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"The Most Popular Artist Ever!
Popular culture and populisms in the work of Grayson Perry"

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1. Introduction

On February 27, 2020, Grayson Perry was awarded the Erasmus Prize, an award frequently described as the Dutch version of the Nobel Prize.[1] The award is annually given "to a person or institution that has made an exceptional contribution to the humanities, the social sciences or the arts, in Europe and beyond. (…) Emphasizing the importance of tolerance, cultural pluriformity and non-dogmatic critical thinking, the Foundation endeavours to express these values in the choice of its laureates."[2]

Previously the prize has been awarded to people such as Barbara Ehrenreich, Jürgen Habermas, Renzo Piano, or Ernst Gombrich. The 2020 award, which includes a € 150.000 prize money, had the theme "The power of the image in the digital era." In the statement to Perry's win, the Erasmus Prize Foundation wrote: "At a time when we are constantly bombarded with images, Perry has developed a unique visual language, demonstrating that art belongs to everybody and should not be an elitist affair. Perry receives the prize for the insightful way he tackles questions of beauty and craftsmanship while addressing wider social and cultural issues."[3]

Grayson Perry has been a well-established member of the British art world for twenty years now. He has been characterized variedly, the most common label being “transvestite potter.” It is after all how a wider public got to know him when he won the Turner Prize in 2003 with ceramic works that commented on social issues and the art world, in parts using graphic imagery and drawing some of its inspiration from the artist's childhood.

In this thesis his work will be examined more closely under the aspect of populism. Populism is a difficult term to use within a scientific paper as it is loaded with so much emotion and personal ideas. The populist concept is one usually applied to the realms of politicians. It is also fair to say that due to historical examples of the use of populism in politics, its perception on the part of the general public is, to no small degree, negative. However, populism is a phenomenon that is not only found in the governmental sector but occurs on a much wider scale. For quite some time now, there has been a shift in the way the concept is discussed. Sociologists acknowledge that populism is expanding much further than the general public would like it to

[1] Brown, in: The Guardian, February 27th, 2020.

[2] Official Statement on the Erasmus Prize Foundation.

[3] Official statement on Grayson Perry as the winner of the Erasmus Prize 2020, URL: https://erasmusprijs.org/en/laureates/grayson-perry/ (25.07.2020).

be. In fact, it can be applied to any field that involves mediation from one person to a crowd of people; in the case of the art world, the artist/art lover relationship. This thesis will examine this relationship and how the artist, as a mediator, is in a position to use populism.

The contemporary art world finds itself in a strange situation. It is earning money through personal expression and, at the same time, is connected to the international market. To be successful in a market, you have to play by its rules, and these rules are generally determined by money and those who control it. One could say that, in contrast, contemporary artistic creation is based on individual personal expression, which should not be jeopardized by market rules.

In 2018, sales on the global art market reached a new high of 67.4 billion dollars. Post-war and contemporary sales accounted for 50% of global art sales.[4] Grayson Perry is part of this market. The Contemporary Art Market Report of 2018 ranked him 84th on its list of the 500 most successful contemporary artists.[5] Artists are judged on sales, lots sold, and the highest price paid for any of their works. Perry had total sales of $2,669,864, 25 lots sold, with the highest price paid for one of his works being $825,783. If you look at the auction pages, most of his ceramics reach six-figure sums. Perry is a contemporary of the Young British Artists, which includes artists such as Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, and Tracey Emin. Although he shares some of the same gallery owners, he has never been seen as part of them, and it is fair to say that for various reasons, he did not quite fit in. His choice of material, his figurative approach, and later his regular appearances in all kinds of entertainment programmes set him apart from many contemporary artists.[6]

When Perry surprisingly won the Turner Prize in 2003, Emin commented, "Grayson is pretty popular with the masses."[7]

Inherent in this quote is the mistrust in the judgment of large crowds that is inherent in many of us, especially in art matters. Perry certainly saw it as an insult. In an interview for one of his exhibitions, dealing with the subject, he said: "Populism is the version of popular that other people don't like. […] It's used as an insult. It's like, 'When loads of people like me, it's popular. But when loads of people like you, it's populism.'"[8] He also stated, when questioned

[4] McAndrea 2019, p. 143.

