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Foreword
Why Lacan for Art Education?

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The work of Lacan has had significant influence in psychoanalytic circles and perhaps even more so in other academic areas, especially in cultural studies and education. But it is not well known in art education. Lacan is still a relative newcomer to art education studies, and the purpose of this special issue of Visual Arts Research (VAR) is to help make the possible value of his work better known to art educators. We think it has much to offer the field, especially as extension and revision of current trends, and we want to explore some of what that might be.

We don’t see ourselves as committed to Lacanian thought or approaches in any consistent theoretical way. Lacan was a theoretician (as well as a practitioner), but he constantly changed his theory and refused to allow it to be pinned down with too much certainty. Consequently, unlike with Freud’s work, those who have used his thought in the humanities—as opposed perhaps to psychoanalytic practice—have tended to use particular concepts or parts of his theory, rather than the theory as whole, to illuminate their topic. Some of these concepts are desire, the objet a, méconnaisance, the Real, the sinthome, the mirror stage, and the Gaze; with the unconscious being the most fundamental of all. The essays here use several of these Lacanian concepts, each in a different way.

Lacanian thought seems useful because it allows us to raise questions or focus on issues that otherwise we tend to ignore because they do not fit our current approaches and theories. In very general terms, art education has tended to move in cycles: from an emphasis on the child and expression (Victor Lowenfeld, Herbert Read) to the emphasis on the disciplines of art (discipline-based art education [DBAE]) to a concern with diversity and, most recently, to an emphasis on
visual culture, post-structural thought, and social justice. All of these phases have no doubt contained differences and controversies, and none were truly systematic or hegemonic, which is perhaps what allows the wheel to turn. Nevertheless, they have each, sequentially, led to the promotion of some interests and topics and the submergence of others.

One currently submerged topic is what Lacan called *subjectivity*, close to what in our literature is usually called the *subject*. In the visual culture/post-structural paradigm, the subject has been understood as basically constructed as a set of positions taken within a variety of discourses; that is, identity is determined mostly by social influences. It seems fair to say that in general this paradigm has done much better with analyzing the social than the individual: It accounts much better for the effects of the social on persons than for the reverse. For example, it does not do well with the idiosyncrasies and persistence of desire, fantasy, refusal to understand, and thought that falls outside of consciousness.

It is true that recently the socially constructed post-structural subject has begun to show signs of morphing into something else. The role of the viewer responding to mass media or artwork has increasingly been acknowledged as an active and creative one. There is recent interest, for example, in the carnivalesque and the “transgressive pleasures” of visual culture (Duncum, 2009). But we have no good way of acknowledging the implications of this. How can we account for the individuality of responses, the fact that individuals often have highly specific obsessions, interpretations, and resistances? And what is the origin of the variety of pleasures in visual culture? (“Pleasures” is surely an inadequate word for the complexities of desire involved.) In his essay, jagodzinski discusses this situation and says that we appear to be faced with a choice between the older belief in an innate identity struggling to get expressed and an ever-changing set of positionalities within multiple discourses.

jagodzinski argues that Lacan’s account of subjectivity, complex and difficult to follow as it is, offers a way out of this opposition. That account manages to acknowledge—to insist on—the post-structural insights about the influences of social structures, the importance of discourses, the unstable character of language, and so on, and yet to find a place for subjectivity. That place, of course, is in the unconscious.

Subjectivity is connected to desire: Without desire, there would be no subjectivity. Lacan’s account of desire is typically complex. It is shaped by the expectations of society and the language—what Lacan calls the Symbolic—and yet transcends it, since it ultimately resides in the unconscious and we can never quite determine for sure what it is that we desire. Desire is always based on a mistake, a misidentification with some item offered by the Other, which means it can never be satisfied and is always uncertain.
It is no accident that several of the essays in this issue use Lacan’s notion of desire, each in a different way and context. Two of them use it to comment on art education as a field in a kind of institutional critique; because the social inhabits and structures the Lacanian unconscious, desire can motivate institutions in return. Laura Hetrick refers to the notion of desire and the related one of fantasy to discuss the fantasies and preoccupations of art education as a field, preoccupations that, as already noted, have shifted over time. She discusses the common desire of teachers for students to adopt the teachers’ values and beliefs, focusing on the case of feminist activist Katherine Watson, an art teacher portrayed by Julia Roberts in the Hollywood movie *Mona Lisa Smile* (dir. Mike Newell, 2003). Kevin Tavin writes about the fantasy of child art—of the spontaneous and authentic art of children—as an unattainable and misleading fantasy that has influenced art education for more than a century. He focuses his discussion on the work of Brent Wilson, in whose hands the fantasy may have morphed into “child visual culture,” and on Wilson’s three sites of child artmaking: the classroom, the visual culture, and the “third site” that hopes to thread between these two. The conclusion in both cases is that such fantasies, while motivating, are in true Lacanian fashion based on a misunderstanding and can never be satisfied.

The notion of misunderstanding, *méconnaisance*, or miscognition is fundamental to Lacan since he argues that our understandings are influenced by the unconscious and we cannot be clear about that influence. We all make misreadings, maintain selective ignorance, and reject unwanted knowledge because of unconscious motivations. The notion of miscognition troubles and disturbs—or amplifies and complements—the many “cognitive” attempts in our literature to explain how we understand particular images, issues, and texts. Those attempts have had plenty of room for the influence of the social but have not done well with the unconscious, especially with unacknowledged bias and motivations. One thinks, for example, of Britzman’s (1998) Lacanian-influenced discussion of student motivated ignorance of social issues, in spite of our educational attempts to raise them. Britzman argues that cognitive approaches to “difficult knowledge” are not sufficient because of underlying identity issues, which are related to unconscious desires and not to reasoning. Tavin (in press) has written about miscognition and art education, and Vicki Daiello’s essay here also relates this theme. She writes about her efforts as a teacher/researcher to understand the critical writings of her students about items of visual culture. She discusses her growing recognition of the recurrent interference of unconscious content with her reading and with the student writing and the way it led to an acceptance of the inevitability of episodes of uninterpretable idiosyncrasy in student writing. In doing so, she opens up a Lacanian extension of research methodologies such as self-study and textual analysis.

One of the major ways that Lacanian ideas can be useful to art educators
is in interpreting particular images and items of visual culture. This has become commonplace in cultural studies, thanks to the influence of Slavoj Žižek (1989, 2001) and his many followers. Film studies, for instance, has made significance use of Lacanian ideas, as have art historians (e.g., Foster, 1996; Iversen, 2007; Krauss, 1993), so it is surprising that he has not been more popular in this way in art education, since we are interested in interpreting artworks and visual images of all kinds. Much of Jan Jagodzinski’s work (2004, 2005) is a major exception to this remark.

Two of the pieces included here are of this kind, both taking up the impact of the Lacanian register of the Real as a resistance to and undermining of the Symbolic. Sydney Walker uses the late Lacanian notion of the sinthome to emphasize the potential of trauma and absurdity of the Real for artistic practice. She does this through an examination of the practice of political activist artist Alfredo Jaar. To discuss interpretations of art writing, Beth Thomas uses the Lacanian conception of metaphor as the irruption of the unconscious and the Real into conscious speech. Her example is the critical writing of Daniel Birnbaum’s (1999) article “Stream of Conscience,” which explores artist Mark Dion’s development of his exhibit The Tate Thames Dig.

In the second half of his essay, Jagodzinski also discusses the concept of the Real, arguing that there are two versions of it in Lacan: the Real as a pre-Symbolic experience located at the level of the body with direct action on the nervous system (this is the Real of retinal art) and the Real as a post-Symbolic moment (the Real of nonretinal art, as with Marcel Duchamp).

Paulo Petry and Fernando Hernández present an account of an attempt to use Lacan’s idea of desire in teaching. They used writings about desire by both Lacan and Deleuze to get undergraduates to analyze desires as portrayed in movies and also to think about their own personal desires, including their desire within the teacher-student relationship. They are careful to caution the reader about the difference between education and psychoanalysis. There is an important distinction between the clinical psychoanalytic setting and the classroom. Both Petry and Hernández and João Fróis, in his overview of the relation of psychoanalysis and education, and of the history and present use by art educators of psychoanalysis, stress this difference. Fróis in particular reviews the skepticism of both Freud and Lacan about education. Clearly, educators must avoid taking on the role of the analyst, even when, as with Petry and Hernández, they focus attention on the teacher-student relationship. Their purposes were to help students see the complexities of our notions of desire and to promote greater awareness of their own motivations. Nor should the critic attempt to psychoanalyze artists, authors, or viewers, even though it is useful to ask, as Jagodzinski says, “What holds up the fantasy that sustains the image and what is the desire of an audience, a nation, or
an individual viewer that sustains that desire in the psyche?” This is perhaps another way of saying that the educational use of Lacanian thought is not so much as a comprehensive theory to be applied to education but rather as a set of concepts that can be used to achieve greater insight into particular cases.

Summary

The eight authors in this issue have found much in Lacan that speaks to and troubles accepted ideas and practices in art education. Their collective work witnesses the suppleness and plasticity of Lacanian concepts and the void that can exist when subjectivity is left unaddressed. We hope that this special issue of VAR evidences some of the ways in which Lacan might be useful to art education and suggests prospects that do not appear to be attended to by other perspectives.

References
