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## Constructions of Professional Subjectivity at the Fine Arts College

**Abstract:** Higher education can function as an important marker of seriousness in fields characterized by diffuse professional standards. Using the case of a fine arts institute, the article outlines the role of higher education in promoting the interconnection of a professional and individual subjectivity; being an artist is not merely something one does but something one is. By primarily examining interview material, it explores how an ideal position of individual self-reliance relates to the alumni of the institute. Some respondents were not “in sync” with this position and needed to seek out other resources in order to construct themselves as professional artists. However, they seldom rejected the kind of subjectivity promoted by their education, but rather renegotiated it as part of the uncertainty of their chosen field.

**Keywords:** arts professionals, artistic education, self-reliance, discursive repertoire

As in many branches of higher education, art college students learn to develop practices and learn the conventions of their field, that is, to embody the occupation of an artist. Art students acquire specific knowledge and skills, as well as norms, values and shared assumptions (Singerman, 1999; Flisbäck, 2006). In some occupations, the link between professional status and education is clear, at times in the form of licenses that allow the practice of a profession. Formally, this is not the case for most artistic occupations, as autodidacts and amateurs have access to artistic markets as well as to the identity “artist.” However, as argued by Sciulli (2007), art and professionalism were once closely interlinked, as visual academies in France and Italy during the *ancien régime* created prototype professionals. The academies linked theoretical instruction “to the delivery of expert occupational services” (Sciulli, 2007, p. 38) and admitted students on the basis of skill rather than social status or family affiliation, that is, established a professional norm.

However, informal processes of the contemporary art world make education an important requirement for achieving recognition. Having the name of a prestigious college on one’s CV functions as a passport to the art world, and has become practically a prerequisite for gaining acceptance as a professional artist (Gustavsson, Börjesson, & Edling, 2012; Thornton, 2008). The legitimization provided by the state through the creation of higher education in the arts is also an important aspect of artists gaining acknowledgement in society (c.f. Sjöstrand, 2013). The issue of professionalism in art is a complex one; artists seem to escape *and* conform to aspects of classic and semi-professions, as outlined by Brante (2013) (artists traditionally have strong autonomy and control over work and often belong to the upper middle class, however, they seldom acquire large monetary rewards and have no real closure of market). As such, arts education is an interesting case relating to other occupations that are not formally professions, as it is part of creating the in-

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formal norms that influence who gets to belong to the category “artist.”

In the present paper, artistic professionalism is conceived of as an “identity that is committed to the values and norms of a given profession” (Paquette, 2012, p. 10). As such, it is close to the definition of an occupational based subjectivity. The norms and values of an educational institution are analysed in relation to their role as discursive resources in the process of constructing certain artistic subject positions, and by extension, identities (cf. Skeggs, 1997; Taylor & Littleton, 2012). This means that I understand discourses as a way to “control” understandings of concepts such as “the artist.” Institutions, such the educational system, create subject positions by imposing conditions on how to act (such as how to be an artist), often by more or less unspoken norms and values. Occupations that lack formal criteria for who can be accepted may develop informal criteria based on norms and values. This kind of informal criteria is important to study in relation to professionalism.

The aim of the study is to outline the role of an arts institution in promoting self-reliance as a certain aspect of the artist’s professional and individual subjectivity. This is to be understood as a construct that is informed by a discourse of freedom, in relation to the processes that build up an understanding of oneself as a (professional) artist. The learning situation in some of the more prestigious arts colleges, such as Goldsmiths in the UK, California Institute of The Arts (CalArts) in the US and the Royal Institute of Arts in Stockholm (hereafter referred to as the Institute), has been found to place considerable responsibility in the hands of students (Thornton, 2008; Edling, 2010). This involves few or no obligatory elements, as the studies are based on individual work. Drawing from material containing retrospective interviews with art alumni, the article asks: What kind of subjectivity related to being a professional artist do these norms help construct, and how do art students themselves engage in these kinds of norms? What happens if they find they do not fit into any normative or desired position? Through exploring these questions, the article highlights how professional subjectivity can be constructed at a particular site.

## Previous research

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, art works were understood to represent immutable truth, morality and beauty (Scully, 2007). Due to these norms, art academies could gain royal privilege to instruct experts. However, their authority could not be retained when impressionists started to challenge normative standards of truth and beauty. Since around the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, romanticism placed art in another position in society through its articulation of the importance of freedom and autonomy (Vestheim, 2009; Taken & Boomgaard, 2012). This entailed a kind of subjectivity, where artists have been regarded as geniuses with a mission of “truth-telling” and “society-changing.” In her study of alumni of the University of the Arts London, Oakely (2009) found that ethical notions inherited from romanticism were remarkably consistent among her respondents. Consequently, the alumni often differentiated “art” from “work” (cf. Taylor & Littleton, 2012). However, art schools in Europe and America did not immediately follow the romantic ideas of free art as they were emerging at that time (Witham, 2012). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most art academies still followed classical principles, meaning that art students displayed their professionalism by copying the work of masters. As noted by Taken and Boomgaard (2012), it was much later that visual art education became “Romanticized”, that is, came to focus on the freedom of the arts.

Translated to the concrete learning situation at the arts college, the idea of freedom in the arts involves a minimum of curriculum or obligation (Edling, 2010).

The students are expected to individually lead the process of creating their own work, typically assessed at an exhibition in their final year. This “laissez-faire mentality” of arts institutes is understood to rest on the romantic concept that creative talent cannot be taught (Edling, 2010, p. 196; Witham, 2012). The logic behind this mentality is also based on the need to create a means of preparing for the highly individualized and uncertain art world (Edström, 2008b; Edling, 2010, 2012). Existing since the 16<sup>th</sup> century but belonging to the state-run higher education system since 1977, the Institute under study has a dominant and prestigious position in the field of artistic education with regard to financial resources and professorial positions (Ericson, 1988). Gustavsson et al. (2012) found that having graduated from the Institute has been a stepping-stone into different prestigious positions and successful careers in the Swedish art world. Generally accepting around 3% of applicants each year, competition for a place in the program is intense (Gustavsson et al., 2012).

As noted by Oakely (2009), there is a lack of international research exploring the relationship between the training of artists and their attitudes to work. Nordic research, much of it based on Bourdieu’s capital and field theory (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 2000), has argued that the student autonomy that is valued and recognized by art professors can be seen as a social skill acquired through belonging to the higher social classes (Flisbäck, 2006; Edling, 2010; Gustavsson et al., 2012). The professional field of art has been found to require resources to be used as “venture capital” if one is to take a position in which one’s material and economic security are compromised (Flisbäck, 2006). The supposed naturalness of exercising freedom thus becomes problematic when we consider the social selection to the art colleges and the social production of the artist. However, researchers have also pointed out the realistic training for the future that is provided by the laissez-faire educational approach, owing to its close connection to the uncertainty and fluctuations of the art world (Edling & Görts, 2003; Edling, 2012). Previous research has provided great insights into the context of the higher education in the arts and the impact of class background and access to various forms of capital. However, little has been done on the significance of arts institutions in forming certain discourses that impact on how art students form their (professional) self. In order to understand how institutions form structures for subject positions that are linked to professional identity and activity, a more poststructuralist approach is fruitful, as it can shed light on some artists’ ambivalence toward viewing art as a professional career choice (cf. Røyseng, Mangset, & Norgen 2007; Taylor & Littleton, 2012).

### **Analytical perspective – (un)troubled subject positions**

As outlined by Biesta (2003), different theorists have understood subjectivity differently. For example, Immanuel Kant (2003) stressed the notion of autonomy and independence as prerequisites of being a subject, which has had great influence on modern education. However, as Biesta (2003) concludes, this kind of individualistic approach does not raise the issue of the social prerequisites of subjectivity. In the present study, the concept is used to identify an idealized way of being, constructed mainly by the local discourse as used by the actors at the Institute. According to this perspective, “freedom” is understood as a discursive resource that characterizes the construction of a self-reliant subject position, capable of making choices, in an institutional frame (Marshall, 1996; Edwards, 2002). It is also used to try to understand how different people are distinguished by their ability to display this ability to handle the uncertainty of seemingly infinite choice.

