

## *Real Love: Fragments on Art Education, Politics, and Jacques Lacan*

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Real love, I'm searching for a real love  
someone to set my heart free  
real love, I'm searching for a real love  
*Mary J. Blige: Real Love*

Love songs and political discourses in art education share interesting similarities. They are often cut through by feelings of loss, promises of a future fulfillment, and claims of community (in love songs, often communities of two) that, together, build up the affective totality of their message. Like Mary J. Blige points out above, there is always a “real love” that waits for the one who has the courage and will to keep on searching for it. Moreover, this *real* love is not only something that makes one feel loved, but it is a force that sets one *free*: it opens one’s heart to its full potential to live *and* love (notably, when in love, living and loving are practically indistinguishable).

When trying to sketch out what Lacanian psychoanalytic theory can bring to art education research, Blige’s search for real love offers a productive entryway to the tension between desire and discourse; a tension that, for me, points to the limits of the phantasmic image(s) of art education and the affective investments to its outcomes. After all, a promise to live one’s life to its full potential can be found in various discourses concerning the social, cultural, and political significance of art education.

Akin to acts of (real) love, both art and education seem to support and sustain the totality of one’s subjectivity; a totality that is rooted in the notion of freedom and the agency that this freedom grants to the subject. For art educators and their allies, the idea that education in general offers keys to a better life involves a specific yet crucial supplement: a *real* love/education chiasma denotes an education that is total insofar as it includes art. This means that in order to *set our hearts free*, that is, in order to experience a *real* education that can be distinguished from an ersatz one, the promise of

education needs to be tied to the promise of art. Lacan distracts such thought by pointing out that the Real (love) that constitutes the kernel of the search for such freedom *qua* subjective totality is not a site of liberation, but a state of being where our Symbolic-Imaginary image of ourselves does not function like it should.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for Lacan, the promise of freedom has its limits: when understood as a process of totalizing *self*-identification, the love/art/education that sets our heart free is *real* insofar as it represses the *Real*.

It is within the tension between the completion of one's subjectivity and the limits that such completion sets for political imagination that, I claim, the analysis of the politics of art education is to be situated, especially when trying to understand what does it mean to imagine a socio-political significance to our profession. After all, to say that art education does *something* to the student and/or the society entails an idea of a *fulfillment* of this *something* through an artistic and educational encounter, just like a heart set free by a *real* love. The task of theorization is, then, to grasp what does such *something qua* freedom mean in terms of our identification with art education and its promises. Lacan's writings help to approach this inquiry from the standpoint of subject's desire for totality that unfolds the affective level of the discourses around art education. He forces to ask, what is it that makes art education *feel* like an integral part of our students, our society, and us? Moreover, how to understand this feeling in terms of political theorization in art education?

My love, tell me what it's all about  
you got something that I can't live without  
happiness is so hard to find  
hey baby, tell me what is on your mind  
*Nu Shooz: I Can't Wait*

When I started working with my master's thesis in 2010 on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and its implementations in political theorization in art education, the Finnish Ministry of Education had just proposed a 50% cut in the compulsory visual art education in the middle school level, which heated the discussion on the importance of visual arts as a part of the Finnish schooling system. I was shocked, but not solely because of the reduction of art classes: rather, the language that was used in the defense of art education felt simply *too familiar*. It felt like an old wound had been opened and the traumatic kernel of our love for the arts had been exposed; a love that balances between the desired promises of completeness and the fear of losing the image of a completed human subjectivity. As a graduate student who wanted to understand what makes art education

seem so valuable for human life and the society, the public uproar granted me an access to this strange mixture of fear and love that, interestingly enough, I had been already initiated into throughout my art education studies. For example, as someone wrote in a public Facebook page:

In its various forms, the visual arts are a natural way for a child to find ways to understand oneself and a means of self-expression. It can even be vital for the survival of a child who is in danger to alienate or is dealing with other problems!<sup>ii</sup>

