Lind defines aesthetic learning processes as part of rhizomatic (network) becoming. It is about:

*twisting and turning the creative learning process from new discursive positions, in order to reach trustful and responsible access to the production of meaning and desires in an aesthetic visual knowledge production. It is a process that is open for unpredictable connections,*
Thus, an aesthetic learning process includes specific ways of knowing that involve the crisscrossing and constant adding of different intersections of knowledge, which in turn creates unexpected and merged constructions of actualisations that represent the materialisation of ideas: in this case, visual creations of art, culture and communication. The qualities of aesthetic learning processes have to do with both the unexpected linking of objects, thoughts and areas of knowledge, as well as the disentanglement of what we already know. Based on the research about aesthetic learning processes presented here, I suggest that aesthetic learning is fruitful both as a concept and an educational practice in resisting neoliberal discourse and to unleash creative potential through learning encounters (Hellman & Lind, 2017). Learning encounters here refer to human and non-human assemblages that connect, transform and expand. Assemblages may be thought of as complex arrangements and connections involving bodies, objects and expressions that come together and temporally create new ways of functioning (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2004). In everyday language, one could say that assemblages involve relations and collaborations not only to humans, but also regarding non-human objects and materiality.

The importance of aesthetic subjects was stressed in the Swedish school curricula reform of 1999, and creative activities [skapande verksamhet] were defined to be driven by students’ own questions and goals (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1999, p. 63). The authors of the reform stated that answers are not given in aesthetic learning processes; teachers need to not only support students but also challenge their preconceptions through examples such as cultural experiences and artistic language.

In the teacher training reform of 2011, however, the space for aesthetic subjects was heavily reduced; aesthetic learning processes and aesthetic forms of expressions were removed from the core of teacher education (Lindgren & Ericsson, 2013; Regeringens proposition, 2009/10:89). Previous research that used Reggio Emilia Pedagogy to examine aesthetic learning processes in Sweden notes
that these methods clash with a school culture based on assignments (Ericsson & Lindgren, 2010; Hansson-Stenhammar, 2015; Karlsson Häikiö, 2007).

These curriculum changes can be understood as a sign of rising neoliberal managerialism, which strives to produce end-product driven education in a global context (Atkinson, 2016; Davies, 2009; Hellman & Lind, 2017). Predetermined pathways for learning often means finding the correct answer to a question or a problem, then stopping the learning process to give the correct answer (Hellman & Lind, 2019). This is a problem in visual arts education and for creativity in general, especially now when spaces for open-ended learning processes have been reduced or even removed entirely from curricula. Aesthetic learning processes cannot be regulated by a rational pedagogical discourse according to goal-means-results.

The purpose of this chapter is to add to the body of knowledge about what aesthetic learning encounters are and could become, by investigating local learning events in a higher education visual arts course. By making visible how aesthetic learning encounters unfold in educational practice, I intend to improve understandings of what learning in open-ended and experimental processes can mean for learners and for visual arts education. Moreover, I investigate and discuss the implications of aesthetic learning processes in an ethically sustainable education.

These aims are addressed through the following research questions:

- How do aesthetic learning encounters unfold in the visual arts classroom?
- How do students experience and reflect on their encounters with aesthetic learning processes?
- What are the implications for aesthetic learning on political, ethical and sustainable levels?

To answer these questions, I first establish the study’s theoretical framework. Second, I explain the methods used and the context surrounding the investigation. I then present my results and analysis based on one empirical example: a visual arts portfolio submitted by a student named Doris in the Leisure Time Teacher Training Program in Sweden. I was both teacher to Doris and researcher.
for the present study. Doris’s experience contributes to a meaningful discussion about aesthetic learning encounters and how they can lead to a sustainable and ethical future for visual arts educators, students and researchers, as presented at the end of this paper.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Image of Thought: A Posthuman Ontology**

