

The People's Princess: Grayson Perry and English Cultural Identity



Anna Murphy
Exeter College
University of Oxford

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Trinity 2015

Abstract

This thesis will consider the art and persona of Grayson Perry in relation to ideas of national identity. In particular, it will argue that Perry has been occupied with ideas of class and national identity throughout his career, but that these underlying concerns have often been subsumed, or obfuscated, by the foregrounding of other more obvious aspects of his work, such as his transvestism. At the centre of this thesis is the argument that Perry's vision of England, and the purportedly ambivalent way in which he presents it, functions as a way of negotiating – and repatriating – English national identity at a time of crisis. I want to further argue, however, that this has been complicated by Perry's self-positioning, and I propose that he has cultivated an air of subversion and transgression that has tempered the more affirmative aspects of his work. This half-subversive, half-affirmative stance allows him and his work to resonate with both those critical of the usual institutions of contemporary art – including many sections of the public and certain newspapers, tabloid and broadsheet alike – as well as the institutions themselves. This stance has implications not only for Perry's engagement with contemporary art but for his considerations of national identity as well, enabling an enquiry into, and ultimately a restitution of, 'Englishness' (and, to a lesser extent, 'Britishness'), by framing it within a rhetoric of ambivalence and diminishment rather than overt nationalism, the latter of which would have more problematic associations. Similarly, I want to suggest that it is this stance and its mediatory properties, coupled with his earlier self-positioning and his subtle but consistent foregrounding of domestic and demotic issues of national identity throughout his career, that has made Perry such a popular candidate to take on the task of reinvigorating this identity now.

Long abstract

This thesis will consider the art and persona of Grayson Perry in relation to ideas of national identity. In particular, it will argue that Perry has been occupied with ideas of class and national identity throughout his career, but that these underlying concerns have often been subsumed, or obfuscated, by the foregrounding of other more obvious aspects of his work, such as his transvestism. At the centre of this thesis is the argument that Perry's vision of England, and the purportedly ambivalent way in which he presents it, functions as a way of negotiating – and repatriating – English national identity at a time of crisis. I want to further argue, however, that this has been complicated by Perry's self-positioning, and I propose that he has cultivated an air of subversion and transgression that has tempered the more affirmative aspects of his work. This half-subversive, half-affirmative stance allows him and his work to resonate with both those critical of the usual institutions of contemporary art – including many sections of the public and certain newspapers, tabloid and broadsheet alike – as well as the institutions themselves. This stance has implications not only for Perry's engagement with contemporary art but for his considerations of national identity as well, enabling an enquiry into, and ultimately a restitution of, 'Englishness' (and, to a lesser extent, 'Britishness'), by framing it within a rhetoric of ambivalence and diminishment rather than overt nationalism, the latter of which would have more problematic associations. Similarly, I want to suggest that it is this stance and its mediatory properties, coupled with his earlier self-positioning and his subtle but consistent foregrounding of domestic and demotic issues of national identity throughout his career, that has made Perry such a popular candidate to take on the task of reinvigorating this identity now, and which has resulted in him being endorsed and institutionalised by several national channels, including the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Arts Council, the National Portrait Gallery, *The Times*, and the British Museum.

With these issues in mind, this thesis examines the reasons for Perry's success, situating him and his art within artistic, cultural, and historical contexts in order to better evaluate the significance of his

popularity in the current moment, and charting this trajectory throughout his career. Perry rose to fame in 2003 when he was nominated for, and subsequently went on to win, the Turner Prize, a contemporary art prize for up and coming British-based artists under the age of 50. Since then, he has become a British celebrity in his own right, both in the art world and in the media more generally. Initially famous for his cross-dressing and his vases – both of which, at the time of his Turner Prize nomination, were characterised as being particularly controversial – Perry has since become a household name, thanks to a high-profile status bolstered by a seemingly constant stream of newspaper column inches, TV and radio appearances, and his own prodigious output as both an artist and curator; more recently, he has even been branded a ‘national treasure’.

In spite of – or perhaps, due to – his popular appeal, however, very little has been written about Perry academically. Most of the literature on Perry so far has been heavily mediated by the artist himself. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the major monograph on the artist by Jacky Klein, *Grayson Perry*, in which Perry describes his works while Klein bookends them with short thematically-organised, art historical but uncritical essays; the monograph was first published in 2009, and re-published in an expanded edition in 2013. Another example of this is Perry’s autobiography as told to Wendy Jones, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (2006), which recounts his life through a first-person narrative. Perry’s many exhibition catalogues – such as for *The Charms of Lincolnshire*, *Unpopular Culture*, and *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* – take a similar format to these, with Perry heavily involved in describing the process and intentions behind his art-making. When Perry does receive mention in more academic frameworks, it is usually in the context of reviews of these exhibitions or catalogues. As of yet, there has been no major enquiry into the particulars of his own practice as a whole. Indeed, Perry’s absence from academic discourse is notable, and, in light of his fifteen or so years in the spotlight, this lack of a more rigorous critical interpretation seems a particularly remarkable oversight. This thesis aims to address this lack, questioning whether there is more to this often superficial-seeming artist than meets the eye, and arguing that his anti-intellectual

posturing is actually itself a conceptual position that masks, but also subtly enriches, some of his other artistic concerns.

In the course of my research, I have allowed Perry's various works and projects to suggest which interpretive approaches and theoretical models are most appropriate at any given time, with the ultimate aim that each enunciation rehearses anew, and allows me to better articulate, the central claims of my argument. As such, while this thesis is structured by an overarching theme that runs throughout – that is, Perry's formulation of national identity, expressed often through gender and almost always with ambivalence – there is no single theory that unifies all of these iterations. Instead, in approaching these topics, I draw on a number of methodological approaches and angles, each of which furthers my underlying querying of Perry's half-critical, half-affirmative relationship with contemporary cultural norms. In addition to key texts such as Julian Stallabrass's *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Marjory Garber's academic survey of cross-dressing *Vested Interests*, and a number of books and articles on pantomime, drag, transvestism in film, and academic considerations of Monty Python, my thesis also draws on English literary criticism (in the case of William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* and scholarship on the poet Philip Larkin); political, historical and cultural theories of national identity (such as those formulated by Krishan Kumar and Tom Nairn on the topics of England and Britain, and Sianne Ngai on Japan's 'cute' culture); cultural studies (including the writings of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams); and, of course, contemporary art history. In this respect, Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend's *The Art of Tracey Emin*, a collection of academic essays dealing with the artist, serves as a particular model for the way in which I wish to approach my own subject, including as it does several different critical essays situating her within various different art historical, theoretical, and cultural frameworks. As will be considered shortly, the similarities between Perry and Emin make Emin scholarship a particularly rich mine for this thesis. For reasons that will be expanded more comprehensively later in the thesis, I have for the most part chosen not to engage with LGBT, queer theory, or psychoanalytical formulations of cross-dressing, except when discussing why it is not relevant to Perry's own practice or persona.

In addition to close readings of the artworks and exhibitions themselves, my research also involves a close interaction with primary sources, such as media interviews with the artist and press response to his exhibitions, the combination of which allows us to complicate his own self-presentation and rhetoric. While I am interested in the ways in which Perry has been received by the public, this is not my primary object of analysis. I am, rather, interested in how his work has generated a range of meanings in specific art-historical and cultural contexts. I use the reception of his work mainly to flesh out my reading of particular pieces and exhibitions, and for this reason I have attended primarily to his reception in print media.

One final note: unlike Merck and Townsend, I have chosen not to conduct an interview with my subject. As discussed above there has, as of yet, been no real academic response to, or critical discourse, around Perry; instead, he appears ubiquitously in catalogues, monographs, and his own autobiography, as well as countless media interviews and articles. With this oversaturation of Perry's own commentary as to his artistic and personal meanings and intentions, I judged it necessary to take a step back and examine this already existing wealth of sources so as to look more critically at what Perry says, as well as why and how he says it, in order to chart how this rhetoric has changed over time and to consider what it might be obfuscating or implying. To interview Perry would not, I argue, shed new light on the matters at hand; on the contrary, Perry in particular has repeatedly shown himself to be a skilled media manipulator. Similarly, the aim of this thesis is not to get 'inside' the artist's mind, but rather to explore how he and his art function within the broader cultural landscape.

In considering Perry's oeuvre, my thesis focuses on three main elements of his work and artistic persona: his self-definition in opposition to the much derided and often conceptual Young British Artists (YBAs), who had characterised the art scene before his rise to fame; his manipulation of gender; and his cultivation of 'Englishness', particularly as it interrelates with ideas of Britishness. Rather than being organised as a chronology, I will address each of these in turn, structuring my arguments around these key issues.

Chapter one explores the British art scene in the lead up to Perry's Turner Prize nomination, cataloguing the major traits of YBA art and artists, as well as the subsequent responses to this cultural landscape from both the media and the public. By situating Perry's own practice against the backdrop of sensationalism, self-promotion, and shock tactics so often associated with the YBAs in particular and with contemporary British art more generally, we can begin to consider Perry's own self-presentation – as a craftsman, as sincere and down to earth, and as a transvestite rather than a macho lad or ladette – as a carefully cultivated response to a perceived 'lack' in the market, a re-positioning of the artist which is essential to further critical discussion.

Following on from this, chapter two looks at Perry's use of transvestism. This chapter is split into two parts. The first part outlines the different forms Perry's transvestism has taken, and considers their significances not only with relation to particular moments in his career, but also their resonances with a number of issues of national identity. To explore this issue, I draw on theoretical models of transvestism and gender performativity, and also locate Perry's work in its specifically British context, where cross-dressing has taken on particular meanings at different points in the recent past. The implications of this, as well as this type of performative transvestism's straddling of the precarious boundary between transgression and affirmation, will be considered with particular reference to Perry's own performance(s) of gender and the centrality of this to his artistic persona.

Part two of this chapter will bring together a number of key elements from both part one and the preceding chapter in an extended consideration of Perry in relation to fellow contemporary artist Tracey Emin. Here, I consider this link between the two artists – who both use craft, autobiography, sincerity, explicit sexual imagery, media savvy, and gender performativity in their practices – anew, considering how Perry's transvestic gender performance and ultimate heteronormativity allow him to dabble in the domains usually associated with 'women's art' (craft, the confessional) and use many of the same artistic strategies employed by Emin without suffering the same media derision and loathing, but also, interestingly, without receiving the same academic attention and clout. In this respect, this case study neatly summarises many of the thesis's major themes – the YBAs, Englishness, class,

gender, sincerity – in order to question to what extent gender, self-presentation, and ‘authenticity’ can be said to affect the artists’ reception in both the media and academia.

Finally, chapter three takes as its focus two exhibitions curated by Perry in 2006 and 2008, using them to shed light on his most famous curatorial venture, 2012’s *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, suggesting that each of these exhibitions has Englishness or Britishness (or the problematic conflation of the two) at its centre. *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2006) will be considered as a type of pastoral, and I will draw on the relevant literature concerning both the theory and practice of the pastoral as mode or genre; *Unpopular Culture* (2008), I argue, is best understood as a nostalgic elegy reminiscent of the anti-modernist poetry of Philip Larkin, and I will therefore situate the exhibition in relation to writing on Larkin’s vision of England and, importantly, the positive reception of this among critics. With these in mind, *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, by way of conclusion, will briefly be read as an institutional affirmation of the British Museum. The chapter will close by considering the three exhibitions collectively; seen as a group, they together reveal a number of recurring themes in Perry’s particular invocation of English and British culture.

It is important at this point to address the use of the terms English and British throughout this thesis. While I make every effort not to unconsciously reproduce these elisions in my own scholarship, I do intend to probe the fissures in the interrelationship of the two throughout. These terms have a complicated relationship; indeed, it is this complex entanglement that underpins many of this thesis’s enquiries, and, I suggest, many of Perry’s own projects. While the two terms are distinct – Britain, of course, encompassing not only England but also Scotland, Wales, and often implying Northern Ireland – they are often used interchangeably. In *The Making of English National Identity*, Krishan Kumar refers to ‘the lordly English habit of subsuming British under English’, a habit that is exhibited not only in the media responses discussed here, but in Perry’s art, too.¹ This habit betrays the way in which ‘Britishness’ has long been monopolised by ‘Englishness’, but in fact this is ‘especially problematic

¹ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 1.

for the English, particularly when it comes to conceiving of their national identity'.² This becomes especially pertinent in the current moment, when the search for a specifically English national identity has become more pronounced, particularly in the wake of devolution.

While I primarily want to suggest that Perry's practice uses visual culture to re-figure, re-promote, and even legitimise English national identity specifically, however, the intersection of this with broader ideas of British cultural identity must be considered, too. While Perry exhibits a rather English conception of Britishness throughout his career – that is, an Anglocentric one – this takes on rather a different tenor as Perry is institutionalised by national establishments, and purported loci of British identity, such as the British Museum and the National Portrait Gallery. Indeed, this shift from presenting 'Englishness' to presenting 'Britishness', even when what is being represented is still primarily English, suggests that these identities are still being negotiated.

² Ibid., p. 2.

Acknowledgements

I am incredibly grateful for the generous and kind support I have received during the course of my studies at Oxford, without which I would not have been able to complete this thesis.

First and foremost, I want to thank my excellent supervisor, Professor Alastair Wright, for his guidance, support, expertise, and encouragement throughout the course of this project. I have benefitted greatly from his thoughtful, precise, and nuanced engagement with my work, which has deeply enriched my approach. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with him these past few years.

This project was made possible through funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and an Usher Cunningham studentship, for which I am very grateful. I am indebted to Dr Anthony Gardner and Dr Jo Applin for the expert attention they gave to my thesis, and for the instructive and encouraging conversation that arose from this. Discussing my project with them was both helpful and enjoyable, and I am immensely grateful for their comments. My thanks also to Professor Craig Clunas and Professor Gervase Rosser, whose constructive and encouraging feedback was instrumental in honing my arguments at various stages of this project; I appreciate the time and care that they gave to my work. For their encouragement throughout my academic career, I would like to thank Professor Hanneke Grootenboer, Dr Flavio Boggi, Dr Sabine Kriebel, and Dr Ed Krčma. Likewise, I am grateful to Mr Liam Nott for fostering my love of art history from an early age, and encouraging me to pursue it at university. My mother, Tina, has provided considerable help in the form of her exceptional proofreading skills, and our many discussions have helped to shape and clarify my ideas; for this and more, I am deeply grateful.

I have been truly lucky to meet some of the most wonderful people I could hope to know while here at Oxford, and I want to thank them for making my time here such a joy. I have been privileged to be a part of two fantastic graduate communities, at St Catherine's College and Exeter College, where I

have met too many kind, excellent, intelligent, funny people to list here. In particular, I want to thank Brittany Allesandro, Caroline Marciniak, Enrico Tassi, Andrew van Paridon, John Sigmier, Michael McLeod, Naomi Vogt, and, in Cork, Rob Carlile, and my uncle, Dr Ian Murphy, for their support, both academic and emotional, and their friendship. Special thanks to Alex Weiss, with whom I have shared many wonderful adventures in Oxford and beyond, for his love and support, and to his family, Wendy, Jack, and Hayley, for their warmth and kindness. My special thanks, too, to Victoria Sainsbury, who has been an integral part of my Oxford experience from the very beginning, and whose companionship has shaped it in the loveliest of ways.

To these people and more, I want to say thank you: for all the late-night chats, the formal dinners, the blanket forts, the fancy-dress parties, the pie-baking sessions, the midnight sing-alongs, the trips, and the many treasured memories, both in Oxford and elsewhere; I look forward to making many more.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, with special thanks to my grandparents, Nora, Denis, Helen, and Sonny, and to my sister Joan, for her patience and excellent sense of humour. I am immeasurably, infinitely, indescribably grateful to my parents, Tina and Tadhg, for their constant support, encouragement, and love – throughout this project and long before – and without whom none of this would have been possible. Thank you for everything.

I dedicate this thesis to them.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Young British Art and the Middle-Aged English Craftsman.....	15
Chapter Two: Dressing the Part.....	68
Introduction.....	68
Part One.....	90
Part Two.....	142
Chapter Three: Curating the Past.....	187
Introduction.....	187
The Charms of <i>The Charms of Lincolnshire</i>	192
Never Such Innocence: Nostalgia, Elegy, and the Construction of Englishness in <i>Unpopular Culture</i>	218
Institutional Affirmation: Grayson Perry at the British Museum.....	245
There'll Always Be an England.....	252
List of Illustrations.....	260
Bibliography.....	268
Illustrations.....	292

Introduction

At the end of a cul-de-sac in Wrabness, Essex, overlooking the River Stour, there is a house (Figure 1). Its gleaming gold triangular roofs are staggered, creating a concertina effect, with big red-framed windows peering out of them like cartoon eyes. The façade is covered in thousands of ceramic tiles, alternating between white and khaki-green triangles bearing various *imprese* – hearts, mixtapes, nappy pins, the Essex coat of arms – and more elaborate workings of a naked and heavily pregnant woman, identified as ‘Julie’, squatting beneath a decorated arch like a powerful Sheela-na-Gig. This is Julie May Cope, the house-cum-shrine’s fictional and secular deity, who reappears again on top of the building in the form of a silver sculpture, her palms gently raised and opened to benevolently welcome approaching visitors. Described colloquially as a ‘gingerbread house’,¹ the building’s architecture mixes religious, fairy-tale, and folk iconography, referencing follies and wayside chapels.²

Inside, the devotional qualities are amplified. The floor is a mosaic imprinted with the dates of Julie’s birth and death, while another altarpiece-like ceramic sculpture of Julie in a blood-red niche presides over the house’s main room. Woodcuts adorn the ceiling, like black and white photographs scrapbooking the six decades of her life. Vases perch on shelves, and two twinned tapestries describe her narrative as it unfolded across Essex, from Canvey Island to Basildon to South Woodham Ferrers to Colchester: her ‘rock chick’ youth, first marriage, and motherhood eventually giving way to divorce, her second marriage, and a new career as a social worker in north Essex, until her unfortunate death at the wheels of a curry-delivering takeaway vehicle. The instrument of her passing – the deliveryman’s moped – serves as the central room’s chandelier, and the house, we are told, is Julie’s second husband Rob’s ‘Taj Mahal’ to his dearly departed wife. A portrait of the couple in their middle age, her holding

¹ Tom Batchelor, 'Grayson Perry unveils "gingerbread house"', *The Independent*, 8 August 2014.

² 'Fat and Grayson Perry win approval for controversial house', *Building Design*, 5 October 2012.

wild flowers and him clutching a glass of merlot, looks beyond the crisp white bed of one of two bedrooms to gaze lovingly upon the Essex countryside.

This is *A House for Essex*, a collaboration between the artist Grayson Perry and the architecture firm FAT (Fashion Architecture Taste). Commissioned by Living Architecture, an organisation founded by the philosopher Alain de Botton with the aims of promoting public engagement with contemporary architecture, the house is fully functional and available to anyone for short rentals as a holiday home. Planning permission for the house was announced in October 2012, and it was fully completed in 2015 after years of development, with an accompanying documentary about the project titled *Grayson Perry's Dream House* airing on Channel 4 in 2015. The programme follows Perry throughout the building process, before finally accompanying him as he takes six Essex women, all named Julie, on a pilgrimage to the house.

Perry has described the house as a 'temple to the Essex everywoman'³ inspired by 'single mums in Dagenham, hairdressers in Colchester, and the landscape and history of Essex'.⁴ The fictional character of Julie functions as a way for Perry to, as he sees it, 'capt[ure] the idea and people of Essex',⁵ where he himself grew up. Of the house, he has said: 'I wanted the building to reflect the different aspects of the county, its traditional side with a hint of its more recent history'.⁶ Indeed, the house is intended as a rebuke to the 'quite rude received wisdom about Essex' that haunts the region,⁷ including the negative and nationally-recognised 'Essex girl' stereotypes and the similarly deleterious reputation minted by the television series *The Only Way is Essex* (or TOWIE, as it is popularly known). Instead, Perry has suggested, the project is an attempt to show a fuller picture of a county that

³ Oliver Wainwright, 'For Grayson Perry's Essex house, the only way was "bonkers as possible"', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2015.

⁴ Batchelor, 'Grayson Perry unveils "gingerbread house"'.

⁵ Rowan Moore, 'Grayson Perry's A House for Essex: a stonking shrine to a fictional woman', *The Observer*, 10 May 2015.

⁶ 'Fat and Grayson Perry win approval for controversial house'.

⁷ Darryl Webber, 'Grayson's fairytale house is now a stunning reality', *Brentwood Gazette*, 20 May 2015.

encompasses ‘a range from the industrial edge of London, to the estuary docks, to coastal resorts such as Southend and Clacton, to the scenes painted by Constable’.⁸

While early reports on the project emphasised Perry’s struggles with the locals and their complaints about the project,⁹ this drama soon dissipated, and the house was quickly accepted and admired. Several sources attribute this shift in public opinion to discussion with Perry himself, who met with the residents of Wrabness to discuss their concerns, with one local describing how they ‘spent a very pleasant couple of hours [with him]. He’s a nice chap, he explained the concept and he wasn’t patronising’.¹⁰ This event is preserved in the programme, too, and one review in *The Independent* describes *Grayson Perry’s Dream House* as charmingly showing Perry ‘tottering about Essex in his orange clogs, winning over conservative villages with grace and humour’,¹¹ while another in *The Guardian* notes that there was little work for Perry to do in the first place, as a meeting in the village hall ‘fails to throw up any of the expected fireworks or outrage from Conservative rural England. They all seem to love the idea of Grayson’s dream house, disappointingly’.¹²

Indeed, the house and programme were received with almost universal praise, on local and national scales and from both sides of the political spectrum. Essex newspaper the *Brentwood Gazette* called it ‘one of the most remarkable houses ever built in this country, let alone Essex’, describing the final effect as ‘awe-inspiring’.¹³ *The Guardian* pronounced the house variously ‘beautiful’¹⁴ and ‘joyous’,¹⁵ and noted that ‘Julie, in all that she encompasses, easily spans the interlocking themes of class, taste and identity’ that were at the heart of Perry’s previous documentaries, 2012’s ‘All in the

⁸ Moore, ‘Grayson Perry’s A House for Essex’.

⁹ Charlie Cooper, ‘Grayson Perry has a vision for Essex... but the village of Wrabness doesn’t like it’, *The Independent*, 5 October 2012; John Hutchinson, ‘Furious locals brand Grayson Perry’s Gingerbread House holiday home an “abomination” for causing traffic chaos in sleepy Essex village’, *The Daily Mail*, 2 March 2015.

¹⁰ Cooper, ‘Grayson Perry has a vision for Essex... but the village of Wrabness doesn’t like it’.

¹¹ Chris Bennion, ‘Grayson Perry’s Dream House, Channel 4, TV review: Potter’s attempt to create an Essex Taj Mahal was a lovely treat’, *The Independent*, 18 May 2015.

¹² Sam Wollaston, ‘Grayson Perry’s Dream House review: “very Hansel & Gretel – a joy”’, *The Guardian*, 18 May 2015.

¹³ Webber, ‘Grayson’s fairytale house is now a stunning reality’.

¹⁴ Filipa Jodelka, ‘Grayson Perry’s Dream House: a secular chapel to the Essex everywoman’, *The Guardian*, 17 May 2015.

¹⁵ Wollaston, ‘Grayson Perry’s Dream House review: “very Hansel & Gretel – a joy”’.

Best Possible Taste' and 2014's 'Who Are You?'.¹⁶ As described above, the project was – perhaps unexpectedly – a success with more conservative audiences, too. *The Evening Standard* described it as 'an extraordinary and fecund vision' that is 'moving in its observations on class and feminism'.¹⁷ *The Telegraph* called it 'deliriously madcap', arguing that although it may sound 'like hard work' on paper the building itself may 'win you over yet', and writing: 'Pretentious? Absolutely. And yet the project's boundless visual imagination ultimately carries the day.'¹⁸ Even *The Daily Mail*, whose early coverage focused primarily on the locals' outrage¹⁹ and who later printed a sensational, emotive article about the house from the perspective of Perry's mother (from whom he is estranged),²⁰ ran a heavily illustrated and remarkably neutral feature about the house which seemed to play along with Perry's narrative by reprinting Julie's life story, and included more positive local responses to the house.

I have begun with *A House for Essex* because this recent project neatly brings together a number of the concerns that I will be arguing have informed Perry's career from the start, incorporating as it does his propensity to mythologise, using both fiction and his own autobiography; his preoccupation with gender, particularly femininity and womanhood (Perry is known for his transvestism); and his use of craft media, such as ceramics and tapestries, which separates him, at least to some degree, from his more conceptual contemporaries. Equally important is the way in which it uses these elements to consider – and specifically, re-figure – local and national identities, in order to probe and reconstruct ideas of English (and British) cultural identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is this latter aspect, perhaps, that explains at least some of his success. Certainly this is suggested by the response of one enthusiastic reviewer, who like many among both the public and the media was

¹⁶ Jodelka, 'Grayson Perry's Dream House: a secular chapel to the Essex everywoman'.

¹⁷ Robert Bevan, 'EXCLUSIVE: Grayson Perry and architects FAT design "A House for Essex"', *The Evening Standard*, 15 May 2015.

¹⁸ Ellis Woodman, 'Grayson Perry's A House For Essex, review: "deliriously madcap"', *The Telegraph*, 16 May 2015.

¹⁹ Hutchinson, 'Furious locals brand Grayson Perry's Gingerbread House holiday home an "abomination for causing traffic chaos in sleepy Essex village'.

²⁰ Nic North, 'How my son Grayson Perry drove me to the brink of suicide: Mother's agony over double rejection as transvestite artist "kills" her in his latest creation', *The Daily Mail*, 16 May 2015.

unreservedly willing to embrace Perry's vision of England. Nestled amongst the reams of positive reviews, the response of journalist Hugo Rifkind was particularly cogent and telling:

He's a genius, Grayson Perry. I wasn't sure until now because he's prone to being terribly silly, and sometimes it's hard to look past the giggles and taffeta to see substance. Think about where we are right now, though, with politicians of all hues hunting for a modern narrative of England that they can get a hold of, understand and engage with. They think big thoughts about industrialisation and multiculturalism and aspiration, and try to narrow it all down to the scale of a human. Perry did the opposite. He started with a made-up woman, normal as anything, and drew the England out. Then he built a church to it, in Essex. They should all go and have a look.²¹

Rifkind's analysis is, I suggest, an apt and perceptive (even if naïvely uncritical) interpretation of the response to Perry's work, which names this response while simultaneously performing it himself (Perry is a 'genius').

This thesis will argue that Perry has been occupied with ideas of class and national identity long before these recent projects made it explicit, but that these underlying concerns have often been subsumed, or obfuscated, by the foregrounding of other, more obvious aspects of his work, such as his transvestism. My title, 'the people's princess', is something of a play on this: while it draws on Perry's own comments about his popularity with the public in the lead-up to the Turner Prize ('I am the people's princess'²²), it is also, of course, an implicit reference to Princess Diana and her own popular appeal. In this way, it encapsulates many aspects of Perry's persona, both manifest and latent, by humorously invoking his transvestism (he is a 'princess'); his incorporation of English references and national history (here, the monarchy and the media phenomenon of Princess Diana); his rags-to-riches

²¹ Hugo Rifkind, 'Hugo Rifkind on TV: Grayson Perry's dream house was brilliant and bonkers', *The Times*, 23 May 2015.

²² Quoted in Lesley Wright, 'My week – Grayson Perry', *The Independent*, 1 November 2003.

Cinderella narrative of an ‘outsider’ transvestite craftsman becoming a Turner Prize-winning artist; and the broad public approval that he has very actively (and often cynically) sought to attract. Similarly, such a comparison is in service of Perry’s own self-presentation, in that his rhetoric of sincerity and therapy can also be linked to his self-conscious adoption of a Princess Diana-like role within the institutions of contemporary art, referencing the emotional public outpouring witnessed after her death. At the same time, and more appositely for my arguments here, it simultaneously (and perhaps unintentionally) points towards the ubiquity of his media image and the necessity of its interrogation.

It is to the question of how Perry positioned himself as the people’s princess that this thesis will attend. In particular, I will deconstruct the ways in which Perry’s exploration of these issues has, from the start of his career, repeatedly intersected with – and perhaps been obscured by – his more often commented upon play with gender. In doing so, I want to suggest that the ‘[hunt] for a modern narrative of England’ with which the public can engage has not only been at the centre of Perry’s work and persona from the beginning of his career, but has also been one of the main reasons for his popularity. At the centre of this thesis is the argument that Perry’s vision of England, and the purportedly ambivalent way in which he presents it, has struck a chord with an audience newly grappling with its uncertain status, and, most importantly, functions as a way of negotiating – and repatriating – English national identity at a time of crisis. I want to further argue, however, that this has been complicated by Perry’s self-positioning, and I propose that he has cultivated an air of subversion and transgression – again, not least through his transvestism – that has tempered the more affirmative aspects of his work. Indeed, even as Perry moves to more explicitly engage with issues of national and cultural identity, these are modulated by his professed intentions, which typically frame his ultimately affirmative stance in more insurgent language.

Perry’s half-subversive, half-affirmative stance is significant, as it allows him and his work to resonate with both those critical of the usual institutions of contemporary art – including many sections of the public and certain newspapers, tabloid and broadsheet alike – as well as the institutions

themselves. Similarly, this stance has implications not only for Perry's engagement with contemporary art but for his considerations of national identity as well, enabling an enquiry into, and ultimately a restitution of, 'Englishness' (and, to a lesser extent, 'Britishness'), by framing it within a rhetoric of ambivalence and diminishment rather than overt nationalism, the latter of which would have more problematic associations. Similarly, I want to suggest that it is this stance and its mediatory properties, coupled with his earlier self-positioning and his subtle but consistent foregrounding of domestic and demotic issues of national identity throughout his career, that has made Perry such a natural, and celebrated, candidate to take on the task of reinvigorating this identity now, and which has resulted in him being endorsed and institutionalised by several national channels, including the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Arts Council, the National Portrait Gallery, *The Times*, and the British Museum.

With these issues in mind, this thesis examines the reasons for Perry's success, situating him and his art within artistic, cultural, and historical contexts in order to better evaluate the significance of his popularity in the current moment, and charting this trajectory throughout his career. Perry rose to fame in 2003 when he was nominated for, and subsequently went on to win, the Turner Prize, a contemporary art prize for up-and-coming British-based artists under the age of 50. Since then, he has become a British celebrity in his own right, both in the art world and in the media more generally. Initially famous for his cross-dressing and his vases – both of which, at the time of his Turner Prize nomination, were characterised as being particularly controversial – Perry has since become a household name, thanks to a high-profile status bolstered by a seemingly constant stream of newspaper column inches, TV and radio appearances, and his own prodigious output as both an artist and curator; more recently, he has even been branded a 'national treasure'.²³

²³ Perhaps the first instance of this term appears in the *Financial Times* in 2009, used in a review of Jacky Klein's monograph on Perry; it reappears in 2011, and from 2012 is used freely, although his national treasure status is often described as being on the verge of being awarded (writing for *The Daily Telegraph*, for example, James Walton declares that he is 'now heading perilously close to national-treasure levels'). See: Jackie Wullschlager, 'Pot luck: The ceramic artist who stole the nation's heart', *Financial Times*, 10 October 2009; Tom Craig, 'Snap shot', *The Sunday Times*, 30 October 2011; Barry Diccock, 'Taste of modern Britain', *The Herald*, 5 June 2012;

In spite of – or perhaps, due to – his popular appeal, however, very little has been written about Perry academically. Most of the literature on Perry so far has been heavily mediated by the artist himself. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the major monograph on the artist by Jacky Klein, *Grayson Perry*, in which Perry describes his works while Klein bookends them with short thematically-organised, art historical but uncritical essays; the monograph was first published in 2009, and re-published in an expanded edition in 2013. Another example of this is Perry’s autobiography as told to Wendy Jones, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (2006), which recounts his life through a first-person narrative. Perry’s many exhibition catalogues – such as for *The Charms of Lincolnshire*, *Unpopular Culture*, and *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* – take a similar format to these, with Perry heavily involved in describing the process and intentions behind his art-making. When Perry does receive mention in more academic frameworks, it is usually in the context of reviews of these exhibitions or catalogues. As of yet, there has been no major enquiry into the particulars of his own practice as a whole. Indeed, Perry’s absence from academic discourse is notable, and, in light of his fifteen or so years in the spotlight, this lack of a more rigorous critical interpretation seems a particularly remarkable oversight. This thesis aims to address this lack, questioning whether there is more to this often superficial-seeming artist than meets the eye, and arguing that his anti-intellectual posturing is actually itself a conceptual position that masks, but also subtly enriches, some of his other artistic concerns.

In the course of my research, I have allowed Perry’s various works and projects to suggest which interpretive approaches and theoretical models are most appropriate at any given time, with the ultimate aim that each enunciation rehearses anew, and allows me to better articulate, the central claims of my argument. As such, while this thesis is structured by an overarching theme that runs throughout – that is, Perry’s formulation of national identity, expressed often through gender and almost always with ambivalence – there is no single theory that unifies all of these iterations. Instead,

Anthony Horowitz, ‘What class am I? All three!’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 10 June 2012; James Walton, ‘For me, earnestness is the greatest crime’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 November 2012.

in approaching these topics, I draw on a number of methodological approaches and angles, each of which furthers my underlying querying of Perry's half-critical, half-affirmative relationship with contemporary cultural norms. In addition to key texts such as Julian Stallabrass's *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Marjory Garber's academic survey of cross-dressing *Vested Interests*, and a number of books and articles on pantomime, drag, transvestism in film, and academic considerations of Monty Python, my thesis also draws on English literary criticism (in the case of William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* and scholarship on the poet Philip Larkin); political, historical and cultural theories of national identity (such as those formulated by Krishan Kumar on the topic of England and Britain, and Sianne Ngai on Japan's 'cute' culture); cultural studies (including the works of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams); and, of course, contemporary art history. In this respect, Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend's *The Art of Tracey Emin*, a collection of academic essays dealing with the artist, serves as a particular model for the way in which I wish to approach my own subject, including as it does several critical essays situating her within various different art historical, theoretical, and cultural frameworks. As will be considered shortly, the similarities between Perry and Emin make Emin scholarship a particularly rich mine for this thesis. For reasons that will be expanded below (and more comprehensively later in the thesis), I have for the most part chosen not to engage with LGBT, queer theory, or psychoanalytical formulations of cross-dressing, except when discussing why it is not relevant to Perry's own practice or persona.

In addition to close readings of the artworks and exhibitions themselves, my research also involves a close interaction with primary sources, such as media interviews with the artist and press response to his exhibitions, the combination of which allows us to complicate his own self-presentation and rhetoric. While I am interested in the ways in which Perry has been received by the public, this is not my primary object of analysis; rather, I am interested in how his work has generated a range of meanings in specific art historical and cultural contexts. I use the reception of his work mainly to flesh out my reading of particular pieces and exhibitions, and for this reason I have attended primarily to his reception in print media.

One final note: unlike Merck and Townsend, I have chosen not to conduct an interview with my subject. As discussed above there has, as of yet, been no real academic response to, or critical discourse, around Perry; instead, he appears ubiquitously in catalogues, monographs, and his own autobiography, as well as countless media interviews and articles. With this oversaturation of Perry's own commentary as to his artistic and personal meanings and intentions, I judged it necessary to take a step back and examine this already existing wealth of sources so as to look more critically at what Perry says, as well as why, where, and how he says it, in order to chart how this rhetoric has changed over time and to consider what it might be obfuscating or implying. To interview Perry would not, I argue, shed new light on the matters at hand; on the contrary, Perry in particular has repeatedly shown himself to be a skilled media manipulator. Similarly, the aim of this thesis is not to get 'inside' the artist's mind, but rather to explore how he and his art function within the broader cultural landscape.

In considering Perry's oeuvre, my thesis focuses on three main elements of his work and artistic persona: his self-definition in opposition to the much derided and often conceptual Young British Artists (YBAs), who had characterised the art scene before his rise to fame; his manipulation of gender; and his cultivation of 'Englishness', particularly as it interrelates with ideas of Britishness. Rather than being organised as a chronology, I will address each of these in turn, structuring my arguments around these key issues.

Chapter one explores the British art scene in the lead up to Perry's Turner Prize nomination, cataloguing the major traits of YBA art and artists, as well as the subsequent responses to this cultural landscape from both the media and the public. Taking as my guide – but also critically contesting some of the assumptions contained in – Julian Stallabrass's *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, the major academic tome on the subject of British art in the 1990s, I aim to position Perry within this taxonomic framework, considering both his similarities with, and his differences from, this (already itself disparate) artistic 'group'. That Perry has never truly been associated with the YBAs is significant; that he has utilised a number of their artistic strategies while avoiding such categorisation is more so. By situating Perry's own practice against the backdrop of sensationalism, self-promotion, and shock

tactics so often associated with the YBAs in particular and with contemporary British art more generally, we can begin to consider Perry's own self-presentation – as a craftsman, as sincere and down to earth, and as a transvestite rather than a macho lad or ladette – as a carefully cultivated response to a perceived 'lack' in the market, a re-positioning of the artist which is essential to further critical discussion.

Following on from this, chapter two looks at Perry's use of transvestism. Often associated with Perry's personal psychosexual history, and thus functioning as a sort of public emblem of his sincerity and reinforcement of his autobiography, Perry's cross-dressing has characterised his artistic persona and his artworks from the late 1980s onwards, overshadowing his critical reception. Over the years, his cross-dressing has taken many guises, as has 'Claire', the previous name for his transvestic 'alter-ego' (Perry has since come to reject the name Claire and the term 'alter-ego', claiming instead that he is simply Grayson in a dress). This chapter is split into two parts. The first part outlines the different forms Perry's transvestism has taken, and considers their significances not only with relation to particular moments in his career, but also their resonances with a number of issues of national identity. To explore this issue, I draw on theoretical models of transvestism and gender performativity, and also locate Perry's work in its specifically British context, where cross-dressing has taken on particular meanings at different points in the recent past. It is important to note here that transvestism is not considered in a psychosexual capacity, but as a surface performance. As such, the theory used here draws not only on performative gender theory and feminism (Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*), but also on theatre and national costume, including specific references to academic discussions of Shakespearean 'crossing the stage', pantomime dames, cross-dressing in the works of English comedy troupe Monty Python, and the use of 'temporary transvestite' narratives in popular films (such as, for example *Tootsie*) which are used to suggest the illusion of transgression while ultimately upholding the heteronormative status quo. The implications of this, as well as this type of performative transvestism's straddling of the precarious boundary between transgression and affirmation, will be

considered with particular reference to Perry's own performance(s) of gender and the centrality of this to his artistic persona.

Part two of this chapter will bring together a number of key elements from both part one and the preceding chapter in an extended consideration of Perry in relation to fellow contemporary artist Tracey Emin. Though Perry was often compared to Emin early on in his career, the associations quickly stopped. Here, I want to consider this link between the two artists – who both use craft, autobiography, sincerity, explicit sexual imagery, media savvy, and gender performativity in their practices – anew, considering how Perry's transvestic gender performance and ultimate heteronormativity allow him to dabble in the domains usually associated with 'women's art' (craft, the confessional) and use many of the same artistic strategies employed by Emin without suffering the same media derision and loathing, but also, interestingly, without receiving the same academic attention and clout. In this respect, this case study neatly summarises many of the thesis's major themes – the YBAs, Englishness, class, gender, sincerity – in order to question to what extent gender, self-presentation, and 'authenticity' can be said to affect the artists' reception in both the media and academia.

Finally, chapter three takes as its focus two exhibitions curated by Perry in 2006 and 2008, using them to shed light on his most famous curatorial venture, 2012's *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, suggesting that each of these exhibitions has Englishness or Britishness (or the problematic conflation of the two) at its centre. This chapter seeks to not only compare the common features of these exhibitions – which together paint a very particular picture of Perry as concerned with the parochial, esoteric, and local facets of Englishness while whitewashing elements of England's colonial and imperial past, and which all position Perry as the curator not only of the exhibition at hand but of English and British culture more generally – but also situates each within its own relevant theoretical framework. *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2006) will be considered as a type of pastoral, and I will draw on the relevant literature concerning both the theory and practice of the pastoral as mode or genre. *Unpopular Culture* (2008), I argue, is best understood as a nostalgic elegy reminiscent of the

anti-modernist poetry of Philip Larkin, and I will therefore situate the exhibition in relation to writing on Larkin's vision of England and, importantly, the positive reception of this among critics. With these in mind, *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, by way of conclusion, will briefly be read as an institutional affirmation of the British Museum. The chapter will close by considering the three exhibitions collectively; seen as a group, they together reveal a number of recurring themes in Perry's particular invocation of English and British culture.

It is important at this point to address the use of the terms English and British throughout this thesis. While I make every effort not to unconsciously reproduce these elisions in my own scholarship, I do intend to probe the fissures in the interrelationship of the two throughout. These terms have a complicated relationship; indeed, it is this complex entanglement that underpins many of this thesis's enquiries, and, I suggest, many of Perry's own projects. While the two terms are distinct – Britain, of course, encompassing not only England but also Scotland, Wales, and often implying Northern Ireland²⁴ – they are often used interchangeably (usually, as we will see throughout this thesis, by English people, as well as by non-Britons; that is, this substitution is rarely used by non-English Britons). In *The Making of English National Identity*, Krishan Kumar refers to 'the lordly English habit of subsuming British under English', a habit that is exhibited not only in the media responses discussed here, but in Perry's art, too.²⁵ This habit betrays the way in which 'Britishness' has long been monopolised by 'Englishness', but in fact this is 'especially problematic for the English, particularly when it comes to conceiving of their national identity'.²⁶ This becomes especially pertinent in the current moment, when the search for a specifically English national identity has become more pronounced, particularly in the wake of devolution.

²⁴ While Northern Ireland is not technically part of Great Britain (a geographical term for the landmass which includes England, Scotland, and Wales), it is a part of the United Kingdom, to which the term 'Britain' is often used to refer (albeit incorrectly). That Perry includes Northern Ireland in his considerations of Britishness is clear from his 2014 tapestry *Comfort Blanket*, which incorporates Northern Irish referents such as 'The Troubles' and 'Seamus Heaney'. This artwork will be discussed further in the conclusion of this thesis.

²⁵ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

While I primarily want to suggest that Perry's practice uses visual culture to re-figure, re-promote, and even legitimise English national identity specifically, however, the intersection of this with broader ideas of British cultural identity must be considered, too. While Perry exhibits a rather English conception of Britishness throughout his career – that is, an Anglocentric one – this takes on rather a different tenor as Perry is institutionalised by national establishments, and purported loci of British identity, such as the British Museum and the National Portrait Gallery. Indeed, this shift from presenting 'Englishness' to presenting 'Britishness', even when what is being represented is still primarily English, suggests that these identities are still being negotiated.

Chapter One: Young British Art and the Middle-Aged English Craftsman

When Grayson Perry won the Turner Prize in 2003, he famously declared in his acceptance speech: ‘It’s about time a transvestite potter won the Turner Prize.’¹ Dressed in a silky lavender dress decorated with cyan bows and trim, a frilly petticoat and collar, and appliqués of flowers and leaping rabbits bearing the words ‘Claire’ and ‘Sissy’ – all accessorised with shiny apple-red Mary Jane shoes, ruffled socks, a bow in his hair, and heavy make-up (Figure 2) – Perry was the obvious punchline to his own joke. Not simply a glib and comic reference to his own outlandish specificity, however, Perry’s comment also reflects a growing shift that had been happening in the British art world: that is, a gradual disillusionment with contemporary art, as embodied by the Young British Artists (often abbreviated to ‘YBAs’) and perpetuated by the institution of the Turner Prize itself. With this remark, made at his moment of triumph over YBA sculptors and shock tacticians Jake and Dinos Chapman, who had been the favourites to win throughout, Perry seems to suggest a movement away from the ‘YBA’ hierarchy that had dominated the Turner Prize since the mid-1990s in favour of something ‘different’ and, he suggests, long overdue – something which is here represented by him.²

¹ Nigel Reynolds, ‘Transvestite’s shocking pots claim victory in Turner Prize’, *The Telegraph*, 8 December 2003; ‘Transvestite Potter Wins Turner’, *BBC*, 7 December 2003, accessed 10 March 2015 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3298707.stm>. Perry’s remark also made it into a humour book published in 2008, *Dim Wit: The Funniest, Stupidest Things Ever Said*, listed under the ‘Awards’ category alongside other glib comments and sincere-but-derided remarks alike. Rosemarie Jarski, *Dim Wit: The Funniest, Stupidest Things Ever Said* (London, 2008), p. 191.

² Since the rebranding of the Turner Prize in 1991, when Channel 4 became its sponsor and the prize money was increased to £20,000, a significant percentage of the nominated artists have been linked with Young British Art. While the problems of defining the term ‘Young British Art’ and categorising who is and is not a ‘YBA’ will be discussed shortly, it is worth acknowledging that those artists most strongly associated with the movement, whether through their existing ties with Goldsmiths and *Freeze* or through their collection by YBA patron Charles Saatchi and later inclusion in his major 1997 exhibition of Young British Art, *Sensation*, make up almost 35% of the nominees between 1991-2003 (inclusive), and account for 30% of the winners in this period. These include 1991 nominees Ian Davenport and Fiona Rae (*Freeze*), 1991 runner up and 1993 winner Rachel Whiteread (collected by Saatchi and later featured in *Sensation*), 1992 nominee and 1995 winner Damien Hirst (*Freeze*), 1995 nominees Mona Hatoum and Mark Wallinger (both featured in *Sensation*), 1996 nominees Gary

Though various aspects of his career were predicted by the YBAs – such as high media visibility and engagement, the de-intellectualising of art, and the gendered performance of the artist – it is notable that Perry would play with these components to instead construct and maintain his persona in marked opposition to his contemporaries. In this section, I want to consider Perry in relation to Young British Art, exploring his similarities with, and departures from, the typical tenets of the YBA style as it is generally defined. Perry's omission from surveys of Young British Art is more than coincidental, and his continued taxonomic separation from other similar contemporary British artists is especially revealing, particularly when we note that it is also diachronistic; that is, in the beginning, he was often couched in similar language to his controversial peers, and even categorised alongside them. The aim here, however, is not to decide whether Perry is or is not a YBA in a simple attempt at classification, but to consider how Perry has incorporated, rejected, and manipulated YBA strategies in order to market himself as something outside this norm.

In order to do this, I want to first chart Perry's artistic output throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, considering how his use of pottery and his personal rhetoric developed throughout these years before settling into the form for which he would become famous in the 2000s, and suggesting how this might relate to the artistic landscape of this period more generally. Secondly, I wish to look briefly at the concurrent trajectory of the Young British Artists, who were Perry's contemporaries for the majority of his career and represented the dominant artistic tendency at the time, from their breakthrough in 1988 to their eventual decline ten years later. In doing so, I want to pay particular attention to the major 1997 exhibition of Young British Art at the Royal Academy, *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Gallery*, as the definitional embodiment of this artistic moment. *Sensation* lived up to its name in terms of media response and served as both the first and last cohesive outing of the 'group'; as such, it is the perfect case study through which to explore how Young British

Hume and Simon Patterson (*Freeze*), 1997 winner Gillian Wearing (*Sensation*) and nominee Angela Bulloch (*Freeze*), 1998 winner Chris Ofili and nominee Sam Taylor-Wood (both *Sensation*), 1999 nominees Tracey Emin (*Sensation*), 2001 nominee Richard Billingham (*Sensation*), 2003 nominees Jake and Dinos Chapman (*Sensation*) and Anya Gallaccio (*Freeze*).

Art was defined, presented, received, and remembered, and how its decline paved the way for Perry's rise. Indeed, Perry's riposte to the YBAs can be seen in the playful way he staged his own exhibition titled *Sensation* at the Laurent Delaye Gallery shortly afterwards in 2000. Finally, I want to set the tone for the rest of the thesis's preoccupation with issues of national and cultural identity by considering what Young British Art's decline, and Perry's subsequent ascension, might suggest about contemporary art and British culture more broadly. In particular, I want to consider the role of Young British Art in New Labour's failed 'Cool Britannia' nation branding campaign, and ultimately argue that Perry suggests an alternative model that I will explore further throughout the thesis.

Bad Art, Bad Pottery³

In 1980, while still a student at Portsmouth Polytechnic where he did his Fine Art degree,⁴ Grayson Perry created a multimedia artwork about himself entitled *Transvestite Jet Pilots* (Figure 3). The piece is a mixed media shrine made from a dressing table, covered in carvings of voodooistic symbols intended to mimic the buttons in a cockpit, and surrounded by a parachute fanned out to create a sunbeam halo. In the bottom drawer of the dresser are, fittingly, a series of photographs depicting the process of Perry getting dressed, transforming from Michelangelo's *David* to 'a kind of Oxfam auntie'.⁵ The tabletop is scattered with Perry's handmade 'Stone Age artefacts', 'aggressively male' combinations of typical dresser bits and bobs with the imagery of male genitalia.⁶ Perry describes it as the beginning of his artistic career, and while the crudeness indicative of this and other early works is no longer emblematic of Perry's style (and nor does he use such media) it nonetheless synopsis a number of Perry's overarching artistic concerns, which have stuck with him throughout his career: craft and the handmade; gender and transvestism; the domestic and the secrets it keeps;

³ The title of this section comes from that of a pot Perry made in 1996.

⁴ It is worth noting even at this early juncture Perry's divergence from the narrative of the primarily Goldsmiths-educated Young British Artists; his Fine Art training at a polytechnic as opposed to a more prestigious university is later used as further evidence of his anarchic outsider position within the art world.

⁵ Grayson Perry quoted in Jacky Klein, *Grayson Perry* (London, 2009), p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Perry's own autobiography; playful fictional histories (the 'Stone Age' artefacts) presented alongside purportedly sincere personal ones (Perry's transvestism); and ritualism.

Perry began to make the pottery for which he would become famous in 1983 after enrolling in evening classes, but it would not become his primary medium until the mid-1980s; in 1987, his commitment to ceramics was consolidated with the purchase of a kiln.⁷ Until then, however, Perry often worked in film, and even as late as 1987 his artistic CV is divided into 'Main Sculpture Exhibitions' and 'Main Film Shows'.⁸ Perry's work at this time betrays the influences of his post-degree experiences living in a squat in London in the early 1980s, where he continued the stylistic trends seen in *Transvestite Jet Pilots* by making art from 'the meagre materials that were readily to hand'⁹ and performed with the Neo-Naturists, a purposely hippie-ish 'performance based live art practice' that involved performers coating their nude bodies in painted designs and entering into the New Romantic London club scene as a sort of unfashionable and outdated intervention.¹⁰

Perry's films in particular allowed him to combine these interests, involving both handmade elements and performance, and they foregrounded his preoccupations with ritual, magic, banality, and, above all, amateurism.¹¹ Two of the most famous of these, now preserved in the British Film Institute's archives, centre around narratives involving innocent girls being drawn into dark worlds by powerful, sadistic women – a dynamic that would be replayed in his transvestism – and they similarly portray both the lack of craft and the thematic preoccupations evinced by his pottery of the same time. In *The Green Witch and Merry Diana* (1984, 19 minutes 52 seconds), a young girl is cursed with a tail by a witch, and must go on a quest around Camden to collect a number of neon-green plastic objects in order to reverse it. The film's shambolic, homemade qualities are conspicuous throughout: when

⁷ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 17.

⁸ *Grayson Perry: Ceramics* (London, 1987), n.p.

⁹ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 13.

¹⁰ For more on the Neo-Naturists, see: *Grayson Perry: Guerrilla Tactics* (Rotterdam; London, 2002); *Neo Naturist Cabaret 1979-2013*, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.neonaturists.org.uk/>

¹¹ One film which exists at something of a remove from this type is *Bungalow Depression* (1981). Devoid of magic but rich in ritual, banality, and satire, *Bungalow Depression* is Perry's most famous film as it performs the transvestism so central to his career, and it will be discussed in more detail in chapter two.

Diana's tail appears, we can see her pushing it down the waistband of her skirt, and the whole piece is overlaid with a mix-tape soundtrack, interspersed with accidental bursts of Perry's own voice as he struggles to record the audio – 'But why is it turned right down, why isn't it coming through? What did you do?', and later, 'Oh shit' – and intercut with stop-motion segments that loosely resemble the story.

This amateurism is only compounded in Perry's last film, *The Poor Girl* (1985), which, at 47 minutes 13 seconds long, has over twice the running time, as well as a significantly larger cast.¹² *The Poor Girl* again incorporates many of Perry's early trademark themes, this time revolving around a young girl kept in captivity by her wheelchair-bound mother (rhyming once more with many of Perry's transvestic fetishes at this time, including mother figures, imprisonment and bondage, and disabilities), who indoctrinates the girl with a love for consumerism and money above all else. At one point, the two women, dressed in fur coats, headscarves, and large handmade badges bearing the faces of Margaret Thatcher and the Queen, travel to the department store Selfridges, in front of which the girl lies down reverently.

While such explicit invocation of Thatcher and consumerism suggests satirical political commentary, however, this is undercut by the film's blatant silliness, which is figured both in the plot and its execution. The film builds to a climactic frenzy in which a table of women, all with heavy 1980s make-up and teased hair, eat eggs and thick, phallic sausages from the witchy crockery of Perry's own pottery, before devolving into a cackling, orgiastic ceremony that consists alternately of screaming, lying on their backs and wagging their legs, and spinning in circles repeatedly. This ritual summons the film's lone male figure, a murderer, into their midst, and he and the girl dance. Throughout the film, the players can be seen to be clearly and woodenly reading their lines from scripts off-screen and trying not to smile or laugh, a task at which they frequently fail.

In spite of Perry's eventual abandonment of filmmaking in favour of pottery, there are nonetheless clear and illuminating links between the two practices. Retroactively reading these films

¹² There are eight actors introduced at the film's beginning, not including 'Baba Yaga' who makes nine, in contrast to *The Green Witch and Merry Diana's* three.

alongside Perry's other works, Klein uses them to position Perry as outside the prevailing artistic narrative of his peers, writing that 'while many of the filmmakers around him were experimenting with the new medium of videotape and moving into the world of the pop-music promo,¹³ Perry's films were more wistful and personal', and suggesting that '[h]is productions embodied a spirit of rebellious fun with their oddball narratives, deadpan humour and strange juxtapositions of the surreal, the imaginary and the everyday'.¹⁴ For Klein, then, while Perry's films may have used the dominant format, they nonetheless expressed a 'resistance to fashion' that would come to shape his later practice,¹⁵ and functioned as an 'antidote to [the] serious and self-conscious trendiness' that characterised contemporary filmmaking.¹⁶ This reading fits neatly into the dominant Perry narrative, but it is further notable for the way in which it implicitly describes Perry's practice as being shaped by, and ultimately a response to, those popular artists around him, a dynamic we will see again shortly when we come to look at his relationship to the YBAs.

Similarly, although Perry has cited the medium's time and cost intensiveness as his main reason for its discontinuation, particularly in comparison with ceramics,¹⁷ we should perhaps query this further. Indeed, such an explanation is consistent with Perry's early self-positioning, as it situates his artistic practice within a rhetoric of artless and immediate gratification divorced from skill, effort, or conceptual strictures. I want to suggest, however, that the conceptual nature of this shift to pottery can be better understood in the context of these films. In this respect, these early forays into filmmaking are perhaps most useful for the way in which they enunciate the importance of intentional amateurism to Perry's project. That is, while 'naffness' is central to both, the use of the purposely unfashionable medium of pottery enables it to be more clearly articulated as a conceptual position. Similarly, these

¹³ Though Klein is talking about work made in the 1980s, it is relevant to note that many of the YBAs – particularly Damien Hirst and Sam Taylor-Wood – would go on to make music videos for Britpop bands in the 1990s, and so her comment here seems to anachronistically register a note of opposition to later as well as immediate categorisations.

¹⁴ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

films reveal the way in which more serious themes such as political commentary and cultural engagement (*The Poor Girl* opens with text declaring that it is ‘Dedicated to the County of Essex’, though it was not filmed there, instead referentially implying both the film’s creator and Essex’s history of witch trials) are ambivalently invoked before being defused by this amateurism and the outlandish narratives it is used to paint, a strategy we will see repeated throughout Perry’s career.

Like Perry’s particular strand of filmmaking and his stint with the Neo-Naturists, pottery was something he adopted because it was ‘naff’ and uncool, and it was registered as all the more so for being taught through evening classes and not at a prestigious artistic institution. Perry’s first solo ceramics show was at the James Birch Gallery in London in 1984, followed by another there the year after. Relatively little material remains from these early shows,¹⁸ although Klein asserts that the first exhibition ‘immediately sold well’.¹⁹ A photograph of the gallery front shows it decorated in a manner reminiscent of an occult shop, with dim lighting and ‘Grayson Perry’ painted in a punky purple assemblage font; adding to the witchy vibe, the G is made up of a crescent moon and an elongated crucifix (Figure 4). Through the windows, it is possible to see plates jauntily adorning the walls. Another photograph of the inside of the gallery space shows several pots, vases, and urns clustered on shelves in an alcove and flanked by more plates, again looking like a domestic-cum-pagan shrine.

As with *The Green Witch and Merry Diana* and *The Poor Girl*, these early ceramic works, such as his first plate *Kinky Sex* (1983, Figure 5), emphasise above all Perry’s explicit use of amateurism as an aesthetic and conceptual position.²⁰ Although Perry is now known for his use of craft, its usage here serves a different function than it does in his later work. While the pots shown at his Turner Prize exhibition in 2003 and its Barbican predecessor in 2002 employed a strategy of ‘guerrilla tactics’, mixing difficult or subversive subject matter with distractingly pretty, shiny decoration on skilfully made pots intended to draw people in, Perry’s early work suggests a more aggressive dialogue between

¹⁸ Two publicity postcards for these shows are held in the Tate’s ephemera collection, and I have discussed them in detail in my Masters thesis. See: Anna Murphy, ‘The Mind That Knows Itself: Identity, Psychoanalysis, and Performance in the Works of Grayson Perry’ (University of Oxford MSt thesis, 2012), pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 17.

²⁰ Perry’s early use of craft will be considered again in chapter two in relation to Tracey Emin.

‘craft’ and ‘high art’, instantly registering a provocation to both through its poorly-made forms. When reflecting on his first forays into ceramics, Perry often highlights his own ineptitude (he has said that in the beginning he made plates because he ‘couldn’t do sides’²¹) as well as the economic and artistic advantages of working the way he did ([...] quickly realised that I could make an artwork in a single week [...] I thought, Christ, I’m onto a winner here!’²²).

Perry’s technical skills soon improved, however, and much of the crudeness soon migrated from form to content. The work Perry made in the mid- to late-1980s varied between dark, earthy tones and lurid, acid-trip colours, and incorporated drawings, stamped texts, and photo-transfers; the themes were often sexual, sadomasochistic, violent, and diaristic, similar in style and content to his gruesome 1992 graphic novel, *Cycle of Violence* (which will be discussed in more detail in chapter two). Many early works rely heavily on stamped-in narratives, such as the confessional letterings in *I Was Just an Ordinary Person* (Figure 6), *Secret Woman* (Figure 7), *My Inner Other Life*, *The Keeper of the Bed* (Figure 8), and the unnamed plate which adorns the cover of his 1987 catalogue for his ceramics exhibition at Birch & Conran (Figure 9),²³ continuing Perry’s earlier mixed media and collage-heavy aesthetic.

Whereas *Kinky Sex* is both crudely fashioned and crudely themed, presenting a blotchy image of a crucified man ejaculating (with this being represented by the incorporation of a coin which melted in the process of making the plate), these later plates show a process of refinement, involving images inscribed and painted by Perry himself as well as the incorporation of photographic transfers; nonetheless, their forms and edges remain wobbly, lingering in the uncertain space between ‘art’ and ‘craft’ allowing Perry to refute the status of ‘craftsman’. As evidenced by these pieces, by the time of this show, images of masturbation, cross-dressing, and bondage had begun to take precedence, and the

²¹ ‘Grayson Perry and Oliver James Talk Sex and Ceramics’, *Tate Online*, accessed 25 May 2012, at <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/grayson-perry>.

²² Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 26.

²³ While there are no dates given for these works in *Grayson Perry: Ceramics*, their inclusion in this catalogue means they are from 1987 at the latest.

seeds of Perry's emerging mythology and iconography that were first sown in *Transvestite Jet Pilots* began to fully sprout.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Perry's statement for the accompanying catalogue, which spins a number of the threads of his early presentation, many of which would later weave together to form his public image. This preface in particular endeavours to fully underscore Perry's emphasis on craft, his utilisation of the inherent language and history of pottery (particularly with relation to the interlinking themes of craft, gender, and status), and his attempted deconstruction of the art industry through anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, and anti-craftsmanship. In it, Perry speaks of his style '[emanating] from the prim housewife whom I worked alongside at evening classes', discusses the way in which '[none] of [his] techniques are particularly complicated' and that in fact he '[relishes] using methods taught to the newcomer at an evening class', and declares that his 'drawing has not progressed since the sixth form'.²⁴ Furthermore, pointedly blasé statements such as his claim that people 'might find [his] pots aggressive, subversive or even shocking but [he is] very at home with these images, sometimes mildly bored' register the discord between his aim to shock and his desire to deny any such intention, and feature as particularly transparent acts of self-positioning,²⁵ all of which serves to link him with similarly contrarian statements that would be made by – and indeed the motivations of – the Young British Artists who would begin to similarly germinate the following year.²⁶

In addition to Perry's artistic manifesto, also significant in this catalogue is Perry's opening anecdote, which describes his first childhood experience of pottery with Freudian import:

One afternoon when I was eight or nine years old, I was given my first pottery lesson at Woodham Ferris C of E School, Essex. To protect our

²⁴ *Grayson Perry: Ceramics*, n.p.

²⁵ Perry would later comment on this: in *Grayson Perry*, he is quoted describing the decoration of an early 1984 pair of vases as him 'being an angry punk trying to shock people'. Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 29.

²⁶ Similarly contrarian and provocative are statements by Damien Hirst and Jake and Dinos Chapman. Hirst has said 'I can't wait to get into a position to make really bad art and get away with it' (Hirst in an interview with Liam Gillick, in *Building One, Gambler* [London, 1990], n.p.), and when asked if he and his brother intended to cause disgust, Dinos Chapman responded, 'We definitely intend to cause disgust, certainly in ourselves'; when further asked 'For what purpose?', he replied, 'For pleasure' ('Brilliant bad boys of the galleries', *The Guardian*, 7 October 1995).

clothes we were made to wear long sleeved smocks made of light blue rubber. I can vividly recall mine being too small as the pretty teacher did up the snap fasteners down the back. I became very excited at the feeling of the tight smooth material. In this state I made my first ever pot, an ashtray for my dear mother.²⁷

This brief paragraph details the first recorded instance of what would come to be one of the most oft-repeated tales of Perry's childhood; in fact, it appears almost verbatim in a number of later sources, such as in an article for *The Sunday Telegraph* in 2002. Functioning as Perry's own origin story, it neatly incorporates a number of the most essential and recurring aspects of his artistic persona: his fetishism and cross-dressing; his upbringing and family life in Essex; his strategy of confessional biographical and sexual openness; and themes of childhood, psychoanalysis (which is clearly invoked by the Freudian reference to his mother), and their sexualised intermingling. Significantly, all of these themes come to be unified by, and symbolised in, Perry's use of the medium of pottery.

Parallel to Perry's mythmaking, however, another mythology was being forged. A year after Perry's show at Birch & Conran, the now-legendary Damien Hirst-organised exhibition *Freeze* took place in an empty London Port Authority building, and – according to popular art historical lore – the Young British Artists were born.

Sensation

In his book *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, art historian Julian Stallabrass opens his introduction with the following reflection:

Once upon a time, not so long ago, some of us involved in the art world thought that all would be well with contemporary art if only it were less

²⁷ *Grayson Perry: Ceramics*, n.p.

elitist, if a little air could be admitted into the tight circle of our enthusiasm, if the public could be persuaded that the products of this world were not some con, dedicated to providing assorted posh types with an easy and entertaining living.²⁸

In the scathing survey that follows,²⁹ Stallabrass acknowledges the increased popularity and wider reach of contemporary art that indeed ensued in the 1990s, but laments its ultimate failure, deploring that ‘the cultural utopia that some had hoped would unfold with wider participation has not come about’,³⁰ leaving us instead with ‘an art that looks like but is not quite art, that acts as a substitute for art’.³¹ He is referring, of course, to Young British Art, or as he chooses to call it, High Art Lite, a term he coined in order to refute Young British Art’s claims of youth, Britishness, and artfulness, as well as to disaffirm its power as a marketing term, the name having originally been taken from the titles of exhibitions held at the Saatchi Gallery. Stallabrass’s disappointment – and at times even disgust – with Young British Art forms the backbone of the book, which is dedicated to charting and deconstructing the ‘movement’ and emphasising its failings.³²

While numerous critics have engaged with various aspects of Young British Art both at the time and since, *High Art Lite* remains the closest thing to a sustained academic response to the movement.

²⁸ Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London, 1999), p. 1.

²⁹ It is interesting to note just how many critics praise the book for its excoriating approach, and how the author (or perhaps the publisher) uses this in its marketing. The cover quote for both editions, taken from Brian Appleyard (*The Sunday Times*), declares it a ‘withering attack on the avant-garde pretensions of current British art’; a quote on the back of the book from Will Self (*New Statesman*) endorses Stallabrass’s analysis of Young British Art as ‘almost wholly eaten up by its abject willingness to be fucked’ in numerous ways (including ‘fucked to buggery by its co-option by the new Labourite idiotology’); ‘Inflammatory’ is attributed to previous Director of Tate Britain Stephen Deuchar; and the 2006 edition declares it ‘lacerating’ (*Financial Times*) and a ‘full-throated attack’ (*Kirkus Reviews*).

³⁰ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² The term ‘movement’ is, as we will see, problematic when used to discuss the YBAs, for it suggests both a more unitary artistic style – which the YBAs, working in a variety of media and using a number of different aesthetic approaches, cannot be said to have – and a more intentional ‘group’ mentality on the part of the artists, which, despite often exhibiting together, and despite early curatorial collaborations, similarly cannot be said to be true on the whole. Furthermore, the term ‘YBA’ is one applied to the artists by the media, galleries, or collectors, rather than proposed by the artists themselves; no artist self-identifies as a YBA. Instead of ‘movement’, Stallabrass often uses the term ‘tendency’, which is perhaps more accurate, and which I also use here; however, the whole notion of grouping the YBAs together in any format is, as we will see, a fraught endeavour.

Although there have been a number of relevant critical and academic articles published on the topic (with many appearing in the contemporary art journal *Third Text*), most other book-length engagements with the subject – with the exception of the contemporaneous 1998 anthology *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art*, also edited by Stallabrass with Duncan McCorquodale and Naomi Siderfin – are either exhibition catalogues, monographs, or personal memoirs of associated fringe figures,³³ all of which have their limitations when considering the overall structures and importance of Young British Art. *High Art Lite* was originally published in 1999, at the height of Young British Art's media saturation (following *Sensation*), and was republished in a revised and expanded edition in 2006, with a new, more smugly fatalistic suffix: *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*.³⁴

The former edition contains no mention of Grayson Perry, who, although working at this time, would not come to major public attention until his Turner Prize nomination in 2003,³⁵ the second edition contains only one passing reference to Perry.³⁶ Though Stallabrass openly says that the book 'is not a survey and some significant work is neglected',³⁷ Perry's omission nonetheless seems significant (and the neglected work to which Stallabrass refers seems to be that 'unjustly neglected' contemporary British art which does not align with the 'the popular heights of high art lite' rather than anything that might resemble it, as Perry does). Whether this exclusion is because Stallabrass designates Perry as something other than a Young British Artist or because Perry simply came along too late to be fully

³³ These include Matthew Collings's *Blimey: From Bohemia to Britpop* (Cambridge, 1997) and Gregor Muir's *Lucky Kunst: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London, 2010).

³⁴ Unless otherwise noted, references here are to the 1999 edition rather than the 2006 reprint; this is in an attempt to better reconstruct and understand contemporary reactions in the cultural moment before Perry's Turner win, rather than after it (and reflected through the lens of hindsight).

³⁵ Though mentions of Perry begin to trickle into review pages from the early 2000s onwards, it was his Turner Prize nomination that produced the most publicity. Perry was nominated for his show *Grayson Perry: Guerrilla Tactics* which was on display at the Barbican in London from 21 September to 3 November 2002, but, despite features in *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, and *The Evening Standard*, the exhibition does not appear to have been widely reviewed.

³⁶ Perry is referenced in a section titled 'Sex and Death' which discusses work which suggests that 'behind domestic banality lies abjection and horror – wife battering, violent sexual perversions, child abuse, perhaps. This is by now an entirely conventional media view. [...] It is also reflected in Grayson Perry's pottery, which is thoroughly saturated with the mass-media presumption that behind every net curtain is a potential or actual sexual deviant.' Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London, 2006), pp. 137-8.

³⁷ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite* (1999), p. 12.

included, it is nonetheless clear that Perry exists at something of a remove – whether stylistically or chronologically – from the typical YBA trajectory.

As a classification, the term Young British Art is a complicated one. Although historically it derives from the title of a series of five exhibitions at the Saatchi Gallery, beginning in 1992, which were intended to showcase work by young and emerging British artists, it soon began to take on a larger media significance, incorporating certain notions about the artists involved and the style of the work itself. Referring to the marketing potential of the ‘brand name’, Stallabrass muses that the term YBA (also commonly stylised as yBa) is perhaps ‘no more than a media confection, a useful logo under which to publicise the productions of an otherwise disparate generation of artists’,³⁸ hinting at the many diffuse aesthetic sensibilities the term is used to include. Stallabrass’s rebranding of Young British Art as ‘high art lite’, a term that is notably often referenced but rarely adopted by other critics, is further intended to puncture the fantasy, making more explicit the art’s collusion with marketing and capitalism through his use of the final word ‘lite’, ‘a designator that has migrated into common speech, vulgarised spelling and all, from the advertisement campaigns of soft drink companies’,³⁹ to indicate its nutritionally void status. This refusal and renaming is also found elsewhere: writing in 1997, prior to the publication of *High Art Lite*, James Gaywood invents the term ‘New-Boomers’ in order to avoid ‘reproducing the phenomenalisation embodied in the highly connotated “yBa” term’.⁴⁰ For both critics, even the term itself has an almost talismanic power which can only be broken through its negation.

In his essay ‘The Myth of the Young British Artist’, Simon Ford outlines the way in which the movement seems to have sprung fully-formed, meta-referentially asserting that ‘commentary on the myth of the yBa becomes part of the myth of the yBa’.⁴¹ (Writing just a few years later in 2000, Elizabeth Legge comments that ‘Simon Ford’s devastating, axiomatic, demythologising critique of the

³⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

³⁹ Gene Ray, ‘Little Glass House of Horrors: High Art Lite, the Culture Industry and Damien Hirst’, *Third Text*, Vol. 18 (2004), p. 120.

⁴⁰ James Gaywood, “yBa” as Critique: The Socio-Political Inferences of the Mediated Identity of Recent British Art’, *Third Text*, Vol. 11 (1997), p. 4.

⁴¹ Simon Ford, ‘The Myth of the Young British Artist’, in Julian Stallabrass, Naomi Siderfin, and Duncan McCorquodale (eds.), *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art* (London, 1998), p. 133.

yBas-as-phenomenon has in turn become a foundational part of yBa mythology'.⁴²) While Ford himself does not question or extricate himself from the 'YBA' moniker (though he does reach through it to argue that it was 'possibly the first movement to be created by a collector'⁴³), neither does he intend to, preferring instead to chart how the artists and their supporting institutions – that is, collectors, critics, galleries, and the State itself – neatly and almost invisibly map to a kind of art historical atlas. In the narrative of the YBAs, Ford locates a creation myth (*Freeze*), a father figure (Goldsmiths tutor and artist Michael Craig-Martin), and an underlying moral (the illusion of rebellion and 'do it yourself' attitude that belies the truth of its State and British Council sponsored funding). Ironically, Saatchi himself does not feature much in this mythological narrative; while he can be argued to be the true father of the YBAs, the mythology, at least, seems directly intended to occlude the realities of these economic origins.⁴⁴

Such an awareness of this mythology is essential particularly when considering the publicity around, and responses to, the major YBA exhibition, *Sensation*. Although *Freeze* is considered to be the major starting point of the YBAs, numerous commentators including Hirst himself have suggested that *Freeze* is an exhibition that everyone claims to have seen but nobody actually did,⁴⁵ further emphasising its mythic status. On the contrary, it seems that everybody saw *Sensation*, and several reviews mention the long queues for the exhibition and the type of people in them, which differed from the usual crowds drawn by the Royal Academy. It received massive coverage, both in the British media and in academic journals which reviewed both the exhibition and its catalogue. Publicity was generated even before the exhibition opened with the controversial announcement that the Royal Academy would be displaying Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1995, Figure 10) – an enormous portrait of the Moors murderer Myra Hindley who, alongside her partner Ian Brady, sexually abused, tortured, and

⁴² Elizabeth Legge, 'Reinventing Derivation: Roles, Stereotypes, and "Young British Art"', *Representations*, Vol. 71 (2000), p. 17.

⁴³ Ford, 'The Myth of the Young British Artist', p. 134.

⁴⁴ Stallabrass in particular explores these economic realities. See: Stallabrass, 'The market and the state', in *High Art Lite* (1999), pp. 170-195.

⁴⁵ Jessica Berens, 'Freeze: 20 years on', *The Observer*, 1 June 2008.

murdered several children in the 1960s, painted with the repeated pixel of a child's handprint – despite complaints. The scandal caused several Royal Academicians to resign, and the exhibition was protested by some of the mothers of Hindley's victims, while debates about whether the painting should be hung raged on in the newspapers prior to the exhibition's opening.⁴⁶

Similarly, although *Freeze* is considered (albeit retroactively) to be the birth of the YBAs, it is *Sensation* that cemented the branding of the artists associated with the term. Admittedly, there was considerable overlap between the two sets of exhibitors, with nine of the sixteen artists in *Freeze* going on to show work in *Sensation*.⁴⁷ However, while this means that a large proportion of *Freeze* exhibitors (over half) would go on to show in *Sensation*, they comprised only a fifth of the exhibition's artists in total, and several of the new additions are those most associated with Young British Art today, including Tracey Emin, Chris Ofili, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Marcus Harvey, Mark Quinn, Jenny Saville, Sam Taylor-Wood, Gavin Turk, and Gillian Wearing. (Other represented artists, such as Yinka Shonibare, Rachel Whiteread, Ron Mueck, and Mona Hatoum, have had continued success that is often defined and interpreted outside of the realm of Young British Art.)

Much of the work collected in the exhibition already had strong associations with the public thanks to previous media coverage, and many of the decade's defining works of Young British Art were on display. Among these were Hirst's colloquially derided 'pickled shark', otherwise known as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991, Figure 11), as well as a similar formaldehyde sculpture of a sheep entitled *Away from the Flock* (1994) which had made headlines in 1994 when it was vandalised by Mark Bridger, an unemployed artist, who filled the tank with black ink and called it *Black Sheep*.⁴⁸ Also in a vitrine was Gavin Turk's *Pop* (1993, Figure 12), a waxwork depiction of the artist-as-Sid Vicious-as-Andy Warhol's *Elvis*, which has become the

⁴⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of this controversy, see: Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, pp. 201-10.

⁴⁷ These artists were Mat Collishaw, Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Michael Landy, Abigail Lane, Sarah Lucas, Richard Patterson, Simon Patterson, and Fiona Rae. Of the artists included in *Freeze* but not represented in *Sensation*, Angus Fairhurst is perhaps most strongly associated with the YBAs. Anya Gallaccio, Angela Bulloch, and Ian Davenport also have reputations which are still somewhat intertwined with that of Young British Art, and all were nominated for the Turner Prize. Gallaccio was nominated in 2003, alongside Grayson Perry.

⁴⁸ 'Artist guilty of sabotaging pickled sheep', *Reuters News*, 18 August 1994.

quintessential icon of Young British Art's self-obsession, self-aggrandisement, and use of appropriation. Marc Quinn's *Self* (1991, Figure 13), a Hammer Horror death mask of the artist's bust made from nine pints of his own frozen blood, was presented in its own cryogenic glass case, another kind of postmodern pedestal. Aside from Harvey's monumental *Myra* (which was, perhaps predictably, defaced during the exhibition⁴⁹), complaints about the inappropriate use of children were further raised about Jake and Dinos Chapmans' *Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-Sublimated Libidinal Model* (1995, Figure 14), a fibreglass sculpture of several glossy, nude child mannequins fused together, their bodily orifices sealed over but for the addition of erect penises for noses and stretched holes for mouths.⁵⁰ Another of the Chapmans' mannequin works, *Great Deeds Against the Dead* (1994), re-enacts one of Goya's etchings from *The Disasters of War* in a self-congratulatory art historical affront to the master. Tracey Emin's by-then notorious embroidered tent *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995, Figure 15) was also on display, as was work by Jenny Saville, Rachel Whiteread, and Sarah Lucas, whose sculpture *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992, Figure 16) presented the female body as a four-legged table decorated with two small, saggy fried egg breasts and a yawning vaginal pitta bread stuffed with mangy meat.

More so than *Freeze*, then, *Sensation* is, and should be, the exhibition which best defines that tenuous category known as Young British Art, and as such it provides a useful model against which we can consider Perry's own output. Its significance in the current context is twofold, as *Sensation* is both helpful for the way in which it provides examples of many of the works to which Perry was reacting in the early 1990s, and necessary as an exhibition in itself, an important cultural event critical to the interpretation of Perry's work and persona post-1997. Many of the genre's defining interests were on display: post-modern referentiality (Turk); provocative and sensational subject matter (Harvey, Chapmans); the deskilling of art (Hirst, Emin, Lucas); interest in the self (Turk, Quinn, Emin);

⁴⁹ One man was arrested for throwing ink at the painting; another, an egg. 'Two held for defacing UK gallery's "sick" picture', *Reuters News*, 18 September 1997.

⁵⁰ Stallabrass comments on the juxtaposition of this piece with *Myra* due to the layout of the exhibition space. Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 205.

questions of gender (Saville, Emin, Lucas); and an interest in domestic British matters and tabloid fodder (Harvey, Lucas). In this way, although the idea of Young British Art as a cohesive ‘movement’ may frequently be perceived as nothing more than a marketing confection manufactured by Charles Saatchi and crystallised by a media that traded on its sensationalism, looking at *Sensation* nevertheless allows us to examine the work collectively to establish whether it did, indeed, have any shared thematic or aesthetic traits other than the institutions that defined it, and to observe how these might relate to Perry’s own practice. In doing so, I want to not only consider how Perry’s work at the time related (or did not relate) to the work on display, but also to flag some of the ways in which it would be shaped, often contradictorily, by this legacy going forward, particularly throughout the 2000s.