Moreover, subjectivity denotes the individual’s sense of self, which in turn is understood as an ongoing process of becoming that derives from the relation between the self and the social context (Staunæs, 2003; Bacchi, 2005). This is close

to the concept of identity, however, sense of self is understood as a socially rather than psychologically conditioned principle (Gielen, 2012). Discourses are understood to create “instructions” for those identifying with certain subject positions, such as that of the artist, making it difficult to behave in different ways and still be considered, by others, to belong to this position (Winter Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000; Staunæs, 2003). This is not to say that individuals have no power over their identity process. The analysis is intended to be sensitive to the way people accept or question accessible discourses and subject positions (Skeggs, 1999). When analysing the lived experiences of the alumni, I have used the concept “un/troubled” subject positions (Staunæs, 2003). When individuals find themselves unable to access ideal subjectivities/identities, or to create subjectivities that seem inappropriate relative to accepted norms or values, they are analysed as troubled. In contrast, when individuals are “in sync” with the discursively constituted appropriate subject position, they are analysed as untroubled (Staunæs, 2003, p. 106).

## Data and method

The empirical material consists of interview data with twenty graduates from the Institute: eleven women and nine men. All of my respondents except one live in Stockholm. The interviews lasted from roughly forty to ninety minutes, and were carried out in the respondents’ studios or workplaces, or in cafés. Selection of respondents was purposive and meant to ensure a heterogeneous age and gender constellation. In the results section, the respondents have been given pseudonyms in order to reduce the risk of recognition. The data reduction process has been focused on identifying key discursive resources or discursive repertoires related to the production of artist subjectivities (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discursive resources are “collectively held meanings and values” that, in an institutional context, can be local (Taylor & Littleton, 2012, p. 42). As repertoires, they form patterns in ways of talking about certain phenomena. These patterns are choices of words, metaphors, and utterances that describe how people, actions or phenomena (whether material or social) are or were. The study is also supplemented with interviews with staff members—two professors, one lecturer and the vice chancellor of the Institute<sup>1</sup>—as well as a reading of Institute documents<sup>2</sup>. The material from the Institute represents people who uphold and control the discursive resources regarding the artist subject position, thus those who function as gatekeepers. Although the sample of staff interviews is relatively small (the proportion of staff is smaller than that of the alumni), the staff respondents represent different important positions at the institute, and the reading of the written material ensures reliability. The material can thus be understood as representing an institutional frame around the alumni material with regard to the research questions on artist subjectivity. In the following section, this material will be presented first in order to depict the institutional frame. Consequently, the analysis of the alumni material will be presented in relation to this contextual framing.

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1 The vice chancellor of the Institute gave his consent to participate although he is easily identified, and has been given the opportunity to read the interview transcript and the article itself in order to accept the usage of quotes.

2 The annual reports for 2011 and 2012 (the annual report for 2013 was not yet published at the time of writing the article), Information on the application for Master of Fine Arts 2012/2013, Information on the application for Bachelor of Fine Arts 2012/2013, a compendium describing the courses, seminars and workshops offered 2011/2012, a compendium describing the BA and MA programs in fine art, 2012 and A guide for students, 2012/2013.

## Discursive negotiations of artist subjectivity

### *The institutional context: provision and facilitation*

The Institute's task is constructed as "creating the best conditions for artistic development", quoting the vice chancellor. In the material, the teachers and workshops are described as "resources" that are aimed at promoting students' ability to "independently realize their projects and ideas" (A Guide for Students, 2012/2013). As it seeks to offer a platform for artistic development, not to steer through curriculum, the Institute thus frames itself rather as a "passive" provider than an "active" educator (cf. Gustavsson et al., 2012). However, the task of the Institute is also constructed as showing students what they, according to the vice chancellor and professor 2, "don't already know", in order to avoid the risk of students only using techniques they already master. Thus an element of a teaching-learning outcome exists alongside the provider repertoire, which in turn is constructed in opposition to teaching-learning outcomes. Important to the framing of the Institute as a provider is drawing on discursive resources regarding talent, because there is an understanding that it is impossible to teach anyone how to be an artist. As professor 1 put it: "Someone who does not have it, you cannot help."

The discursive repertoire of talent thus rests on an understanding of natural endowment, as opposed to mechanical, teachable abilities. This understanding of the naturalness of talent and the role of the institution in fostering that talent resembles the notion of "organic markets" and resistance to any interference with the spontaneous order of markets by liberal economists such as Friedrich Hayek (see, e.g., Hayek, 1945; Peters, 2001). In her work on the history of artist education, Stankiewicz (2007) also noted how artist educators persist in their belief in the talented genius. It is the discursive repertoire of talent that creates the need for a specific procedure when selecting new students to the Institute, as described by Gustavsson et al. (2012), where students are not accepted on the basis of grades or scholarly credentials, but on their artistic skill. According to professor 1, "there are those who do not have these educational merits but are still amazing artists." The selection process is thus based on the idea that artistic talent is not reflected through regular training and qualifications, and that this talent must not be missed due to lack of scholarly merit. Professor 2 articulates the notion of the non-trainable artist in the same way:

As an artist, everything is based on your own desire, it's something a bit special that you can't really teach, you can encourage them when you feel that somebody has it, you can say it's right, and you have to carry that by yourself (...).

In the quote, the respondent draws on the impossibility of teaching art students, and on discursive resources regarding autonomy ("you have to carry that by yourself" as referring to the students). The importance of autonomy is also visible in how meanings are constructed in the written material, in expressions such as "student-led," where students are "free to choose" which "artistic technique they wish to pursue" (A Guide for Students, 2012/2013), and in statements by the staff such as "The education is based on the idea that the student will develop his or her own language (...) their job (as students) is to handle all these decisions themselves" (interview professor 2).

### *Conflicting discourses and the self-reliant subject position*

In alumni reports published by the Institute (i.e., Bown, 1996; Lindström, 2012), the issue of freedom is discussed as a simultaneously positive and negative factor. As interpreted by the vice chancellor, the positive sides of the Institute have been

framed as the “resources” available, primarily in the form of the professors and teachers, the premises of the Institute, the workshops, courses and economic potential to finance one’s projects. Being able to “work with what you want” is understood as the positive side of freedom. The Vice chancellor described it like this: “Here, things are a bit more anarchistic, chaotic, people do pretty much what they want, and there are advantages to that.” I argue that this understanding of the positive side of freedom as the absence of top-down power is a result of the discursive repertoires of freedom and organic talent: the “anarchistic and chaotic” opportunity to do “what you want” is constructed as optimal for creativity (cf. Edling, 2012).

According to theories of discourse, subjects are simultaneously positioned in different ways by conflicting discourses (Winter Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). In the material, the freedom repertoire competes with an understanding of the negative sides of freedom. These are lack of transparency and the presence of informal power structures. The processes of admissions, examinations, graduation and exhibitions have been “very unclear” (quoting the vice chancellor) and largely orally transmitted. It is thus difficult for students to know on what basis one “passes” (his quotation mark). The task of the Institute, according to the vice chancellor, is to “identify the positive aspect of freedom, and counteract the negative sides of freedom.” This has primarily been accomplished by involving the personnel and student representatives in jointly formulating guidelines to promote transparency and openness. Freedom can thus be understood as a battery with a negative and positive pole, both required to keep creativity running.

The artist subjectivity constructed in the Institute material thus draws on several and sometimes competing discursive resources. It is based on a repertoire of natural talent, where beneficial structures for creativity are understood as occurring organically under the conditions of freedom from top-down power and constraints. This is complemented with a competing discursive resource that highlights the risk of creating intangible and invisible power structures, a situation that needs to be altered through regulations and processes of involvement. The Institute is thus trying to handle the beneficial and destructive aspects of these competing discursive repertoires, which is why they can co-exist.

Resulting from the competing discursive repertoires is the subject position of being self-reliant. In order to be an artist, one must be self-reliant, and the act of self-reliance lies in the ability to handle choices. My analysis shows that the importance is not the freedom to choose per se but on the ability (obligation) to handle decisions in a space of almost infinite possibilities. This result reflects the work of Edling (2010). Providing the tools and resources for active choosers becomes the core rationale of the Institute. Thus, by promoting the notion of art students as having choices, the Institute engages in practices that position the students as enterprising. I would argue that the valuing of self who has free choice signifies a moralizing discourse, aimed at the responsabilization of the student (cf. Edwards, 2002; Peters, 2001). These practices were acutely experienced by the alumni, to whom the next section will turn.

### ***The alumni: Being/wanting education***

The alumni could largely be divided into two overarching groups, related to their ability and experiences of adhering to the repertoire of freedom. Helena, who had an artist parent, and had attended one of the most competitive preparatory schools aimed at acceptance to the Institute, appreciated the ability to “do what you want,” as she could spend her time on her projects. She constructs herself as “her own education.” She started her business while a student and made external exhibitions during her fourth year. She and other alumni benefiting from the Institute as a provider thus viewed the Institute as a platform for their already accomplished artistic subjectivity. For them, the years at the institute are comparable to a five-year bur-

sary with access to student loans, material, mentors and studios. As the construction of their subjectivity aligned with the self-reliant subject position of the Institute, their sense of their professional self remained “untroubled.” Having untroubled subjectivity in this context means, thus, having the ability to embody the self-reliant subject position without friction or reactions of dis-identification.

Typical of the respondents categorized as having untroubled subject positions is that they form a discursive repertoire of seriousness when speaking of their years at the Institute. In my material, expressions such as being a “studio rat,” “working very hard” and “practically living” at the Institute align part of their self-construction with the seriousness attached to the artist subject position (cf. Røyseng et al., 2007). One of the alumni, Per, formulates a critique against the discourse of talent based on his understanding of the artistic career as “all hard work.” This repertoire of seriousness as hard work reflects the absence of the talent repertoire in the alumni interviews, thus challenging the idea of natural endowment. It also echoes theorization of the protestant ethic as outlined by Weber (2001). Alongside the construction of oneself as hard working could be the respondent’s attempt to be admitted to the Institute as an extension of an interest, not as a career choice. Robert exemplifies this: “It was not because I wanted to be an artist or something, if you know what I mean, the difference? It was ... a great interest to me.” These ambivalent feelings toward turning your interests into a profession are illustrative of what Taylor and Littleton (2012) found as the construction of the creative self in opposition to work and true to the trope of art for art’s sake.

However, the untroubled artistic subjectivity could clash with the experience of facing an indifferent art world after graduating from the Institute. There is an understanding of the Institute as “something other than reality,” Vera puts it, expressed, for instance, as the Institute being a “bubble,” “protected world” and “artificial breathing.” Hanna experienced her graduation from the Institute as a “reality shock” and “almost a mental crash.” The sudden lack of context, support and economic resources could be in stark contrast to the situation at the Institute, or could feel, Vera says, like “walking into a wall.” This attests to the fact that their investment in the self-reliant subjectivity was reliant on the acknowledgement of others (cf. Skeggs, 1997). It also relates to the transition between education and work as one of “trial and error,” where the alumni had to learn to write grant applications, understand the procedures for handling a public art assignment, write project designs, handle the finances of a small business, or handle their contacts with important actors on the art scene. This is understood in terms of the discrepancy between “being” an artist and “working” as an artist, where the artist subject position could leave aspects of working artistically untouched.