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1968/2014) introduces the concept of ‘image of thought’. This concept refers to dogma that crushes real thought under an image of thought. Here, thoughts are assimilated and naturalised to make us think that we think, when in fact we are only reproducing an image of thought. Deleuze uses the idea to demonstrate how the concept of thinking is taken for granted in philosophy and questions whether we think at all. According to Deleuze, we are born into a conformative tradition of thinking, manifested through examples such as common sense and cultural conventions. ‘Thinking’ involves the process of recognition and subjective connections to previous thoughts, which restricts us to ‘thinking’ only that which is already known. Real thinking, for Deleuze, is to think without an image (of thought), which means to think of what we do not recognise. Thought is therefore a process of becoming ‘other’ within the self, or to differ from oneself; this multiplicity and the divisions within oneself provoke thought (Deleuze, 1968/2014). In their later work, Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1994) introduce the concept of ‘the new image of thought’, which suggests that real thinking is not about the lack of an image but to think with a new image of thought that is non-representational. The new image of thought precedes or exceeds all conceptual orders and is driven by forces, relations and becomings; it is the ground for all thinking and concepts. In this way, thinking can become a truly creative act, freed from conventions and common sense (Hein, 2017). In an educational context, the image of thought can be the assimilating, habitual and procedural frameworks of institutional learning that normalises the way we think.
Methods and Context

Mapping Aesthetic Learning Processes

Using cartography to explore events in a visual arts classroom entails studying the milieu as social, material, affective and intensive, as well as investigating how people navigate and move in trajectories or itineraries to fulfil their needs, desires, driving forces and curiosities while eluding social constraints (Lenz Taguchi, 2012). The milieu and trajectories are closely intertwined: ‘the trajectory merges not only with the subjectivity of those who travel through a milieu, but also with the milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it’ (Deleuze, 1997, p. 61). In this research, cartographic tracing and mapping of the aesthetic learning process includes local events of learning through art’s event of becoming. This is a ‘becoming’ process for humans as visual arts teachers as well as the becoming or production of the milieu; here, the milieu refers to the visual arts classroom and locations investigated in the learning process. The methods of analysis draw from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987/2004) theories for intervening (in this case by researching) and inventing. In the present context, this implies discussing what the potential or future implications of the study might be (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). It is equally important to highlight the ethical responsibility of the researcher, since the production of knowledge contributes to the future of the milieu for humans and non-humans alike (Lenz Taguchi, 2012).

The Researched Milieu

Because of the curricula changes of 2011, students of the Leisure Time Teacher Training Program must choose between visual arts or physical education as their qualification to teach in elementary school. Those who chose visual arts cited either interest or experience in the subject; some expressed concerns that they did not know anything about visual art-making when entering the course. In this chapter I focus on the portfolio of a student enrolled in the visual arts course in the autumn semester of 2018. In addition to serving as the researcher for this study, I was also the teacher of the visual arts course; as such, I documented the
course both as a teacher and a researcher via text and photographs. The class included 20 students and consisted partly of distance studies; this meant that I only met the students five times in one semester, each time over a three-day period. It was the first time that I taught this course, and I sensed that both the students and I had an open and explorative approach; following hunches and being sensitive to classroom relations. The course took form in a collaborative ongoing process where the students and I reflected and discussed the course as it unfolded. All students in the course signed consent forms that permitted me to access their portfolios for research.

During the course, the students received an assignment called ‘Aesthetic Learning Processes’. This project, which ran through the whole semester, consisted of a series of missions. I devised the missions in an ongoing process as the course developed, discussing and negotiating with the students as I did so. In the first mission, I asked them to choose a place that had personal meaning and investigate it visually. I encouraged them to approach the place as an archaeologist or a detective at a crime scene. The students made visual and textual notes and collected materials and objects from their respective locations. They researched the places physically and materially on-site, then investigated the location’s history online and through interviews with people of their choosing. Their explorations involved the question, ‘who do I become at this place?’ To explore this, the students used visual arts techniques such as sketching, painting and drawing (tools included graphite, charcoal, crayons, aquarelle, ink, video and photography). I asked the students to design a display using materials and objects found at their locations, and the displays were photographed. Finally, the students created antitype images of their locations, analysing and locating discourses (ways and orders of seeing) connected to their selected places, and attempted to challenge dominant ways of seeing by visual means. Each student’s visual work was presented in a portfolio along with their reflections. One student, Doris, chose to investigate the old church of Jokmokk in the town where she grew up.
Example: A Learning Encounter with the Old Church of Jokmokk

The old church of Jokmokk is called *Lappkyrkan* in everyday speech. The word ‘Lapp’ [Laplander] refers to the indigenous people of Sweden, who are now called ‘Samer’ [Sami]. Doris wrote that the church was originally built in 1753, but it burned down in 1972 and was then rebuilt. As Doris lived in Jokmokk most of her life, she was well acquainted with the church. She remembered rumours from her childhood that the church area was haunted by the inhabitants of coffins stored in the wall surrounding the building [bogårdsmur], and she never dared to pass by the church after dark. The ground outside the church froze in winter, so the coffins were stored in the wall until spring when the frost would give way and graves could be dug. Doris described the wall as made of robust timber with room for new coffins.