Why be a YBA?⁵¹

As the Young British Artists began to dominate the artistic scene with increasing ubiquity throughout the 1990s, Perry’s focus and self-presentation began to quietly change in tandem. During this decade, Perry took part in a number of significantly less publicised group and solo exhibitions. Often, his work was included in group shows that dealt explicitly with ceramics or pottery, rather than contemporary art, highlighting the definitional problems raised by his practice. One such example was the Barbican’s 1993 show *The Raw and the Cooked: New Work in Clay in Britain*, which later travelled to Oxford, Swansea, and Japan throughout 1994 and 1995. A review for the exhibition gave Perry only a passing mention, calling his pots ‘confessional’.⁵² Perry’s gallery, on the other hand, attempted to complicate his association with craft in 1994 by presenting his pots explicitly as artworks (at, Perry notes, the behest of his dealer at the time, Anthony d’Offay), displaying them on shelves of various height; though this both concealed large swathes of the imagery and kept them at a distance which obscured their details, it nonetheless reframed Perry’s ceramics within ‘the orthodoxy of

⁵¹ I have borrowed this title from a 1998 article in *The Observer*: Andrew Anthony, ‘Why be a YBA?’, *The Observer*, 22 November 1998.

⁵² ‘Raw Talent from a Multi-Ethnic World’, *The Financial Times*, 31 July 1993.

contemporary art'.⁵³ Though Perry participated in a number of shows at various galleries, however, these were rarely discussed in the media. Instead, the newspapers remained preoccupied with the buying habits of Charles Saatchi,⁵⁴ the bitchy politics of the Turner Prize,⁵⁵ and the hype of Young British Art and its producers.⁵⁶

During this YBA-dominated period, Perry began to use his liminal position to critique these dominant trends. While often his pots sought to trouble or satirise the distinctions between art and craft, as seen above, many of his works at this time also explicitly targeted the contemporary art world, lampooning its key figures and strategies. For example, *Gilbert and George in China* (1993, Figure 17) is a pair of two vases of the famous English artists, with a portrait of each on one side giving way to a degrading image on the other: verso, George is first seen saying 'Arse for all' (a parody of the duo's slogan 'Art for all'), while recto, a Chinese dignitary ejaculates on him as he kneels reverentially; another dignitary tells Gilbert, 'why thank you Gilbert and George seeing your wonderful Art has made us stop the oppression of our people' [sic], signalling Perry's unconcealed derision for the limited capabilities of contemporary art, mirroring the responses of many in the public.⁵⁷

Continuing this derision, another work from 1996, *Gimmicks* (Figure 18), represents famous artists from the 'man-in-the-street' view (we should note here Perry's implicit self-positioning), reducing them to their 'gimmicks' using open-stock transfers: Gilbert and George are again referenced (as 'matching suits'), with other trademarks including 'soup cans', 'targets', 'shark', and 'dots'. *Metaphor for the Human Condition Bollocks* (1996) takes its title from the pretensions of contemporary artists. Art is frequently exposed as a commodity: a slightly later work from 2000, *We Are What We Buy* (Figure 19), explicitly compares artists to brands, by drawing gallery-goers and

⁵³ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 204.

⁵⁴ William Packer, 'From dreams to dead fish – the latest Saatchi installation', *The Financial Times*, 10 March 1992; Sacha Craddock, 'Schools of small fish in the Saatchi art collector's pond', *The Guardian*, 13 March 1992; Simon Garfield, 'I like it, I'll take the lot – Charles Saatchi', *The Independent*, 20 March 1993; 'Energy on a grotesque scale', *The Financial Times*, 28 January 1994.

⁵⁵ Hugo Young, 'Bleak landscape where art and politics can't co-exist', *The Guardian*, 24 November 1994.

⁵⁶ Paul Richardson, 'Young blood', *The Evening Standard*, 25 February 1993; Matthew Collings, 'Transformer man – Gavin Turk', *The Guardian*, 18 October 1995.

⁵⁷ Despite this, Perry notes that he 'really liked their work at the time'. Quoted in Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 209.

labelling them with the names of the cars they drive, the designers they wear, and the art they buy; visible in the background are minimalistic drawings of Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, Quinn's *Self*, and Lucas's *Au Naturel* (1994).

Collectors and dealers, too, came under fire, occasionally literally. At a time when interest in the role of art collectors was reaching fever pitch in the media thanks to public figures such as Saatchi and Jay Jopling, Perry took aim even at those dealers who supported him. Anthony d'Offay is represented by a matching set of phalluses, with each listing the top twenty share prices and the top twenty artists represented by d'Offay (*Portrait of Anthony d'Offay*, 1998, Figure 20). Another pot from 2000 called *Anger Work* – an ironic manifestation of an immediate and unrestrained therapy technique in the carefully controlled medium of ceramics – shows Perry with a machine gun having murdered and castrated Laurent Delaye outside his smashed gallery (Figure 21). With these works, Perry takes the institutions and customs of contemporary art in his crosshairs, even as he does so from within. In the process, he defuses his own similarities to these norms.

At the same time, by looking at the work he made throughout this decade, we can begin to see a notable shift in Perry's own artistic output, which similarly marks his emerging self-differentiation from the YBAs. Instead of provocatively crude, poorly-made pieces, he began using more classical ceramic forms, and his pots became more glamorous and refined. This shift in his aesthetic style, which took place gradually throughout the 1990s, is immediately obvious if we compare his treatment of the theme of class in two works approximately ten years apart: *The Common Enemy* (1990, Figure 22) and *Them and Us* (2001, Figure 23). *The Common Enemy* bears many of the trademarks of Perry's early work. Made while Perry was still experimenting with the form and honing his skills, the mouth of the vase sags and distends like a 'wet paper [bag]',⁵⁸ emphasising his intentional laissez-faire ineptitude. The colours – a murky green and black – create a dull and swampy surface, and his drawings are both sharp and naïve, looking very much like the kind of thing a teenager would scratch into the surface of a school-desk, compared with the softer and more artful lines of his later work. The

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

transfers Perry so often uses on his vases are here arranged with no attempt to integrate them into the overall aesthetic schema other than the occasional rhyming of a prominent lurid green shade; instead, they are deployed like punky fly-posted stickers, leaving us with floating images of kitschy kittens, teddy bears, farmyard scenes, and pin-up girls.

In contrast, the three vases that make up *Them and Us* are representative of the more glamorous pottery aesthetic for which Perry is best known.⁵⁹ The pots work as a triptych, with each representing a different social stratum. Two larger vases represent the working and upper classes – their caps adorned with a golden Pit Bull terrier and a lofty horse and rider respectively (and we should note here that the dog is on his back, exposed and vulnerable, while the horse and rider remain elevated) – with a smaller lidless middle pot representing the middle class. On each, Perry has etched a representative landscape and its populace. The monochromatic drawings are complemented with an accent of light blue, used to shade people and important objects, while the background is gilded with gold to become a shimmering negative space.

As with *The Common Enemy*, Perry's trademark transfers are once again present, here taking the form of old-fashioned floral sprigs. While they are similarly kitsch, however, their colour palette of pale blue, golden saffron, and softly faded pastels accentuates, rather than disrupts, the vase's overall sense of harmony, and more consciously plays with typical notions of pottery and its decoration. In a technique Perry has used again and again, the classed figures on the pots are given miniature speech bubbles, comic-book style, to voice their displeasure about the other classes. The working class men, skateboarding around a derelict landscape, yell slurs like 'Stuck up do-gooders', 'Elitist parasites', and 'Fat cat sloanes', and call for 'Toffs out of art now!', while the upper class women in their country village declare them to be 'Social security scroungers', 'Violent drunks', 'Dirty beggars', 'Lazy thickies', 'Illiterate scum', and 'Criminal classes'. The small doll-like folk figure of (what appears to

⁵⁹ Perry notes that these pots were 'a rare commission' and so he wanted 'to make a piece very blatantly about class, to tease art collectors a little'. (Ibid., p. 46.) Nonetheless, the pots are consistent with both his aesthetic and ideological canon, and, I argue, should therefore not be considered differently because they were a commission. Indeed, Perry's interest in the issue of class has only increased over the years, and it has been the subject of many of his works since, including his 2012 tapestry project, *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

be) Claire hovers near the upper class vase's lip, present yet removed, as though to mark Perry's alter-ego as outside this class system and delineate his role as watchful commentator.

By comparing these two pieces, we can begin to see the larger evolution of Perry's style throughout this period, particularly notable at the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s: from neophytic forms, purposeful artlessness, and crude provocation to skilled craftsmanship, detailed drawings, and luxurious quality. The timing for this is particularly relevant, and when set against the particular cultural backdrop of the London art scene, Perry's subtle adjustments can, as I have suggested above, be seen as a way of differentiating his own art – whose earlier provocative artlessness, attempts to shock, and rhetoric of boredom could be said to resonate ideologically, intentionally or not, with work being made by, and the motives of, the YBAs – from that being made by his contemporaries. In almost direct contrast to Young British Art (of which writer and critic Matthew Collings describes one of the main hallmarks as 'Not aestheticism. Anti-aestheticism'⁶⁰), Perry now focused on making beautiful, aesthetic objects. One obvious manifestation of this is Perry's use of gold, which, as seen above in *Them and Us*, began to feature heavily in his ceramics in the early 2000s, lending an opulence and a richness of depth to the surfaces, which gleam from afar.⁶¹ This ornamentality is further emphasised through the use of glazes, transfers, and patterns (often floral, folksy, or otherwise traditional) to create a highly worked-up and seductive façade, as opposed to the dull and muddy surfaces of his work in the 1990s.

This refinement of Perry's ceramics also extends to include a more thoughtful engagement with its various histories, allowing him to incorporate the varied iconographies of the Japanese, Chinese, African, American, and English ceramic traditions into his own practice (though, we should note, these often become subsumed by narratives of Englishness, rather than being used to open a dialogue about

⁶⁰ Matthew Collings, 'The new establishment', *Independent On Sunday*, 31 August 1997.

⁶¹ Other pots of Perry's that use this golden sheen include: *Bad Art, Bad Pottery* (1996); *Revenge of the Alison Girls* (2000); *We've Found the Body of Your Child* (2000); *Golden Ghosts* (2001); *Dolls at Dungeness, September 11th, 2001* (2001); *Floating World* (2001); *I Was an Angry Working Class Man* (2001); *Precious Boys* (2004); *A Pattern of Bruises and Cigarette Burns* (2004); *In Praise of Shadows* (2005); *Pot Based on Twenty-Year-Old Collage* (2006); *What's Not to Like?* (2006); and *Personal Creation Myth* (2007).

multiculturalism). This development from artless to artisan is essential to his overall methodology, as Perry's increased technical skill is what enables him to play with the conventions of pottery and its historical and cultural associations in the way that he does, for his work relies on that juxtaposition between verisimilitude of form and incongruity of subject matter. It is worth noticing, however, that while Perry's pots did become distinctly more polished, he retained a vestigial flicker of his disruptive early craftlessness: in the publicity surrounding his Turner Prize nomination he was noted as coiling rather than throwing his vases, a gesture of amateurism that keeps alive his problematic conflation of art and craft and his subsequent 'outsider' status.

At the same time, the themes that had preoccupied Perry in the early stages of his career – his transvestism, gender, class, religion, the art world – similarly became noticeably more nuanced, though they remained central throughout. In part, this process was a subsequent enactment of his transformation of form. The aggressive fantasy world of early pieces such as the plate *The Keeper of the Bed* (Figure 8), for example – which depicts a prim woman watching over a naked man who has been tied up, castrated, and is now being taunted with his own dangling penis – depicts a sexual explicitness and an engagement with kink and fetishism that is still present in Perry's oeuvre, but which has since been made less confrontational by his own self-referential, psychoanalytical statements, as well as the nature of the newly polished surface. *Moonlit Wankers* (2001, Figure 24), for example, depicts a group of people in a field before an acid sunset, masturbating in unison. In the foreground, a seated man touches himself, his beer belly hanging over his lacy lingerie; another pair of women's underwear is wrapped around his face like a balaclava, and his high-heeled feet dig into the ground. The effect is comical, the title light-hearted. The vase itself is elegantly formed, its elongated neck and full, swollen body performing another innuendo: a formal erection.

While *Moonlit Wankers* flirts with perversion, another work, *Strangely Familiar* (2000, Figure 25) more explicitly re-presents the same sadomasochism previously seen in *The Keeper of the Bed*, setting S&M practitioners enacting their kinks over a collaged photographic background of endless suburbia. Between these two layers of imagery, almost imperceptible, is the repeated text, 'Daddy

don't hit me' and 'Mummy stop him'. Printed in small white font, this text is superimposed over the sepia buildings to look, from afar, like brickwork, the kink ingrained into the very fabric of ordinary domestic life. Perry has said that the shape of the piece comes from a pot by Bernard Leach (1887-1979), referencing the 'father of British studio pottery'⁶² to again formally set up the 'respectable old English' veneer that he then goes on to subvert.⁶³ Of the text, Perry explains that it functions as 'the layer of the unconscious like a voice from childhood', representing the way in which the title 'comes from the fact that in S&M scenarios we are revisiting an emotional experience which, though we may not know it, we went through in childhood'.⁶⁴ (As well as using the terminology of both child abuse and sadomasochistic roleplay, 'Daddy don't hit me' and 'Mummy stop him' has an implicit air of self-referentiality, as Perry has repeatedly spoken about his violent stepfather.)

This last statement exemplifies the way in which Perry also begins to use more thoughtful psychoanalytical language to discuss his art and himself at this time, in stark contrast to his previous comments in his 1987 manifesto. Therapy looms large in Perry's persona: he has repeatedly talked about his six years of therapy, which he undertook from the mid-1990s to just after he won the Turner Prize; his wife, Philippa Perry, is also frequently noted by commenters as being a psychotherapist herself. (When asked in 2012 whether the contemporaneous wane of his therapy and win of his Turner Prize were coincidental, he deadpanned: 'Yeah, if you do therapy, you'll win the Turner Prize.'⁶⁵) Perry's use of the terminology of therapy functions retroactively, too, allowing his early work to perform as the 'before' picture in his personal journey. Perry describes looking at his pre-therapy work post-therapy and seeing that he 'was leaking madly about [his] issues'; therapy, he claims, was a way of 'clearing up [his] toolshed' so that now he uses his issues with awareness.⁶⁶ Similarly, in an

⁶² 'Bernard Leach (1887-1979)', *The British Council*, accessed 15 April 2015, at <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/collection/artists/bernard-leach-1887>.

⁶³ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 124.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Quoted in Decca Aitkenhead and Christian Bennett, 'Grayson Perry on art and therapy: "If you do therapy you'll win the Turner Prize" – video', *The Guardian*, accessed 2 May 2012, at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2012/apr/11/grayson-perry-therapy-video>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

interview in 2004, Perry is quoted as saying, 'In the beginning, I was really kind of an angry young man, and I did my damndest to try to upset people by using as many naughty images as possible' – again reneging on his statement in the 1987 Birch & Conran catalogue, but in a way that makes him more rather than less sincere – suggesting that now that he understands himself better he is less inclined to shock for the sake of shocking.⁶⁷ In this way, however, it is not only his early work that stands as the 'before' in his evolutionary process, but the Young British Artists, who are surreptitiously implicated by Perry as having not yet matured from this damaged, leaking state, and who still shock just for the sake of shocking.

In tandem with his newly glamorous, ornamental ceramic surface and his more open and 'sincere' rhetoric of psychoanalysis, Perry's transvestism similarly took on a new form, which analogously encapsulated both of these newfound aspects. With the advent of 'Claire's Coming Out Ceremony' in 2000, Claire was re-envisioned as a little girl, a pivotal moment to which we will return later in more detail. If Perry could have been mistaken for a YBA before, then, these subtle changes – his increased emphases on craftsmanship, the decorative, sincerity, and psychoanalysis – served to deliberately declare his difference, particularly when coupled with his repeated critiques. While all of these shifts are interesting in themselves, however, they take on a more particular – and underacknowledged – significance when we begin to map them to the rise and fall of the YBAs. That these transformations happened around the year 2000 is, I argue, not coincidental, but contingent on the artistic and cultural landscape at that time more generally; in order to fully understand the significance of this, we must contextualise it once more within the phenomenon of the Young British Artists, and, particularly, their decline.

⁶⁷ Sarah Lyall, 'A Trendy Tranny Potter's New Purse', *The New York Times*, 2 May 2004.

Unsensual

Writing in the *Sensation* catalogue, Brooks Adams proposes three ‘dominant, frequently interwoven thematic strains within Young British Art’.⁶⁸ The first he labels as ‘Kool’ (meaning ‘cool with a touch of toxic perversity’), and which he suggests indicates a ‘Pop, Colour-Field, Mod or Techno influence’.⁶⁹ The second he designates as ‘Post-Colonial Neo-Victorianism’, that is, an updated (and not exclusively British, as he also identifies it in American art) ‘gothic-neurotic’ strand of art-making ‘requiring odd taxidermical skills and the iron stomach of a 19th-century naturalist or anatomical draughtsman’.⁷⁰ The third strain, ‘the most quintessentially home-grown’, is for Adams the contemporary descendant of British Kitchen Sink painting of the 1960s, involving an atmosphere of ‘militant’ ordinariness and an emphasis on the ‘domestic difficulties and social trouble, everyday squalor and working-class grit’.⁷¹ These three categories are perfectly functional, incorporating, though not elucidating, the tendency’s propensity towards sensationalism; shock tactics (in particular, the use of children for this, particularly when mixed with sexuality or predation, as with *Myra* and the Chapmans’ sculpture); the incorporation and refutation of art historical and theoretical referents; and the art and artists’ relationship with popular culture, the media, and class (these last three often being intermingled).

Correspondingly, in the introduction to *High Art Lite*, Stallabrass briefly attempts to catalogue Young British Art’s defining characteristics, which, in opposition to Adams’s aesthetic categories, he notes are usually defined in terms of ‘temperament and tactics, rather than style or medium’.⁷² For Stallabrass, the primary trifecta is instead the ‘overtly contemporary flavour of the art’, especially as it breaks with the ‘provincial air of much previous British work, or at least [adds] sufficient inflection to

⁶⁸ Brooks Adams, ‘Thinking of You: An American’s Growing, Imperfect Awareness’, in Norman Rosenthal (ed.), *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London, 1997), p. 37.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷² Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 3.

that character to allow it to appeal to an international market’;⁷³ the artists’ ‘new and distinctive’ relationship to the mass media and their culling of material from popular culture which resurfaces in their art; and finally, the way in which the artists ‘present conceptual work in visually accessible and spectacular form’, so that new audiences no longer needed specialist theoretical knowledge and were perhaps even hindered by it.⁷⁴ The conceptual nature of the work also meant that it often relied on little – if any – physical artistic skills.

Together, these six broad definitions cover almost all of the work that comes under the umbrella of ‘Young British Art’, and it is interesting to use them as a framework within which to consider Perry’s art-making at this time. As we have already seen, Perry’s approach to ceramics underwent a dramatic development during the 1990s, which I have argued above to be an attempt at differentiating himself from the dominant fashions represented by his contemporaries; indeed, we have seen that many of Perry’s early motivations could be construed as similar to those which characterised the YBAs, making his divergence all the more marked. Of Adams’s categories, only the influence of British Kitchen Sink Painting could be deemed relevant to Perry, but it is, arguably, more significant to him than to the YBAs; as we will see in a later chapter, Perry would go on to emphasise these links explicitly in his 2008 exhibition *Unpopular Culture*. In the meantime, his use of the domestic medium of pottery, combined with the overtly domestic and demotic thematic concerns he inscribed upon it, signals Perry’s interest in matters of ordinariness, social issues, class struggle, and everyday Englishness. Two examples which are usually given of this strain in the YBA tendency, however, highlight just how different Perry’s approach is to that of the YBAs: in contrast to the photographic work of Gillian Wearing (*Signs that Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say*, 1992-3) or Richard Billingham’s evocative and gritty photographs of his working-class family (*Ray’s a Laugh*, 1996, Figure 26), for example, Perry’s work is figurative, fictional, and significantly less aggressive and exploitative.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 4.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

On the other hand, we can see that Perry has a nuanced relationship with Stallabrass's definition of Young British Art. Of Stallabrass's three requirements, two are a natural fit. Perry's relationship with the mass media can be seen in the way he incorporates contemporary references into his work, which only becomes more, not less, significant over time: we might think, for example, of his tapestries in the 2000s and 2010s, which playfully incorporate popular brands and celebrities. Similarly, as Perry's fame grew in the lead-up to, and eventual announcement of, the Turner Prize, he revealed himself to be perhaps the most media-friendly artist in Britain, thereby deploying the YBA strategies of media-savvy self-presentation to present himself as, ironically, dissimilar to the YBAs, thanks to his self-deprecating humour and lack of seriousness. Perry's use of pottery seems to re-envision Stallabrass's description of the presentation of 'conceptual work in a visually accessible and spectacular form' which, despite his earlier protestations,⁷⁵ he conceded in 2008 was itself a conceptual practice.⁷⁶ Similarly, one does not need any specialist knowledge to understand Perry's work, and he often uses idiomatic imagery; although he does draw on a number of art historical and ceramic referents, from Brueghel to Bernard Leach, the identification of these allusions is not a prerequisite to appreciating his pots, and, furthermore, he regularly uses his monographs and interviews to make public note of them himself.

While Perry's own practice can be seen to have a substantial overlap with Stallabrass's definition, however, it notably diverges from the in-your-face contemporariness he catalogues, and instead can be seen as something of a return to the provinciality that Stallabrass describes as typical of previous British work. This can be seen in Perry's use of the intentionally *non*-contemporary form of pottery (and, eventually, tapestries), but also in the local and parochial references he invokes, which make his work distinctly un-international. As Stallabrass notes, Young British Art's appeal to an

⁷⁵ In 2003, Perry is quoted as saying, 'The trouble is that people now look at all art as if it is conceptual art, which it isn't' (Jessica Berens, 'Frock tactics', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2003), and even as late as 2006 he is described as being 'bracingly rude about conceptual art' (John Walsh, 'Pot luck', *The Independent*, 16 December 2006).

⁷⁶ 'I'm a conceptual artist masquerading as a potter.' Quoted in Rebecca Rose, 'There is too much slapdashery in art', *Financial Times*, 3 May 2008.

international market was significant, and, though its actual ‘Britishness’ has long been debated,⁷⁷ it had nonetheless been adopted as a national symbol both domestically and internationally by 1995. Stallabrass explains that, ‘[w]hile work with British references may not be understood in quite the same way abroad, its general point is to appeal to a unitary and nostalgic image of Britain, a land of character and cliché’.⁷⁸ In this way, the exports of Hirst, Emin, and the other YBAs projected – and represented – Britishness to audiences overseas and around the world.

With the exception of Tracey Emin’s use of Margate (which is itself seen to be somewhat exotic), however, Young British Art was generally London-centric, both in the origin of its making and in its references, making Perry’s parochialism all the more distinct. Indeed, the 1995 exhibition of Young British Art that travelled around America, *Brilliant!*, had the further tagline ‘New art from London’ superimposed over a photograph of the aftermath of the IRA bombing of Bishopsgate in 1993. As the capital of both England and the United Kingdom, London has an internationally understood significance and cultural persona. Although seen as a synecdoche of both England and Englishness – which is in itself internationally seen as a synecdoche of Britain or Britishness – London, as one of the major ‘big cities’ of the world, also has a generic identifiability about it, both because of its caricatured visual recognisability – typified by Big Ben, red buses, telephone boxes, and the like – and its cultural similarities with any other metropolitan urban centre. As such, the YBAs’ use of London allowed them to incorporate specifically British references, but not at the expense of the art’s international marketability or resonance. It is art with an English accent: a gloss noticeable enough to make it different, but readily intelligible to anyone speaking the same language. Perry, as we will see, speaks in dialect. His turn away from this internationally marketed Britishness, and internationally saleable contemporariness, in favour of internal alternatives is a point to which we will return at the chapter’s conclusion.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Hyla L. Robicsek, who has argued that in fact Young British Art was distinctly influenced by American Minimalism, and that this transnational artistic relationship of influence and derivation is at the very core of the movement. Hyla L. Robicsek, “‘You Give Us This and We Give You That’: ‘young British art’ and the Legacy of Anglo-American Influence”, *Third Text*, Vol. 22 (2008), pp. 257-271.

⁷⁸ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 240.

It is significant, then, that while Perry's work does not resemble Young British Art aesthetically – sharing virtually nothing in common with either Adams's or Stallabrass's visual descriptions – it does have some correspondence with it ideologically, suggesting a complex interrelationship in which Perry uses, diverges from, and re-figures YBA strategies in order to construct his own persona. Like much Young British Art, Perry's focus remained on quotidian issues, and he dealt with many of the same themes, often using his pots to explore the topics of sex, social class, gender, the self, and the media. In contrast to the kind of work shown at *Sensation*, however, his use of pottery as his medium purposely limits – though that is not to say completely excises – any aggressive threat they might have; similarly, Perry often considered these issues in more measured, narrative, personal, or light-hearted ways, in contrast to the YBA tendency to appropriate shocking imagery and present it bombastically without commentary. (We might think here of Harvey's *Myra*, Lucas's *Sod You Gits* [1991], or the Chapman brothers' *Great Deeds Against the Dead*.) Indeed, Perry often took on the role of cultural commentator and recorder, rejecting the status of mute re-appropriator. Similarly, we can see that the YBAs' lack of intelligent or art historical commentary about their own works was replaced instead with Perry's psychoanalytic interpretations, and shock and boredom were superseded by therapy and introspection.

Fulfilling its eponymous promise, *Sensation* dominated the media. Whereas *Freeze* remains mythical, with only one review appearing in the London listings magazine *Time Out*,⁷⁹ *Sensation* was everywhere, and contemporary reviews embodied many of the ideas still widely held about Young British Art now. Writing in *Art Journal*, Alexandra Anderson-Spivy remarked that despite appearances, 'there remained something deeply aesthetically conservative. What appeared to be innovation often turned out to be only skin-deep',⁸⁰ and that '[perhaps] the most pertinent discomfort the exhibition provoked was not caused by the works themselves but by the cosy relationship that underlay the whole event' (referring to the 'rapprochement' between Saatchi and the Royal

⁷⁹ Sacha Craddock, "'Freeze': Defrosted', *Time Out*, 24 July 2008.

⁸⁰ Alexandra Anderson-Spivy, 'The Freeze Generation and beyond', *Art Journal*, Vol. 57 (1998), pp. 89-90.

Academy).⁸¹ Neil Mulholland ended his review in *The Burlington Magazine* with an almost audible sigh: ‘Only in such a venue, perhaps, could this exhibition manage a re-enactment, yet again, of the cliché-ed process in which avant-garde art becomes enshrined in art history’.⁸² In an account of *Sensation*’s American incarnation – around which the media controversy focused not on the figure of Hindley, whose significance is localised to Britain, but on Chris Ofili’s *Holy Virgin Mary* (1995) with its images of genitals and buttocks photographed from behind and its large globes of elephant dung in place of more traditional Christian iconography – John Loughery of *The Hudson Review* writes that ‘[the] first thing that needs to be said, however, is that Ofili’s *cause célèbre* was an anticlimax’, and that, overall, ‘[the] exhibition – can this be a surprise? – was neither breathtaking nor awful. Large stretches were dull, a fair amount was juvenile, and several works were provoking in the best sense, and that is my experience with most big surveys of contemporary art.’⁸³

In spite of its forceful use of advertising, then – and, in terms of myth-building, the catalogue for *Sensation* is one of the most egregious examples – it seems inevitable that *Sensation* would kill the concept of ‘Young British Art’, which was so built around mythos and, indeed, hyped-up sensation, that when presented with the actual artworks, most critics responded with boredom. In many ways, the very fact of its staging at the Royal Academy was the first toll of the death knell as this physically manifested its underlying institutionalisation, in stark contrast to its rebellious origins in empty London Port Authority buildings. In this way, *Sensation* was at once the major landmark ‘coming out’ show of Young British Art and the symbol of its own demise.⁸⁴ Indeed, already by 1998, the term ‘YBA’ was anathema, with Andrew Anthony writing in *The Observer*: ‘It’s not merely a natural bohemian resistance to pigeon-holing that causes the accused to wince at mention of the dread phrase. It’s worse than that. What really hurts is that it now sounds so dated, so mid-Nineties.’⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁸² Neil Mulholland, ‘“Sensation”’. London’, *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 139 (1997), p. 888.

⁸³ John Loughery, ‘Sensations’, *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 53 (2000), p. 100.

⁸⁴ Partly this highlights how much emphasis was placed on the idea of rebellion and existing ‘outside the system’ within the mythology of the YBAs; when they were ‘institutionalised’, so to speak, all pretence was lost.

⁸⁵ Anthony, ‘Why be a YBA?’.

In addition, there were a number of political and cultural shifts around this time which further contributed to the waning of Young British Art.⁸⁶ The primary one was, of course, the change of government in 1997, when the Labour Party (rebranded as ‘New Labour’) came into power, ending the long-standing Conservative reign. Stallabrass thoughtfully charts the relationship between Young British Art and the political climate, noting how both public feeling and the role of art dramatically shifted in the mid- to late-1990s. Many commentators considered Young British Art to be something of an ironic result of Thatcherism, a bootstrap artistic movement that blossomed from the landscape of economic recession and barren arts funding.⁸⁷ In this way, Young British Art was indexically linked to the Conservative government, thriving against a ‘backdrop of a rudderless, backward-looking government that abhorred cultural forms’⁸⁸ which helped to make it feel edgy and relevant. New Labour, on the other hand, sought to foster a British cultural renaissance, with both Britart and Britpop being subsumed into its ‘Cool Britannia’ brand. Young British Art ‘no longer seemed oppositional but part of an official culture’, and ‘[in] this blanket of official approval, the negative edge of the tendency was lost’.⁸⁹

While the arts were considered to be relevant and central under New Labour, however, Young British Art in particular was beginning to look outdated for reasons other than simply its institutionalisation. The new government had managed to sow a ‘cautious optimism among the middle class – something that had cultural consequences in that wallowing in sheer negativity or irony no longer seemed quite so cool or plausible’.⁹⁰ For New Labour, ‘culture [was] supposed to play a large role in the process of social cohesion and healing, bringing together the elements of a divided society’

⁸⁶ It is important to note that when I talk about Young British Art’s ‘decline’, I refer to the notion of it as a cohesive movement: many of the artists most associated with Young British Art continued to have lucrative artistic careers and are still popular and successful today, but they are seen as individuals, and any sense of a group dynamic has been almost completely eroded but for its past significance.

⁸⁷ Some critics have even gone so far as to call the YBAs ‘Thatcher’s Children’ for their do-it-yourself approach to creating opportunities in a landscape of economic recession (and also, later, as a dig at their underlying conservatism and their associations with Saatchi, whose advertising firm helped to bring Margaret Thatcher to power in 1979). See, for example, Andrew Brighton, ‘Review: Thatcher’s Artists’, *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 22 (1999), pp. 129-33.

⁸⁸ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite* (2006), p. 295.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

and playing an ‘integral part [in] national renewal’.⁹¹ With this optimism and desire to use culture for social change in mind, Young British Art’s tone now seemed strikingly discordant, preferring as it did to nihilistically accentuate the negative with little regard for how it might be improved. Similarly, Stallabrass notes the tendency’s confused relationship between past and present, suggesting that the artists ‘generally wanted nothing more than to work within the status quo, hiding their essential conservatism and nostalgia behind a veneer of up-to-date pop cultural references, a scattering of demotic material, and constant assurances that they are the expression of the present’.⁹²

With its influence and popularity fading throughout the late 1990s, Stallabrass designates the year 2000 in particular as the year Young British Art truly died, seeing its demise in the publicity around that year’s Turner Prize shortlist, when Tate Director Nicholas Serota asserted that Young British Art had ‘had its day, and that it was time to move on to look at fresher figures’.⁹³ 2000 also marked the year that the Turner Prize reframed its criteria to allow artists working in Britain to be eligible for the prize (instead of exclusively British-born artists, as it was before), with the British Art Show following suit in 2005, reflecting not simply growing globalisation and cosmopolitanism in the art world but also a reframing of what it means to be ‘British’. ‘Young British Art’ was over, and British art – as well as Britain itself – was changing.

Grayson Perry’s Coming Out Ceremony

It is within this art historical and cultural context – the dense matrix of lowbrow conceptualism, media saturation, sensationalism, ambivalent feminism,⁹⁴ internationally exported British national identity, and critical boredom that was the YBA legacy, combined with the cautious optimism, modernisation, and national rebranding that came with New Labour – that we must situate the

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 297-8.

⁹² This, Stallabrass says, is ironically contrary to Thatcherism, which he argued functioned reversely. Ibid., p. 298.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 292.

⁹⁴ The role of women artists within Young British Art will be considered in more detail in chapter two.

emergence of Grayson Perry. Indeed, though Perry had been working steadily for many years, his rise to fame can be read in relation to the YBAs as a chronological as well as ideological succession. In *High Art Lite*, Stallabrass looks (even as early as 1999, with little temporal distance) at the art that Saatchi supported post-YBA and the movement that he generated to follow *Sensation*, which was branded as ‘New Neurotic Realism’ in a 1998 exhibition of the same name. Stallabrass notes how the exhibition catalogue of that show tried to make New Neurotic Realism rise from the ashes of Young British Art. This was despite the fact that it was only blurrily partitioned from Young British Art in the first place, as ‘the new term is broad enough to include much of the old, and Maloney and Peter Davies, part of the new tendency, also showed in *Sensation*’.⁹⁵ The gallery even went so far as to decry its eldest child, writing: ‘Inevitably, the YBA cult of personality became tired. [...] Cynicism was finally *passé* and the art star a bore.’⁹⁶ Despite these declarations, however, further marking New Neurotic Realism’s actual lack of difference from Young British Art is Adrian Searle’s review in *The Guardian* which sneeringly heralds, ‘a whole new ism! Except that it isn’t an ism; it’s hype’, before continuing: ‘This, we understood, was the next generation; this was life after *Sensation*. The trouble is that this is art in a similar vein, only much more lame.’⁹⁷

New Neurotic Realism was derided from the start, with many disparaging its clumsy definitional status (‘the overall impression is of unmanageable diversity’⁹⁸) and seeing it instead ‘largely for what it is: a cynical ploy, given the growing dissatisfaction with the antics of high art lite, to push the art market on in a direction that Saatchi can control’.⁹⁹ Unlike with Young British Art, neither the name nor the movement took off, and New Neurotic Realism was, for the most part, consigned to history. It is worth noticing, however, the sort of movement Saatchi tried to manufacture as the antidote to Young British Art, and in particular how it might prefigure Grayson Perry’s own remedies. Writing in *The*

⁹⁵ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite* (1999), p. 218.

⁹⁶ Dick Price, ‘Don’t Stop ’til you get Enough’, in *The New Neurotic Realism* (London, 1998), n.p.

⁹⁷ Adrian Searle, ‘New kids in the dock’, *The Guardian*, 16 January 1999.

⁹⁸ ‘Reviewed Work: The New Neurotic Realism by Dick Price’, *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 141 (1999), p. 46.

⁹⁹ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 221.

Times, Dick Price – whose unusually positive description of the show can be attributed to his role as author of the catalogue’s introduction – characterises the movement as ‘[reacting] against [Young British Art] by shaking off the ironical one-liner stance, the cynical indifference, the cult of the artist as superstar’, and lists instead its interest in ‘collective memory’, its use of ‘neurotic psychology as an accepted subject’, and its ‘revisiting [of] traditional forms on the way’ (usually painting). Though Perry has no link with the movement, almost all of these traits could be applied to him, too, in proclaimed intentions if not in actual effect.¹⁰⁰

In particular, the colourful, childlike paintings of Martin Maloney play a central role in New Neurotic Realism, and it is his work that adorns the cover of the catalogue. Despite being presented to us as a key figure of Young British Art’s supposedly antithetical replacement, Maloney, we should remember, had also been prominently associated with the YBAs, and was one of the artists featured in *Sensation*, further exacerbating our definitional difficulties. This suggests not only that there is less division between the movements than the people behind them might want us to believe, but also that the strategies being used to present the art are as important as those being used to create it: that is, a YBA piece by any other name is not necessarily a YBA piece.

What is perhaps most compelling about Maloney as a key figure, however, is the way in which, when discussing his work, he foregrounds its humour and (arguably ironic) lack of irony, as well as the way in which Stallabrass quotes, focuses on, and responds to these claims at some length. Maloney says of his own artistic methods: ‘These paintings are not bad paintings, that is, they are not ironic. I am not anti-painting or stating the opposite of my intentions. I am painting what I hope will be regarded as serious paintings’, and, ‘I hope you can find, that the comic sometimes masks the serious, that knowledge can be displayed to look dumb and the sadness of the world-weary can contain an

¹⁰⁰ Like New Neurotic Realism, Perry is, I argue, reacting against Young British Art, and he, too, purports to shake off these particular characteristics associated with it, although arguably with limited success. Although, for example, one of the main criticisms of Perry’s work is that it too often comes across as a ‘one-liner’ (see footnote 133), he has always declared his distaste for irony and cynicism; similarly, while his own brand of superstar-artist cultdom has, in many ways, eclipsed that of his contemporaries, it also seems to come with a knowing and self-deprecating deconstruction of the trope at large. His interests in collective memory, neurotic psychology, and traditional forms are more patent.

innocent wit full of gentleness.¹⁰¹ At their core, these statements clearly resemble many of Perry's own proclamations, emphasising as they do sincerity, humour, and his proposed lack of irony. In his response to Maloney, we can perhaps project Stallabrass's phantom response to Perry:

Maloney protests too much about irony. If almost everyone thinks that his cack-handed paintings are ironic, and he alone thinks they are not, then maybe there is something badly awry with his project. Yet, as with the art, the protests are not quite what they seem. To proclaim, 'I'm not the Kylie Minogue of painting', would be to put a fatal weapon in the hands of the opposition, but only if you believed that such an opposition existed, and only if you didn't really want to be known as just that.¹⁰²

New Neurotic Realism was intended to be a swing in the opposite direction, the 'nice' counterpart to the nastiness of Young British Art,¹⁰³ responding to and counteracting many of the problems of the latter, such as its conceptualism, its sardonicism, and its lack of traditional media. Although it was a failure, it nonetheless marked the shift away from Young British Art and began to flesh out what a young British art that was not burdened by the criticisms of Young British Art might look like. Stallabrass further notes this impetus in the touring exhibition British Art Show 5, which he reads as additional evidence of the decline of the YBAs.¹⁰⁴ The British Art Show takes place every five

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 220.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 221. This seems an especially apt quote since in 2003 Perry compared himself to Gerhard Richter in a similar manner: 'I am not someone like Gerhard Richter, who has succeeded by nodding and wearing a nice suit and not doing anything rash... He is tasteful, a class act. There are no heightened emotions. He is the Bryan Adams of the art world.' Quoted in Berens, 'Frock tactics', *The Guardian*.

¹⁰³ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 219.

¹⁰⁴ Stallabrass attributes this to the markedly different focuses of the 1995 British Art Show 4 and the 2000 British Art Show 5, but it is interesting to note that in fact many of the reviews for British Art Show 5 were negative and disappointed, lamenting the lack of direction that had been supplied by Young British Art five years prior. One critic wrote that BA5 'reflects the general sense of malaise one senses in Tony Blair's frighteningly bland image of national rejuvenation. Gone, therefore, are the grand revolutionary gestures of a Damien Hirst or a Tracy Emin - perhaps Charles Saatchi was away on holiday when the current artists were being selected' (Richard Jaques, 'Substance swamped by the superficial', *The Scotsman*, 7 April 2000); another calls the exhibition a 'desperately depressing experience' where 'most of [the artists] appear to have very little of interest to say and manage to say it with precious little style, technique or charm' (Terry Grimley, 'A Sinking feeling at this jolly poor show', *Birmingham Post*, 6 December 2000).

years, and while 1995's show had been an 'unashamed celebration' of the YBAs,¹⁰⁵ 2000's included 56 artists and 'own[ed] up to not knowing where British art was going'.¹⁰⁶

Perry was one of these 56, and his presence in that year's touring show supplemented two other London exhibitions of his work in 2000, one at Fig-1 and the other at Laurent Delaye. Strikingly, the media response to Perry's work in the British Art Show reveals the way in which Perry's cynicism about contemporary art in general, and Young British Art in particular, rhymed with that of his audience, as well as the overwhelming success of this position. For example, a negative review of BAS5 in the *Birmingham Post* (Birmingham being one of the four locations to which the exhibition toured, alongside Edinburgh, Southampton, and Cardiff) nonetheless singled Perry and his pot *Boring Cool People* (1999, Figure 27) out for praise as 'the star of the show', admiring in particular his critical reflection of the contemporary art amongst which he is displayed.¹⁰⁷ This same praise is given by Scottish newspaper *The Herald* to Perry's piece *Video Installation* (1999, Figure 28), a pot which 'enumerates in its glaze much of what is to be found in the galleries around it' by listing, as its only decoration, ten trendy art categories (such as 'video installation with home-made soundtrack', 'found objects arranged in a pattern', 'vitrine with kitsch model', 'series of large kinetic sculpture', and 'seemingly casual photographs').¹⁰⁸ *The Herald's* reviewer Keith Bruce suggests that it is telling that 'such a throwaway – if beautifully thrown – piece has a resonance that seems to be lacking elsewhere, but it does', contrasting it with the 'witless and boring mix of vulgarity and kitsch that make up the interior monologues of Tracey Emin in the room down the hall [which offer] no competition'.¹⁰⁹ While we have already seen Perry use his craft to critique contemporary art and artists throughout the 1990s (we should note that his previously discussed pot *Gimmicks* was also on display in the show), it is significant that this tendency should be so lauded now, post-YBA, when it could be seen to give voice to the dominant public opinions about contemporary art; it is significant, too, that it provides a

¹⁰⁵ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite* (2006), p. 291.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Grimley, 'A sinking feeling at this jolly poor show'.

¹⁰⁸ Keith Bruce, 'Such crate expectations', *The Herald*, 10 April 2000.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

resonance thought to be lacking elsewhere. Furthermore, that Bruce juxtaposes Perry with Emin – with whom, as we will see in chapter two, Perry in fact has much in common – serves to further signal both his perceived demarcation from the Young British Artists, and his superiority over them.

At the same time as he was being singled out in these group shows, Perry's solo exhibitions at Fig-1 and Laurent Delaye combined to make him the subject of features in *The Times* and the free London newspaper *The Evening Standard*, suggesting a growing public presence.¹¹⁰ Both features focused on his use of pottery as a subversive and unfashionable medium; the intertwined triad of his transvestism, psychoanalysis, and the story of his early family life; Perry's own wit and humour, as well as his mischief-making; and his commentaries on social class and the art world, both of which are legitimised by his dichotomous outsider/insider status. These two articles are the first major features on Perry, and in them we can see the blueprints for many others in the future which emphasise, again and again, these same angles, marking the way in which the 'shock' of his transvestism would be normalised and displaced onto his 'shocking' use of pottery instead (with both 'shocks' distracting from the actual works themselves). The similarity between these two articles – and, eventually, the many others that would follow – suggests two things: firstly, that Perry's artistic persona was already well established by this point, and secondly, that he was a deft and skilled interviewee who remained at the helm of his public image.

As previously mentioned, 2000 also marks the year that Perry gave Claire – his transvestite alter-ego – something of a makeover. He designed *Claire's Coming Out Dress* (Figure 29) for a group exhibition about ritualistic objects called *A Sense of Occasion* in Birmingham. The dress is something of a turning point for Perry, who describes:

I had a kind of epiphany in 2000 when I realised that being a transvestite wasn't about pretending to be a woman. It was about putting on the clothes that gave me the feelings that I wanted, and I would get the most

¹¹⁰ Simon Grant, 'Trials of a transvestite potter', *The Evening Standard*, 5 April 2000; Rachel Campbell-Johnston, 'Perry – perturbing, perverse or just potty?', *The Times*, 5 April 2000.

concentrated hit of those feelings from something frilly and flouncy. The style of this dress was very important to me, because it was taking me back to the absolute distilled essence of femininity that I realised I had been somehow reaching out for as a child. Classic little girl dresses are for me the ultimate in frilliness and sassiness – the absolute antithesis of the macho.¹¹¹

Claire's Coming Out Dress is similar in style to the one Perry would later wear to accept his Turner Prize. Made of shiny silk satin, rayon, and lace, it is a gleaming icy blue with a cinched-in ribboned waist, a frilly white Peter Pan collar and arm cuffs, short poofy sleeves, and a ruffled bib and trim. The dress is embroidered with gendered and gender-bending imagery, including some specific to Perry's own narrative: Alan Measles appears as an 'avenging primitive god', clawed, fanged, and erect.¹¹² Butterflies representing 'the transvestite coming out of the cocoon of puberty'¹¹³ show agonised naked figures (seemingly with both breasts and a penis) in high heels, splayed against the wings like a crucified Christ. Jet planes and racing cars adorn the dress, decorated with hearts and resonant, in their cross-section style displays, of wombs. A circular pattern of erect penises with their tips joined at the centre looks, from afar, like a floral motif – perhaps, fittingly, a pansy. Individual veiny penises with dark purple heads are wrapped in coy green ribbons in Perry's attempt to 'decriminalise the penis': 'A red penis is seen as a threatening image so I wanted to make it look somehow cute, like a sweet little bird you could nurture or a motif you might see on a child's dress, like a pair of cherries'.¹¹⁴

The dress was worn by Perry at an event at his show at the Laurent Delaye Gallery in October 2000, which he called 'an actual coming out ceremony'.¹¹⁵ In his monograph, he describes wearing it, entering through an archway of balloons, giving a speech to a 'selected group of friends and family', and showing a slideshow of his history as a transvestite, before asserting: 'It was a real occasion, not

¹¹¹ Quoted in Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 113.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

something staged as an ironic performance piece'.¹¹⁶ (A profile on Perry from the 2003 Turner Prize section of the Tate's website, however, says that he made the dress to be worn 'during a performance which merged his private female persona with his artwork'.¹¹⁷) Aside from being a major moment in Perry's emotional narrative, it also signals a significant rebranding of his public image. Though Perry was already known for his transvestism – he had previously made the news when he 'protested' outside the Tate Gallery dressed as Claire¹¹⁸ and is remarked to have turned up as Claire to his opening at Fig-1¹¹⁹ – most of his transvestism up to this point had parodied a sort of lower- to middle-class English feminine identity. As we will see in the next chapter, it was Claire's little girl incarnation that would garner him significant media attention and occasional controversy.

Not incidentally, this transition can also be linked to the post-YBA landscape, replacing the aggression of Young British Art with a visual embodiment of the more vulnerable, uncertain, comic-serious, unironic-ironic, self-aware alternatives that had, as we have seen previously, characterised attempts to fill the void left by its decline. As if to further cement this link, Perry's show at the Laurent Delaye Gallery was titled *Sensation*, although rather stunningly neither the title nor its satire is commented on in the (admittedly few) pieces reviewing it (though the connection would later be noted in passing in the catalogue for *Guerrilla Tactics*). When reviewing Young British Art's decline, Stallabrass notes the titles of two shows in 2000, imbuing them with some significance: the Saatchi Gallery's *Ant Noises* (an anagram of *Sensation*) is deemed, by Stallabrass and other reviewers alike, to be (as it promises) nothing more than a derivation of *Sensation*, whereas Tate Britain's *Intelligence* seemed to 'have in its sights a notorious show with another one-word title'.¹²⁰ That Perry would stage an exhibition – his first solo show since 1996-7, and, thus, since the original *Sensation*¹²¹ – with such a

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ 'Turner Prize 2003 Artists – Grayson Perry', *Tate*, accessed 10 May 2015, at <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/turner-prize-2003/turner-prize-2003-artists-grayson-perry>.

¹¹⁸ Oliver Bennett and John Windsor, '2000 – Millennium Arts Special', *The Independent*, 1 January 2000.

¹¹⁹ Grant, 'Trials of a transvestite potter'.

¹²⁰ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite* (2006), p. 292.

¹²¹ 'Grayson Perry', *Victoria Miro*, accessed 2 May 2015, at http://www.victoria-miro.com/usr/documents/artists/biography_document_EN/12/perry-cv.pdf.

culturally loaded title, at such a moment, is an obvious provocation.¹²² With this, Perry is explicitly positioning himself in relation to Young British Art in a way that both satirises their legacy (literally burlesquing it), and proposes, as he is wont to do throughout his career, that the ‘true’ sensation or challenge to contemporary art isn’t shock tactics but craft, the handmade, and the ‘sincere’. This is twinned, of course, with a wry recognition of the outright attention-grabbing sensationalism of this ‘sincere’ transvestism, particularly in its new and more controversial guise of little girl, a figure which, as we have seen, was particularly loaded in Young British Art. By co-opting that famous title, Perry refigures that previous show to teasingly deride the YBA legacy while using many of its strategies – and many of its counter-strategies – to suggest himself as the new next big thing in art; similarly, his use of parody both knowingly mocks his similarity and simultaneously declares his difference.

Although we will explore it further in the next chapter, this new iteration of Perry’s transvestism also served a number of functions in this context: as a brand, it made him easily identifiable, like the YBAs were; it visually signified his artistic origin story and thus his promise of sincerity (for his transvestism traversed the personal/public divide); it provided an initial shocking focus point that Perry would then go on to defuse; and it removed any sense of transvestic ‘threat’ (homophobic or transphobic) that might come from mistaking him for a ‘genuine’ woman, and instead positioned him as a mildly comic outsider. (That the YBA women such as Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas were often seen as aggressive and laddish makes the success of Perry’s transvestism all the more subtly parodic.) His transvestism also served to deflate some of the pretensions of the ‘cult of superstardom’ that came with the YBAs by making his own such cultdom so silly and unserious, and he makes it abundantly clear that he does not take himself or his role as artist too seriously. In 2002, he recalls wondering whether to dress as Claire at an opening in Amsterdam that year:

¹²² One might also be reminded of a comment Perry made about his piece *Video Installation* – ‘I also gave the pot this title because I thought it would be funny to be listed in a catalogue as “Grayson Perry, *Video Installation*” – and note that the ultimate effect is to playfully and disruptively list *Sensation* on his CV. Quoted in Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 216.

I did think, should I be serious about this? But then I thought, I didn't get here by being serious. I got here by dressing up in frocks and mucking about. That's basically what artists do, isn't it? They're paid mucker-abouters. Anyone who says anything else is lying. You're not solving the world's problems - you're just mucking about.¹²³

Similarly, although Perry had been working in pottery for years, the backlash against Young British Art and the search for alternatives around this time certainly benefitted his own career. Indeed, though Perry is often quoted as saying his role as craftsman is far more difficult for the art world to accept than his role as transvestite,¹²⁴ he was, at various moments in his career, buoyed up by a burgeoning craft movement. This has already been evidenced by Perry's participation in group ceramics shows in the early 1990s, such as the aforementioned exhibition *The Raw and the Cooked*, but the resurgence of this tendency in the early 2000s – this time within the explicit context of mainstream contemporary art – should be situated as a deliberate response to the conceptualism of Young British Art and the frequent complaints about its unskilled nature.

Perry was one of eight artists to be featured in *New Labour* in 2001, one such show at the Saatchi Gallery, which sought to 'reprise traditional handicraft techniques to bold new effect'.¹²⁵ Like *New Neurotic Realism*, *New Labour* was yet another obvious coda to Saatchi's previous collections and exhibitions; similarly reactionary, this time it suggested instead that 'anti-anti-handmadeness is where British art is currently at'.¹²⁶ The title is, of course, a pun, but it is also a recognition (however ironic) of the shift in cultural atmosphere that, as we have seen, came with the new government. While the exhibition's break from stereotypical and 'unskilled' Young British Art is immediately registered by its emphasis on craft, the YBA associations with shock tactics were this time kept intact – giving

¹²³ John Preston, 'Him and her big feats of clay', *The Telegraph*, 11 September 2002.

¹²⁴ In his Turner acceptance speech, Perry declared, 'I think the art world had more trouble coming to terms with me being a potter than my choice of frocks', a quote which was reprinted many times in the wake of his win and in the years that followed. Paul Majendie, 'Transvestite potter wins British Turner art prize', *Reuters News*, 8 December 2003.

¹²⁵ Richard Cork, 'Richard Cork's five best London exhibitions', *The Times*, 28 April 2001.

¹²⁶ Charles Darwent, 'Handmade tales of pots and porn', *Independent of Sunday*, 29 April 2001.

the overall impression that the Saatchi Gallery was trying to work through every permutation of what did and did not make Young British Art successful in order to strike upon the next big thing – and the exhibition’s use of craft to portray explicit sexual scenes made it worthy of a scandalised media warning. Perry’s transvestism was part of this ‘sensation’ of the show, and one critic gossiped, ‘The easily shocked might like to give the new exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery a miss, and not just because “New Labour” includes a video of a clay figure indulging in onanistic pleasures [Rebecca Warren’s *Masturbation*]. One of the male artists involved in the show is planning to attend the opening night on Tuesday as a woman.’¹²⁷

New Labour received significant media attention, with many lauding the beautifully-made works on display. Waldemar Januszczak, calling the return to handicraft an ‘inevitable moment’, was persuaded by the exhibition that ‘a proper force for change is at work’, identifying Perry as one of the three artists for which the show would be remembered. Calling him an ‘astonishing talent’, Januszczak prefigures Perry’s future appeal to his audience when he writes that, as you engage with his pots, ‘you find yourself in the presence of a fiery, caring, audacious, inventive imagination’.¹²⁸ Richard Dorment locates in Perry’s ‘superbly crafted’ pots a confrontation with ‘an age-old dilemma in the philosophy of aesthetics’, that is, the decorative.¹²⁹ Elsewhere, the show’s curator Jenny Blyth is quoted as saying she thinks the pots are going to be ‘a revelation’.¹³⁰ In contrast, however, while *The Guardian*’s Jonathan Jones admired some aspects of the show, he isolated Perry’s contributions in particular for scathing condemnation. In a review entitled ‘If I had a hammer...’, he writes furiously: ‘Smash [his pots] and bury the pieces. [...] Perry is a terrible artist.’¹³¹ Jones’s dismissal – ‘Once you have got the

¹²⁷ Sholto Byrnes, ‘He shall go to the ball – and with Honor’, *Independent on Sunday*, 29 April 2001.

¹²⁸ Waldemar Januszczak, ‘At the Saatchi Gallery, you’ll find proof that New Labour really is working’, *The Sunday Times*, 29 April 2001.

¹²⁹ Richard Dorment, ‘Art for the eyes, not the brain’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 May 2001.

¹³⁰ Maev Kennedy, ‘Back to basics for New Labour young artists’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2001.

¹³¹ Jonathan Jones, ‘If I had a hammer...’, *The Guardian*, 5 May 2001.

point, why buy the pot?’ – is more gently expressed by other critics, who acknowledge Perry’s intentions but similarly note their limitations, citing repetition and gimmickry as their main failings.¹³²

It is notable that these (mostly positive) reviews focus on those elements of Perry’s practice which we have seen him purposefully foster and develop in the preceding years: his decorativeness and craftsmanship; his persona (‘fiery, caring, audacious, inventive’); his ‘revelatory’ disparity from other art on the market; and even his newly-sensationalised transvestism. Similarly, although *New Labour* exhibited seven other artists alongside Perry, again indicating a broader movement, the exhibition nonetheless seemed an especially apposite venue for his work in particular: displayed in the Saatchi Gallery, Perry could be seen to be at once similar to, and dissimilar from, the YBAs; using, but subverting, provocation; and working within, while simultaneously critiquing and registering his distinction from, contemporary art institutions.

Shortly after *New Labour*, Perry was the subject of a major solo exhibition, *Guerrilla Tactics*, which took place at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2002 before travelling to the Barbican where it would earn him his Turner Prize nomination in 2003. In the usual media furore that attends the announcement of the Turner nominees, Perry was registered by the tabloids with much the same sensationalist outrage as his ‘shocking’ contemporaries, from that year and before. The announcement was met with headlines of ‘Male artist “Claire” nominated for prize’ (*The Yorkshire Post*),¹³³ ‘The gun-toting transvestite up for Turner Prize’ (*The Mirror*),¹³⁴ ‘Pornographic potter gunning for £20,000’ (*The Daily Mail*),¹³⁵ and ‘Paedo art prize bid’ (*The Sun*, outdoing itself).¹³⁶ Other newspapers ran more nuanced accounts, but nonetheless argued that the shortlist was typical of the Turner Prize up to its old

¹³² One critic describes: ‘One angry obscene pot is subversive, 40 begins to look like a habit.’ Martin Gayford, ‘The dotty potter’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 9 October 2002. See also: Laura Cumming, ‘What a sew and sew’, *The Observer*, 29 April 2001. Such criticisms have plagued Perry throughout his career, particularly when his work is collected and displayed *en masse*: writing in 2015, a critic reviewing Perry’s ‘retrospective’ exhibition Provincial Punk noted that ‘an extensive museum-style show [...] tends to lose its edge’ as the same themes are repeated. See: Alison Cole, ‘Grayson Perry: Provincial Punk Loses His Edge’, *The Independent*, 29 May 2015.

¹³³ ‘Male artist “Claire” nominated for prize’, *Yorkshire Post*, 29 May 2003.

¹³⁴ Rebecca Smith, ‘The gun-toting transvestite up for Turner Prize’, *The Mirror*, 30 May 2003.

¹³⁵ ‘Pornographic potter gunning for £20,000’, *The Daily Mail*, 30 May 2003.

¹³⁶ ‘Paedo art prize bid’, *The Sun*, 30 May 2003.

tricks: ‘Usual suspects on Turner shortlist’, noted *The Guardian*¹³⁷ and ‘Controversy wins again as Turner list revealed’, announced *The Times*,¹³⁸ while *The Independent* mockingly declared, ‘A transvestite, mouldy potatoes and war. It’s Turner time again’.¹³⁹ In contrast to the glib way in which he was used by – and used – the media in cursory headlines, however, those newspapers which featured Perry as the focus of individual interviews highlighted instead the same attributes we have seen highlighted since those early features in 2000, once more shifting the emphasis (at, we must imagine, Perry’s skilled directive) from the ‘shockingness’ of his costumes to the ‘shockingness’ of his use of pottery instead. In this way, Perry’s ‘scandalous’ transvestism is remarkable for the way in which it sets Perry up in sensationalist YBA terms only for him to disrupt them later, reinforcing the dichotomy between the YBAs and him.

Those reporters looking to be scandalised oscillated between fixing their outrage on Perry or the Chapman brothers; in both cases, it focused on the artists’ ‘paedophilic’ use of children and their explicit depictions of sexual perversions. There is an irony to this: the ‘paedophilic’ Perry pot to which so much of the press frequently referred was *We’ve Found the Body of Your Child* (2000, Figure 30), a gilded Brueghel-inspired piece which in fact challenges the media obsession with ‘stranger danger’. Acknowledging that most of the danger in such cases comes not from strangers but from family despite what media sensation suggests, Perry ambiguously depicts a woman next to the dead body of her child, surrounded by soldiers who may be comforting her or arresting her for her crimes. Floating around the top of the vase are a number of contemptuous comments made by parents about or to their children, ranging in intensity from ‘You’ll spoil him’ to ‘Cry baby’ to ‘You fucking little slut’.

Although *We’ve Found the Body of Your Child* does centre on the theme of child abuse, it is remarkably different from, for example, the Chapmans’ earlier-discussed *Zygotic Acceleration*, which ambivalently presents the spectacle of sexualised children, making the media circus around Perry’s pots ‘incised with scenes of paedophilia’ a rather damning enactment of his hypothesis regarding

¹³⁷ Maev Kennedy, ‘Usual suspects on Turner shortlist’, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2003.

¹³⁸ Dalya Alberge, ‘Controversy wins again as Turner list revealed’, *The Times*, 20 May 2003.

¹³⁹ Ian Burrell, ‘A transvestite, mouldy potatoes and war. It’s Turner time again’, *The Independent*, 30 May 2003.

skewed and sensationalising media representation.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the frequency with which the word ‘paedophilia’ appears in the media to describe Perry’s work suggests that it was part of the original press release; whether this was Perry’s doing or a Tate publicist’s remains unclear, though its inclusion is notable for the way in which it misrepresents and hyperbolises Perry’s work, provoking his audience so that he may subdue them later. More than anything, however, this brings my earlier arguments into relief. Perry, like his pots, performs a sort of guerrilla tactic: on the surface, he appears to be doing one thing, but after being drawn in, he is revealed to be doing another; that is, he may seem to play the YBA game (and he does this, in some ways, by actually playing it), but on closer inspection, he is in fact doing something slightly different, and subtly critical.

Perry, of course, went on to win the Turner Prize, though he was not expected to do so. In winning, he triumphed over two generations of YBAs: *Freeze*’s Anya Gallaccio, and *Sensation*’s Chapman brothers. (The other nominee was Willie Doherty, a Northern Irish video artist who had previously been nominated in 1994.) Though numerous headlines referred once more to the ‘transvestite potter’ who won the prize, much of the shock within the art world came not from his cross-dressing but from the proposed split from conceptualism he presaged (being the first ‘craftsman’ in the prize’s twenty year history), as well as for the implied ‘snub to [the Chapman brothers]’ principal patron, Charles Saatchi’ that his win was seen to enact.¹⁴¹

While we must be wary of projecting too linear or simple a narrative of YBA decline leading to Perry’s rise, it is nonetheless notable that Perry should emerge at this juncture, both artistically and culturally. Perry was similar but different to the YBAs, serving as both their critic and their descendant. Like those artists, he was media savvy and aware of his own media currency, but unlike the YBAs he had a degree of perspective, humour, and self-awareness that they were often deemed to be lacking. With his own unpretentious ceramics and his frank and psychoanalytical way of discussing them, Perry attempted to make contemporary art more accessible to the masses. As we have seen with

¹⁴⁰ Kennedy, ‘Usual suspects’.

¹⁴¹ Reynolds, ‘Transvestite’s shocking pots claim victory in Turner prize’.

Boring Cool People and *Video Installation*, he also often used his work to take the contemporary art world to task in a way that contemporary critics and reviewers evidently found incisive and cathartic. In contrast to the craftless conceptualism of the YBAs, Perry's use of pottery became a legitimising seal of his artistic skill, and the handmadeness of his medium further reinforced his own individual presence within his oeuvre, as opposed to the anonymously studio-made and outsourced nature of much Young British Art. YBA nihilism was replaced with aestheticism and a return to the material object; similarly, the aggression that haunted much Young British Art and its makers was satirically feminised, with Perry replacing this antagonistic machismo with (an enacted and emasculating) girlish vulnerability.

In this way, Perry's trajectory can be situated within the larger arc of contemporary art's pendulum swing, but it is, I want to suggest, too simplistic to say that it is simply that. There is, at the same time, a broader cultural resonance, particularly with an issue which was prefigured in the earlier discussions of 'New Labour': that of national identity.

Branding the nation

The subject of Britain's 'national identity crisis' has been the topic of much discussion and some consternation for years now, arising again and again in various iterations and at various provocations.¹⁴² The YBAs presented, as we have seen, one version of national identity, which was mobilised by New Labour in their attempt to rebrand Britain as a modern and thriving cultural centre. In her article 'Rebranding Britain: Cool Britannia, the Millennium Dome and the 2012 Olympics', Charlotte Werther considers some attempts at rebranding British identity throughout the 1990s and 2000s under the rubric of 'nation branding'. Ying Fan, a nation branding scholar, loosely defines nation branding as 'applying branding and marketing communication techniques to promote a nation's

¹⁴² At this point, I would like to note that the slippage between 'Britain' and 'England' in conversations like these is significant, and any reproduction of this slippage here is not intended to suggest that they are in fact equivalent but, rather, is often simply a replication of the conflation as it stands in popular – often English – discourse.

image’,¹⁴³ and he suggests that a nation brand ‘is the total sum of all perceptions of a nation in the minds of international stakeholders, which may contain some of the following elements: people, place, culture/language, history, food, fashion, famous faces (celebrities), global brands and so on’.¹⁴⁴ While a country will likely already have an innate nation brand in the sense that it already presents a certain unconscious image on the international stage, the act of nation branding is a conscious attempt to manufacture or manipulate this as one might a product’s brand, with the intention of promoting the nation’s image to an international audience.¹⁴⁵ This forced re-presenting is difficult and challenging to successfully accomplish, with the result that ‘[real] examples of nation branding in its true sense are rare and far between’,¹⁴⁶ but both Fan and Werther give the example of Cool Britannia in particular as a key example and widely-considered failure.¹⁴⁷

Werther suggests that the rise of nation branding ‘coincided, in Great Britain, with a debate about that very self-perception or identity linked among other things to devolution of political power to a Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly, and an increasingly multicultural population, especially in London’, and as evidence of these concerns points to the profusion of literature forecasting the ‘death’ of Britain and considering the role and future of British identity which abounded at the end of the 1990s.¹⁴⁸ Of her first case study, Cool Britannia itself, Werther suggests that the branding was intended to be both external and internal, addressing two issues: firstly, that Britain was seen, externally and internationally, to be stuck in the past, and secondly, that, internally and domestically, its identity was in flux. In its attempts to remedy these, Cool Britannia was unsuccessful on both accounts. In the case of the former, according to Fan, it ‘failed exactly because it abandoned all those traditional images associated with the country in favour of hippy and trendy images. It is ironic that the

¹⁴³ Ying Fan, ‘Branding the Nation: What Is Being Branded?’, *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 12 (2006), p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ Fan, ‘Branding the Nation: Towards a Better Understanding’, *Place Branding & Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 6 (2010), p. 98.

¹⁴⁵ Fan, ‘What is Being Branded?’, p. 9.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁷ Charlotte Werther, ‘Rebranding Britain: Cool Britannia, the Millennium Dome and the 2012 Olympics’, *Moderna Språk*, Vol. 105 (2011), p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

nation has lost its distinctiveness in its search for distinctiveness.’¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Werther attributes its internal failure to having

too much emphasis on a trendy, modern and cutting-edge image of Britain for it to resonate with the *internal or domestic audience* of the campaign, the British general public. For most of them, Cool Britannia smacked too much of a narrow and essentially London-based Britain that felt remote and completely different to their lives. [...] In branding terms the campaign failed to convince the internal audience, the British population, let alone to make them ‘live the brand’.¹⁵⁰

It is easy to see the myriad ways in which Young British Art maps to this failed nation branding exercise, particularly in its similarly narrow London-centricity and in its abandoning of ‘distinctive’ traditional images in favour of more modern, contemporary, and international ones. Correspondingly, though she does not frame Young British Art in nation branding terms, Elizabeth Legge similarly considers its role as export in her article ‘Reinventing Derivation: Roles, Stereotypes, and “Young British Art”’, in which she looks at the way in which Young British Art presents the identity of Britishness abroad. She is particularly interested in the relationship between Young British Art and American art, seeing in it something of a metaphor for the two countries’ international relations at large, particularly in the way in which Young British Art has been received and interpreted by critics in the US. (The *Sensation* catalogue further materialises this underlying sense of competition when it uses an American writer, Brooks Adams, to assert the superiority of contemporary Young British Art over its American equivalent in an essay pointedly titled, ‘Thinking of You: An American’s Growing, Imperfect Awareness’.)

¹⁴⁹ Fan, ‘What is Being Branded?’, p. 10.

¹⁵⁰ Werther, ‘Rebranding Britain’, p. 4.

Legge pays particular attention to the YBAs' use of stereotypes as they function abroad, exploring their deployment through the application of postcolonial theory and arguing that '[s]elf-presentation in stereotypes derives from the British crises of identity after the "loss of Empire": seeing one's disempowered self in the way that one has seen the colonised other'.¹⁵¹ In her argument, she claims that the ultimate (and ultimately exportable) stereotype is that of Britain's 'lost identity, shored up only by stereotypes', which feeds into a rhetoric of Britain's decline and post-imperial guilt and thus ironically exploits American expectations.¹⁵² Legge further notes that if Young British Art 'plays into stereotypes of an exhausted Britain of uncertain identity, it does so with the knowledge that being exhausted is a theoretically versatile option; perhaps given the scepticism of all national rhetorics, the only option', before going on to quote a passage in *Artforum* which attributes the art's crudeness to a 'mood of helplessness and apathy in a culture struggling to come to terms with its colonialist and neo-colonialist past'.¹⁵³ For Legge, however, this all appears to be a knowing and wry position that the YBAs adopt, and she calls the relation of British art to its American counterparts 'deliberately that of a pantomime horse to a method actor'.¹⁵⁴

This account is particularly useful when combined with the above reflections on nation branding, for, as well as cogently compounding many of the tensions and uncertainties we have previously seen above about the 'Britishness' of this British art, Legge's discussion also brings to the fore the underlying issues of national identity and postcolonial uncertainty that Werther credits with prompting the need for rebranding in the first place. Legge's emphasis on postcolonialism is suggestive, and though she seems to propose its usage as part of a tongue-in-cheek performance of lost identity intended to tease an American audience rather than as evidence of an actual crisis, the above attempts at rebranding, as well as the contemporaneous evidence outlined previously, suggest that it was perhaps both. Indeed, Legge's article is perhaps most valuable for the way in which it raises these

¹⁵¹ Legge, 'Reinventing Derivation', p. 6.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13. See also: Robicsek, "'You Give Us This and We Give You That'".

dual issues of postcolonialism and the crisis of national identity – which clearly were topics of some concern for Britain and its people at this time – which lurked behind Young British Art and its international usage while repeatedly emphasising that these deliberations were aimed at an external, rather than internal, audience. This is a problematic combination. Both Fan and Werther discuss the important role the internal audience plays in nation branding, and emphasise the disastrous effects for any nation branding campaign that does not have them on board: these include public and media derision, as Werther charts with the failed projects of Cool Britannia and the Millennium Dome, as well as the risk of the nation brand being promoted seeming “foreign” to the domestic audience’, or of that domestic audience finding the way they are being portrayed to outsiders offensive and insulting.¹⁵⁵ Werther repeatedly finds that nation branding efforts must be ‘*inclusive*, rather than imposed top-down’.¹⁵⁶

In terms of nation branding, then, it is easy to see how Young British Art aligned with the tenets of New Labour’s ‘Cool Britannia’, and, relatedly, why it failed. As a proposed emblem of national identity, it did not resonate with the wider British public, as we have seen repeatedly, and its emphases on a cutting-edge contemporary London were both exclusionary to non-Londoners and too dissimilar from the traditional and familiar images most associated with previous ideas of national identity, as ‘the campaign also failed to recognise that established images cannot be changed overnight, especially in “an old country” such as Britain’.¹⁵⁷ (This is not to suggest, of course, that modernism is somehow anathema to conceptions of British cultural identity, for of course it is not, but rather to reconstruct the tensions inherent in this particular instance of nation branding in the late 1990s and 2000s.) The urge to rebrand was there, but the proposed rebranding was insufficient, failing to deliver the hoped-for results of such an endeavour.

This is, I argue, why Grayson Perry’s emergence at this particular moment is so significant, for he suggests an alternative vision of the nation brand, and, ultimately, of national identity. Though

¹⁵⁵ Fan, ‘What is Being Branded?’, p. 11.

¹⁵⁶ Werther, ‘Rebranding Britain’, p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Perry is not officially endorsed by any government (although his *Print for a Politician* was bought as part of its art collection and anecdotally was said to be hanging in Conservative MP George Osborne's office), he did, as we will see throughout the remainder of this thesis, quickly foster links with a number of national institutions in the decade succeeding his Turner Prize win: local heritage museums (specifically, The Collection in Lincolnshire), The Arts Council, *The Guardian*, Channel Four, the BBC, the British Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery. While Perry may not overtly be part of any overarching nation branding campaign, his association with these national bodies does suggest his privileged position within discourses of national identity.

In this respect, the nation branding literature remains an elucidative model, and within it, Perry's marked difference from the YBAs takes on another significance. Instead of marketing his art to an external and international audience, Perry's work remains aimed specifically at an internal audience, often using insular, parochial, and esoteric references instead of easily exportable ones. Though Perry, like the YBAs, lives and works in London, many of his pieces centre on Essex, where he grew up, or take as their subject other locations around England, helping to diversify the locations represented.¹⁵⁸ (Importantly, however, Perry remains a specifically English artist, and this diversification does not extend to the representation of Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland; this will become particularly relevant as Perry begins to engage with various British institutions and collections.)

Similarly, Perry, as we have seen earlier and will continue to see throughout the following chapters, embodied a particularly interesting mix of the contemporary and the traditional. If New Labour's nation branding failed to recognise the difficulties in dramatically changing established images overnight, Perry worked within this schema by *using*, not replacing, the traditional images, but doing so with humour, irony, and self-awareness. In this way, Perry can be seen to be returning to the provincial English identity that was seen to be 'lost' as it was assimilated into multicultural modernism, repeating and restituting many of those unique, 'distinctive' British qualities of which

¹⁵⁸ This is particularly true of the exhibitions Perry would come to curate in the mid- to late-2000s, as we will explore further in chapter three.

Ying Fan lamented the disappearance, all while under the paradoxical guise of contemporariness and transgression, both of which are implied by his status as transvestite and craftsman. In his persona and artworks, Perry draws on numerous distinctly English figures to further supplement this: his transvestism includes callbacks to Margaret Thatcher, Princess Diana, Camilla Parker Bowles, Monty Python, Alice in Wonderland, and pantomime dames; his art refers to English stalwarts such as William Hogarth, L.S. Lowry, Aubrey Beardsley, Bernard Leach, and the Kitchen Sink School; and his tenor takes on something of the bawdy traditions of the seaside postcard and the *Carry On* films mixed with unmistakably English wit and self-deprecation.

This engagement with heritage and nostalgia re-presents the English past (as well as its present) as an object of pleasure as well as scrutiny. Like the YBAs, Perry's vision of Britain is, necessarily, a postcolonial one, which does consider and acknowledge its diminished imperial power and even its flaws and uncertainties; but, notably unlike those contemporaries, Perry's depiction of Britain is never purely nihilistic (despite, sometimes, what he may purport). There is also an interesting relationship between Perry and the kind of YBA practice outlined by Elizabeth Legge: if Young British Art exploits stereotypes of British decline to parody a status of cultural subordination and prostration, in a way that, however ironic, could be positioned as ultimately humiliating, Perry assimilates this humiliation into his persona through his transvestism in a way that performs but ultimately disempowers it. In this way, he defuses the act of taking pleasure in British – actually English – nationalism, with all of the fraught and problematic history such nationalism entails. Instead, in a related postcolonial gesture, Perry subdues the macho aggression of Young British Art and of 1990s' British culture more generally by literally disarming and cross-dressing it, using the fragility of ceramics and the destabilising properties of transvestism to present it as something not threatening but potentially vulnerable instead, much like his earlier motif of the penis with a bow on it.

In the chapters that follow, I want to consider the particular ways in which Perry does this, arguing that, despite the veneer of vulnerability, it is in fact a considered and powerful position from which to renew British cultural identity and give voice to a burgeoning British nationalism; perhaps, to

paraphrase Legge's earlier claim about the YBAs in their time, it is at this moment the only option if one wants to reinvigorate national pride post-imperialism without veering into unsavoury connotations (although, as we will see throughout the thesis, Perry's approaches raise a number of their own deeply problematic concerns). Writing in 2005, Ying Fan talks of attending a seminar on the topic of branding Britain, where, he notes, 'the panel was unanimous that there [was] a need for someone to be in charge of the British reputation but they disagreed on whether the government or industries should take the leadership'.¹⁵⁹ It is my assertion that, particularly in the wake of the failure of Cool Britannia and Young British Art to fill such a void, Perry's nuanced and considered self-positioning made him a strong contender.

¹⁵⁹ Fan, 'What is being branded?', p. 8.

Chapter Two: Dressing the Part

Introduction

In a talk given at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in 2013, Grayson Perry, dressed in full Little Bo Peep garb, joked about his reputation as the ‘tranny potter’, suggesting that the only thing powerful enough to dislodge that epithet would be for him to become a serial killer – in which case he would be referred to as the ‘serial killer tranny potter’ instead.¹⁶⁰ Perry’s transvestism has long dominated the discourse surrounding him: as we have already seen, it was an integral factor in his rise to fame and a key focus of the publicity surrounding the 2003 Turner Prize, and, over a decade later, it still characterises almost every media appearance and interview he gives. Perry’s feminine ‘alter-ego’ Claire – a taxonomy he came to publicly reject circa 2011, preferring instead to acknowledge that it is and has always been ‘just [him] in a frock’,¹⁶¹ but which I still use here for ease of reference – is arguably more recognisable than he is as simply ‘Grayson’, and plays a vital iconographic role in both Perry’s art and branding.

While such monologic focus on Perry’s transvestism can at times be obfuscatory, distracting from, and overwhelming, his work at large, his cross-dressing also, paradoxically, does not attract the critical attention it deserves. In the discourse surrounding him, it is both overexposed and under-theorised, occupying the somewhat contradictory position of being simultaneously over- and undervalued; both seen and unseen. Perry’s transvestism has been a central subject for both the artist and the media for over a decade, and yet neither its generalities – that is, the explicit functions of his transvestism within the cultural and art historical spheres – nor its specificities – the particular visual forms it takes – have been mapped in detail, instead being subsumed under a rhetoric of

¹⁶⁰ Grayson Perry, ‘Why art matters’, talk given at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1 May 2013.

¹⁶¹ Nigel Farndale, ‘Grayson Perry is tired of living a double life’, *The Telegraph*, 9 October 2011, accessed 23 September 2013, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/8813146/Grayson-Perry-is-tired-of-living-a-double-life.html>

psychoanalysis, fetishism, and sincerity that once again obscures its particulars. In saying this, I do not mean to discount these personal and psychosexual elements, unlike early post-Turner Prize tabloid exposés that sought to prove Perry's transvestism was all a ruse;¹⁶² rather, I intend to divorce Perry's transvestism from this monopolising narrative in order to reinstate it instead within the broader cultural context and make it amenable to analysis.