[5] Artprice: The Contemporary Art Market Report 2018.

[6] Perry has appeared at shows like *QI, Have I Got News For You?* and *Question Time*.

[7] Klein 2013, p. 9.

[8] Interview for the opening of the Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!, London 08.06.2017.

about the ambiguous position of the word popular: "Popularity also threatens an important part of art's appeal – its exclusivity."[9]

Here we also see how the art market is different from other markets. While you would inform yourself about others' opinions before buying a car, a dishwasher, or other daily use items and would be more inclined to obtain the most popular product than the one that comes with no recommendations, the art world often works differently. In the contemporary art world, being popular with the masses is usually somewhat frowned upon. Individuality is crucial, and this seems to lose its importance when the artwork in question is enjoyed by a "broad mass." According to Perry, one of his ambitions in creating art is "to widen the audience for art without dumbing it down."[10] This seems to be a fear of many people in the art scene: that popularization would harm their high standards, and this is a concern one shouldn't take lightly. Komar's and Melamid's *Most Wanted Paintings* comes to mind, a project in which the two artists, through surveys, tried "to discover what a true 'people's' art would look like." They conducted polls in eleven countries, in order to find out what the majority of the population would want to see in a painting and used those results to create eleven artworks, the results of which were rather unchallenging realistic paintings of landscapes, decorated with a few figures.[11] This is, of course, an exaggerated representation of the problem, but it illustrates what a lot of art professionals' fears are regarding a popularization of the artistic sphere.

Perry doesn't seem to be too concerned with the effects a popularization might have on the art world. In the second chapter of *Playing to the Gallery*, titled "Democracy Has Bad Taste," he writes the following:

> "Historically the art world has been fairly inward-looking because it can operate as a closed circle. In fact, I feel like the art world has a pretty tense relationship with popularity. The circle of artist, museum, critic, dealer and collector did not necessarily need the good opinion of the public. Now, I think that it's different, and that popularity may affect the course of art history."[12]

In the 2017 article, *Which Force is More Harmful to the Arts: Elitism or Populism?* American critics Adam Kirsch and Liesl Schillinger write about the difference between literature that is

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[9] Perry, in: The Guardian, May 27, 2017.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Dia: Komar + Melamid: The Most Wanted Paintings, 1995-1997.

[12] Perry 2014, p. 9.

recognized as elitist and literature, labelled as populist. Both Kirsch and Schillinger talk about populist art as something understandable to and approachable by "the mass" and the "non-educated" spectator. In contrast, elitist art is art made for an audience with a particular background, as Bourdieu would have called it, with a higher "cultural capital."[13] "Anyone can adore (or hate) ballet; but only a balletomane knows the difference between a sublime grand jeté and one that's merely passable."[14]

According to Adam Kirsch, the elitist author "is one whose vision of the world and style of expression are defamiliarizing, who does not reproduce the world in words but transforms it."[15] By implication, the populist author – or artist – would be someone whose depiction of the world is settled in a theoretical – and in case of the fine artist, most of all, visual – reality. The portrayed scene is familiar and recognizable and a rendition of the real world.

Within the art scene, it is controversial to be called popular. It means accessible, easy to understand, and simple, which at worst means being pretty, appealing, or decorative. Contemporary art should challenge the viewer, and if it doesn't, it may just be delightfully kitschy. But especially in recent decades, more and more voices have been heard, including from within the cultural scene, demanding accessibility and arguing that this does not necessarily mean abandoning standards. Some of them will be examined in the following chapters.

The question of what is popular and the terms associated with this label have been part of Perry's oeuvre for quite some time.

The many aspects of popular culture are something he has been working on since early on. A large part of his work deals with ideas of popularity and how to integrate them into the contemporary art scene.