From a Lacanian standpoint, the argumentation above opens an intriguing entryway to the constitution and sustainment of the socio-political promise(s) of a better life and/or a better society in and through art. As phantasmic objects of desire (objet a) qua a totalizing sense of completeness, art grants subject both self-understanding and self-expression.<sup>iii</sup> Like in Nu Shooz's lyrics above, the presence of art in education is directly related to the possession of "something that I can't live without;" something that brings "happiness [that] is so hard to find." In *I Can't Wait*, the struggle for love corresponds to the struggle for survival that the writer above identifies as a part of the humanness of human life and its manifestation in self-understanding and self-expression. In other words, a central part of the affective investment to the "something that I can't live without" *qua* the completion of one's humanness stems from the pain that its lack engenders in the subject. This creates a paradoxical tension that is often present in love songs: the reason why the narrator in *I Can't Wait* is unable to wait is precisely because she, indeed, waits for a completion. Similarly, the reason why "the visual arts are a natural way for a child to find ways to understand oneself" is because human life itself is naturally devoid of self-understanding.

A Lacanian intervention to this scene of struggle twists the terms of the argument: despite its lure, the sense of completion is always merely a misrecognition; a feeling of success that is entwined with a traumatic sense of failure. Lacan's notion of the lack as the constitutive element of human subjectivity thus shifts the focus of inquiry from the phantasmic objects and their characteristics (i.e. defining the *realness* of a *real love*) to the desire that marks the relationship between the subject and these objects. After all, for Lacan, it is the repression of the Real by the Symbolic-Imaginary economy of meaning making that brings about the subject, meaning that the subject is always already split when it enters into the human community.

For political theorization in art education, acknowledging this split opens up a possibility to question the agency that the promise of art education *qua* a completion of one's humanness brings about and approach it as both recognition and misrecognition that sustains a specific scene of

interpellation; a scene where that *something* that Nu Shooz's narrator "can't live without" is given a signifying function that structures subject's identifications with art education. What we have here is a double effect: on the one hand, art makes us feel whole and free; we need art to *put ourselves together*. On the other hand, however, we are trapped by it and subjected to its signifying power since it is, indeed, something that we can't live without.<sup>iv</sup>

We were as one babe  
for a moment in time  
and it seemed everlasting  
that you would always be mine

Now you want to be free  
so I'm letting you fly  
'cause I know in my heart babe  
our love will never die, no

You'll always be a part of me  
I'm a part of you indefinitely  
boy don't you know you can't escape me  
oh darling, 'cause you'll always be my baby  
*Mariah Carey: Always Be My Baby*

Mariah Carey's *Always Be My Baby* offers an interesting deviation from the usual narrative of love songs. Instead of telling a story about the struggle that finding, sustaining, or losing love engenders, the narrator is full of peculiar certainty concerning a future completion of her relationship. This certainty is so deep that she willingly lets the object of her desire "fly," that is, actualize his aspiration for freedom; a freedom that offers an interesting parallel to the freedom that Mary J. Blige's *Real Love* represents. Thus, even though the crucial part of the completion of narrator's self is absent ("you'll always be a part of me"), the feeling of *indefinite* love (and, interestingly, ownership) overcomes this absence and, paradoxically, turns it into a guarantee of togetherness *qua* completeness. In psychoanalytic terms, such love is perverse: instead of hysterically trying to find an object that would bridge the split between real/Real love, the narrator knows exactly how to position herself in relation to her desire. Notably, the fulfillment of such phantasmic love can be found from the establishment of the "one:" a (heterosexual) unity that structures the final image of togetherness *qua* an actualization of a monogamous love.

It is worth noting that the sense of certainty that one finds from *Always Be My Baby* is merely the other, perverse, side of the hysteric fear of a never-ending struggle that life *without art*

education stands for. The promise of an actualization of the full potentiality of shared love is as true for Carey as the completed subjectivity in and through art education is for art educators and their allies. The difference between them is, of course, that while Carey perverts the act of longing for a completion by abolishing the mystery that so often structures the narrative of love songs (i.e. the uncertainty about whether the narrator finds real love or not), the hysterical uncertainty that emanates from discourses around the socio-political significance of both art and education intensifies the promise of art education to the point where its diabolic shadow (the failure inherent in the *objet a*) gains at least similar affective strength as its redemptive qualities. Consider, for example, the following passage from a public Facebook post, found from the same page as the previous example:

There is a little creative artist living inside every child, who wants to raise her/his head and say: "I can too!" If this artist is stifled, something valuable that can never be purchased with money, knowledge, merits, or achievements is lost. Knowledge is mainly outside oneself, art is, however, mainly stemming from the self.<sup>v</sup>

Here, the double effect mentioned above becomes manifested in discourse. On the one hand, there is something *true* and *deep* in every person; something, that is connected to creativity and self-expression. Just like the indefinite love that will "never die" in *Always Be My Baby*, the possession of this quality is tied to the completion of a phantasmic promise of subject's sense of total self. On the other hand, this *true* and *deep* essence is something that *can* be stifled and lost forever; it is subjected to the threat of a violent capture of the "I" that shouts, "I can too!" The hysteric fear of stifling (notably, an act that does not have a subject in this passage) *qua* the capture of the I is precisely what sustains the need for art education: since its promise *can* be broken, its importance has to be constantly reaffirmed. Like living under an agnostic fear of God (i.e. if one cannot neither confirm nor negate the existence of the divinity, it is better to believe in it than face the dreadful consequences in the afterlife), art educators and their allies cannot question the source of their uneasiness concerning the possible absence of art, but, nevertheless, are full of certainty about the repercussions that follow from forgetting the need for it.

From a Lacanian perspective, the image of a stifled artist helps to give a more detailed reading of the subjectivity that the promise of, and the need for, art education entails. As the passage above suggests, there is something more in the signifier *child* than its mere signifying quality: a phantasmic figure of a *little creative artist*. This spectral substance is so valuable that it

demands a protection of its bearer, the child. Without this quality, the child is nothing but a bare lack: s/he is deprived from her own agency that stems “from the self.” Most importantly, this agency is not child’s own, but it belongs to the *little creative artist* who is under a constant threat of being stifled (here, it is worth remembering the struggle that Nu Shooz describes). In other words, it is this fundamentally alien creature, the voice of the Other *qua* an artist, who speaks and acts *through* the child and grants the child the agency that art education promises. Thus, the art that “stems from the self” is simultaneously an alien substance and the kernel of one’s subjectivity. In Lacanian theory, this *extimité* (extimacy, an external intimacy) manifests the entwining of subject’s outside and inside. While in *Always Be My Baby*, the true completion of the narrator’s self is tied to the completion of the unity in love,<sup>vi</sup> the little creative artist has to remain as an alien substance in order to perform its function as a *natural* part of subject’s self-understanding.

In terms of political theorization, what we have here is not only a discussion of various fantasized *meanings* that are placed upon our students, but also a description of power relations between different subjectivities within the realm of art education. If the fantasized completion of students’ subjectivities is depicted as dependent upon the magical qualities of art, students are assumed to desire the knowledge and skills of art educators; knowledge that (through artistic practices) liberates them to be who they *really* are. Here, the same certainty that Carey relies in *Always Be My Baby* shows its compulsive dimensions: without art education *you are nothing, you are not yourself, you cannot become the person you should be, you will never truly love anyone else, boy don’t you know you can’t escape me.*

To depict art education as a necessary requirement for the completion of one’s subjectivity is a request to desire art, and, most importantly, desire things that *have it* (e.g. art education). This means that art teachers’ knowledge is positioned as the object of students’ desire, because they are the only people who can protect the fundamentally alien artist inside every child. Reciprocally, teachers’ desires are directed toward this alien substance in their students. If the *little creative artist* is already stifled to death, art teachers are left with a necromantic mission: like living dead, students are depicted as part human and part inhuman (not dead, but not living their lives to the full) and the task of art education is to actualize their life force with the love of their teachers. It is important to underline that it is not the student that is the object of desire for art educators, but their phantasmic surplus, *agalma*, the *little creative artist*, whose death is mourned the most.

See my days are cold without you  
but I'm hurting while I'm with you  
and though my heart can't take no more  
I keep on running back to you  
*Ashanti: Foolish*

Like for Ashanti above, it is the blurred boundary between pleasure and pain that sustains the idea of love and politics as activities that strive for a totalizing completion of a lacking subjectivity. Although the narrator's excessive love that she feels toward the object of her desire is deeply hurtful, she cannot escape it: she *has* to return to the scene where her love *qua* completion fails her. In Lacanian sense, the struggle that occupies the central position in the narrative (similarly to Nu Shooz's *I Can't Wait*) is resolved neither through the presence nor absence of the *objet a*; rather, the deep entwinement of pain and pleasure in the desire for the *objet a* becomes fully manifested and truly *felt*.

For a political theorization in art education, Ashanti's lines offer an intriguing perspective on the presence of art in our lives. When the idea that art education is a necessary component in the (assumedly) completed humanness is approached through a similar pleasure/pain cluster described in *Foolish*, it is possible to theorize the socio-political significance of art education beyond a dichotomous axis between presence and absence. After all, following Lacan, the misrecognized totality of one's subjectivity is constituted on a necessary absence of the Real (love); an absence that, nevertheless, is never total. This allows a more nuanced understanding of the affective investments that circulate within the discourses concerning the subjective and/or social need for art education, since, like in *Foolish*, the relationship between the desire and its completion remains in tension. Such tension distracts a teleological thought that sees art education merely as a means to an end, as a self-annihilating step toward an actualization of one's *true* humanness.

In order to put art education itself in question, a task that a political theorization in art education ought to take, the compulsive sustainment of a fantasized point of completion has to be opened up and, most importantly, allowed to fail us. This is exactly what distinguishes Ashanti from Mary J. Blige: whereas for the latter, a real love denotes love that has a redemptive feeling of a completion of one's subjectivity *qua* the freedom of the heart, the latter sings about a Real love that involves a traumatic encounter with the gap in the totality that supports subjects' Symbolic-Imaginary identifications with its desire. This does not mean that one should reside in cynicism or fetishize the collapse of one's psyche in a traumatic failure of a fantasy: after all, both real and Real love are necessary components of our desire for art education. Rather, what Lacan may offer us is a

different way to “run back” to art education. It is this constant *return* to a scene of fantasy that both Lacan and Ashanti help to articulate. For art education theory, this opens a possibility to shift the focus of inquiry from an endless search for the *right* kind of qualities that support a set of predetermined socio-political functions of art education to an examination of the phantasmic constitution of its functionality.



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i For readers interested in Lacan's theory of the subject, Bruce Fink's *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* offers an excellent overview. See Fink, 1995.

ii The original quote in Finnish: "Kuvataide eri muodoissaan on lapselle luonteva keino löytää väyliä itsensä ymmärtämiseen ja ilmaisuun. Se voi olla jopa elintärkeää selviytymiseen syrjäytymisuhan tai muun ongelman parissa elävälle lapselle!" The two Finnish passages I quote in this text are taken from my master's thesis. See Tervo, 2011.

iii For an excellent summary on Lacan's conceptualization of the objet a and its use in political theorization, see Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008.

iv Interestingly, when I was writing my doctoral dissertation, I encountered a similar type of argumentation, that is, an argumentation that positioned art education as a vital part of human life, both from the tradition of American progressive education in the 1920s and 1930s as well as from contemporary (North American) academic journals (*Studies in Art Education and Visual Arts Research*; all issues from 1998 to 2014). In this respect, the fragments of online discussion that I

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have chosen to use here should be understood as parts of long tradition of thought that traverses discourses on the relationship between art, education, human life, and the society. For further discussion on this issue, see Tervo, 2014.

v The original quote in Finnish: Jokaisessa lapsessa asuu sisällä pieni luova taiteilija, se joka tahtoo nostaa pään esille ja kertoa: Minäkin osaan! Jos tuo tukahdutetaan, tukahdutetaan jotain arvokasta jota ei rahalla, tiedolla, arvosanoilla ja saavutuksilla koskaan voida mistään lunastaa. Tieto on valtaosin itsen ulkopuolista, taide taas valtaosin itsestä lähtevää.

vi It is important to underline that this completion is not about the “boy” as another subject, but refers their unity that they form as a signifier of a heterosexual love. For Lacan, it is the Other, *not other*, which “is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear.” (Lacan, 1981, p. 203)