This chapter aims to achieve this through a number of methods, and is split into two parts accordingly. To begin with, the remainder of this introduction will map out some of the principal definitions and concerns regarding transvestism as it will affect the rest of this chapter: defining what transvestism, for these purposes, is and is not; considering Perry's own transvestic history; outlining some of the main theory and methodology as it pertains to my readings of Perry's cross-dressing; and suggesting transvestism's particular importance within both art historical and English contexts. After this brief theoretical preface, part one of this chapter will look at three particular iterations of Perry's transvestism throughout his career, and, following on from my cursory mapping of cross-dressing to English national identity here, will consider each one by theorising it in relation to a major national 'character' within the English cultural cast list. Here, I want to look specifically at the figures of Monty Python; the little girl, which I will investigate cross-culturally, looking at her role within both English and Japanese contexts; and the pantomime dame. In each case I will consider both the forms and the functions of Perry's transvestism, considering how it allows him to use and subvert gender within his work and persona. Part two will push the analysis of Perry's play with gender further through an extended comparison with Perry's contemporary Tracey Emin, a figure with whom Perry shares much in common, and who, like Perry, works, and is received, in gendered terms. In the course of this comparison, I want to consider how Perry invokes or utilises gender by looking at his use of craft, his violently gendered graphic novel *Cycle of Violence*, and his media reception, comparing these with similar moments in Emin's career.

¹⁶² Geoffrey Levy, 'Frocky horror show!', *The Daily Mail*, 9 December 2003.

It is important to note that while I have suggested above three particular recurring styles within Perry's cross-dressing to be examined in this chapter, these are three categories of my own designation, rather than either widely recognised concrete classifications or groupings to which Perry himself adheres. Similarly, they are not distinctly chronological, though the sequence in which they appear here does mirror the overall progression of his wardrobe. While these three categories encompass, I believe, a number of recurring themes and styles within Perry's cross-dressing oeuvre, they are not intended to be comprehensive, and there are a number of outfits which do not adhere to these three types. Correspondingly, it should be noted that, while Perry's costumes are incorporated into his oeuvre and persona by the dual acts of his choosing and wearing of them, they have various 'authors', ranging from high street shops, to Perry's own designs, to young fashion students.¹⁶³ In discussing these outfits in relation to Perry I do not mean to obscure their sources, or to imply that Perry is solely responsible for their creation; nonetheless, they form an important part of his star image, and should be considered accordingly.

Theorising transvestism

Before considering Perry's transvestism, it is first necessary to designate what transvestism, in this instance, is defined to be. In academia as in life, transvestism appears in a number of guises, and it is a term that is often employed to describe a wide variety of practices and situations: it is a psychosexual and fetishistic compulsion, providing a topic for serious psychoanalytical enquiry; it is a

¹⁶³ While Claire's 'housewife' or 'ordinary Briton' phase was constituted of everyday women's clothes (some of which, Perry notes, were bought from the specialty shop for tall women, Long Tall Sally), later outfits were often made especially for him. Certain of these, like Claire's Coming Out Dress, were designed by Perry and made to his specifications. Since 2004, however, Perry has participated in a project with Central St. Martins, which asks its fashion students to design an outfit for Perry, with him buying and wearing his favourite three designs each year. As a result, it is often difficult to ascertain the origins or makers of Perry's costumes, though he does occasionally credit them publicly. While the implications of this will not be considered further here for reasons of space, it is nonetheless worth mentioning that this is an interesting state of affairs for an artist who simultaneously declares the importance of the personally handmade to his work, and whose transvestism is central to his persona and public image; though Perry likes to declare his difference to those artists (particularly the YBAs) who outsource their work to studios, a large part of Perry's image comes from the work of other artists.

phase in transitioning from one gender to another before sex reassignment surgery (or to constitute a transgendered lived identity without this surgery); it is associated with LGBT and queer theory issues such as gender performativity and identity construction; it is a major and cross-cultural feature of theatre, from Shakespeare to Japanese Kabuki; it is a signifier of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque or of the trickster; and it is played for shock value or laughs in mainstream popular culture, often with the ultimate intention of upholding the status quo and norms of both gender and sexuality. In any and all of these iterations, which range in subject area from psychology to medicine to social sciences to humanities, transvestism is often a topic of special interest for gender and sexuality theorists, particularly following the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). These theorists may see the ambiguous play enacted by the transvestite as disrupting (however temporarily) hegemonic ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality, or, alternatively, as reinforcing essentialising ideas about what each gender 'is'.

Perhaps because of transvestism's figuration in a number of different discourses, its particulars as a standalone practice remain difficult to pin down. As Samantha Allen notes in her article 'Whither the Transvestite? Theorising Male-to-Female Transvestism in Feminist and Queer Theory', it is difficult to find a terminology for transvestism that is not also used to denote 'cross-dressing homosexual men' or transsexuals.¹⁶⁴ This is at least partly because 'the category "transvestite" [...] has never functioned with the same clarity of definition in the socio-political sphere' as other terms such as, for example, 'gay' and 'lesbian',¹⁶⁵ and so 'male-to-female transvestism remains under-theorised in

¹⁶⁴ Samantha Allen, 'Whither the transvestite? Theorising male-to-female transvestism in feminist and queer theory', *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 15 (2014), p. 52. This chapter deals exclusively with male-to-female transvestism, as this is what Perry himself presents. While female-to-male transvestism does exist, it is significantly rarer, and brings with it an entirely different set of connotations, and, unlike male-to-female transvestism, it is more heavily associated with queer culture. Partly this is because typically 'masculine' clothing, such as trousers, is not culturally proscribed to women in the same way that typically 'feminine' clothing, such as dresses and skirts, is to men, and so there is less fetishism around the process. For more on female presentations of masculinity, see: Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC; London, 1998).

¹⁶⁵ Allen, 'Whither the transvestite?', p. 53. For context, this statement of Allen's is not meant to endorse such fixity but is an acknowledgement that queer theory's emphasis on 'indeterminacy' is a response to 'the use of "gay" and "lesbian" as determinate, closed and definable categories in identity-based political movements'.

feminist and queer literature’;¹⁶⁶ subsequently, she says, ‘one of the most urgent tasks facing any theory of male-to-female transvestism is to specify it and disarticulate it from the other sexualities, identities and practices with which it is frequently confused’.¹⁶⁷

Indeed, perhaps the most notable text that deals monographically with the subject of cross-dressing, Marjorie B. Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992), also insists upon such confluences. Garber’s tome is, I argue, remarkably unhelpful (and now even outdated) for perpetuating almost exactly these elisions: in addition to using the term ‘transvestite’ as an umbrella term that incorporates everything from ‘heterosexual men with an erotic interest in cross-dressing, female impersonators, Shakespearean stage actors and a wide variety of female-to-male cross-dressers’,¹⁶⁸ Garber also repeatedly confuses transvestism with transsexualism (or transgenderism),¹⁶⁹ using the two terms almost interchangeably and suggesting, intentionally or otherwise, that they are somehow always related. Similarly, Garber insists that transvestism is always (and should be) necessarily linked to homosexuality, as homosexuality is ‘the repressed that always returns’.¹⁷⁰

Garber’s frustrating compression of these highly varied and disparate instances of cross-dressing further makes it difficult to support the unified claims she intends to make throughout the book about, apparently, *all* of these – often broadly dissimilar – transvestic practices (which again traverse both the personal and the publicly performed, two entirely disparate categories) being equally and similarly subversive. In light of this, it is unsurprising that Garber is also insensitive to the nuances of national differences, preferring instead to delineate a historiographical account of transvestism in the West as a

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁶⁹ Regarding the difference between these two terms, the Trans* Awareness Project suggests that ‘[s]ometimes transsexual is used to imply that a person has or desires to have some sort of gender affirmative surgery, while transgender is sometimes used as an umbrella term’, in the same way that trans* also is. (The asterisk takes its cue from search practices on the Internet, whereby an asterisk acts as a blank placeholder for any possible word that might follow, allowing for more inclusive results.) ‘What is the difference between transgender and transsexual?’, *Trans* Awareness Project*, accessed 20 June 2015, at <http://www.transawareness.org/what-is-the-difference-between-transgender-and-transsexual.html>

¹⁷⁰ Marjorie B. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London, 1993), p. 5.

whole. Despite her claims that ‘the tendency on the part of many critics has been to look *through* rather than *at* the cross-dresser’ and to ‘elide and erase – or to *appropriate* the transvestite for particular political and critical aims’, then, Garber seems guilty of doing exactly this herself in favour of her Butlerian argument that all cross-dressing is necessarily subversive for the way in which it ‘offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity’,¹⁷¹ when in fact analysis suggests that it is just as likely to uphold these binaries as to challenge them.

Transvestism’s plurality is further emphasised by the number of monikers for the act of dressing as the other gender – transvestism, drag, cross-dressing, *travesti*¹⁷² – each of which has its own nuances, denoting something subtly different. It is important to note that Perry has always used the term ‘transvestite’ (or its colloquial, and occasionally derogatory, diminutive, ‘tranny’) to describe himself.¹⁷³ Although transvestite is the commonly used catch-all term to describe someone (especially a man) who wears the clothes of the opposite gender, it is also used to designate a type of paraphilia (that is, an atypical sexual desire), and so it also frequently comes with psychosexual and fetishistic connotations, which, in Perry's case, are completely intentional. Perry has spoken at length about his fetishism, his sexual interest in humiliation, and the origins of his interest in women's clothing, the latter of which, as outlined in the previous chapter, he attributes to his enjoyment of the restrictive feeling of a too-tight smock in an art class when he was a child.

In these contexts, transvestism, as opposed to the other forms of cross-dressing listed above, is also often not intended for an audience, but instead is usually private or domestic, occurring furtively and secretly, most typically amongst heterosexual men.¹⁷⁴ This makes the transvestite vastly different

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁷² It is worth noting that while a term like ‘drag’ is often associated with queer culture (as with drag queens and drag shows), the phrases ‘in drag’ or ‘cross-dressed’ are often used as generic terms for being dressed in the clothing of the opposite gender, regardless of queer or psychoanalytical slant or lack thereof.

¹⁷³ Perry has discussed his ‘mixed reactions from the transgender community’, which he suggests thinks he is ‘the wrong sort of weirdo’ and that he ‘wasn’t the right sort of tranny’. Quoted in Matthew Jenkin, ‘Artist Grayson Perry says he’s “wrong sort of tranny”’, *Gay Star News*, 20 June 2012, accessed 23 September 2013, at <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/artist-grayson-perry-says-hes-wrong-sort-tranny200612/>

¹⁷⁴ In one survey of 1,032 transvestites undertaken in 1997, 87% of respondents described themselves as heterosexual. Richard F. Docter and Virginia Prince, ‘Transvestism: A Survey of 1032 Cross-Dressers’, *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, Vol. 26 (1997), pp. 589-605.

from, for example, the drag queen, whose ‘public, parodic achievements overshadow the shy transvestite’s private re-stylisings of gender’.¹⁷⁵ While drag queens are (usually gay) men dressed as exaggerated caricatures of femininity that are performed with full awareness of their underlying, if concealed, male bodies, the designator ‘transvestite’ often implies the desire to ‘pass’, that is, to be recognised as, or mistaken for, a ‘genuine’ member of the opposite gender. Whether or not the individual actually does ‘pass’ is irrelevant; what matters is the desire to do so. In this way, transvestism is in many instances constructed as a serious and earnest pursuit and interpreted genuinely, and often without cynicism, in psychoanalytical, sociological, or anthropological contexts. Importantly in this instance, this also means that unlike other forms of performative cross-dressing, transvestism in particular is also linked – albeit perhaps subconsciously – with sincerity, and with the kind of compulsive, psychological personal expression that is ultimately undisprovable and unknowable, a point which will become significant later in Perry’s case.

As this discussion defines it, then, transvestism is not a gender identity *per se*, and it is considered to be completely distinct from issues of transgender identity. That is, transvestism here is not the sign of a dissonance between one’s assigned gender and biology, and the act of cross-dressing does not signify the desire of the transvestite to eventually transition into living as another gender; it is, instead, a purely performative and temporary state. Similarly, it is not in this case linked to homosexuality or queer culture, and instead, as we will see, is more resolutely linked to heterosexuality. Furthermore, while psychoanalytic or sociological approaches to transvestism often try to explore more internal and subjective issues, usually including fieldwork and interviews with transvestites in their studies, cultural considerations of transvestism have to, I argue, take a much more external and objective viewpoint. That is, the transvestite has to be read as an image, or a symbol, rather than a subject of psychoanalytical investigation. In this way, the actual ‘sincerity’ of the transvestism is entirely irrelevant; what matters instead is how these public disruptions of gender function. (Sincerity itself, similarly unknowable, is still relevant but as a rhetorical device rather than a

¹⁷⁵ Allen, ‘Whither the transvestite?’, p. 58.

provable truth, as we will again see later.) Resultantly, when transvestism appears in the public sphere,¹⁷⁶ it is usually not with the intention of ‘passing’, since by the very nature of being publicly acknowledged it necessarily rescinds its ambiguity. Instead, it becomes something more consciously performed.

In his biography and in interviews, Perry charts his changing views about his own transvestism and the subject of passing. Perry has stated that in his youth, particularly as a teenager and in his early 20s, he was interested in trying to pass, but that nowadays – particularly since staging the previously discussed ‘Claire’s Coming Out Party’ in 2000, when he rebranded his transvestite persona as a little girl (or rather, a middle-aged man in little girl-style dresses) – he no longer attempts to do so, as he says it is no longer the point for him.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, although Perry’s cross-dressing has taken a number of visual forms over the years, it is interesting to note that they have all been used performatively to supplement his artistic practice, troubling the distinctions between private and public, and sincere and artificial. (Specific examples of these will be discussed in more detail throughout the rest of this chapter.)

In this way, although Perry himself uses the term transvestite, with all its connotations of sincerity, he actually has more in common with the cross-dresser, as distinguished by Esther Newton and summarised by Chris Straayer, as

¹⁷⁶ By ‘public sphere’ I here mean in the media specifically, rather than ‘public’ as in simply ‘outside’; I clarify this distinction as the more domestic scales of private/public have a particular significance for transvestites, too, who will often dress up in private before attempting incrementally to take their transvestism outside, by going for walks, buying something in a shop, and so on, using these interactions as ways of testing the convincingness of their transvestism.

¹⁷⁷ Perry has talked of becoming bored with typical transvestism and the ideal of passing; see, for example: A.A. Gill, ‘Girl talk’, *The Sunday Times*, 16 October 2005; Nicola Copping, ‘I was a fan of the young Princess Anne’, *The Times*, 12 December 2007. On the topic of passing, it is worth noting that Perry has also discussed, on several occasions, the difficulties of aging as a transvestite, and of finding that he is no longer as ‘pretty’ or as naturally-androgynous looking as he was in his youth; in this respect, his movement away from discourses of ‘passing’ can also be seen as a way of circumventing this. See: Emma John, ‘Turning fifty: the rise of the “quintastic”’, *The Observer*, 23 January 2011, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/23/turning-fifty-quintastics-50>; Ella Alexander, ‘Grayson Perry discusses the “psycho-sexual process” of being a transvestite’, *The Independent*, 6 October 2014, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/grayson-perry-says-not-wearing-a-dress-doesnt-stop-you-from-being-a-transvestite-9777881.html>

the [transvestite] attempts to pass as a member of the opposite sex while the [cross-dresser] exaggerates the opposite sex's assumed gender codes to appear obviously, inadequately disguised. The male cross-dresser appears not as a woman but as a *man in woman's clothing*.¹⁷⁸

That is not to say that these definitions are concrete and exclusionary, of course, and there are certainly times when the two terms converge. In her discussion of what she terms 'the temporary transvestite film' genre, to which she ascribes such films as *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Tootsie* (1982), Straayer notes that the disguises adopted by the main characters in these films are both transvestism and cross-dressing at once, because they are 'sufficient to trick other characters' (hence, transvestic) but not sufficient to trick the film audience, so 'its extradiegetic operation is that of cross-dressing'.¹⁷⁹ Though Perry is not in 'disguise', his use of cross-dressing nonetheless has much in common with Straayer's 'temporary transvestite' films, which – although they are open to queering (that is, being interpreted anew through queer lenses via the application of queer theory or the excavation of coded or unconscious sexual or gendered subtext in the original), as Straayer (among others) has somewhat done with her discussion – are mostly mainstream and at least superficially (and at most prescriptively) heteronormative, 'righting' their gender confusions by the end and ultimately upholding the gender binaries and their naturalised relation to biological sex. Similarly, Straayer notes that in these instances, cross-dressing is almost always performed with comedic intent and outcomes, echoing Perry's oft-repeated claim that there is something inherently funny about a man in a dress.

Though Straayer focuses more on sexuality than gender – that is, how various transvestic pairings within the narrative can suggest queer readings for otherwise conventionally heterosexual texts – many of her observations about the intentional safety of what she calls 'inadequate disguise'

¹⁷⁸ Chris Straayer, 'Redressing the "Natural": The Temporary Transvestite Film' (1992), in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader IV* (Texas, 2012), p. 489.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

also seem relevant when we consider Perry's own cross-dressing, and whether or not we can, or should, interpret it as subversive or as something else. Straayer suggests that '[it] is a fear of actual cross-sex passing that necessitates the convention of inadequate disguise', because to be too convincing would be to 'pose too great a threat to society's trust in sex and gender unity as a system to communicate and recognise sex'.¹⁸⁰ In this respect, inadequate disguise – Perry's as much as the characters' in the films Straayer discusses – is a way of flirting with transgression without ever really transgressing in any meaningful way.

That said, however, even though these performances might ultimately fail to solve or undo the gender contradictions they temporarily raise, the fact that they are visually represented is nonetheless still significant, creating queer frissons (if only momentarily) and opening up the possibility for other, less conformist, 'gender trouble' in the future. Furthermore, Straayer recognises the potential for audience pleasure in these plots, to which she credits their continuing success and repetition. The enjoyability of transvestite performances is often raised by commentators on transvestism (Judith Butler describes the 'pleasure, the giddiness of the performance'¹⁸¹), and is again worth emphasising in the case of Perry, who has been a hit with the public from the beginning; several accounts of his Turner Prize show in 2003 remarked on the audience's affection and visitor comments of 'I love you Claire!',¹⁸² and, as noted previously, he has recently been deemed by the media to have reached 'national treasure' status.

Just like the characters in the films Straayer discusses, Perry's cross-dressing plays with the disparity between sex and gender, often humorously. While the visual iconography of Perry's costumes will be considered in more detail in part one of this chapter, and although his costumes have evolved and changed throughout the years (running the gamut from a lower- to middle-class housewife to a pantomime dame), the emblematic Grayson Perry look consists of a large, often embroidered and frilly, babydoll dress; Mary Jane shoes with ankle socks; his chin-length blond hair coiffed into a bob

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 496.

¹⁸¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, 1999), p. 175.

¹⁸² Fiachra Gibbons, 'But the real shock is...the Essex vases', *The Guardian*, 29 October 2003.

and decorated with a bow or occasionally a bonnet; and bright, childlike makeup and accessories. (I characterise this as the quintessence of Perry's 'look' as it was what he was frequently pictured wearing when he first came to fame at the time of the Turner Prize; in addition, since then, many of these basic components have often appeared repeatedly in various different permutations.) This caricaturally childlike garb is then worn on the body of a very tall, lean, (at least) 40-something-year-old man with a booming voice, who does little to effect the feminine comportment his outfit might suggest. As such, Perry, like Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot*, or Dustin Hoffman slugging someone who steals his taxi in *Tootsie*, uses his underlying and ever-present masculinity to both remind the viewer of his 'true' gender at all times, and to create a humorous juxtaposition. In this way, Perry aligns with the many cross-dressing men acknowledged by Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough in *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (1993) who have historically 'burlesqued women's conduct rather than seriously enacting it, since comic impersonation left no question that they were males'.¹⁸³ (This becomes particularly relevant when we come to explore Perry's relationship to the Monty Python model of cross-dressing in part one.)

While Straayer's argument is, I argue, the most relevant when considering Perry's transvestic practices for the way in which it uses canonical gender theory to foreground the theatrical image of cross-dressing within generally heterosexual contexts, it is worth considering, too, Perry's relationship to some of the other most prominent texts on the topic. In particular, Straayer's essay shows the contemporaneous influence of Judith Butler, whose pivotal thesis *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1990, is evident in the way Straayer theorises the performance of gender and the relation of gender, biology, and desire. For Butler, gender is culturally constructed and separate from one's assigned biological sex, and is made up of a 'stylised repetition of acts':¹⁸⁴ gender is always a 'doing', and there

¹⁸³ Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia, 1993), ix.

¹⁸⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 179.

is ‘no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’.¹⁸⁵

In her attempts to ‘think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalised and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power’,¹⁸⁶ Butler discusses (and lauds) drag, arguing that it ‘fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity’,¹⁸⁷ even as she notes that it has often been understood within feminist theory to be degrading to women. Samantha Allen suggests that Butler’s argument only applies to these delimited kinds of cross-dressing and is in fact problematic for theories of transvestism, however, as many transvestites, though they may incidentally challenge notions of sex and gender, are ‘nonetheless invested in the performance of gender, not to subvert it or expose its ficticity [sic], but to enjoy the show’, while antithetically, ‘Butler’s text places a high premium on the value of revelation, exposure and denaturalisation’.¹⁸⁸

Even as she proposes the subversive potential of drag, however, Butler warns that ‘[p]arody by itself is not subversive’,¹⁸⁹ and asks us to consider ‘what performance where’ will ‘compel a reconsideration’ of the stability of the masculine and the feminine, and ‘what performance where’ will ‘enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself’ in a way that destabilises these naturalised categories, rather than reinforcing them.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993), Butler clarifies that ‘drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality’, but declares that ‘[at] best, it seems, drag is a site of certain

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁸⁸ Allen, ‘Whither the transvestite?’, p. 59.

¹⁸⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 176.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 177.

ambivalence'.¹⁹¹ Using those same temporary transvestite films discussed by Straayer as her point of reference, Butler argues that 'heterosexual privilege operates in many ways' and that these films are an example of those

forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself [...] where the anxiety over a possible homosexual consequence is both produced and deflected within the narrative trajectory of the films. [...] Indeed, one might argue that such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness, and that this displaced production and resolution of homosexual panic actually fortifies the heterosexual regime in its self-perpetuating task.¹⁹²

Here, Butler, like Straayer, focuses once again on the issue of sexuality that underlies many discussions of transvestism as a cultural image. In considering male-to-female transvestism, then, we soon discover that the links between transvestism and queer theory are constantly being reinforced in academic considerations of the former – and that these considerations often only appear in the discourse as an addendum to discussions of the latter anyway.

The subsequent result is that, while all of these readings (including Garber's) praise certain aspects of cross-dressing, lauding its transgressive potential, in doing so they also imply that transvestism is only subversive – and, indeed, valuable – when it disrupts heterosexual norms. In this regard, Perry is interesting from the perspective of LGBT studies because – like the key players in a temporary transvestite film – in addition to being presented as resolutely masculine, he is also always presented as resolutely, unambiguously heterosexual, removing any possibility of queer frisson. Perry has consistently made this point in interviews, and mention is often made of Perry's wife, Philippa, and

¹⁹¹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, 1993), p. 85.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

his daughter, Flo. In one feature in *The Sunday Telegraph* in 2002, John Preston declares it to be ‘worth pointing out at this point – lest anyone should run away with the wrong impression – that there is nothing in the least effete about Perry’, a barely-veiled re-assertion of Perry’s heterosexuality intended to soothe the fears of anyone who may be concerned, including, it seems, Preston himself.¹⁹³

From the early days, Perry was insistent on quashing any suspicions of homosexuality that might have been harboured about him, representing instead the majority of transvestites who are heterosexual and who are often members of otherwise ‘typical’ heterosexual family units. Furthermore, when Perry appears as ‘Grayson’, instead of ‘Claire’ in a dress, he is arguably equally in drag, constantly emphasizing his ‘blokey’ qualities like his love of motorbikes and wearing Harley Davidson t-shirts.¹⁹⁴ Despite his wardrobe, then, Perry’s heterosexuality, and his ultimate conformity to gender norms, is never truly in question. Similarly, the psychoanalytical terms in which Perry couches his transvestism do little to negate the underlying idea that certain attributes are for women and others are for men, and that it is only by performing as the other gender that we can access them. Although Perry might superficially lament these divisions, he nonetheless upholds them through his recognition and repetition of them, expressing an attitude that aligns him more with regressive, rather than subversive, instances of cross-dressing. In this way, Perry’s transvestism is a form of ‘masculine protest’ and reassurance, exemplifying the way in which, ‘*despite* the female clothing and nomenclature, the male transvestite asserts his masculinity’ (emphasis in original), and “‘proving” that he is male against the most extraordinary odds’.¹⁹⁵ As we will see when we come to consider Perry in relation to Tracey Emin in part two of this chapter, Perry’s transvestism, and success, therefore bears some worrying resemblance to ‘Tootsie syndrome’ (named for the Dustin Hoffman movie of the same name in which a struggling actor only gets a part when he cross-dresses as a woman): that is, the underlying assumption that the best woman for the job – any job – is a man.

¹⁹³ Preston, ‘Him and her big feats of clay’.

¹⁹⁴ Recent outings, including and subsequent to the publicity surrounding 2011’s *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, have shown Perry’s style change from jeans, t-shirts, and Converse sneakers to patterned shirts, thick-rimmed glasses, and brightly-coloured cardigans and trousers.

¹⁹⁵ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 96.

The art of cross-dressing

While I have above considered Perry in relation to theories of cross-dressing more generally, I want to also note that, as a cultural signifier, transvestism has a certain resonance within an art historical context, too. Perhaps the most famous cross-dressing artist is Marcel Duchamp, who famously posed as a character named Rrose Sélavy in a series of photographs taken by Man Ray in the 1920s. As well as figuring as an image within Duchamp's art, Rrose Sélavy (her name a pun, as in French the double 'r' transforms the pronunciation to 'eros, c'est la vie', or 'love, that's life'), was also the signified 'author' of some of his works, becoming an adopted identity like his famous *Fountain's* creator, 'R. Mutt'. In the most famous of Man Ray's images (Figure 31), Duchamp is heavily made up, with smoky eyes and dark lips, wearing a patterned hat and cradling a fur stole around his face with delicate, feminine hands. Rrose's style of dress and the hazy photographic form, as well as her sultry gaze, have caused some commentators to refer to these images, and even the Rrose persona on the whole, as a seduction.¹⁹⁶ A few decades later, the legacy of Duchamp's cross-dressing would find its continuation in Andy Warhol, who not only socialised with and photographed many drag queens in New York in the 1960s, but also occasionally dragged up himself: in a series of photographs called *Altered Images* (Figure 32), taken by Chris Makos, Warhol makes an explicit tribute to Duchamp's alter-ego, using a number of different wigs and heavy, drag queen-influenced make-up.

Feminised clothing has long been associated with the figure of the bohemian 'artist' (we might think here of the popularity of dandyism as a sartorial choice¹⁹⁷), but that outright cross-dressing is so associated with Duchamp and Warhol – both massively influential artists who adopted deflected 'trickster' personas and created visually simplistic but conceptually challenging work that questioned

¹⁹⁶ See: Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, 1994).

¹⁹⁷ See, for example: Susan Fillin-Yeh, 'Dandies, Marginality and Modernism: Georgia O'Keeffe, Marcel Duchamp and Other Cross-Dressers', in *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 18 (1995), pp. 33-44; Amelia Jones, "'Clothes Make the Man": The Male Artist as a Performative Function', in *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 18 (1995), pp. 18-32; Robert Stilling, 'An Image of Europe: Yinka Shonibare's Postcolonial Decadence', *PMLA*, Vol. 128 (2013), pp. 299-321.

the boundaries of art – is important.¹⁹⁸ Although Perry is narratively differentiated from these artists as a result of his ‘authentic’ transvestism (in contrast to their purely performative versions), he nonetheless becomes implicitly art historically linked to them through this shared practice, and his cross-dressing becomes an unconscious emblem of this artistic inheritance and, resultantly, a declaration of his own significance and relationship to these artists.

In addition to the above discussions, then, it is further instructive to briefly consider Perry’s Claire alongside Duchamp’s Rose.¹⁹⁹ For Amelia Jones, Duchamp’s cross-dressing is a further signification, and enactment, of his destabilisation of the author function, which she sees as particularly significant considering his patriarchal position within the history of postmodern art. In a chapter devoted to the significance of Rose Sélavy in her book *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, Jones also sketches out a number of important contextual, ideological, and theoretical factors necessary to establish the importance of the gesture, reconstructing notions of femininity (specifically, the ‘New Woman’ and the *femme fatale*), the commodity, and the artist, in the contexts of both French and American culture in the 1920s and beyond, and accounting also for the images’ renewed significance in American postmodernism in the 1960s. This focus on the specific nuances of Duchamp’s alter ego performs an anchoring that is integral to its interpretation, locating it within a matrix of cultural change – both gendered and general – in a way that I aim to recreate through my own analysis of Claire’s changing forms.

¹⁹⁸ As an aside we might note that Duchamp is generally figured as being resolutely heterosexual, whereas Warhol was ‘queer in more ways than one’. See: Jennifer Doyle (ed.), *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham, N.C., 1996).

¹⁹⁹ For reasons of space, I must limit my brief consideration to just one artist, and Duchamp is the foremost choice for two reasons: firstly, because many people see Warhol’s gesture as an homage to Duchamp’s, making it more productive to go back to the former; and secondly, because Duchamp’s cross-dressing involved a unitary identity with a given name, like Perry’s Claire, rather than Warhol’s photoshoot which involved multiple anonymous images of ‘women’. Had I more space to do so, I would also have liked to situate Perry’s cross-dressing within other forms of artistic gendered performances that do not necessarily cross genders: I am thinking here of Joseph Beuys’s use of costume to repeat and perform his identity, as well as Jackson Pollock’s classed and gendered ‘workman’s’ outfit. For more on these, see for example: Donald Kuspit, ‘Joseph Beuys: Between Showman and Shaman’, in David Thistlewood (ed.), *Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques* (Liverpool, 1995), pp. 27-50; Jones, “‘Clothes Make the Man’”.

From the outset, Jones is explicit about her own desires as a feminist scholar, acknowledging her ‘investment in producing Rrose Sélavy in such a way as to disrupt the notion of Duchamp as authorial “father”’ (itself perhaps a rather Freudian aim).²⁰⁰ In order to legitimise this ultimate argument, Jones first delineates a counter-argument to immediately deconstruct: that is, that Rrose Sélavy is another manifestation of the aforementioned ‘Tootsie syndrome’, particularly when read in tandem with Duchamp’s other ‘typically (male) avant-garde, “misogynistic” ploys’, and is just one more example of men ‘appropriat[ing] the voice of femininity to control it’.²⁰¹ Jones repudiates this, however, and her final conclusion is that Duchamp’s cross-dressing remains subversive for the way in which Rrose Sélavy is constructed as an agent – that is, another author function – and not simply as a mute image. In this way, she reads Rrose Sélavy alongside Duchamp’s other ‘self-constructing strategies’ as disrupting the many “‘I, I, I’s” of Duchamp’, and sees her as further serving to ‘dislocate Duchamp, the unitary, paternal origin of postmodernism’,²⁰² thus performing an ultimately disruptive function that aligns with, rather than refutes, Butler’s earlier claims about drag.

For Jones, then, one of the key elements that prevents Duchamp from slipping into more problematic territory for feminists is that Sélavy is constructed as another identity alongside the already fictive ‘Marcel Duchamp’ identity, and that ‘she’ too signs ‘his’ works; it is this contextualisation that enables Jones to read Duchamp’s other, more ambivalent, cross-dressing gestures within the same spirit of playful disruption rather than misogynistic arrogation. In this regard, however, Perry’s practices diverge from Duchamp’s, and markedly resist being read in a similar vein. As noted above, Perry publicly dismantled the fiction of the ‘persona’ of Claire in 2011, although he had been clear even before then that the name ‘Claire’ served a purely nominative function. Indeed, in marked contrast to Rrose Sélavy’s all-important signature and creator-persona, when asked why Claire (who is noted as being, ‘famously, banned from Perry’s studio’) ‘[has] to be so neat and clean’ and ‘[d]oesn’t she need a busy space too?’, he is recorded as replying, with a tart laugh: ‘She’s not a real

²⁰⁰Jones, *Postmodernism*, p. 151.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

person. This is it. It's me in a dress'.²⁰³ While in some ways this could be seen as a more progressive gesture, acknowledging that Perry, and everyone, always consists of both 'feminine' and 'masculine' traits, it primarily serves to reassert Perry's own author function and to deflate the transgressive fusion of transvestism, instead reaffirming Perry as unambiguously masculine, heterosexual, and, as suggested earlier, subsequently unthreatening in his cross-dressing. Even as he playfully ventriloquises Claire and Alan Measles, Perry remains the single unitary 'I'.

If we must look to context for affirmation – and the inherent ambivalence of transvestism, as outlined above, requires that we must – scrutiny reveals little feminist or queer affirmation in Perry's own practices. Indeed, throughout these various methodological texts, we have seen the repeated (albeit occasionally implicit) claim that transvestism is only acceptable within queer or feminist spheres if it teeters somewhat impossibly between affirmation and transgression: that is, it must be convincing enough to incite 'gender trouble' and prove that gender is an adopted performance divorced from biological sex, but also declarative in its intentions to do so (for to simply 'pass' as the other gender without comment is to incite no trouble at all; one has to be seen to do so²⁰⁴). In this way, cross-dressing – and particularly transvestism, which is grounded in a desirous (and private) fiction of authentically passing – is always a fraught and loaded endeavour, with a seemingly Sisyphean task.

Nonetheless, it is notable that, according to the combination of rubrics outlined above, Perry has cushioned the subversive potential of his transvestism in a number of ways: by relinquishing the ambiguity of his gendered performance; by purposely quashing any homosexual inferences or queer possibilities; and by upholding, as the transvestite is wont to do, hegemonic ideas about gender that are exemplified by, but not limited to, distinctions of dress (for example, that women receive more praise and attention, or are societally allowed to be more sensitive and emotional, and that dressing as a

²⁰³ Decca Aitkenhead, 'Grayson Perry: "The most interesting thing about Damien Hirst is probably his accounts"', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2012, accessed 5 May 2013, at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/mar/25/grayson-perry-interesting-thing-damien-hirst>

²⁰⁴ For example, Allen notes that 'Butler's text places a high premium on the value of revelation, exposure and denaturalisation, the operative yet implicit assumption being that if people are made aware of the fact that gender is unnatural, they will become more tolerant of difference'. Allen, 'Whither the transvestite?', p. 59.

woman allows the transvestite to access these feelings himself). Similarly, while we could claim that Perry's early, frank discussions and depictions of (often 'controversial' or unrepresented) sexual behaviours such as transvestism, BDSM, fetishism, and masturbation are transgressive and subversive in their own right, we have already seen that these elements of his persona and work have become markedly less prominent over time. Partially, we can assume, this is because Perry had already 'been there, done that' and was ready to move on, but this minimisation also aligns with the sanitising of his fetishism more generally, which we can further note in his trajectory from 'typical' cross-dressing to outlandish, avant-garde, and only tangentially gendered outfits (what I deem his 'pantomime' phase).

Perry's transvestism, then, may have shocked the presses initially but it does not hold up to scrutiny as an actual transgressive act, particularly when examined within the framework of feminist and queer theory. Instead, as we have seen, it acts as a declarative badge for his promises of authenticity, sincerity, and his artistic ancestry, and it fulfils a performative function that is ultimately akin to Straayer's 'temporary transvestite' cinema. It is this latter resonance that leads me to compare Perry's transvestism to other performative manifestations in the subsections that follow. As I explore these other performative manifestations, however, I want situate them within broader historically- and culturally-specific contexts. In particular, I want to suggest that by looking precisely at the examples that follow, we can see that Perry's transvestism plays into wider notions of, and anxieties about, cultural and national identity.

National dress

Although transvestism appears in various cultures around the world, it is often deemed to have a particular psychic resonance with Englishness. Perhaps one of the most influential factors behind this association is the deification of Shakespeare within English culture (both domestically and internationally) and the related Elizabethan dramaturgical practice of enforced cross-dressing; that is, female characters were played by young boys, as women were usually not allowed on the stage.

Regardless of origin, the linkage between English culture and cross-dressing can anecdotally be seen in a strip from *Scandinavia and the World*, a popular online webcomic created by an otherwise-anonymous Danish woman known online as ‘Humon’, which personifies various nationalities and uses these caricatures to gently lampoon their international stereotypes. Titled ‘Rock that Dress’ (Figure 33), the strip shows the male England, wearing golden hoop earrings and a dress version of his usual St. George’s flag shirt, similarly apparelling young boy versions of Canada and Australia in dresses and hair bows, and banishing a petulant teenage America for refusing to dress in drag. In the final panel, the adult America returns in a dress, to England's delight. The accompanying text declares:

In Britain there is a long standing tradition for men in drag, both for comedy and more serious work.

In fact, it is considered part of a healthy upbringing.

If a boy refuse [sic] to wear a dress even once in his life, he will not only be disowned by his family, but his entire town.

The only way to get back in is to show up in drag and -

Okay, I'm making that up.

But they really really love dudes in drag here.

A lot.²⁰⁵

Here, ‘Rock that Dress’ jokily emphasises the specific and culturally significant relationship between England and cross-dressing which has, as the comic suggests, gained international notability. The author’s byline for the comic – ‘They do. They really do. No one is impressed if you can find a

²⁰⁵ Humon, ‘Rock that dress’, *Scandinavia and the World*, 21 August 2013, accessed 21 September 2014, at <http://satwcomic.com/rock-that-dress>

photo of your favourite British actor in drag. No one'²⁰⁶ – further exaggerates the casualness with which cross-dressing seemingly both appears and is accepted in British culture, particularly in artistic spheres. As well as having a long history of use in theatre, from Shakespeare to pantomime, cross-dressing is also particularly prominent in British comedy, as evidenced by the all-male comedy troupe Monty Python (who both nonchalantly use their male players to portray female characters, and actively invoke the trope with sketches such as their famous Lumberjack Song), David Walliams and Matt Lucas's highly successful TV series *Little Britain*, and transvestite comedian Eddie Izzard.

Similarly, as the webcomic suggests, transvestism is also present in a number of more serious English works, though, in a recurrence of the theoretical tropes we have seen above, it is often confused or conflated with transgender issues. In *Billy Elliot* (both the 2000 film and the 2005 musical), it appears most notably through the cross-dressing (and eventually revealed to be gay) character of Billy's best friend Michael, whose presence serves to manifest underlying fears of the homosexual – and potentially transgendered²⁰⁷ – implications of Elliot's interest in ballet, which he repeatedly declares is not just for 'poofs'. (Of this doubling, one critic, Alan Sinfield, suggests the 'the manifest queer masks or exonerates the others – you don't expect to get two in the one narrative'.²⁰⁸) Set as it is in a northern English working-class mining town during the miners' strike in 1984-5, both Billy's and Michael's transgression of gender norms has been read by several commentators as a way of refiguring and discussing working-class and northern English identities at a moment of crisis, with broader implications for national identity.²⁰⁹ Relatedly, two films by the Irish director Neil Jordan, *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), both of which are set dually in (or near) both

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Although the film is ambiguous, at least one critic refers to Michael as transgendered; while it is likely that this is another example of the interpretation of transvestism as a sign of transgenderism on the part of the critic, it is a definitional elision (and underlying fear) that we might expect of the film's characters, too. See: David Alderson, 'Making Electricity: Narrating Gender, Sexuality, and the Neoliberal Transition in *Billy Elliot*', *Camera Obscura*, Vol. 25 (2011), p. 13.

²⁰⁸ Alan Sinfield, 'Boys, Class and Gender: From Billy Casper to Billy Elliot', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 62 (2006), p. 166.

²⁰⁹ See: Alderson, 'Making Electricity'; Sinfield, 'Boys, Class and Gender'; George Rodosthenous, 'Billy Elliot The Musical: Visual representations of working-class masculinity and the all-singing, all-dancing bo[d]y.', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, Vol. 1 (2007), pp. 275-292; Steve Blandford, *Film, Drama and the Break-Up of Britain* (Bristol, 2007), pp. 28-30.

Northern Ireland and London, thematically marry transgender characters and the IRA at the time of the Troubles, using transgender identities to probe the fissures in the construction of national identity; this is particularly relevant when we consider that the Irish are one of the key ‘Others’ used by England to construct its image of itself.²¹⁰

While examples of transvestism in other cultures abound, then, it is rarely seen as being as culturally representative as it is of England, due in no small part to these theatrical legacies and the various ways in which it has been used to figure and probe English national identity. In the sections that follow, I want to consider how Perry uses transvestism to link into these wider cultural traditions, and how he wields these particular sets of associations in the contemporary British art world specifically. Significantly, each of the three iterations discussed in the following sections has both a micro and a macro resonance with Englishness. On the macro level, by referencing figures with such national importance and reputations, Perry is inserting himself into national traditions and speaking in not only an ingrained visual language but also a sort of cultural dialect. While I want to ultimately suggest that Perry’s use of English referents functions to implicitly figure him as a national spokesperson, however, I want to do this by now looking to the micro level, and suggesting that each iteration reveals, and comments on, Perry’s own artistic and cultural strategies at a particular moment in time.

²¹⁰ See: Blandford, ‘Beyond “Priests, Pigs and Poverty”’: Ireland and Cinema’ in *Film, Drama and the Break-Up of Britain*, pp. 47-64 (especially pp. 54-55).

Part One

And Now For Something Not So Different: Grayson Perry and Monty Python

Of all the innately English referents subtly invoked by Perry's cross-dressing, I want to first set the scene with one of the most beloved and, perhaps, culturally inculcated: the comedy troupe Monty Python. Monty Python (or 'The Pythons', as both the troupe and its members are often known) was formed by Oxbridge alumni John Cleese, Michael Palin, Graham Chapman, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and American animator Terry Gilliam, who first cut their teeth during their respective stints in their universities' comedy societies, Cambridge's Footlights and the Oxford Revue, before coming to prominence with their BBC series, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, which was broadcast from 1969 until 1974. *Flying Circus* quickly became an enduring icon of absurdist British comedy both at home and abroad, known for its use of surrealism, non-sequiturs, animated segues, and playfully anarchic refutation of both hierarchical societal structures and theatrical tropes like the ever-present 'fourth wall'.

Most relevantly for this chapter, however, as an all-male troupe, many of the Pythons' sketches involved the use of cross-dressing to portray their female characters, playing with the audience's gendered and classed assumptions and ability to suspend their disbelief in a way to which Perry has, I wish to argue, become the artistic successor. In this section, I want to suggest that Perry's transvestism implies ideological links to Monty Python that are referenced by, but not limited to, his cross-dressing; that is, that Perry's cross-dressing invokes the anarchic, playful, much-beloved spirit of Monty Python and all of its national significance through his similar use of sartorial silliness. To do this, I want to briefly outline a few relevant instances of Perry's transvestism, before studying a number of cross-dressed Monty Python sketches to look for visual and conceptual resonances between these and Perry's own transvestism and persona; finally, I want to further consider what the re-emergence of

these Pythonesque strategies in the contemporary art world might mean and how they might function in this context.

The association that I want to chart here, then, is primarily a behavioural one, which I want to argue can be seen to underpin every stage of Perry's career. Nonetheless, there are remarkable visual similarities which further serve to underscore the association; indeed, the earliest phases of Perry's cross-dressing in particular suggest a marked resemblance to the transvestic strategies of the Pythons, in both appearance and tone, setting the scene for his career to follow. This, I argue, is significant, immediately branding Perry as a transvestite of the Pythonesque variety. Key among these early artistic representations of Perry's cross-dressing is his most famous film, *Bungalow Depression* (1981, Figure 34), which presents a fictional 'day in the life of a Women's Institute member'.²¹¹ The film depicts Perry dressed as a woman (tangentially Claire by association, although there is no explicit mention of this in the film), wearing multiple mostly-pink outfits and with 1980s makeup and a full bouffant of ringlets, as she goes about her day: making tea and eating toast in bed; watering her plants in a floral housecoat; peering nosily through the net curtains; dusting her television; eating lunch – which appears to be more toast, eaten with a knife and fork – while reading the paper; going for a prim walk around the suburb, dressed in a pastel pink suit and white high-heeled shoes; lounging in the sun in a bikini as she applies tanning lotion to her carefully-positioned leg (with what appears to be yet more toast on the table next to her); and drinking an evening sherry in front of the television. The closing scene once more shows her on her walk, as she passes the 'Wannock' place sign that opened the short film.

The mood of *Bungalow Depression* is obviously satirical and humorous, a series of silly vignettes stitched together by a trivial, barely-there narrative that allows Perry to both enact his own transvestic fantasies and simultaneously spoof a specific type of English femininity.²¹² In this, Perry is clearly performing a certain brand of domestic, conservative, lower middle-class English woman,

²¹¹ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 20.

²¹² That the protagonist is a member of the Women's Institute is never explicitly suggested in the video itself, only in Perry's comments, but it is perhaps implied by the type of woman we meet regardless.

which becomes parodic when presented by a man. Using what will shortly be revealed to be Pythonesque strategies, Perry's transvestism is openly implied, mostly unconvincing (primarily because of its acknowledgement), and yet accepted within the fiction as a woman nonetheless; his role is both as woman (within the diegesis) and transvestite (without). This is perhaps best exemplified when (s)he walks, with a hurried and uptight gait and hands and shoulders stiffly clenched; it is the walk of both the hurried transvestite, trying not to be recognised as a cross-dresser,²¹³ and the hurried Englishwoman, trying not to be bothered on her stroll. The emphasis on toast, too, is ludicrous; as well as being repeated to the point of Pythonesque farce (reminiscent in fact of their obsession with Spam), it further hints at the Women's Institute's well-known propensity for jam-making.

Although Perry's transvestism has taken numerous forms over the years, the earliest versions of Claire, as *Bungalow Depression* illustrates, presented her as this sort of aspirational working- to middle-class woman, the 'sort of woman who would go to Principles',²¹⁴ a 'fortysomething woman who lives in a Barratt home, the kind of woman who eats ready meals and can just about sew on a button',²¹⁵ whose appearance was 'a cross between Katie Boyle and Camilla Parker Bowles'.²¹⁶ These repeated explicatory emphases on the 'type' of woman she is further reveal that she is rooted in stereotypes, clichés, and stock characters, confirming that she is, in this early stage, a performance rooted in class, Englishness, and parody, and not simply the manifestation of Perry's own psychosexual urges as he devoutly claims. Notably, even as this iteration of Claire extended into the late 1990s – as seen photographed holding his ceramic sculpture X92 in a parody of model-aeroplane magazine covers (Figure 35) in 1999, or protesting outside the Tate for 'No More Art' in 2000 (Figure 36) – she remained entirely 1980s in her appearance and referents, representing an already outdated and nostalgic image of English womanhood that has become both obsolete and yet resonantly iconic;

²¹³ For more on the importance of moving versus static imagery to the idea of passing, see Allen, 'Whither the transvestite?', especially pp. 62-67.

²¹⁴ Quoted in Campbell-Johnston, 'Perry – perturbing, perverse or just potty?'.

²¹⁵ Quoted in Grant, 'Trials of a transvestite potter'.

²¹⁶ Quoted in Campbell-Johnston, 'Perry – perturbing, perverse or just potty?'.

these smiling, sweater-wearing women with their conservative ankle-length skirts were as purposely out of place in the late 1990s as they would be now.

In this way, Perry's fixation on the fusty Women's Institute type that characterised these early presentations of Claire within his art is part of an intentionally backward-looking, nostalgia-driven performance that is purposely more an enactment of class and national identity than gender. On this topic of performativity, it is worth noting that while this image of Claire is perhaps the closest Perry has come to 'passing' in the traditional sense – along with a related phase in 2008, when he was publicising his *Unpopular Culture* exhibition by again dressing in retro, nostalgic fashion as a prim older woman with a headscarf (Figure 37) – by using it so performatively, Perry purposely punctures its transgressive potential and draws attention to its fiction, deploying it as part of a wider, sardonic artistic strategy that undermines both its sincerity and its transvestic disruptiveness.

With this particular typification of Perry's transvestism in mind, I wish to turn now to the manifold appearances of cross-dressing in Monty Python to explore their similarities. In one of the troupe's most famous sketches, a barber (played by Michael Palin) attempts to cut the hair of his client (Terry Jones, himself a veteran cross-dresser within the troupe, perhaps best known for playing the role of Brian's mother in their 1979 film *The Life of Brian*).²¹⁷ Coated in blood and apparently suffering from Tourette's Syndrome and intrusive, Sweeney Todd-like thoughts involving razors, Palin's barber anxiously attempts to convince his customer that he has already cut his hair, before breaking down and revealing that he hates hair and instead dreamed of being a lumberjack. What follows is a disarmingly jaunty musical number, in which the barber, now wearing a plaid shirt, braces, and a fuzzy hat with ear flaps, stands spotlighted in front of a painted British Columbian forest (Figure 38). Pressed against his side is his 'best girlie' (Connie Booth), who is blonde, buxom, and silently smiling. As the barber sings

²¹⁷ Monty Python, 'Lumberjack song', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 1, Episode 9, first broadcast 14 December 1969. I have transcribed the quotations from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* that follow from the episodes myself, in an attempt to mimic the dialogues' particular cadences, but for the scripts see: Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin, *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words* (London, 1990).

his verses – ‘I’m a lumberjack and I’m OK, I sleep all night and I work all day’ – they are subsequently repeated and reaffirmed by a chorus of Canadian Mounties. Together, they recount the imagined daily life of the lumberjack, which involves cutting down trees, shopping, eating buttered scones, and ‘[going] to the lavat’ry’. Finally, the lumberjack, with a slap of his knee, sings: ‘I cut down trees, I skip and jump, I like to press wildflowers/I put on women's clothing, and hang around in bars’, much to the confusion of his faithfully repetitious chorus. With Booth now sobbing beside him, he sings, ‘I cut down trees, I wear high heels, suspenders and a bra/I wish I'd been a girly, just like my dear Mama’, a couplet which is enough to finally disperse the exasperated and perturbed Mounties, and sends his blonde girlie sobbing off-screen, lamenting ‘I thought you were so rugged!’²¹⁸

The original sketch appeared in an episode of Monty Python's Flying Circus in December 1969, and it has had a long life in the Monty Python oeuvre ever since. (Perry, we might remember, was born in 1960.) Though the above synopsis is taken from its original television incarnation, several variations exist across multiple media, which may star different troupe members as the singing protagonist, contain slightly different lines (one such variation in the 1971 film *And Now For Something Completely Different* involves replacing ‘I wish I'd been a girly, just like my dear Mama’ with ‘just like my dear Papa’, making it both more absurdist and more explicitly transvestic than potentially transgendered²¹⁹), or different professions dreaming of this idyllic gender-bending lifestyle (such as the pet shop owner in another famous Monty Python sketch in which a customer attempts to return a dead parrot to his store, again in *And Now For Something Completely Different*). Regardless, the humour always derives from the same fundamental elements: the typical Pythonesque non sequiturs; the increasingly faltering echolalia of the chorus; and, of course, the juxtaposition between the purportedly ‘rugged’, manly profession of the lumberjack, and said lumberjack's desire to incite gender trouble, or at least some ‘unorthodox’ sexual confusion, by ‘[putting] on women's clothing and [hanging] around in bars’.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ian MacNaughton (dir.), *Monty Python's And Now For Something Completely Different* (London, 1971).

Although this might be the most famous and quintessential moment of cross-dressing in the troupe's repertoire, it is worth further exploring both its context and other depictions of gender in the works of Monty Python. In its original television incarnation, the Lumberjack sketch is immediately followed by two related short skits. First, we are treated to an angry response letter to the piece we have just seen, narrated by John Cleese:

Dear Sir,

I wish to complain in the strongest possible terms about the song which you have just broadcast, about the lumberjack who wears women's clothes. Many of my best friends are lumberjacks and only a few of them are transvestites.

Yours faithfully,

Brigadier Sir Charles Arthur Strong (Mrs.)

P.S. I have never kissed the editor of the Radio Times.

Secondly, more tacitly continuing the theme of transvestism, the letter is followed by a snippet of an interview with a middle-aged woman (Graham Chapman in purposely unconvincing drag), who squawks: 'Well! I object to all this sex on the television. I mean! I keep falling off' (Figure 39). In this way, we see two distinct but related threads of humour that interweave throughout Monty Python's lexicon: the first places emphasis on the *act* of cross-dressing, that is, the notional transition from man to woman, drawing attention to its processes, impulses, and its potential banal omnipresence; the second completely ignores that process while simultaneously enacting it, presenting the male Pythons as accepted and unequivocal women within the diegesis, despite the lack of any attempt to actually convince us of this.

Examples of the former type – cross-dressing as a punchline in and of itself – abound. In one clip in both *Flying Circus* and *And Now For Something Completely Different*, the camera languorously spans across several women in bikinis standing in a field, posed statically like suggestive mannequins but for their flirting eyes, before finally resting on a lingerie-clad John Cleese (replete with bow tie) stretched seductively across the non-sequitur of an office desk, who announces: ‘And now for something completely different’ (Figure 40; we might compare this with the aforementioned scene of Perry in a bikini from *Bungalow Depression* in Figure 34). In another sketch from *Flying Circus*, ‘Poofy judges’, two solemn judges walk down the corridor to official-sounding classical music, before reaching a private room in which they remove their formal robes to reveal gaudy women’s garments (Figure 41).²²⁰

While these examples further highlight the potential humour inherent in the trope, it is the latter presentation of cross-dressing – the obvious man as poorly disguised yet accepted woman – on which I wish to focus here. Although sharing some traits in common with the temporary transvestite, the Monty Python variation differs in that the ‘normalcy’ of their originary genders is never restored at the end, and neither are they furnished with narrative reasons for their cross-dressing; though their disguise is certainly inadequate, to return to Straayer’s classification, they nonetheless function as women (or, occasionally, women impersonators) throughout. This scenario, too, is positively ubiquitous in the Monty Python oeuvre: notable examples include one of the politically obstinate peasants encountered by King Arthur in the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (ironically Arthur first addresses the 37-year-old man as ‘old woman’ before being corrected, but immediately refers to Terry Jones’s cross-dressed character as ‘good lady’²²¹), Brian’s mother in *The Life of Brian* (1979), and the fecund wife in *The Meaning of Life*’s musical showstopper ‘Every Sperm is Sacred’ (1983), as well as numerous bit

²²⁰ Monty Python, ‘Poofy judges’ (and continued at the end of the episode in ‘Judges’), in *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, Series 2, Episode 8, first broadcast 17 November 1970.

²²¹ Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones (dir.), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (London, 1975).

parts in *Flying Circus* sketches, such as ‘Hell’s Grannies’.²²² It is Chapman’s above vignette, however, which suggests the most appropriate basis for comparison with Perry’s own *modus operandi*.

Chapman's character in the above vox pop belongs to a recurring category of Python characters known as the ‘Pepperpots’, matronly, middle-aged, British housewives, always portrayed by one of the men (of course, for there were no true female Pythons, a point we will consider presently), and with the shrill, cawing falsetto that came to typify such casting. Though this particular joke comes from a silly mix of misdirection and innuendo (a tactic we might also find relevant when we consider the Pepperpots in relation to Grayson Perry, who enjoys using similarly bawdy humour and quick wit; in a 2012 interview with *The Guardian* in front of an audience, Perry responds to a reader’s comment that, when dressed like Claire, Perry resembles the reader’s mother-in-law with the deadpan response, ‘Well, he’s got a very interesting mother-in-law’²²³), several other Pepperpot sketches derive their punchlines from their mix of the banal and the lofty. ‘Mrs. Premise and Mrs. Conclusion Visit Jean-Paul Sartre’ opens with the two women (Cleese and Chapman) in a shabby laundromat, surrounded by other similarly dressed, similarly classed women (Figure 42). They discuss, in voices inflected by lower middle-class accents, putting their pets down, before abruptly considering the nature of personal freedom:

Mrs Premise: It’s a funny thing freedom. I mean how can any of us be really free when we still have personal possessions.

Mrs Conclusion: You can’t. You can’t. I mean, how can I go off and join Frelimo when I’ve got nine more instalments to pay on the fridge.

Mrs Premise: No, you can’t. You can’t. Well this is the whole crux of Jean-Paul Sartre’s ‘Roads to Freedom’.

²²² Monty Python, ‘Hell’s Grannies’, in *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, Series 1, Episode 8, first broadcast 7 December 1969.

²²³ Aitkenhead, ‘Grayson Perry’.

Mrs Conclusion: No, it bloody isn't. The nub of that is, his characters stand for all of us in their desire to avoid action. Mind you, the man at the off-licence says it's an everyday story of French country folk.²²⁴

Eventually, the two decide to settle their bickering by calling Sartre himself, whom Mrs. Premise met on holiday in France the year before. Speaking in Anglicised French (another recurring Monty Python trope), the two set off to visit him for tea that evening. On arriving, they are greeted by Mrs. Sartre (another Pepperpot, this time played by Michael Palin, and described in the script as 'a ratbag with a fag in her mouth and a duster over her head'²²⁵) and ask an off-screen Jean-Paul Sartre their question in person – 'Jean-Paul. Your famous trilogy "Rues i Liberte", is it an allegory of man's search for commitment?' – to which he casually and anti-climactically replies: 'oui'.

Other sketches highlight just how Pythonesque Perry's own approach to art is, and provide a clear precedent to his humorous mix of knowledgeability, dismissiveness, and transvestism. In 'Art Gallery' (Figure 43), two Pepperpots (Chapman and Cleese again, as Marge and Janet respectively) are in an art gallery, trying to prevent the infants in their custody from wreaking havoc on the works therein:

Marge: Well, we've just come from the Courtauld and Ralph smashed every exhibit but one in the Danish Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition.

Janet: Just like my Kevin. Show him an exhibition of early eighteenth-century Dresden Pottery and he goes berserk. [Talking to child off-screen.] No, I said no, and I meant no! [Smacks unseen

²²⁴ Monty Python, 'Mrs Premise and Mrs Conclusion visit Jean-Paul Sartre', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 3, Episode 1, first broadcast 19 October 1972.

²²⁵ Chapman et al., *Just the Words* (Vol. 2), p. 56. Of course, Sartre never married, and instead had an open relationship with feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir, making the notion of 'Mrs. Sartre' all the more facetious, particularly one who nonsensically decries: 'Revolutionary leaflets everywhere. One of these days I'll revolutionary leaflets him.'

infant again.] This morning we were viewing the early Flemish Masters of the Renaissance and Mannerist Schools, when he takes out his black aerosol and squirts Vermeer's *Lady at a Window*!²²⁶

The sketch concludes with Marge confiscating J.M.W. Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* from the maws of the little child; both women decide that, like a garment marred by a particularly aggressive red wine stain, there is simply nothing to be done for it but to 'just put it in the bin over there'. Finally, the two women, now feeling 'peckish' themselves, start to pick thick chunks of Turner's impasto from the canvas and eat them, with Marge declaring 'I never used to like Turner', and Janet concluding 'No, I don't know much about art, but I know what I like'. This is a sentiment that has been clearly echoed by Perry throughout his career, from his aforementioned 'No More Art' protest outside the Tate Gallery (in which he is dressed suspiciously like Marge and Janet, in a long coat and hat) to his 2013 Reith lectures about the value (or lack thereof) of contemporary art and the importance of individual taste.²²⁷

The Pythons' use of cross-dressing in these sketches is funny for a number of reasons, but perhaps most strikingly it is its absurd incongruity and mix of highbrow and lowbrow that makes us laugh. In this way, whether Perry is the conscious inheritor of the Pepperpot sensibility (and wardrobe), he is, wittingly or not, certainly the conceptual and cultural heir. As previously noted, incongruity is not simply manifest in the Pepperpots' appearances, but also in their comportment and hidden intellects. The Pepperpots, whether in a laundromat or an art gallery, consistently display a precise and astute level of knowledge that the viewer, based on other (perhaps prejudicial) cues, presumes to be beyond them. This is not simply a gendered assumption, but a classed one, and it is these intersecting, underlying assumptions about the scope and intellectual interests of lower- to middle-class English housewives that ultimately, and humorously, betray us. These women, pictured

²²⁶ Monty Python, 'Art gallery', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 1, Episode 4, first broadcast 26 October 1969.

²²⁷ See: Grayson Perry, *Playing to the Gallery* (London, 2014).

coarsely harping on about dull banalities like pets, holidays, the local price of wine, and idle gossip, and shown smacking the children in their care as they calmly discuss dealing with tattered masterpieces as if they were household chores, are simply not the sort of women we associate with a comprehensive knowledge of French philosophy or contemporary Danish sculpture, a perception we might also have held about Grayson Perry, a lower-class blokey transvestite from Essex who learned pottery from an evening class and received his artistic training from Portsmouth Polytechnic. Perry, like these sketches, ‘invert[s] commonplace conceptions about the relationship between quotidian life and high culture’.²²⁸

That, of course, is the joke, along with the utterly banal ways in which they discuss these elitist subjects as though they were curtains or shopping lists. The juxtaposition is unexpected and amusing, poking fun at the pretensions of the middle class, and Grayson Perry fundamentally re-tells this joke in his artistic (and transvestic) persona. He, too, is a tall, stereotypically masculine-featured man, dressed unconvincingly in the garb and make-up of a certain and easily identifiable class of English woman; he, too, speaks loudly in a brash, accented, colloquial voice (even if it is not quite an artificial falsetto); and he, too, makes use of humorous innuendoes and an astute, cultured commentary on contemporary art and English culture, punctuated by more banal anecdotes and observations. This has been part of Perry’s practice since his most explicitly Pythonesque early days, when he made ceramics which purposely teased the art world and oscillated between naivety and perspicacity, and it has remained a constant trait ever since, as evidenced by numerous interviews, his multiple television series, and his 2013 Reith lectures, all of which he delivers in accessible vernacular, to the masses, and which often receive laughter in response.

There are, of course, many significant differences between the projects of Perry and Python. Perhaps key among these is the ‘genuine’ classes behind the performed roles; while the Oxbridge-educated Pythons are clearly acting, Perry’s own working-class status complicates our interpretation of his cross-dressing, confusing it with the purportedly sincere expression of his authentic transvestism.

²²⁸ Marcia Landy, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (Detroit, 2005), p. 75.

In this respect, however, comparing their practices becomes especially useful, as it reveals the performative function of both. In particular, the Pythons' use of cross-dressing to subvert class expectations is one form of undermining the prescribed social order – and, ultimately, authority more generally – an objective which recurs again and again throughout their repertoire.

One sketch of this ilk, 'Face the Press', performs a parody of a BBC political talk show, with a calm Eric Idle introducing the 'Minister for Home Affairs', Graham Chapman. After a close-up shot of his neatly parted hair, his thick moustache, and his ministerial pipe, the camera zooms out to illustrate Idle's narration that he is wearing 'a striking organza dress in pink tulle, with matching pearls and a diamante collar necklace. The shoes are in brushed pigskin with gold clasps, by Maxwell of Bond Street. The hair is by Roger, and the whole ensemble is crowned by a spectacular display of Christmas orchids' (Figure 44).²²⁹ 'Face the Press' both mocks and mimics the effects of cross-dressing in the public sphere, presciently enacting the very processes we have seen with Perry, whereby transvestism distracts from the message of the transvestite; we are unable to hear the Minister's own comments beneath the fashion parade narration, although we know that they are silly.

To suggest, as Marcia Landy does, that this is an attempt to 'feminise' the Minister to ridicule political roles, is, I think, not quite the intent here (though it does raise questions about the problematic aspects of the Pythons use of cross-dressing).²³⁰ Certainly, the Minister does a good enough job at ridiculing his profession himself, without his transvestism even entering into it: the opponent on the couch opposite who will be putting the case against the Government is a 'small patch of brown liquid', and when asked a question the Minister responds, 'I'd like to answer this question if I may in two ways: firstly in my normal voice, and then in a kind of silly high-pitched whine'. Instead, these moments of overtly and banally acknowledged cross-dressing serve as little anarchic moments of typically Pythonesque chaos, domesticating the taboo and suggesting its workaday prevalence in order

²²⁹ Monty Python, 'Face the press', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 2, Episode 1, first broadcast 15 September 1970.

²³⁰ Landy, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, p. 73.

to disrupt and disempower figures – and discourses – of authority. Decades later, Grayson Perry would come to echo this in a pithy exchange during his first Reith lecture:

Sue Lawley: I have to say, Grayson, that this must be the first time in the sixty-five year history of Reith that a cross-dresser has been the lecturer.

Grayson Perry: Well, as far as we know.²³¹

Somewhat ironically, the very next sentence sees Lawley asking Perry to describe his outfit for the lecture's radio audience, which he does: 'Yes, I'm usually dressed by St Martins students now so this, this sort of oversized t-shirt in psychedelic colours was made by a student called Angus, a Chinese student actually, and I'm wearing my orange patent flatforms, I think you call them.'²³² (He did not mention if his hair was 'by Roger'.) While this ludicrously perfect mirroring appears late in Perry's career, far beyond the times of his Pythonesque cross-dressing, it nonetheless suggests the ways in which the influence of Monty Python has reasserted itself at various moments, having made an indelible mark early on. It is alarmingly, amusingly resonant of Idle's fashion parade narration, with both exchanges implicitly – though I would infer, at least in Perry's case, unintentionally – enacting a critique of the way men and women are treated by the media by facetiously reversing these common tropes; more than this, however, they inject an element of playful frivolity into these otherwise hallowed broadcasting institutions, which then more seriously suggests a disruption of the way we consume such 'authoritative' media. In the context of the Reith lectures, it serves to subtly lampoon the BBC institution in much the same way as 'Face the Press' lampoons politics and their public rituals.

In this way, 'Face the Press' also embodies another key element of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, seen earlier with Cleese's written complaint and Chapman's saucy vox pop; that is, the way in

²³¹ Grayson Perry, 'Democracy Has Bad Taste' (transcript), accessed 15 December 2013, at <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/transcripts/lecture-1-transcript.pdf>

²³² Ibid.

which it used the medium of television to parody the medium of television, mining source material from advertisements, man-on-the-street interviews, newscasts, and political debates. This, too, is linked to the disruption of both expectations and authority, providing a playful challenge to the frame of the dependable, sensible BBC by using its own language to mock it. As Landy notes, Monty Python's 'self-reflexive and critical treatment of the character of television was evident through the constant interruptions in the comic segments, the linking of so many of the episodes to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) setting, and the constant allusions to televisual modes of production and reception' which further draws the viewer's attention to the inherent codes of the medium, often breaking the implicit fourth wall and directly addressing the audience.²³³ This is particularly significant, for as Larsen notes, television had, 'until recently, been the safe haven for essential conservatism and the reaffirmation of prescribed Englishness'.²³⁴

The Pythons' pastiche of these tropes to create something critical of the medium and yet which remains within its established and endorsed boundaries is an anti-authoritarian gesture that can be allied to Perry's own practices within the art world (the culmination of which will be explored further in the final essay of this section). At this moment, however, we should note that these stratagems strikingly resemble Perry's own at the opening of his career; we might think again of the pots and vases discussed in the previous chapter, which used art to satirise art. Much of Perry's early success was built on exactly this use of the medium – 'inadequately disguised' as its neighbour, craft – to lampoon and undermine the unspoken pretensions of the art market and its key players. This was made all the more potent by his self-presentation as a Pythonesque housewife, a tactic which immediately registered the characteristically English humour and anarchic spirit within which he was to be read. This vacillation between transgression and complicity has lingered throughout Perry's career to become one of his most defining features, and further examples can be seen also in the various corporate sponsorship and collaborations that enabled his exhibitions even as he satirised the very

²³³ Landy, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, p. 3.

²³⁴ Darl Larsen, *Monty Python, Shakespeare, and English Renaissance Drama* (Jefferson, N.C.; London, 2003), p. 184.

concept of brands in his 2009 *Walthamstow Tapestry*, to the vestigial ‘rule-breaker’ image that is still frequently attributed to him by journalists but which he points out is now at odds with his institutionalisation as a CBE and an RA.²³⁵ In this way, Perry has often quoted – and embodied – the artist Nam June Paik’s mantra that ‘an artist should always bite the hand that feeds him – but not too hard’,²³⁶ like the playful nipping of the Pythons.

While the above outlines the visual and thematic similarities between Perry and Python, I also want to consider the temporal and contextual similarities which are so fundamental to the success of both. Landy contextualises *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* within the broader socio-political landscape, suggesting that the 1960s and 1970s were a subversive ‘countercultural’ moment of British transition²³⁷ that was particularly conducive to the ‘irreverence and radical forms’ of the Pythons.²³⁸ At the same time, Landy notes the social and political changes that characterised this period, mentioning Britain’s ‘increasing, if not threatening, diversity’, ‘economic crisis resulting in the devaluation of the pound, strikes, disagreement over British entry into the European Economic Community, and rising demands for a limitation on immigration from Asia and Africa’, as well as ‘for devolution from both Welsh and Scottish nationalists, to say nothing of demands for a withdrawal from Northern Ireland’.²³⁹ Landy connects the emergence of the troupe to these anxieties, arguing that Monty Python – and their television presence on a changing BBC – were ‘part of worldwide cultural transformations that increasingly challenged existing social and political institutions, opening the door, for better or worse, to more critical, and perhaps cynical, approaches to questions of authority, gender, generation, sexuality, and national and regional identity’.²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Chris Harvey, ‘Grayson Perry, interview: “Rule-breaker? I’m a CBE!”’, *The Telegraph*, 21 October 2014, accessed 30 October 2014, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/11176854/grayson-perry-interview-channel-4-show-Who-Are-You.html>

²³⁶ Aitkenhead, ‘Grayson Perry’.

²³⁷ Landy, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, p. 16.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

It is worth noting that many of these same apprehensions exist, in these forms or variations, in current fears about Britain today, and, more precisely, were (as previously suggested) major issues in the late 1980s and 1990s when Perry first came to fame: the issues of immigration, devolution, Britain's role within the EU, and the threatening mutability of British national identity – as well as the uncertainty of English national identity – remain key anxieties, which the promotion of Young British Art in particular and British culture more generally sought to suture.²⁴¹ We might notice, then, an interesting temporal and cultural parallel between Perry and the Pythons, who shared not only a chronological overlap – for Perry was growing up and even making art during Monty Python's heyday – but a circumstantial one, evidenced by the similar cultural and national conditions in which they both found their fame. Furthermore, if the cultural transitions of the 'Swinging Sixties' fostered and enabled the subversive comedy of Monty Python, it is not insignificant that the mid-1990s and Young British Art were advertised as being the second coming of this pivotal period, and that Perry should adopt similar Pythonesque strategies to likewise lampoon and challenge them (even going so far as to use many of the same referents as the Pythons and not, as one might expect, updated contemporary equivalents, to further reinforce the link).

As we have seen throughout this section, then, cross-dressing plays a pivotal role in this countercultural ridiculing of class and English culture, for both Monty Python and Grayson Perry. While, as might be expected from the discussion introducing this chapter, Monty Python's use of cross-dressing remains a theoretically fraught endeavour – and here Larsen rightly criticises the lack of actual women in the writing rooms and on the screen except for when they are needed as busty props²⁴² – for Landy the Pythons' use of gender reversal is nonetheless 'parallel to the series' consistent practice of inverting all roles involving social class and national and generational identities'.²⁴³ In this

²⁴¹ Similarly, writing in 1999, Stallabrass asserts that it 'is no ideological accident that the 1960s should now be so much revisited. The usefulness of the image of Britain as a unified, classless nation – a bit eccentric, a bit raunchy but basically safe – which can be marketed to the British, obviously, but also to others, especially tourists, is plain to those professional boosters of the economy and the culture'. Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 215.

²⁴² Larsen, *Monty Python, Shakespeare, and English Renaissance Drama*, p. 192.

²⁴³ Landy, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, p. 71.

way, she ascribes to their practice a clear anarchic and even nationally significant role; drag is used to ‘reverse viewer expectations about traditional social, and particularly professional, roles’,²⁴⁴ and to ‘unsettle prevailing conceptions of dominant heterosexual domestic life’,²⁴⁵ particularly in the otherwise-repressed England.²⁴⁶ Landy seems to acknowledge the aforementioned flaws in this argument – and indeed in the Pythons’ strategies at large – when she notes that their ‘caricatures of femininity, heterosexuality, and homosexuality are not congenial to supporters of identity politics’, as they do not present desirable or affirmative images to emulate, but even so she ultimately lauds them for ‘unsentimentally offer[ing] inverted, exposed, and exploded institutionalised representations of gender and sexuality as they are expressed and disseminated broadly through the culture and through the medium of television’.²⁴⁷

In this way, despite the occasionally questionable implications of their cross-dressing (which, as we have seen, is an occupational hazard of this kind of transvestism), Perry’s invocation of Monty Python serves to channel the troupe’s obsessions with class, Englishness, and (the disobedience of) authority, as well as their subsequent disturbance of the expectations of these. Similarly, of the controversy surrounding Monty Python – and there was plenty, regarding both *Flying Circus* and their films, particularly *The Life of Brian*²⁴⁸ – Robert Hewison notes that despite their silliness and crudeness, there was ‘always a strong thread of contemporary critical comment in what they chose to be funny about’,²⁴⁹ an assertion we might also apply to Perry, whose transvestism and sensationalised media presence as a transvestite (and later a ‘paedo potter’) also used silliness to distract from the more serious social critiques that underwrote his often humorous work. Furthermore, the targets of these social critiques, for Perry as much as for Monty Python, ‘came from all levels of society, from different classes and different political positions, though their subject matter and treatment were

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁴⁶ Larsen, *Monty Python, Shakespeare, and English Renaissance Drama*, p. 26.

²⁴⁷ Landy, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, p. 79.

²⁴⁸ See: Robert Hewison, *Monty Python: The Case Against* (London, 1981).

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

largely geared toward educated and middle-class audiences'.²⁵⁰ Perry's use of Monty Python in an artistic context serves to position him correspondingly, allowing him to likewise critique the art world, and English culture more generally, at a related moment of transition by using humour and silliness to defuse the pretensions of contemporary art, drawing influences from the quotidian and 'lowbrow' forms of television and comedy to make 'lofty' and middle-class realms more accessible.

With such a goal in mind, the benefit to Perry of being funny is obvious; primarily, it allows him to rise above widely-held notions of contemporary art as being stultified, overly serious, and out of touch with the ordinary person, as well as to build a rapport with his audience through shared laughter. The benefit of embodying Monty Python in particular is more significant, however. Monty Python is widely considered to be a national treasure, and is itself intrinsically linked with other notions of Englishness; hyperbolically claiming this for themselves, an early Monty Python book is titled *The Complete Works of Shakespeare and Monty Python: Volume One – Monty Python*.²⁵¹ More seriously, however, Larsen explores how the troupe does in fact utilise and bastardise a number of Shakespearean effects – not least the Renaissance tradition of men playing women's parts – to reconstitute a sense of English national identity at, as Landy has already suggested, a rather crucial moment of transition and uncertainty. Larsen suggests that '[it] is in this context – Shakespeare as National Poet, as the "mythological construct" capable of being read and reread, as proprietarily English – that we must approach Monty Python's own version of Bardolatry in its often orgiastic form'.²⁵²

According to Larsen, it is partly because of Monty Python's engagement with Shakespeare as an entity and an influence that they have become 'an English national symbol, a group National Poet and Anglophone itself ripe for appropriation, adaptation, and consumption'.²⁵³ Larsen even goes on to link the Pythons' enduring success to an English crisis of identity that longs to 'possess' these symbols of acculturation. He argues that the

²⁵⁰ Landy, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, p. 31.

²⁵¹ Monty Python, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare and Monty Python: Volume One – Monty Python* (London, 1981).

²⁵² Larsen, *Monty Python, Shakespeare, and English Renaissance Drama*, p. 15.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

anxiety over Englishness in an increasingly global society seems to weigh heavily on the English psyche, but it is apparent that the touchstone still remains. The National Poets – Shakespeare and Monty Python – still speak that cultural dialogue interpretable as Englishness and, judging by the sheer number of avenues through which to access the Shakespearean and the Pythonesque, the message of Englishness is still being spoken and received.²⁵⁴

In these early manifestations of Perry's transvestism, then, and subsequently throughout his career, we can see Perry speaking various forms of this inflected English, Pythonesque dialect. Indeed, these claims – about the anxiety over English national identity, and the shoring up of that identity through the resurgence of assorted 'touchstones' – significantly support and echo the arguments I want to make for Perry throughout this thesis; Perry's reference to Monty Python is one such iteration, but, as we will see, there are many others, and we will return to this idea again, firstly when we come to look at Perry's pantomime dame phase, and then again in chapter three, which explicitly deals with Perry's cultivation of an overtly English persona through his curation of national history. For now, however, I want to further explore this anxious, heavy weight, and another version of Perry's sartorial response to it.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

You're Lost, Little Girl: Childhood and the Crisis of National Identity

As we have already seen, the year 2000 marked a major transition in both Perry's image and his work, when his aesthetics – both transvestic and artistic – became significantly more glamorous and elaborate. With 'Claire's Coming Out Ceremony', Perry 'purified' his transvestic urges, distilling them into the figure of the little girl and dressing in ruffled, frilly, childlike dresses to create a look that he described as 'the crack cocaine of femininity': 'It's the furthest from the male macho look you could get. It's vulnerable, it's young, it's humiliating.'²⁵⁵ Claire's transformation from a middle-class, middle-aged Englishwoman to a young girl was, for Perry, a way to 'externalise [his] need for attention; almost like a child, to be doted upon', and he again emphasises Claire's childishness, and childish origins, when he situates her (as an alter-ego in general and not just this iteration of her, although of course there is a more pointed relevance in this particular instance) as 'the result of a child's imagination' and not his 'adult imagination'.²⁵⁶

In this way, he describes Claire, as the embodiment of his cross-dressing, as 'a crude metaphor as understood by a child', and not 'a sophisticated, complex enactment of an emotional life'.²⁵⁷ Perry's sudden reassertion of the childhood, and psychoanalytical, origins of his transvestism is a strategy that serves to both authenticate and exonerate his motives, exaggerating their uncontrollable and unconscious fetishistic roots in a way that seems to exculpate him from any gendered complaints of appropriation; when asked in 2002 whether he is simply 'agreeing with the brutes' by 'assuming a feminine disguise in order to express qualities stigmatised as unmanly' instead of challenging them by being a masculine man who embraces these denigrated qualities, we are told that 'Perry acknowledges the logic of this, but says an interpretation after the fact isn't relevant to a childhood compulsion'.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ Simon Hattenstone, 'If the shoes fit...', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2014.

²⁵⁶ 'Grayson Perry', *Saatchi Gallery*, accessed 30 June 2015, at http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/grayson_perry_articles.htm

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Rhoda Koenig, 'Potter of the perverse', *The Independent*, 17 September 2002.