To situate Perry's entire oeuvre in the contemporary art landscape, we will take a look at Perry's early days as an artist and examine how he was influenced by the cultural currents of the 1980s, when the Pop Art movement was still a strong force, especially within London's youth culture. Visually, these influences can still be found in his work, but the philosophies of the Pop Art artists and art theorists of the time also seem to have had an impact on Perry.[16]

Contrary to some of his contemporaries, Perry himself has become a very public figure, appearing in television and radio shows and at other public events.

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[13] See chapter 3. Populism.

[14] Kirsch/Schillinger, in: New York Times, April 13, 2017.

[15] Ibid.

[16] See chapter 5.1. The Pop Art Movement.

Being a crossdresser, he usually appears to public engagements as Claire, who is commonly described as his female alter-ego. Perry's public image is dominated by the fact that he is called "the transvestite potter," a label he supports wholeheartedly.

A large part of Perry's oeuvre consists of ceramics, which is an unusual choice of material for an artist of Perry's profile. His art draws much from craftsmanship and traditional art forms that historically have had a hard time and still have a hard time fighting for their place within "high culture."

As he is a potter who uses traditional methods, Perry can and should also be positioned in the field of craftsmanship and its relationships within the art world.[17]

In terms of Perry's special status in the art world, one repeatedly encounters comparisons to Outsider Artists. While Perry himself, per definition, is not one of them, there are connections between his works and Outsider Art or rather some of its representatives that cannot be denied.[18]

When speaking about art and how populism can be used within it, various aspects need to be addressed. In the context of this widely discussed field of populism and its effects and influences on the cultural scene, to avoid misunderstandings, we must consider the terminology. This will be done with help from various sociological texts. It is necessary to take into account the multiple fields of application in which populism can enter the artistic sphere. We will do this by looking at the oeuvre of Grayson Perry.

This thesis is also based on the notion that there are mechanisms of exclusion within the contemporary landscape of the art world, and it will look into what those mechanisms are and how Perry is dealing with them through the use of popular culture.

Grayson Perry has dealt with this not only conceptually and thematically, but also by the choice of his materials, by the presentation of his works and last but not least by the contribution of his own personality and "self-dramatization" - reflecting some of the figures in his artworks.

2. Research status and methodology

As already mentioned above, the amount of scientific writings on Grayson Perry is relatively scarce. This is, of course, partly due to the fact that as he is a contemporary artist, most of the

[17] See chapter 8. Grayson Perry as a craftsman.

[18] See chapter 5.3. Outsider Art and Dargerism.

writings will be done in the future. As of today, the majority of texts surrounding his work are exhibition critiques. However, in recent years he has gained some attention from the university scene. In 2016 Susan Jane Walsh submitted her doctoral thesis on the representation of class taste in the works of Grayson Perry.[19] Other examples would include a diploma thesis from 2010 about transsexuality in his body of work and another one from 2017 that investigated ceramic works as a point of intersection between art and handicraft by referencing the Norwegian artist Ingrid Askeland as well as Grayson Perry.[20] Considered the artist's high profile within the UK, this still seems quite sparse.

Methodologically one of the points of departure for this thesis was a study of Perry's body of work. Large portions of his artistic creations – especially in later years – are well documented and published in several exhibition catalogues, as well as Jacky Klein's monograph on the artist.[21] With the recent *The Pre-Therapy Years* exhibition at the Holbourne Museum in Bath that covers Perry's early work, from around the time he graduated from university in 1982 until the 1990s.[22] Additionally to this, in 2016, extracts of the artist's sketchbooks were published, showing drawings from as early as 1980. However, as Perry's artistic output is quite steady and especially a lot of his early works can't be traced anymore, none of these represent a complete catalogue of his oeuvre.

As most of the texts in the publications accompanying his exhibitions were contributed by Perry himself, they provide an interesting perspective into his artistic creation; still, they cannot be judged as scientific contributions and need to be analysed accordingly.

Additionally to all those publications, in 2007, Wendy Jones, in collaboration with the artist, published *Grayson Perry. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* which introduces the reader to Perry, not so much through the lens of his artistic work but his personal upbringing and childhood.[23] