

This is not a love song

We fall in love, we fumble for a pencil. Or a paintbrush. Or a video camera. Through the ages people have grappled with how to express the confusing emotion that is love. Roses are given, names are carved into trees, corny love songs are written. *This Is Not A Love Song* asked thirteen contemporary artists and collectives to present an artwork which explored the theme of love and its relationship to popular culture. After demanding artists to expose their innermost thoughts, some of who have never made public any artwork that professes affection, I felt it was only fair to begin this piece by sharing a personal story of my own.

This time last year, after six months of agonizing romantic twists and turns, I found myself forfeiting a possible career in New York and flying to Beijing to reunite with my partner. Over the course of the 20 hour international flight, romantic movies were my bread and butter as I trawled through one clichéd soppy storyline after another, desperately looking for confirmation that my decision was the “right thing to do.” One film in particular, a terribly corny Chinese teenage rom-com, *Lian ai tong gao* (*Love in Disguise*) told the story of an incredibly famous pop star, DMH, who enrolls in the local music school incognito to look for the one thing missing from his glamorous life; true love. He is captivated by the guzheng soloist in the classical Chinese orchestra, LMQ, and puts his career on the line as he attempts to woo her despite their musical differences. After causing me to bawl my eyes out (I could hardly read the subtitles through my tears) the film led me to the conclusion that indeed love *does* conquer all, love *is* the only thing that matters, that all you really need *is* love. I had done what felt *right*.

Such clichéd stories are fed to us throughout our entire lives. It sometimes seems as though love has always dominated artistic expression, there is certainly no lack of examples to back such a thesis: Shakespeare’s best known plays, from *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) to *Hamlet* (1602), revolve around either finding or avenging a loved one; Thomas Edison’s *The Kiss* (1896), one of the first films ever shown commercially to the public, depicts a 47 second close up shot of a couple kissing; *Venus of Hohle Fels*, one of the oldest pieces of prehistoric sculpture which dates to some 40,000 years ago, is an erotic figurine of a woman; and the love poems depicted on 3500-year-old pieces of Egyptian papyrus and pottery are filled with language not dissimilar from that heard in contemporary pop songs.

Romantic subject matter has, therefore, remained popular throughout history however the *types* of love creatively expressed are always changing. The very word “romance” derives from the Medieval period and the first popular literary genre *romanz/romances*. A popular theme of later French romances was courtly love, referring to secret expressions of chivalrous love and admiration between members of the nobility (although generally not practiced between husband and wife!). The structure of relationships has changed immeasurably over the years from times when romantic, sexual and marital loves were isolated. In modern times all three are assumed inseparable, creating a calamity of pressure on relationships that has been endured by few other generations in history. Additionally, the rise of male employment in mechanized factories during the Industrial Revolution has created the traditional ‘family unit,’ a thinly veiled capitalist structure that continues to dramatically affect the role of romantic love in Western culture. Nevertheless, despite rapidly changing attitudes and contradicting historical interpretations of romance, artistic obsession with love has continued well into the 21st century.

James Cameron's epic romance disaster film *Titanic* (1996) remained the highest-grossing film of all time for twelve years and today still holds the record number of attendance figures for any film. Such timeless fascination with romantic expression, evident in all forms of art, is telling of a few interesting aspects of human nature that continue to manifest within contemporary culture. It suggests the existence of some innate drive to creatively express feelings of love, and furthermore, to share this initially private expression in public.

When romantic narratives are performed as entertainment, the effect on the viewer is paramount. Emotions are a slippery beast; due to their intangible nature, our understanding of what constitutes "love" or "hate" derives from the representation of that feeling, whether through words or actions. For example, many of us view the gift of flowers as a romantic gesture simply because we are accustomed to associate flowers with love. The ways in which love has been expressed towards an individual undoubtedly affects their interpretation of the word, their feelings and romantic expectations. This phenomenon thus affects the methods available for that person to express *their* feelings, with every person walking around with a different understanding of love and a highly personal vocabulary available with which to express themselves. Amongst this multitude of languages, most films, songs, performances and artworks represent only the most dramatic and interesting aspects of love. Considering this circular semiotics of language and actions and feelings, it is only natural that our impressionable minds confuse these stories with real-life expressions of love. As we absorb the way romance is portrayed in popular culture, our romantic expectations quickly become idealized and it is impossible for the reality of personal relationships to compete.

This is Not A Love Song seeks to highlight the overarching images of love that have been created through past artistic expression, in both high art and popular culture, and how such images affect our expectation of what love should feel and look like. The exhibition questions the existing vocabulary used to articulate the emotion of love, as well as its transferral from the public domain into the private lives of ordinary people and vice versa. The conceptual interest, therefore, lies in the nature of this constant circulation of expressions.

Flying halfway around the world to be with the person you love is perhaps the most quintessentially romantic thing one can do. From New York to Beijing, I now realize that throughout the entire saga my head was (literally) in the clouds. In reality, the image of love does not reflect the domestic and banal reality of spending one's life with someone. So much of love revolves around the practicalities of everyday life, work routines and household arrangements, rather than the dramatic highlights we see in the movies. Don't get me wrong, love can be incredibly rewarding and special. But it's not a love song.

Laura Castagnini, 2012