While Perry's transvestism may have sprung from his childhood, however, his choice to rebrand it in the image of a child was, indeed, an adult decision. In chapter one, I considered this in my discussion of *Claire's Coming Out Party*, suggesting the aesthetic and temporal significance of this particular image of Perry's cross-dressing in relation to both the YBAs and national identity. With these precursory comments in mind, I wish to continue this argument here through an extended and cross-cultural focus on the significance of the figure of the little girl, and the subsequent implications of the foregrounding of childhood, girliness, and 'cuteness' in this version of Claire. In particular, I want to propose that there is a compelling link to be made between Perry's image of girlhood and other practices of imagining the self, the past, and even the nation as a child, and specifically as a little girl – even, or perhaps especially, when the imaginer is in fact a man. These, I contend, can be linked to other cross-cultural practices of self-infantilisation, which in turn allow us to theorise strategies of powerlessness in both artistic and national contexts.

While Perry's own childhood has long been a subject of his work (as in his 1996 pot *Mad Kid's Bedroom Wall*, for example), the theme of childhood, and in particular the plight of children both locally and around the world, became exaggerated at the time of Perry's empathetic rebranding in 2000. The infantry of infants who now invaded Perry's pots were usually depicted using a very particular vestimentary code, with the girls wearing dresses that resemble Perry's own at this time, as can be seen in works such as *Golden Ghosts* (2001, Figure 45) and *Plight of the Sensitive Child* (2003, Figure 46). Furthermore, the same outfits appear, too, in Perry's depictions of gatherings of adult male transvestites, as seen on the pots *Defenders of Childhood* (2000, Figure 47) and *Cuddly Toys Caught on Barbed Wire* (2001, Figure 48), both of which use image and title to clearly code this type of outfit as symbolically, and even fetishistically, childlike.

As a trope, this style of attire can be seen in Perry's work as early as his 1992 *Cycle of Violence*, in which the main character Bradley is forced by his abusive mother to wear frilly, bow-laden, Peter Pan-collared dresses scrawled with abusive slurs like 'PansybabyQueer' (Figure 49), reminiscent of the 'Sissy' dress Perry would later wear to collect his Turner Prize (Figure 2). The style of dress itself

is both outdated and timeless, still recognisable today but seeming always to belong to another period; an ur-ensemble of petticoats, puffed sleeves, and Mary-Jane shoes that can be seen to typify representations of young girls across time and space, from John Tenniel's 1865 illustrations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Figure 50) to Lisa Simpson (of popular American cartoon *The Simpsons*) in her Sunday best (Figure 51).

Such garb has defined Perry at crucial moments of his career, including 'Claire's Coming Out Ceremony', his Turner Prize win (the exhibition for which also displayed *Claire's Coming Out Dress*), and the cover image (and title) of his 2006 biography *Grayson Perry: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (Figure 52). Further reinforcing the iconicity of this image is British artist Jonathan Yeo's portrait of the artist as a young girl, *Grayson in Claire's Room* (Figure 53). Yeo is famous for his contemporary portraits of celebrities, politicians, and artists, which often combine photorealistic detail with kinetic brushstrokes; often, he probes the constructed identities of these public figures by using his portraiture to present more than simply their likenesses, leaving sections of canvas blank to signal the manufacturedness of both portraiture and celebrity. At times, this involves compressing his subjects' art and life into one image, such as his portrait of *Kevin Spacey as Richard III* (2013) which shows the actor in character during his critically-lauded run at the Old Vic theatre in 2011; another, *Damien Hirst* (2013), shows the artist dressed in what appears to be a hazmat suit, his gas mask removed to show the hint of a smirk, enthroned in one of his own vitrines.

Yeo's painting of Perry is particularly interesting when we consider that it was made in 2013, a full decade after his Turner Prize win (and thirteen years after 'Claire's Coming Out Ceremony'), reaffirming that, as an archetype, this remains the quintessential image of Perry: even after all the changes his wardrobe has undergone, it is still his little girl phase that is deemed most iconic. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Yeo's painting, however, is not simply the fact of his depiction of these visual trappings of Perry's transvestism, but his tacit manifestation of their psychological effects on the viewer. In its construction of space, setting, colour scheme, tone, presentation of the artist, and mix of

fantasy and reality, the painting recreates the subtle manipulation inherent in Perry's own deployment of transvestism, particularly in his use of the figure of the little girl.

Created with oils on canvas, the 1.27m x 1.02m canvas of *Grayson in Claire's Room* is a wash of pale pinks. In it, Perry sits on the edge of a bed, dressed in a girlish, babyish frock of ballet-slipper hues, with softly ballooning sleeves trimmed with lace. Ribbons cascade from his hair, and surrounding him we see crumpled pillows, a large straw hat, a lamp, and what appear to be some loosely sketched cosmetics. The oils are hazy and dreamlike, emphasising the fantasy elements of Perry's transvestic identity: while Claire's room is a real room in Perry's house, there is no indication that this is in fact it, and here it is constructed as a shimmering and uncertain space, ebbing into and out of focus with receding brushstrokes; a mental, rather than physical, location.

In sharp contrast to this, Perry's face and arms – the only parts of his body on display – are painted with perfect, almost photographic precision, as though to accentuate the juxtaposition between his sexed bodily reality and his imaginary gendered life. (We might note, too, that the title makes clear that it is Grayson who is in Claire's Room, puncturing any fictional pretence from the outset.) Despite his childlike garments, his true gender and age are betrayed by the bulging veins that wrap around his hands and arms, as well as by the creases under his eyes. Perhaps the ultimate symbol of his transvestite status is, as Perry previously counselled us to look for, his too-thin, drawn-on eyebrows.

This is a rose-tinted image, both literally and metaphorically. Perry holds our gaze, but his expression is ambiguous: simultaneously plaintive and impish, his pursed lips reveal little, and the slight cocking of one artificial eyebrow seems to oscillate between supplicatory and wry. He is at once vulnerable, his softly bowed shoulders deferring to the viewer and inviting them in, while also remaining entirely in control: this is his space, after all, and his bright eyes, as well as that self-same cocked-eyebrow, proffer a mischievous challenge to the audience, as though daring us to impugn him. Ultimately, he is both disarmed and disarming.

Further disorientating the viewer are the logistics of the painted space, which resemble another famous portrait of a little girl: Mary Cassatt's *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (Figure 54, 1878).

Although remarkably different in colour scheme and demeanour – the ‘authentic’ little girl in blue cannot wait to shed the enforcements of her gender as she splays ungracefully across the chair, while the artificial ‘little girl’ in pink attempts to recreate those same enforcements – both paintings seek to externalise the subject’s interiority. Griselda Pollock has argued that the construction of space in Cassatt’s painting functions to recreate the perspective of the (feminine) child, noting that ‘the viewpoint from which the room has been painted is low so that the chairs loom large as if imagined from the perspective of a small person placed amongst massive upholstered obstacles’, and that the background ‘zooms sharply away indicating a different sense of distance from that [which] a taller adult would enjoy’.²⁵⁹ While this might also function to position the viewer as a fellow child, rather than situating us as an unrelated party I want to suggest instead the way in which it outwardly manifests the girl’s subjectivity, inviting us to share her experience.

For Pollock, this use of space, at that time, by a woman artist, to paint a young girl, illustrates the way in which the spaces of femininity are not simply the represented rooms, like the drawing-room or sewing-room, but ‘are those [spaces] from which femininity is lived as a positionality in discourse and social practice. They are the product of a lived sense of social locatedness, mobility and visibility, in the social relations of seeing and being seen. [...] Femininity is both the condition and the effect.’²⁶⁰ In its adoption of these particular strategies, then, Yeo’s painting of a transvestite is itself transvestic, using codes of feminine representation and interiority to more convincingly portray Perry’s ‘male subjectivity in drag’, to borrow a phrase from Marjorie Garber.²⁶¹

In this way, this depiction of Perry in Claire’s room mimics the way in which Cassatt’s painting ‘not only pictures a small child in a room but evokes that child’s sense of the space of the room’,²⁶² refiguring the adult man as a little girl both spatially as well as sartorially, while retaining the observer’s ‘adult’ position. Nonetheless, Yeo leaves dimensional clues as to Perry’s transvestism, too;

²⁵⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (London, 2003), pp. 91-2.

²⁶⁰ Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. 93.

²⁶¹ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 96.

²⁶² Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. 92.

whereas the furniture swamps Cassatt's little girl, Perry quietly dwarfs his. In this way, Yeo's vision of Perry cleverly pictorialises the way in which Perry's little girl persona positions, and affects, the viewer, while also registering its inherent discords.

While Yeo's depiction of Perry is but one visualisation of the artist, it does grasp in illuminating fashion the core devices and contradictions of Perry's 'little girl' self-presentation; it also confirms that these aspects are grasped by Perry's audience, whether that audience is another artist, as here, or a wider public. Furthermore, Yeo's portrait signals another aspect of Perry's little girl persona: its inescapable association with particular forms of memory or nostalgia. The shifting, hazy construction of space in Yeo's image suggests not only fantasy but also memory: certain parts of the painting, like the rectangles on the table and the paling edges of Perry's dress, blankly reveal the gridded lines of the canvas underneath, like details that have been forgotten and are yet to be filled in, or a faded childhood photograph. This auxiliary suggestion of memory, in addition to simply fantasy (as well as the constructedness of Perry's star image), is compelling, for in fact the use of the figure of the little girl to memorialise and re-figure a male author's lost childhood has long roots, dating back at least as far as Victorian England.

In her book *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*, Catherine Robson looks at how the metaphor of girlhood functions as both personal and cultural fantasy, and, through an exploration of figures like John Ruskin and Lewis Carroll, considers why and how Victorian men constructed such fervent and idealised images of the little girl. In particular, she links this to the Victorian practice of breeching, whereby both girls and boys were dressed in gowns in the nursery until boys were 'breeched' (that is, dressed in trousers) at the age of seven or eight and thus distinguished from their feminine counterparts, marking the beginning of their gendered, and eventually adult, lives. As a result, childhood was always gendered female, and has a remarkable association with cross-dressing which, for Robson, is metaphorical – enacted by her subjects through photography or literature, for example – but which becomes more poignant when literally manifested by Perry.

In many of these accounts, Robson identifies both an insistence among male Victorian writers that ‘perfect childhood is always exemplified by a little girl’ and, simultaneously, a lamentation for ‘a man’s lost girlhood’, despite the ‘logical and biological impossibilities’ of such a stance.²⁶³ Referring to this ‘pervasive fantasy of male development in which men become masculine only after an initial feminine stage’, Robson argues that subsequently ‘little girls represent not just the true essence of childhood, but an adult male’s best opportunity of reconnecting with his own lost self’.²⁶⁴ While Robson’s analysis is chronologically situated in Victorian times and customs, it would be remiss to delimit her findings to that period, however: although ‘breeching’ may no longer be the standard practice, the legacy left behind by these writers – particularly Carroll and his curious invention of Alice – has nonetheless ensured that the little girl remains the ultimate symbol of childhood, even for men, and, more importantly, becomes the quintessential image of a now-lost innocence.

While enquiries such as Robson’s chiefly prioritise the relationship between the symbol of the child and the conceptualisation of the self, however, it is interesting to note the suggestive prevalence of locational and temporal language used when doing so. In *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority 1780-1930*, Carolyn Steedman talks of ‘the search for the lost *realm* of the adult’s *past*, for the far *country* of dreams and reverie that came to assume the shape of childhood from the end of the eighteenth century onwards’ (emphases mine).²⁶⁵ For Steedman, like Robson, the child is used to embody ‘loss and dislocation’,²⁶⁶ making the child-figure ‘a central vehicle for expressing ideas about the self and its history’.²⁶⁷ By locating childhood as a past country, however – and Steedman’s use of ‘dislocation’ even construes it as a patria of sorts – we can begin to see childhood as

²⁶³ Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford, 2001), p. 5.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁶⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (London, 1995), viii. Steedman’s child is not exclusively gendered like Robson’s, but she does pay particular attention to the androgynous-but-female acrobat Mignon from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*; she also further notes that historically, ‘when the child was watched, written about and wanted, it was usually a feminised set of qualities (if not a female child) whose image was left behind for our analysis’ (p. 9).

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, viii.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

not simply a personal metaphor, but a public one, too, that incorporates nostalgic notions of place and time in a way that can be linked to conceptions of national identity and history.

Perry's 'little girl' persona in effect combines these two tropes. The 'lost world' invoked by Perry's use of the image of the child denotes these two somewhat intertwined realms: that of an imagined innocent past, and, relatedly, that of the now-diminished British empire. (The relationship between these two concepts will be considered in further detail when we come to look at Perry's exhibition *The Charms of Lincolnshire* in chapter three.) Both have a particular resonance in this temporal context, for Perry is working in an age characterised by cynicism – as emblematised by his direct contemporaries, the YBAs – as well as by an awareness of Britain's faded national power.

Of this imperial link, we might note that Perry's regression to child aligns him with a series of plucky young children, who, as M. Daphne Kutzer argues in *Empire's Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books*, were often fictively presented within the narrative, and covertly spoken to without, as the future generation of imperialists. These books include, for example, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905), the tale of a young girl whose imperial wealth is lost and who must quietly conduct herself with grace and kindness while being forced to work as a servant at a boarding school until it is eventually restored. For Kutzer, *A Little Princess* provides microcosmic examples of both the devastating effects of 'bad empire', as evidenced by the cruelly-run school at which the heroine Sara is treated terribly after the loss of her wealth,²⁶⁸ and the benefits of a properly organised hierarchical empire, which is an 'agent of good for all',²⁶⁹ the novel also functions, she suggests, as 'a fairytale for England about the role of India in its empire'.²⁷⁰ Burnett's works are particularly relevant here among Kutzer's examples as they focus on young girls and their particular role within empire, which, although still important, is circumscribed by their gender and delimited to domestic realms. As a result, the limited capabilities of this figure also

²⁶⁸ Kutzer writes that the school is 'malevolent and ill-run because its governor, Miss Minchin, has her own interests at heart, not the interests of her subjects'. M. Daphne Kutzer, *Empire's Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books* (New York; London, 2000), p. 49.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

implicitly suggest an innocence and a lack of culpability that, I argue, resonates with Perry's own presentation of these traits: Kutzer notes that *A Little Princess*'s Sara is 'both female and child, and thus, can have no direct involvement in amassing wealth by exploiting the resources and labour of foreign lands'.²⁷¹

Furthermore, Kutzer writes that eventually in these narratives, empire was not signalled explicitly but instead becomes 'encoded as nostalgia for a more arcadian and ordered English life',²⁷² a trope we will soon see used but subverted in Perry's exhibitions. This colonisation of children through books – which here include the works of Rudyard Kipling, E. Nesbit, and A.A. Milne, as well as Burnett – reveals their significant role on the stage of empire, as well as the way in which 'an entire culture can try to relive past glory through its children'.²⁷³ Children's correctional powers, too, are highlighted: Kutzer describes that if 'political and social circumstances seem troubling or wrongheaded to adults, if the world seems to be going in the wrong direction, adults can hope that the next generation will restore the world to its proper balance'.²⁷⁴ In this way, the figure of the child simultaneously speaks to our sense of longing for the past and our hope for the future.

Perry sharpens the meaning of the figure of the child by twinning it, as I have suggested, with memories (whether conscious or not) of the Victorian adult male fixation on the little girl and the associated notion of the adult male's girlish childhood. Through the avatar of the little girl, then, Perry offers an alternative, one which both nostalgically (and imaginarily) looks backwards to a more 'innocent' time, before the sexualisation, commodification, and cynicism of the modern era and, more pointedly in this context, of contemporary art. At the same time, however, he also implicitly recognises the falseness of that fantasy, for the proposed 'innocence' of the little girl – which is itself an ideal projected onto children by adults – is here tainted (and recognised as a construct) by its performance as part of Perry's sexualised transvestism; this troubling of the 'innocence' of childhood is further echoed

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 55.

²⁷² Ibid., xvi.

²⁷³ Ibid., xvii.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

in his work's repeated identification of the difficulties faced by children around the world. In this way, the idealisation of the innocent past – whether personal or national – that is embodied in such uses of the symbol of the child is revealed for the fetishisation it truly is.

While up until this point I have looked at general, historical, and psychoanalytical conceptions of the child, with a particular focus on how this functioned in Victorian England, in order to historicise this phase of Perry's transvestism, I want to now further contextualise this by way of a cross-cultural comparison with contemporary Japan, in order to consider how girliness might function in presentations of national identity today. If this seems an odd connection to make, it is one that is, I argue, suggested by both Perry's dress and practice themselves: as I want to propose, the costumes of Perry's little girl phase are reminiscent of a Japanese sartorial subculture known as Lolita, and in 2007 Perry staged a solo exhibition at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan. One of Perry's very few solo exhibitions outside of England, and his first in Asia, the exhibition – *My Civilisation: Grayson Perry* – was of a scale 'larger than that of any other exhibition of his works held thus far', suggesting a resonance between Perry's work and his audience.²⁷⁵

In contemporary Japanese culture, Lolitas, or Lolis, are young women who dress in elaborate outfits that replicate the idealised wardrobe of a frilly Victorian child or doll, 'covered from head to toe in lace, ruffles, and bows'.²⁷⁶ A number of sub-types of Lolita exist, each with its own visual iconography and associated personalities: most notably, these include the Classic Lolita, as outlined above; the Sweet Lolita, an even more over-the-top 'cute' and ruffled version with prints of 'fruits and sweets or cute animals' (Figure 55);²⁷⁷ and the Gothic Lolita (or Elegant Gothic Lolita), which draws inspiration from Victorian mourning clothes and incorporates elements of Goth culture such as a

²⁷⁵ 'My Civilisation Grayson Perry', *British Council*, accessed 1 May 2014, at <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/exhibitions/exhibition/my-civilisation-grayson-perry-2007>. The exhibition itself will not be a focus here.

²⁷⁶ Theresa Winge, 'Undressing and Dressing Loli: A Search for the Identity of the Japanese Lolita', *Mechademia*, Vol. 3 (2008), p. 47.

²⁷⁷ Dabrali Jimenez, 'A New Generation of Lolitas Makes a Fashion Statement', *The New York Times*, 26 September 2008, accessed 29 June 2015, at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/28/nyregion/thecity/28trib.html?_r=2&oref=slogin

predilection for the colour black and morbid symbols such as coffins. Perry, with his dresses covered in sissy-rabbits and cherry-like ribboned penises, is reminiscent of a Sweet Lolita, the most overtly childlike of the types. Lolitas are also known to curl or otherwise style their hair in the manner of small girls or dolls, and often carry stuffed toys and other cutesy accessories with them, mirroring Perry's obsession with Alan Measles, as well as mentions, particularly circa-2003,²⁷⁸ of a doll named Clara which Perry used to bring with him to openings and dress in miniature replicas of his own outfits.²⁷⁹

Although it shares a name with Vladimir Nabokov's tale of paedophilic lust, Lolita fashion is in fact not sexual in nature. Lolitas and Lolita enthusiasts alike are quick to point out the distinctions between Lolita fashions and the culture of lolicon, a Japanese portmanteau of 'Lolita complex', which, like Nabokov's novel, does controversially fetishise and sexualise underage girls. On the contrary, it has been argued that Lolita fashion is not about presenting a spectacle for the male gaze but rather can be considered to be a feminist gesture against it, both materially, in its modest covering of the body, and psychologically, in its reversion to a selfish and egocentric childishness instead of the selflessness that is traditionally prescribed to Japanese women within their family unit and in society at large.²⁸⁰

Indeed, it has been argued that lolicon enthusiasts would, in actuality, not desire an actual Lolita, because the subversive and potentially aggressive elements involved in publicly dressing as a Lolita ironically mark the wearer as transgressing the helpless, hapless girliness so fetishised by lolicon in the first place.²⁸¹ Despite these assertions, however, the fact of whether or not Lolita fashion is fetishistic or feminist remains contestable, and the use of what are ultimately still culturally sexualised symbols, even if not used with sexual intent, is still fraught at the very least, if not outright problematic; in fact, it arouses many of the same issues cross-dressing does, even when performed by

²⁷⁸ See, for example: Wright, 'My week – Grayson Perry'; Stuart Jeffries, 'Top of the pots', *The Guardian*, 21 November 2003.

²⁷⁹ Similarly, Teresa Younker writes that Lolitas 'often own and carry around matching dolls' (Teresa Younker, 'Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying', in *Stanford Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 11 [2012], p. 97). Of Perry's own doll, a 2008 article suggests that the original porcelain Clara had broken and been replaced by a similar vinyl doll which he named Shirley Jean. Jessica Rolland, 'Grayson Perry at the Barbican', *Dazed*, accessed 29 June 2015, at <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/1238/1/grayson-perry-at-the-barbican>

²⁸⁰ Younker, 'Lolita' (in particular, pp. 100-101).

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

women. Nonetheless, instead of being sexualising, Lolita fashion is often read as an attempt to revert to a romanticised and nostalgic idea of (a fictional, non-Japanese) childhood, free from responsibility and the pressures of adulthood, in a way that parallels Robson's own claim about the use of the little girl by Victorian men. In the spectre of Lolicon that inevitably haunts the fringes of the Lolita subculture, however, the uncomfortable bedfellows of innocent regression and problematic fetishisation are once more manifested.

Consequently, the relationship between Lolita fashion and the pressures and constructs of Japanese society provides one mass cultural example of the way in which girliness can be exploited and performed as an active response to the culture in which it is situated. In this way, while I do not intend to suggest that Perry is himself consciously engaging with Lolita culture, I do want to argue that his seemingly individual fetishism has a mirror image in Japanese culture that can perhaps shed light on Perry's practices. Though their fashions are not identical – Lolita costumes are generally more elaborately and sincerely wrought, whereas Perry's have a certain shambolic, ironic, and self-deprecating pantomimic quality to them that will be explored further in the next section – there are still a number of visual and theoretical similarities between Lolitas and this version of Claire. Firstly, both find their sartorial root in a Victorian aesthetic that idolises frills, bows, pastels, ruffles, lace, and stuffed animals. Secondly, both claim to be performing their girliness as a form of transgression, though whether or not these performances subvert or reinforce cultural notions of femininity in their respective contexts remains open to debate. Thirdly, both construct a nostalgic, dislocated, and gendered fantasy of a childhood they have never experienced (as Lolitas reference an anachronistic Victorian past that is not, and has historically never been, a part of Japanese identity, and Perry has never been a young girl). Finally, both utilise a visual vocabulary of 'cuteness', which I now want to suggest can be seen as a disarming presentation, and veneration, of a pathos that reflects something of the unstable post-war culture in which they emerged.

It is this last point which, I argue, provides the richest grounds for comparison, and to which I want to dedicate the remainder of the current enquiry. Lolita fashion can be seen to be consistent with

larger aesthetic trends in Japan; in particular, it can be read as another facet of the country's prominent *kawaii*, or 'cute', culture, which is itself associated with both the feminine and with childhood.²⁸² In her essay 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde', Sianne Ngai theorises the aesthetic, noting that 'the formal properties associated with cuteness – smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy – call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency'.²⁸³ Ultimately, she argues, cuteness implies an aggressive power relation between the object and viewer, for it is crucial to their cuteness that cute objects look like they can be easily '*de*-formed under the pressure of the subjects feeling or attitude towards it',²⁸⁴ in this way, it becomes clear that cuteness can 'provoke ugly or aggressive feelings, as well as the expected tender or maternal ones', for 'in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle'.²⁸⁵

Significantly, in her attempt to situate cultural uses of cuteness, Ngai finds that these strategies have national resonances. Of the historical lack of 'cuteness' in the American toy market before World War I, Ngai writes that it is perhaps unsurprising that 'an aesthetic of smallness, helplessness, vulnerability, and deformity might find its prominence checked in the culture industry of a nation so invested in images of its own bigness, virility, health, and strength'.²⁸⁶ Conversely, she deems Japan's current *kawaii* culture to be deeply resonant of its psychic landscape, arguing that

in post-World War II Japan, an island nation newly conscious of its diminished military and economic power with respect to the United States in particular, [the *kawaii* aesthetic] had a comparatively accelerated development and impact on the culture as a whole [...]. There are historical reasons, in other words, for why an aesthetic

²⁸² Sianne Ngai, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde', *Critical Enquiry*, Vol. 31 (2005), p. 814.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 816.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 819.

organised around a small, helpless, or deformed object *that foregrounds the violence in its production as such* must seem more ideologically meaningful, and therefore more widely prevalent, in the culture of one nation than in that of the other.²⁸⁷

Japan's postwar obsession with cuteness, then, is considered to be a reflection of – and a conscious self-reflection on – the nation's 'diminished sense of itself as a global power'.²⁸⁸

While obviously Japan has a very different history to Britain, this idea of a newfound awareness of its own vulnerability has a certain resonance with Britain all the same. For Japan, this vulnerability is physical as well as conceptual, and is a response to the tangible devastation caused by the atomic bombings in addition to the dissolution of the Japanese Empire. While the former remains a uniquely Japanese concern, the vulnerability caused by the latter applies to Britain, and perhaps more specifically England, too, having undergone a similar diminishment of empire and power: now, '[w]ith empire gone, the English have indeed had to reconsider their future as a nation'.²⁸⁹ Sociologist Krishan Kumar writes that often this is accompanied by 'not just the feeling of a lack but also a certain bitterness, a certain sense of victimhood that is common among former imperial powers';²⁹⁰ it is easy to see how this sense of victimhood might be embodied in the 'cute' object which can be destroyed and de-formed. Similarly, Kumar suggests that there are many 'who would wish England to accept its reduced role in the world, to settle for a cosy and comfortable Englishness, akin perhaps to the way the Dutch or the Belgians have come to terms with the loss of their empires'.²⁹¹

It is this last point which is so integral to Perry's performance of, and artistic depictions of, a 'cute', vulnerable, and diminished national identity, for he presents exactly this; a 'cosy and

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Krishan Kumar, 'Negotiating English identity: Englishness, Britishness and the future of the United Kingdom', *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 16 (2010), p. 478. Kumar is referring here to the way in which the other countries in Britain have always retained their own national identities, but England is elided with Britain and so without it is a more uncertain entity.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 477.

²⁹¹ Ibid., p. 482.

comfortable Englishness’ which seems to come to terms with the loss of its own sense of empire as it ironically looks back to a previous age. Perry emphasises the fragile, the nostalgic, and the faded, appeasing those ‘who would wish England to accept its reduced role’. It is important to note, however, that despite appearances, such a position is not itself an entirely powerless one; rather, it is disarming, appearing to do one thing but in fact enacting another. In particular, Ngai argues that while seeming to invite aggression and violence, cute objects in fact can also withstand and absorb it;²⁹² with this in mind, we might also suggest that Perry’s mollifying image of English national identity deflects and absorbs these criticisms, presenting the veneer of prostration without, in fact, prostrating itself. In this regard, Ngai uses the work of artist Takashi Murakami – in particular, a series of ‘increasingly distorted, deformational permutations’ of his cute mouse-like character Mr. DOB which render him more and more menacing²⁹³ – to illustrate that, in fact, ‘it is possible for cute objects to be *helpless and aggressive at the same time*’ (italics in original).²⁹⁴ She further mentions that ‘prototypically cute objects – babies, puppies, and so on – often have a deverbalsing effect on the subjects who impose cuteness upon them’, suggesting that the cute object has an ability to ‘infantilise the language of its infantiliser’;²⁹⁵ that is, it has a way of almost unconsciously destabilising the viewer, which upsets – if not outright reverses – the aforementioned power structure of control and submission, much like Yeo’s painting does.

As a strategy, Ngai sees in cuteness a way of theorising complex ideas about not only national identity, but about the limitations of avant-garde art. (Indeed, this latter point forms the crux of her argument.) Moving from the material to the linguistic, from commodity culture to avant-garde poetry, she invokes Theodor Adorno to suggest that

poetic explorations of cuteness [...] can be read as a way of acknowledging but also critically addressing oft-made observations about the literary avant-garde’s

²⁹² Ngai, ‘The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde’, p. 830.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 823.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 827.

social *powerlessness*, its practical ineffectualness or lack of agency within the “overadministered world” it nonetheless persists in imagining as other than what it is.²⁹⁶

With this in mind, she writes that ‘[we] can thus see why the commodity aesthetic of cuteness might be mobilised by the poetic avant-garde, particularly in times of war or global crisis, as a meditation on its own restricted agency in a totally commodified society of ends-means rationality’.²⁹⁷ While I have already claimed something similar in relation to Britain, Perry, and the YBAs in my previous discussion of ‘Claire’s Coming Out Ceremony’ in chapter one, Ngai’s arguments once again provide a useful locus around which to crystallise my own. As we have already seen, the YBAs can be seen to not only symbolise the masculine aggression to which cuteness is antithetical (and we might think again of Ngai’s characterisation of the non-cute America), but also, as Stallabrass’s scathing *High Art Lite* repeats again and again, they provide one of the most potent examples of art that is, ultimately, socially powerless.

Perry’s adoption of cuteness, then, is a response to these concerns, both national and artistic. In doing so, he represents Britain in diminished, endearing terms that remove the threat of imperial aggression and at the same time absorbs and internalises the violence that characterised the YBAs. In this way, it functions as a critique of the ineffectuality that characterised both that art and the vision of Britain it was used to promote. Furthermore, in burlesquing these, Perry in fact draws on other, older traditions of conceptualising the self in girlhood terms, which can themselves be read as metaphors for attempting to access lost historical and psychic pasts. By presenting himself as a little girl, a literal manifestation of the strategies Robson identifies in Lewis Carroll and John Ruskin, Perry can be seen to lament, and reconnect with, not just his own ‘lost self’, but the nation’s, too, using his transvestism to link into ideas upheld throughout his works about identity, culture, and the construction of the self, as well as to ironically puncture – and yet simultaneously uphold – contemporary cynicism. While

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 837.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 838.

Perry's use of girlhood marks him as vulnerable, however, it is also disarming, and all the more so because of his transvestism (which helps to keep the entire gesture fixed in the previously-discussed realm of Pythonesque silliness, and counters his implied dream of a lost innocence with ambivalence). Cuteness, we must remember, is not simply a passive state, but an active strategy; with it, Perry uses our ingrained historical urge to protect and vindicate children to invoke similar responses to both himself and England.

Widow Twanker: Grayson Perry and the Pantomime Tradition

The third and final type of Perry's transvestism that I want to chart in this chapter is what I deem his 'pantomime dame' phase. This phase, much like the others I have identified before it, is not a discrete chronological chapter; rather, it is an exaggeration of, and addendum to, these previously recognised traits, retaining and building on many of the aspects found in those prior iterations. In the same way, while there has been an underlying pantomimic quality to Perry's transvestism throughout – for example, an appearance by Perry on the BBC One political debate television show *Question Time* in 2008, in which Perry wore a babydoll-style dress typical of those discussed in the previous section, resulted in viewers and journalists complaining that Perry 'reduced the programme to the status of a second-rate pantomime'²⁹⁸ – this phase marks the explicit amplification of this spirit, both sartorially and theoretically.

While the first 'Pythonesque' phase considered above used store-bought, high-street versions of women's garments to construct everyday, if pointedly classed, women's outfits, and the second 'little girl' phase was defined by frilled and ruffled girlish dresses, Perry's pantomime phase is primarily characterised by its general garishness, self-referentiality, and over-the-top theatricality. Often, this is comprised of ensembles in brightly clashing colours, sometimes patchworked together, occasionally with knickerbockers, clownish shoes, bonnets, and usually involving even heavier make-up than before, with gems accentuating the face (see Figure 56). Many of these outfits are made by Central Saint Martins students for Perry as part of their annual coursework; despite their visual incongruities and multiplicity of authors, these should nonetheless be categorised as a subset of this pantomime phase, due to their exaggerated staginess and reliance on Perry's public persona as a transvestite.

²⁹⁸ Liz Hunt, 'Is "Question Time" reducing itself to a second-rate panto? Oh yes it is...', *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 July 2008.

Indeed, the excessiveness of these costumes is ensured by Perry's brief, which asks the students to make him something that even he would be embarrassed to wear.²⁹⁹ Furthermore, many of the chosen outfits – Perry picks three each year to buy, celebrating the occasion with an awards ceremony – incorporate a pantomimic reliance on well-known tropes and stories (and an expectation of their audience to know the same) by using the image of Alan Measles, with the result that Perry has numerous outfits involving the teddy bear in 'all sorts of cute and rude scenarios', including Alan as Jesus Christ and a top with 'Alan-shaped padded breasts'.³⁰⁰ In further pantomime fashion, 2013's winner even invites audience participation: Ayaka Sakurai's winning design is a semi-circle of fabric with a seaside head-in-the-hole cut-out that places the participant's face on Alan Measles's glow-in-the-dark body as he floats through space (Figure 57).³⁰¹

The escalation of Perry's transvestism to pantomimic proportions was a gradual process, mimicking his own rising status within the British art and cultural spheres. In particular, however, the look was given one of its most major outings in 2011, in advance of his exhibition at the British Museum, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. This, I want to argue, is particularly significant, for each of the three 'phases' I have identified in this section are not simply sartorial variations but also mark significant shifts in Perry's career and his self-positioning. Resultantly, it is notable that each one characterises and shapes a certain period within Perry's trajectory: from his early anarchic Pythonesque self-positioning; to his non-threatening, self-deprecating rise to fame; to, now, his eventual self-aware institutionalisation and his subsequent repositioning to account for this.

That Perry should reinvent himself as a dame on the art world stage at this moment is a particularly wily move: by exaggerating those traits that have always underpinned his self-

²⁹⁹ Aitkenhead, 'Grayson Perry'.

³⁰⁰ Grayson Perry, 'The great Grayson Perry frock competition', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2013, accessed 20 September 2014, at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jul/08/great-grayson-perry-frock-competition>

³⁰¹ On this topic of classification, there is another recurring image in Perry's wardrobe which has so far eluded easy categorisation: this is Perry as a Bo Peep figure, which incorporates elements from both his little girl and pantomimic dress codes. While its whiff of kitsch Victoriana and frilled, ruffled petticoats resonate strongly with his little girl phase, however, I choose to here read it within a rhetoric of 'shepherding' his audience that bridges the two phases and aligns neatly with the underlying ideologies that mark his pantomimic self-presentation.

presentation, Perry now identifies himself as the most beloved, ‘truthful’ character of the pantomime, known for mediating between the world of the story and that of the audience, as well as for playfully teasing the authorities even as (s)he is sanctioned and contained by them. Such a reinvention becomes particularly loaded at the moment of Perry’s British Museum exhibition, which literally manifests his collaboration with the ‘authorities’; in this way, it presents Perry as this self-same mediator between British culture – both historical and contemporary – and the public.

In this respect, a widely-reproduced publicity photograph of Perry outside the museum is particularly significant, and gives another apt example of the kind of typifying outfits that make up this phase (Figure 58a; see also Figure 58b for another view of this same outfit). Perched in front of the museum’s austere exterior, Perry fizzes against the muted grey-browns of the building and its dreary English lighting. He wears a salmon-pink and lime-green floral-patterned knickerbocker suit, with a darker mauve lace around the edges. The suit’s jacket is topped off with an exaggerated turquoise collar. Dangling from the knickerbockers, and made from the same material, is a long, floppy fabric penis with a bell hanging from the tip, like a wearable phallic cat toy. This matches Perry’s handbag, a similar concoction made of leather, which he refers to as his ‘scrotal sack’. Underneath his bloomers, he sports bright orange tights, decorated with orange-red spots. His head is adorned with a heart-shaped bonnet-like contraption, which appears to be decorated with reams of frilled lace and, on closer inspection, the head of a Beanie Baby teddy bear. Underneath this, Perry’s hair is coiffed in a severe fringe, and he wears thick patches of make-up which are easily identifiable from far away – lipstick, a splotch of red blusher, a stripe of electric blue eyeshadow, some decorative colours around the temples – much like that of an actor on a stage.

A brief foray into the literature on pantomime makes explicit the extent to which Perry’s costume here draws heavily on the iconography of the dame. Writing in *British Pantomime Performance*, Millie Taylor writes that dames ‘generally wear outrageous and grotesque costumes’; though these may vary depending on the type of dame portrayed, they will nonetheless ‘still be bright

and incorporate clashing colours, large spots and stripes and often striped stockings and boots'.³⁰² Many times, '[b]rightly coloured wigs with plaits, buns, Afros or beehives are also a feature',³⁰³ and '[m]ake-up is also often a parody of that worn by women with false eyelashes, raised eyebrows, bow lips, and sometimes a red spot on the nose of a drinker' (though she notes that characters such as 'the ugly sisters [in Cinderella] tend to be more extreme than a dame who has to maintain a greater degree of empathy with the audience').³⁰⁴ In 'Male Dames and Female Boys: Cross-Dressing in the English Pantomime', Shirley Ardener describes something similar, writing that, with the exception of 'the glamorous Dames like [those portrayed by dame actor Danny] La Rue, the make-up is usually applied deliberately crudely; lipstick overflows the lips; rouge appears as bright red circles; false hair is piled outlandishly high'.³⁰⁵ Often, dames undergo multiple, escalating costume changes, and by the end of the story, they 'usually end up in an over-the-top glamorous outfit, covered in jewels and crowned by feathers' (Figure 59).³⁰⁶

We can see, then, an obvious homage in Perry's use of bright and clashing patterns and almost textbook dame makeup. In arguing that this is not just a visual reference, but comes to function – explicitly and implicitly – as a signifier of Perry's self-positioning within the art world, I want to focus on three main inferences implied by the figure of the dame. The first draws on pantomime's Britishness, and, more explicitly, its provincialism, which becomes particularly important as Perry enters this new phase of his career in which he takes as his main concern issues of Britishness, Englishness, and identity. The second is more particular to the specific figure of the dame herself, and I want to here suggest that Perry's distortion of his transvestism to pantomimic proportions is a way of sanitising it and of purging the more challenging aspects of such a practice from his persona; this, I suggest, is a necessary operation in order to ensure the widest appeal as Perry approaches 'national

³⁰² Millie Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol, 2007), p. 111.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁵ Shirley Ardener, 'Male Dames and Female Boys: Cross-Dressing in the English Pantomime' in Alison Shaw and Shirley Ardener (eds.), *Changing Sex and Bending Gender* (New York; Oxford, 2005), p. 128.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

treasure' status. Finally, and relatedly, the character of the dame denotes a particular relationship between the character (or performer) and the audience, which I want to consider with specific reference to some of Perry's more recent ventures.

To begin, like the other previously explored influences on Perry's transvestism, pantomime, too, is another way of manifesting Perry's esoteric Britishness. Writing in 1984, Charles Kaplan called pantomime (or 'panto' as it is commonly known) 'the only native British art form', referring to both its English origins and its seemingly exclusively British appeal; of the latter, Kaplan writes that 'panto does not travel well. It may be that it is too deeply planted in British theatrical soil to be uprooted'.³⁰⁷ The patriotic potential of the medium is further figured, although seemingly parenthetically, in Kaplan's discussion of pantomime's tendency to 'incorporate incongruous material', which consists almost entirely of anecdotes of nationalism's explicit intrusion into this (apparently already implicitly nationalistic) theatrical form. In particular, he recounts a khaki-dressed Cinderella leading the audience in patriotic songs during World War I, and, during World War II, the 'Chinese' characters of *Aladdin* singing, at various points, 'There'll Always Be an England' and 'Soldiers of the Queen'.³⁰⁸

In fact, pantomime's parochialism is a key element of its appeal, and touring productions will often incorporate local references to institutions such as 'the local football team or the activities of the town council' or to 'the best restaurant in town',³⁰⁹ alongside the topical national references (political and cultural) that are pantomime's bread and butter. Furthermore, this parochialism is present at the level of production as well as performance. Writing in 2005, Ardener states that, 'owing to escalating production costs, commercial panto is no longer found on London's West End stages, but it still flourishes in the London suburbs, and in many provincial towns'.³¹⁰ She describes it as a community-led, even familial, do-it-yourself process: 'Mothers are still found making costumes, while uncles are

³⁰⁷ Charles Kaplan, 'The Only Native British Art Form', *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 42 (1984), p. 267.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

³¹⁰ Ardener, 'Male Dames and Female Boys', p. 120.

painting scenery.³¹¹ Of course there are larger, and more commercial, panto companies (such as Qdos, the world's largest), which are more likely to trade on celebrity branding, but even this remains exclusively British, as the celebrities are often stars of national soap operas or other domestically famous figures, such as Paul Merton, Julian Clary, and Lily Savage.³¹²

Already we can see that this rhymes rather neatly with Perry's own branding, as discussed in previous comparisons with the YBAs and as will be argued in more detail in the next chapter when we come to look at Perry's use of curation. In his pots and costumes, Perry repeatedly emphasises not only the esoterically British, as reiterated through his use of brand names, iconography, and public figures, but the parochially so: Perry constantly references, and situates his work in, distinct English locations, incorporating all of their implicitly and internally known reputations and stereotypes.³¹³ As previously suggested, however, this is particularly relevant now, as Perry aligns himself with that most stalwart of institutions, the British Museum, making him an officially sanctioned wielder of British identity. Much like pantomime is given the theatrical liberty to reinvent and modernise traditional fairytale narratives, Perry, as the pantomime dame of the art world, is bestowed with the freedom to invigorate the stolid collections of the British Museum.

Indeed, the 'Britishness' of pantomime – that is, its cultural centrality and institutionalisation – is one of the main roots of the association of 'Britishness' with cross-dressing. Gender-bending has been a fixed element of pantomime since 1861.³¹⁴ Although, as previously mentioned, cross-dressing was a standard theatrical practice during Shakespearean times, when women were not allowed on the stage and female characters were played by boys, pantomime's gender reversal is not incidental but thoroughly intentional and indeed even central, and is perhaps the most important signifier of the carnivalesque and subversive space of the pantomime. Historically, there are two main gender-bending

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² For more on the casting of celebrities in pantomime, see: Martina Lipton, 'Celebrity versus Tradition: "Branding" in Modern British Pantomime', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 23 (2007), pp. 136-51.

³¹³ This will be explored further in the next chapter, as we look at the use of the various place-identities cited by Perry in his exhibitions.

³¹⁴ Kaplan, 'The Only Native British Art Form', p. 269.

roles: the Principal Boy, the young male hero played by a woman in breeches (whose main function in the mid-1800s seems to have been as an excuse to present shapely, womanly legs for public consumption³¹⁵), and – as outlined above – the dame, an older woman played by a man. These days, however, the Principal Boy is rarely played by a woman except in the most traditional of theatre companies, usually being replaced by a young male actor, often a celebrity, instead. (One exception to this is *Peter Pan*, in which the titular character is often still played by a woman; Marjorie Garber proposes that this is because, like Peter, a woman will never grow up to be a man.³¹⁶) The decline of the female Principal Boy, often linked to an attempt to discredit any suggestion of lesbianism between ‘him’ and the Principle Girl (who was also played by a woman), has only furthered the popularity of the dame, who is subject to no such policing and whose sexual transgression is, ironically, a large part of the enduring success of both her character and pantomime itself.

The politics of the dame’s use of cross-dressing are similar to those we have seen elsewhere throughout this chapter, and can similarly oscillate between disruptive or affirmative according to the way in which she is played (and received). As such, I do not want to focus unduly on material that has been theorised elsewhere in this thesis, but I do want to briefly sketch the way in which these pantomime traditions are in concord with, and diverge from, those we have seen already, and what this suggests about Perry’s own practices. Crucially, much like the Pythons she precedes, the dame never tries to truly pass for a woman, and is always, obviously, a man in a dress who is at once diegetically a woman and extradiegetically a man; that is, within the play, ‘she’ is a woman, and believed as such by the other characters, but ‘he’ acknowledges his true sex through numerous innuendoes and asides with the audience that break the fourth wall, such as:

Seducer: Marry me, you'll get a surprise.

³¹⁵ See: Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 118; Kaplan, ‘The Only Native British Art Form’, p. 269; Lipton, ‘Principally Boys? Gender Dynamics and Casting Practices in Modern British Pantomime’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 18 (2008), p. 480.

³¹⁶ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 168

Dame (to audience): Not half the surprise he'll get.³¹⁷

Dames are often widows, such as *Aladdin's* Widow Twankey, and are often presented as desperate, love-lorn, or lascivious; their sexual appetites are one of the driving forces of comedy in the pantomime, and as such, they are given free reign to flirt with men both in the plot and, in true panto fashion, in the audience.

As a result, the dame has the potential to be an obvious site of homosexual tension, anxiety, and liberation within the pantomime, particularly when we consider the frissons caused by her sexual aggression's interloping beyond the confines of the stage and into the laps of the male audience members (sometimes literally). Despite this possibility – and many companies, such as Qdos, often use self-identified queer performers and encoded references to gay male culture in order to purposely 'carry a queer charge to queer spectators while carrying different pleasures for straight audiences'³¹⁸ – numerous dame actors, owing in part to the aforementioned parochialism of the medium, instead opt to remain resolutely heterosexual. This tactic is perhaps best exemplified by the early seminal dame actor Dan Leno, 'acknowledged to be the funniest and greatest dame of all', who worked between 1886 and 1902.³¹⁹ In the Leno tradition, the dame 'remains obviously male, comically representing and then detonating sexual anxiety and fears of overt sexuality and male homosexuality'³²⁰ in a way that seems to predict the later strategies of temporary transvestite films, and she instead foregrounds the working-class struggles that usually plague these types of dames. In addition to raising issues of gender and sexuality, then, the figure of the pantomime dame also brings with her a number of other deep-rooted connotations about class, particularly in relation to these aforementioned concerns.

Class is figured both in the characters themselves and in their relationship with the audience. Taylor writes that the character of the dame 'is generally that of a working-class woman, often

³¹⁷ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 100.

³¹⁸ Lipton, 'Principally Boys?', p. 475.

³¹⁹ Kaplan, 'The Only Native British Art Form', p. 275.

³²⁰ Lipton, 'Principally Boys?', p. 472.

struggling to make ends meet'.³²¹ Even when she is not, however, she is still resolutely, and Britishly, classed, and Kaplan isolates as a 'customary high point in *Aladdin* [...] the confrontation between [the dame] Widow Twankey's resolute British middle-classness and the splendour and pomp of the Chinese Emperor', an exchange which hints at national pride and which is inflected with mild (and yet enjoyable for the audience) xenophobia and cultural superiority.³²² In 'Principally Boys? Gender Dynamics and Casting Practices in Modern British Pantomime', Martina Lipton locates one modern example of the working-class Dan Leno-style dame in Yorkshire, where dame actor Berwick Kaler is 'sensitive to hypermasculinity and its association with the representation of Yorkshire men', and thus remains masculine in order not to alienate the heteronormative men who (he suggests) constitute much of his audience.³²³ Kaler's description of himself as 'firmly anti-mincing, as well as any other indication that the male dame might enjoy his feminine role too much' uses quietly homophobic language to resolutely resist campness and the queering of the pantomime, with the result that his dame is 'not a conscious site for transgressive licensed misrule or subversive destabilising of gender and sex boundaries' and instead 'reaffirms her audiences' cultural capital as a distinct taste community that identifies with a parochial, patriarchal, normatively heterosexual representation of Yorkshire society'.³²⁴ These types of dames often eschew the heavily caricatural make-up, hair, and costumes (complete with fake heaving bosom) most typical of the quintessential pantomime dame, instead emphasising 'naturalism and mimesis', playing her as 'a washerwoman whose feet hurt'.³²⁵

Similarly, Perry, who has repeatedly asserted his working-class roots in Chelmsford, Essex, can be seen to perform something of a related strategy. We might note that at the same time as the photograph of Perry outside the British Museum was taken, Perry was also working on – or about to start working on – the series of tapestries and the accompanying documentary television series (*The Vanity of Small Differences* and *In The Best Possible Taste*, respectively) that would mark the

³²¹ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 107.

³²² Kaplan, 'The Only Native British Art Form', p. 271.

³²³ Lipton, 'Principally Boys?', p. 473.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 474.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

beginning of several projects involving public outreach; these involved Perry going to, among other places, Sunderland, to engage with, and make art about, the working-class people he met there. In this way, for Perry, like Kaler, remaining psychosexually ‘unthreatening’ is a way of ensuring the widest reach for his own audience and removes the risk of alienating them, for, as Taylor argues, a good dame ‘appeal[s] to all parts of the audience’. Taylor seems to propose that this empathetic response towards the dame comes more naturally to women, as, since the dame is not ‘mocking women but the mores and rituals of the dominant culture’, they ‘identify strongly with [her] and often feel themselves represented in the pantomime, which encourages them to be complicit in the comedy and participation’; the necessary ‘trick’, then, is to ‘keep men engaged with the fun of the ungainly and inelegant dame too’,³²⁶ which, seemingly, can only be achieved after the excision of homosexual threat.

In his own presentation of the dame, then, Perry seems to embody Kaler’s ‘anti-mincing’ philosophy that ‘you mustn’t make the man in the audience uncomfortable’.³²⁷ This may seem counterintuitive, as there are numerous examples (particularly during his little girl phase) whereby Perry’s strategy was *precisely* to make the man in the audience uncomfortable; of running into Perry-as-Claire at a party, for example, *Guardian* journalist Howard Jacobson surmises, ‘Why I should enjoy his conversation less when he is being Claire than when he is being Grayson I cannot say, but I don’t doubt it’s my fault. Just as I don’t doubt it’s his intention I should think that’.³²⁸ Nonetheless, in this most pantomimic of stages, we can observe that Perry’s wardrobe has markedly moved away from convincingly transvestic or otherwise gendered clothing and instead veers towards ludicrous garments that seem to exist entirely outside of gender and purely in the realm of spectacle. This disfiguration of his transvestism to pantomimic levels is, I argue, a way of sanitising those more controversial parts of his persona as he moves into the more cuddly, and less aggressive, ‘national treasure’ stage of his

³²⁶ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 115.

³²⁷ Rhoda Koenig, ‘Berwick Kaler: Grand old dame of York’, *The Independent*, 30 December 2004, accessed 23 September 2014, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/berwick-kaler-grand-old-dame-of-york-26472.html>

³²⁸ Howard Jacobson, ‘I have run out of clean shirts’, *The Guardian*, 20 June 2003.

career, using over-arching visual silliness to become something more akin to a carnivalesque clown than a psychically threatening figure. Similarly, while Perry retains the dame's defining preoccupation with sex – even his personal potter's symbol, a registered ceramic trademark used to identify and sign Perry's works, is a bawdy little pictographic rebus: the letter W followed by a symbol of an anchor – it is somewhat vestigial, preserving the innuendoes but not the come-ons.

The above arguments suggest a number of helpful ways in which the model of cross-dressing provided by the figure of the pantomime dame differs from those seen before in Monty Python and temporary transvestite films, and why this new adaptation might be particularly relevant at this moment for Perry: namely, the success of the dame, as a theatrical figure that aims to encourage audience participation, is dependent on factors such as localisation, audience affirmation, and likeability, all of which Perry had sought to integrate more centrally into his own persona. This last feature in particular is especially significant, as it is perhaps the dame's most essential trait that she must convey pathos. Those who succeed in doing so, such as Leno, are valorised with the affection of an audience that extends beyond the realm of the stage; Ardener recounts that when Leno died, the nation mourned, and his funeral route was lined with people for miles.³²⁹

An empathetic response to the dame is such an essential component of the successful pantomime because it is she who provides the link between the stage and the viewer. Ardener writes that, 'according to tradition, it should only be the Dame, with the occasional exception of the servant Buttons [another stock character in *Cinderella*], who may address the audience directly' and break the fourth wall.³³⁰ Consequently, it is also the dame who is tasked with 'draw[ing] the audience into a complicitous relationship in the creation of comedy and telling the story'.³³¹ This function of the dame is especially relevant when we come to consider Perry's own practices at this time, which similarly involve an element of audience participation and institutional mediation. Such strategies can be read analogously with Perry's *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, which similarly aimed to engage the

³²⁹ Ardener, 'Male Dames and Female Boys', p. 125.

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 126.

³³¹ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 107.

audience (here with both traditional culture and contemporary art) and inspire pilgrimage to the British Museum. This objective becomes yet more pronounced when Perry begins to make tapestries about the various classes with *The Vanity of Small Differences*, and, in doing so, makes a series of television programmes in which he literally draws the audience – both in the sense of the man on the street and the television audience – into a ‘complicitous relationship in the creation of [contemporary art] and telling the story’. Indeed, all of Perry’s television-artwork combinations – a dual medium he has come to favour, likely for its desacralisation of contemporary art in favour of making it accessible to those who might not perceive themselves as its intended audience – use this approach, reaching out to the ordinary members of the ‘audience’ for participation in much the same way as the pantomime dame calls on the stranger in the crowd and makes them feel as though they are part of the narrative.

In this way, pantomime still retains strong ties to its origins in Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, which in turn has strong links to carnival traditions. Despite its formulaic plots, the pantomime is nonetheless a space of carnivalesque possibility, in which hierarchies are upturned, class systems are reversed, and audience boundaries are blurred in favour of participation. In particular, the figure of the pantomime dame is carnivalesque not only for her subversion of gender but also for the elevation of the working class which is usually entailed by her character; furthermore, by the end of the pantomime, she has usually undergone a journey from rags to riches alongside the pantomime’s hero, thus transgressing class boundaries entirely. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorisation of the carnivalesque describes the use of the carnival form to

liberate from the prevailing view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a

new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.³³²

The pantomime dame, then, is a primary agent of this, ‘adding to the confusion of reversals and transgression that links pantomime with the anarchic fun of the carnivalesque’.³³³ Applying Bakhtin’s theories to this form of theatre, Taylor writes that the ‘ritual and the participation of pantomime involve the audience in seemingly subversive activity, while the laughter at physical comedy and the grotesque body as well as at topical and political humour allows the audience to laugh at the joke while becoming aware of its own subjectivity and complicity’.³³⁴ While appearing transgressive and subversive, however, there is an underlying element of control implicit in the carnival form; it serves as a cathartic outlet to release and dissolve tensions that might otherwise boil over – with more problematic consequences – of their own accord. Instead, the spectacle of the carnival – and pantomime – vents these staged rebellions within sanctioned times and places, with the result that, while it provides ‘the opportunity for symbolic disruption and subversion of authority’, ultimately ‘the license for subversion for the period of carnival is granted by the authorities, thus reinforcing the social containment in the seemingly anarchic’.³³⁵

This paradox is especially apposite when we consider again Perry’s newfound roles within various institutions. By 2011, Perry had already won a Turner Prize; he had collaborated with the Arts Council on his exhibition *Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry Selects From the Arts Council Collection*; he had served as an arts correspondent for *The Times*, and had penned numerous articles for *The Guardian*, too; he had featured on multiple flagship BBC programmes, from the debate show *Question Time* to the topical comedy *Have I Got News For You*; he had been elected a Royal Academician; and, at the close of the year, he was scheduled to host a major exhibition at the British Museum, which was so popular it was eventually extended due to public demand (and which was the

³³² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), p. 34.

³³³ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 106.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

subject of another BBC programme, Alan Yentob's *Imagine*). Shortly afterwards, in 2012, Perry would collaborate with Channel 4 to make his series *All In the Best Possible Taste*, the artistic results of which he would donate to the Art Fund; in 2013, he would be named that year's Reith lecturer; and in 2014 he was awarded a CBE. Later in 2014, he would stage another exhibition in the rooms of a national institution, this time the National Portrait Gallery, which was again commemorated with a Channel 4 series.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, Perry, for much of his career, had positioned himself as the outsider, the anarchic transvestic craftsman; now, such self-positioning was impossible, as all evidence pointed to the contrary. While Perry was still careful to mark his difference from his contemporaries (as noted by a 2012 interview with *The Guardian*³³⁶), he was no longer the potter-outcast, but a key player within the contemporary art world. The figure of the pantomime dame, then, provides an astute way of negotiating this complex situation, which could otherwise threaten to disrupt the transgressive persona for which Perry became famous in the first place. Instead, Perry preemptively recognises and incorporates this into his persona himself. By reinventing himself using the image of the pantomime dame, Perry signals his intermediary position between the art world and the public, winking towards the idea that, while he may be on the institutional stage, it is with the audience that his allegiances really reside.

In this respect, it is important to note, too, that even though the dame is a make-believe female character played by a man (and so involves an extra layer of fiction beyond the obvious implied by acting more generally), she is nonetheless considered to be the voice of authenticity within the pantomime. Partially, this comes from the implicit and extradiegetic acknowledgement that she is not what she seems; ironically, the artifice of her cross-dressing performs a sort of sincerity, since the dame's lack of 'attempt to create an illusion of womanhood' is one of 'the areas where the play with distance, or the lack of pretence at "realism" is most clearly apparent'.³³⁷ Within the narrative, it is the

³³⁶ Aitkenhead, 'Grayson Perry'.

³³⁷ Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance*, p. 105.

dame's role to both perform and divulge the truth: regarding the former, Taylor argues that the dame is 'a comic character, bawdy, vulgar, vain, quick-witted and irrepressible, but the character must be based on truth to elicit sympathy and identification from the audience',³³⁸ while on the issue of the latter, Ardener quotes the description of a dame as 'a fellow in a frock with a truth'.³³⁹ By drawing attention to her own artificiality, she becomes a trustworthy, truth-telling character, who is honest and sincere where other characters are not.

By co-opting the figure of the dame, then, Perry is performing a similar kind of assertion about his dual roles, maintaining the promise of his sincerity that has for so long been his artistic emblem – and which has marked his divergence from the cynicism and opacity of other contemporary artists – while also acknowledging that his own role and position has, indeed, changed. While these associations uphold Perry's claim to sincerity, however, the sanctioned and institutionalised nature of the dame figure still complicates it; by definition, when acting from within this role, Perry's subversive possibilities remain circumscribed by the institutions that sanction him. In a mirroring of the situation of the dame, however, this is equally true of every other character – in this case, contemporary artist – on the stage, too; it is only the dame who admits it, paradoxically becoming more sincere for her acknowledgement of insincerity.

In this way, Perry's cross-dressing as a pantomime dame signals a certain position within the art world, one that exposes its artifice while simultaneously playing along with it; he is, as the title of his Reith lectures so aptly put it, 'playing to the gallery'. Like the dame, Perry teases the institution, reflecting and voicing the widely- and popularly-held thoughts and beliefs of his audience, but he shies away from truly disturbing the status quo. By accurately acknowledging and making light of his complicity, however, he manages to retain his image of sincerity and transgression. In this way, Perry's adoption of the style of the pantomime dame is a particularly loaded gesture, which subtly brings with

³³⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

³³⁹ Ardener, 'Male Dames and Female Boys', p. 126.

it a set of ingrained, implicit notions about gender, class, the role of the audience, and Perry's own role on the stage of British culture.

Part Two

In the lead up to Grayson Perry's Turner Prize nomination and eventual win, when sensationalist publicity about the artist abounded, a number of articles in the press referred to Perry, without qualification, as being known as 'the Tracey Emin of ceramics'. The term was first used in October 2002 by Martin Gayford in a profile piece for *The Telegraph* entitled 'The dotty potter'. In it, Gayford writes that Perry's use of sexual and adult themes makes it apparent that Perry 'is the enfant terrible of the craft world, the Tracey Emin of ceramics'.³⁴⁰ The phrase resurfaced in 2003, and was used epithetically by BBC News when they announced the Turner Prize shortlist in May,³⁴¹ and again by *The Guardian* in a Q&A with the recently-nominated artist in July of that same year.³⁴²

The use of the phrase without any justification or explanation is striking; so, too, is its emergence as a purportedly well-known moniker, as well as that comparison's swift decline as Perry quickly rose to fame on his own terms. As explored in chapter one, Perry has always been quick to minimise his relationship to, and with, the YBAs at large, although, as we have seen, the publicity that flanked the beginning of his career did paint him in a similarly controversial light. With Emin, however, there have been clear and consistent parallels in their subject matter, personae, artistic media, use of autobiography, and cultural status. That this parallel has been so fleetingly acknowledged – and even then, *underacknowledged*, with only their similar use of sexual imagery being used to link them and not their myriad other similarities – reveals not only how different Perry's manipulation of gender stereotypes is to Emin's own, but also how unflinchingly different the attitudes of both the media and the public are when responding to contemporary male and female artists. That Perry and Emin have been written about in such different terms has in part to do with very real differences in their work, but

³⁴⁰ Martin Gayford, 'The dotty potter', *The Telegraph*, 9 October 2002.

³⁴¹ 'Controversial duo on Turner list', *BBC News*, 29 May 2003, accessed 15 September 2014, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/2946040.stm>

³⁴² Rosanna Greenstreet, 'Q&A: Grayson Perry', *The Guardian*, 12 July 2003.

it also, I shall argue, has to do with the gendered nature of art criticism and commentary in contemporary Britain.

While part one of this chapter looked at the specific visuals of Perry's transvestism throughout his career to date, investigating how Perry has encoded a number of specifically English references into his cross-dressing in order to skilfully signal his own self-positioning within the art world, I want to now look not to the forms but to the functions of Perry's transvestism. That is, with these previous discussions in mind, I wish to consider more generally what Perry's transvestism, as a performative gender identity, allows him to do, and, perhaps more importantly, how it structures audience and media perceptions of him. Considering him alongside Emin will allow us to understand this better, for, despite their aforementioned similarities, radically different accounts have been generated around their work: Emin is one of the most prominent but publicly derided figures in British contemporary art, while Perry, in marked contrast, has achieved 'national treasure' status.

In the sections that follow, I want to consider the comparison between these two artists more fully, paying particular attention to the ways in which both make use of what we might broadly label as the sexual confession. To do this, I want to first re-establish the role of women's art at the time, before beginning to delineate the theory surrounding the genre of the sexual confession, and positing that Perry's transvestism allows him to traverse both masculine and feminine artistic roles. Secondly, I want to look more closely at the specific similarities between Perry and Emin by comparing their personal mythologies and their artworks; I then aim to complicate this by deconstructing their respective uses of artifice and mediation within the confessional mode, to challenge the gendered readings under which they are so often subsumed. Thirdly, to push this analysis further, I want to perform an in-depth examination of Perry's troubling 1992 graphic novel *Cycle of Violence*, which has a complicated relationship with ideas of gender that is apparent in both its depictions and its reception. Finally, I want to conclude by exploring the nuances of each artist's media reception in light of the above discussions, in order to more fully map the role gender – and in particular, Perry's manipulation of it through his performance of transvestism – plays in the contemporary British art world.

Just One of the Girls: Contextualising Gender in Young British Art

Before charting the similarities between Perry and Emin, I want to first re-situate both within the artistic landscape of the early 1990s. While I have already done this more broadly in chapter one, for the purposes of the present discussion I want to here delineate, and underscore, the widespread proliferation of women artists at this time. The art made by women YBAs during this time has been assimilated into the canon of Young British Art to provide some of its most famous examples, and Emin, Sarah Lucas, Jenny Saville, Mona Hatoum, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Gillian Wearing are still some of the most recognised artists, female or otherwise, working in Britain today. Even Julian Stallabrass, generally hostile to the YBAs, concedes that one aspect for which their generation deserves at least some credit is the high ratio of female artists, a development which he argues ‘must count as one of the signal achievements of high art lite’.³⁴³

Partially, Stallabrass argues, this influx of women artists is part of the tendency’s turn towards the domestic, which has benefitted female and male YBAs alike, as ‘horror in the home is one of those few subjects that is open to both feminist readings and to media sensation’.³⁴⁴ Emin and Rachel Whiteread, for example, deal specifically with these themes, Emin with her use of stereotypically ‘domestic’ handicrafts like sewing and quilting,³⁴⁵ as well as the famous furniture of her controversial work *My Bed* (Figure 60, 1998), and Whiteread with her preservative and emotive casts of interior domestic spaces.³⁴⁶ (We should recall, too, that Perry’s appearance in the 2006 edition of *High Art Lite*

³⁴³ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite* (1999), p. 158.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ For more on these forms of craft as feminine, and feminist, mediums, see: Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London, 2010). Parker uncertainly discusses Emin’s practice in her introduction (xv-xvi).

³⁴⁶ It is interesting to note, however, that Whiteread, unlike the others, is not usually read as a ‘feminist’ artist. While her interest in domestic spaces and abject sculptural forms could certainly lend itself to that reading, she is more often interpreted within discourses of memory, space, history, and social politics. Indeed, in marked opposition to the feminist interpretation of other women YBAs, Chris Townsend describes Whiteread’s most famous work, *House* (1992), as ‘a profoundly *humanistic* work. It registered what it meant to be a human subject, across time, in an architectural space’ (emphasis mine). Chris Townsend, ‘When we collide’, in Townsend (ed.), *The Art of Rachel Whiteread* (London, 2004), p. 19. That said, however, it is similarly worth noting that

is at a similar moment of discussion in the text as Stallabrass similarly notes Perry's own domestic preoccupations, though he fails to relate this back to Perry's transvestism.)

Other women artists working at this time took as their subject the female body, particularly as it relates to the media and its cultural expectations of women. Jenny Saville's fleshy tableaux of obese women contorts the artistic medium of oil painting, historically used by male artists to construct idealised female nudes, in order to present instead a different female form as spectacle. (Her project has been casually referred to as 'Fat is a Feminist Issue – the painting'.³⁴⁷) Sarah Lucas employed grungy household objects and organic matter to stand in metonymically for the female body 'as a misogynist might imagine [it]'.³⁴⁸ Her choice of objects recalls insulting laddish slang for genitals, with breasts ranging from fried eggs to melons, and with vaginas being represented by dry, grisly kebab meat (*Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab*, Figure 16), a plucked and goosebumped raw chicken slit (*Chicken Knickers*, 1997), a bristly, wiry scouring utensil (*Nude No. 2*, 1999), a large vacuum packed kipper (*Bitch*, 1994), and a cold, cavernous bucket (*Au Naturel*, 1994). With the video piece *Corps Étranger* (1994), Mona Hatoum looked inside her own body at a microscopic level. Tracey Emin's video work discussed her abortions, an experience rooted in, and exclusive to, the female body. In Emin's case, as we will soon see in more detail, depictions of sex and references to her own sex life – as well as her rape at a young age – traversed her artwork to become part of her celebrity persona. In a faux-FAQ about the main artists featured in *Sensation*, Matthew Collings poses the question 'What else does [Emin] want us to know?', immediately answering it with: 'That she pushed an Orangina bottle all the way up inside herself and fell asleep that way'.³⁴⁹

Whiteread is often differentiated from YBA discourse entirely, as Townsend is quick to do (*ibid.*, p. 20; Stallabrass also describes her as having 'only one foot in the high art lite camp' [Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 10]). For more on Whiteread, see: Townsend, *The Art of Rachel Whiteread*; Charlotte Mullins, *Rachel Whiteread* (London, 2004); *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces* (New York; Berlin, 2001); James Lingwood (ed.), *Rachel Whiteread: House* (London, 1995).

³⁴⁷ Collings, 'The new establishment'.

³⁴⁸ Andy Beckett, 'Shock art to shop art', *The Guardian*, 28 August 1997.

³⁴⁹ Collings, 'The new establishment'.

For Emin, Lucas, Saville, and, at least in the early days, Taylor-Wood (now Taylor-Johnson, though I refer to her here as she was known in the 1990s), their success is highly linked to their reflections on, or presentations of, gender, hinging on either the way they perform femininity in their personas or present it in their artworks. In particular, Stallabrass has accused Taylor-Wood of making ‘some of the most extreme work of the high art lite tendency’ and lists her, alongside Jake and Dinos Chapman and Matt Collishaw, as one of the artists who has adopted ‘the most extreme stance of amorality and nihilism’.³⁵⁰ While he later discusses a work in which she fly-posted pictures of herself wearing a t-shirt designed with a swastika around Brick Lane (which he calls ‘frivolous and irresponsible’),³⁵¹ it is his description of three works in which she subverts gender constraints which immediately follows his claim. The first is *Cunt* (1994), a typographic piece which simply prints the word in a Gothic font. The second is her famous image *Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank* (1993, Figure 61), in which she stands before the camera wearing a baseball t-shirt bearing the titular adage, her shoulders tilted at a haughty angle, her jeans pushed to the floor, and her sunglasses accessorised with a slight smirk. The third image is *Slut* (1993, Figure 62), in which the artist is photographed smiling, eyes closed, with her neck ringed by love-bites.³⁵² As such, Taylor-Wood exemplifies the way in which those women artists most pertinently identified with the YBAs traded on their own sexuality, explicitly or implicitly, whether offering it up for consumption to viewers or reclaiming it as their own. The radicalism implicit in such a practice is registered by Stallabrass’s consideration of these photographic self-portraits alongside works such as those made by the Chapman brothers (whose oeuvre, we might remember, includes fibreglass sculptures of fused-together child-sex mannequins).

³⁵⁰ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, pp. 141-142.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁵² It seems odd that Stallabrass would use these gendered images to brand Taylor-Wood as amoral and nihilistic for using her sexuality, and perhaps it is simply a result of poor editing; it is possible that, instead of judging her for using her sexuality, he is judging her for using it so vacuously, and maybe when he claims that she makes some of the most extreme High Art Lite work, he means extreme in the sense that it so fully embodies his main accusations of shallowness and emptiness. This does not seem fully true either, however, as he discusses (and even compliments) her nihilism more specifically when considering *Five Revolutionary Seconds*, suggesting that there is indeed a gendered element to his criticism.

As the above examples show, many of the images of women presented by these woman YBAs – many of them self-portraits – remain markedly ambiguous. These provide something of a challenge not only to the viewer but to the scholar: by presenting them(selves) sexually, are they complicit with the objectification of women or offering a feminist challenge by reclaiming these bodies on their own terms? Is their sexualisation an act or an expression? While in residence at their studio-cum-Claes-Oldenburg-tribute *The Shop* on Bethnal Green Road, Lucas and Emin would wear t-shirts emblazoned with the slogans ‘I’m so fucky’ and ‘Have you wanked over me yet?’, and Collings locates the hint of flirtatious lesbianism between the two artists as one of *The Shop*’s major appeals,³⁵³ highlighting the way in which their behaviours, whether ‘sincere’ or not, certainly added value within a heterosexual male discourse, particularly in the media.

Such ambiguity is common within Young British Art, which, as we have seen, often presented controversial images without context or moral judgement (such as with Marcus Harvey’s *Myra*), leaving it to the viewer to decide whether they were reproducing or ironically commenting on the issues at hand. This ambiguity, however, is not simply a YBA strategy but is also a feature of feminist art more generally. Many feminists have questioned how to represent the female experience or body without succumbing to representational images that lend themselves to objectification,³⁵⁴ acknowledging that centuries of sexualising and objectifying representations of women have left many forms of representation (such as Saville’s oil paints) particularly loaded, thus rendering them fraught to use.

Regardless of the fraught nature of their images, however, it is notable that the women YBAs who have had the most enduring success have often been adopted by feminist critics who use their works to unpack or hang some aspects of feminist theory. It seems revealing that in her book *Shark Infested Waters: The Saatchi Collection of British Art in the 90s*, Sarah Kent opens her essays on both Lucas and Saville with a quote from feminist art historian Lynda Nead’s *The Female Nude*; likewise,

³⁵³ Collings, *Sarah Lucas* (London, 2002), p. 31.

³⁵⁴ See, for example: Mary Kelly and Paul Smith, ‘No Essential Femininity’, in Donald Preziosi (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 370-382.

her essay on Jane Simpson opens with two quotes from major feminist thinkers, the writer Jeanette Winterson and the philosopher Luce Irigaray. (Male artists are not defined by their genders in the same way, and are introduced by quotes from more ‘universal’ authors such as Roland Barthes.) Similarly, the discourse surrounding Tracey Emin is perhaps the most notable illustration of this phenomenon, and the embrace of her work by certain strains of feminist art history can be considered to account for much of her continued critical success. Chris Townsend and Mandy Merck’s anthology, *The Art of Tracey Emin* (2002), is a prime example of this, comprising as it does a collection of essays each of which almost invariably locates Emin within some aspect of feminist practice, ranging from confessional art to autobiography to craft, and often implicitly situating her within the second-wave feminist adage that ‘the personal is political’.

While it is important to acknowledge the space that Young British Art opened up for contemporary women’s art, then, it is equally important to consider the kind of work that this was taken to entail: sexually explicit, confessional, humorous, ambivalent, sensational, provocative, often utilising the image of the artist, and often involving a performative embodiment of gender.³⁵⁵ While some of these traits are, as we have already seen, coeval with Young British Art more generally, it seems that similar work, when made by women, garners significantly more lasting critical and academic attention than that of their male contemporaries, particularly when it can be subsumed under a feminist rhetoric.

While Perry has been a transvestite since before he was an artist, it is nonetheless significant that his own rise to fame should coincide with this particular moment, when work from female artists had an unprecedented public and critical presence. In this context, Perry’s use of gender carries an extra weight, and it is telling that a transvestite artist should emerge simultaneously alongside these women artists, particularly when he also made work characterised by many – if not all – of the above-mentioned traits. Situated within such a discourse of women using their genders and sexualities

³⁵⁵ As previously suggested, work that does not fit this mould – such as Whiteread’s – is read under different rubrics.

performatively, ambiguously, and provocatively, Perry's transvestism becomes a particularly charged gesture, which, alongside Perry's more overt derision of contemporary art, serves to once more undermine the practices and players of the YBAs. At a time when women artists dominated the media, seeing them tacitly lampooned by a transvestite – whether this was Perry's intention or not – surely held an implicit frisson for an oversaturated and, as we have previously seen, often contemptuous audience. Similarly, although the conservative, repressed 1990s' version of Claire did not even remotely resemble the sexually-liberated, modern women artists of the time, this seems, too, to be part of the point: not only was this version of Claire looking backwards to, and literally fetishising (albeit ironically), a conservative, traditional England, she was also the exact antithesis of the aggressive, laddish woman artist associated with the YBAs, generally symbolised in the media by Emin or Lucas.

At the same time as he could be interpreted to subtly mock these women artists, however, Perry simultaneously benefitted from his own manipulation of gender, which gave him access to, and allowed him to appropriate, these self-same 'gendered' modes of art-making. In particular, Perry's use of craft, and in particular pottery, was figured as a feminised artistic form; pointedly, Perry noted that part of the appeal of craft and transvestism for him was that both pottery and women are seen as 'second-class' things, linking the attraction of this to his 'low self-esteem'.³⁵⁶ Furthermore, Perry used his artwork to articulate his explicit sexual fantasies, both autobiographical and imagined, adopting in the process a confessional tone in detailing these often 'taboo' ventures.

The genre of sexual confession has a complex and problematically gendered history. In her anthology *Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media*, Irene Gammel aims to show how 'the confession has become a specifically female discursive practice', and presents a collection of essays intended to probe this idea of 'the sexual confession as a gender discourse'.³⁵⁷ While *Confessional Politics* is intended to be a feminist intervention, Gammel first outlines the problematic associations of the sexual confession, both historical and contemporary.

³⁵⁶ 'Grayson Perry', *Saatchi Gallery*.

³⁵⁷ Irene Gammel (ed.), *Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media* (Illinois, 1999), p. 1.

In particular, she describes how the commonly-reproduced elision of ‘sexual expression’ and ‘personal confession’ when discussing women’s writing has led to ‘the easy and often unquestioned association made between a woman’s voice of sexuality and the confessional genre’,³⁵⁸ describing also how the term ‘confessional’ is a problematic one for feminists, bringing to mind ‘its patriarchal history’,³⁵⁹ and associations with ‘sin, shame, and voyeurism’.³⁶⁰

Indeed, Gammel goes on to write that

confessional readings frequently entail a process of devaluation of the female voice. The female voice relating personal experience, like the sinner’s and the patient’s, belongs not to the realm of abstract and official *langue* but to *parole*, to familiar and intimate speech, and is thus characterised by a low degree of formality and authority, as it is perceived as ephemeral or trivial.³⁶¹

This devaluation is similarly split down gendered lines, for, as Lori Saint-Martin writes, ‘[t]he realm of the personal and sexual has always been literary for men (Saint Augustine, Rousseau, Michel Leiris, Henry Miller) and confessional for women (Colette, Erica Jong, Anaïs Nin [...])’.³⁶² Similarly, Gammel suggests that ‘[a] history of confessional readings has created the perception of women obsessively confessing their secrets, reinforcing stereotypes of the female psyche as fragmented and, what is perhaps even worse, as “needy”’, leading to confession becoming ‘a measure of mental immaturity and emotional instability’.³⁶³

In this way, the ‘confession’ is often a reading that is imposed on a woman’s work simply as a result of her gender; that is, ‘women do not so much confess as their articulations of sexuality are

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

³⁶¹ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁶² Lori Saint-Martin, ‘Sexuality and Textuality Entwined: Sexual Proclamations in Women’s Confessional Fiction in Québec’, in Gammel (ed.), *Confessional Politics*, p. 28-9.

³⁶³ Gammel, *Confessional Politics*, p. 4.

subjected to confessional readings by the social machine'.³⁶⁴ For confession to be political, then, it often requires a feminist intervention or renegotiation. Gammel summarises many of the tactics used by women to politicise and articulate their sexual confessions and disavow the framework in which they are interpreted, writing that:

[m]any 'real-life' stories encode an awareness of the confessional reality principle, of possible appropriation and recolonisation of their life stories; suspicion and scepticism mark their self-representation, signalling that theirs is not the unmediated cry from the female heart. Women encode boundaries and warnings, signalling their desire to create their own safe space in which to articulate their personal and sexual lives, while defying confessional entrapments. They tell and retell their personal stories by simultaneously enacting, and reacting against, confessional modalities that wish to contain them.

At the forefront of these strategies is a signalled awareness of the 'confession's' own construction, a key tactic used by women to disentangle their personal stories from reductive, gendering interpretations.

Notably, this interpretation of women's work as the 'unmediated cry from the female heart' is something which haunts Emin's art in particular, dealing heavily as it does with notions of autobiography, sincerity, and her own sexual experiences; it is significant that this reading occurs, and recurs, despite the many traces that remain to signal its own artifice. Conspicuously, however, these are many of the same topics that have defined the work of Perry. While his transvestism allows him to speak using the feminine, confessional voice – and we might note that this is a literal enactment of a broader assertion which affirms that 'when men do confess their sexualities, they inevitably become

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

feminised'³⁶⁵ – Perry's work, much like his performance of gender, is always received as constructed; that is, even though he is perceived as sincere, it is clearly not unmediated, as signalled by his use of the laborious medium of pottery and the artifice of his dressing, both of which necessarily imply intent and consciousness rather than unthought spontaneity. This, I want to suggest, is particularly revealing; in the section that follows, I want to consider the particulars of this through an extended comparison of both the personas and works of Perry and Emin, considering in more detail their autobiographical – and fictive – uses of sexuality, and their media receptions.

His Eminence

Like Perry, Tracey Emin has a very particular autobiographical mythos, which is reinforced repeatedly through her artworks, interviews, and public appearances, subsequently blurring the boundaries between her art and her life. Emin was born in Croydon in 1963, the result of the respective affairs of her parents (who were both married to other people), and raised in the seaside town of Margate, where her Turkish-Cypriot father owned the Hotel International; when the hotel closed down, the family fell from a position of relative affluence to a more working-class status. Her early life was tumultuous, and she was raped at the age of thirteen. In *Tracey Emin C.V.* (1995, Figure 63), she describes the experience with her trademark emphasis on humiliation: 'One [of the men] has sex with me – the other one watched – then they laughed at me. They pointed down at my brown long labia and they just kept laughing at me.' She dropped out of school shortly afterwards, and her teenage years were characterised by promiscuity, casual sex, and passionate affairs. She had two abortions, one of which was botched and turned especially traumatic when, a week later, it became apparent that she had actually been carrying twins as she suffered a miscarriage; she has recounted, in *Tracey Emin C.V.* and since, how the second foetus slid down her leg as she was travelling in a taxi.³⁶⁶ As such anecdotes reveal, autobiographical incidents become poetically fictionalised in Emin's narrative; in her

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

³⁶⁶ Tracey Emin, *Strangeland* (London, 2005), p. 158.

autobiography *Strangeland*, she describes how, ‘at the moment of [her] birth into this world, [she] somehow felt a mistake had been made’,³⁶⁷ and in both her monoprint *We Killed the Fucking Dinner Lady* (1995) and numerous interviews she claimed to have killed a dinner lady while at school, though journalists found that no such dinner lady ever existed.

Emin studied printing at Maidstone Art College (in *Tracey Emin C.V.*, she summarises: ‘Apply to art school with no qualifications – get into Maidstone College of Art’), before completing an MA in painting at the Royal College of Art in London. In 1992, she met fellow artist Sarah Lucas, with whom she would collaborate on the punky art endeavour ‘The Shop’ in 1993. Artistically, Emin became famous for her naïve, seemingly poorly-constructed artworks in a range of media – drawings and monoprints, fabric crafts, installation – that retold her stories and expunged her psyche, replete with spelling mistakes and childish backwards letters. On 3 December 1997, she appeared drunk on the television show *After Dark* live on Channel 4 as part of a discussion panel entitled ‘Is Painting Dead?’, rambling and eventually walking off, cementing her image as a drunken, self-destructive, abrasive ‘ladette’. (This incident will be discussed in more detail at the close of this chapter.) Perhaps most famously, Emin displayed her grimy installation piece *My Bed* in the Tate Gallery in 1999 when she was nominated for the Turner Prize, bringing her to national attention. These events, and her ensuing media presence, continued to conflate Emin’s dual roles of artist and celebrity, and she would go on to model for Vivienne Westwood in a symbiotic artistic collaboration in the early 2000s, and to pen a weekly column for London newspaper *The Independent*, which ran from 2005 to 2009.

There are a number of other key moments and artworks in the trajectory of Tracey Emin, but these are the most frequently rehearsed. They focus on a number of gendered, classed experiences, as well as her formative early life and relationships (or lack thereof), and her supposedly raw, unbearably sincere and uncontrollable emotional state. Emin's use of frank, sexually explicit and psychoanalytical autobiography not only mirrors Perry's own, but both accounts share a considerable number of the same elements. Perry, too, discusses a troubled childhood. Both children were shaped by their parents’

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

extramarital relationships. Whereas Emin's parents were both married to other people and her and her twin brother Paul's conception was the result of what was supposed to be their final tryst, Perry's mother had an affair with the milkman, causing Perry's father to leave the family, and the milkman – an abusive alcoholic – to move in in his stead. Emin details a number of sexual encounters from an early age, both consensual and non-consensual; Perry has on multiple occasions declared the first time he wore a too-tight painting smock at a pre-pubescent age to be the canonical first moment of his transvestic sexual awakening. Both artists grew up in working-class environments, with hints of status mobility, evident in Emin's previous wealth and Perry's attendance at a prestigious grammar school with an 'excellent reputation and a very good relationship with Oxbridge'.³⁶⁸ Similarly, both Emin and Perry are now known for their connection to, and reiteration of, these roots in their artworks and public personae. Both artists use a lexicon of repeated symbols to stand for their autobiographical presence: for Perry, these are the icons of Alan Measles, his teddy bear-cum-personal deity-cum-father figure, and Claire, his transvestite self, which immediately link to his childhood, his past, and his own experiences with transvestism and his sexuality; for Emin, it is the scrawled self-representation of her female figures, bent over or splayed, and her constant textual interjections in the first person, usually in her own handwriting and dialect, which make her artworks equally indissoluble from her lived sexuality and her past experiences of rape and abortion.

Despite featuring a number of the same elements, however, the stories are told – and read – in remarkably different tenors. Perry's narrative is seemingly rehearsed (often by Perry himself) to the *Yakety Sax* theme tune of *The Benny Hill Show*, loaded as it is with a distinctly English farce normally reserved for seaside postcards and instalments of *Carry On*: the milkman who impregnated three women at the same time;³⁶⁹ the furtive gender-bending and awkward masturbation; the comically uncouth working-class supporting players of his family ('When my friends visited, my mother would get her tummy out, slap it on the kitchen table and brag, "Look at that, you don't get many of them for

³⁶⁸ Wendy Jones, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (London, 2006), p. 69.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

the pound”³⁷⁰); and the benevolent deific teddy bear named Alan Measles, a synecdoche for Perry’s father, God, and England, who bravely fought and bested the Germans in all playtime scenarios. That is not to say, of course, that there is not genuine pain under that layer of light-hearted, irreverent, jokey narrative, and indeed many of the experiences Perry describes are highly difficult ones: divorce, abuse, coming to terms with one’s sexuality, the absence of a parent, and the difficulties of escaping one’s socially inscribed class status. That Perry discusses them with such apparent flippancy is, he would argue, at least in part a result of his years of therapy. More than that, however – or perhaps as a result of that – what is most important is simply that he chooses to do so, reflecting his objectively uncomfortable experiences through an often humorous subjective lens.

As we have explored elsewhere in relation to other topics, Perry uses this approach artistically as well as rhetorically. From the late 1990s onwards, ugly topics, including those related to his own personal history, are depicted using frantic, inky black line drawings, but this content is soothed and placated by the soft pastel colours, shimmering metallic sheens, and ceramic gloss of the pots’ forms. In the truest display of Perry’s famed ‘guerrilla tactics’, the (literally) polished and beautified objects obscure, or perhaps exorcise, the more upsetting or difficult content they hold. This functions not just on a mass scale, as with the universal horror of murdered or abused children in *We’ve Found the Body of Your Child* or *Golden Ghosts*, but on a personal one as well. In this way, *Sublime Hatred* (Figure 64, 1999) provides an apt metaphor for Perry’s presentation of his own emotional state. The pot, which is brown and covered in repeated white geometric symbols and cut-out black-and-white newspaper advertisements for dominatrices, prostitutes, and women’s lingerie, draws on Japanese ceramic traditions, in which broken pieces are sealed together again using gold lacquer. Like the Japanese Edo teaware that inspired it, *Sublime Hatred*’s cracks are filled with gold, making the finished pot more beautiful, and more precious, for having been broken. Just like Perry, then, its ‘faults’ are fixed, and though (or rather, because) they are left on display, the overall object becomes more appealing. The pot represents vulnerability but also strength, as well as sincerity. The allusions are almost too obvious

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 61.

– Perry himself says of the pot, ‘I think that psychologically, I have got an awful lot of mileage out of my own faults and scars [...] I’ve revered my damage in a way’³⁷¹ – but that the piece, and the approach it embodies, becomes a metonym for Perry’s own performance of the trauma in his past is nonetheless notable, particularly in relation to Emin.

This trauma is, in typical confessional fashion, often linked to sexual experiences: in Emin’s case, these oscillate between explicitly non-consensual and consensual but misguided or regrettable, while in Perry’s, the traumas of his childhood have ostensibly been processed and packaged into his adult transvestism. In both traumatic and non-traumatic contexts, however, both artists use, and refer to, crude sexual imagery. In her film *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995), Emin describes the early and plentiful sexual experiences which characterised her youth:

And then there was sex. It was something you could just do, and it was for free. Sex was something simple. You’d go to a pub – you’d walk home, have fish and chips – then sex. [...] By the time I was fifteen I’d had them all, and for me Margate was too small.

In particular, feminist art historian Jennifer Doyle considers Emin’s art in relation to what she deems a ‘bad-sex aesthetic’.³⁷² Doyle explains that the term arose from a feminist think-tank that hoped to ‘drive a wedge into discourses on women and sexual history’, discourses which have traditionally offered only a dichotomy of ‘good/happy/fulfilling sex or assaultive sex’.³⁷³ She says: ‘It seemed to us that we could use more room to acknowledge the importance of experiences of boring or non-orgasmic sex, humiliation, even painful and traumatic (but entirely consensual) encounters as potentially formative – as foundational, at the very least as experiences of what we do not want’.³⁷⁴ From this perspective, Doyle admires in Emin’s work its tendency to address and represent these

³⁷¹ Quoted in Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 186.

³⁷² Jennifer Doyle, ‘The Effect of Intimacy: Tracey Emin’s Bad-Sex Aesthetics’, in Chris Townsend and Mandy Merck (eds.), *The Art of Tracey Emin* (London, 2002), p. 102.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

messy, boring, unfulfilling, or consensual yet nonetheless emotionally troubling sexual encounters. Even as she does so, however, Doyle criticises herself for fulfilling ‘the cliché of a woman’s response to a woman’s work – in which I identify with it, in which I refuse emotional distance and linger in affective proximity’.³⁷⁵ Such readings complicatedly circumscribe Emin’s work within the genre of the confession, simultaneously painting it as a feminist vocalisation that serves to better articulate women’s sexual experience and yet simultaneously relegating it to the status of affective feminine expression.

Though occasionally Emin pictures two people together (as in *Thinking about you all the time* [1996]), frequently her depictions of sexuality show it as both privately and performatively onanistic. Often the female body is represented alone, masturbating or spread open; some prints, such as *I use [sic] to have such a good imagination* (1997, Figure 65) and *No clear thoughts* (1998) seem to suggest a bored, lazy, private encounter, whereas others, such as *Don’t just leave me here* (1997), in which the ‘me’ is viewed at a distance, bent over and spurting something from her mouth, clearly implicate an absent other. Another, *Terribly [sic] wrong* (1997, Figure 66), shows a faceless body lying on her back, spew falling from between two splayed legs. It could be anything – Doyle refers to it as a ‘squiggly pile of blood, shit or semen’ – but between the title, the image’s accompanying text (‘SOMETHINGS WRONG’), and Emin’s life story, it is just as easy to read that self-same pile as an aborted or miscarried mess. Rarely positive, Emin’s work focuses on the kind of sex – the ‘bad sex’ – that so often goes unspoken: not only the unfulfilling or boring, but also the ‘morally’ bad, whether explicitly so – as with rape and abuse – or ambiguously or societally designated as such. Emin often conflates these categories of desire and fear, consent and victimisation, as in 1996’s blanket *Love Poem* (Figure 67):

YOU PUT YOUR HAND
ACROSS MY MOUTH STILL

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

THE NOISE CONTINUES
EVERY PART OF MY BODY IS
SCREAMING IM LOST
ABOUT TO BE SMASHED
INTO A THOUSAND MILLION
PIECES EACH PART FOR
EVER BELONGING TO YOU

Love Poem gives expression to Doyle's characterisation of the sex recorded in Emin's work as 'aggressive, delirious and joyful, and loaded with fear, humiliation and anger',³⁷⁶ traits which we will see, too, in Perry's depictions.

In much the same way as Emin became known for her crude, sexually explicit, and purportedly self-referential drawings, so too did Perry garner a reputation for putting smutty pictures on pretty pots. While the autobiographical sex referenced – explicitly or implicitly – in Emin's work refers to rape, abortion, and mercurial encounters, in Perry's it takes the form of cross-dressing, humiliation, and sadomasochistic fantasies. An early work from 1988, *Y-Fronts and Roses* (Figure 68) deals with themes of fetishistic emasculation. The pot presents two face-swapped transfers of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, now with Charles's ruddy, masculine face smiling out from underneath a wave of flipped blonde hair, and wearing a satiny pink frock and jacket with bows on its puffy sleeves; the final image bears more than a passing resemblance to Perry himself, with his similar coiffure and predilection for both prissy satin dresses and rigid English femininity. Drawn into the surface of the pot we see two men. One, superimposed over a large white phallic shape and facing the newly emasculated transfer of Charles, is a dejected office worker, wearing a shirt, jacket, tie, socks, and tightly-laced shoes, but no trousers; his penis hangs as flaccidly as his shoulders. Elsewhere on the pot,

³⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

a dominating figure in a corset and high heels – presented as feminine but for an enormous erect penis – scowls down and ejaculates at the Charles-as-Diana transfer, completing the humiliation.

Ejaculating penises are a recurring visual trope for Perry: as we saw in chapter one, the very first plate he made, *Kinky Sex*, shows a figure being crucified along the ridges of the plate, made with a coin in the centre that melted over the crotch to give the impression of a climactic frenzy. Perry's first quilt piece, *Tree of Death* (1997) similarly depicts this motif, using a repeated, decorative pattern of 'phalluses ejaculating into anuses with foliage made up of atomic explosions, coffins, medicine capsules, and veins with needles going into them', intended, he says, to represent death from AIDS.³⁷⁷ Detailed drawings of penises, mostly erect, appear on Perry's pots too many times to count, featuring on, for example, *Secret Woman* (1986), *As I Laid in the Arms of a Lady Newsreader* (1987), *Women of Ideas* (1990), *Floating World* (2001), *Village of the Penians* (2001), and *In Praise of Shadows* (in which an erect penis strolls down the street with a lady while wearing a top hat [2005]). Perry's work also features kinky pornographic sadomasochistic imagery (*Strangely Familiar* [2000]; *Good and Bad Taste* [2007]), and, like Emin, he portrays images of sad, despondent, 'bad sex' (the dejected fellatio on *Pot based on Twenty-Year-Old Collage* [2006]) and scenes of masturbation (*Moonlit Wankers* [2001]), including his own (*St Claire [Thirty-Seven Wanks Across Northern Spain]* [2003]).

Perry's pots are every bit as graphic as Emin's drawings – arguably more so since they are considerably more detailed in their depiction – and far more graphic than some of the other 'sexual' work she has been most publicly criticised for, such as the embroidered tent *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995, Figure 15) or the only-indexically sexual *My Bed* with its debris of condoms and birth control. It becomes apparent, then, that it is not simply a matter of what is being drawn, but how, and by whom.

³⁷⁷ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 104.

Constructing confessions

While Emin's use of confession can be said to characterise her whole career, her use of film provides a particularly apposite starting point from which to deconstruct claims that her work is unmediated, for in it there is a neat comparison to be made with Perry's own previously discussed short film, *Bungalow Depression*. Indeed, the strategies of confession and negation that will shortly be discussed in *Cycle of Violence* are prefigured in *Bungalow Depression*; the two rhyme in their use of artifice to express autobiographical and 'authentic' aspects of their creator's persona. Perry acknowledges that early films such as this were an opportunity for him to '[play] out his desires',³⁷⁸ and we have already seen how *Bungalow Depression* details Perry's ongoing obsessions with aspirational English femininity and classed social rituals, enacting a transvestic fantasy that is later repeated in a number of Perry's other artworks and costumes. Though this is ostensibly not a film about Perry's own narrative autobiographical experience – rather, it is a film about a fictional character, in a fictional, even satirical, narrative – it nonetheless by its very nature enacts this same experience, as it enables Perry to perform his transvestism, both theatrically and semiotically. In this respect, while the film may not appear to be confessional, it nonetheless uses narrative and artifice to enable Perry's transvestic and sincere sexual fantasies.

Emin's films, on the other hand, do not use the veils of fiction but instead overtly and seemingly sincerely 'document' chapters of her life, as she recounts personal events – such as her abortion in *How It Feels* or her thwarted and humiliating performance in a dance contest in *Why I Never Became a Dancer* – to the camera. These are authenticated not only by her own presence and voice, which specifically address the viewer, but by the presence of places and figures from her private life, such as the clinic where she underwent the termination, or even her mother, who is featured in *Tracey Emin C.V. Cunt Vernacular*. In 'Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art', Christine Fanthome notes that 'naming individuals appears to be a

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

crucial element of establishing the truth' in Emin's work, used to 'celebrate intimacy, to declare love and affection, to acknowledge key influences on her life and to shame those who have wronged her in the past'.³⁷⁹ As we have already seen, however, the promise of historical accuracy implied by this is a false one, as the case of the killed dinner lady, the non-existent Mrs. Edwards, testifies.

Despite this apparent veracity, then, Emin's films are, of course, equally as constructed as Perry's various fables. *Why I Never Became a Dancer* makes this abundantly clear. In it, Emin creates a narrative of judgement and redemption in small-town Margate. The movie, like Perry's, is shot on Super-8 film, similarly incorporating a sense of nostalgia into the very medium; likewise, Super-8's connotations of family home movies further compound Emin's promise of authenticity. Emin's distinctively accented voice is underlaid with grainy scenes of Margate as she recounts her young departure from school, her explorations with sex as a 13-14 year old, her growing disgust with the 19- to 25-year-old men with whom she was sleeping, and the eventual replacement of sex with her newfound love of dancing.

Numerous shots have a resonant significance which belie their constructedness – her remark that 'I remember the first time someone asked me to grab their balls' is accompanied by a shot of a woman playing a claw crane machine – but many others are of the local buildings and the lazy waves. Even this nostalgic, romanticising camerawork is something of a deception, however, as Emin's story comes to its climax and it becomes clear that such an idealisation of Margate is a false one. Emin tells of how she had entered a dance competition that, if she won, would serve as her ticket out of the town that was now 'too small for [her]' and which would take her straight to the big city, London; while she competes, however, a group of men with whom she had previously had sex start to shout 'Slag! Slag! Slag!', and, running from the dance floor, she cements her decision: 'I'm leaving this place, I'm getting out of here. I'm better than all of them. I'm free.' The film ends with an acidic call to the men who shamed her – 'Shane, Eddy, Tony, Doug, Richard – this one's for you' – as Emin dances around a

³⁷⁹ Christine Fanthome, 'Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art', *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 18 (2008), p. 228.

wide, empty room to the tune of Sylvester James's 1978 disco hit, 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)' before giving a broad, goofy thumbs up to the camera. The camera pans around Emin as she appears to be dancing directly with the viewer, laughing and smiling; the final shot shows a bird flying across dazzling sunlight.

In Perry's *Bungalow Depression*, we see explicit artificiality – the filmic narrative – used to perform the artist's 'authentic' subjectivity as artifice (that is, as a construct in the film); in Emin's, we have the promise of 'authentic', sincere subjectivity, but mediated to us through implicitly artificial means (again, the filmic narrative, as belied by the video's use of editing, symbolism, montage, and Emin's pre-meditated and pre-written script). In this way, these early video examples foreshadow the dynamic which, as we have already seen, will figure again and again throughout each artist's career, emblematising the way in which both Perry and Emin use the same elements (autobiography, sincerity, gender and sexuality) in different constellations, and, subsequently, revealing the way in which the 'constructedness' of each artist is foregrounded or veiled based on their performance of gender.

Emin's 'unmediated cry from the female heart' is further inferred from her works in other media, many of which similarly use the first person. In particular, Emin's use of text written in her own handwriting is frequently used by critics to emblematisise this; her misspellings have become a recurring trope in her oeuvre, symbolising to many her lack of education, her spontaneity, and her rawness, and corroborating the theory that Emin's work pours out of her unmoderated and unthought. The emphasis, too, is on Emin's mistakes, adding to the caricature – painted by Emin herself – of dumb Emin the hopeless fuck-up, 'mad Tracey from Margate', who has neither the self-control nor the filter to prevent or remedy her blunders, instead leaving them exposed and bleeding for all to see. In this way, her handwriting can be seen to encompass her entire ethos, and this is further supported by statements such as this one made about her patchwork blanket, *Pysco Slut* (1999, Figure 69): 'I spelled

it “Pysco” and I had no idea I had written it wrongly [sic], and of course I didn’t do it on purpose. I try to put the right word down, but if I don’t know it I don’t care’.³⁸⁰

Statements like this repeat the narrative many choose to hear, but in the preceding breath, Emin has just recounted her experience of working on another blanket, *Garden of Horror* (1998, Figure 70): ‘[...] I spelt tomatoes wrong as “tomartoes”. I had this blanket on the floor of my museum, and I was working on it and people would point at the spelling, and I corrected it and it didn’t look good’.³⁸¹ Even as she acknowledges that she never learned to spell, Emin is clearly making conscious decisions, fully aware of the effect of her language and spelling. The belief that she is not – and even that she may be dyslexic – resurges again with her monoprints, ignoring the fact that this is a medium which requires immediacy, and, crucially, is worked in reverse. Occasionally, this results in a number of backwards letters when the work is completed, since the medium by nature calls for hurried mirror writing. Even still, Chris Townsend argues that while the monoprints do require quick workmanship, they also demand careful consideration beforehand to account for this. Furthermore, he asserts that Emin’s monoprints show clear signs of premeditation concealed as spontaneity. In particular, he challenges the reception of her use of hotel-branded paper (as in *Room Service* and *Room Service II* [1997]) as evidence of impulsiveness, instead noting that the fact that she has travelled with the supplies necessary to produce monoprints suggests that, rather than having carelessly forgotten to bring paper, her usage here was a conscious decision, perhaps intended to invoke the feeling of being away from home.³⁸²

Reversed letters also appear in a number of Emin’s quilts, such as the above-mentioned *Garden of Horror*, reminiscent of patchwork ransom letters (‘LIE AND ILL KILL YOU HA HA HA HA’). This suggests once again that Emin’s use of ‘mistakes’ is not entirely mistaken, for blankets, unlike monoprints, have no similar claims to instantaneity. Although they still register and preserve Emin’s

³⁸⁰ Quoted in Jean Wainwright, ‘Interview with Tracey Emin’, in Townsend and Merck, *The Art of Tracey Emin*, p. 202.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Chris Townsend, ‘Heart of Glass: Reflection, Reprise and Riposte in Self-Representation’, in Townsend and Merck, *The Art of Tracey Emin*, pp. 79-101; in particular, see pp. 84-90.

errors – and again, this is emphasised as a conscious aesthetic choice, for she says that ‘[c]rossing things out, especially with the blankets, is visually satisfying, and also I might have sewn all the letters on and then change my mind, and if you unpick them all it’s time-consuming. It’s much better to cross it out for people to see what was there before’³⁸³ – the medium stages spontaneity but, by its laborious nature, cannot truly enact it. In this way, constructedness is figured in the (pretence of a) lack of construction.

We can see, then, that Emin and Perry have both traded in explicit and autobiographical sexual imagery, mediated through the genre of the (constructed) confession; however, audience, media, and critical responses to their work – and to themselves – have been entirely disparate. While both artists invoke the confessional mode, making their personal sexual experiences and fantasies integral parts of their oeuvres and personas, Emin remains circumscribed by it, whereas Perry – in part due to his transvestite status – can dabble with the feminised genre but is not delimited in the same way. Instead, he is ultimately seen to bring it back to more ‘masculine’ spheres of logic, introspection, and the general, as opposed to the personal (the personal, of course, being the feminist political, as well as marking out the aforementioned distinction between *langue* and *parole*). To illustrate this more fully, I want to now consider Perry’s problematic 1992 graphic novel *Cycle of Violence*, and its even more problematic reception twenty years later.

Cycle of Violence

By way of introduction to *Cycle of Violence*, I want to first briefly return to Perry’s less polished, and less successful, early work. While Perry’s use of the medium of craft has been considered previously in chapter one, it is worth noting at this juncture not just the unfinished, artless quality of Perry’s early pieces, but also their sharp, often ugly iconography. In stark contrast to the beautiful objects Perry would become known for, we have already seen that Perry’s pots made in the

³⁸³ Quoted in Wainwright, ‘Interview with Tracey Emin’, p. 202.

late 1980s and early 1990s are often marked by drawings of androgynous, angular, cruel faces – distinctly different from the softer, rounder, more skilled drawings he would later make – and by intimations of sexual violence. (Often, this is consensual within the rubric of sadomasochistic fantasies, but not always; in this way, it can be read as somewhat analogous to Emin’s bad sex yet again.) Two previously considered works from the 1987 Birch & Conran catalogue particularly exemplify this: *The Keeper of the Bed* (Figure 8) and the catalogue’s untitled cover image (Figure 9).

While both of these plates have been analysed in more detail in chapter one, I want to draw particular attention here to their brutality. Despite their more abrasive qualities, these plates, and Perry’s rather contrarian statement in the accompanying catalogue (‘People might find my pots aggressive, subversive or even shocking but I am very at home with these images, sometimes mildly bored’³⁸⁴), clearly still come with an ironic intent, and are not to be taken entirely seriously. Nonetheless, however, their violence is marked, and felt, in a way that is not so with his later works. It is not simply a violence of content, for we see gruesome themes and images repeated again and again in Perry’s later works (although, it is worth noting, not to the same extent), but a violence of form. The lack of polish, both literal and metaphorical, makes the crudeness and cruelty of the work more apparent, and the sense of a brutal, sadomasochistic fetishism more pronounced; all facets of the work which are subsequently sanitised both by Perry’s later practice and his own more nuanced self-presentation.

These early works, then, can be seen to typify the trend which Perry himself describes as ‘my unconscious leaking like some sort of stain out onto my paintings’.³⁸⁵ Perhaps the best exemplar of this is Perry’s 1992 graphic novel, *Cycle of Violence*. In the novel, which was also repackaged and re-released twenty years later at the height of Perry’s fame in 2012, we follow Bradley Gaines, a

³⁸⁴ Grayson Perry: *Ceramics*, n.p.

³⁸⁵ Grayson Perry, ‘I Found Myself in the Art World’ (transcript), accessed 20 September 2014, at <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/transcripts/reith-lecture4-csm.pdf>

champion cyclist who becomes haunted by his repressed childhood memories of his abusive mother.³⁸⁶ Under her almost schizophrenic influence, the once-nice Bradley suffers a mental breakdown and embarks on a spree of filthy, murderous sexual violence, gruesomely killing nine women. The book deals with a number of Perry's trademark issues, and it is easy to read the story through an autobiographical veil. (This is a point to which we will return later.) Bradley's parents, like Perry's, separate due to his mother – here, it is at her insistence, rather than his father's abandonment – and his relaxed, hippy, mechanic father is replaced by a stepfather whose snaky sideburns more than coincidentally make him resemble Perry's description of his own hated stepfather as 'Elvis meets Tom Jones'.³⁸⁷ Young Bradley adores planes, bikes, and cars, and certain pages show Alan Measles-esque teddy bears in the driver's seat of his toy cars and tanks; one panel shows him attacking a crucified figure that resembles later depictions of Claire.

Phalluses and erections appear at every corner, profiled in shadows and present in the shape of the car-substitute Bradley and his contemporaries drive; a thick, oblong sausage of a vehicle. They also appear in the cycling outfits Bradley wears, again foreshadowing a motorcycling outfit Perry would later commission for himself, with the outline of an erect penis decoratively festooning the crotch of the jumpsuit. Sapphic shapes also appear, usually as Freudian voids: the character of Martha Epstein wears a 1950s-style poodle skirt that reads 'fuckme fuckme fuckme' and an apron, positioned at crotch-level, of undulating labia. Like Freud's *vagina dentata*, vaginas here are violent and destructive chasms, and in even more Freudian fashion the most dangerous of all belongs to Bradley's mother. An early panel shows Bradley, naked, crucified on a vagina while his mother is mockingly superimposed over him, connected at the genitals. The two figures are often sexually conflated: while Bradley is raping his victims, he appears as a hermaphroditic figure, with the head of his mother and his own violent bludgeon of a penis.

³⁸⁶ At the time of its re-release, Perry commented on the 'spooky coincidence of its central character' in relation to Bradley Wiggins, the real-life 'British Tour de France-winning cyclist who sports sideburns'. Grayson Perry and Laura Barnett, 'Grayson Perry on his first artwork, Cycle of Violence', *The Guardian*, 1 January 2013.

³⁸⁷ Jones, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl*, p. 7.

Bradley's murders are initiated by kind women trying to talk to him about his problems, and notably in the end it is only when a fellow man does exactly the same thing that Bradley can be cured. When the first victim, Beatrice, takes Bradley in and attempts to help him, he instead hears the cooing abuse of his mother, calling him a woman for expressing emotions. At this, Bradley flies into a drooling rage, his penis as dangerous as the knife in his hand, as he yells, 'Noooo..no. I will show you bitch wh♀ is a **man**' and begins stabbing the ghost of his mother (Figure 71).³⁸⁸ The next page, however, shows not his mother's corpse but Beatrice's. Her body is askew, black blood is spewing from her mouth, and both her dress and her body are slit from breast to vagina. There is ambiguity, too, as to Bradley's order of procedure: whether the women are raped first and then murdered or vice versa, or whether perhaps it is one continuous procedure of mutilation. One especially disturbing full page panel explicitly shows Bradley in the process of brutally raping his victim, who is tied up with her bloody nipples hammered into the floor, sobbing, begging him to stop. She survives due to police intervention and sympathetically tells the policeman, 'Please don't harm him officer inside he's just a frightened **child**'.³⁸⁹

Furthermore, Bradley's mother divorces his father on the grounds of '[him] being so bloody **boring**, never losing [his] temper and being a complete fucking **wimp**',³⁹⁰ immediately setting up the reductive, rigid, and highly fetishised dichotomy of gender that characterises the novel and Perry's own cross-dressing, to which we will return momentarily. Humiliation looms huge in this narrative, and the young Bradley is taunted abusively by his mother with terms like 'sissy' and punished by being forced to wear frilly girls' dresses of the kind Perry would later come to favour himself. In this way, the language used in *Cycle of Violence* creates an exegetical puncture: while narratively, and in any other context, it would and should constitute abuse, when read in tangent with Perry's personal story it is blatantly fetishistic and erotically charged; indeed, even without the looming presence of the

³⁸⁸ Grayson Perry, *Cycle of Violence* (London, 1992), n.p.

³⁸⁹ Ibid. Here we can see the more sinister aspects of the exculpatory function of the figure of the child, as discussed in relation to Perry's 'little girl' transvestism in part one of this chapter.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

artist, it is tonally clear regardless, loaded as it is with fetishised words like ‘sissy’. As a result, the narrative is wholly fractured, incapable of upholding the reader’s suspension of disbelief. The story of Bradley is not the origin story of a transvestite – for, as Perry notes, ‘very rarely does cross-dressing come about by having to wear dresses when you were a child’³⁹¹ – but rather the sexual fantasy of one. In this way, Perry seems to play with the confessional medium, telling a story that simultaneously signals its own constructedness even as it reveals something of the genuine sexual fantasies of its creator.

The constructedness of *Cycle of Violence* is further signalled by the stylistic and referential choices Perry makes throughout the novel. To begin with, the blocky black and white colour palette, coupled with Perry’s iconography of elaborate garments, sex acts, and massively oversized phalluses, aligns Perry’s illustrations with those of fellow transgressive English artist Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898). Beardsley was famous for his Japanese-inspired grotesques, which used distinctive simple lines, monochromatic swathes of solid colour, and bursts of finely-lined details to mimic the look of woodcut prints. His work often mixed the grotesque and the erotic, with the resulting images constituting a subtle social critique.

In her article ‘Aubrey Beardsley’s “Japanese” Grotesques’, Linda Gertner Zatlin deftly charts Beardsley’s unique approach to the use of the grotesque in the context of Victorian England: unlike the grotesques employed by other English creators, which were often moralising in tone and ‘were allowed the freedom of parody because they caricatured figures already ridiculous or marginal to the middle class, and they made explicit the morally undesirable nature of the exaggerated character traits’,³⁹² Zatlin argues that Beardsley ‘followed the Japanese practice, which more often used the grotesque to reinforce the presence of sexuality without judgement’, emphasising instead ‘whimsy rather than

³⁹¹ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 178.

³⁹² Linda Gertner Zatlin, ‘Aubrey Beardsley’s “Japanese” Grotesques’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 25 (1997), p. 91.

criticism'.³⁹³ Zatlin suggests that Beardsley's images responded to Victorian repression by instead putting on display those taboo sexual vices that he saw to be lurking under the surface.

Beardsley's resulting works are at once sexual and humorous. In one, *Lysistrata Shielding her Coynte* (1896, Figure 72), the frontispiece for Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (a Greek play about women withholding sex from men in an attempt to make them end the Peloponnesian War), Lysistrata is framed by phalluses. Naked but for a revealing transparent gauzy tunic with a floor-length ruffled back and sides, which truly only serves to further emphasise her nakedness, her left hand rests placidly on the enormous chest-height erection beside her, suggesting both her mastery over it and also her fondness for it. In the same hand she holds an olive branch of peace, the trajectory of which arcs from the head of the penis towards her in an ejaculatory innuendo. Though the title suggests she is ostensibly 'shielding' herself, her right hand instead appears more sensually poised than protectively so. Perhaps the silliest detail of all is the statuesque phallus's luscious mane of pubic hair, which falls in curls at Lysistrata's feet like a lavish sheepskin rug.

The above example shows not only Beardsley's propensity for innuendo, but also for the drawn line. Using a colour palette of only black and white, Beardsley fills his drawings with rich texture, from the Spartan outlines of his figures to the transparent fabric of Lysistrata's garment. Pattern, decoration, and negative space all combine to create Beardsley's distinctive, fluid designs. This emphasis on monochromatic variances of texture is partly what betrays Perry's style in *Cycle of Violence* as something of an homage to Beardsley. *Cycle of Violence* similarly fills its pages with an abundance of patterns, which, though lacking Beardsley's refinement, nonetheless show his influence. For Perry, however, even the restricted colour palette functions as a kind of artistic fetishism; of it, he writes, 'I enjoyed enormously the *discipline* of black and white: it was liberating for me, and it's something that has fed into my work ever since' (emphasis mine).³⁹⁴

³⁹³ Ibid., p.100.

³⁹⁴ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 178.

Even with its glib attempts at irony, its knowing winks at therapy, and its purported negation of sexual violence under the rhetoric of its creator's fantasies, however, *Cycle of Violence* can at times be a highly uncomfortable read. Though perhaps intended as a grotesque and humorous social critique akin to those of Aubrey Beardsley, there is another major comparison to be made, and that is the striking resemblance between *Cycle of Violence* and Dada *Lustmord* painting. The trope of *Lustmord*, or sexual violence, became popular in Weimar Germany in the early 20th century, with many scholars attributing its prevalence to cultural anxieties about the shifting role of women in society and a growing sense of post-war emasculation. In response to these, as well as to the commonly-held belief that prostitution was a societal epidemic which epitomised the degradation of the metropolis and all it stood for, depictions of sexualised murders, particularly against prostitutes, arose as a cultural phenomenon; a sensationalist preoccupation that sought to psychologically reassert masculine dominance and which took a perverse, punishing pleasure in the mutilation of women, psychically 'purging' the utmost symbol of societal decline.

The resulting images were grotesque, too, but in violent and deforming ways, rather than the humorous, harmless images of Beardsley: phalluses are twinned with knives (as in George Grosz's *Woman Slayer* [1918, Figure 73]) and female bodies are ripped open violently at their reproductive seams, leaving their entrails to spill out (Figure 74). In particular, Perry's illustrations for *Cycle of Violence* show sexually violent acts carried out with all the frenzied fervour of Otto Dix's maniacally grinning *Sex Murderer: Self Portrait* (1920, Figure 75). Dix's self-portrait of a sort finds a kindred spirit in Perry's self-portrait of a sort through the avatar of Bradley Gaines. In perhaps a rather resonant twist of mirroring, Dix's painting is missing and now exists only in black and white reproduction; this reduction of the original painting only accentuates the similarities between the two artworks – not least of which is the characters' shared gruesome, toothy smile – by inadvertently mimicking the monochromatic style of Perry's comic (Figure 76).

One critic in particular, Maria Tatar, author of *Lustmord: Sexual Violence in Weimar Germany*, uses these paintings to psychoanalyse and damn their creators on a personal level, suggesting that by

despoiling the female body, these artist-creators are jealously lashing out at the ultimate biological creator, woman.³⁹⁵ While Tatar's criticism is, I argue, highly flawed in the context of Dada imagery, in that she ignores both the formal qualities and approaches of individual artists that might temper the works' ultimate meanings, as well as any mitigating factors such as post-traumatic stress disorder from time spent at the front and broader cultural anxiety, her remarks find an odd resonance here, in Perry's highly gendered, self-reflective, and admittedly psychosexual fable.

The graphic novel seems to pre-empt psychoanalytical criticisms like Tatar's, however, by making the subtext into text, paying explicit homage to Freudian theory and therapy, albeit somewhat sarcastically. That the mother is the (sexualised) villain is caricaturally Freudian, and indeed, the book, typical as it is of Perry's pre-therapy days, riffs parodically on ideas of therapy and healing, belittling them even as it uses them. In the end, Bradley's ghosts are laid to rest and he stands, cured, on the Tour de France winner's podium for the sixth time, declaring that he feels as if he were '**happy** for the first time in [his] **life**', wearing a shirt that reads 'VOTE THERAPY' where the sponsor's logo usually resides.³⁹⁶

Finally, we should also recognise that *Cycle of Violence* takes the medium of a comic book, a form which has a difficult relationship with the sexualisation of, and violence against (and the sexualisation of violence against) women. Comic books are usually the domain of superheroes, and as such they often imply a certain type of violence, in which (almost exclusively) men with superhuman strength battle equally super-strong villains and mutants, crashing down entire cities as they do so while rarely sustaining any lasting injuries. Women in these narratives, however, are often permanently brutalised, murdered, or raped to serve as plot points for the male characters. This trope, referred to by comic book writer Gail Simone as 'Women in Refrigerators' in reference to *Green Lantern #56*, in which the hero comes home to find his girlfriend has been murdered by his enemy and

³⁹⁵ Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, 1995), p. 125.

³⁹⁶ Perry, *Cycle of Violence*, n.p.

stuffed in his refrigerator to taunt him, is meticulously catalogued on the website of the same name,³⁹⁷ making the gendered violence inherent in the medium shockingly explicit. Simone's original list of characters who succumbed to 'Women in Refrigerators syndrome' was originally made in 1999, and includes women who have been 'killed, mutilated, or depowered'; it contains more than 90 female characters. While this may seem like simply an occupational hazard of living in a comic book world, Simone pointedly notes the problems with this excuse: 'First, there's [always been] a larger selection of male characters, so a handful killed made barely a ripple. Second, they didn't seem to be killed in the same way – they tended to die heroically, to go down fighting. Whereas in many cases, the superLADIES were simply found on the kitchen table already carved up.'³⁹⁸

Another example given by Simone of the medium's devaluation of women is the divergent fates of Batman and Batgirl, which reveals the way in which this trope affects not only the wives and girlfriends of superheroes, but superwomen who are the stars of their own books, too. Both heroes have their backs broken by villains at some stage (Batman's is broken by Bane, Batgirl's by the Joker), but while Batman transcended his injuries and was fine less than a year later, Batgirl was rendered paraplegic and remained in a wheelchair for many years after the incidents of Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*. In fact, Batgirl's injuries were so permanent in the comic book universe that after being paralysed, Batgirl – or rather, Barbara Gordon, her civilian alter-ego – became instead the wheelchair-bound superhero Oracle. It is intimated, too, that Batgirl is sexually abused at the same time as she is rendered paraplegic, though this is implied rather than shown. Notably, *The Killing Joke* is not even Batgirl's own story, but a standalone graphic novel about Batman. Not only this, but she is injured not while fighting crime but as a civilian, so that she can be used as collateral against her father, Police Commissioner Gordon. The lives of female characters – and even female superheroes, who we might hope would be treated with the same level of importance as their male counterpoints – are routinely reduced to plot points in the narratives of men, often with an alarming degree of physical violence.

³⁹⁷ Gail Simone, 'Women in Refrigerators', accessed 21 September 2014, at <http://lby3.com/wir/>

³⁹⁸ Simone quoted in Shannon Cochran, 'The cold shoulder: saving superheroines from comic-book violence', accessed 17 July 2014, at <http://bitchmagazine.org/article/comics-cold-shoulder>

Perpetuating the *Cycle*

All of these referents suggest various culturally contextualised interpretations, all of which legitimise the sexual violence of the graphic novel by dismissing it as homage, parody, or playful quotation, and all of which lead us away from reading *Cycle of Violence* as the ‘unmediated cry’ from the cross-dressed heart. The graphic novel is, however, clearly informed by the artist’s biography and sexual fantasies. Looking back on his graphic novel in 2013 for a piece published in *The Guardian*, Perry himself has said of *Cycle of Violence*: ‘What I see is a still-seething cauldron of anger, self-doubt and sado-masochism. This book is a glimpse into the psyche of my pre-therapy self, before I became “happy”’.³⁹⁹ More problematically, he also notes that, ‘[c]omparing it to [his] work now, the humour is there and [he is] surprised how many of the psychological insights still ring true’, but he is careful to acknowledge that he finds the sexual violence ‘uncomfortable to look at now. I used such imagery a lot in my work at the time and was probably inured to it’.⁴⁰⁰

In line with many other elements of Perry’s self-fashioning, then, the work is suggested as a sincere insight into the artist’s mind, troubled and difficult though it may have been, and its re-release becomes a marketing strategy to reassert this brand of sincerity. That the artist’s likeability is not endangered is ensured by his subtle distancing from the more problematic aspects of the work; on the contrary, it is bolstered by the intimacy of his sharing it with us, despite the problems it may cause. A review in the *New Statesman* in 2012 reaffirms the success of this strategy, describing Perry as an authentic artist set apart from the others: ‘Many artists might prefer to keep work produced in an experimental, pre-success era locked away in the closet of history – but not Perry.’⁴⁰¹ The suggestion is further reinforced when the graphic novel is described as ‘disturbing, offensive, poignant, wholly

³⁹⁹ Perry and Barnett, ‘Grayson Perry on his first artwork’.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Charlotte Simmonds, ‘Psycho-sexual self help with a side order of violence’, *New Statesman*, 20 November 2012, accessed 17 July 2014, at <http://www.newstatesman.com/cultural-capital/2012/11/psycho-sexual-self-help-side-order-violence>

original and very, very weird. But ultimately, it is unashamedly honest, and this makes it very brave': it is 'introspection at its most terrifyingly candid'.⁴⁰²

That the negative aspects of the graphic novel are so easily annulled by this intimation of 'honesty' is a testament to the strength of Perry's public persona and rhetoric of sincerity, into which the re-publication of his 'pre-therapy' graphic novel then seamlessly feeds in its own cycle of perpetuity. We should consider, however, what in particular is being praised as brave. The *New Statesman's* Charlotte Simmonds seems to laud it for its examination of gender archetypes, remarking that there aren't many among us 'who do not feel the tension between "masculine energy" and "feminine energy" raging inside them', and seemingly celebrating Bradley's acceptance of 'his inherent male-female duality'.⁴⁰³

This, however, is both a problematic reading of the novel's gender dynamics and a rather startling ignoring of its painfully misogynistic imagery. At first analysis, the segregation of characters into neat stereotypical categories – women are virgins or whores, men are macho or effeminate – may seem to satirically problematise society's own insistence on gendered binaries, which are reinforced through social roles, behavioural preconceptions, and clothing. At the centre of the chaos that spurs Bradley to murder is the age-old tenet that women talk and feel, while men act and repress. Almost every woman Bradley meets wants to him to talk about his feelings, and it is only when he does so, and undergoes therapy, that he can be cured. The novel seems to suggest that the crisis could have been averted entirely if only Bradley had been more in touch with his 'feminine side', and had been permitted by society to access and express those emotions. This, too, seems to be the message inferred by the *New Statesman*.

The problem with this, of course, is that instead of dismantling gender binaries, it thoroughly upholds them. Men should be encouraged to access their 'feminine side', but in continuing to mark those traits as feminine instead of accepting them as universal, the hierarchy is upheld. Women, then,

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

are still emotional and irrational, whereas men are fundamentally logical and rational; by travelling to their 'feminine side' as though to a foreign land, men can indulge it without threatening the boundaries of masculinity, which is still rigidly defined. Towards the end of the novel, Bradley asks a group of men around a campfire, 'You mean I can be a cry baby sissy?', and his healer Rufus replies 'Hell yes. But remember you're a *man* whose [sic] crying Brad, so that makes crying manly'.⁴⁰⁴ Like the novel at large, however, even the language here contradicts itself. While the sentiment may appear to be conducive to the reconfiguration of gender, the erotic frisson implicit in the term 'cry baby sissy' suggests that the charge is in accessing forbidden feminine elements precisely *because* they are anathema to masculinity, and thus to reintegrate them would be to negatively dismantle the production of pleasure. The novel, then, is in itself quintessentially transvestic, relying on the preservation of rigid gender binaries so that they can be transgressively and pleasurably traversed at will.

Furthermore, we should consider the role and fate of the women in this novel, almost all of whom are murdered for their attempts to help Bradley. That their feminine and feminising form of intervention proves to be the only kind that can save Bradley is important; that to do so, it must come not from a woman but from a heterosexual and sexually comfortable man (and not, for example, Bradley's weak and 'wimpy' father) is even more so. Feminine behaviour must be authorised by an acceptably masculine male figure before it can be permitted or accepted. Ironically, this authorisation of 'male femininity' is something Perry himself does in his public persona, though again it is a fervent upholding of two definitive spheres (the girly frocks, the manly motorbikes) rather than the miscegenation of them. Ultimately, the novel seems to suggest that men should engage with their feminine side but there is no equivalent expansion of roles for women. Indeed, those women who possess any typically 'masculine' traits – such as Martha, who makes a sexual advance to Bradley, or Bradley's mother, who takes on a dominatrix-like role within the story – are murdered or depicted as hermaphroditic monsters. Even if this new emotionality for men ekes out some progress for them, then, we see that instead of positively effecting change in societal gender norms, the continuing

⁴⁰⁴ Perry, *Cycle of Violence*, n.p.

demarcation of gender in fact only further reduces women's agency, value, and ability to productively act, even to save their own lives.

Simmonds's praise, then, seems troubling at best. When coupled with her earlier-discussed comments about Perry's honesty and bravery, however, it becomes apparent that her commendation is not truly about the representation of genders portrayed here, but rather is linked to Perry's 'authentic' and confessional tone. While Simmonds acknowledges that it might be easy 'to dismiss this book as a sexed up exercise in self-reflection' and that 'in many ways it is so ludicrous that it almost loses credibility', she ultimately argues against dismissing the novel as 'Freudian drivel', instead suggesting that '[f]rom the sticky recesses of these lurid pages, something authentic emerges as Perry's little book begins to tackle genuine issues of sexual identity'; namely, she proposes, the question of whence our sexual identity originates.⁴⁰⁵ She claims that in response, Perry 'uncover[s] the truth we'd find peering into our own mind if all the self-censoring were removed'.⁴⁰⁶ That his 'bravery' is linked to the trope of the confession is further revealed by the admiring way Simmonds lauds him for releasing this early work, even despite its messy and potentially damaging nature. In addition to the above, she writes that '[r]e-reading, and indeed re-publishing, a piece of work certainly makes for fascinating introspection', before conclusively praising: 'Not often do we see sexual identity discussed in all its messy, confused, candid glory – even less often do we see it dredged from the past in a public way by an artist at the very height of his career. If I were Grayson Perry, I'd look back on this one proudly. And maybe wince a little, too'.⁴⁰⁷

The claim that it is 'not often' that we see 'sexual identity discussed in all its messy, confused, candid glory' – particularly when it is rooted in an artist's autobiographical past and published in ways that could be used to undermine or attack its producer – is patently false, for, as we have already seen, there is at least one well-known contemporary British artist who has made a career out of divulging exactly that. There is a clue in Simmonds's prose that posits an awareness, however unconscious, of

⁴⁰⁵ Simmonds, 'Psycho-sexual self help with a side order of violence'.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

her own erasures: this is not something frequently done by an artist at the height of ‘his’ career. It is, however – as suggested by the previous discussion of the confessional – a practice frequently enacted, and invoked, by women artists, and one which has, as outlined above, prominently typified the oeuvre of Tracey Emin in particular. Indeed, Fanthome writes that the ‘confessional art through which [Emin] appears to explore, analyse and evaluate her own identity arguably touches a wider public, provoking questions around issues of self-identity and lived and imagined experience, whilst striking at the heart of the human condition’, attributing to this Emin’s success with both ‘demographically disparate audiences’ and those ‘not normally engaged by contemporary art’.⁴⁰⁸ Written in 2008, it is striking how such a description almost exactly echoes Simmonds’s claims about Perry’s *Cycle of Violence*.

This reveals an underlying problem, for Perry’s sexual confession is being not only praised but elevated, and his claims extrapolated, to a more universal status, while Emin’s sexual confessions remain delimited to feminine spheres of experience and feminist academic circles. In contrast to Perry’s thinly veiled use of fictionalised autobiography, many commentators read Emin’s autobiographical works as unthinkingly sincere, and these conflation of Emin and her art have led critics to ‘dispute her motivation and accuse her of narcissism, self-absorption, or cynical exploitation of the public’s predilection for voyeurism’.⁴⁰⁹ Returning to those confessional tropes above, her art is ‘frequently wrongly assumed to be an unmediated reflection of her experiences’.⁴¹⁰ Whereas Perry – even at his most disturbing – is perceived as composed, self-deprecating, and jokey, Emin is interpreted as wild, self-important, and almost painfully sincere.

⁴⁰⁸ Fanthome, ‘Articulating authenticity through artifice’, p. 226.

⁴⁰⁹ Fanthome, ‘The Influence and Treatment of Autobiography in Confessional Art: Observations on Tracey Emin’s Feature Film Top Spot’, *Biography*, Vol. 29 (2006), p. 30.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

‘The disgrace is fantastic’

One of the key differences in approaches by, and to, the two artists lies, I argue, in their relationship with humiliation. Perhaps due to Perry’s relationship with transvestism and sadomasochism, humiliation is something with which he is seen to be comfortable and, most importantly, of which he is in control. Speaking at ‘Claire’s Coming Out Ceremony’ in 2000, Perry commented: ‘I acknowledge that no matter how accepted [cross-dressing] becomes, a man in a frilly dress can still be a ridiculous spectacle. So please imagine, for a moment, what it is like to feel compelled to put yourself in that position – and maybe it’s not so funny’.⁴¹¹ Humiliation is often understood as something that is out of your control; a response to something unwanted which happens to you. While Perry’s statement hints at the underlying compulsion behind it, it nonetheless also acknowledges his overall agency in the process (as he is ‘[putting himself] in that position’).

In his autobiography, Perry discusses this further, touching upon his humiliation fetish’s ultimate paradox:

Humiliation is one of the most powerful turn-ons for me. What is unsatisfying about humiliation, though, is that usually it doesn’t have any consequences. The consequences are only in my own head because embarrassment is a fantasy of what other people are thinking. [...] If I think I look ridiculous it’s horrible, although simultaneously, the disgrace is fantastic – it’s a turn-on. Yet the reality of the situation is never as shameful as the fantasy, because my personality kicks in and I’m having a lovely time so I don’t get the abasement I’m seeking.⁴¹²

⁴¹¹ Quoted in Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 101.

⁴¹² Quoted in Jones, *Grayson Perry*, p. 48.

By the very nature of desiring it, Perry's humiliation becomes negated, part of an alchemic process in which an otherwise negative emotion is either overcome ('I'm having a lovely time') or fetishised into a positive experience ('the disgrace is fantastic – it's a turn on'). While this may seem like an oversimplification of how fetishes work – for example, someone with a rape fantasy can, of course, still be raped – it is important to note that this is how it is presented by Perry himself to his audience.

What is more, Perry may be inured to his attempts at self-humiliation, but his cross-dressing appears to have something of a knock-on effect. We might recall, for example, Howard Jacobson's remarks about his discomfort in the presence of 'Claire'.⁴¹³ It is interesting to note that this is a response found almost exclusively in the writings of male journalists, whereas women are – at least anecdotally – more likely to respond with the dotage Perry supposedly craves.⁴¹⁴ This discomfort can be perceived as something of a second-hand humiliation, perhaps a psychoanalytical transference of sorts, which attempts to shore up the male respondent's own intact masculinity as though to protect against the influence of Perry's 'fractured' one, as seen previously in *The Telegraph's* John Preston's reassurance that Perry is heterosexual and not 'effete'. Furthermore, Perry's use of humour throughout his work and persona – his masking of significant and objectively distressing life events in something of a playful, seaside postcard, Monty Python-esque tone – serves to make him the teller of the joke instead of the butt of it. Perry's countless interviews and public talks only bolster this image, as he is a skilled comic storyteller who adeptly controls the flow of laughter in the room.

Emin, on the other hand, is so often seen as 'embarrassing herself'. It wasn't always this way, however, and it is remarkable to note the shift in media (and presumably also public) perception of Emin; in particular, her drunken television appearance in late 1997 seems to have swayed a previously quizzical but often engaged audience to the side of her detractors. Prior to this, early articles on Emin in particular or the contemporary art scene in general mark her out as one to watch, and she is often named as one of the more remarkable working British artists, with her tent *Everyone I Have Ever Slept*

⁴¹³ Jacobson, 'I have run out of clean shirts'.

⁴¹⁴ Perry writes that 'women tend to look at [him] and go "aren't you sweet?"'. Quoted in Lesley Wright, 'My Week'.

With frequently being singled out for comment (albeit often a sensational or sexist one). Though she has always been regarded as egotistical and narcissistic, at the beginning of her career she was also seen as being wry, tongue-in-cheek, and extremely savvy. Early projects, such as *The Shop* (with Sarah Lucas), her Tracey Emin Museum, and her various self-promotional techniques, which included a letter-writing campaign asking people to invest in her as an artist and buy her 'bonds', best exemplify her 'Thatcherite' ingenuity when it came to self-promotion; similarly, they signal her use of art historical referents, invoking Claes Oldenburg in the first instance and Duchamp in the latter. It is precisely this shrewd and self-aware fusion of art and commerce that spared her from accusations of pure narcissism. A note in *The Times* in 1996 summarises her museum thusly: 'Between a hairdresser's and a dentist sits an artist's museum to herself. Filled with a changing line-up of objects that relate to her life, Emin's museum could be regarded as the height of arrogance and self-importance. But the fact that her name above the doorway is in pink neon suggests more tongue-in-cheek than head-in-air'.⁴¹⁵ Her widespread success was such that in 1997 she was tipped as a shoe-in for a Turner Prize nomination (though she did not receive one until 1999, and did not win when she did).

Despite her occasional detractors, such as critic Cosmo Landesman (who suggested that '[to] experience the art of Tracey Emin is to enter the self-indulgent, solipsistic world of a seven-year-old hell-bent on terrorising the adult population with creative tantrums'⁴¹⁶), Emin had several public supporters. Investors in her bonds included the influential art dealer Jay Jopling, fellow artists Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, and Antony Gormley, and the Tate Gallery's then-director of public services, Sandy Nairne.⁴¹⁷ Landesman aside, a number of other critics were on her side, too. Writing for *The Guardian*, Adrian Searle succinctly reviewed a performative audience with Emin while also registering her affective capabilities: 'Her self-exposure is, of course, a highly effective form of manipulation, but looking down, I notice I'm weeping into a scatter cushion'.⁴¹⁸ Such reviews enact precisely the

⁴¹⁵ Guy Walters, 'State of the art', *The Times*, 20 July 1996.

⁴¹⁶ Cosmo Landesman, 'Consumed by herself', *The Sunday Times*, 25 February 1996.

⁴¹⁷ John Windsor, 'A different class of bond', *The Independent*, 25 January 1997.

⁴¹⁸ Adrian Searle, 'Bedsit tales amid the stripped pine – Tracey Emin', *The Guardian*, 22 February 1996.

argument of Fanthome, who suggests that Emin's constructed confessional artifice nonetheless engenders a genuine affective response in the viewer, but rarely is her project so succinctly acknowledged in the media.

One of Emin's most vocal supporters was *Sunday Times* art critic Waldemar Januszczak, who lauded her as one of the new British 'bad girls' of art.⁴¹⁹ His support, however – positive though it may have been intended to be – also contributed to a rapidly growing body of male-penned criticism about Emin which veered from positive discrimination to outright sexism. Januszczak's own remarks, in which he compared Emin and other female YBA artists to the pop band The Spice Girls, were rightly registered as problematic by Emin herself: 'We're women, for God's sake. I'm 34.'⁴²⁰ In their introduction to *The Art of Tracey Emin* (2002), editors Chris Townsend and Mandy Merck remark on the profluence of these sexist media strategies into the academic domain:

The principal publication devoted to the work of Tracey Emin to date contains three essays. The first begins: "Tracey Emin has big tits and comes from Margate." The third is titled "Just How Big Are They?" The one in the middle is headed by an epigraph from Emin opening with "I feel terribly depressed...I'm starting to panic...It's quite obvious I'm useless."⁴²¹

Jennifer Doyle's essay published in the same volume further expands on this, noting that '[her] reception is littered with come-ons. Everyone is trying to pick up Emin'.⁴²² Among Emin's suitors, Doyle enumerates Neal Brown, Jay Jopling, Matthew Collings, and David Bowie, who Doyle quotes as saying she 'shimmied like a disco-queen. If she wanted, she could travel the length and breadth of the land with me and my band. Everyone from stagehands to musicians would immediately fall in love

⁴¹⁹ Waldemar Januszczak, 'The girls adding spice to still life', *The Sunday Times*, 8 December 1996.

⁴²⁰ Windsor, 'A different class of bond'.

⁴²¹ Chris Townsend and Mandy Merck, 'Eminent Domain: The Cultural Location of Tracey Emin', in Townsend and Merck, *The Art of Tracey Emin*, p. 6.

⁴²² Doyle, 'The Effect of Intimacy', p. 112.

with her'.⁴²³ A 2002 review in the *New Statesman* writes, 'I feel very awkward writing about Tracey Emin, because we used to be lovers', before going on to clarify that this 'relationship' is the author's response to the intimacy of Emin's work, which, he argues, implicates every viewer: 'all of them, all of us, humped her and dumped her'.⁴²⁴ Even on those rare occasions when she was not sexualised, Emin was nonetheless marked almost exclusively within distinctly feminine spheres: writing for *The Guardian*, Richard Gott describes her as 'so transparently and dangerously honest that in an earlier century she would have been a candidate for witch-burning – or sainthood'.⁴²⁵

Perhaps the pivotal turning point for Emin's reputation came when she appeared on Channel 4's *After Dark*, which was broadcast in the wake of the recently-awarded Turner Prize. Emin appeared drunk on the show, and slurred insults and derisive comments before walking off, declaring 'I want to be with my friends. I'm drunk. I want to phone my mum. She's going to be embarrassed by this conversation. I don't care. I don't give a fuck about it'.⁴²⁶ The media response was scathing, using the event as an opportunity to attack both Emin and the state of contemporary art. *The Guardian* wrote that Emin gave the impression that 'she might have been carrying more booze than the Fighting Temeraire. But this was probably her iconoclastic way of dramatising the tension between Life, Art and Illusion amid the fog generated by an artist alone on live TV with her critics'.⁴²⁷ Claire Longrigg, also writing for *The Guardian*, scoffed that the debate 'turned into a piece of performance art', scornfully suggesting that 'Tuesday's performance may be hailed as Tracey Emin's most significant, certainly her most entertaining, contribution to British art'.⁴²⁸ In *The Independent*, Thomas Sutcliffe called Emin 'not quite legless (since she lurched out halfway through the programme) but certainly well beyond the reach of reason', and wrote that he 'still can't decide whether The Turner Prize Discussion [...] was a satire on contemporary art or a satire on arts television', but '[that] it was a comedy of some kind – and

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Toby Litt, 'Grand aesthetic of the dumped', *New Statesman*, 25 November 2002, accessed 21 September 2014, at <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/156709>

⁴²⁵ Richard Gott, 'Sexual in-tent', *The Guardian*, 5 April 1997.

⁴²⁶ 'For the record', *Independent on Sunday*, 7 December 1997.

⁴²⁷ 'Taking a Turner for the Worst', *The Guardian*, 4 December 1997.

⁴²⁸ Claire Longrigg, 'Sixty minutes: noise – by art's bad girl', *The Guardian*, 4 December 1997.

of quite a high order – isn't in doubt'.⁴²⁹ Writing for *The Herald*, Ruth Wishart declared Emin 'anxious to be famous for being famous, [and she] enhanced her chances on television on the night of the Turner Prize', before describing her 'principal claim to artistic merit' as the tent that 'seems to indicate not so much a prodigious artistic talent, as evidence of the ability to pass O-grade needlework allied to poor sexual manners'.⁴³⁰ Perhaps the kindest remark was made by John Walsh, also in *The Independent*, who called 'the Tracey Emin figure' a 'puzzle' in the same breath as he described her as being 'as pissed as a parrot': 'One knows that the real Ms Emin is a warm and clever artist with a sense of humour [...] but how could you square this with the apparition that appeared on screen?'⁴³¹

The response to Emin was like a shower of arrows being loosed from pre-loaded bows; a crescendo of damnation that had been building all along and had finally been given a legitimate outlet. The sense of catharsis in these comments is palpable. In them, the critics gleefully defenestrated not only contemporary art, but Emin herself. Furthermore, as the link between Emin's persona and her work was already seen to be bidirectional, her humiliating, argumentative, brash, and unintelligent television appearance further fuelled criticisms of her art as equally unmediated and uncontrolled.

While Perry's own television appearances have occasionally been met with controversy of their own, they are usually received on different terms. Perhaps the most contentious of these was Perry's inclusion in June 2008 on the BBC political debate show *Question Time*, which garnered approximately 40 complaints from viewers online.⁴³² In many cases, however, the outrage was aimed at the BBC and not Perry himself: these included viewer criticisms that the programme had 'descended into a Channel 4-type freak show', and was now 'aimed at thick, lowest common denominator

⁴²⁹ Thomas Sutcliffe, 'TV Review – The Turner Prize Discussion', *The London Independent*, 4 December 1997.

⁴³⁰ Ruth Wishart, 'Acid test for an artist', *The Herald*, 8 December 1997.

⁴³¹ John Walsh, 'Of course the Turner Prize should really have gone to the chat show', *The London Independent*, 4 December 1997.

⁴³² Tara Conlan, 'BBC defends Question Time after "freak show" complaints', *The Guardian*, 27 June 2008.

types’,⁴³³ as well as *The Telegraph*’s accusations that Question Time was pulling ‘silly pranks aimed at shocking Middle England’.⁴³⁴

Notably, most condemnations of Perry’s presence came from tabloid and conservative spheres. *The Star* reported that Perry was ‘pointless on Question Time. Or anywhere’;⁴³⁵ *The Express* reprinted objections that his presence was ‘stomach-churning’;⁴³⁶ and *The Birmingham Mail* opined (after an obligatory mention of ‘I like to think I am open-minded but’) that ‘this particular transvestite ruined the programme by his weird appearance’.⁴³⁷ Nonetheless, Perry’s involvement was simultaneously defended by viewers and journalists alike: while Liz Hunt at *The Telegraph* accused Perry’s inclusion of reducing the programme to ‘the status of a second-rate pantomime’,⁴³⁸ other viewers supported exactly this, arguing that he was ‘making a statement about politics being a pantomime’,⁴³⁹ while another article in *The Telegraph* noted that some ‘described the artist as “very intelligent” and “the most honest panellist” on Thursday night’.⁴⁴⁰ Whereas Emin was decried by both liberal broadsheet and conservative tabloid papers alike, the ire over Perry’s appearance came only from those who ‘didn’t get it’; and whereas his appearance was defended by not only the BBC but a number of other institutions, hers was simply presented as a universal disgrace.

There is an obvious difference, of course, in Emin’s drunkenness, which does present her in markedly different tones to Perry’s composed behaviour, and which further fosters ideas of her being out of control. While it would be simply untrue to reduce the scandal over Emin’s comportment solely to issues of gender, there is, I assert, still a gendered component, related to Emin’s ‘laddishness’ and unfeminine behaviour, both of which are confirmed by her inebriation; the accusation of her ‘poor sexual manners’ subtly corroborates this. Furthermore, Emin’s drunkenness has long been a part of her

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Hunt, ‘Is “Question Time” reducing itself to a second-rate panto?’.

⁴³⁵ Garry Bushell, ‘Random irritations’, *The Star*, 29 June 2008.

⁴³⁶ Elisa Roche, ‘Viewers in shock over cross-dress panel guest’, *The Express*, 28 June 2008.

⁴³⁷ Maureen Messent, ‘Not ready for Perry’, *The Birmingham Mail*, 4 July 2008.

⁴³⁸ Hunt, ‘Is “Question Time” reducing itself to a second-rate panto?’.

⁴³⁹ Conlan, ‘BBC defends Question Time after “freak show” complaints’.

⁴⁴⁰ Nicole Martin, ‘Furore over Bo Peep artist on BBC debate’, *The Telegraph*, 28 June 2008.

persona. Accounts of *The Shop* with Sarah Lucas describe it as having a ‘permanent atmosphere of drunkenness and hangover’,⁴⁴¹ and drunken tales underpin many of Emin’s works. Relatedly, there are temporal differences, too, and contemporary art was held in a different regard in 2008 than it was in 1997, at the peak of YBA oversaturation and audience contempt. In many ways, then, Emin’s ‘performance’ on Channel 4 – the home of the ‘freak show’, as the opposition to Perry’s *Question Time* appearance made clear – presented exactly what was expected of her, and it was consumed with characteristic voyeuristic, and purgative, glee at her misfortune.

In using the word ‘performance’, I do not mean to suggest, like Emin’s critics, that her drunkenness was some form of performance art. It was not. The media’s widespread positioning of it in the same realm as her ‘confessional’ artwork, however, loudly signifies the status afforded (or rather, denied) to the feminised confessional genre. Similarly, in suggesting the similarities between Perry and Emin, I do not intend to argue that they are the same but for gender, and that their divergent receptions are simply the result of institutionalised sexism; again, they are not, though this certainly has a role to play. Undoubtedly, Perry is doing something subtly different from Emin, much like he is doing something related but subtly different from the YBAs. Nonetheless, that this ‘something different’ builds on, and shares many traits with, Emin’s practice – in ways that have been received differently, and even outright denied, based on Perry’s self-positioning – is similarly undeniable.

In particular, Emin’s highly gendered, sexualised, and confessional work provides a useful model against which to compare Perry’s own. Perry’s similar use of autobiography, rehearsed experiences, sexual frankness, and purported candour positions him alongside Emin, and his proposed sincerity places his (already feminised) work squarely within the feminised genre of the confession, a categorisation that is further enforced by his transvestism. While Perry’s cross-dressing allows him to adopt these feminised genres and media, however, he is not limited to them, a fate which commonly befalls women artists who do the same; similarly, unlike his female contemporaries, Perry’s artistic agency is not undermined by the belief that his work is something that flows unmediated from his

⁴⁴¹ Collings, *Sarah Lucas*, p. 29.

psyche, even when confronted with evidence to the contrary. Rather, he is allowed both the sincerity that is associated with women's confessions, and the logic, thoughtfulness, and universality that is concomitant with men's art. While this authorisation is not limited to his performance of gender, and is also linked more broadly with his ironic, humorous, and self-deprecating construction of self more generally, a comparison with the equally-constructed persona of Tracey Emin reveals that there is nonetheless much indebted to Perry's underlying, reassuring masculinity.

Chapter Three: Curating the Past

‘Do not look too hard for meaning here.’

– Perry, in *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*

Introduction

In 2011, Perry’s major exhibition, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, was held at the British Museum. A collaboration with the institution proposed by Perry himself to the director, Neil MacGregor, the exhibition saw Perry selecting a number of personally resonant objects from the museum’s stores and interweaving them with his own artworks. Unlike the usual strategy of contemporary artistic intervention within museum and gallery institutions, however, Perry here sought to ‘reverse the process of response’. He describes:

When an artist is invited to ‘respond’ to the collection it is an artificially induced version of the process that has powered world culture forever. Makers of artefacts have been ‘responding’ to objects made by earlier generations since the beginning of craft. [...]

Why not, I thought, make the works I am inspired to create, and find objects in this vast collection that respond to them? Somewhere in its endless storerooms there must be objects that echo my concerns and style.¹

¹ Grayson Perry, ‘Introduction’, in *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (London, 2011), p. 11.

From more than eight million objects in those endless storerooms, Perry chose 170, complementing them with – or using them to complement – 30 of his own works, both new and old. Together, he loosely categorised these by theme, with classifications including ‘Shrines’; ‘Magick’; ‘Maps’; ‘Souvenirs of Pilgrimage’; ‘Sexuality and Gender’; ‘Scary Figures’; and ‘Craftsmanship’. Alan Measles featured throughout as the ruling deity of Perry’s imagined world, depicted in Perry’s own works but also figured in the form of other cross-cultural images of bears, such as a painting from an Iranian manuscript, a carving of the Egyptian god Bes, Swiss medals, and a Russian badge of a cartoon bear.

The show was a critical and public success, receiving widespread media coverage, general acclaim, and high visitor numbers; it was so popular, in fact, that it was extended an extra week beyond its initially-projected closing date, with many of the run’s final dates being fully booked out in advance. Also selling out were items from the gift shop, including a pewter keychain of Alan Measles on Perry’s Kenilworth motorbike. Writing for *The Independent*, author and journalist Howard Jacobson’s review reads like a love letter (with a nod to Jane Eyre he swoons, ‘Reader, I’m in love’): through his gushing, he calls it ‘[t]he best exhibition by a contemporary artist I’ve seen in years’, and says that ‘[h]ere is not just art but the reason why art is’.² In *The Observer*, Laura Cumming writes that ‘the past comes so brightly to life through his eyes’ and that ‘[t]aken out of context and mixed up with Perry’s works, [the museum’s objects] acquire new freedom and force’.³ Cumming also praises Perry’s humour, which ‘enriches the whole experience, coupled with his superb insights into the minds of unknown craftsmen stretching back a million years’, calling the whole exhibition an ‘exhilarating celebration’.⁴ Likewise, while *The Daily Telegraph*’s Charles Spencer opens by documenting his distaste for Perry and his low expectations for the show – which he summarises with a synopsis of the show’s premise and a curt ‘[s]o far, so irritatingly pretentious’ – before admitting that ‘actually,

² Howard Jacobson, ‘When the rouge an artist wears is deceptive’, *The Independent*, 8 October 2011.

³ Laura Cumming, ‘One man and his teddy’, *The Observer*, 9 October 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

Perry's work has a high degree of craftsmanship, and, unlike Hirst, he does the tricky stuff himself'.⁵ Spencer, now fully charmed, declares that 'this illuminating voyage around the artist's personal obsessions proves both entertaining and unexpectedly touching', and that 'the great thing about Perry, it turns out, is that he has a sense of humour and an admirable honesty'.⁶

While Spencer's newfound love of Perry is at least partially predicated on his distanciation from the YBAs and the typical strategies of contemporary art, as outlined in chapter one (there is something of this in Jacobson's account, too⁷), it is also, troublingly, related to Perry's response to the British Museum's collections. As well as admiring his humour and honesty, Spencer refers to a pot in the show made by Perry called *I Have Never Been to Africa* (2011, Figure 77), which depicts a number of stereotypes about the continent as portrayed by the media. Spencer writes that in this, Perry 'comes up with his own take on African art, while admitting that he has never been to Africa and that, whenever he thinks about the place, he feels a mixture of guilt and fear – precisely echoing my own shameful response to the dark continent'.⁸

While this is only one isolated – and clearly problematic – critical response, it in fact picks up on a thread that I argue underpins not only Perry's curation but his work as a whole, most pertinently with regards to his consideration of themes of national identity and multiculturalism, and which begins to explain Perry's adoption as 'national treasure' on both sides of the political spectrum. Despite Perry's overlaid narratives of religion, spirituality, and the construction of culture more generally through material objects, then, I want to suggest that there is an underlying national politics to Perry's exhibition at the British Museum. Although *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* is not, ostensibly, about national identity, instead being preoccupied with playfully de- and re-constructing systems of knowledge and belief through the avatars of Perry's personal mythology, its staging at the British

⁵ Charles Spencer, 'I'll admit it: Perry's got pots of talent', *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2011.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jacobson has previously written about his distaste for the Turner Prize; see: Howard Jacobson, 'Is the Turner good for art?', *The Observer*, Sunday 19 November 2000.

⁸ Spencer, 'I'll admit it'.

Museum is revealing, and loaded. In particular, I want to propose that, in wielding these collections, Perry is being institutionalised as a cultural spokesperson for the nation.

To make this claim, I want to look not at *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (though I will return to that exhibition at the conclusion of this chapter), but rather, to consider two earlier exhibitions curated by Perry – *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2006) and *Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry Selects from the Arts Council Collection* (2008) – in order to investigate how it was that he could come to occupy such a position in the first place. In many ways, these two exhibitions can be said to prefigure the curatorial strategies of *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, and the ways in which Perry uses these earlier shows to play with ideas of authenticity, English (and British) culture, the role of the artist, and the representation of history – or perhaps more accurately, heritage – suggest corollary interpretations and essential context for this later show.

In particular, these earlier outings reveal the ways in which Perry uses curation, heritage, and national collections to refigure English national identity at a time of uncertainty, using folk culture, nostalgia, and elegy – as well as a postmodern deconstruction of these same techniques – to shore up Englishness against the threats of multiculturalism, Europeanism, and the devolution of Britain. In considering these exhibitions, I want to suggest that Perry’s curation has always been occupied with ideas of national and cultural identity, and that this has been executed in a way that promotes these agendas without being understood to be explicitly ‘nationalistic’ or even necessarily patriotic. (One way that this is achieved is through the repeated use of the distancing yet legitimising frame of the past.)

In this way, I argue, Perry’s exhibitions provide an oblique space for the re-establishment of English national identity. My use of ‘English’ and not ‘British’ here is intentional, and this distinction will be considered in depth throughout the rest of the chapter. I argue throughout that Perry is a distinctly, and purposely, English artist, and that the slippages between his conception of ‘Englishness’ and ‘Britishness’ are consistent with the English psyche more generally, as it has been theorised by a

number of scholars. This in particular makes his institutionalisation by the British Museum all the more intriguing.

The Charms of *The Charms of Lincolnshire*

In 2006, Perry curated his first major exhibition, *The Charms of Lincolnshire*. Designed to take place at The Collection, a newly opened, nationally- and locally-funded gallery in Lincoln,⁹ the show ran from 4 February to 7 May of that year, before moving to Perry's London gallery, Victoria Miro, from 7 July to 12 August. The collaboration was commissioned by the Senior Keeper of The Collection, Jeremy Webster, who notes that he had identified Perry as an artist with whom he would like to work as early as 2001, when The Collection had not yet been built and Webster was working for the Usher Gallery; this was another local gallery which housed a collection of decorative objects, such as watches, porcelains, miniatures, and silver, which were bequeathed to the city by the Lincoln-born jeweller James Ward Usher, and which merged with The Collection on its creation in 2005. Webster also comments that at this time, the Usher Gallery had been contemplating a major refit, and considered that Perry 'might be the sort of artist to help re-hang [their] collections'.¹⁰ Perry was asked to work with the gallery in 2002, but due to his Turner Prize nomination and the media popularity that followed, the plans were postponed for another few years, and eventually manifested instead in the Usher Gallery's newer incarnation.

During this time, the exhibition concept soon shifted from a simple rehang of the collection's objects to instead using curation to create and tell a story, written using various objects from many of Lincolnshire's museums. In *The Charms of Lincolnshire's* exhibition catalogue, Perry discusses how

⁹ Among The Collection's 'partners and funders' is the Arts Council England, with whom Perry would work on his next exhibition, *Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry Selects from the Arts Council Collection* (2008), and the British Museum, with whom he would work on, and host, 2011's *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. Other listed supporters include national and international organisations such as The Art Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, and a number of local bodies, such as The City of Lincoln Council, the Heslam Trust, Visit Lincoln, and Visit Lincolnshire. For more on The Collection's funding bodies, see 'Our Partners and Funders', *The Collection*, accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://www.thecollectionmuseum.com/?/about-us/our-partners-and-funders>

¹⁰ This quote is taken from a transcript of a presentation about the exhibition which was given by Webster at The Visual Arts and Galleries Association's 'Legacies of Commissioning' symposium at the University of Glasgow on 13 June 2007, and which has since been uploaded to the Scottish Contemporary Art Network's website. 'Legacies of Commissioning', *Scottish Contemporary Art Network*, accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://sca-net.org/downloads/50f2e5d67e84d-report.pdf>

originally this story revolved around ‘an unknown artist, a mentally ill farmer’s wife who was driven insane by the loss of her children’.¹¹ In the text of a presentation uploaded to the Scottish Contemporary Arts Network’s website, in which he used the exhibition as a case study during a panel on ‘Legacies of Commissioning’ at the University of Glasgow in June 2007, Webster expands on Perry’s proposal: ‘And so [the farmer’s wife] started to make pots as a sort of therapy and of course this Victorian farmer lady would be Grayson. So he would get a chance to dress up and then he would also start to make work [in response to the collection], so the whole element of creation would be a part of the process as well.’¹² In the end, however, the idea of an official story was dropped in favour of the exhibition’s final manifestation as ‘a poem written with objects’,¹³ but Perry nonetheless notes that the fictional widow’s ‘ghost and those of the children haunt the choices and works [he has] made for the show’.¹⁴

The exhibition’s publicity materials, as well as a number of photographs in the show, further attest to this ghostly presence, containing Perry himself cross-dressed as this omnipresent spectre. The exhibition’s key image, used to advertise the show (Figure 78, 2005), depicts Perry-as-widow, his dour face enclosed by a drooping bonnet with a trail of ribbons. He sits in front of a fireplace in a corseted Victorian dress, his hands aimlessly resting on his knees, while in front of him, off-centre, partly out of frame and out of focus, one of his large modern pots from the exhibition sits on a table.

That pot is *Quotes from the Internet* (Figure 79, 2005), perhaps the antithesis of Victorian imagery and ideology in title, content, and form. The pot itself is a glazed bright yellow, covered in decorative black and red swirls, loops, and designs, including floral arrangements, deer, calligraphic loops, crossed rifles, men on horseback, blocky steeples, and a crown. Nestled between these illustrations are a number of blocks of text. The pot is covered in ‘inspirational’ or otherwise famous quotes from major intellectual figures including Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and

¹¹ Grayson Perry, ‘Essay’, in *Grayson Perry: The Charms of Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 2006), p. 7.

¹² Webster, ‘Legacies of Commissioning’.