In her portfolio, Doris wrote:

All of my three children are baptised here, and there are often concerts and musical events here. My memories of the church are of peace and joyfulness, not about grief. I wondered why there are no funerals in this church. When I went to the parish house to interview some persons there, they told me that the church is too small to bring a coffin inside. I was given the key to the church for the day; it is with great respect that I unlock and step inside. The sun is shining through the old window glass, and it makes one experience serenity, I feel all the stress draining off me. It feels exciting to be alone and to have the
opportunity to investigate the church and the things in there more closely … The hymn books I found were in Swedish, South-Sami and North-Sami language … The furnishing and decoration are influenced by the Sami culture, the antependium [a textile to decorate the altar] has an embroidery of tin thread with Sami patterns …

Even though the church was very familiar to Doris, she experienced a new connection to it and learned something more, a deeper understanding of the place. Her learning process was created through the event in which personal experiences met with visual investigation. As teacher, I could not predict or control this learning process; further, I had no personal knowledge of the Jokmokk church or its history. Each time a student presented his or her visual

Figure 4. Display with artefacts and a drawing of tin embroidery from the church. Photograph: Doris, 2018.
investigation of a place, everyone in the class learned something new. The assignment led to a multiplicity of relational learning, knowing and knowledge sharing about places that had previously been unknown to us.

At the end of the course, Doris investigated practices of looking at the church (and churches in general). For her last assignment, she created a series of photomontages that challenged normal ways of looking at churches, for an example how churches are depicted on postcards. In one image, she took a photo of the church's exterior and added the emblem of the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club to the sign outside the building. She also staged an event through a series of photographs where the church became a crime scene; she even borrowed and put up yellow-and-black striped tape from the police to stage the scene. Doris showed these photographs to her colleagues at the local leisure time centre. One of her colleagues was disturbed by the images, and another warned Doris that she might get into trouble if the images became public. They told her that she was disrespectful towards the church and the homestead of Jokmokk. Doris became upset and worried, she contacted me and asked if she had done wrong, and if she should delete the photomontages and redo the assignment. We had a conversation about the many examples of art and media's power to affect or provoke people. This led to a very valuable discussion in class about ethics and the potential of visual art to challenge images of thought and habitual ways of seeing. When I contacted Doris about using her portfolio example in this study, she stated that she did not want the provocative photo montages to be published. However, she wrote that she felt very happy and proud of her work with the Jokmokk church.

Doris's explorative visual investigation resulted in unexpected connections between objects, different areas of knowledge and the actualisation or materialisation of personal knowledge, affect, thoughts and learning. When the course was evaluated, some students expressed that they first found the assignment of aesthetic learning processes difficult to interpret, but in the end, it was the most important experience for many of the students. The potentials, or the force of visual art, culture and communication has to do with disrupting procedural, normative learning in institutional contexts. This force enables new ways
of seeing and understanding, which seems highly valuable in an educational context that is mainly governed by prescribed learning. Although the students worked individually with the assignment, it was a relational and collaborative learning encounter that involved humans, places, affects, buildings, digital technologies, memories, thought and visual art materials. These relational encounters between humans and non-human objects generated dynamics with unpredictable learning processes that intensified the virtual power of becoming. Based on course literature and her own learning experiences, Doris wrote the following about the specific qualities of aesthetic learning and how, in her perceptions, it can matter to a learner:

An aesthetic learning process does not aim at a specific goal with an expected result, it is about the student’s choices that creates different directions in the process. It is a process of investigating where students are trying things out and the result is determined by what the student consider important. An aesthetic learning process … it is about developing participation so that they [the students] can have the possibility to express themselves freely and combine different forms of expressions.