Other alumni, however, talked about needing “more guidance” or expressed that they “had expected to get an education.” These alumni were not “in sync” with the discursively constituted appropriate subject position. Peter, who came from a preparatory school based on courses, describes the free approach of the Institute as a “shock” and as “uninspiring.” These respondents understood the context of the Institute as a premise that would give them some sort of key to artistic professionalism. Wanting an education—that is, taking courses and creating a context of educational outlines at the Institute, in contrast to isolating oneself in the studio—can be understood a way to handle or cope with the feelings of abandonment and isolation the subject position of self-reliance could cause those who lacked preparation or a “feeling for the game.” Typically, some of the alumni left the institution for long periods of time as a way to handle their inability to fit into this subject position, something that, paradoxically, is reflected on as having been beneficial to their professionalism, as it forced them to learn how to work on their own. One of the respondents, Ulrika, illustrated how some deviated from the discursive repertoire of seriousness and hard work, as she found herself “in a sort of coma” after being accepted to the school:

I sat there staring in the studio, I went to bed and I was tired, I had this, I was afraid of making mistakes, I simply had performance anxiety... It was so free, it was so free when [NN] was vice chancellor, and I think it's great that, it's supposed to be completely free, it's utopian, but I couldn't do it, I needed more guidance, when, I wasn't confident."

Ulrika's statement about her inability to do anything as a consequence of her freedom to do whatever she wished is significant in relation to the troubled subject position, as she simultaneously acknowledges the norm of freedom. The alumni speak of self-reliance as a precondition for accessing the resources of the Institute. This entailed the premise of having "an idea about something," having a vision, being driven, ambitious, persistent, stubborn, outreaching, not passive, needy or shy, which in turn created a situation of strong competition. Some alumni even talk about seeing other students "crashing". The discursive repertoire of freedom could thus be understood as a way to "weed out" those who could not "take the pressure." In her study of students in higher artist education, Edström (2008a) also saw traces of an informal agenda, according to which students who are unable to handle the extreme self-direction were deemed unfit to become artists.

The condition of self-reliance can also be framed in terms of silences on the part of the Institute, regarding information about bursaries, available courses, and the conditions of the art world. Maria, who had an MA from a university in another European country, reacted to the tendency for students to not share information: "You see to yourself in a different way... because you don't want someone else telling you what to do, it's not that they aren't generous, but they don't want to restrict your freedom to choose." Maria's statement illustrates the positive connotation attached to choice that was present at the Institute, which was in contrast to her idea of generosity as sharing information; a result of having experiences from other contexts. Another example is Markus, who grew up in a family that, in his view, lacked cultural capital. He tried to ask his professor about "tricks" regarding "how to survive afterwards," but never got any answers. In relation to other students who had artist parents to ask for advice, he felt "very empty-handed." In her study of art colleges in the US, Thornton (2008) also found silence regarding aspects of the art market and how students were hungry for information. These silences thus seem to reflect an inability for the art colleges to respond to the general lack of correlation between a successful artistic career and educational context. In this material, silences are understood as a result of the freedom repertoire, with the corresponding self-reliant subjectivity connected to the ability to navigate in a situation characterized by lack of transparency.

### ***(In)visible hierarchies and the importance of mentors***

The discursive repertoires of freedom, as they were constructed at the Institute, could be questioned through the alumni's understanding of the influence and power of the professors. Although the absence of criteria was thought to function as way for the Institute to avoid exerting top-down power, students were still assessed according to principles of "interesting" and "uninteresting" art, according to professor 2. The power of assessment was evident to the alumni, causing them to question whether the Institute really was "free."

Although the supervisory studio conversations with a professor and other teachers are understood as the "backbone" of the education at the Institute (A guide for Students, 2012/2013), one alumni report (Lindström, 2012) found that the graduates received unequal numbers of supervisory visits from their professor, ranging from zero to twenty visits per semester. In line with the self-reliant subject position, the students were expected to be active in their pursuit of contact with their profes-



sor. The importance of the supervisory professor is expressed by graduates who had positive experiences of this relationship (Taylor & Littleton, 2012). The alumni speak of important aspects of the good relationship based on respect for the supervisor as a good artist, appreciation of his/her ability to talk about the art work, to have discussions and dialogues that led to new insights, to be challenged and to be understood.