¹³ Perry, ‘Essay’, p. 6. Perry’s use of poetry in his curatorial strategies will be discussed in more detail in the next section when we come to discuss his next exhibition, *Unpopular Culture*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Mahatma Gandhi, such as ‘We must become the change we want to see in the world’ (Gandhi), ‘Everywhere I go I find a poet has been there before me’ (Freud), and ‘Sentimentality is a superstructure covering brutality’ (Jung). That these easily digestible quotes are, as the title notes, simply harvested ‘from the Internet’ and not from a sustained engagement with the writings of the authors themselves is the pot’s very point, which seems to be making a statement about superficial and glib attempts at intellectualism trumping actual thought in an Internet age where all knowledge is at our fingertips.

In this respect, the pot is an interesting choice for the Victoriana-themed exhibition at hand, but it is this self-same prolepsis that makes it so compelling in the case of the exhibition postcard: the central image of Perry as widow is in sepia, camouflaging all anachronistic details in an act that Waldemar Januszczak would come to characterise as the show’s tendency towards deliberate ‘doublecrossing’,¹⁵ in reference to the way in which many of Perry’s photographs and objects purport to be authentic Lincolnshire artefacts until closer inspection reveals their tricksterism. Furthermore, the pot’s presence in this setting reveals that Perry’s own guerilla strategies are once again at work here: without the bright colours (here numbed by the sepia), the title, and a close inspection of the distinctly non-Victorian text on the pot, one might mistake its folksy outlines of English rural iconography (the man on horseback in a top hat and the rifles, both of which suggest hunting; the parochial steeple; the royal crown; the botanical calligraphy) as ‘authentic’.

This idea of authenticity is something with which Perry flirts heavily in the exhibition. As the inclusion of the above pot makes clear, the exhibition was indeed not simply a basic re-hang, but came to include objects both from Lincolnshire’s museums and of Perry’s own making. As such, Perry served as both curator and artist, a combination of roles which he would again inhabit when he came to curate his *Unpopular Culture* show with the Arts Council in 2008 (for which he would similarly dress up as a kind of character, like his Victorian widow here) and then again with his *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* exhibition at the British Museum (for which his costume could be suggested to be

¹⁵ Waldemar Januszczak, ‘The chamber of secrets’, *The Sunday Times*, 16 July 2006, p. 17.

something of a caricature of himself up to that point, positioning himself as the pantomime dame of the art world, as we have seen in chapter two).

Importantly, the exhibition had no labels on anything, and all of the items included – ranging from Perry’s own sculptures to an unusually plain embroidered sampler from the collections – were treated as fine art objects.¹⁶ Webster describes how ‘[...] things were shown on white plinths and they were given space around them. There was no clutter, objects were displayed on their own and the lighting was very dramatic.’¹⁷ The catalogue preserves this approach, with the objects being similarly presented without comment other than Webster’s opening remarks and Perry’s brief essay. Even here, in book form, the images are presented against contemporary white backgrounds with no information other than the title of the object or piece: they are given without dates, and without authors.

Such strategies of display are intended to level the hierarchies between objects, using the space of the gallery to insist that each piece is worthy of the same attention and discrimination, regardless of the period of its creation or the reputation of its maker. A consequent side effect – and, of course, intention – of this approach is the confusion of origin and the disruption of value judgements of taste. Webster gives the example of a sculpture made by Perry for the show, *Hunt Post* (Figure 80, 2005), explaining that ‘[a] lot of people thought this was a genuine object from Lincolnshire Museums, found in a ditch, but it was actually one of Grayson’s pieces’.¹⁸ The piece has an inbuilt faux-antiquity, lacking many of Perry’s artistic signatures; instead, it is rust coloured (the obfuscation of the catalogue makes no mention of its materials, but Perry’s use of metal for another piece on display, *Angel of the South*, suggests that it too may be made of iron) with an underlying trident overlaid by a curlicue of horses, dogs, and deer.

Other objects which court this troubling of authenticity include a selection of photographs, much like the publicity image of Perry with *Quotes from the Internet*. The exhibition displays a number of faded, sepia images of rural life in Lincolnshire (Figure 81): industrial advances alongside wooden

¹⁶ Webster, ‘Legacies of Commissioning’.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

carts overloaded with bags; farmers milling around; women in aprons and bonnets re-enacting Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners* or lugging heavy sacks. It is here that we find, slipped in amongst these deteriorating documents, photographs which on further inspection star Perry himself. As well as the previously discussed image of Perry by the fireplace in a Victorian corset and crinoline – an outfit which becomes contemporarily fetishistic in the light of Perry's cross-dressing – another image (Figure 82) shows Perry in a peasant's smock, apron, and bonnet, like his hunched over compatriots in the other images. He stands next to a man – perhaps an implied husband, or simply an employed gravedigger – with his head bowed towards a miniature child-sized coffin. That coffin is *The Angel of the South* (Figure 83, 2005), another artwork created by Perry for the show.

Of images like this, Perry has said 'I hope it will make people look twice at the pictures and realise they are not what they seem'.¹⁹ In this way, both *Quotes from the Internet* and *The Angel of the South* become artefacts of an imagined past, presented as 'authentic', or at least Victorian, because of having been ironically 'documented' as so. Perry's statement does not just refer to his own presence, pictorial or artistic, in the show, however. Instead, his frustration of authenticity further serves to disrupt not only the way we engage with museums, particularly those presenting a historical or scientific narrative that is so often accepted as objective and factual simply by virtue of being presented in, or by, a museum (creating something of a paradox, as items must be 'authentic' and deemed worthy of display to be in a museum, but the act of displaying them in a museum bestows upon them this 'authenticity' and worthiness), but also to complicate our engagement with the rural and 'authentic' countryside, an essential facet of the exhibition which we will consider in more detail shortly.²⁰

¹⁹ 'Grayson favour', *Lincolnshire Echo*, 3 February 2006, p. 8.

²⁰ Such strategies and statements exemplify another key ambition of Perry's exhibition which has so far in this discussion been at the fore throughout: that is, the way in which *The Charms of Lincolnshire* seeks to complicate and question our engagement with museums and galleries as institutions more generally, and to explore how we construct and receive national identity; however, while these concerns are certainly appropriate here, Perry's own brand of 'institutional critique' will instead make up the central focus of this chapter's concluding discussion of *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*.

Continuing these disruptive curatorial strategies, the lack of placards and catalogue details makes it difficult to tell which objects are which, though this tactic is, in effect, more theoretical than practical. More than anything, the result is that every object is now ‘by’ Perry, appropriated by his act of curatorship. Writing for *The Observer*, art critic Laura Cumming similarly affirms that Perry’s curatorial style is really an extension of his usual method of ‘geurrilla tactics’, arguing that ‘he manipulates the local art according to his own signature ruse: at first glance lovely, on closer inspection upsetting – exactly the way his pottery operates’.²¹ Furthermore, Perry’s own works are, for the most part, distinctly his; while some, such as *Hunt Post*, successfully remain inconspicuous, the majority are more obvious, and the pots included are characteristic of the work that won him national acclaim as a Turner Prize winning artist. *Attracted to Suffering* (Figure 84, 2005), another pot in the exhibition, shows a woman in a bonnet and typical Victorian dress crawling on all fours around a rural village, presenting Victoriana in a sadomasochistic and fetishistic light typical of Perry’s usual and highly modern *modus operandi*; around her are several decoupage flowers with cut-outs of screaming, orgasming women’s faces for petals. As well as representing Perry’s own trademark interests, then, the piece seems to suggest that all of the city’s seedier vices, contrary to popular belief, also exist in the country, too, and have done so throughout history (as evidenced by the normally ‘quaint’ historical outfit’s re-figuring as an item of fetishism).

Similarly, several plates drawn in crude faux-art style depicting folksy designs – a bird, a horse, both drawn in naïve style – are captioned simply by the brand names of modern corporations (‘Nokia’, ‘Ikea’ [Figure 85, 2005]), intended to rupture the folksy idealisation of past and present life in the countryside. Perry’s statements about these pieces – ‘the mobile is more common than birdsong’;²² ‘[in the country] you don’t go to a local craftsman for your handmade Windsor chair turned out of new willow by some guy in the forest. You go down to Ikea just like everyone else’²³ – make clear his intentions to confront existing sentimental preconceptions about the country by transposing such

²¹ Laura Cumming, ‘Could he be stringing us along?’, *The Observer*, 16 July 2006, p. 17.

²² Quoted in Gabriel Coxhead, ‘Ploughman’s bunch’, *Financial Times*, 31 July 2006.

²³ Quoted in Alastair Sooke, “‘I don’t go out of my way to shock’”, *The Daily Telegraph*, June 2006, p. 27.

idealisation into branded corporate language. In contrast to the other ‘uncanny, powerful’ historical objects on display, one reviewer calls them ‘easy, ironic gags’ and ‘blatant one-liners’, a criticism that has regularly been levelled at Perry’s work at large.²⁴ When read in tandem with *Attracted to Suffering*, however, it is apparent that – regardless of whether he is successful or not – Perry is nonetheless presenting himself as disrupting the wholesome lens through which we stereotypically view the countryside.

While the exhibition has a number of themes running through it – explicitly, those foregrounded by Perry of ‘death, childhood, folk art, hunting and the feminine’,²⁵ and implicitly, the authenticity of the museum, the construction of ‘heritage’, and the melancholia of English nationalism – Perry’s focus on, and characterisation of, the countryside is, I argue, one of the exhibition’s most important facets.

In its web archive for the exhibition, Victoria Miro’s blurb reads: ‘Grayson Perry was born and grew up in rural Essex. Living and working in London the artist’s practice has largely dealt with metropolitan themes. *The Charms of Lincolnshire* allows Perry the possibility to think and create work about the countryside’.²⁶ As exemplified here, emphasis is repeatedly placed on Perry’s engagement with the rural and pastoral countryside, as opposed to the urban and cosmopolitan themes and landscapes that have so often characterised his work. Both Perry and others accentuate his suddenly rural upbringing in Essex, and he writes:

I grew up in the country and have strong memories of playing in tumbledown barns under wormy oak rafters, like being inside a whale carcass. I enjoyed clambering on rusting pieces of farm machinery clogged with cobwebs and brambles. The colours and textures of such numinous childhood moments meant that in our search [for objects to

²⁴ Coxhead, ‘Ploughman’s bunch’.

²⁵ Perry, ‘Essay’, p. 7.

²⁶ ‘Grayson Perry: The Charms of Lincolnshire’, *Victoria Miro*, accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://www.victoria-miro.com/exhibitions/369/>

include in the exhibition,] I was drawn to items that were corroding, unloved, or in need of fumigating.²⁷

In querying this it is not my intention to suggest that Perry's upbringing was *not* in fact rural, but it is notable that this sort of *Boy's Own* rough-and-tumble adventure prose had not been present in any previous discussions of the artist or his childhood (including his autobiography *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl*, which also came out in 2006), with the majority of the focus until now remaining, as we have previously seen, on Perry's early psychosexual childhood experiences, unhappy family relationships, and internal life which veered from obsessions with planes, trains, and automobiles to women's clothing. By presenting such an outdoorsy image of himself now, however, Perry not only authenticates his role as curator, by ensuring the audience that he is the appropriate country boy for the job of handling Lincolnshire's past, but also enables the exhibition to be framed as a return to his authentic roots, as well as a shift away from the homogenous London art scene. Rural Lincolnshire is made to stand for rural Essex, and both are seen as a retreat from his (and contemporary art's) more metropolitan concerns in a sort of conceptual pastoral.

Some version of pastoral

It is this underlying idea of the pastoral that is especially striking in *The Charms of Lincolnshire*, and which ties together the exhibition's interweaving threads of English nationalism, folk culture and the mourning of its loss, and the exhibition's subtly hierarchical relationship with its subject(s). *The Oxford Companion to Western Art* defines the pastoral as 'a genre of painting whose subject is the idealised life of shepherds who sing, make love, and graze their flocks in an ideally beautiful landscape; such works represent the courtier's or city-dweller's dream of escape, and the genre

²⁷ Grayson Perry, 'Child death and rural voodoo: my delight in the dark side', *The Times*, 1 February 2006, p. 16.

suggests a longing for a past Golden Age or a remote Arcadia'.²⁸ The pastoral genre, or mode, appears throughout literature, music, and the visual arts; in painting, its most famous example is perhaps The Louvre's *The Pastoral Concert* (previously known as *Fête Champêtre*; c. 1510-11 [Figure 86]), which has alternately been attributed to Giorgione and his pupil Titian. Antoine Watteau's *fête galante* paintings of the 18th century, which show elegantly attired individuals in the idealised landscapes of Arcadia are a variation on this theme; though these were envisioned as a way to present both his patrons and the more accepted genre of moralising mythological painting at once, in actuality they perhaps best represent the trope's underlying tension between the city (the civilised, cosmopolitan patrons, who look out of place in their discordantly fancy garments) and the country (the incongruous, lush landscape) that lurks at the heart of the pastoral. Not simply a nostalgic and regressive image of the countryside – though it is often that too – the pastoral always also embodies a number of socio-political and cultural concerns about the meanings, and inhabitants, of these two 'oppositional' spaces.

William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*, written in 1935, perhaps best exemplifies this inherent discordance. Though the text is not without its problems – fellow scholar of the pastoral Paul Alpers has called it 'as difficult to use as it is easy to admire',²⁹ and Empson himself wrote, in his 1974 preface to the 1935 original, 'I have corrected some mistakes, but could not bring the first chapter up to date, nor even purge successfully the bits in later chapters which now seem to me turgid'³⁰ – it has nonetheless remained hugely influential even outside of its field of English literature, particularly for modernist and Marxist art historical interpreters such as Thomas Crow and Julian Stallabrass.³¹ In his opening essay, 'Proletarian Literature', Empson posits that:

²⁸ Helen Langdon, 'Pastoral', in Hugh Brigstocke (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Western Art* (Oxford, 2003), accessed 16 February 2015, at

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662037.001.0001/acref-9780198662037-e-1990>

²⁹ Paul J. Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago, 1996), p. 32.

³⁰ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1995), xxix.

³¹ For more, see: Thomas E. Crow, 'The Simple Life: Pastoralism and the Persistence of Genre in Recent Art' in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, 1996), pp. 173-211; Julian Stallabrass, 'The urban pastoral' in *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London, 1999), pp. 237-257.

The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way). From seeing two sorts of people combined like this you thought better of both; the best parts of both were used.³²

In this way, although the pastoral might be associated with John Constable-esque images of whitewashed spaces – that is, cosily nostalgic and with any offending or disparate technological imagery or other ugliness edited out – such representations necessarily come with an intrinsic political and ideological motive.

Empson's repeated focus is on the way in which the pastoral process '[puts] the complex into the simple',³³ and he notes that 'both versions [of the pastoral], straight and comic, are based on a double attitude of the artist to the worker, of the complex man to the simple one ("I am in one way better, in another not so good"), and this may well recognise a permanent truth about the aesthetic situation'.³⁴ His use of the term 'proletarian', particularly in 1935, immediately situates his argument within a Marxist discourse, as does his questioning of who comprises pastoral literature's audience; pastoral is, he argues, 'a puzzling form which looks proletarian but isn't'.³⁵

Empson's differentiation between folk literature and the pastoral is also worth considering in the context of Perry's exhibition, which, through its emphasis on folklore and ritual, cultivates the sheen of the former while actually enacting the latter. Perhaps the most explicit of these references is the inclusion of Perry's early piece, *Baba Yaga's Hut* (Figure 87, 1983), a scrappy assemblage of junk forming a run-down house with chickens' feet, and its conceptual companion, *God Please Keep My*

³² Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, p. 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Children Safe (Figure 88, 2005), a taut white ceramic hare which has been entirely covered in frantic, bleeding blue scrawls pleading the title of the piece. The superstitious nature of both of these pieces plays on the double meaning of the exhibition's name, which at once suggests a 'bucolic cliché of National Trust fluffiness [...] and also [hints] that the items on display are talismans of some arcane rural voodoo left fallow in our drive-by culture'.³⁶

In Slavic folklore, Baba Yaga is a witch-like figure who often kidnaps children and tries to lure them into her oven so she can eat them.³⁷ Though somewhat anomalous here for not being an English figure, Baba Yaga fits neatly into the exhibition's explicit focuses on child death – with her menacing presence contained by the protective hare of *God Please Keep My Children Safe* – and folklore. While on the surface, the inclusion of the piece seems to reflect a further narrative consideration of the themes earlier demarcated by Perry (death, the feminine, childhood), it implicitly calls to mind Empson's suggestion that '[the] wider sense of the term [proletarian literature] includes such folk-literature as is by the people, for the people, and about the people. But most fairy stories and ballads, though *by* and *for*, are not *about*; whereas pastoral though *about* is not by or for.'³⁸ Perry's emphasis on his use of fairy tales and folk culture – such as the presence of *Baba Yaga's Hut* – in fact obfuscates the true nature of the show and its audience: that is, its underlying pastoral ideology.

To understand Perry's use of the pastoral here, however, we must not only look to its traditional manifestations but also to its recent mutations as seen in the work of his contemporaries. In *High Art Lite*, Julian Stallabrass discusses contemporary British art's proclivity for what he calls the 'urban pastoral'. Here, he summarises a recurring strain of YBA art that takes as its focus the city, and particularly inner-city, landscape, using it with the same theoretical implications as its predecessor. Stallabrass uses Sarah Lucas's *Islington Diamonds* as his opening example: part of a larger installation, 1997's *Car Park*, we are told that 'Islington diamonds' is a slang term that refers to the broken gems of

³⁶ Perry, 'Child death and rural voodoo'.

³⁷ For more on Baba Yaga, see: Andreas Johns, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother of the Russian Folktale* (New York, 2004), especially the chapter 'Baba Yaga and Children', pp. 85-139.

³⁸ Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, p. 13.

vandalised car windows. The work, Stallabrass argues, is thus ‘about seeing something valuable in something trivial associated with the less advantaged sections of society, and bringing that to the attention of art lovers’.³⁹ In this impetus, Stallabrass locates something of the fundamental motivations of the pastoral in general, allowing him to note that such tourism of the inner city is a continuation of the ‘pastoral strain that runs through contemporary British art’.⁴⁰ The traditional landscape form is no longer the green belt, but the concrete jungle.⁴¹

Empson’s theorisations in particular are key to Stallabrass’s formulations of the pastoral in contemporary British art. In quoting the same passage cited above, Stallabrass reiterates how Empson touches on a critical facet of the pastoral: its class connotations. While this has obviously always been one of its central tenets, it seems even more appropriate when we consider YBA art, in which the use of class markers forms a significant part of its visual rhetoric. If the pastoral expresses simple truths in complex form, these simple truths are the folk wisdom of common people, ‘adorned with the refined expression of the gentleman’,⁴² leading Stallabrass to conclude, like Empson, that it remains ‘plainly an art that is about common people but not for or by them’, a definition he extends to Young British Art in general.⁴³ In addition to further upholding the stratification of these geographical zones (whether city and country in the usual definition of the pastoral, or city and inner city in Stallabrass’s formulation) and, more importantly, the hierarchical ranking of each and their denizens, there is, then, naturally something inherently both voyeuristic and exploitative about the mode.

Contemporary British art as discussed in *High Art Lite* may have taken traditional pastoral objectives and transposed them to the inner city, but Stallabrass notes that the old pastoral’s optimistically educational tone has been replaced with a typical YBA cynicism (presided over by

³⁹ Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 250.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For more on the city-specific elements of YBA art, see Aidan While, ‘Locating Art Worlds: London and the Making of Young British Art’, *Area*, Vol. 35 (2003), pp. 251–263.

⁴² Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, p. 251.

⁴³ Ibid.

Damien Hirst, who ‘serves as the usher, with his metaphorical murder of the rural idyll’⁴⁴). Discussing Richard Billingham’s art book, *Ray’s a Laugh*, which photographs and displays his dysfunctional, alcoholic, lower-class family, Stallabrass notes that ‘lacking explicit critique, the lives of these people are put up for aesthetic appropriation’ in a way that to some constitutes ‘middle-class porn’, though he is careful to also acknowledge the visual hints of an ‘aspiration to make things better, present in the mother’s decorative drive, in pictures of Billingham’s parents embracing, of the mother cuddling and feeding a tiny kitten’.⁴⁵

Ray’s a Laugh is something of an exception, however, and most of the contemporary urban pastoral work discussed by Stallabrass does not use people. Instead, it uses objects to stand in for them, partially because the working class no longer holds an idealised pull for the middle class, and thus ‘today’s lumpen urban underclass cannot serve as the repository of industry and virtue, nor are these attributes as attractive as they once were’.⁴⁶ (Stallabrass’s emphasis on ‘today’s lumpen urban underclass’ is particularly pertinent in the context of Perry’s exhibition, which avoids such pitfalls by staging a pastoral of both place and time.) Here, we begin to reach the crux of the matter: what, exactly, *does* the middle-class gallery-going audience ‘get’ from looking at these people – whether the rural farmers of the pastoral of old or the working class city-dwellers Stallabrass discusses in *High Art Lite* – in such a way?

Partly, Stallabrass suggests, the drive to do so is a reflection of middle-class insecurity, for, similar to the changes the working class has undergone in recent times, the middle class too has changed, becoming ‘larger, vaguer, more fluid, and less certain of itself’.⁴⁷ More importantly, however, there is something validatory in it, something vindicating – and vindictive. Stallabrass describes it as the ‘confirmation of the opposite in themselves; the feeling that, however much they may be holidaying in other people’s misery, they never lose their sense of who they are, that sense being

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 253.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 263.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 265.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 266.

continually affirmed by the consumption of its opposite in art'.⁴⁸ It is Sigmund Freud's 'narcissism of small differences' in action; that is, a pure example of one group defining itself in relation to its near neighbours to reassure itself of its own sense of self, and, ultimately, worth.

Class will have a further role to play in Perry's next curatorial outing, *Unpopular Culture*, which deals more explicitly with this theme; we might also note in passing that the above Stallabrass quote is essential when considering Perry's 2012 set of tapestries and accompanying documentary TV series, the former of which is itself inspired by, and derived its title from, the Freudian concept (the tapestries are collectively known as *The Vanity of Small Differences*). For now, however, let us return to their relation to the pastoral as it applies to Perry. These definitions and examples suggest a number of findings.

Firstly, Perry's own project fits neatly in line with the pastoral as it is defined by numerous critics, for it too presents a movement from city to country – temporally as well as spatially – with a particular emphasis on finding wisdom and beauty in the way of life therein. Indeed, the pastoral experience he presents is a distinctly meta one, encompassing many iterations. He is at once drawing on the pastoral traditions of old, with his laudatory references in interviews to the hunting paintings of the English pastoral painter Thomas Gainsborough;⁴⁹ he is contradictorily claiming to subvert such traditions, countering with his own purportedly 'unidealised' description of the countryside; and he is referentially responding to the YBA tendency towards depicting the inner city instead of the country and reversing it by returning to the 'uncool' conservative mode, in an act of 'unfashionable' self-fashioning that serves to brand himself as distinct from his edgy contemporaries once again. In one interview at the time of the show, he is quoted as saying: 'I think rebellion is for squares. It's an overly trodden path.'⁵⁰ (In the same interview he also suggests that he is very comfortable in the countryside,

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 268.

⁴⁹ Perry, 'Child death and rural voodoo'.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Louise Jury, 'From frocks to smocks: Perry's show celebrates rustic life', *The Independent*, 5 July 2006, p. 3.

‘unlike some artist friends who were frightened by the cows’;⁵¹ though this is paraphrased and not a direct quote, there is an obvious juxtaposition called to mind between the naturalistic Perry and Hirst’s taxidermied bovines.) Though he never explicitly uses such terminology, Perry himself seems to be directly summarising the process of the pastoral pilgrimage when he comments: ‘I live in the art world, it’s my village, but it’s very nice to go to another village and make art about that. [...] I have a nostalgia for a time when I wasn’t alive. I’m very moved by tradition and ritual.’⁵²

Secondly, although idealisation is, as Stallabrass shows, not actually a prerequisite for the pastoral – in fact, Stallabrass’s suggestion that the pastoral provides an outlet for ‘holidaying in other people’s misery’ seems especially appropriate here, as Perry has exaggerated that misery to the maximum, making it the central focus of the show – we can nonetheless see a number of examples of it at work in Perry’s statements. Although Perry publicly claims not to idealise the countryside or the past by instead focusing on their grimy undertones, the personal views he expresses in interviews nonetheless complicate this assertion, suggesting that perhaps one set of stereotypes has simply been swapped for another. For all Perry’s repeated mention of wanting to puncture the idealised cookie-cutter image of country life by accentuating the negative, he ends up fetishising it in an entirely different way. By Othering the countryside in relation to the metropolitan city (that is, London, where Perry and most of the English art world live), and by comparing it ethnographically to foreign and ‘primitive’ cultures, Perry presents a world that is no less stereotyped than the stereotypes he claims to be fighting to combat.

For example, in his interview with *The Lincolnshire Echo*, the paper notes *The Charms of Lincolnshire’s* underlying point that ‘romanticised images of idyllic country life deserve to be challenged’, and quotes Perry as saying that ‘[e]ven people who live in the country have a sentimental idea of it’.⁵³ Only two paragraphs later, however, Perry is further quoted as saying ‘I like to visit our house in the country and go walking or cycling. Visiting the country is like getting into a warm bath

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ ‘Grayson favour’.

for me but I try to be realistic about it'.⁵⁴ Despite this disclaimer, Perry's description of a relaxing and idyllic countryside retreat is nonetheless typical of many city-dwellers' approach to the country, and of a pastoral outlook itself, in which the countryside provides a peacefully regressive escape from the trials and tribulations of advanced modern living; modern living to which, after their brief sojourn, the traveller will indubitably return after being rejuvenated. In fact, the very idea of a 'country house' is, as Raymond Williams, author of *The Country and the City*, points out elsewhere, implicitly problematic: country houses (a term which he notes is in other contexts also often a euphemism for mansions and other repositories of English 'heritage', with 'heritage' being a particularly loaded notion to which we will shortly return) are only country houses 'in necessary relation to their "town houses" or apartments. The real country houses are those of the people who find their diverse livelihoods in the country'.⁵⁵ Williams goes on to assert that it is 'always necessary to distinguish "the country" as a place of first livelihood – interlinked, as it always must be, with the most general movements of the economy as a whole – and "the country" as a place of rest, withdrawal, alternative enjoyment and consumption, for those whose first livelihood is elsewhere'.⁵⁶

Similarly, pastoral stereotypes are further conjured up by Perry's description of the country folk who inhabit such places. Aside from the voodooistic superstitions of their Victorian predecessors, which are amplified in the show at hand and in certain of the aforementioned pieces made by Perry, they are characterised by Perry as such: 'Real rural people are pragmatic about the country which is why they defend hunting, for example, because it has a pragmatic purpose'.⁵⁷ Further idealising the 'ancient ritual' of hunting, he says 'Though my spirits are lifted every time I see Monsieur Reynard loping into a copse or across a Central London street I also love to see a pink-coated hunt in full cry (rosy-cheeked faces from Gainsborough) and glistening horseflesh'.⁵⁸ Though these two quotes are

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Raymond Williams, 'Between country and city', in Simon Pugh (ed.), *Reading Landscape: Country, City, Capital* (Manchester, 1990), p. 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ 'Grayson favour'.

⁵⁸ Perry, 'Child death and voodoo'.

pulled from different interviews (the former printed in *The Lincolnshire Echo* and the latter printed in *The Times*), they were published only one day apart, and yet suggest two entirely different visions of hunting that nonetheless seem to occupy the same space in Perry's consideration. The latter type of hunting, however – the 'rosy-cheeked' kind painted by Gainsborough – has nothing to do with the rural pragmatism he is espousing above, and everything to do with middle- and upper-class escapism of the kind previously mentioned – the kind which usually sets out from a country house.

Furthermore, even despite this incongruity, the idealisation of 'real' rural pragmatism is, of course, a stereotype in itself, typically attributed to ruddy and stoical farmers, and does nothing to reinvent the typical image of the countryside. It is problematic in much the same way as the phrase 'real women have curves' is: much like 'real' women are in fact defined by virtue of their lived experience as women rather than by arbitrary and hugely varying corporeal attributes, so too are 'real' rural people defined by virtue of their living or having lived in the country, rather than by the possession of a single plucky characteristic. Indeed, this sort of stereotyping is exactly what Perry is purportedly trying to dismantle with his *Ikea* and *Nokia* plates. Perry's proposal to debunk the idealised mythology of 'the countryside', then, does not hold up to scrutiny, for it falters in its slippages and simply continues many of the underlying associations, ultimately re-presenting the same privileged pilgrimage to the countryside.

Thirdly, the exhibition seems to poignantly prove Empson's, and later Stallabrass's, claim that the pastoral is an art 'that is about common people but not for or by them'. Though conceived as a Lincolnshire-specific exhibition, and originally displayed in Lincolnshire using the county's own historic artefacts, the show received significantly more publicity and critical attention when it was in London than it did in Lincolnshire. Partly this is a matter of disparate audience numbers – and Jeremy Webster claims that the exhibition was a critical and commercial success in Lincolnshire on its own terms⁵⁹ – but partly it is also a reflection of the different levels of cultural engagement in the two areas. Webster observes: 'The exhibition was a critical success. We didn't get as much press in Lincoln as we

⁵⁹ Webster, 'Legacies of Commissioning'.

wanted, but as soon as the show went down to London, it was just about in every broadsheet or Sunday paper you could lay your hands on.’⁶⁰ Furthermore, it is perhaps ironic that, while enacting an emotional and intellectual pastoral, the exhibition was unable to incite a physical one. Webster recounts these difficulties in his presentation to the Visual Arts and Galleries Association:

[W]hen I went to the opening of the show at the Victoria Miro Gallery I bumped into [art critic] Richard Cork and I said: ‘Why didn’t you come up to Lincoln and review the show?’ He looked me in the eyes and said ‘Well do you have to change trains?’ And I said: ‘Yes’. And he said: ‘Well, there you go – that is why we don’t come to Lincoln.’ It was very disappointing but perhaps quite honest of him.⁶¹

In this post-exhibition report, Webster discusses how they attempted to engage ‘the ordinary countrymen’ in the museum’s mission, giving the example of a Lincolnshire woman in her sixties, wearing a ‘twin set and pearls’ and looking at Perry’s pots, who he suggests was almost duped by the exhibition’s name:

There is no way she would have looked at these things if we had just called the show ‘The Grayson Perry Exhibition’. But because it was called ‘The Charms of Lincolnshire’, a title that Grayson came up with, all the yellow bellies (someone born and bred in Lincolnshire) came. They interpreted it in one sort of way, but Grayson’s use of the word ‘charm’ had more to do with witchcraft and the other meaning of ‘charm’. So it had quite a double meaning. The people in Lincolnshire really took it to heart.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Presumably unintentionally, Webster paints a rather unflattering picture of the philistine locals, in which the Lincolnshire ‘yellow bellies’ are tricked into attending and then miss the nuances of the show entirely.

What is more, the exhibition purposefully plays on the cultural connotations of Lincolnshire, which can only function when it exists as a symbolic entity rather than a quotidian reality. Perry openly states that ‘Lincolnshire is unknown to me, as a county it does not impinge on the national consciousness like its noisy neighbour Yorkshire. Perhaps it is lucky to have avoided having a strong identity in the media, unlike my birthplace Essex which suffers all the jokes about chavs and white stilettos’.⁶³ In translation, then, it soon becomes not about Lincolnshire specifically but about (Perry’s vision of) Victorian English rural lower-class life more generally, mined for pathos, exported to the city, and operating under the sign of ‘Lincolnshire’ for added veracity.

Good mourning

As we have seen throughout, the picture Perry paints of the countryside is an intentionally grim one, aiming to emphasise the dark and uncomfortable aspects of rural life. Ironically, this is done partially in order to refute any claims of idealisation, and Perry quotes Jung’s adage that ‘sentimentality is a superstructure covering brutality’ (a quote we have already seen printed on *Quotes from the Internet*) when he ‘wonder[s] what dark “isms” are sheltered by these *cloying pastorals*’ (emphasis mine).⁶⁴ As seen above, however, idealisation is not truly necessary to invoke the pastoral, and neither does Perry truly succeed in not romanticising the vision he presents. Nonetheless, Perry’s overt emphasis on death, particularly the emotive topic of child mortality, creates a mood of melancholy, nostalgia, and loss that, I wish to now argue, further rhymes with his use of the pastoral, although perhaps in unexpected ways.

⁶³ Perry, ‘Essay’, p. 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13.

Perhaps the show's central object is a Victorian hearse from 1880 – Perry himself calls it 'the centrepiece of the show',⁶⁵ and its presence is physically overwhelming in the gallery space (as seen in Victoria Miro in Figure 89) – which casts every other object in the exhibition in its funereal light. Its presence transforms the child-size nightdresses hanging on the wall into 'souls ascending to heaven'⁶⁶ (according to Perry), or 'the suicidal children in [Thomas Hardy's novel] *Jude the Obscure*' (according to *The Guardian* critic Charlotte Higgins).⁶⁷ In his essay in the exhibition catalogue, Perry uses the hearse to exemplify the Victorian attitude to death and mourning he envisaged for the show, and which clearly informed his choice of objects:

[The hearse] reminds me of Miss Haversham's wedding breakfast. It bears dying witness to an era of more elaborate rites. When mourning black was worn for months or even years, when jewellery was made from a dead one's hair, when experienced mourners were hired to cry at a funeral.⁶⁸

This theme of death and mourning that permeates the exhibition is not just a material one, however, represented though it is through hearses, lost items, old clothes, and images of individuals who are long since dead. It is also a self-reflexive consideration, which not only refers to the deathliness of the museum,⁶⁹ but to the folk culture of the past and the England of old. Perry's exhibition has, from the outset, claimed an authorial narrative of mourning and melancholy – that is, the grieving widow – but it seems that beneath that narrative lies a deeper mourning; not necessarily for these little rituals themselves, but for English folk culture and identity more generally.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Perry, 'Essay', p. 9.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Hermione Eyre, 'What should I wear?', *Independent On Sunday*, 2 July 2006, p. 27.

⁶⁷ Charlotte Higgins, 'The past, through a glass darkly', *The Guardian*, 5 July 2006, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Perry, 'Essay', p. 9.

⁶⁹ For more on the melancholic nature of art history and practice, see Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton, 2013).

⁷⁰ Perry's use of nostalgia will be considered in more detail in the next section on *Unpopular Culture*.

This mourning is an innate part of the exhibition, registered immediately through its topic and choice of objects, both of which incorporate the theme of ‘folk’: folk culture, folk art. In his article ‘Instituting English Folk Art’, Martin Myrone quotes Waldemar Januszczak’s assertion that ‘it is quite hard to envisage fully functioning British folk art. [...] Think of folk art here and you surely feel a simultaneous sense of loss. It’s gone.’⁷¹ Myrone goes on to theorise, however, that historical discussions of ‘British folk’ (itself a shifting notion) have always implied this sense of loss, which is circumscribed by the recurring desire to present or preserve it, that it might be saved from the brink of extinction on which it is so often imagined.⁷² Myrone catalogues these movements and expressions throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries: the fear in the early 1900s that ‘the need to create a [national folk museum] was urgent, as “The time cannot be far distant when, from the growing dearth of material, a comprehensive national folk-museum will be impossible”’⁷³ (a similar opinion resurfaces in 1930⁷⁴); the acknowledgement that, in the late 1920s to 1930s, ‘artistic engagement with vernacular is [...] concerned with nostalgia for a knowingly lost cause, rather than a rediscovery of “deep” values: it was always already marked by a sense of absence, incompleteness, even irony’;⁷⁵ and the assertion that pre-war commenters on English ‘folk’ culture ‘had always insisted that this was, emphatically, a thing of the past – an absence that testified to the vast historical trauma of industrial modernity’.⁷⁶

Additionally, Perry’s use of Victoriana here redoubles this sense, as Myrone suggests that historians of ‘Englishness’ claim that ‘the period 1880-1920 sees the ascent and entrenchment of a distinctly nostalgic view of England’s rural heritage which made peasant traditions central to the national self-image, in fierce opposition to economic modernity and political progress’.⁷⁷ (This ties in neatly with Perry’s use of Victorian childhood dress as outlined in chapter two, too.) In this sense,

⁷¹ Martin Myrone, ‘Instituting English Folk Art’, in *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 10 (2009), p. 27.

⁷² Much has been written on this topic; see, for example: Michel de Certeau, ‘The Beauty of the Dead: Nisard’, in de Certeau (trans. Brian Massumi), *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Manchester, 1986), pp 119-136; George K. Behlmer and Fred M. Leventhal (eds.), *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia, and Identity in Modern British Culture* (Stanford, 2000).

⁷³ Myrone, ‘Instituting English Folk Art’, p. 30.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Perry's use of Victoriana, folk, and pastoral each figure a distinct loss or absence, mourning a lost national past that itself mourned for an imaginary national rhetoric.

To metaphorically fill the exhibition's hearse, Perry created *The Angel of the South* (Figure 83), investing it with its own talismanic charm by staging and photographing its authentic 'burial', as discussed above. (In situ, the sculpture was installed on a plinth behind the hearse and surrounded by headless mannequin mourners dressed in Victorian frocks.) Made from cast iron, the piece is an obvious companion to Antony Gormley's enormous public sculpture *The Angel of the North*, which measures 20 metres by 54 metres and stands in Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, in North East England. In contrast to that piece, which Perry accuses of being a 'celebration of the industrial/military might forged in our northern cities and sent off around the world in the Victorian age to hammer out an empire', this southern counterpart takes the form of a small child's coffin to serve as a 'non-triumphal monument' to the 'countless victims' of such an enterprise.⁷⁸

More than simply encapsulating the morbid feel of the exhibition and capitalising on the controversial shock tactic of child death, however, Perry further uses *The Angel of the South* to re-contextualise Victoriana in modern terms (a technique he has used elsewhere in the exhibition by contrasting a religious embroidered sampler for a lost child with a secular, atheistic one he made for the show). We are told that the coffin, which is decorated with the three-dimensional outline of a thin, long-legged child in funerary repose alongside more geometric designs, represents infant mortality rates in the 'south', that is, the developing world. That this means Africa is intimated through Perry's visual (and textual, in his essay) reference to the West African Benin Bronzes, which he invokes as a problematic symbol of Britain's imperial and colonial past (ironically ignoring their problematic present as residents of the British Museum), and the rusty patina of the iron which colours the child's skin brown. In addition to ahistorically connecting the two child mortality rates, Perry suggests that the children dying now in Africa are not socio-economically dissimilar from those dying then in Victorian England, with both often coming from poor rural backgrounds and farming families.

⁷⁸ Perry, 'Essay', p. 9.

As a primitivist object, *The Angel of the South* perfectly exemplifies Perry's overarching objective to 'Other' England's Victorian past, something so colloquially familiar and cosy to us, by presenting its artefacts 'as if they were the product of some exotic Third World culture rather than the everyday bric-a-brac of our great grandparents we normally encounter decorating the walls of a country pub'.⁷⁹ Speaking to *The Lincolnshire Echo*, Perry elaborated: 'I think sometimes we dismiss our own culture and I wanted our own local clutter to be seen like something exotic, like artefacts from far flung places'.⁸⁰

It is worth noting that the sculpture does little to enhance, improve, or even truly comment on or engage with our understanding of the problem of child mortality in developing countries; instead, it relies on, and perpetuates, a stereotype that equates the entire continent of Africa with a unitary image of poverty, death, and misery that is emblematised in the pleading face of a child who needs the intervention of prosperous, developed, mostly white countries. In fact, it subscribes almost definitionally to what Susan Hiller summarises as the 'primitivist fantasy that the far-away is the same as the long-ago'.⁸¹ By equating contemporary Africa with Victorian England, we are encouraged less to think about the social problems affecting Africa today and more to further reduce it to a caricature of primitivism and exoticism to which we can favourably compare the now-developed England while holidaying in its 'primitive' past. Furthermore, such a work subtly presents us with an 'us' and a 'them' that is split down racial and ethnic terms, precluding the possibility of a non-white British identity.⁸² In this way, *The Angel of the South* lacks the serious engagement with issues of race, post-colonialism, and Britain's imperial history that is found in the works of other British artists, such as

⁷⁹ Perry, 'Child death and rural voodoo'.

⁸⁰ 'Grayson favour'.

⁸¹ Susan Hiller, 'Editor's Introduction', in Hiller (ed.), *The Myth of Primitivism* (London, 2006), p. 67.

⁸² This will be seen again in *Unpopular Culture*, and the topic of multiculturalism will be explored in more depth in that section.

Yinka Shonibare, Steve McQueen, and Chris Ofili, instead caricaturing the issues at hand to make another easy, and intensely problematic, ‘one-liner’ comparison.⁸³

This problematic use of an African child as a literal symbol (and enacting agent) of Othering is yet more problematic in the context of the exhibition’s implicit engagement with British ‘Heritage’, an association which naturally arises from *The Charms of Lincolnshire’s* use of folk, Victoriana, and the English national narrative, as well as its staging in a local museum. In ‘Whose Heritage? Un-settling “The Heritage”, Re-imagining the Post-nation’, Stuart Hall discusses the ‘peculiar inflection’ of the British idea of ‘Heritage’, which is defined primarily in relation to the past and must fit neatly alongside an established “national story” whose terms we already know’: ‘Heritage’, in a British context (which, he notes, usually really means an English context⁸⁴), is about ‘preservation and conservation’,⁸⁵ rather than inclusion or acknowledgement; it is also, he says, implicitly about whiteness.⁸⁶ Writing in 1999, Hall catalogues the ‘Heritage’s’ lack of diversity and urges for a restructuring of this narrative to reflect the vast multicultural influence that it otherwise denies: ‘This is not so much a matter of representing “us” as of representing more adequately the degree to which

⁸³ It is worth noting that, while these three artists are almost universally associated with popular black British art, this has been seen to be problematic in itself. Ofili in particular is, like Perry, considered by some to be something of a ‘one-liner’, using stereotypical images of Africa and ‘African materials’ such as elephant dung (actually gathered from London Zoo) to re-produce a reductively stereotypical black imagery without truly engaging with or commenting on actual issues of race or ethnicity. While there are certainly critical accounts defending and lauding them, the success of these three artists in particular, and the ease with which they come to mind in discussions such as this, has been criticised, suggesting that their success stems from their engagement with issues of race and colonialism which cater to what a white audience expects from black artists. Nonetheless, I argue that there is still a significant difference between how these artists invoke these issues and the flippancy with which Perry does so here, which seems to have no real awareness of issues of race or ethnicity, and instead invokes Africa as an ‘Other’ and considers colonisation from the coloniser’s perspective. For more on Shonibare, Ofili, and McQueen and the ‘burden of representation’, see: Kobena Mercer, ‘Black art and the burden of representation’, *Third Text*, Vol. 4 (March 1990), pp. 61–78; Nancy Hynes, ‘Africanizing Chris Ofili?’, *African Arts*, Vol. 34 (2001), p. 9; Divya Tolia-Kelly and Andy Morris, ‘Disruptive Aesthetics?: Revisiting the *Burden of Representation* in the Art of Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare’, *Third Text*, Vol. 18 (March 2004), pp. 153–167; Eddie Chambers, *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain*, (Amsterdam; New York, 2012).

⁸⁴ We have seen – and will continue to see – this elision again and again, and it will be a particular focus in the next section. Stuart Hall writes that ‘[t]he Act of Union linked Scotland, England and Wales into a united kingdom, but never on terms of cultural equality – a fact constantly obscured by the covert oscillations and surreptitious substitutions between the terms “Britishness” and “Englishness”.’ Hall, ‘Whose Heritage?: Un-settling “The Heritage”, Re-imagining the Post-nation’, *Third Text*, Vol. 13 (1999), p. 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

“their” history entails and has always implicated “us”, across the centuries, and vice versa. The African presence in Britain since the sixteenth century, the Asian since the seventeenth and the Chinese, Jewish and Irish in the nineteenth have long required to be made the subjects of their own dedicated heritage spaces as well as integrated into a much more “global” version of “our island story”.⁸⁷

It is notable, then, that Perry’s vision of English heritage so fully upholds that static vision of ‘Heritage’ against which Hall argues. Drawing on Foucault, Hall contends that collections ‘have always been related to the exercise of “power” in another sense – the symbolic power to order knowledge, to rank, classify and arrange, and thus to give meaning to objects and things through the imposition of interpretative schemas, scholarship, and the authority of connoisseurship’.⁸⁸ This characterisation almost perfectly describes the relationship between the construction of heritage and Perry’s curatorship, which similarly ‘slowly constructs [...] a collective social memory’ that is then institutionalised (here, by The Collection, and in later instances by the Arts Council and the British Museum) and canonised as ‘truth’.⁸⁹ In this way, the exhibition’s emphasis on a fictional and subjective narrative, then, distracts from its underlying reinforcements about who and what is represented in the narrative of British identity – and why – for, as Hall says, ‘[it] follows that those who cannot see themselves reflected in [The National Heritage’s] mirror cannot properly “belong”’.⁹⁰

It is perhaps unsurprising that this underlying construction of British identity, and this melancholic nostalgia for a ‘lost’ English folk culture, has gone unacknowledged in favour of the obfuscatory veil of Perry’s avowed – and distractingly similar but subtly different – agenda. Certainly, the exhibition does deal with death, childhood, religion, the country, and the other themes Perry allocates to it, but underpinning all of this is an indirect and recurring characterisation, construction, and affirmation of English national identity. This nostalgia is figured not only in Perry’s use of ‘Heritage’ and ‘folk’ – both constructed discursive practices that are often figured as objective

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

historical fact – but through the pastoral journey undertaken which here spans across space *and* time, crystallising the implicit nostalgia for times past which so often underpins many pastoral scenes: in much the same way as they idealise the countryside, so too do they idealise ‘simpler times’ (and so, too, are they loaded with primitivist and classist ideology). While Perry is quick to acknowledge that the ‘biscuit-tin idyll of cosy village Britain is luckily in the past, for it was a candlelit back-breaking, sexist, tubercular child-death hell’,⁹¹ a sense of nostalgia is nonetheless consistent with Perry’s artistic and media persona, evident in his return to the outdated and ‘naff’ form of pottery, his derogatory remarks about conceptual art, and his constant references – whether artistic, verbal, referential, or sartorial – to various earlier periods in England’s history.

By presenting England’s ‘Heritage’ ethnographically, he aims to encourage fresh engagement with it in a way that fosters, and enables, a sort of positive patriotism; indeed, the exhibition’s narrative, while supposedly aiming to debunk sentimentality by using grisly details, in fact nurtures it in another way by presenting this humanising, tragic, emotive narrative, as well as by harking back to a ‘purer’ vision of England pre-multiculturalism (itself a falsity, for of course Britain has always been informed by its imperialism and thus its relationship with other countries and cultures; the obscuring of this will become again relevant when we return to *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* at the British Museum). Once again, as he has done with his transvestism, Perry presents England not as a brutal colonising power – and if he does, it is ostensibly apologetically so as to diffuse the negative connotations, as with *The Angel of the South* – but as vulnerable in its own right. The show, then, may operate under the guise of parodying an ironic ‘National Trust England’, but in its foregrounding of not only English locations but English history, regressively denying any possibility of multiculturalism and retold for an audience in the process of grappling with their national identity, it performs essentially the same function, making the cliché souvenir tea-towel he designed a little less satirical than he claims.

⁹¹ Quoted in Jessica Lack, ‘Preview: Exhibitions: Grayson Perry’, *The Guardian*, 1 July 2006, p. 37.

Never Such Innocence: Nostalgia, Elegy, and the Construction of Englishness in *Unpopular Culture*

In 2008, Perry curated his next major exhibition, *Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry Selects from the Arts Council Collection*. The show, in which Perry selected and displayed a number of objects from the Arts Council's 7,500-strong holdings, augmenting them with two pieces of his own, opened in the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex, before going on to tour around England and Wales, with locations in Preston, Durham, Southampton, Aberystwyth, Scarborough, Wakefield, and Bath. The objects on display encompassed painting, sculpture, and documentary photography, ranging from the 1940s to the 1980s: from post-war to pre-Thatcher.

In considering the motivations behind this exhibition and its subsequent importance to Perry's oeuvre, we must explore how it functions both explicitly and implicitly. In the case of the former, I wish to first survey how Perry himself situates the exhibition within the contemporary artistic landscape, as well as how he vocalises his own intentions behind the show. Next, I want to review in more detail the kinds of content, media, and locations present in order to explore how Perry links the exhibition with his own persona and agenda, reinforcing once again his own centrality to the issues at its heart. Finally, after examining these explicit intentions of the exhibition, I want to reassess its underlying ideologies through an extended comparison with those of the poet Philip Larkin, whom the exhibition references; that is, by considering the analogous strategies and receptions of Larkin, I wish to consider in more depth Perry's use of nostalgia and elegy to re-examine and ultimately reconstruct – if not resurrect – English national identity in ways similar to, but subtly different from, *The Charms of Lincolnshire*, and suggest what the positive media reception of this introspection might reveal.

Unpopular Culture

Before even looking at the art chosen, however, I want to first unpack the ways in which we are primed to receive it. Perry's title, *Unpopular Culture*, signals a few of the exhibition's key objectives. In his essay for the catalogue, which was also published as a pre-exhibition feature in *The Guardian*, Perry says that it 'stems from a notion that, in the period represented by this show, stories about art did not feature daily in the broadsheets, nor did contemporary artists crop up frequently in gossip columns'.⁹² Though this notion was quickly debunked by communication from the estate of one his chosen artists, John Bratby, which revealed him to be 'an absolute publicity hound, who would do anything to get into the diary pages',⁹³ the aim is still clear. Perry's exhibition is not simply a rehabilitation of these purportedly forgotten and overlooked works, but is situated as a response to contemporary art and its tactics. Discussing the exhibition, he is pointed about its contemporary resonance:

I have chosen the works for this show chiefly to please myself, but in doing so I have perhaps betrayed my attitude to trends in society and contemporary art. My choices are as much about today as the period of their making. This exhibition is defiantly not a quick fix of visual stimulation for an adrenaline-addicted consumer.⁹⁴

As we have seen many times before, this declaration serves to position Perry as 'outside' contemporary art and as oppositional to the YBAs. Similarly, it again appeals to a public exasperated with those same contemporary artists, as Perry acknowledges when discussing his selection process: 'I was also aware of the remnants of hostility to fine art from Daily Mail Britain, who still see art as an

⁹² Grayson Perry, 'Glad to be grey', *The Guardian*, 23 April 2008.

⁹³ Sean O'Hagan, 'Before all the shouting started', *The Observer*, 11 May 2008.

⁹⁴ Perry, 'Glad to be grey'.

elitist con'.⁹⁵ (This supplication to a conservative audience will be considered in further detail later.) Both in intention and execution, Perry emphasises that the exhibition was an attempt to get as far away from current notions of 'contemporary art' as possible. Subsequently, the works displayed are all figurative but for the occasionally abstracted lump of bronze, and they are all in muted tones, depicting quotidian scenes of English life – nothing that could possibly be construed as pretentious or even intellectual. On this figurative bias, Perry reiterates his attempts to distance himself from elitism and academicism by stating that abstract art reminds him 'too much of beardy art lecturers with grey chest hair poking out of their denim shirts as they spout vague, unchallengeable tosh'.⁹⁶

The secondary meaning of *Unpopular Culture* refers to the represented time period and figurative content itself, which poet and critic Blake Morrison describes as a 'certain strand of British culture [that] has never been given the attention it deserves, because written off as naff, ephemeral or self-effacing'.⁹⁷ The exhibition is filled with artists that Perry proudly proclaims 'anybody with a Sunday afternoon degree in art history wouldn't have heard of',⁹⁸ such as Jack Smith, Alan Lowndes, and Michael Andrews, as well as those with more stalwart national reputations, such as L.S. Lowry, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Anthony Caro. Notably absent is any trace of the Swinging London of the 1960s, or of Pop Art, perhaps the two most obvious, or at least immediate, emblems of England in the scope of the exhibition timeline. Perry explains that this is 'partly due to a suspicion that the swinging 60s, in all its groovy glory, was really only enjoyed by a minority; and partly because I'm a bit tired of the hackneyed nostalgia for a psychedelic, World Cup-winning, Mini-driving, miniskirt-wearing, Beatles-loving supposed golden age'.⁹⁹ (As we have already seen multiple times, there is a correlation between the Swinging Sixties and the YBAs which should also be kept in mind

⁹⁵ Ibid. Though a number of quotes are taken from this pre-exhibition feature of Perry's catalogue essay, it is worth noting that each point is often repeated several times in future articles, with each repetition corroborating its importance.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Blake Morrison, 'Waving Goodbye', in *Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry selects from the Arts Council Collection* (London, 2008), p. 16.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Tom Lubbock, 'The fine art of staying famous', *The Independent*, 2 May 2008.

⁹⁹ Perry, 'Glad to be grey'.

here.) Instead, the works on display show a less glamorous and significantly more working-class image of England.

This working-class sensibility is at the forefront even despite Morrison's claims that the class affiliations of the art on display can be somewhat muddled, though he is right to point out the increased social mobility in post-war Britain, no doubt a side effect of the need to rebuild after the fallout – both literal and psychic – from the war, which does complicate matters. Often, then, there is an implication of voyeurism: of the middle classes painting the working classes. Such nuances, however, although mentioned in passing by Perry, are rarely acknowledged within the exhibition itself, as will shortly become clear. Here, working-class culture is reiterated in both serious and 'trivial' registers, spanning economic difficulties to modes of culture and entertainment. Of the former, we are presented with images of poverty such as Thurston Hopkins's untitled photograph of a young girl sleeping under a splayed out newspaper, its headline prominently and poignantly declaring 'SLIMMING METHODS' (1947-56, Figure 90); Bert Hardy's *A fight springs up between dockers waiting for work in the Pool of London* (1949); and Tish Murtha's untitled photograph of young boys with shaved heads jumping from the window of a dilapidated house on to an ersatz trampoline made of grim mattress slivers (1980-81, Figure 91).

These ominous scenes are interspersed with light-hearted images such as comedy duo Morecambe and Wise eating seafood on the beach (*Morecambe and Wise on Blackpool Beach*, 1953; Figure 92), balancing plates of food on knees unbalanced by tipsy folding chairs, each with a lit cigarette to hand (or to mouth). Seaside images make a number of appearances, embodying, with a hint of irony, an unspoken English optimism that is suggested to underpin the entire national character: in each photograph, the beachgoers, like Morecambe and Wise and like the seated party of Tony Ray-Jones's *Brighton Beach 1967* (Figure 93), are fully clothed and windswept, with the black and white monochrome of the photograph filling in for the presumably equivalent tones of the sky. Homer Sykes's *Whit Wednesday Pinner Fair* (1969-75) seems to emblematised bawdy seaside fantasies, as two naked women, in *Venus Pudica* pose, stand in front of an audience under the scrutiny of a balding,

suiting man, a relic of jolly institutionalised sexism. In *Untitled (Pearly King & Queen, East Ham, 1969-71)*; Figure 94), a Pearly King and Queen are photographed in the reflection of their grimy mirror, decked out in their mother of pearl finery, the King's defensive stance and dangling cigarette juxtaposed with their ostentatious costumes. As though to reiterate his own presence within the exhibition, Perry includes a photograph by David Hurn of three men in drag, elaborately coiffed and adorned in slinky sequined dresses (Figure 95).

Other than Perry's own pot, *Queen's Bitter* (Figure 96, 2007), there is no pottery in the exhibition; instead, the sculptures chosen are bronze, ceramic's theoretical antithesis. In contrast to the fragility and delicacy of Perry's usual vases, we are presented with resilient weathered lumps, reminiscent of public sculptures which are linked for Perry with 'childhood trips to concrete new towns' bristling with optimism.¹⁰⁰ Though the new towns may once have been optimistic, the bronzes are not, and often they invoke worn-down forms, echoing Morrison's description that several of the human figures represented in *Unpopular Culture* are 'round-shouldered, as though bowed down by a sense of loss or depression'.¹⁰¹ Many suggest a sense of introspection, of curling up and becoming self-defensive or self-sufficient, such as Kenneth Armitage's *Figure Lying on its Side (No. 5)* or Meg Rutherford's *Quartros*. These great big lumps of bronze are then complemented by Perry's own great big lump of bronze, and William Turnbull's sculpture *Head* becomes refigured in Perry's only other piece in the show, *Head of a Fallen Giant* (Figure 97, 2008), a work to which we will return in more detail later, alongside *Queen's Bitter*.

As with *The Charms of Lincolnshire*, then, we can see that Perry is present in a number of the images here, even in absentia; he is registered by the themes he chooses to present and their purported relationship to his own childhood. The name of the exhibition, too, trades on his reputation, emphasising both his artistic selection process and the value it imbues ('Grayson Perry Selects') as well as his own heavily constructed status as an uncool outsider potter ('Unpopular Culture').

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Morrison, 'Waving Goodbye', p. 14.

Similarly, as with *The Charms of Lincolnshire*, it is an image of Perry, and not an object from the Arts Council collection, which was used to publicise the exhibition and which adorns the cover of its catalogue, a black and white photograph embedded in a chartreuse fabric covering. In it, he wears a patterned headscarf, which surrounds his curled quiff and solemn expression. He is dressed in a dark knee-length coat and pointed shoes, with a small crocodile skin purse affixed to his wrist, and his hands in their leather gloves are crossed defensively at the waist. This particular iteration of his cross-dressing is a slightly more polished, higher-classed variation of his earliest type, which has been discussed at length in chapter two; nonetheless, it is worth briefly re-acknowledging its symbolic Englishness here, functioning not only as a gendered symbol, but also a classed one, as well as its comparative seriousness.

Underlining his omnipresence, this image of Perry re-appears not just in the publicity and catalogue for the exhibition, but in the exhibition itself, as a portrait on *Queen's Bitter*. The pot is covered in photographs of Perry in this same guise. A central cameo shows Perry full length, as above, with his background coloured chartreuse, while others depict Perry in portrait form, tinted in shades of blue. Perry explains that the entire pot is intended to be chromatically reminiscent of John Smith's *After the Meal* (Figure 98, 1952),¹⁰² a painting which Perry considers central to the mood of the exhibition as a whole.¹⁰³ Perry revels in Smith's anti-intellectual status, citing him as one of those aforementioned mid-century British artists unknown to armchair (and academic) art historians and associating him with the 'rise of the working class voice'.¹⁰⁴

Perry's summary of Smith's artistic trajectory is also worth noting in the context of this exhibition and its aims. His assumption that Smith's rejection of the Kitchen Sink School of painting in favour of the kind of experimental abstracts that Perry has so purposely excluded from *Unpopular Culture* was due to being 'beaten down by fashion' (and that this was ultimately 'a shame') hints at a narrative of authenticity inherent in being 'unpopular', a theme which recurs throughout the exhibition

¹⁰² Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 54.

¹⁰³ Perry, 'Glad to be grey'.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Lubbock, 'The fine art of staying famous'.

and can be seen to echo his statements about the inauthenticity of current contemporary art.¹⁰⁵ The figurative and technically simplistic nature of the paintings on display – qualities which Perry personally lauds when explaining his choices – is an approach which Perry has always claimed to incorporate into his own works, eschewing claims of intellectualism or any deeper meaning other than those he ascribes to them.

Imag(in)ing England

The paintings included are not only all figurative, but they also all depict landscapes or domestic scenes; again, nothing that could be considered lofty or elitist, and all of which are tied to resolutely quotidian depictions of English life. Indeed, as with *The Charms of Lincolnshire* and other examples of Perry's work, the images chosen and displayed in *Unpopular Culture* often reference specific locations around the UK: Cornwall (Bryan Wynter's *Landscape, Zennor*, 1948); Lancashire (*Morecambe and Wise on Blackpool Beach*, and represented indexically in the presence of its native L.S. Lowry); Brighton (*Brighton Beach 1967*); West Yorkshire (Martin Parr, *Jubilee Street Party, Elland 1977*); Liverpool (Thurston Hopkins, *Harassed father left to cope with the family, Liverpool 1955*); Glasgow (Bert Hardy, *Pub scene in the Gorbals*, 1948); Newcastle; Middlesex; Essex; Dundee; and Coventry. Even when the settings in question are centred in or around London – such as Frank Auerbach's *Euston Steps – Study* (1980-81), Victor Pasmore's *Riverside Gardens, Hammersmith* (c. 1944), and John Piper's *Palace of the Bishop of Winchester (Design for mural for Merton Priory Civic Restaurant)* (1942-3) – they nonetheless avoid the clichés of the transcendental signifier of 'London', decentralising it and presenting it as equivalent to any other British town.

The intention seems to be that the multiplicity of localities will combine to present a 'comprehensive' picture of Britain. By showing a number of images that all resemble each other, however, the overall effect is less individualising than homogenising: Perry seems to suggest that the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

experience of living in Britain in the 1940s to 1980s was a universal one, or at least one that was divided along fault lines of class rather than location. Gerry Badger's photograph of Essex (*Essex, 1980*, Figure 99) rhymes exactly with his photograph *Near Dundee, Scotland, 1977* (Figure 100), with both presenting an overgrown wilderness littered with the dishevelled remnants of passers-by, right down to the macabre human symbols: an abandoned prim Victorian torso sprouting from the ground in Essex is mirrored by an amputated doll hanging from a tree near Dundee. Though the array of locations should suggest diversity, there is very little of it actually on display, minimised further by the overarching muted colour schemes and similar styles.

This effect is further corroborated by those paintings and photographs not rooted in specific places. Their visual congruity with the other named locations, in terms of content, form, and mood, serves to fill in the gaps, suggesting the images' ubiquity and universal nature. Tenement buildings appear in Michael Andrews's *Flats* (1959, Figure 101), Christine Pearcey's *Untitled* (1973, Figure 102), Tish Murtha's photograph (Figure 91), and David Hepher's *Arrangement in Turquoise and Cream* (1979-81, Figure 103). William Roberts's *The Seaside* (c. 1966) and L.S. Lowry's *July, The Seaside* (1943, Figure 104) correspond with aforementioned photographs of Brighton and Blackpool beaches; Lowry's antlike figures are similarly dressed in dour overcoats and hats, rehearsing the same British bad weather. The conspiratorially clinked glasses of Bert Hardy's *Pub scene in the Gorbals* (1948, Figure 105) are repeated in pubs countrywide as Alan Lowndes's figure raises an authorial finger in *Telling the Tale* (1964, Figure 106). Domestic scenes of harried Scouse and Geordie parents flanked by children (Thurston Hopkins's *Harassed father left to cope with the family, Liverpool 1955* [Figure 107] and Tish Murtha's *Untitled* [Figure 108; 1980-1]) are similarly flustered in painting (Jack Smith's *After the Meal*). Other paintings are presented as standard repeating icons of the British cityscape or countryside: Duncan Grant's *Cow Stalls* (1942), William Scott's *Slagheap Landscape* (1953), Alan Reynolds's *The Village – Winter* (1952), Brian Robb's *Townscape* (1959). The works on display unite these disparate places with a unifying sense of post-war drudgery.

Discussing *Unpopular Culture*, Perry has said:

The show I was putting together was about the intangible visual language of Englishness. There has been much talk in the media for some time now about national identity. It's very hard to pin down: there isn't an instant, easy answer to what Englishness is. We no longer have a clear folk identity, so when we talk about ethnicity it's always about non-Englishness, about the 'other', whether it's about immigrants or the Scots, say.¹⁰⁶

This is particularly interesting when we consider that the locations on display are not simply England, but also include at least two named shots of Scotland: the aforementioned photographs taken near Dundee and in a pub in the Gorbals, Glasgow. The incorporation of Scotland, and Scottish-born artists like William Scott, problematises any easy reduction to either 'English' or 'British', as does its visual assimilation into an otherwise exclusively English narrative (at least, that narrative which has been recorded for posterity in the catalogue). The exhibition tour's stopover in Wales – but not Scotland – as its only non-English location additionally complicates the matter. The show cannot be about Englishness, because it includes – or rather, assimilates – Scotland; and yet, it does not include enough non-England for it to be about Britishness, unless the two are being presented as identical and nominally interchangeable. (This, as many scholars of British and English national identity point out, is a rather standard elision for an English person to make, and one rarely made by non-English British people.)

These images of Scotland are not presented as an encounter with the other to redefine the self; instead, these places are presented as being coterminous, rather than a popular form of 'fairy-tale Scottishness' in which Scotland 'can exist only as a "set" upon which the fantasies of the English characters are played out', a portrayal evidenced by popular English movies such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.¹⁰⁷ Their quiet inclusion in the story of Englishness would also seem to deny the possibility that they are included in recognition of Scotland's role in shaping England, however. Instead, Perry's curation seems to ultimately subsume these images into an English lexicon without fully explaining, or even acknowledging, the problematic associations of doing so. This pictorial

¹⁰⁶ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 143.

¹⁰⁷ Blandford, *Film, Drama and the Break-Up of Britain*, p. 20.

(re)unification of Britain post-devolution is significant, especially when paired with the pre-devolution chronological period of the show, and particularly in the context of Perry's statements about national identity and his search for the 'visual language of Englishness'.¹⁰⁸

Both of the previously mentioned pieces made by Perry for *Unpopular Culture* deal with these themes of the changing nature of Britishness and Englishness that underpin the exhibition as a whole. The previously discussed *Queen's Bitter*, 'a primitive drinking flagon, dedicated to beery Britain in the second Elizabethan age',¹⁰⁹ incorporates much of the iconography seen throughout other images in the exhibition, uniting them in one vase (and, ironically, under one [English] monarch). It is covered in folksy drawings of 'pearlies', with a Pearly King and Queen each holding a squealing baby; pigeons; National Trust oak leaves and acorns; crossed Union Jacks; and a meagre table, fashioned after Jack Smith's, set with a pint of ale and the crucial bottle of Heinz ketchup. The aforementioned photographs of Perry are framed and topped with designs of a royal crown, riffing on the identity of the queen in question: Perry (humorously invoking gay slang), Her Majesty, or even Margaret Thatcher (whom Perry here resembles).

The other piece made by Perry for the exhibition, *Head of a Fallen Giant*, may, as suggested earlier, be easily linked to Turnbull, Eduardo Paolozzi, and the other bronze sculptures on display, but in fact it has a much more famous contemporary counterpart: Hirst's *For The Love of God* (Figure 109, 2007). The two pieces are contemporaries, antitheses even, and within the context of the show – or even without – it is impossible to read Perry's *Head* as anything but a rehearsed response.¹¹⁰

Hirst's *For The Love of God* was a media sensation, a human skull cast in platinum and covered in over 8,000 flawless diamonds, as well as a full set of original human teeth, exemplifying more than anything Perry's criticisms of contemporary art in his catalogue's opening remarks ('sensational, shocking, funny', providing merely a 'quick fix of visual stimulation'¹¹¹). According to Hirst's

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Klein, *Grayson Perry*, p. 143.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹¹⁰ Perry himself makes this clear. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹¹¹ Perry, 'Glad to be grey'.

website, *For The Love of God* is a classic *memento mori* reminder that our existence is transient, gilded in denial as part of a flawed coping mechanism: ‘You don’t like [death], so you disguise it or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable – to such an extent that it becomes something else.’¹¹² As the skull seen around the world, however, it also became a fleeting emblem of British art more generally. Received – both positively and negatively – as ‘tacky’, most critics were nonetheless cynical of the piece, which had an estimated worth of £50 million. In an article in *The Observer* reporting on art critic Robert Hughes’s denunciation of Hirst, Perry is quoted praising Hughes’s opinion and its ‘erudite grumpiness’, saying: ‘We get the art we deserve and Damien is the perfect artist of our times of fluff economies, New Labour and celebrity hype’.¹¹³

Such commentary from Perry is perhaps ironic, for *Head of a Fallen Giant* (as well, of course, as Perry himself), is also resolutely of its time, and in fact deals with many of the same issues. It, too, is a *memento mori*, but intended for a nation. Perry describes it as ‘a large war-like bronze skull [whose] subject is the changing face of Britain in the second half of the 20th century’, taking aim at Hirst as he does so:

In response [to media debates about what Britishness is], I offer an ethnographic artefact, a voodoo relic of a once huge empire encrusted with a boiled-down essence of itself in the form of tourist tat. Routemasters, the three lions, Beefeaters, Big Ben, Tower Bridge, bulldogs, all hallowed tribal symbols. Symbols that Brits hold more dear than blinging diamonds, I hope.¹¹⁴

In a pre-exhibition preview of the skull again in *The Guardian*, Perry glibly intones: ‘It’s saying the empire is over and we should get over it; it’s good that we are a less powerful nation.’¹¹⁵

¹¹² ‘For the Love of God, 2007’, *Damien Hirst*, accessed 17 October 2014, at <http://www.damienhirst.com/for-the-love-of-god>

¹¹³ Vanessa Thorpe, ‘Top critic lashes out at Hirst’s “tacky” art’, *The Observer*, 7 September 2008.

¹¹⁴ Perry, ‘Glad to be grey’.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Mark Brown, ‘The face of a nation – but is it ours?’, *The Guardian*, 5 May 2008.

The pre-exhibition article in *The Guardian* repeatedly focuses on the skull's 'Britishness', using this term exclusively. While Perry says that he 'wouldn't presume to say what should represent Britishness today',¹¹⁶ *Head of a Fallen Giant* is described as being 'covered in representations of Britain, such as the union flag, Anne Boleyn, the Routemaster bus, Beefeaters, a postbox, a ban the bomb symbol, a bowler hat, the Queen and so on'.¹¹⁷ We might consider, however, how many of these symbols are actually reflective of Britain and how many are more typically associated with England, particularly being culled, as they were, from central London tourist shops. (Routemaster buses, for example, may be British but are most often used as archetypal symbols of London.) Citing John Major's much-derided description of Britain as 'long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and – as George Orwell said – "old maids cycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist"', Kumar registers the trend, particularly common among politicians, of using the term 'Britain' when clearly 'it was really England [...] that was the bearer of the proud identity invoked'.¹¹⁸ Major's description, for example, is pointed out by Kumar to be 'quintessentially English' and does not 'conjure up recognisable images of' Scotland, Northern Ireland, or Wales.¹¹⁹ While Perry's use of tourist tat automatically involves a more ironic mediation of the idea of national identity than Major's, drawing on external rather than internal brand identity, the *Guardian* article is revealing for the way in which *Head of a Fallen Giant* is proposed as, indeed, 'British'.

These negotiations are at the heart of *Unpopular Culture*. At the crux of the exhibition is a sense of loss and diminishment, coupled with the underlying attempt to refigure an English national identity capable of filling the void of such absence. We have seen this motivation behind much of Perry's work thus far – not least in *The Charms of Lincolnshire* – but unlike previous iterations, *Unpopular Culture* marks Perry's most explicit engagement with the theme until this point; even still, however, we can see

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, p. 227.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

that it is not without its obfuscations and veils, as Perry's reductive, even dismissive, statement above shows. In making such claims – 'the empire is over and we should get over it', 'it's good' to be 'less powerful' – Perry shows his awareness for the changing nature of British and English identities but does not acknowledge how the alternatives he proposes actually function. In the section that follows, I want to consider the more subtle implications of Perry's presentation of everyday nostalgia through an extended enquiry into the works and reception of Philip Larkin, whom Perry cites implicitly, in his similar, localised vision of England, and explicitly, in his catalogue.

Poetry in motion

If *The Charms of Lincolnshire* was 'a poem written with objects', *Unpopular Culture* is a poem of another kind: an elegy. The sense of nostalgia is overwhelming. Though the exhibition is not, in fact, monochromatic, the combination of black and white photographs, unicolour bronzes, and a painting palette of muddy blues, browns, greens, and greys combine to colour the exhibition with the hazy, sepia tones of remembering, intended to function like a cinematic flashback made manifest. The exhibition was accompanied by a series of film screenings from the British Film Institute's collection of works, entitled *Nostalgia for the Bad Times*; this title, particularly when combined with the propagandistic films Perry chose, was clearly meant to be a wry aside about the idealising nature of the 'nostalgia industry', but there is nonetheless an element of it played straight, too, that cannot simply be dismissed through jokey awareness.¹²⁰ The exhibition's elegiac ambience is hinted at in other ways, too. That the catalogue's other essay is by poet Blake Morrison is important; that the catalogue entries are interspersed with poetry is even more so. Included in its pages are six poems: 'London Park in Time of Peace' by Vernon Scannell; 'The Figure' by Tony Harrison; 'MCMXIV' by Philip Larkin; an anonymous poem, 'Dahn the Plug'ole', which phonetically uses dialect to depict child mortality in a

¹²⁰ The films chosen include *Springtime in an English Village* (1944); *New Town For Old*; *O Dreamland* (1953); and *By the Fireside* (1945); see also footnote 151.

poor working-class family; ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ by Larkin; and ‘Going, Going’, also by Larkin, which sits appositely on the page next to *Head of a Fallen Giant*.¹²¹

Larkin, who appears three times, is, as Morrison emphasises, an obvious figure to invoke. For Morrison, this is because his poetry ‘expresses the same unobtrusive elegance and nostalgia as the works in the show’.¹²² He acknowledges Larkin’s perception of modernism as a rupture, even in spite of his own assimilation of it (a relationship which mirrors that of many of the artists in the exhibition). He does not, however, fully acknowledge how this relates to Perry, or even what their similar uses of conservatism and their resultant ensuing popularity might mean in this moment. Instead, he takes at face value Larkin’s lament in MCMXIV on the eve of World War I (‘Never such innocence again’) as the quintessential cry of a nostalgia for an England on the cusp of being lost, and hears it echo against the walls of *Unpopular Culture*.

Larkin is an especially potent figure here not just for his poetry but also for how he, as an author, has been used to represent an entire nation. His synecdochal function as national monument was so intense that revelations of Larkin’s misdeeds and misthoughts, when they emerged with the publication of biographies and his *Selected Letters*, were taken by many critics as a personal loss. (One reviewer wrote: ‘Without ever having known Larkin I feel, as I think many readers will, that I have lost a friend.’¹²³) In his article “‘The life with a hole in it’: Philip Larkin and the condition of England’, Nigel Alderman interrogates Larkin’s role as keeper of the British past:

Why Larkin? Why did so many reviewers nostalgically use Larkin or a Larkin poem as means to access a whole historical period, and why were they so saddened and rattled by the revelations of his racism, misogyny, and misanthropy, as if his views said something about them? Why did their words convey the overwhelming sense that a home (a *home*?) they once had was lost, was no longer to be enjoyed,

¹²¹ All poetry is quoted from *Unpopular Culture*.

¹²² Morrison, ‘Waving Goodbye’, p. 14.

¹²³ Nigel Alderman, ‘The life with a hole in it’: Philip Larkin and the condition of England’, *Textual Practice*, Vol. 8 (1994), p. 297 (note 4).

admired, or celebrated, but rather had to be elegised as something irretrievably gone in a way that can only be called suitably Larkinesque?¹²⁴

To these reviewers using Larkin as a window to the past, we can add Perry, who ticks many of these same boxes (though with no mention of Larkin's negative associations – perhaps they are incorporated under the nostalgia for a less 'politically correct' time).

Furthermore, Larkin has a considerable reputation which lingers on in the public consciousness, and which finds something of an equal in Perry. Perry has a particular resonance with Larkin, the latter being presented as

the plain-speaking, robustly philistine, man of the world, who has no time for the pretentious cant of the litterateur and/or academic and who responds to such questions as, 'but what if a critic construes a poem in a way you felt you didn't mean?' with the amusingly offensive, 'I should think he was talking balls.'¹²⁵

As the above intimates, Larkin is also seen as the voice of the ordinary and the everyday. In 'Philip Larkin: Laureate of the Common Man' (a title which speaks for itself), Hermann Peschmann suggests that Larkin has 'set poetry free to celebrate, and show in a new light, the significance of the most ordinary actions of happenings in our daily life'.¹²⁶ Indeed, to his poetry at large is ascribed much the same function we see at work in *Unpopular Culture*, that of 'trafficking in the truth of ordinary life, revealing its dullness to the full, and rejecting the false imaginative act that would aim to redeem it [...]',¹²⁷ while remaining 'warm but always detached enough to show things as they really are, and if they are shoddy and second-rate to say so'.¹²⁸ Larkin, like Perry, is also concerned with registering

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 279.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 282.

¹²⁶ Herman Peschmann, 'Philip Larkin: Laureate of the Common Man', *English*, Vol. 24 (1975), p. 51.

¹²⁷ A. Kingsley Weatherhead, 'Philip Larkin of England', *ELH*, Vol. 38 (1971), p. 617.

¹²⁸ Peschmann, 'Laureate of the Common Man', p. 54.

that strange interlude between present and past, using memory, nostalgia, and impending change to elegise, seemingly, for both times at once. For both poet and artist, this technique is as much technical as it is thematic, and Perry's use of pottery can certainly be seen to echo Larkin's 'preponderant use of traditional forms, regular metres, syntax, and rhyme schemes, [which is] itself an appeal and a tribute to past times which seem so solemn and so orderly against our own, as it is, to some extent, an effort to resurrect them'.¹²⁹

In his study of Larkin's central role within English culture, Alderman deconstructs Larkin's status as national poet and his perceived quintessential English style. To repudiate this, he looks at how Larkin's writing was in fact influenced by W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot in a way that mimicked Britain's political preoccupations. In this way, Alderman suggests that typical readings ignore the 'larger historical question of the problematic status of any "English" poetic subjectivity when it is mediated through an American and an Irishman'.¹³⁰ He writes that 'Larkin's position as a belated national poet, writing after the domination of English literature by Yeats and Eliot, corresponds to England's problematic status as a belated nation, which has lost its colonies (beginning with Ireland), and which is secondary to the new imperial power, America'.¹³¹ Loss is figured not just in the content, but in the form.

For Alderman, much of Larkin's poetry deals with this mediation between Britishness and Englishness and its accompanying sense of failure, loss, and diminishment; England is born from Britain's decline, in a way that rhymes neatly with the ideas of Kumar and the other political scholars discussed in this thesis's introduction and which informs the enquiry into national identity seen in *Unpopular Culture*. Alderman explores these concepts through an analysis of Larkin's poem 'Home is so Sad', to which he attributes themes such as the failure of home, both domestically and nationally, as well as upward class mobility (which, fittingly for the present context, he locates in the poem's final phrase, 'that vase', the contemptuous tone of which he takes to indicate the speaker's surpassing of the

¹²⁹ Weatherhead, 'Philip Larkin of England', p. 624.