Doris demonstrates ‘becoming’ in at least three ways. First, she is becoming an artist through her investigations at the Jokmokk church, working with different visual art materials and figuring out how to create and express her new experience and knowledge in a visual way. Second, Doris is becoming a researcher through merging with the explorative process much like an ethnographer, allowing her encounters with materials, persons and objects to create the continuation of the process. She investigates systematically without knowing what the results might be. Third, Doris is in the process of becoming a teacher, which is visible in her written portfolio reflections where she discusses her own learning process in relation to imagining her future as a visual arts teacher at an elementary school.
Discussion

If the curriculum changes of 2011 are any indication, aesthetic learning processes are undesirable politically. Therefore, it is an important task to bring forward the benefits but also addressing the risks of aesthetic learning processes. Rhizomatic learning processes are unpredictable, thus challenging the neoliberal ideal of education and learning. A neoliberal ideal in educational settings rely on images of thought and, in doing so, reproduce the already known and assimilate students’ learning processes (Atkinson, 2016). In the culture of organising learning through assignments that follow prescribed stages of learning instead of learning processes based on curiosity, current educational settings run the risk of creating streams of assimilation that standardise students’ becoming and learning processes.

It should be noted that pedagogical learning encounters can also become too much of a risk for some students. Therefore, it is necessary to think and act ethically as a teacher by taking responsibility for the process and demonstrating relational sensitivity. This research example of working with images that challenge norms shows not only the possibilities of how aesthetic learning encounters might unfold, but also the limits, restrictions and taboos of visual experimentation even within an educational and ‘secure’ context. In the example of Doris, she was exposed and vulnerable to the critique of her co-workers at the leisure time centre, since they were provoked by her images. As a result, aesthetic learning processes are not only challenging and unpredictable in positive ways, they might also put the student in different kinds of trouble. The unpredictability of aesthetic learning processes also might include students getting involved in difficult dilemmas and experiencing undesired conflicts or confusion. The students experienced very different learning processes and insecurities about the assignment. As a teacher, I tried to consider the ethics of the assignment with its missions, keeping in mind the possibility of students feeling at loss or experiencing meaninglessness instead of an aesthetic learning encounter. The learning encounters presented demonstrates how vital it is for teachers to be sensitive to students’ different experiences and to be available should they need guidance. To create a sustainable and ethical visual art education, one has to negotiate and be sensitive to student needs for recognition while at the same
time challenge the collectively shared image of thought regarding what visual art learning should be and look like. Doing so allows student subjectivity to expand beyond the academic fields of knowledge, which in turn helps students to access the power of being heard and seen and to trust their own and collective abilities to change and make changes. In doing so, they might surpass the image of thought in a responsible, and ethical mode of learning.

In short, visual arts education should not be located at either extreme: it should not be all about reproducing traditions of depicting or expressionism, but neither should it romanticise ideas of radically overthrowing existing traditions and common conceptions of visual art education. In this research, I question a radical approach to visual art education since it might not be ethical or feel unsafe for the students. Similarly, it would not be a sustainable way of thinking about power; charging students with the task of creating a meaningful learning process by themselves is neither a democratic nor responsible approach, if the students feel they have been abandoned or put out at risk. This seems true even if the assignment is an act against the habitual or prescribed learning currently dominating education. One cannot bring ethics and sustainability to a situation by simply reversing existing orders and hierarchies. Instead, this research stress the importance of democratically negotiating the more radical ideas about visual art education with the normative image of thought about what visual art education should be, in a collaborative learning process. For a student, it might be necessary to risk a leap of thought so that norms can be detected and challenged; for this to happen, the classroom environment must be relational, responsible and trustful. It is the function of the teacher to create assignments that can stimulate unpredictable learning processes and creativity, and a necessary ground for this is to build and maintain relationships of trust. This is a delicate and complex ecology that involves collaboration, subject-specific learning, modes of expressing knowledge, student comprehension of learning, different states of affect and intensities, and who and what may connect to the learning assemblage. Once these learning encounters pick up speed, the learning will be partly uncontrollable; which is why the interweaving and negotiation of aesthetics, learning and ethics is of crucial importance.
Endnote

1 Rhizome is an example of an assemblage, a concept used by Deleuze and Guattari, described in the introduction of their book A thousand plateaus (1987/2004).

References