Another basis for questioning the freedom repertoire was the alumni's awareness of art-related values and hierarchies at the Institute. Edling (2010) has noted the hierarchy of art schools, where more liberal arts schools (like the Institute studied here) were considered more prestigious, while the idea of work-oriented training in art was considered to be of lower status.<sup>3</sup> The hierarchy of art thus roughly follows a logic according to which intellectual and abstract expressions are on the top and more handicraft-oriented techniques, deemed as commercial, are on the bottom. An understanding of the hierarchies of what was or was not deemed interesting could have the effect of one student not telling his peers at the Institute that he wanted to apply for a design school, or result in feelings of inadequacy when working with techniques deemed to be more handicraft oriented. In my interview with Ulrika, this experience was most acute at the final exhibition of her work, which consisted of handicraft material. The higher value attached to conceptual and intellectual art clashed with her wish to work "intuitively" and "with her hands," activities that were not deemed to be "real art". Her rejection of the conceptual hegemony caused her to question herself as an artist. It is interesting to note that Ulrika, who came from a family of artists, could contest the idea of art as conceptual work and thus dis-identify herself as a protest, while Markus, who did not come from a family of artists, struggled to fit into the subject position "artist" when he found himself feeling empty-handed. The respondent's background can thus act as a resource when dealing with a troubled subject position resulting from being unacknowledged by the social context of the school (cf. Staunæs, 2003; Edling, 2010).

### ***The connected artist in an arbitrary art world***

During the interviews, the alumni reflect over the significance of their educational background in retrospect. Most speak of their MFA from the Institute as something that is "taken seriously" by actors on the art scene, although not really understood as an asset by some actors on the labour market. For those alumni whose artistic career had not been as successful as they would have wished, the MFA could function as a way to claim their right to still call themselves professional artists. Also, in contrast to the individualism and competition encouraged through the freedom repertoire at the institute, the alumni speak of the importance of having each other as friends, collaborators and partners. This repertoire of collaboration is understood by Taylor and Littleton (2012) as the connected artist, which emphasizes the often collective nature of artistic work in contrast to the image of the silent, driven individual (Singerman, 1999, Becker, 1982). Many of the alumni have continued to work with former classmates or schoolmates, which has positively influenced their possibilities to work artistically. More importantly, many have formed friendships (and some love relationships) from their student years that function as resources for finding support in difficult times. The repertoire of collaboration is thus understood as competing with the repertoire of freedom as the latter implies self-reliance.

After their graduation, all but one of the alumni have continued their artistic activities. Most have handled their economic situation by working several jobs, some

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<sup>3</sup> See also Witham (2012) regarding the divide between applied art and fine art in American art colleges.

are dependent on the income of their spouses. Important to the alumni's ability to pursue continuous artistic activity is being granted artist bursaries as well as having contacts with galleries and curators in order to have exhibitions. If they were not able to exhibit their work or do a considerable amount of artistic work, having a studio and some contact with the art world via colleagues and peers still provided opportunities to hold on to the professional artistic identity, irrespective of any monetary income through artistic work. However, the possibility to identify as an artist was more complicated for those with no income from artistic work or no ability to work artistically on a regular basis.

However, none regret their years at the institute, whether they had positive or negative experiences. The respondents speak of the time they were given as a great resource, as these quotes show: "It's hard to really describe, but I think I really got the time for development and testing" (Kajsa); "I was given the possibility to work for five years" (Gustav). Time and the relationship to their peers were thus important resources for development of their artistic subjectivity as it was related to the actual work. Isabella, who has not been able to pursue the artistic career she had hoped for, explains why she is not disappointed with her education:

I think some are complaining that the training you got did not prepare you for the harsh reality, but it's not possible, just because things look the way they do... I think I have felt bitter, never really toward [the Institute] itself, but rather about my own choices... I don't think I ever expected the school to make me into a successful artist.

Thus, due to the arbitrariness, fluctuations or even injustices of the art world regarding what makes a successful artist, the arts education seems to be an opportunity to get time for immersing oneself in one's art rather than an opportunity for any real career enhancement. Although some express disappointment about the small chances of making it as an artist, grieving the non-transferability of their long educational years on the labour market, they do not reject the self-reliant artist subjectivity, but merely question it. As there are no guarantees, it is more likely that alumni turn to their own choices and abilities when trying to understand the prospect of a career. Thus, the formation of a professional identity is related to the status and prestige of the Institute, as it helped the alumni's to identify as professionals. The actual experiences of their years at the institute can be said to create a "split" professional identity: They knew what it meant to be an artist, but seemed to lack insight into what it meant to work as an artists. Contexts outside the Institute (support from peers, having access to a studio) could still provide resources for constructing, that is, identifying with, a professional subjectivity.

## Concluding discussion

According to Scully (2007), professions must be based on universally recognized substantive or procedural norms, which is why art can be understood as an expert occupation but not a profession. If we conceive of professionalism as having a work-based subjectivity that is committed to certain values and norms, we are made aware of the ambivalence towards the professional role in the arts world, as it has historical and institutional roots. The aim of the present study was to outline how professional subjectivity was constructed at a particular site. The basis for the analysis is that this subjectivity draws on several and sometimes conflicting discursive resources. Being a professional artist is not understood as a neutral skill, but as largely dependent on context and social practice. The present study has thus intended to deepen our knowledge of how the ability to access a certain professional subject position is played out in the context of higher education. The non-evident

connection between education and working life is not exclusive to artist educations (cf. Abrandt Dahlgren et al., 2006). My intention is that the discussion can give insight what it can mean to identify as a professional in other fields characterized by diffuse professional standards and uncertain or even precarious career paths. Interesting cases for comparison could be journalists, writers and academics.

The process of undertaking five years at a university college should perhaps result in the identification with a professional role, but as the analysis has shown, the process is fraught with contradictions. This is mostly visible in the way the Institute encourages students to incorporate the category “artist” into their identities, that is, something one is, rather than promoting a professional role—something one does. In “being” an artist, one must exhibit the ability to be self-reliant, a subject position informed by the discursive resource of freedom (where freedom implies the necessity to be able to choose). Experiences from the respondents’ years at the Institute, and from their time after graduation, positioned some of them as “troubled” in relation to the discursive repertoires of freedom and thus self-reliance, while others had the tools to navigate this freedom in ways that were deemed “right”.

Although the *laissez-faire* outline of the Institute was intended as a way to avoid the execution of top-down power, the alumni were aware of how they were judged and assessed—by real people with power, and in relation to something more intangible: the notion of how to be an artist. This notion was upheld through the assessments by professors, but also through silences regarding certain topics, especially regarding how to make a living as an artist. Alumni whose subjectivities were troubled (as they did/could not embody the norms of the Institute), sometimes questioned the basis of self-reliance for attaining the artist subject position, but seldom rejected it. This study confirms the findings of Edling (2010) and Flisbäck (2006), according to which the reasons for unequal access to “the feeling for the game” seem to be differences in background, preparatory education, and acceptance of norms and ideals surrounding art forms. However, the present study adds to the knowledge in this area by emphasizing the importance of the discursive formations of the Institute, which orchestrate a certain attitude toward the self as responsible for maximizing one’s own potential. Perhaps there will always be art students who do not enrol in higher arts education to “learn”, however, it is clear that this attitude can be rewarded by the institutes as part of a desired artist subjectivity.

Upon leaving the institute, the respondents encountered an outer (material) structure that could not be negotiated regardless of whether they had lived up to the ideal of the self-reliant artist. For the alumni, this seems to be more or less accepted as part of the insecurities of the art world. Due to this understanding, the alumni never rejected the discursive repertoires of the Institute, even if they had had negative experiences. The opportunity to immerse themselves in their artistic practice during their school years are looked back upon as a great resource. Because there are no guarantees of success in the art world, the educational context cannot be understood as providing any labour market security or possibility for a position in the art world. This understanding of the arbitrary art world is more likely to lead to an individualization of failure, as the respondents reflect upon their lack of confidence or poor choices. It would seem that the identification with one’s profession (work being something one is rather than something one does) limits the possibility of a politics of work. The structures of the art world thus echo theorizations of postmodern or late-modern society as a period characterized by conditions of insecurity, where individual citizens must manage risk and be responsible for their own lives and welfare (Rose, 1996; Lemke, 2001).

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