¹³⁰ Alderman, 'The life with a hole in it', p. 284.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

home that produced him, which is emblematised by its kitsch, classed pottery). Reading this alongside a number of other of Larkin's poems, he summarises:

In other words, 'home is so sad because the move from *the* British museum to *an* English one means a move from a universal rhetoric, one that can incorporate other nations and national pasts [...] to a rhetoric of difference that signifies the breakdown of the island's universal term: the post-Imperial necessity of re-theorising English as a term after the triumphant age of European imperial-nationalism is a function of the country's relative decline; a decline, moreover, linked to the upsurge of nationalism and national identity elsewhere which forced the decolonisation of the Empire.¹³²

Here, Alderman – and Larkin – seems to be foreshadowing the questions of Kumar in *The Making of English National Identity*, and which Perry would later raise with his *Head of a Fallen Giant*: if the empire is dead, who are the English now?

In this respect, the irony of Perry's use of tourist tat as his emblems for *Head of a Fallen Giant* is exacerbated by flanking it with Larkin's 'Going, Going', thus framing his sculpture with the lines:

For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn't going to last,
That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in
Except for the tourist parts

The poem's opening statement, 'I thought it would last my time', though written in 1972 and described in 1975 as 'our generation's epitaph',¹³³ is an adage which finds itself repeated by every generation. While it ostensibly refers to the English landscape, having been commissioned by the Conservative government for an HMSO document on the environment,¹³⁴ its resonances are more psychological than

¹³² Ibid., p. 282.

¹³³ Peschmann, 'Laureate of the Common Man', p. 56.

¹³⁴ The commissioning committee, however, censored the more critical of Larkin's lines, though Larkin restored these (and changed the poem's name to 'Going, Going') with the publication of his volume *High Windows* two years later; he is said to have written to friends 'protesting this Tory censorship'. John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery* (Basingstoke, 2014), p. 139.

environmental. Larkin's poems are never really about England as it was, but about the anxiety of its dissolubility, and the frantic knitting of nostalgia to cover the gaps in identity. In 'MCMXIV', Larkin memorialises a year eight before his own birth in 1922 (much like Perry discussing the 1940s and 1950s in *Unpopular Culture*). Its final line, 'Never such innocence again', has been read as both a mourning for the world about to be lost¹³⁵ (as suggested above) and as indicative of a devotion 'to a sense of wonder at the archaic images of the pre-modern age'.¹³⁶ Quite overlooked is the opening couplet of the final stanza, 'Never such innocence/Never before or since', which in fact suggests a wry acknowledgement of the very process of nostalgia and the fictionalising properties of memorialisation.

Nostalgia for the bad times

Perry's invocation of Larkin, then, is a pointed one, which rhymes with his own similarly problematic, self-aware, yet nonetheless ultimately glorifying nostalgic image of England post-Britain. In fact, more than simply being Larkinesque, Perry pictures the very England about which Larkin was writing by imaging the 1940s through to the 1980s. It is unsurprising that the search for English identity should be a backwards-looking one, for both Perry and Larkin. Kumar writes that, in recognising that the 'the imperial game was over, [...] England had to find a new identity. But that identity could only be found in the past, in the old England that "remained unaltered" despite "the strange fantastic structure" of empire and all the other ventures that England had engaged in over the centuries'.¹³⁷

Here, Larkin's hallowed position within the English canon – and the canon of Englishness – should be further deconstructed, for it is particularly relevant in the context of my current arguments about Perry, and provides an important model against which to interpret the reception of *Unpopular*

¹³⁵ Morrison, 'Waving Goodbye', pp. 14-15.

¹³⁶ Weatherhead, 'Philip Larkin of England', p. 624.

¹³⁷ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, p. 267. He here appears to be quoting Enoch Powell, who he notes is 'popularly taken as a racist'; without disclaiming this, Kumar suggests that 'he is not so much a racist as an English nationalist' (p. 267).

Culture. We have already seen that Larkin is principally concerned with notions of English life and Englishness; furthermore, the version of England and Englishness this entailed is ‘often characterised as regressive or reactionary’,¹³⁸ as well as ‘politically conservative’.¹³⁹ The valorisation of this, however, has often been underexplored; while Larkin’s ‘Englishness’ is frequently noted, the euphemistic nature of this term is not (and perhaps, in fact, its euphemistic nature is not even fully understood by its users). In his 1992 article ‘Larkin and Europe’, Tim Trengrove-Jones rectifies this omission, rightfully situating Larkin’s attitudes, both poetic and personal, within the nationalistic rubric it has always implicitly voiced.¹⁴⁰

We have already seen above that Larkin did in fact assimilate non-British influences, despite his purported disavowals of all things foreign. Nonetheless, it is his provinciality that has both defined his image and led to his canonisation. As Trengrove-Jones says, it is widely agreed that “‘Larkin” as a cultural phenomenon is committed to the articulation of distinctively national interests and the constitutions of strictly demarcated tribal affiliations’.¹⁴¹ He goes on, however, to situate this position against an emerging Europeanism, writing that ‘to an extent not yet fully appreciated, this poet’s reputation rests on what one might call the closing of the English mind’¹⁴² and thus using Larkin to consider the relationship between England and Europe in a way that I want to suggest resonates with Perry’s own in his use of curation here.

Trengrove-Jones cogently links Larkin’s canonisation to rising nationalism in the face of the Pan-European ideal, writing that a

key feature of Larkin’s critical reception is that the ways in which his ‘Englishness’ has been celebrated have tended to soften the vigour and rigour of his cultural programme, if indeed it is allowed that he had one. [...] But

¹³⁸ Zachary Leader, ‘Movement Fiction and Englishness’, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 42 (2013), p. 247.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251

¹⁴⁰ Tim Trengrove-Jones, ‘Larkin and Europe’, *English Studies in Africa*, Vol. 35 (1992). This is also obliquely hinted at, but ultimately unspoken, in Bernard Bergonzi, ‘Davie, Larkin, and the State of England’, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 18 (1977), p. 344.

¹⁴¹ Trengrove-Jones, ‘Larkin and Europe’, p. 53.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

throughout his life, his critical pronouncements all show a poet committed to what is best understood as cultural nationalism, the much more aggressive actuality that is partially elided by the characteristic references to his ‘Englishness’.¹⁴³

Similarly, he notes that ‘what Larkin’s imagination found exciting, and what it excited in many of his readers was [...] the reassertion and reconstruction of national identity’.¹⁴⁴ Even his ‘installation as “the Poet of England” displays the classic symptoms associated with the rise of a nationalist culture’, incorporating the ‘rediscovery of the national space’; the ‘re-emergence of a national poet’; and, in the centralisation of a man who ‘claimed to hate the literary life of London’, the ““peripheral” coming to constitute the tone of the centre’.¹⁴⁵ We should note, too, how appositely all three of these criteria apply to Perry also, as he similarly focuses on the depiction of the national space (as outlined above), is lauded as a sort of ‘national poet’, and, as a craftsman, exists at the periphery of the art world. These parallels suggest a somewhat analogous relationship between the two men and underlying themes of national identity, as well as the prioritisations of Larkin and Perry signalling something of the resurgence of a nationalist culture, or, at the very least, a search for identity.

The resonances between Perry and Larkin go further than simply Perry’s knowing invocation of the latter through the incorporation of his poetry, then. Though Perry does not denounce foreign influences as Larkin does – rather, he emphasises his use of them, noting his references to Japanese and African ceramic languages in his monograph, although, as we have seen in our previous discussion of *The Angel of the South*, these can themselves be reductive and Othering in effect – he nonetheless uses a similar sort of visual ‘sociolect’, particularly in this exhibition, which takes the cataloguing of a distinctly English visual language as its central focus. (Pearly Kings and Queens are idiosyncratically

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 54-5.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

English, for example, and their image may be unintelligible to a non-British, and perhaps even a non-English, viewer.)

Furthermore, it is critical to note that such expressions – and, just as importantly, subsequent cultural enshrinements – of Englishness as Larkin’s (and, now, Perry’s), though they may at first glance appear to be innocuous, banal, or even negative, neither exist in a vacuum nor are free from political agenda. Indeed, Trengove-Jones writes that Larkin’s letters and the ensuing controversy ‘make it no longer possible to hide from the unattractive aspects of the cultural matrix that attended Larkin’s election to unofficial Poet Laureate’.¹⁴⁶ Instead, we are forced to confront the now ‘unavoidable’ racist biases that necessarily underpin his nationalism,¹⁴⁷ ideologies that had heretofore been subsumed under Larkin’s ‘Englishness’ (and which often still are). It is, I argue, the lack of fervour – and instead the promotion of dull, even disappointing, minutiae, as well as a focus on the negative rather than explicit patriotic praise-singing – that allows such cultural nationalism to escape its own recognition.¹⁴⁸ This is, as my previous discussion of *The Charms of Lincolnshire* has suggested, a tactic employed by Perry, too: by highlighting the negative or ugly aspects of Englishness (across culture, history, and identity), the nationalistic propulsion behind the endeavour is obfuscated, but no less present; in fact, it is potentially even legitimised through the ostensibly apologetic self-awareness.

It is worth acknowledging that an interest in heritage is not the exclusive territory of the problematic nationalist.¹⁴⁹ Writing in *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, Patrick Wright argues that ‘[w]hile it can indeed be expressed jingoistically,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁴⁸ A similar argument is proposed by Michael Billig in his book *Banal Nationalism*, in which he writes that the ‘metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building’. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995), p. 8.

¹⁴⁹ Another – and perhaps more nuanced – example of a contemporary artist engaging with the idea of ‘Heritage’ is Jeremy Deller, who won the Turner Prize the year after Perry in 2004. For more on Deller, see: Robert J. Wallis, ‘Bouncing on a huge inflatable Stonehenge: Considering *Sacrilege* by Jeremy Deller’, *World Art*, Vol. 3 (2013), pp. 319-341; Jerome de Groot, “‘I am not a trained historian. I improvise.’ Jeremy Deller interviewed by Jerome de Groot”, *Rethinking History*, Vol. 16 (2012), pp. 587-595; Stuart Hall, ‘Jeremy Deller’s political imaginary’, in Jeremy Deller (ed.), *Jeremy Deller: Joy in People* (London, 2012), pp. 81-91.

the everyday sense of historical existence also testifies to radical needs which [...] may still be reaching out to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” ([Walter] Benjamin)’.¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, there is something not simply nostalgic but undeniably regressive about Perry’s vision of England as presented by *Unpopular Culture*. For one thing, we can see no non-white faces, despite the mass immigration to Britain that took place at this time.¹⁵¹ Instead, we are presented with a vision of England that is superficially acknowledged to be flawed and yet is simultaneously celebrated for its (typically ‘English’) stoicism, particularly in the face of adversity. In this regard, the nationalistic implications of the canonisation of Larkin’s particular brand of insular, parochial ‘Englishness’ are essential criteria to bear in mind when we come to consider the critical response to Perry’s similarly Larkinesque *Unpopular Culture*.

The popularity of *Unpopular Culture*

While many critics commented on *Unpopular Culture*’s bleak and dour outlook, the media response suggests that the exhibition did indeed resonate in the way it was intended. It is interesting to note that, due to its particular nature, ‘success’ for *Unpopular Culture* does not necessarily come in the form of praise. Writing for *The Independent*, for example, Richard Cork calls the exhibition an ‘unsettling vision of Britain’ and an ‘alarming show’, posing the question, ‘does Perry realise just how disturbing this exhibition turns out to be?’¹⁵² Nevertheless, although he is seemingly shaken by the ‘desolation’ on display and describes the show as ‘tough’ and ‘uncompromising’, Cork’s closing

¹⁵⁰ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford, 2009), p. 27.

¹⁵¹ The inclusion of one of the films chosen by Perry, *Springtime in an English Village*, suggests an awareness of these issues, even as they are not more explicitly acknowledged within the body of the exhibition itself. The film, created by the Colonial Film Institute, shows a young black girl being crowned as the traditional May Queen in Stanion, Northamptonshire in 1944. The film is problematic for a number of reasons, not least that it was shown not in Britain but in the colonies, and was intended to entice those populaces to come to Britain, where they could provide cheap labour. Its inclusion by Perry here is a nod of recognition towards these greater sociocultural issues, but, as with *The Charms of Lincolnshire*, it seems a tokenistic one in lieu of further lack of representation or consideration.

¹⁵² Richard Cork, ‘A land of loners, misfits and Mrs Thatcher’, *The Independent*, 11 May 2008.

remarks commending the ‘elegiac’ nature of *Head of a Fallen Giant* – which he says ‘offer[s] itself as a memorial to an era of British life that now seems irrecoverable’ – ultimately paint the show as a grim but necessary encounter, akin, perhaps, to attending a funeral.

Tom Lubbock, also writing for *The Independent*, suggests that without any context one might assume the show was about ‘[g]loom, perhaps, the gloom of mid-20th-century Britain’, consisting as it does of ‘a survey that seems carefully edited to confirm your worst suspicions about the caution and provincialism of British art’.¹⁵³ He proposes instead, however, that, when engaged with on its own terms, ‘your attention does adjust – you become slower, more reflective and more receptive to its modest, solid virtues’. His approval is declared overtly when he announces that he likes the attitude and method of the show, while the article’s tagline situates these approaches within Perry’s proposed discourse of national identity, describing *Unpopular Culture* as making ‘a virtue of British self-effacement. So let’s hear it for the quiet man’. Similarly focusing on the exhibition’s meditative effects, a review in *The Observer* writes that it ‘make[s] you reflect on what we have lost in the “big, brash and shouty” years’.¹⁵⁴ Ostensibly, we are talking about the art world, but the description of the exhibition as ‘unashamedly nostalgic and yet oddly radical, in that it argues against the homogenising effect of global capitalism and mass culture’ intimates that what has been ‘lost’ is not exclusively artistic.¹⁵⁵

Perhaps the most revealing praise comes from those reviews printed in conservative newspapers. In *The Spectator*, Andrew Lambirth – who remarks that he has not seen the exhibition himself, though he references media discussions surrounding it as well as its catalogue – writes an impassioned defence of the artists that are seemingly deemed ‘unpopular’ (before realising, and complimenting, the nature of Perry’s sneaky title).¹⁵⁶ His lamentation that ‘society gets the art it deserves and our quickfix depraved sensationalism is spot on’ is shortly followed by praise for both Perry’s aims (of Perry’s

¹⁵³ Lubbock, ‘The fine art of staying famous’.

¹⁵⁴ O’Hagan, ‘Before all the shouting started’.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Lambirth, ‘The savvy Mr Perry’, *The Spectator*, 7 June 2008.

catalogue essay, he writes that ‘[t]here is much to applaud and agree with here’) and execution (‘I salute Mr Perry for using his own celebrity to bring to a wider audience some of the remarkable talents of 20th century British art’). In extolling the notably traditionalist artworks on display, Lambirth re-enacts the hostility towards contemporary art that Perry associates with the conservative ‘Daily Mail Britain’, and he takes at face value Perry’s rather pointedly reactionary aims.

This relationship between lauding the conservative art on display and the underlying conservative values such glorification often supports is more blatantly exposed by a review in *The Daily Telegraph*. In this, reviewer Rupert Christiansen refers to *Unpopular Culture* as a ‘sombre’ exhibition presenting a ‘bleak, hard vision of life’ that is ‘not to be sentimentalised [...] but it has its dignity’.¹⁵⁷ He describes *Head of a Fallen Giant* as a ‘masterpiece’. Although Christiansen is critical of the insularity of the work selected, noting that it is stunted by the narrowness of its visual allusion (though he is simultaneously approving of the fact that this means it was neither over-stimulated nor obsessed with sensationalism like the contemporary art of today), his remarks that the paintings depict ‘a society that is *ethnically homogenous*, overcast by the long shadow of wartime destruction and deprivation, but resolute amid the rubble’ (emphasis mine) does not seem to be a critical one; indeed, the suggestion that this homogeneity might be a positive attribute is bolstered by his implied admiration of the ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ attitude of steely resolution that once again is so often venerated as central to the English character.

Most tellingly, he pronounces that, ‘[w]ithout any overt ideological stridency, Perry has honoured a sort of Englishness – no, let’s call it Britishness – that the De La Warr’s Bauhausian clarity rejects and focused on a strain of our national art that his introductory essay describes as “subtle, sensitive, lyrical and quiet”’. Christiansen’s rejection – via Perry – of the architecture of the De La Warr Pavilion, which earlier in his review he described as ‘the first important example of European Modernism to be built in Britain’, is further significant, emblematising the disavowal of a ‘European’ identity in favour of the restitution of a uniquely British (or more specifically, English) one, a process

¹⁵⁷ Rupert Christiansen, ‘A treasure trove of gritty Britishness’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 May 2008.

we have similarly seen above in our discussions of Larkin.¹⁵⁸ Christiansen's elision of Englishness and Britishness here is a rather bizarre moment, redolent once more of official attempts to correct the mistaken usage of 'English' in situations where the correct term should be 'British', but here seen in reverse; in effect, his conflation of the two terms performs the same function that he is ostensibly trying to avoid, once more equating Britishness and Englishness, this time by extrapolating the former from the latter (in a way that, it should be noted, Perry has done throughout his exhibition, too).

It is notable, then, that Perry's elegiac, nostalgic vision of England is praised by critics in popular media that spans the political spectrum.¹⁵⁹ All, in fact, laud it for the same thing: its 'mood of melancholic beauty'¹⁶⁰ and attempts to return to a time when 'life was slower and when, maybe, we were more reflective, more civic and more humane';¹⁶¹ a Larkinesque time. Though this regression is presented mostly within an art historical framework, and is tempered by an awareness of 'nostalgia for the bad times', it very clearly has socio-cultural and -political inferences, too, which are evinced in the above reviews and their euphemistic approvals. In *Unpopular Culture*, Perry presents a façade of ambivalence which does not explicitly endorse an English nationalism, but which does not deny or preclude it, either; indeed, Perry reveals that driving his selection processes was the question, 'What should we be celebrating about ourselves?'.¹⁶² At its mildest interpretation, we are encouraged to contemplate what it is that 'we' have lost; at its strongest, to mourn. Again, the full extent of what we are mourning is not directly enunciated, but *The Telegraph's* suggestions of 'ethnic homogeneity' and its revaluation of Englishness in the face of Europeanism seem to articulate something that lurks

¹⁵⁸ We should note, too, that *Unpopular Culture* received many positive write-ups in the local newspapers of its touring destinations as well as by the national press; they are not discussed here, however, as many of these are expository pieces which were clearly written using the press release rather than engaged reviews that expressed the opinions of their writers. On those occasions where the exhibition was reviewed, as in *The Huddersfield Examiner* and *The Coventry Telegraph*, it was received very positively. See: Tamzin Lewis, 'Year was just as good behind headlines', *The Newcastle Journal*, 30 December 2008; Barry Gibson, 'Good Old Days just got worse', *The Huddersfield Examiner*, 2 September 2009; Julie Chamberlain, 'Pictures of British Life', *The Coventry Telegraph*, 29 January 2010.

¹⁵⁹ *The Sunday Times's* Waldemar Januszczak was less convinced by the exhibition, though his criticisms were mostly aimed at the Arts Council Collection itself, and he praises Perry even still: 'His taste is suspect, but not his drive'. Waldemar Januszczak, 'Eee, it were grim back then', *The Sunday Times*, 18 May 2008.

¹⁶⁰ O'Hagan, 'Before all the shouting started'.

¹⁶¹ Perry, 'Glad to be grey'.

¹⁶² O'Hagan, 'Before all the shouting started'.

beneath the surface; something that is referenced ironically by Perry in his selection of propagandistic films but, despite his disparaging comments about these, is never fully addressed or repudiated.

We should note once more that cultural enquiries into the national heritage are not automatically problematic, and *Unpopular Culture*'s positive reception suggests that, regardless of political affiliation, such explorations have a particular cathartic resonance for its audience at this particular moment. Writing in 2003 – the year of Perry's institutionalising Turner Prize win – Kumar declares that '[t]here has never before been a time when some coherent account of English national identity was more needed'.¹⁶³ In this way, Perry's cultural investigations – as well as the popular success of these – reflect this necessity, introspectively probing the national character and providing one articulation of what this Englishness might look like. While we can recognise the need for such enquiries, however, we should nonetheless remain vigilant as to what sort of ideology they ultimately promote. Relatedly, we should be cautious, too, of vestigial, unthinking slippages between 'English' and 'British', which only obfuscate the matter at hand and which regressively make claims for the universality of Englishness in ways that have been revealed to be patently untrue.

While *Unpopular Culture*'s conservatism may at first seem like a faux-kitsch self-posturing, then, further investigation (as well as a comparison with the analogous Larkin) reveals the more problematic conservative matrix on which it is predicated, and within which it is now positively received. Morrison inadvertently gets to the crux of the matter when he describes the nation presented in the exhibition as 'not bursting with imperial self-confidence but gently adapting to its reduced circumstances. [...] It's not an affluent country, nor a fashionable one [...] but it is decent, public-spirited and doing the best it can. George Orwell would have recognised the place and applauded it'.¹⁶⁴ If Morrison's picture of a 'Keep Calm and Carry On' England was not obvious enough (though we should note that he, like the others, uses the term 'Britain', and not 'England'), his invocation of Orwell certainly is: not only is this presentation of England and its denizens a cherished part of the

¹⁶³ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, p. 263.

¹⁶⁴ Morrison, 'Waving Goodbye', p. 14.

English national mythos, but it is a highly charged and didactic one. Perry, like Larkin, is trying to shore up an Englishness that is presented as always being on the cusp of erasure:

And that will be England gone,

The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,

The guildhalls, the carved choirs.

There'll be books; it will linger on

In galleries; but all that remains

For us will be concrete and tyres.

Precisely by allowing it to linger on in galleries, however, Perry is able to not only elegise this nostalgic form of Englishness, but uses this nostalgia to refigure, and reinvigorate, it anew.

Institutional Affirmation: Grayson Perry at the British Museum

With these discussions in mind, I want to briefly return, by way of the chapter's conclusion, to *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. While, unlike *The Charms of Lincolnshire* and *Unpopular Culture*, *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* was not intended to be an exhibition about British cultural identity *per se*, its use of the collections, and stage, of the British Museum inherently make it a somewhat loaded affair.

Thematically, *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* was envisioned by Perry as a homage to the anonymous makers of many of the British Museum's objects. The 'tomb' in the title is a double entendre, referring both to the tombs from which many of these objects were originally excavated, and to the British Museum itself, which functions as their new eternal resting place. 'Unknown' is also something of a pun, since the exhibition was widely publicised as *Grayson Perry: Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, an eponym which hung on large-scale banners and populated posters throughout the duration of the show. Similarly, in many publicity interviews, Perry spoke of being 'absolutely aware of the bitter irony of it being called *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* when it's in fact a celebrity artist's vanity project'.¹⁶⁵ The other referent invoked by the exhibition's title is, of course, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, referring to the national, and nationalist, monuments which play host to the anonymous remains of soldiers killed in battle. Almost every country has an unknown soldier and a monument memorialising him; theseonyms are then used to metonymically stand for all deceased soldiers of that nation, across various time periods and wars, and the monument becomes a site for public mourning and ritualised catharsis.

Although the director Neil MacGregor resolutely resists the idea of the British Museum upholding any sort of nationalism – instead describing the institution as being established 'very

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Charlotte Higgins, 'Pots, pilgrims and a severed ponytail', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2011.

specifically for everybody, for the whole world'¹⁶⁶ (and clarifying that it 'was only called the British Museum because it was not the king's museum'¹⁶⁷) – he also acknowledges as the purpose of the 'encyclopaedic museum' the idea that 'objects speak truths, and objects from other cultures tell us not only about distant peoples but about ourselves too, about our souls';¹⁶⁸ in this way, the British Museum was a means through which 'we could understand a little better the world and our place in it'¹⁶⁹ (though not, he asserts, by upholding categories of superiority and difference¹⁷⁰). It should be noted that while the 'we' used here appears to be intended as 'we, the visitors', rather than 'we, the Britons', there is nonetheless a dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' implicit in MacGregor's descriptions.

While espousing the virtues and possibilities of such a museum, however, MacGregor's universalising narrative neatly omits the most problematic issues surrounding its role within British colonialism and empire (that is, that many of the items in the collection were obtained through colonial means and their organisation into a collection was a method of upholding, structuring, and legitimising imperial power¹⁷¹), issues that are patently embodied in ongoing controversies surrounding repatriation.¹⁷² Furthermore, despite MacGregor's objections, the role of museums in the creation of national identities cannot be undermined.¹⁷³ As Carol Duncan asserts in her 1995 essay 'The Art Museum as Ritual' (presaging Stuart Hall's similar claims, as encountered in our consideration of *The*

¹⁶⁶ Neil MacGregor, 'To Shape the Citizens of "That Great City, the World"', in James B. Cuno (ed.), *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate Over Antiquities* (Princeton, 2009), p. 39.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁷¹ MacGregor acknowledges that 'inevitably it is aided by a past of national wealth and imperial power. [...] But such wealth and powers is an inheritance that can – and should – very properly be put at the disposal of the whole world.' But this obscures the fact this 'power' is not simply being passively shared, but actively shaped by those in possession of it. Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁷² For one recent example of these controversies, see: Paul Daley, 'Preservation or plunder? The battle over the British Museum's Indigenous Australian show', *The Guardian*, 9 April 2015, accessed 15 August 2015, at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/09/indigenous-australians-enduring-civilisation-british-museum-repatriation>

¹⁷³ There is a vast literature on this topic. See, for example: David Boswell and Jessica Evans (eds.), *Representing the Nation: A Reader* (London, 1999); Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London, 1992); Gerard Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader* (London, 2005); Jennifer Dickey, Samir El Azhar, and Catherine M. Lewis (eds.), *Museums in a Global Context* (Washington, DC, 2013).

Charms of Lincolnshire), what ‘we see and do not see in art museums – and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it – is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity’.¹⁷⁴

Similarly, while national identity may not be the explicit focus of *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* as it was in Perry’s earlier exhibitions (albeit occasionally mediated through various other narratives: the countryside, Victoriana, the working classes, and so on), it lurks under the surface. It is significant that both museums and tombs of unknown soldiers are isolated by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* as having particularly symbolic nationalistic functions. Of the latter, Anderson writes that ‘[n]o more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist’ than cenotaphs and Tombs of Unknown Soldiers,¹⁷⁵ while on the topic of the former, Anderson argues that the organisational trifecta of the census, the map, and the museum ‘profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion – the nature of the human beings it rules, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry’.¹⁷⁶

In this respect, it is notable that several of the works Perry created for the British Museum play with notions of maps and museology. These are significant both within nationalistic contexts, as outlined above, and also institutional ones; as Duncan notes, one way that museums reiterate their symbolic roles as representatives, and thus upholders, of beliefs about the order of the world and the individual’s place within it is by ‘equip[ping] visitors with maps to guide them through the universe they construct’.¹⁷⁷

On entering the exhibition space of *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, the visitor is immediately greeted with the pot *You Are Here* (2011, Figure 110), an ironic visitor’s map situating you within your cultural, rather than geographical, environment. The pot is covered with pictures of ‘contemporary

¹⁷⁴ Carol Duncan, ‘The Art Museum as Ritual’, in Donald Preziosi (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford; New York, 2009), p. 425.

¹⁷⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006), p. 9.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁷⁷ Duncan, ‘The Art Museum as Ritual’, p. 425.

cultural pilgrims' (that is, visitors to the exhibition at hand), with each voicing their reasons for attending the show – 'There was such a buzz about it on Twitter'; 'I need to have my negative prejudices confirmed'; 'I try to keep up with what's going on in the arts'; 'It's on my A level syllabus, my tutor told me to come'; 'I came to be outraged'; 'It's the kind of thing people like me go and see'; and 'I just wanted to satisfy myself that I am more clever than this celebrity charlatan' – with the result that the phrase 'you are here' becomes more of a social, psychical statement than a locational one.

Similarly, another piece, *The Rosetta Vase* (2011, Figure 111), is an obvious play on one of the British Museum's most famous objects, the Rosetta Stone, and is decorated with diagrammatic representations of what Perry calls 'mischievous little headings around which the show might or might not be arranged',¹⁷⁸ such as, for example, 'Museum as Cathedral', 'Craftsman Hero in the Digital Age', 'Post-Diana Society', 'DIY Religion' 'Colonialism', and 'The Institution'. This strategy of subtly, superficially acknowledging the broader, thornier issues raised by his curatorship (such as the behemoths of colonialism and the institution, for example) without fully engaging with the complicated inferences of these is a deflective tactic that we have similarly seen at work in both *The Charms of Lincolnshire* and *Unpopular Culture*.

Most explicit for the purpose of the current discussion, however, is Perry's large-scale *Map of Truths and Beliefs* (2011, Figure 112), a monumental (290cm x 690cm) altarpiece-like tapestry. At its centre is the British Museum itself, its rooms labelled with various names for heaven or the afterlife. The museum's Great Court, where Perry's exhibition took place, has a large rainbow eye superimposed upon it, the pupil of which is the alpha and omega figure of Alan Measles. Outside of this circle, the tapestry shows and names famous destinations of pilgrimage; these destinations are not simply religious or spiritual, but cultural, touristic, academic, and fanatical, including as they do Jerusalem, the Grand Canyon, Stonehenge, Glastonbury, Auschwitz, Graceland, and Oxford. Their labels, however, are transposed, creating a discordance between the named places and their representative icons.

¹⁷⁸ Klein, *Grayson Perry* (London, 2013), p. 255.

In light of Duncan's descriptions, then (and the *Rosetta Vase's* earlier mention of 'Museum as Cathedral', one of Duncan's overarching arguments, suggests that he may even be familiar with her work), it would seem that Perry is playfully disrupting, rather than preserving, the logic of the museum; instead of providing coherent maps, diagrams, or explanations, he offers versions whose illogic asks the viewer to be critically aware of how museum maps – as well as traditional ones – order knowledge. Rather than using this to perform a sort of institutional critique, however – that is, interjecting into the museum or gallery space to make explicit its implicit functions¹⁷⁹ – closer analysis reveals instead Perry's institutional affirmation; an affirmation which, I argue, is concealed by this first layer of obfuscatory teasing, in keeping with the superficially negative (but actually laudatory) schema of both *The Charms of Lincolnshire* and *Unpopular Culture*.

In particular, although it may initially seem like Perry is subverting the role of the museum by playfully disordering its knowledge systems, juxtaposing items both 'real' (that is, historical artefacts) and 'fake' (contemporary artworks), and inventing new narratives through the use of cross-cultural and cross-temporal display, in fact these remain remarkably in line with the British Museum's own aims as outlined by MacGregor. In particular, MacGregor's claims for the importance of an encyclopaedic, cross-cultural museum are thrown into relief by Perry's project, which similarly scans through time and space to search for unifying, universalising themes and 'truths' about human experience: MacGregor argues that there are 'truths and insights that can be gathered only in this kind of context',¹⁸⁰ only through the 'study of things gathered together from all over the world'.¹⁸¹ Indeed, his suggestion that the collections of the British Museum insist that if 'we want to understand how we

¹⁷⁹ Notable artists associated with institutional critique include Louise Lawler, Fred Wilson, Michael Asher, and Andrea Fraser. For more on institutional critique, see: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2009); John C. Welchman, *Institutional Critique and After* (Zürich, 2006); Gerald Raunig, *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (London, 2006); Johanna Burton and Anne Ellegood (eds.), *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology* (Munich, 2014); Claire Robins, *Curious Lessons in the Museum: The Pedagogic Potential of Artists' Interventions* (Farnham, 2013).

¹⁸⁰ MacGregor, 'To Shape the Citizens of "That Great City, the World"', p. 54.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

think about God and worship, [...] we need to think about how the Japanese think about the same'¹⁸² rhymes precisely with Perry's own invention of an Alan Measles-worshipping religion, which Perry then uses to throw into relief the analogous religious artefacts from the museum's collection.¹⁸³

In this respect, although Perry's own 'artefacts' are contemporary art constructions and not 'authentic', they, alongside his curation of the collection, nonetheless serve to restage and, ultimately, endorse the encyclopaedic museum's propelling notion that 'the context of the museum would allow truths to emerge that could not emerge if the objects were studied only in the context of objects like them; that is, among only objects from the same culture'.¹⁸⁴ As the glowing reviews synopsised above reveal, this approach – actually the British Museum's own – was represented anew through the avatar of Perry, and widely praised for its fresh and contemporary take. In this way, not only Perry's construction of narrative historiography is praised, but so too is the British Museum and its collections legitimised, the problematic nature of these all but forgotten behind the veil of fiction.

Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman, then, is ultimately an institutional affirmation of the British Museum, a contemporary reinvigoration of that 'traditional' museum and its collections that in fact serves to re-present, rather than re-imagine, its methods and ideologies. Though the sheen of subversion is added through the incorporation of a contemporary artist – and specifically through Perry, with his non-transgressive 'transgressive' transvestism and his frequent public contumelies regarding the contemporary art industry of which he was a part – and though the result may be received as imaginative, playful, even joyous, it nonetheless ultimately upholds, rather than subverts, the collections and institutions, both physical and symbolic, at hand. In doing so, Perry not only

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁸³ Perry's exhibition has a precedent in – and, Perry states, was partially inspired by – Eduardo Paolozzi's 1985 exhibition *Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl*. It was staged at the Museum of Mankind, which then held the British Museum's ethnographic collections. This exhibition is a problematic paradigm, however; though ostensibly intended as a celebratory swansong for 'non-Western' tribes (African, Native American, Mexican) that had died out under the influence of European expansion, it was essentially another restaging of the trope of these peoples' essential primitive innocence. Furthermore, the exhibition revolved around Paolozzi and his inherited and fictionalised conception of what these tribes were like, which he recreated in his exhibition with no effort to support these ideas with factual knowledge. See also: Eduardo Paolozzi, *Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl: An Exhibition at the Museum of Mankind* (London, 1985).

¹⁸⁴ MacGregor, 'To Shape the Citizens of "That Great City, the World"', p. 42.

continues to locate national identity in potentially fraught conceptions of its heritage and past (although this time the national identity is, purportedly, British rather than English), but he also finally manifests the idea, latent throughout *The Charms of Lincolnshire* and *Unpopular Culture*, that this national identity can be re-invigorated and re-created from the spoils of these historical traditions – literally.

There'll Always Be an England

*'Red, white and blue: what does it mean to you?'*¹

I want to conclude this thesis by considering one final exhibition, and, in particular, one final artwork. With 2014's *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?* at the National Portrait Gallery, Perry once more intervened in a gallery's collections, interjecting fourteen portraits into the National Portrait Gallery's established halls. Staged in collaboration with Channel 4 for another documentary series of the same name, the portraits made included *The Earl of Essex*, a miniature of former *X Factor* contestant Rylan Clark (2014, Figure 113); *The Ashford Hijab*, a silk screen-printed headscarf depicting a young woman who had converted to Islam (2014, Figure 114); and *I Am a Man*, a sculpture of a female-to-male transsexual using the iconography of Peter Pan and, yet again, the Benin Bronzes (2014, Figure 115).

The exhibition is a conscious enquiry into the nature of identity, ostensibly both personal and national; more aptly, however, it is an exploration of the latter through the former. This is a strategy we have seen at work repeatedly throughout this thesis, which has considered the ways in which Perry has investigated and revived national identity through the (at times obfuscatory) guises of autobiography, transvestism, and curatorship. Perry's insertion of everyday narratives (with the occasional celebrity, such as Clark or politician Chris Huhne) into the setting of the National Portrait Gallery, whose policy is 'to represent people of achievement in British history and culture',² is consistent with this approach, personalising and humanising the abstract concept of national identity by representing it as

¹ This line is taken from the patriotic 1939 song which lends its title to that of this conclusion ('There'll Always Be an England', written by Hughie Charles and Ross Parker and performed by Vera Lynn); it is notable for the way in which it conflates England ('There'll always be an England/And England shall be free/If England means as much to you/As England means to me') with Britain, as evidenced by its calling of the colours of the Union Jack, as well as its rallying cry, 'Britons awake!'. See: Martin Cloonan, 'State of the nation: "Englishness", pop, and politics in the mid-1990s', *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 21 (1997), p. 58.

² 'Cultural Diversity at the National Portrait Gallery', *National Portrait Gallery*, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.npg.org.uk/about/faq/cultural-diversity-at-the-national-portrait-gallery.php>

individualism. Similarly, the works made for this exhibition show a marked attempt to be more diverse, in contrast to Perry's previously discussed exhibitions, which, as I have noted, lacked such diversity.

Overseeing this enquiry is a monumental tapestry in lurid colours, *Comfort Blanket* (2014, Figure 116). At the centre is a small child labelled 'A British citizen', dissected like a scientific diagram into segments of, for example, 'Fear of Embarrassment', 'Love of the Underdog', and 'Sorry'; to the left of this, there is a pound symbol, and, even further, a Union Jack; and on the right of the tapestry there is a large and garish portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. Surrounding these images are copious swirling words and phrases associated with Britishness and deemed central to British identity, including 'The Beeb' (an affectionate nickname for the BBC), NHS, the Mother of Parliaments, Shakespeare, bitter irony, and fish and chips. Describing the piece in the exhibition, Perry's explanatory text declares it to be

[a] portrait of Britain to wrap yourself up in, a giant banknote, things we love, and love to hate. A friend whose family had walked out of Hungary fleeing the Soviets in 1956 said her mother referred to Britain as her 'security blanket'. As their plane came in to land in the UK, the Tannoy relayed a message from the Queen saying 'Welcome to Britain, you are now in a safe country.' People still come to our country for its stability, safety and rule of law. We should be proud of that.

Comfort Blanket is a particularly apposite piece with which to close this discussion of Perry's relationship to national identity for a number of reasons. To begin with, it shows the way in which Perry's preoccupations with national identity, which I have charted here from the beginning of his career, have now become the overt focus of his art. In addition, it corroborates my argument throughout that Perry has purposely constructed his identity on a bedrock of Britishness: the tapestry namechecks a number of elements that, as we have seen, have been central to Perry's persona; these include, for

example, the ‘Woman’s Institute’ [sic], ‘Monty Python’, and ‘pantomime’, all of which I have argued have been integral to his transvestism.

Similarly, the tapestry and its related exhibition reveal the extent to which this engagement has been endorsed – and utilised – by the national institutions which serve as the implicit constructors and explicit repositories for that identity, as well as the positive response to this from the ‘internal audience’ being branded. The exhibition attracted ‘record crowds’, and representatives from the National Portrait Gallery declared that Perry’s association ‘broadened the reach of the gallery’, drawing in a ‘different kind of audience’ who were then encouraged to visit ‘parts of the gallery they might otherwise not have explored’; this was attributed, at least in part, to Perry’s ability to ‘[speak] to people in a language they understand, the language of their own experience’.³

In the past, we have seen Perry engage with national identity through the veils of history and nostalgia, swathed in declarations of disavowal; this was evidenced in both his transvestism and his curatorship. Now, however, the pretext of subversion or transgression is almost entirely gone, and the affirmative undertones of Perry’s practice – which I have argued have been present throughout – are more fully revealed. (There is, perhaps, a slight element of subversion in his rather grotesque portrait of the Queen, but even this is affectionate rather than challenging, a problematic stance to which I will return momentarily.)

In particular, the preceding chapters of this thesis have looked at the ways in which Perry’s work has aimed to both foster and facilitate a sense of patriotism, giving visual expression to an identity that has, for various reasons, lacked a popular nationalism (due in no small part to its ‘historical willingness to subordinate national expression to broader domestic and global structures of colonial and imperial

³ Mark Brown, ‘Grayson Perry works attract record crowds to National Portrait Gallery’, *The Guardian*, 16 March 2015.

power'⁴); with *Comfort Blanket*, this underlying subtext has been made into text, and Perry openly declares – with his art and with his words – that it's 'OK to be patriotic'.⁵

Perry's quip – printed, significantly, in *The Sun* – was followed by a remark that 'British people feel guilty about our past. [...] We were the first to do the Industrial Revolution, we got in there early with the Empire stuff, and we had the big one – slavery. We were also the first to move on from it'.⁶ This is a statement of absolution that is echoed in the tapestry, becoming something of a royal pardon. Similarly, the cosiness implied by the term 'comfort blanket' is not incidental, and it ties in to many other domestications of Britishness that frequently exonerate or erase its complicated history of empire and colonisation. Perhaps the exemplary symbol of this is that quintessential 'British' stalwart, 'a nice cuppa tea', which appears here in a bright, large diamond; it is patently ironic that tea should be such an emblem of British national identity, when truly it is an emblem of Britain's imperial past.

The affirmation that was once veiled is now openly declared in the work's admiring title, as well as in Perry's assertion that 'we should be proud' (quoted above). As he notes, however, wrapped up in this positive blanket statement are a number of more negative, controversial, and ambivalent aspects, too (those things that 'we love to hate'). It is notable that Perry never defines which is which, leaving that decision-making process up to the viewer. In this way, *Comfort Blanket* utilises a more exaggerated version of the approach seen in his previous exhibitions, whereby difficult aspects of British history and empire are raised but quickly deflected (*The Rosetta Vase* also takes this approach, for example). Here, Perry invokes a number of terms with problematic associations for many, such as Margaret Thatcher, class division, the Troubles, and even the monarchy, which is here represented in the humanised and vulnerable image of the elderly Queen (another deflective strategy, in contrast to her younger image on the banknotes on which the tapestry is based; she is instead presented here as a grandmotherly figure).

⁴ Simon Featherstone, *Englishness: Twentieth-Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity* (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 3.

⁵ Grayson Perry, 'The low-down', *The Sun*, 26 October 2014.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Perry also includes both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, without aligning himself with either (although he is a known Labour Party supporter).

By simply presenting these without commentary, Perry creates an inclusive and uncritical environment in which each viewer can see their own aspirations upheld, like a Rorschach test of Britishness. Such ambiguity is what enabled conservative tabloid *The Sun* to brag about its inclusion, picking out its own selection of bedfellows (and *personae non gratae*): ‘*The Sun* sits alongside other British icons including the Queen, *Top Gear*, fish and chips and the Proms. But there is no room for *The Mirror* or *The Star*.’⁷ Perry’s adoption by *The Sun* – whose first mention of the artist was the contemptuous and sensational headline ‘Paedo art prize bid’ in 2003⁸ – is a particularly telling signifier of Perry’s transformed status within discourses of both contemporary art and nationalism.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the piece cogently – albeit unintentionally – points towards the problems still present in trying to articulate and define Britishness today, particularly as it interrelates with Englishness. As we have already seen throughout this thesis, and as many scholars have been quick to point out, the conflation of the two terms is both commonplace and problematic, and *Comfort Blanket* rather uncomfortably visualises the difficulties of this elision.

To begin with, unlike other examples of Perry’s work on the theme of Britishness seen previously throughout the thesis (particularly in chapter three), this tapestry deliberately seeks to incorporate Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish referents. As a result, filling the Union Jack in the top-left corner are a number of criss-crossed terms: representing Scotland, there is the Edinburgh Festival, whiskey, Robbie Burns, ceilidhs, the Stone of Destiny, bara brith, and William Wallace; for Wales, we see Tom Jones, Offa’s Dyke, and Welsh-language soap opera *Pobl y Cwm*; and for Northern Ireland, we are presented with Seamus Heaney, the Troubles, Titanic, and the Orange Order.

⁷ Leigh Holmwood, ‘Grayson Perry uses The Sun in Brit icon artwork’, *thesun.co.uk*, 23 October 2014, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/6024608/Trans-artist-Grayson-Perry-declares-The-Sun-is-definitive.html>

⁸ ‘Paedo art prize bid’, *The Sun*. The article goes on to use sarcastic quotation marks when referring to him as ‘one of four “artists” nominated for the Turner Prize’. *The Sun*’s readers were equally disdainful, and one letter to the paper opens: ‘I am disgusted about the winner of the Turner Prize for Art. It demonstrates how far down the road of depravity and poor taste the art world has gone’ (‘Letter’, *The Sun*, 11 December 2003).

The problems with this are twofold. Firstly, the inclusion of these national symbols only exaggerates their removal from, rather than incorporation into, Britishness; that is, in many cases they immediately read as Scottish, Welsh, and Irish, rather than British. Burns and Heaney, for example, are often considered as national poets integral to the cultural identities of Scotland and Ireland respectively, and their assimilation into a rhetoric of Britishness seems patently false. In this way, we can perhaps read in this gesture something of the desire to suture the wounded, post-devolution Britain (a necessary operation if we follow the argument that England receives much of its identity from its role within the United Kingdom).

Similarly, we are reminded that, for the other countries in the United Kingdom, Britishness is, for the most part, a secondary identity that supplements, rather than supplants, their own; we are also subtly reminded that ‘the elision of English into British is especially problematic for the English, particularly when conceiving of their national identity’, for, while it is easy to register these as Scottish, Welsh, and Irish, the detangling of ‘English’ from ‘British’ is a more difficult task.⁹ It seems significant, too, that a number of these non-English British referents suggest the presence of the English ‘I’ articulating this Britishness: for example, Offa’s Dyke is the border between Wales and England, and the Troubles were waged in England as well as Northern Ireland.

Secondly, such placement of these ‘other’ Britishnesses gives the impression of sequestering the non-English parts to one small portion of the tapestry, as though the rest is dedicated solely to England’s more significant contributions to Britishness. While this is not entirely true – the tapestry features generic entrants such as ‘rain’, ‘moaning’, and ‘cheeky’, which are not exclusively English – significantly more space is indeed given to English referents, such as Winston Churchill, Jane Austen, the Cotswolds, the city of London, Oxbridge, Corrie [*Coronation Street*], *The Archers*, and Jamie Oliver.

It is difficult to interpret this as anything other than symbolic, manifesting both the way in which the English ‘were not exclusively in charge of Britain and the British Empire – far from it – but they

⁹ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, p. 2.

had been the principal creators of those entities and had for long [sic] derived their sense of themselves from their part in them',¹⁰ as well as the notion that 'England, at a state level at least, invested so much in the forging of Britishness, an identity that few beyond England acknowledged anyway, that the possibility of its own emergence as an operable nation remained in doubt'.¹¹ As such, the tapestry reproduces, rather than rectifies, the monopoly of 'Britain' by 'England', but it also implicitly hints at the vulnerability of this position; a vulnerability that, I have suggested, has been presented, and subsequently contained, by Perry more generally, particularly through the 'little girl' phase of his transvestism.

In this way, *Comfort Blanket* is an apt culmination of the tendencies charted throughout this thesis, making explicit a number of elements which have, I have argued, been implicit throughout; in particular, the complicated negotiation between Britishness and Englishness that has been at the heart of Perry's engagements with national identity. While semantically these recent works may present a shift towards Britishness rather than Englishness, however, they in fact re-present the elisions between British and English that we have seen elsewhere in Perry's work. Indeed, as other commentators have noted, the veil of Britishness can often be used to promote English nationalism,¹² and in this way the conflation of the two is not only a result of imprecision but of the 'complex, distorting history of Englishness and its colonialism'.¹³

Most potently, *Comfort Blanket* pictorialises the difficulties in expressing an English identity that is unique from Britishness. While Perry's resultant vision of national identity is, as I have shown here, not unproblematic, the strength of its, and his, positive reception nonetheless reveals the national desire for – and perhaps even the necessity of – such an endeavour, which becomes 'ever more urgent'.¹⁴ Indeed, Perry's adoption across a range of media, varying from *The Guardian* to *The Sun*, as well as his success with contemporary audiences, suggests that, rather than being limited to any one ideological

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 239.

¹¹ Featherstone, *Englishness*, p. 19.

¹² Ibid., pp. 9-10.

¹³ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, xii.

sphere, this ‘lack’ of national identity is felt across the spectra of politics and class. Perry and his work, then, should be situated within a broader cultural landscape, part of the ‘emerging efforts to mark out an English identity, one that might enable England to take its place – in Britain or outside it – alongside the other better-defined British nations’.¹⁵ While this may now be the near-exclusive focus of Perry’s work, however, it is, I argue, a project that has been at the heart of his practice from the very beginning.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Grayson Perry, *A House for Essex* and details (2015), mixed media.

Figure 2: Grayson Perry accepting the Turner Prize (2003).

Figure 3: Grayson Perry, *Transvestite Jet Pilots* (1980), mixed media.

Figure 4: Grayson Perry's first exhibition at James Birch Fine Art, Waterford Road, London (1984).

Figure 5: Grayson Perry, *Kinky Sex* (1983), glazed ceramic.

Figure 6: Grayson Perry, *I Was Just an Ordinary Person* (1988), glazed ceramic.

Figure 7: Grayson Perry, *Secret Woman* (c. 1986), glazed ceramic.

Figure 8: Grayson Perry, *The Keeper of the Bed* (c. 1987), glazed ceramic.

Figure 9: Grayson Perry, untitled plate from the cover of *Grayson Perry: Ceramics* (c. 1987), glazed ceramic.

Figure 10: Marcus Harvey, *Myra* (1995), acrylic on canvas.

Figure 11: Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), tiger shark, glass, steel and formaldehyde solution.

Figure 12: Gavin Turk, *Pop* (1993), glass, brass, MDF, fibreglass, wax, clothing and gun.

Figure 13: Marc Quinn, *Self* (1991), blood (artist's), liquid silicone, stainless steel, glass, perspex and refrigeration equipment.

Figure 14: Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-Sublimated Libidinal Model* (1995), fibreglass, resin, paint, wigs and trainers.

Figure 15: Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995), appliquéd tent, mattress and light.

Figure 16: Sarah Lucas, *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), wooden table, fried eggs, kebab, photograph.

Figure 17: Grayson Perry, *Gilbert and George in China* (1993), glazed ceramic.

Figure 18: Grayson Perry, *Gimmicks* (1996), glazed ceramic.

Figure 19: Grayson Perry, *We Are What We Buy* (2000), glazed ceramic.

Figure 20: Grayson Perry, *Portrait of Anthony d'Offay* (1998), glazed ceramic.

Figure 21: Grayson Perry, *Anger Work* (2000), glazed ceramic.

Figure 22: Grayson Perry, *The Common Enemy* (1990), glazed ceramic.

Figure 23: Grayson Perry, *Them and Us* (2001), glazed ceramic.

Figure 24: Grayson Perry, *Moonlit Wankers* (2001), glazed ceramic.

Figure 25: Grayson Perry, *Strangely Familiar* (2000), glazed ceramic.

Figure 26: Richard Billingham, *Ray's a Laugh* (1996), photograph.

Figure 27: Grayson Perry, *Boring Cool People* (1999), glazed ceramic.

Figure 28: Grayson Perry, *Video Installation* (1999), glazed ceramic.

Figure 29: Grayson Perry (designer), *Claire's Coming Out Dress* (2000), silk satin, rayon and lace.

Figure 30: Grayson Perry, *We've Found the Body of Your Child* (2000), glazed ceramic.

Figure 31: Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, *Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy* (c. 1920-1), gelatin silver print.

Figure 32: Chris Makos, *Altered Ego (Andy Warhol in Tribute to Rose Selavy)* (c. 1960s), photographic print.

Figure 33: Humon, 'Rock that Dress', from *Scandinavia and the World* (2013), webcomic

Figure 34: Grayson Perry, stills from *Bungalow Depression* (1981), standard-8 film.

Figure 35: *Claire with X92* (1999), photographic print.

Figure 36: *Claire outside the Tate Gallery* (2000), photographic print.

Figure 37: Publicity image of Perry for *Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry Selects from the Arts Council Collection* (2008).

Figure 38: Still from 'Lumberjack song', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969).

Figure 39: Still from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969).

Figure 40: Still from *And Now for Something Completely Different* (1971).

Figure 41: Still from 'Poofy judges', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1970).

Figure 42: Still from 'Mrs Premise and Mrs Conclusion visit Jean-Paul Sartre', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1972).

Figure 43: Still from 'Art Gallery', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969).

Figure 44: Still from 'Face the press', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1970).

Figure 45: Grayson Perry, *Golden Ghosts* (2001), glazed ceramic.

Figure 46: Grayson Perry, *Plight of the Sensitive Child* (2003), glazed ceramic.

Figure 47: Grayson Perry, *Defenders of Childhood* (2000), glazed ceramic.

Figure 48: Grayson Perry, *Cuddly Toys Caught on Barbed Wire* (2001), glazed ceramic.

Figure 49: Grayson Perry, page from *Cycle of Violence* (1992), graphic novel.

Figure 50: John Tenniel, illustration for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

Figure 51: Still from *The Simpsons*, Season 1, Episode 8 ('The Telltale Head'), first aired 25 February 1990.

Figure 52: Cover of *Grayson Perry: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (2006).

Figure 53: Jonathon Yeo, *Grayson in Claire's Room* (2013), oil on canvas.

Figure 54: Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878), oil on canvas.

Figure 55: Example of a Sweet Lolita outfit, from http://www.lolita-fashion.org/sweet_lolita.html (accessed 10 September 2015).

Figure 56: Images of Perry in pantomime dame-style make-up (c. 2011).

Figure 57: Grayson Perry wearing Ayaka Sakurai's winning design (2013), photograph by David Levene for *The Guardian*.

Figure 58a: Grayson Perry outside the British Museum (2011), photograph by Pal Hansen.

Figure 58b: Alternative image from the same photoshoot with a clearer view of Perry's outfit.

Figure 59: Pantomime dames Berwick Kaler (2009) and Antony Stuart-Hicks (2010) in costume.

Figure 60: Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998), mattress, pillows, linens, objects.

Figure 61: Sam Taylor-Wood, *Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank* (1993), photographic print.

- Figure 62: Sam Taylor-Wood, *Slut* (1993), photographic print.
- Figure 63: Tracey Emin, *Tracey Emin C.V.* (1995), ink on paper.
- Figure 64: Grayson Perry, *Sublime Hatred* (1999), glazed ceramic.
- Figure 65: Tracey Emin, *I use to have such a good imagination* (1997), monoprint.
- Figure 66: Tracey Emin, *Terribly wrong* (1997), monoprint.
- Figure 67: Tracey Emin, *Love Poem* (1996), appliqué blanket.
- Figure 68: Grayson Perry, *Y-Fronts and Roses* (1988), glazed ceramic.
- Figure 69: Tracey Emin, *Psyco Slut* (1999), appliqué blanket.
- Figure 70: Tracey Emin, *Garden of Horror* (1998), appliqué blanket.
- Figure 71: Grayson Perry, panel from *Cycle of Violence* (1992), graphic novel.
- Figure 72: Aubrey Beardsley, *Lysistrata Shielding her Coynte* (1896).
- Figure 73: George Grosz, *Woman Slayer* (1918), oil on canvas.
- Figure 74: Otto Dix, *Lustmord*, sheet from the portfolio *Death and Resurrection* (1922), etching.
- Figure 75: Otto Dix, *Sex Murderer: Self Portrait* (1920), oil on canvas.
- Figure 76: Grayson Perry, panel from *Cycle of Violence* (1992), graphic novel.
- Figure 77: Grayson Perry, *I Have Never Been to Africa* (2011), glazed ceramic.
- Figure 78: Grayson Perry in costume as the mad grieving widow in a photograph taken for *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2005).
- Figure 79: Grayson Perry, *Quotes from the Internet* (2005), glazed ceramic.

Figure 80: Grayson Perry, *Hunt Post* (2005), cast iron.

Figure 81: Selection of photographs as displayed in, and printed in the catalogue for, *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2006)

Figure 82: Untitled photograph of Perry burying *Angel of the South* (2005), as displayed in, and printed in the catalogue for, *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2006).

Figure 83: Grayson Perry, *Angel of the South* (2005), cast iron.

Figure 84: Grayson Perry, *Attracted to Suffering* (2005), glazed ceramic.

Figure 85: Grayson Perry, *Nokia and Ikea* (2005), glazed ceramic.

Figure 86: Giorgione and/or Titian, *The Pastoral Concert* (1510-1511), oil on canvas.

Figure 87: Grayson Perry, *Baba Yaga's Hut* (1983), mixed media.

Figure 88: Grayson Perry, *God Please Keep My Children Safe* (2005), glazed ceramic.

Figure 89: The hearse (installation view), in situ at Victoria Miro Gallery (2006). Note behind it *Angel of the South*, surrounded by headless mannequins in authentic Victorian dress, positioned like mourners. Photograph taken from 'Grayson Perry: The Charms of Lincolnshire', *Victoria Miro*, accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://www.victoria-miro.com/exhibitions/369/>

Figure 90: Thurston Hopkins, *Untitled* (1947-56), silver bromide print.

Figure 91: Tish Murtha, *Untitled*, from 'Youth Unemployment in the West End of Newcastle' (1980-1), gelatin silver print.

Figure 92: Thurston Hopkins, *Morecambe and Wise on Blackpool Beach, 1953* (1953-6), silver bromide print.

Figure 93: Tony Ray-Jones, *Brighton Beach 1967* (1967), silver bromide print.

Figure 94: Patrick Ward, *Untitled (Pearly King and Queen, East Ham)*, 1969-71, silver bromide print.

Figure 95: David Hurn, *Untitled* (1971-81), gelatin silver print.

Figure 96: Grayson Perry, *Queen's Bitter* (2007), glazed ceramic.

Figure 97: Grayson Perry, *Head of a Fallen Giant* (2008), bronze.

Figure 98: Jack Smith, *After the Meal* (1952), oil on canvas.

Figure 99: Gerry Badger, *Essex, 1980* (1980), gelatin silver print.

Figure 100: Gerry Badger, *Near Dundee, Scotland, 1977* (1977), gelatin silver print, selenium toned.

Figure 101: Michael Andrews, *Flats* (1959), oil on board.

Figure 102: Christine Pearcey, *Untitled* (1973), silver bromide print.

Figure 103: David Hepher, *Arrangement in Turquoise and Cream* (1979-81), oil on canvas.

Figure 104: L.S. Lowry, *July, the Seaside* (1943), oil on canvas.

Figure 105: Bert Hardy, *Pub scene in the Gorbals* (1948), silver bromide print.

Figure 106: Alan Lowndes, *Telling the Tale* (1964), oil on board.

Figure 107: Thurston Hopkins, *Harassed father left to cope with the family, Liverpool 1955* (1955),
silver bromide print.

Figure 108: Tish Murtha, *Untitled*, from 'Youth Unemployment in the West End of Newcastle' (1980-
1), gelatin silver print.

Figure 109: Damien Hirst, *For The Love of God* (2007), platinum, diamonds and human teeth.

Figure 110: Grayson Perry, *You Are Here* (2011), glazed ceramic.

Figure 111: Grayson Perry, *The Rosetta Vase* (2011), glazed ceramic.

Figure 112: Grayson Perry, *Map of Truths and Beliefs* (2011), wool and cotton tapestry.

Figure 113: Grayson Perry, *The Earl of Essex* (2014), porcelain, digital transfer, electro-formed metal, acrylic.

Figure 114: Grayson Perry, *The Ashford Hijab* (2014), screen-printed silk.

Figure 115: Grayson Perry, *I Am a Man* (2014), patinated brass.

Figure 116: Grayson Perry, *Comfort Blanket* (2014), tapestry.

Bibliography

- ‘Artist guilty of sabotaging pickled sheep’, *Reuters News*, 18 August 1994.
- ‘Bernard Leach (1887-1979)’, *The British Council*, accessed 15 April 2015, at <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/collection/artists/bernard-leach-1887>.
- ‘Brilliant bad boys of the galleries’, *The Guardian*, 7 October 1995.
- ‘Controversial duo on Turner list’, *BBC News*, 29 May 2003, accessed 15 September 2014, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/2946040.stm>
- ‘Cultural Diversity at the National Portrait Gallery’, *National Portrait Gallery*, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.npg.org.uk/about/faq/cultural-diversity-at-the-national-portrait-gallery.php>
- ‘Energy on a grotesque scale’, *The Financial Times*, 28 January 1994.
- ‘Fat and Grayson Perry win approval for controversial house’, *Building Design*, 5 October 2012.
- ‘For the Love of God, 2007’, *Damien Hirst*, accessed 17 October 2014, at <http://www.damienhirst.com/for-the-love-of-god>
- ‘For the record’, *Independent on Sunday*, 7 December 1997.
- ‘Grayson favour’, *Lincolnshire Echo*, 3 February 2006.
- ‘Grayson Perry and Oliver James Talk Sex and Ceramics’, *Tate Online*, accessed 25 May 2012, at <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/grayson-perry>.
- ‘Grayson Perry: The Charms of Lincolnshire’, *Victoria Miro*, accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://www.victoria-miro.com/exhibitions/369/>

- ‘Grayson Perry’, *Saatchi Gallery*, accessed 30 June 2015, at http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/grayson_perry_articles.htm
- ‘Grayson Perry’, *Victoria Miro*, accessed 2 May 2015, at http://www.victoria-miro.com/user/documents/artists/biography_document_EN/12/perry-cv.pdf.
- ‘Letter’, *The Sun*, 11 December 2003.
- ‘Male artist “Claire” nominated for prize’, *Yorkshire Post*, 29 May 2003.
- ‘My Civilisation Grayson Perry’, *British Council*, accessed 1 May 2014, at <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/exhibitions/exhibition/my-civilisation-grayson-perry-2007>
- ‘Our Partners and Funders’, *The Collection*, accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://www.thecollectionmuseum.com/?/about-us/our-partners-and-funders>
- ‘Paedo art prize bid’, *The Sun*, 30 May 2003.
- ‘Pornographic potter gunning for £20,000’, *The Daily Mail*, 30 May 2003.
- ‘Raw Talent from a Multi-Ethnic World’, *The Financial Times*, 31 July 1993.
- ‘Reviewed Work: The New Neurotic Realism by Dick Price’, *The Burlington Magazine*, 141 (1999), p. 46.
- ‘Taking a Turner for the Worst’, *The Guardian*, 4 December 1997.
- ‘Transvestite Potter Wins Turner’, BBC, 7 December 2003, accessed 10 March 2015 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3298707.stm>.

‘Turner Prize 2003 Artists – Grayson Perry’, *Tate*, accessed 10 May 2015, at <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/turner-prize-2003/turner-prize-2003-artists-grayson-perry>.

‘Two held for defacing UK gallery’s “sick” picture’, *Reuters News*, 18 September 1997.

‘What is the difference between transgender and transsexual?’, *Trans* Awareness Project*, accessed 20 June 2015, at <http://www.transawareness.org/what-is-the-difference-between-transgender-and-transsexual.html>

Adams, Brooks, ‘Thinking of You: An American’s Growing, Imperfect Awareness’, in Norman Rosenthal (ed.), *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London, 1997), pp. 35-39.

Aitkenhead, Decca, ‘Grayson Perry: “The most interesting thing about Damien Hirst is probably his accounts’’, *The Guardian*, 25 March 2012, accessed 5 May 2013, at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/mar/25/grayson-perry-interesting-thing-damien-hirst>

Aitkenhead, Decca, and Christian Bennett, ‘Grayson Perry on art and therapy: “If you do therapy you’ll win the Turner Prize” – video’’, *The Guardian*, accessed 2 May 2012, at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2012/apr/11/grayson-perry-therapy-video>.

Alberge, Dalya, ‘Controversy wins again as Turner list revealed’, *The Times*, 20 May 2003.

Alberro, Alexander, and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2009).

Alderman, Nigel, ‘The life with a hole in it’: Philip Larkin and the condition of England’, *Textual Practice*, Vol. 8 (1994), pp. 279-301.

Alderson, David, 'Making Electricity: Narrating Gender, Sexuality, and the Neoliberal Transition in Billy Elliot', *Camera Obscura*, Vol. 25 (2011), pp. 1-27.

Alexander, Ella, 'Grayson Perry discusses the "psycho-sexual process" of being a transvestite', *The Independent*, 6 October 2014, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/grayson-perry-says-not-wearing-a-dress-doesnt-stop-you-from-being-a-transvestite-9777881.html>

Allen, Samantha, 'Whither the transvestite? Theorising male-to-female transvestism in feminist and queer theory', *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 15 (2014), pp. 51-72.

Alpers, Paul J., *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago, 1996).

Anderson-Spivy, Alexandra, 'The Freeze Generation and beyond', *Art Journal*, Vol. 57 (1998), pp. 88-91.

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006).

Anthony, Andrew, 'Why be a YBA?', *The Observer*, 22 November 1998.

Ardener, Shirley, 'Male Dames and Female Boys: Cross-Dressing in the English Pantomime' in Alison Shaw and Shirley Ardener (eds.), *Changing Sex and Bending Gender* (New York; Oxford, 2005), pp 119-137.

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984).

Batchelor, Tom, 'Grayson Perry unveils "gingerbread house"', *The Independent*, 8 August 2014.

Beckett, Andy, 'Shock art to shop art', *The Guardian*, 28 August 1997.

Behlmer, George K., and Fred M. Leventhal (eds.), *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia, and Identity in Modern British Culture* (Stanford, 2000).

Bennett, Oliver, and John Windsor, '2000 – Millennium Arts Special', *The Independent*, 1 January 2000.

Bennion, Chris, 'Grayson Perry's Dream House, Channel 4, TV review: Potter's attempt to create an Essex Taj Mahal was a lovely treat', *The Independent*, 18 May 2015.

Berens, Jessica, 'Freeze: 20 years on', *The Observer*, 1 June 2008.

Berens, Jessica, 'Frock tactics', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2003.

Bergonzi, Bernard, 'Davie, Larkin, and the State of England', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 18 (1977), pp. 343-360.

Bevan, Robert, 'EXCLUSIVE: Grayson Perry and architects FAT design "A House for Essex"', *The Evening Standard*, 15 May 2015.

Billig, Michael, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995).

Blandford, Steve, *Film, Drama and the Break-Up of Britain* (Bristol, 2007).

Boswell, David and Jessica Evans (eds.), *Representing the Nation: A Reader* (London, 1999).

Brighton, Andrew, 'Review: Thatcher's Artists', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 22 (1999), pp. 129-33.

Brown, Mark, 'Grayson Perry works attract record crowds to National Portrait Gallery', *The Guardian*, 16 March 2015.

Brown, Mark, 'The face of a nation – but is it ours?', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2008.

- Bruce, Keith, 'Such crate expectations', *The Herald*, 10 April 2000.
- Bullough, Vern L., and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia, 1993).
- Burrell, Ian, 'A transvestite, mouldy potatoes and war. It's Turner time again', *The Independent*, 30 May 2003.
- Burton, Johanna and Anne Ellegood (eds.), *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology* (Munich, 2014).
- Bushell, Garry, 'Random irritations', *The Star*, 29 June 2008.
- Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, 1993).
- Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* (New York, 1999).
- Byrnes, Sholto, 'He shall go to the ball – and with Honor', *Independent on Sunday*, 29 April 2001.
- Campbell-Johnston, Rachel, 'Perry – perturbing, perverse or just potty?', *The Times*, 5 April 2000.
- Chamberlain, Julie, 'Pictures of British Life', *The Coventry Telegraph*, 29 January 2010.
- Chambers, Eddie, *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain*, (Amsterdam; New York, 2012).
- Chapman, Graham, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin, *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words* (London, 1990).
- Christiansen, Rupert, 'A treasure trove of gritty Britishness', *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 May 2008.
- Cloonan, Martin, 'State of the nation: "Englishness", pop, and politics in the mid-1990s', *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 21 (1997), pp. 47-70.

- Cochran, Shannon, 'The cold shoulder: saving superheroines from comic-book violence', accessed 17 July 2014, at <http://bitchmagazine.org/article/comics-cold-shoulder>
- Cole, Alison, 'Grayson Perry: Provincial Punk Loses His Edge', *The Independent*, 29 May 2015.
- Collings, Matthew, 'The new establishment', *Independent On Sunday*, 31 August 1997.
- Collings, Matthew, 'Transformer man – Gavin Turk', *The Guardian*, 18 October 1995.
- Collings, Matthew, *Blimey: From Bohemia to Britpop* (Cambridge, 1997).
- Collings, Matthew, *Sarah Lucas* (London, 2002).
- Conlan, Tara, 'BBC defends Question Time after "freak show" complaints', *The Guardian*, 27 June 2008.
- Cooper, Charlie, 'Grayson Perry has a vision for Essex... but the village of Wrabness doesn't like it', *The Independent*, 5 October 2012.
- Copping, Nicola, 'I was a fan of the young Princess Anne', *The Times*, 12 December 2007.
- Cork, Richard, 'A land of loners, misfits and Mrs Thatcher', *The Independent*, 11 May 2008.
- Cork, Richard, 'Richard Cork's five best London exhibitions', *The Times*, 28 April 2001.
- Corsane, Gerard (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader* (London, 2005).
- Coxhead, Gabriel, 'Ploughman's bunch', *Financial Times*, 31 July 2006.
- Craddock, Sacha, "'Freeze": Defrosted', *Time Out*, 24 July 2008.
- Craddock, Sacha, 'Schools of small fish in the Saatchi art collector's pond', *The Guardian*, 13 March 1992.

- Craig, Tom, 'Snap shot', *The Sunday Times*, 30 October 2011.
- Crow, Thomas E., 'The Simple Life: Pastoralism and the Persistence of Genre in Recent Art' in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, 1996), pp. 173-211.
- Cumming, Laura, 'Could he be stringing us along?', *The Observer*, 16 July 2006.
- Cumming, Laura, 'One man and his teddy', *The Observer*, 9 October 2011.
- Cumming, Laura, 'What a sew and sew', *The Observer*, 29 April 2001.
- Daley, Paul, 'Preservation or plunder? The battle over the British Museum's Indigenous Australian show', *The Guardian*, 9 April 2015, accessed 15 August 2015, at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/09/indigenous-australians-enduring-civilisation-british-museum-repatriation>
- Darwent, Charles, 'Handmade tales of pots and porn', *Independent of Sunday*, 29 April 2001.
- de Certeau, Michel, 'The Beauty of the Dead: Nisard', in de Certeau (trans. Brian Massumi), *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Manchester, 1986), pp 119-136.
- de Groot, Jerome, "'I am not a trained historian. I improvise.'" Jeremy Deller interviewed by Jerome de Groot', *Rethinking History*, Vol. 16 (2012), pp. 587-595.
- Diccock, Barry, 'Taste of modern Britain', *The Herald*, 5 June 2012.
- Dickey, Jennifer, Samir El Azhar, and Catherine M. Lewis (eds.), *Museums in a Global Context* (Washington, DC, 2013).
- Docter, Richard F., and Virginia Prince, 'Transvestism: A Survey of 1032 Cross-Dressers', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, Vol. 26 (1997), pp. 589-605.

- Dorment, Richard, 'Art for the eyes, not the brain', *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 May 2001.
- Doyle, Jennifer (ed.), *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham, N.C., 1996).
- Duncan, Carol, 'The Art Museum as Ritual', in Donald Preziosi (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford; New York, 2009), pp. 425-434.
- Emin, Tracey, *Strangeland* (London, 2005).
- Empson, William, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1995).
- Eyre, Hermione, 'What should I wear?', *Independent On Sunday*, 2 July 2006.
- Fan, Ying, 'Branding the Nation: Towards a Better Understanding', *Place Branding & Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 6 (2010), pp. 97-103.
- Fan, Ying, 'Branding the Nation: What Is Being Branded?', *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 12 (2006), pp. 5-14.
- Fanthome, Christine, 'Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art', *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 18 (2008), p. 223-236.
- Fanthome, Christine, 'The Influence and Treatment of Autobiography in Confessional Art: Observations on Tracey Emin's Feature Film Top Spot', *Biography*, Vol. 29 (2006), p. 30-42.
- Farndale, Nigel, 'Grayson Perry is tired of living a double life', *The Telegraph*, 9 October 2011, accessed 23 September 2013, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/8813146/Grayson-Perry-is-tired-of-living-a-double-life.html>
- Featherstone, Simon, *Englishness: Twentieth-Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity* (Edinburgh, 2009).

- Fillin-Yeh, Susan, 'Dandies, Marginality and Modernism: Georgia O'Keeffe, Marcel Duchamp and Other Cross-Dressers', in *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 18 (1995), pp. 33-44.
- Ford, Simon, 'The Myth of the Young British Artist', in Julian Stallabrass, Naomi Siderfin, and Duncan McCorquodale (eds.), *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art* (London, 1998), pp. 131-141.
- Gammel, Irene (ed.), *Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media* (Illinois, 1999).
- Garber, Marjorie B., *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London, 1993).
- Garfield, Simon, 'I like it, I'll take the lot – Charles Saatchi', *The Independent*, 20 March 1993.
- Gayford, Martin, 'The dotty potter', *The Daily Telegraph*, 9 October 2002.
- Gayford, Martin, 'The dotty potter', *The Telegraph*, 9 October 2002.
- Gaywood, James, "'yBa" as Critique: The Socio-Political Inferences of the Mediated Identity of Recent British Art', *Third Text*, Vol. 11 (1997), pp 3-12.
- Gibbons, Fiachra, 'But the real shock is...the Essex vases', *The Guardian*, 29 October 2003.
- Gibson, Barry, 'Good Old Days just got worse', *The Huddersfield Examiner*, 2 September 2009.
- Gill, A.A., 'Girl talk', *The Sunday Times*, 16 October 2005.
- Gilliam, Terry and Terry Jones (dir.), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (London, 1975).
- Gott, Richard, 'Sexual in-tent', *The Guardian*, 5 April 1997.
- Grant, Simon, 'Trials of a transvestite potter', *The Evening Standard*, 5 April 2000.

Grayson Perry: Ceramics (London, 1987).

Grayson Perry: Guerrilla Tactics (Rotterdam; London, 2002).

Grayson Perry: The Charms of Lincolnshire (Lincoln, 2006).

Greenstreet, Rosanna, 'Q&A: Grayson Perry', *The Guardian*, 12 July 2003.

Grimley, Terry, 'A Sinking feeling at this jolly poor show', *Birmingham Post*, 6 December 2000.

Halberstam, Judith, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC; London, 1998).

Hall, Stuart, 'Jeremy Deller's political imaginary', in Jeremy Deller (ed.), *Jeremy Deller: Joy in People* (London, 2012), pp. 81-91.

Hall, Stuart, 'Whose Heritage?: Un-settling "The Heritage", Re-imagining the Post-nation', *Third Text*, Vol. 13 (1999), pp. 3-13.

Harvey, Chris, 'Grayson Perry, interview: "Rule-breaker? I'm a CBE!"', *The Telegraph*, 21 October 2014, accessed 30 October 2014, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/11176854/grayson-perry-interview-channel-4-show-Who-Are-You.html>

Hattenstone, Simon, 'If the shoes fit...', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2014.

Hewison, Robert, *Monty Python: The Case Against* (London, 1981).

Higgins, Charlotte, 'Pots, pilgrims and a severed ponytail', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2011.

Higgins, Charlotte, 'The past, through a glass darkly', *The Guardian*, 5 July 2006.

Hirst, Damien in an interview with Liam Gillick, in *Building One, Gambler* (London, 1990).

Holly, Michael Ann, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton, 2013).

Holmwood, Leigh, 'Grayson Perry uses The Sun in Brit icon artwork', *thesun.co.uk*, 23 October 2014, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/6024608/Trans-artist-Grayson-Perry-declares-The-Sun-is-definitive.html>

Horowitz, Anthony, 'What class am I? All three!', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 10 June 2012.

Humon, 'Rock that dress', *Scandinavia and the World*, 21 August 2013, accessed 21 September 2014, at <http://satwcomic.com/rock-that-dress>

Hunt, Liz, 'Is "Question Time" reducing itself to a second-rate panto? Oh yes it is...', *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 July 2008.

Hutchinson, John, 'Furious locals brand Grayson Perry's Gingerbread House holiday home an "abomination" for causing traffic chaos in sleepy Essex village', *The Daily Mail*, 2 March 2015.

Hynes, Nancy, 'Africanizing Chris Ofili?', *African Arts*, Vol. 34 (2001), p. 9.

Jacobson, Howard, 'I have run out of clean shirts', *The Guardian*, 20 June 2003.

Jacobson, Howard, 'Is the Turner good for art?', *The Observer*, Sunday 19 November 2000.

Jacobson, Howard, 'When the rouge an artist wears is deceptive', *The Independent*, 8 October 2011.

Januszczak, Waldemar, 'At the Saatchi Gallery, you'll find proof that New Labour really is working', *The Sunday Times*, 29 April 2001.

Januszczak, Waldemar, 'Eee, it were grim back then', *The Sunday Times*, 18 May 2008.

Januszczak, Waldemar, 'The chamber of secrets', *The Sunday Times*, 16 July 2006.

- Januszczak, Waldemar, 'The girls adding spice to still life', *The Sunday Times*, 8 December 1996.
- Jaques, Richard, 'Substance swamped by the superficial', *The Scotsman*, 7 April 2000.
- Jarski, Rosemarie, *Dim Wit: The Funniest, Stupidest Things Ever Said* (London, 2008).
- Jeffries, Stuart, 'Top of the pots', *The Guardian*, 21 November 2003.
- Jenkin, Matthew, 'Artist Grayson Perry says he's "wrong sort of tranny"', *Gay Star News*, 20 June 2012, accessed 23 September 2013, at <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/artist-grayson-perry-says-hes-wrong-sort-tranny200612/>
- Jimenez, Dabrali, 'A New Generation of Lolitas Makes a Fashion Statement', *The New York Times*, 26 September 2008, accessed 29 June 2015, at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/28/nyregion/thecity/28trib.html?_r=2&oref=slogin
- Jodelka, Filipa, 'Grayson Perry's Dream House: a secular chapel to the Essex everywoman', *The Guardian*, 17 May 2015.
- John, Emma, 'Turning fifty: the rise of the "quintastic"', *The Observer*, 23 January 2011, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/23/turning-fifty-quintastics-50>.
- Johns, Andreas, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother of the Russian Folktale* (New York, 2004).
- Jones, Amelia, "'Clothes Make the Man": The Male Artist as a Performative Function', in *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 18 (1995), pp. 18-32.
- Jones, Amelia, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, 1994).
- Jones, Jonathan, 'If I had a hammer...', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2001.

- Jones, Terry (dir.), *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (London, 1979).
- Jones, Wendy, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (London, 2006).
- Jury, Louise, 'From frocks to smocks: Perry's show celebrates rustic life', *The Independent*, 5 July 2006.
- Kaplan, Charles, 'The Only Native British Art Form', *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 42 (1984), pp. 266-267.
- Kelly, Mary, and Paul Smith, 'No Essential Femininity', in Donald Preziosi (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 370-382.
- Kennedy, Maev, 'Back to basics for New Labour young artists', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2001.
- Kennedy, Maev, 'Usual suspects on Turner shortlist', *The Guardian*, 30 May 2003.
- Klein, Jacky, *Grayson Perry* (London, 2009).
- Klein, Jacky, *Grayson Perry* (London, 2011).
- Koenig, Rhoda, 'Berwick Kaler: Grand old dame of York', *The Independent*, 30 December 2004, accessed 23 September 2014, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/berwick-kaler-grand-old-dame-of-york-26472.html>
- Koenig, Rhoda, 'Potter of the perverse', *The Independent*, 17 September 2002.
- Kumar, Krishan, 'Negotiating English identity: Englishness, Britishness and the future of the United Kingdom', *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 16 (2010), p. 469-487.
- Kumar, Krishan, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge, 2003).

- Kuspit, Donald, 'Joseph Beuys: Between Showman and Shaman', in David Thistlewood (ed.), *Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques* (Liverpool, 1995), pp. 27-50.
- Kutzer, M. Daphne. *Empire's Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books* (New York; London, 2000).
- Lack, Jessica, 'Preview: Exhibitions: Grayson Perry', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2006.
- Lambirth, Andrew, 'The savvy Mr Perry', *The Spectator*, 7 June 2008.
- Landesman, Cosmo, 'Consumed by herself', *The Sunday Times*, 25 February 1996.
- Landy, Marcia, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (Detroit, 2005).
- Langdon, Helen, 'Pastoral', in Hugh Brigstocke (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Western Art* (Oxford, 2003), accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662037.001.0001/acref-9780198662037-e-1990>
- Larsen, Darl, *Monty Python, Shakespeare, and English Renaissance Drama* (Jefferson, N.C.; London, 2003).
- Leader, Zachary, 'Movement Fiction and Englishness', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 42 (2013), pp. 247-268.
- Legge, Elizabeth, 'Reinventing Derivation: Roles, Stereotypes, and "Young British Art"', *Representations*, Vol. 71 (2000), pp. 1-23.
- Levy, Geoffrey, 'Frocky horror show!', *The Daily Mail*, 9 December 2003.
- Lewis, Tamzin, 'Year was just as good behind headlines', *The Newcastle Journal*, 30 December 2008.

- Lingwood, James (ed.), *Rachel Whiteread: House* (London, 1995).
- Lipton, Martina, 'Celebrity versus Tradition: "Branding" in Modern British Pantomime', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 23 (2007), pp. 136-51.
- Lipton, Martina, 'Principally Boys? Gender Dynamics and Casting Practices in Modern British Pantomime', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 18 (2008), pp. 470-486.
- Litt, Toby, 'Grand aesthetic of the dumped', *New Statesman*, 25 November 2002, accessed 21 September 2014, at <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/156709>
- Longrigg, Claire, 'Sixty minutes: noise – by art's bad girl', *The Guardian*, 4 December 1997.
- Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahautl: An Exhibition at the Museum of Mankind* (London, 1985).
- Loughery, John, 'Sensations', *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 53 (2000), p. 99-106.
- Lubbock, Tom, 'The fine art of staying famous', *The Independent*, 2 May 2008.
- Lyall, Sarah, 'A Trendy Tranny Potter's New Purse', *The New York Times*, 2 May 2004.
- MacGregor, Neil, 'To Shape the Citizens of "That Great City, the World"', in James B. Cuno (ed.), *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate Over Antiquities* (Princeton, 2009), pp. 39-54.
- MacNaughton, Ian (dir.), *Monty Python's And Now For Something Completely Different* (London, 1971).
- Majendie, Paul, 'Transvestite potter wins British Turner art prize', *Reuters News*, 8 December 2003.
- Martin, Nicole, 'Furore over Bo Peep artist on BBC debate', *The Telegraph*, 28 June 2008.

Mercer, Kobena, 'Black art and the burden of representation', *Third Text*, Vol. 4 (1990), pp. 61–78.

Messent, Maureen, 'Not ready for Perry', *The Birmingham Mail*, 4 July 2008.

Monty Python, 'Art gallery', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 1, Episode 4, first broadcast 26 October 1969.

Monty Python, 'Face the press', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 2, Episode 1, first broadcast 15 September 1970.

Monty Python, 'Hell's Grannies', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 1, Episode 8, first broadcast 7 December 1969.

Monty Python, 'Lumberjack song', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 1, Episode 9, first broadcast 14 December 1969.

Monty Python, 'Mrs Premise and Mrs Conclusion visit Jean-Paul Sartre', in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 3, Episode 1, first broadcast 19 October 1972.

Monty Python, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Series 2, Episode 8, first broadcast 17 November 1970.

Monty Python, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare and Monty Python: Volume One – Monty Python* (London, 1981).

Moore, Rowan, 'Grayson Perry's A House for Essex: a stonking shrine to a fictional woman', *The Observer*, 10 May 2015.

Muir, Gregor, *Lucky Kunst: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London, 2010).

Mulholland, Neil, "'Sensation". London', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 139 (1997), pp. 886-888.

Mullins, Charlotte, *Rachel Whiteread* (London, 2004).

- Murphy, Anna, 'The Mind That Knows Itself: Identity, Psychoanalysis, and Performance in the Works of Grayson Perry' (University of Oxford MSt thesis, 2012).
- Myrone, Martin, 'Instituting English Folk Art', *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 10 (2009), pp. 27-52.
- Nairn, Tom, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism* (Illinois, 2015 [1977]).
- Neo Naturist Cabaret 1979-2013*, accessed 21 September 2015, at <http://www.neonaturists.org.uk/>
- Ngai, Sianne, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde', *Critical Enquiry*, Vol. 31 (2005), pp. 811-847.
- North, Nic, 'How my son Grayson Perry drove me to the brink of suicide: Mother's agony over double rejection as transvestite artist "kills" her in his latest creation', *The Daily Mail*, 16 May 2015.
- O'Hagan, Sean, 'Before all the shouting started', *The Observer*, 11 May 2008.
- Osborne, John, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery* (Basingstoke, 2014).
- Packer, William, 'From dreams to dead fish – the latest Saatchi installation', *The Financial Times*, 10 March 1992.
- Parker, Rozsika, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London, 2010).
- Perry, Grayson, 'Child death and rural voodoo: my delight in the dark side', *The Times*, 1 February 2006.
- Perry, Grayson, 'Democracy Has Bad Taste' (transcript), accessed 15 December 2013, at <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/transcripts/lecture-1-transcript.pdf>
- Perry, Grayson, 'Glad to be grey', *The Guardian*, 23 April 2008.

Perry, Grayson, 'I Found Myself in the Art World' (transcript), accessed 20 September 2014, at <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/transcripts/reith-lecture4-csm.pdf>

Perry, Grayson, 'The great Grayson Perry frock competition', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2013, accessed 20 September 2014, at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jul/08/great-grayson-perry-frock-competition>

Perry, Grayson, 'The low-down', *The Sun*, 26 October 2014.

Perry, Grayson, 'Why art matters', talk given at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1 May 2013.

Perry, Grayson, and Laura Barnett, 'Grayson Perry on his first artwork, Cycle of Violence', *The Guardian*, 1 January 2013.

Perry, Grayson, *Cycle of Violence* (London, 1992).

Perry, Grayson, *Playing to the Gallery* (London, 2014).

Peschmann, Herman, 'Philip Larkin: Laureate of the Common Man', *English*, Vol. 24 (1975), pp. 49-59.

Pollock, Griselda, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (London, 2003).

Preston, John, 'Him and her big feats of clay', *The Telegraph*, 11 September 2002.

Price, Dick, 'Don't Stop 'til you get Enough', in *The New Neurotic Realism* (London, 1998).

Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces (New York; Berlin, 2001).

Raunig, Gerald, *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (London, 2006).

Ray, Gene, 'Little Glass House of Horrors: High Art Lite, the Culture Industry and Damien Hirst', *Third Text*, Vol. 18 (2004), pp. 119-133.

Reynolds, Nigel, 'Transvestite's shocking pots claim victory in Turner Prize', *The Telegraph*, 8 December 2003.

Richardson, Paul, 'Young blood', *The Evening Standard*, 25 February 1993.

Rifkind, Hugo, 'Hugo Rifkind on TV: Grayson Perry's dream house was brilliant and bonkers', *The Times*, 23 May 2015.

Robicsek, Hyla L., "'You Give Us This and We Give You That": "young British art" and the Legacy of Anglo-American Influence', *Third Text*, Vol. 22 (2008), pp. 257-271.

Robins, Claire, *Curious Lessons in the Museum: The Pedagogic Potential of Artists' Interventions* (Farnham, 2013).

Robson, Catherine, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford, 2001).

Roche, Elisa, 'Viewers in shock over cross-dress panel guest', *The Express*, 28 June 2008.

Rodosthenous, George, 'Billy Elliot The Musical: Visual representations of working-class masculinity and the all-singing, all-dancing bo[d]y.', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, Vol. 1 (2007), pp. 275-292.

Rolland, Jessica, 'Grayson Perry at the Barbican', *Dazed*, accessed 29 June 2015, at <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/1238/1/grayson-perry-at-the-barbican>

Rose, Rebecca, 'There is too much slapdashery in art', *Financial Times*, 3 May 2008.

Searle, Adrian, 'Bedsit tales amid the stripped pine – Tracey Emin', *The Guardian*, 22 February 1996.

- Searle, Adrian, 'New kids in the dock', *The Guardian*, 16 January 1999.
- Simmonds, Charlotte, 'Psycho-sexual self help with a side order of violence', *New Statesman*, 20 November 2012, accessed 17 July 2014, at <http://www.newstatesman.com/cultural-capital/2012/11/psycho-sexual-self-help-side-order-violence>
- Simone, Gail, 'Women in Refrigerators', accessed 21 September 2014, at <http://lby3.com/wir/>
- Sinfield, Alan, 'Boys, Class and Gender: From Billy Casper to Billy Elliot', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 62 (2006), pp. 166-171.
- Smith, Rebecca, 'The gun-toting transvestite up for Turner Prize', *The Mirror*, 30 May 2003.
- Sooke, Alastair, "'I don't go out of my way to shock'", *The Daily Telegraph*, June 2006.
- Spencer, Charles, 'I'll admit it: Perry's got pots of talent', *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2011.
- Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London, 2006).
- Stallabrass, Julian, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London, 1999).
- Steedman, Carolyn, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (London, 1995).
- Stilling, Robert, 'An Image of Europe: Yinka Shonibare's Postcolonial Decadence', *PMLA*, Vol. 128 (2013), pp. 299-321.
- Straayer, Chris, 'Redressing the "Natural": The Temporary Transvestite Film' (1992), in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader IV* (Texas, 2012), pp. 484-509.
- Susan Hiller, 'Editor's Introduction', in Hiller (ed.), *The Myth of Primitivism* (London, 2006), pp. 67-8.

- Sutcliffe, Thomas, 'TV Review – The Turner Prize Discussion', *The London Independent*, 4 December 1997.
- Tatar, Maria, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, 1995).
- Taylor, Millie, *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol, 2007).
- Thorpe, Vanessa, 'Top critic lashes out at Hirst's "tacky" art', *The Observer*, 7 September 2008.
- Tolia-Kelly, Divya, and Andy Morris, 'Disruptive Aesthetics?: Revisiting the *Burden of Representation* in the Art of Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare', *Third Text*, Vol. 18 (2004), pp. 153–167.
- Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (London, 2011).
- Townsend, Chris (ed.), *The Art of Rachel Whiteread* (London, 2004).
- Townsend, Chris, and Mandy Merck (eds.), *The Art of Tracey Emin* (London, 2002).
- Trengove-Jones, Tim, 'Larkin and Europe', *English Studies in Africa*, Vol. 35 (1992), pp. 53-75.
- Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry selects from the Arts Council Collection* (London, 2008).
- Wainwright, Oliver, 'For Grayson Perry's Essex house, the only way was "bonkers as possible"', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2015.
- Wallis, Robert J., 'Bouncing on a huge inflatable Stonehenge: Considering *Sacrilege* by Jeremy Deller', *World Art*, Vol. 3 (2013), pp. 319-341.
- Walsh, John, 'Of course the Turner Prize should really have gone to the chat show', *The London Independent*, 4 December 1997.

- Walsh, John, 'Pot luck', *The Independent*, 16 December 2006.
- Walsh, Kevin, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London, 1992).
- Walters, Guy, 'State of the art', *The Times*, 20 July 1996.
- Walton, James, 'For me, earnestness is the greatest crime', *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 November 2012.
- Weatherhead, A. Kingsley, 'Philip Larkin of England', *ELH*, Vol. 38 (1971), pp. 616-630.
- Webber, Darryl, 'Grayson's fairytale house is now a stunning reality', *Brentwood Gazette*, 20 May 2015.
- Webster, Jeremy, 'Legacies of Commissioning', *Scottish Contemporary Art Network*, accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://sca-net.org/downloads/50f2e5d67e84d-report.pdf>
- Welchman, John C., *Institutional Critique and After* (Zürich, 2006).
- Werther, Charlotte, 'Rebranding Britain: Cool Britannia, the Millennium Dome and the 2012 Olympics', *Moderna Språk*, Vol. 105 (2011), pp. 1-14.
- While, Aidan, 'Locating Art Worlds: London and the Making of Young British Art', *Area*, Vol. 35 (2003), pp. 251-263.
- Williams, Raymond, 'Between country and city', in Simon Pugh (ed.), *Reading Landscape: Country, City, Capital* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 7-18.
- Windsor, John, 'A different class of bond', *The Independent*, 25 January 1997.
- Winge, Theresa, 'Undressing and Dressing Loli: A Search for the Identity of the Japanese Lolita', *Mechademia*, Vol. 3 (2008), pp. 47-63.

Wishart, Ruth, 'Acid test for an artist', *The Herald*, 8 December 1997.

Wollaston, Sam, 'Grayson Perry's Dream House review: "very Hansel & Gretel – a joy"', *The Guardian*, 18 May 2015.

Woodman, Ellis, 'Grayson Perry's A House For Essex, review: "deliriously madcap"', *The Telegraph*, 16 May 2015.

Wright, Lesley, 'My week – Grayson Perry', *The Independent*, 1 November 2003.

Wright, Patrick, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford, 2009).

Wullschlager, Jackie, 'Pot luck: The ceramic artist who stole the nation's heart', *Financial Times*, 10 October 2009.

Young, Hugo, 'Bleak landscape where art and politics can't co-exist', *The Guardian*, 24 November 1994.

Yunker, Teresa, 'Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying', in *Stanford Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 11 (2012), pp. 97-110.

Zatlin, Linda Gertner, 'Aubrey Beardsley's "Japanese" Grotesques', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 25 (1997), p. 87-108.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Grayson Perry, *A House for Essex* and details (2015), mixed media.



Figure 1 (detail): *A House For Essex* (details of exterior).



Figure 1 (detail): *A House for Essex* (interior view of central room).



Figure 1 (detail): *A House for Essex* (detail of tapestries in main room depicting Julie's life).



Figure 1 (detail): *A House for Essex* (detail of bedroom with tapestry of Julie and her second husband, Rob).



Figure 2: Grayson Perry accepting the Turner Prize (2003).

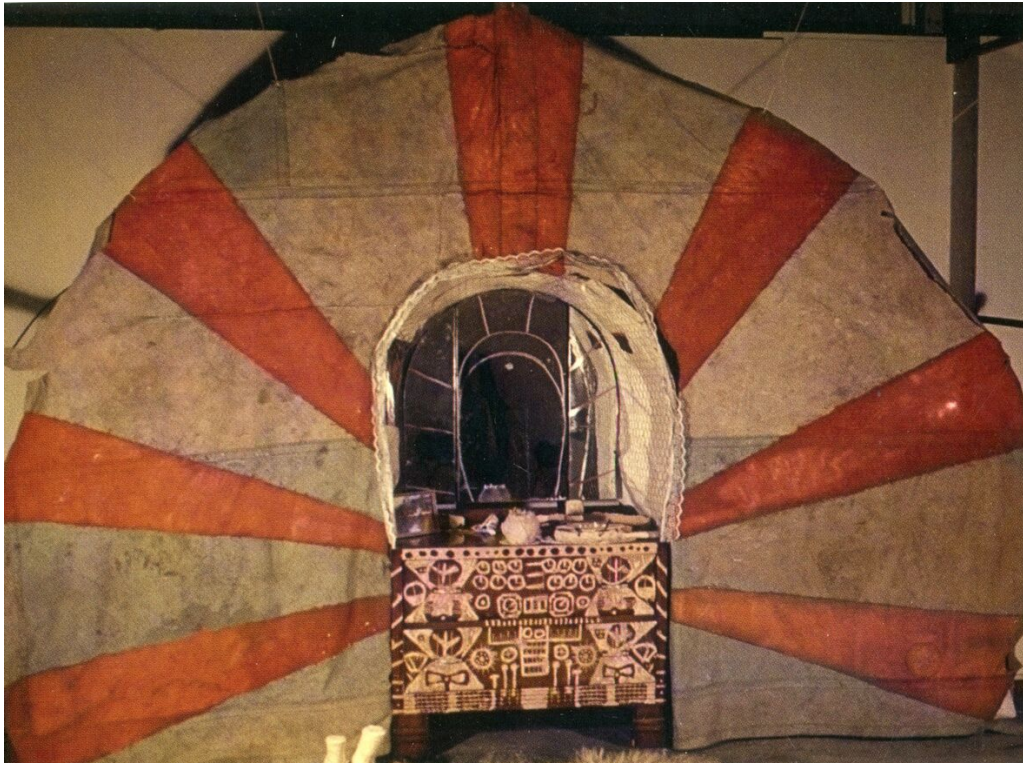


Figure 3: Grayson Perry, *Transvestite Jet Pilots* (1980), mixed media.

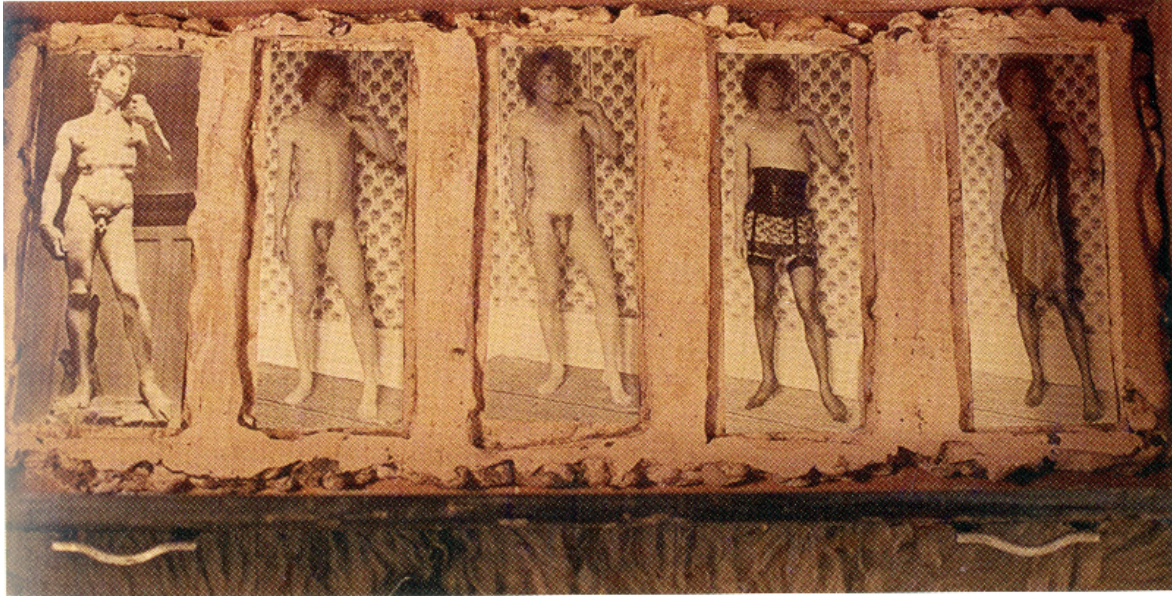


Figure 3 (details): *Transvestite Jet Pilots*.



Figure 4: Grayson Perry's first exhibition at James Birch Fine Art, Waterford Road, London (1984).



Figure 5: Grayson Perry, *Kinky Sex* (1983), glazed ceramic.



Figure 6: Grayson Perry, *I Was Just an Ordinary Person* (1988), glazed ceramic.



Figure 7: Grayson Perry, *Secret Woman* (c. 1986), glazed ceramic.

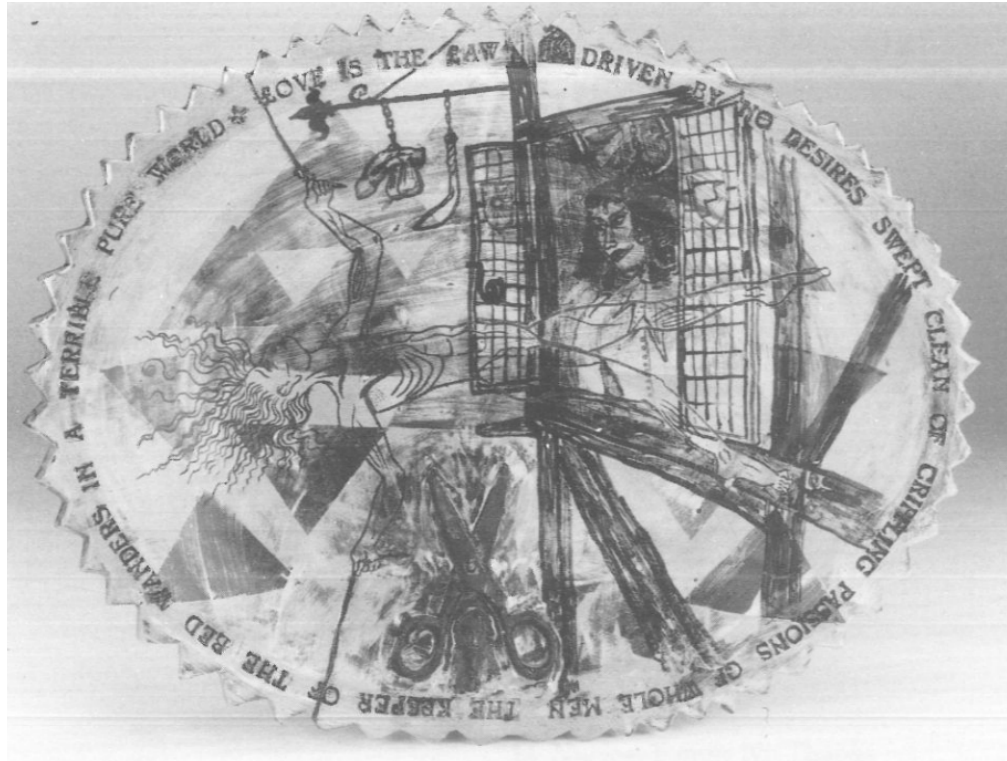


Figure 8: Grayson Perry, *The Keeper of the Bed* (c. 1987), glazed ceramic.



Figure 9: Grayson Perry, untitled plate from the cover of *Grayson Perry: Ceramics* (c. 1987), glazed ceramic.



Figure 10: Marcus Harvey, Myra (1995), acrylic on canvas.

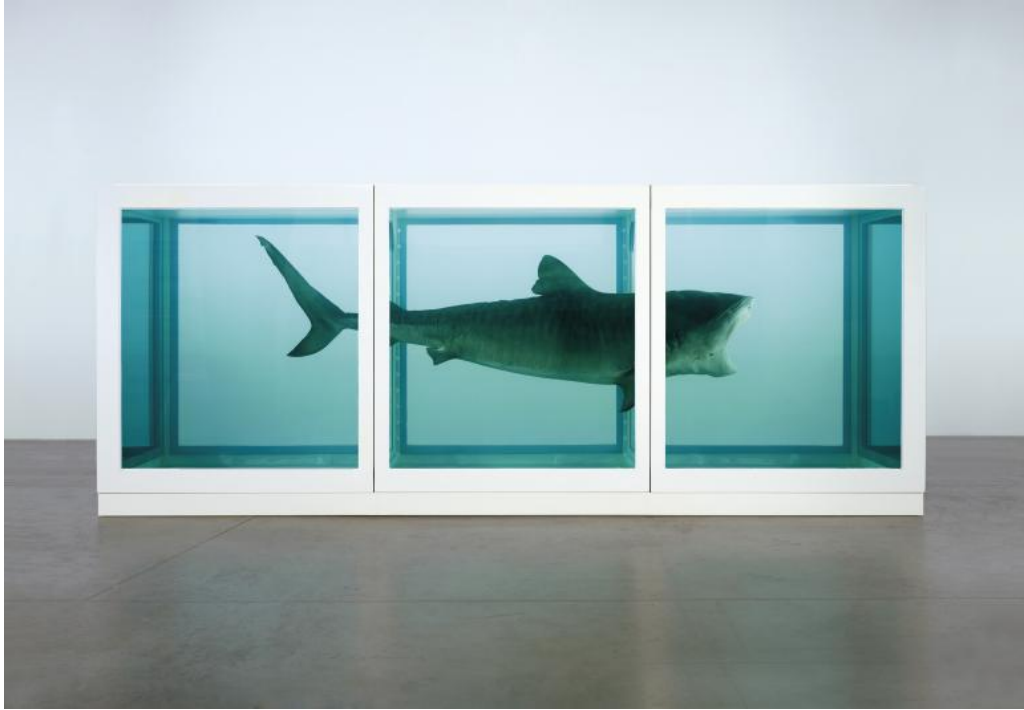


Figure 11: Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), tiger shark, glass, steel and formaldehyde solution.



Figure 12: Gavin Turk, *Pop* (1993), glass, brass, MDF, fibreglass, wax, clothing and gun.



Figure 13: Marc Quinn, *Self* (1991), blood (artist's), liquid silicone, stainless steel, glass, perspex and refrigeration equipment.



Figure 14: Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-Sublimated Libidinal Model* (1995), fibreglass, resin, paint, wigs and trainers.



Figure 15: Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995), appliquéd tent, mattress and light.



Figure 15 (detail): *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (inside view).



Figure 16: Sarah Lucas, *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), wooden table, fried eggs, kebab, photograph.



Figure 17: Grayson Perry, *Gilbert and George in China* (1993), glazed ceramic.

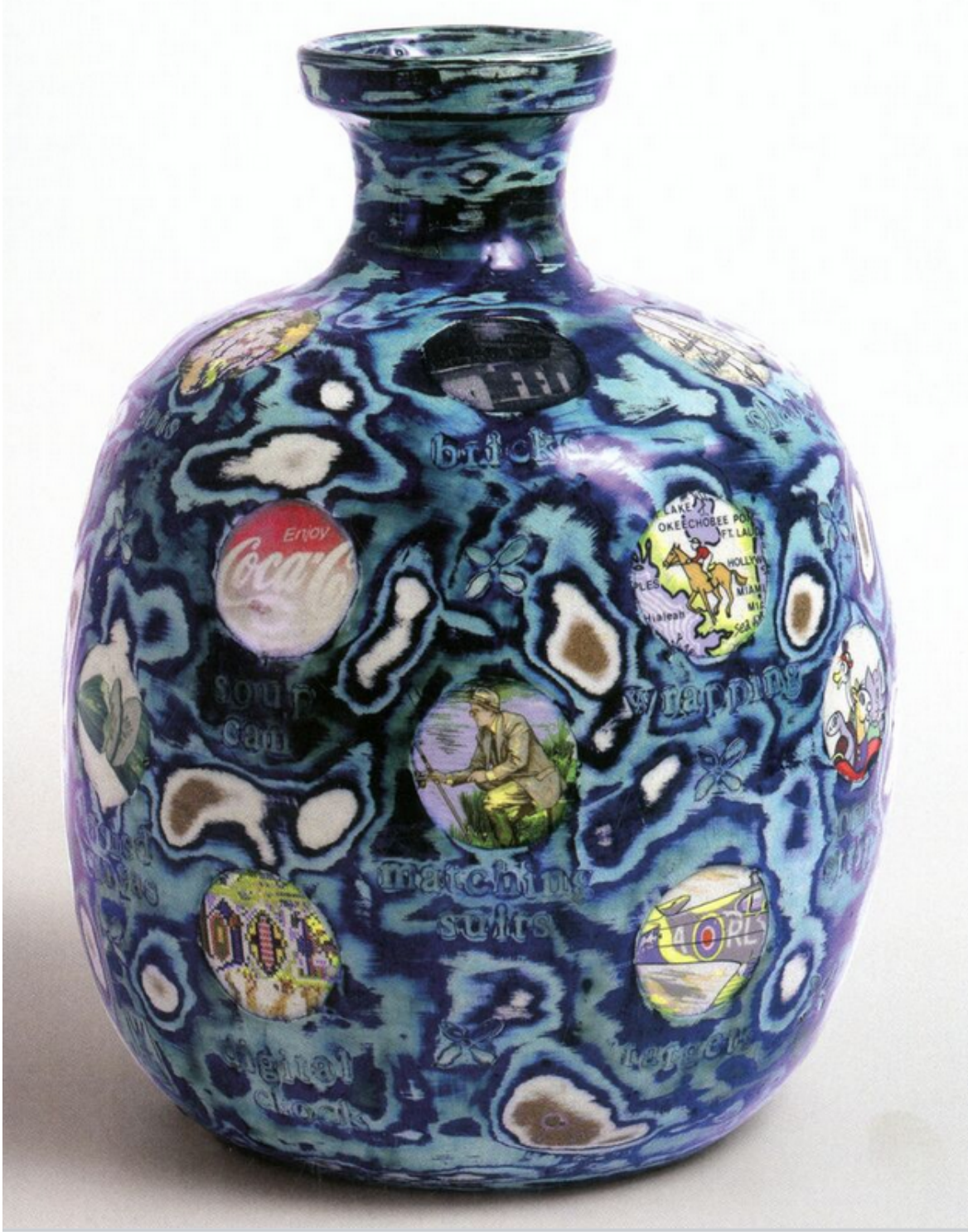


Figure 18: Grayson Perry, *Gimmicks* (1996), glazed ceramic.



Figure 19: Grayson Perry, *We Are What We Buy* (2000), glazed ceramic.



Figure 20: Grayson Perry, *Portrait of Anthony d'Offay* (1998), glazed ceramic.



Figure 21: Grayson Perry, *Anger Work* (2000), glazed ceramic.



Figure 22: Grayson Perry, *The Common Enemy* (1990), glazed ceramic.



Figure 23 (and details): Grayson Perry, *Them and Us* (2001), glazed ceramic.



Figure 24: Grayson Perry, *Moonlit Wankers* (2001), glazed ceramic.



Figure 25: Grayson Perry, *Strangely Familiar* (2000), glazed ceramic.



Figure 26: Richard Billingham, *Ray's a Laugh* (1996), photograph.



Figure 27: Grayson Perry, *Boring Cool People* (1999), glazed ceramic.

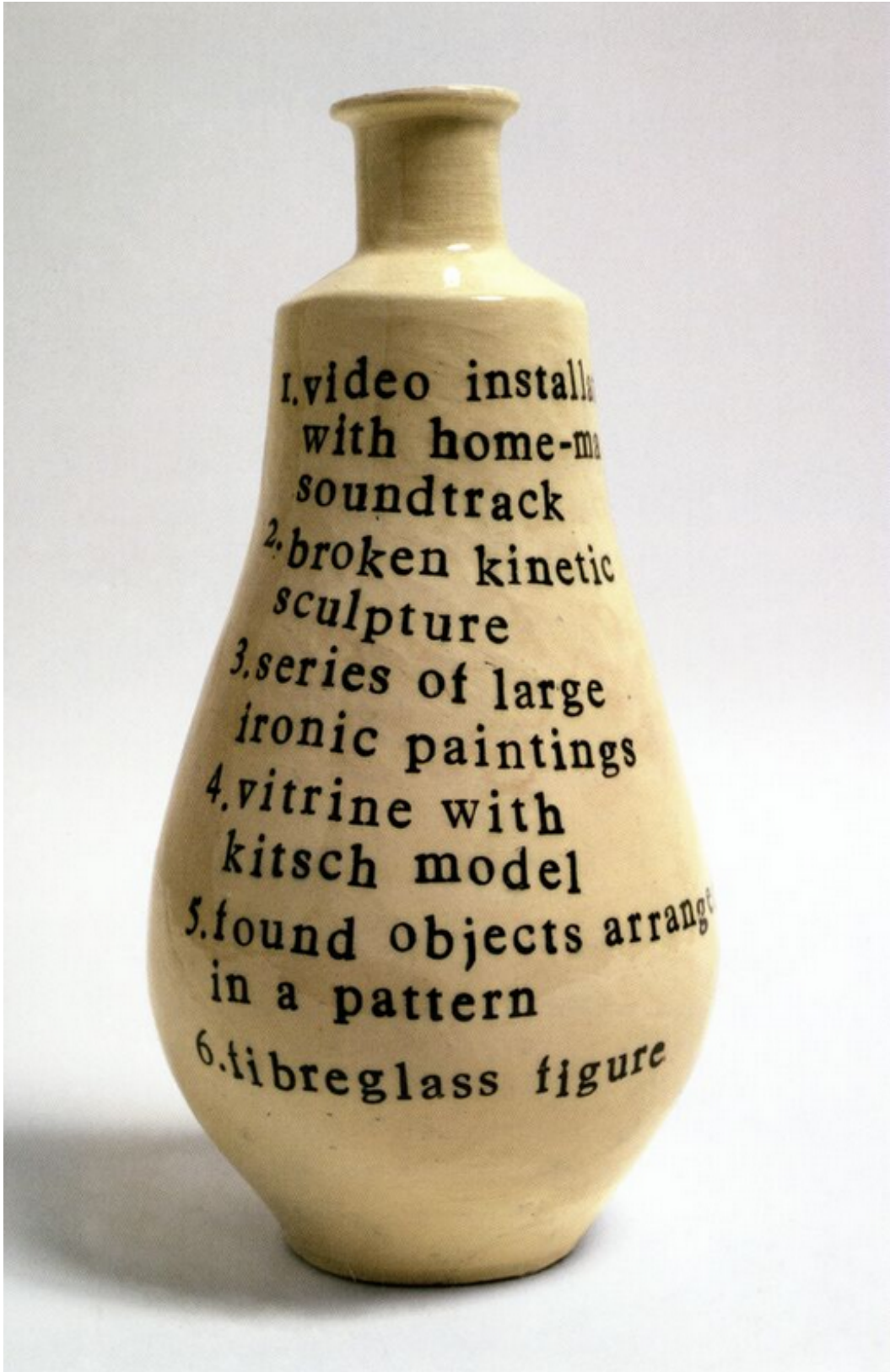


Figure 28: Grayson Perry, *Video Installation* (1999), glazed ceramic.



Figure 29: Grayson Perry (designer), *Claire's Coming Out Dress* (2000), silk satin, rayon and lace.



Figure 30: Grayson Perry, *We've Found the Body of Your Child* (2000), glazed ceramic.

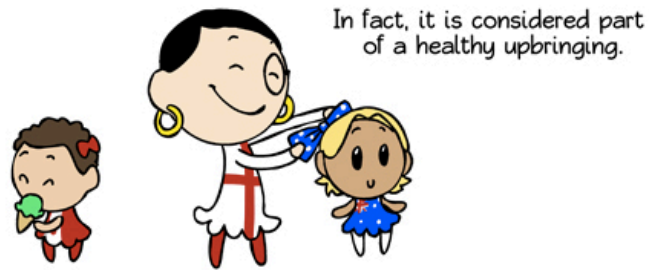


Figure 31: Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, *Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy* (c. 1920-1), gelatin silver print.

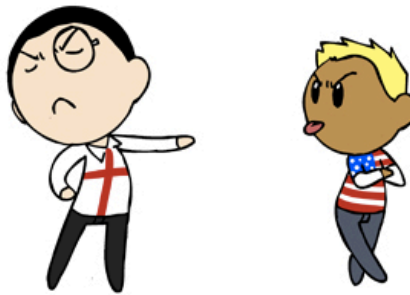


Figure 32: Chris Makos, *Altered Ego (Andy Warhol in Tribute to Rose Sélavy)*, c. 1960s, photographic print.

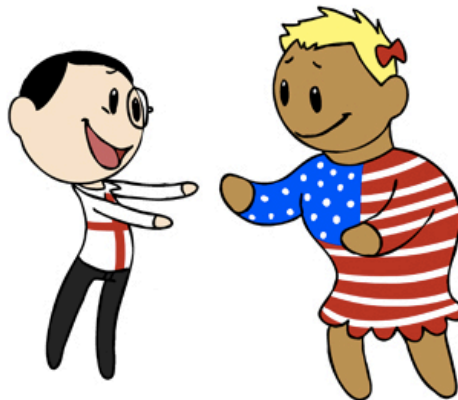
In Britain there is a long standing tradition for men in drag, both for comedy and more serious work.



If a boy refuse to wear a dress even once in his life, he will not only be disowned by his family, but his entire town.



The only way to get back in is to show up in drag and-



Okay, I'm making that up.

But they really really love dudes in drag here.

A lot.

satwcomic.com

Figure 33: Humon, 'Rock that Dress', from *Scandinavia and the World* (2013), webcomic.



Figure 34: Grayson Perry, stills from *Bungalow Depression* (1981), standard-8 film.



Figure 35: *Claire with X92* (1999), photographic print.



Figure 36: *Claire outside the Tate Gallery* (2000), photographic print.



Figure 37: Publicity image of Perry for *Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry Selects from the Arts Council Collection* (2008).



Figure 38: Still from 'Lumberjack song', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969).



Figure 39: Still of Graham Chapman as a Pepperpot from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969).



Figure 40: Still from *And Now for Something Completely Different* (1971).



Figure 41: Still from 'Poofy judges', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1970).



Figure 42: Still from 'Mrs Premise and Mrs Conclusion visit Jean-Paul Sartre', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1972).



Figure 43: Still from 'Art Gallery', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969).



Figure 44: Still from 'Face the press', *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1970).



Figure 45: Grayson Perry, *Golden Ghosts* (2001), glazed ceramic.



Figure 46: Grayson Perry, *Plight of the Sensitive Child* (2003), glazed ceramic.



Figure 47: Grayson Perry, *Defenders of Childhood* (2000), glazed ceramic.



Figure 48: Grayson Perry, *Cuddly Toys Caught on Barbed Wire* (2001), glazed ceramic.

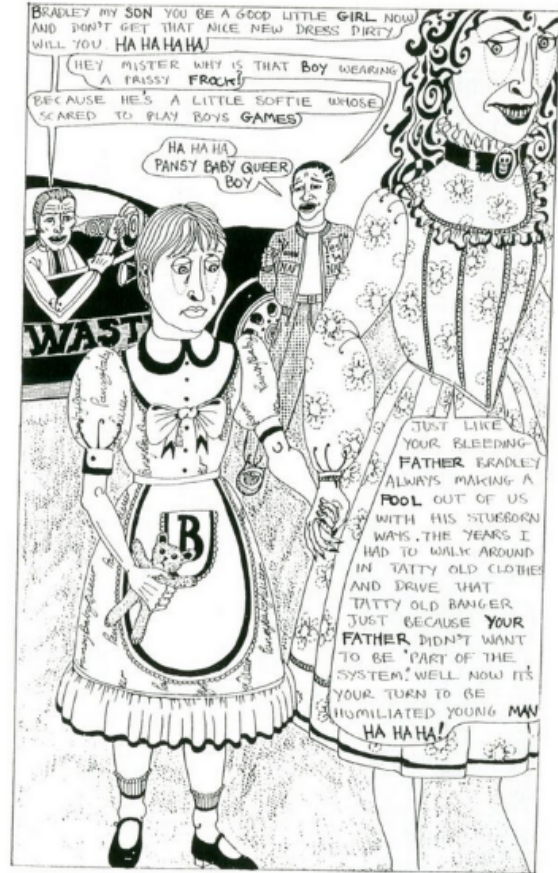


Figure 49: Grayson Perry, page from *Cycle of Violence* (1992), graphic novel.



Figure 50: John Tenniel, illustration for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).



Figure 51: Still from *The Simpsons*, Season 1, Episode 8 ('The Telltale Head'), first aired 25 February 1990.

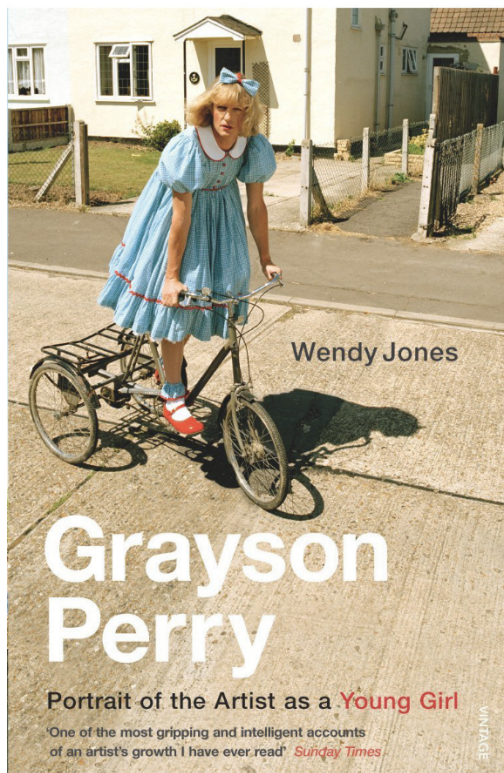


Figure 52: Cover of *Grayson Perry: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (2006).



Figure 53: Jonathon Yeo, *Grayson in Claire's Room* (2013), oil on canvas.



Figure 54: Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878), oil on canvas.



Figure 55: Example of a Sweet Lolita outfit, from http://www.lolita-fashion.org/sweet_lolita.html (accessed 10 September 2015).



Figure 56: Images of Perry in pantomime dame-style make-up (c. 2011).





Figure 57: Grayson Perry wearing Ayaka Sakurai's winning design (2013), photograph by David Levene for *The Guardian*.



Figure 58a: Grayson Perry outside the British Museum (2011), photograph by Pal Hansen.



Figure 58b: Alternative image from the same photoshoot with a clearer view of Perry's outfit.



Figure 59: Pantomime dames Berwick Kaler (above, 2009) and Antony Stuart-Hicks (left, c. 2010) in costume.



Figure 60: Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998), mattress, pillows, linens, objects.



Figure 61: Sam Taylor-Wood, *Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank* (1993), photographic print.



Figure 62: Sam Taylor-Wood, *Slut* (1993), photographic print.

Tracey Emin C.V.

Conceived in Ireland, 1962 -
Same time as my Aunt's death
It was the last night my Aunt's death
was supposed to have a good response.

July 3rd 1963 - Board - 10 minutes
When Paul - Conception may stay overnight -
He then to leave to the nursery -
Spent the first 6 months of my life
sleeping in a wooden crib -

1965 - moved to MARGATE -
mom + 1100 quid local interest -

1965-66 - Travel to Tunisia by boat -
I was in the back in the boat
+ 6 months North of Africa - in the
mountain close to the coast but springs -

Came back to Margate 1966 -
went to Holy Trinity Infant School -
started making friends - BUT was now
on the beach + ran away -

Spent the next 5 years becoming more
+ more strange -

Moved to the cottage in 1972 -
became more + more afraid of ~~the~~ ghosts
because this - touch wood - was to be
but had to be alone - it was yellow
coloured child -

1973-74 - Had a bad day going -
Paul + I - the friend Peter - wasn't
allowed to come - because he was great
+ we were friends - (he was not a friend
until he showed up).

1975 - left Holy Trinity - When very happy
first year in the fields - Spent first
friends with Maria + Marjory -

1975 - went to King's College - fell in love
with Paul Hamilton - it was 1975
+ had a ~~relationship~~

Had school - with all my heart -
So did Paul - we left by the time we
were 13 - 1977, Paul cost the police
of his hand in an accident at the coal
bowling club - things were never the
same after -

January 1977 - I was rapped down
the day -

Spent 6 months avoiding men + all cost
best grow - Paul's hair became thicker
period started - hair under my arm
spread - 1977 - I was at 100 -
Shag - Shag - Shag - first sex -
Fantastic - wonderful - first sex -

I was excited in the face made to go
down on me - my face had swollen
under my nose - the burning flames
of a coal fire - I could almost feel
my skin melting + my eyes popping -

One had sex with me - he came up
outside - then they laughed at me -
They looked to my brown long hair
+ I laughed at me -

He pushed my head to one side -
mind but watching the progress -

Boozy - Boozy - Boozy - Every Friday
night in the back of his seat was -

PUFF - Your all dead -

1979 - Left MARGATE moved to
London - Accident in Captain Jack's

1977 - wanted Susan Shaw Ship outdoors
Gail's Boutique - central street -
They brought coat brought at me - I spent
my week (lost to the car - + accused
me of stealing -

1980 - Kensington Market - The trendy
young thing - black spiky hair -
Guitar - punked plus boots -
+ no future -

1981 - primary college of design
official diploma - dropped out after the
1981-82 had stroke - was advised to go
see a psychiatrist - as I was continuing
myself to life on to do -

1982 - met Billy child - spent 5 years
living with him on a ship - (great
relationship - distribution of underwear
of the sail - used - still friends with him
today -

1982 - Billy married Sheila in secret -
I find out six months later - try to
connect suicide by jumping out of the
window - lights no more than the ship
have to see an analyst - do this till
1983 -

Go to Sir John Cass School of Art -
The first making - 2 days practice -
1983 apply to MAT School - with
no qualifications -

get into Marlborough college of Art -
1983-88 - spent 5 at the happy
1st years of my life - learning so much
so quickly - love in love with
EDUARDO MURCET -
Had a ~~love~~ first class honors degree -

1986-87 - spent quite a few months
dressing around Tuesday - drinking cheap
conjak - Smoking French cigarettes -
drinking water + claims -

(MURCET leaves me first in 1986 -
she joins the merchant navy as a cook -
I am devastated - my last friend since
I was ten years old - gone off to sea)

1987 Fall for a Jewish fishmonger
18 years older than me - had career
he is married with 4 children - I don't
give a damn - I just drink -

+ believe like the crazy village girl -
He's dead now - blown up by dynamite
T. N. T. - Have a book full of his
love letters - He was wild like a
mountain man - Drink - HE tried
to throw me off a cliff into the sea -
he also told me from drowning why
I fell off a boat drunk - it's the last
drink of night - getting slipping under
the blankets of the sea -

He's dead now - I cried all night
when I found out - in the morning I thought
I had a strange terrible death -

1987-89 - went to the Royal College
of Art -

Misleading amazing - after all that of
beer drinking - it says - those were the
worst two years of my life -

OH TO COME TO TEAMS WITH SUICID
MIMBLE BEGGINGS - IN SUICID -
A FUSKING UNSYMPATHETIC
SHIT HOLE -

So and forward - never like -
I was in a one room flat - with someone
who - loved me - who I didn't love -
who became so possessive about me they
put bars up at the windows -
+ they HIT ME -
I can't AND WILL NEVER FORGIVE
FOR THAT - of myself first -
A victim no more - went sad time
of life - no self respect - too poor -

1989 - can't quit - not love me now -
left to R-10 - started to feel a bit
better - 1990 - became pregnant -
had an abortion - it was wrong -
Caught to fear - slipping down my
flight - cryed - + cryed -

1992 - became pregnant again - had another
abortion - didn't give a damn -
just did it - WITHOUT HEART -

middle 1992 - committed
Emotional Suicide -

EMOTIONAL SUICIDE - IS KILLING
yourself - with not dying -
destroyed each - friendship +
relationship - one - by one -
tell I was alone -

destroyed all my art -
left my studio - threw away my
cushions - my computer - my cushions -
my computer - made my home to call -
+ wanted -

1992 - told people to invest in my creative
potential -

1993 - started to sleep with someone
but 75 - got off with cycle - first after
9 years of being - that last time
from 1988 - for at least a year -
we'd spend our night together till 1992 -
it ended with Paul leaving I was crazy -
+ trouble -

1993 - was the my show at the white cube
my major RETROSPECTIVE -
Galaxy it will be my art + only art
Exhibition -

(Only Margaret Sealing dies -)
very sad time for my own
so to America November 1994
1994 - wrote a book called 'Exploration
of the Sea - + do a holiday tour
Journey across America -
Carl drives -

now have my own boat at the R-10 in
MAT fair - feel like a princess -

Dec - January - February - March - April -
1995 -

Saw my tent - with the names of
Billy + I we even slept with -

My 10 September spent the most of the time
down in the kitchen - where my back hit 11 -
+ fantastic summer -

Sep - 1995 - Have for the Tracey Emin
Museum - which it does to open
in December -

Christmas will be spent in London with
Carl -

Figure 63: Tracey Emin, Tracey Emin C.V. (1995), ink on paper.



Figure 64: Grayson Perry, *Sublime Hatred* (1999), glazed ceramic.

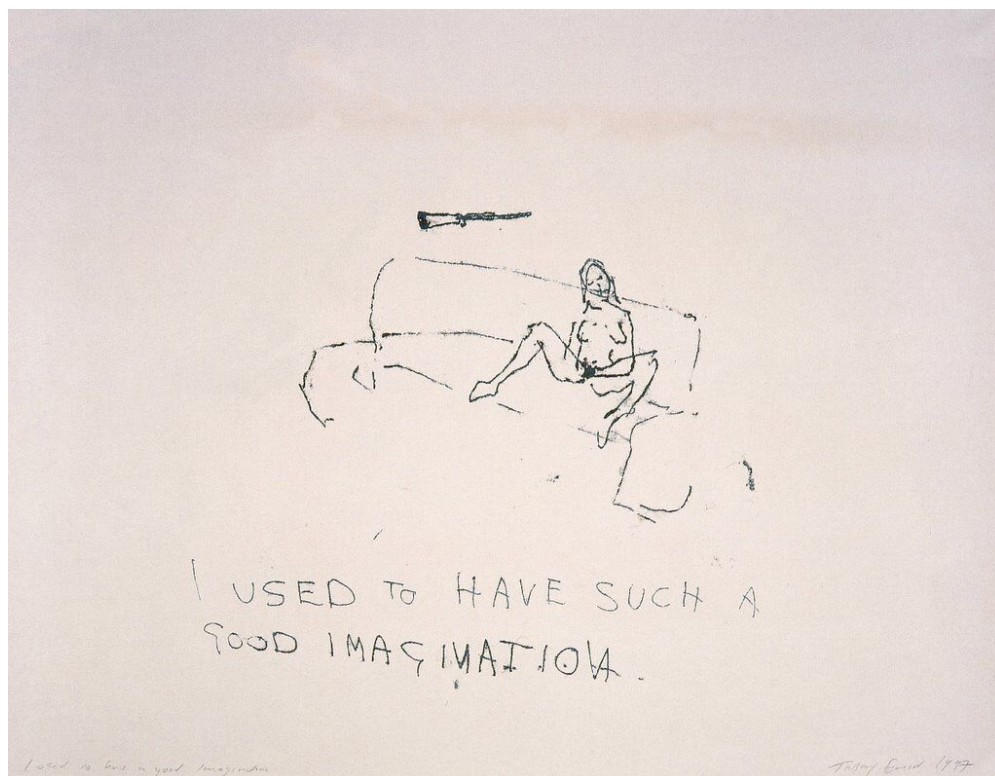


Figure 65: Tracey Emin, *I use to have such a good imagination* (1997), monoprint.

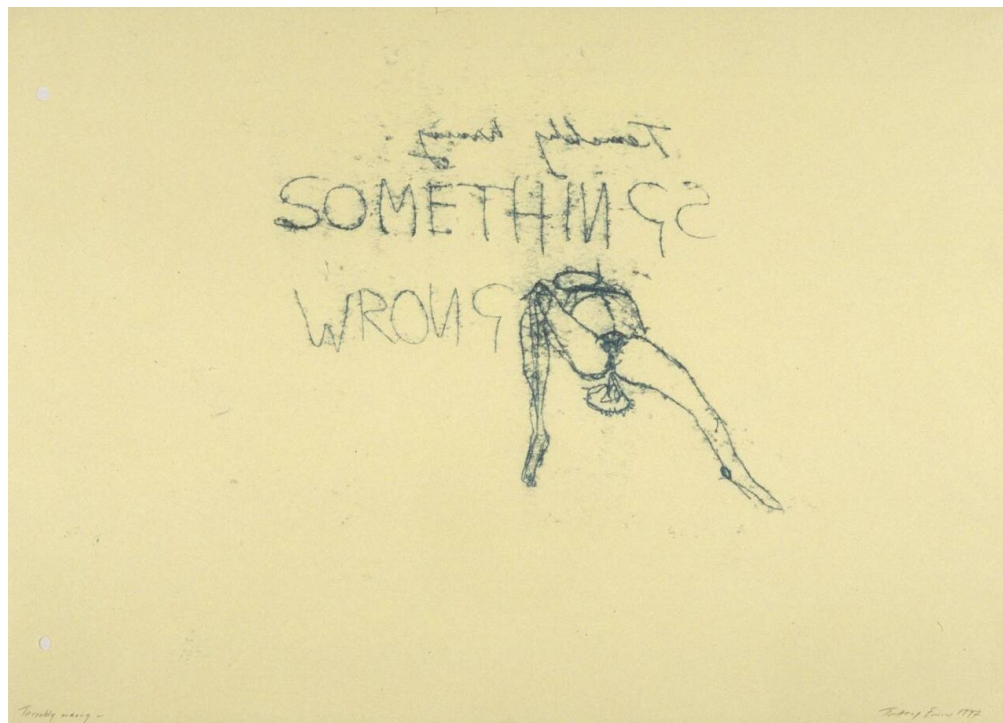


Figure 66: Tracey Emin, *Terribly wrong* (1997), monoprint.



Figure 67: Tracey Emin, *Love Poem* (1996), appliqué blanket.



Figure 68: Grayson Perry, *Y-Fronts and Roses* (1988), glazed ceramic.

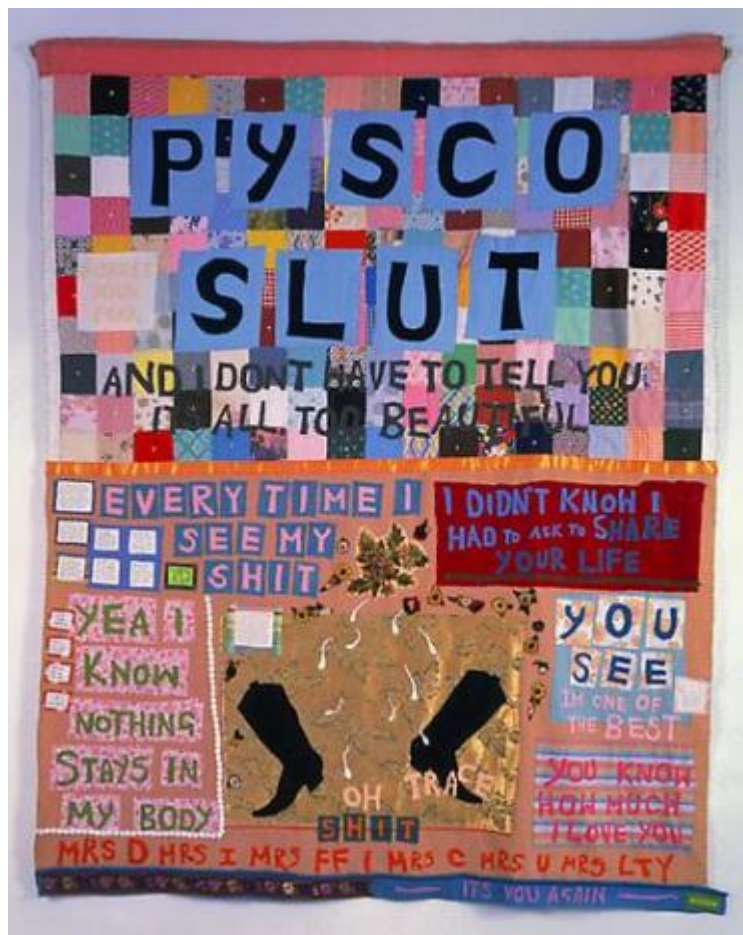


Figure 69: Tracey Emin, *Pysco Slut* (1999), appliqué blanket.



Figure 70: Tracey Emin, *Garden of Horror* (1998), appliqué blanket.

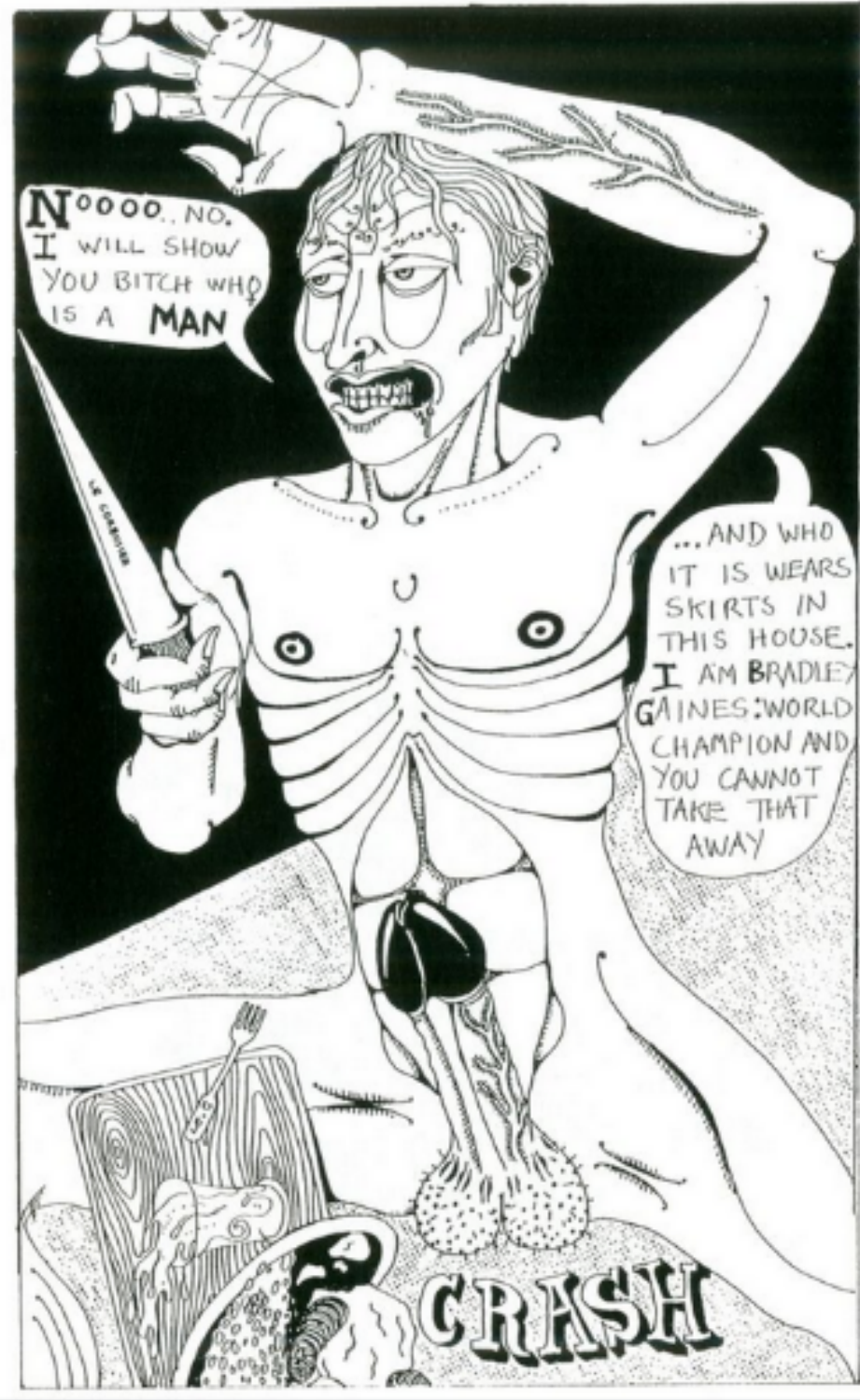


Figure 71: Grayson Perry, panel from *Cycle of Violence* (1992), graphic novel.



Figure 72: Aubrey Beardsley, *Lysistrata Shielding her Coynte* (1896).



Figure 73: George Grosz, *Woman Slayer* (1918), oil on canvas.



Figure 74: Otto Dix, *Lustmord*, sheet from the portfolio *Death and Resurrection* (1922), etching.

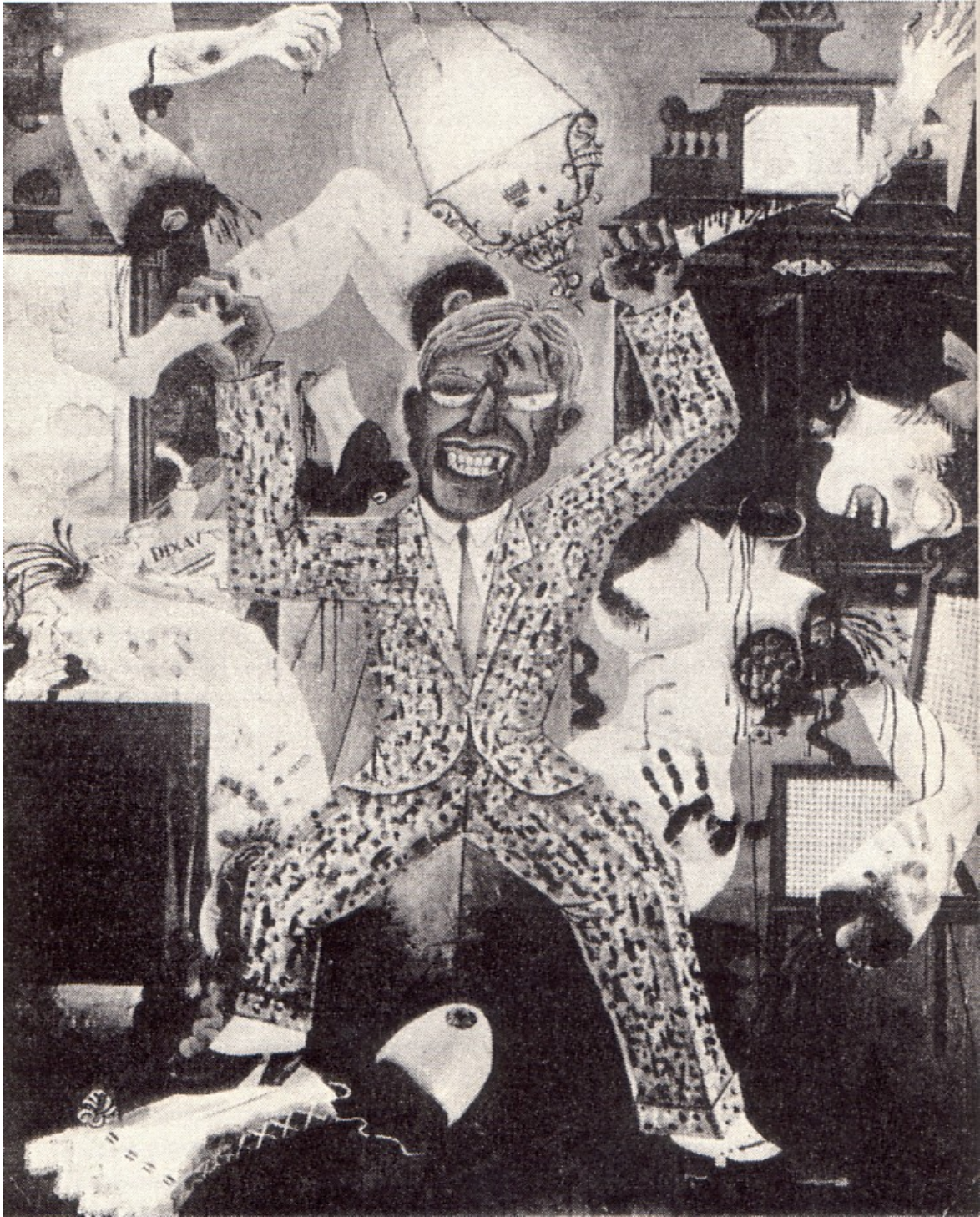


Figure 75: Otto Dix, *Sex Murderer: Self Portrait* (1920), oil on canvas.



Figure 76: Grayson Perry, panels from *Cycle of Violence* (1992), graphic novel.



Figure 77: Grayson Perry, *I Have Never Been to Africa* (2011), glazed ceramic.



Figure 78: Grayson Perry in costume as the mad grieving widow in a photograph taken for *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2005).



Figure 79: Grayson Perry, *Quotes from the Internet* (2005), glazed ceramic.



Figure 80: Grayson Perry, *Hunt Post* (2005), cast iron.



Figure 81: Selection of photographs as displayed in, and printed in the catalogue for, *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2006).



Figure 82: Untitled photograph of Perry burying *Angel of the South* (2005), as displayed in, and printed in the catalogue for, *The Charms of Lincolnshire* (2006).



Figure 83: Grayson Perry,
Angel of the South (2005),
cast iron.





Figure 84: Grayson Perry, *Attracted to Suffering* (2005), glazed ceramic.



Figure 85: Grayson Perry, *Nokia and Ikea* (2005), glazed ceramic.



Figure 86: Giorgione and/or Titian, *The Pastoral Concert* (1510-1511), oil on canvas.



Figure 87: Grayson Perry, *Baba Yaga's Hut* (1983), mixed media.



Figure 89: The hearse (installation view), in situ at Victoria Miro Gallery (2006). Note behind it *Angel of the South*, surrounded by headless mannequins in authentic Victorian dress, positioned like mourners. Photograph taken from ‘Grayson Perry: The Charms of Lincolnshire’, *Victoria Miro*, accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://www.victoria-miro.com/exhibitions/369/>



Figure 90: Thurston Hopkins, *Untitled* (1947-56), silver bromide print.



Figure 91: Tish Murtha, *Untitled*, from 'Youth Unemployment in the West End of Newcastle' (1980-1), gelatin silver print.



Figure 92: Thurston Hopkins, *Morecambe and Wise on Blackpool Beach*, 1953 (1953-6), silver bromide print.



Figure 93: Tony Ray-Jones, *Brighton Beach 1967* (1967), silver bromide print.



Figure 94 (left): Patrick Ward, *Untitled (Pearly King and Queen, East Ham)*, 1969-71, silver bromide print.

Figure 95 (below): David Hurn, *Untitled* (1971-81), gelatin silver print.





Figure 96: Grayson Perry, *Queen's Bitter* (2007), glazed ceramic.



Figure 97: Grayson Perry, *Head of a Fallen Giant* (2008), bronze.



Figure 98: Jack Smith, *After the Meal* (1952), oil on canvas.

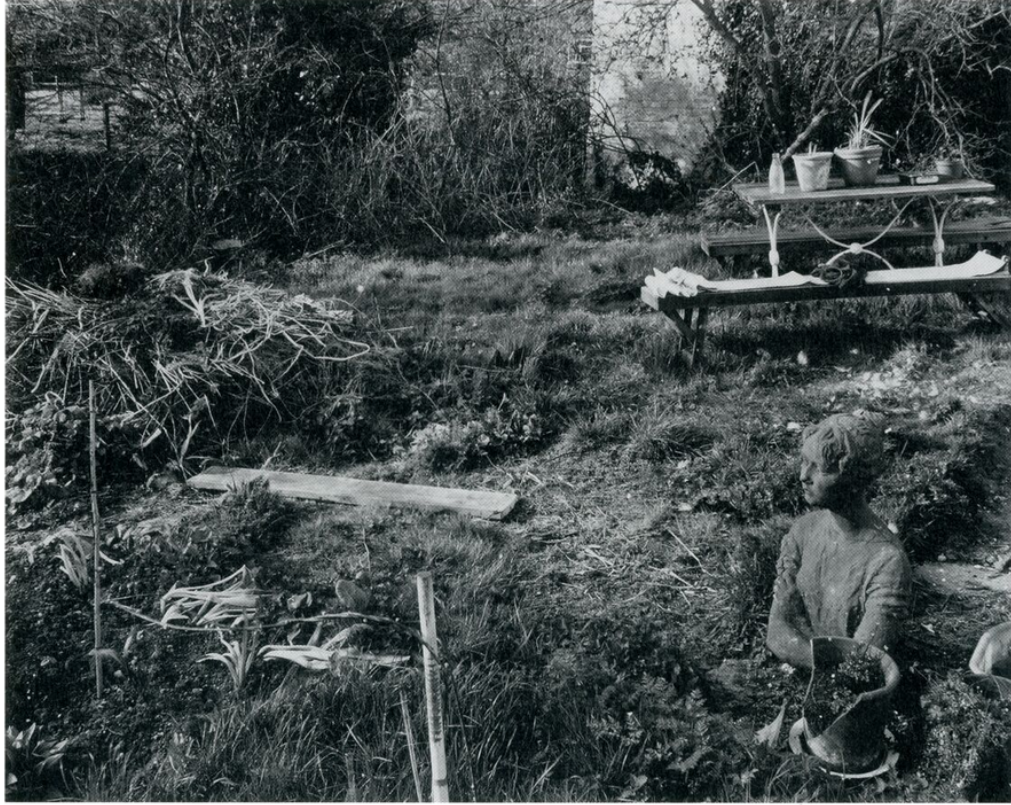


Figure 99: Gerry Badger, *Essex, 1980* (1980), gelatin silver print.



Figure 100: Gerry Badger, *Near Dundee, Scotland, 1977* (1977), gelatin silver print, selenium toned.



Figure 101: Michael Andrews, *Flats* (1959), oil on board.



Figure 102: Christine Pearcey, *Untitled* (1973), silver bromide print.



Figure 103: David Hefner, *Arrangement in Turquoise and Cream* (1979-81), oil on canvas.

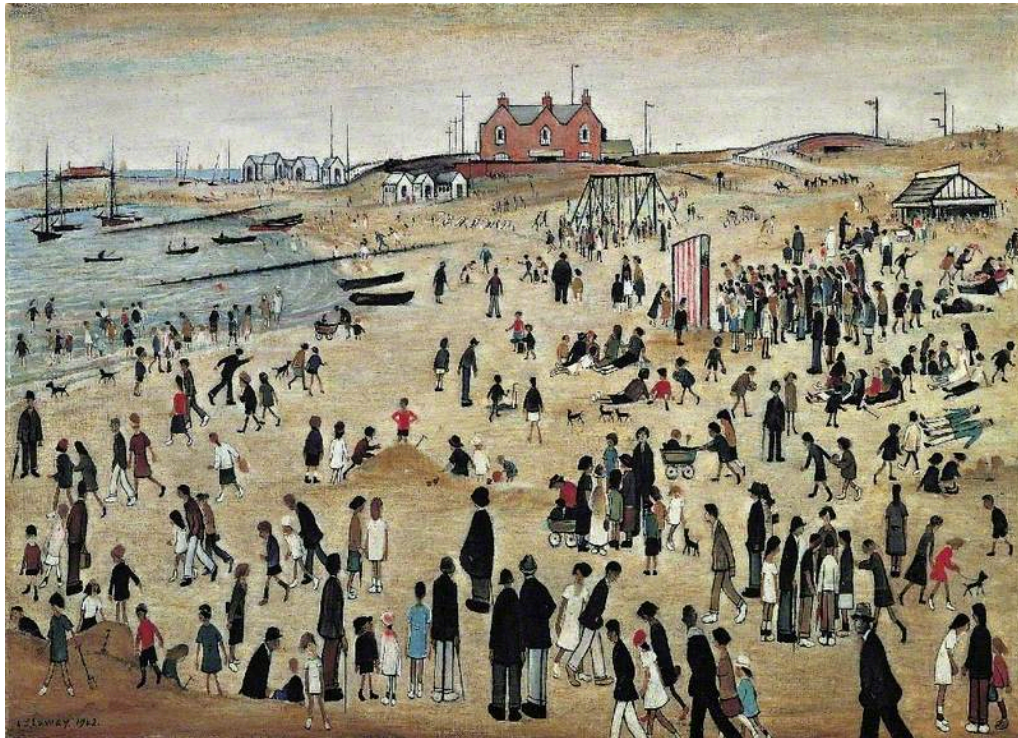


Figure 104: L.S. Lowry, *July, the Seaside* (1943), oil on canvas.



Figure 105: Bert Hardy, *Pub scene in the Gorbals* (1948), silver bromide print.



Figure 106: Alan Lowndes, *Telling the Tale* (1964), oil on board.



Figure 107: Thurston Hopkins, *Harassed father left to cope with the family, Liverpool 1955* (1955), silver bromide print.



Figure 108: Tish Murtha, *Untitled*, from 'Youth Unemployment in the West End of Newcastle' (1980-1), gelatin silver print.

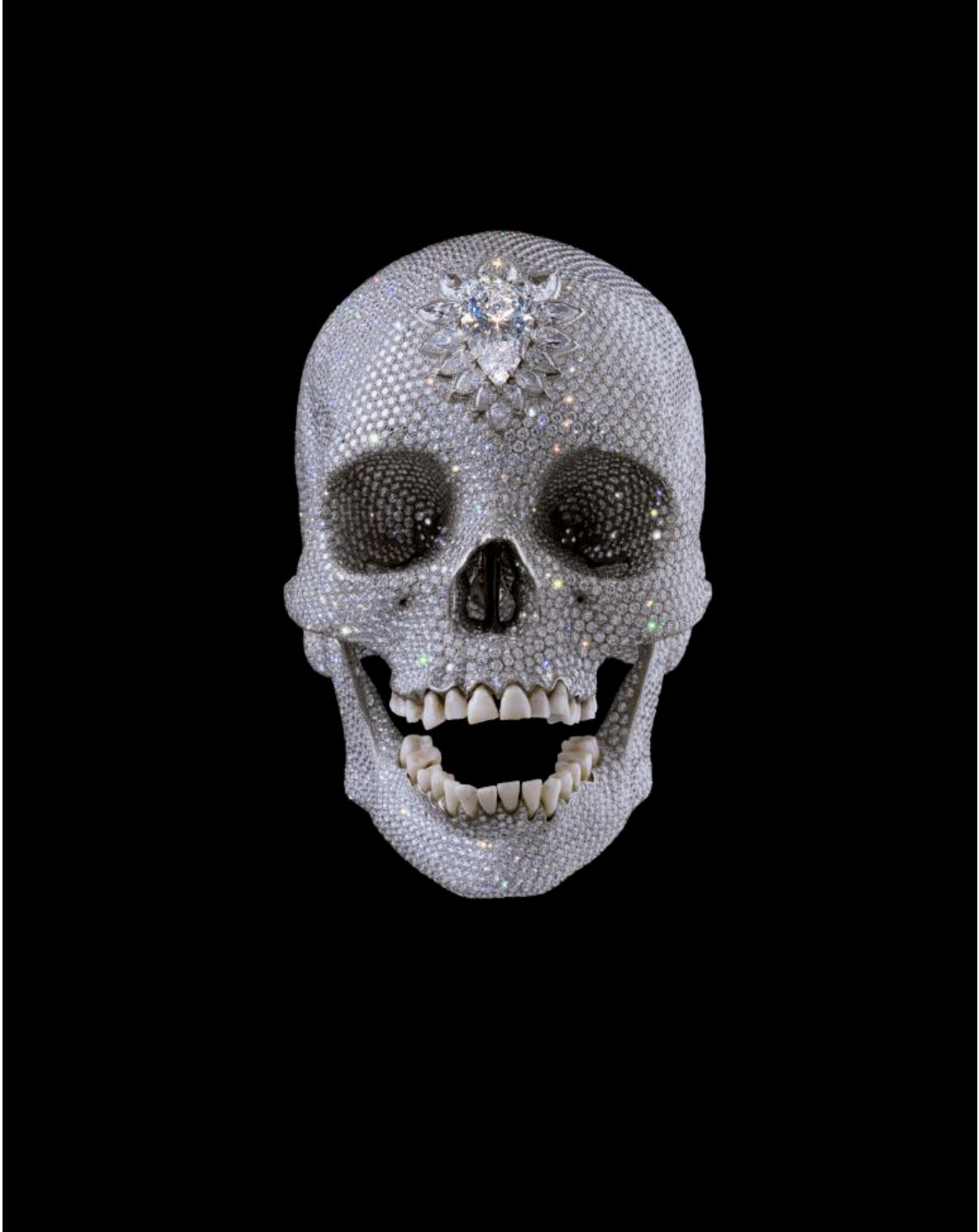


Figure 109: Damien Hirst, *For The Love of God* (2007), platinum, diamonds and human teeth.



Figure 110: Grayson Perry, *You Are Here* (2011), glazed ceramic.



Figure 112: Grayson Perry, *Map of Truths and Beliefs* (2011), wool and cotton tapestry.



Figure 113: Grayson Perry, *The Earl of Essex* (2014), porcelain, digital transfer, electro-formed metal, acrylic.



Figure 114: Grayson Perry, *The Ashford Hijab* (2014), screen-printed silk.



Figure 115: Grayson Perry, *I Am a Man* (2014), patinated brass.

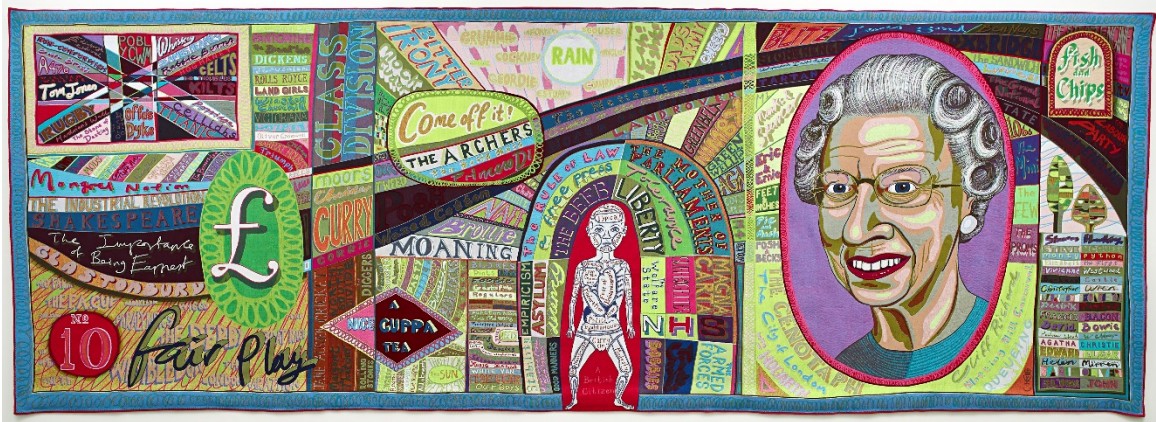


Figure 116: Grayson Perry, *Comfort Blanket* and details (2014), tapestry.

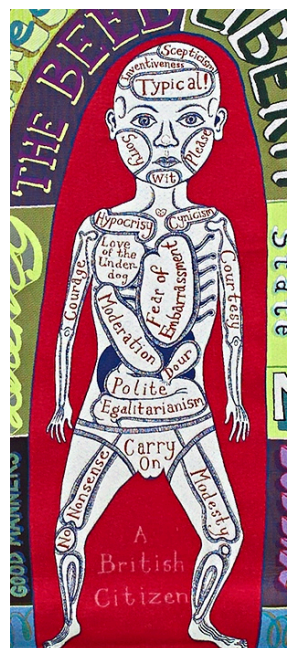


Figure 116 (details): *Comfort Blanket*.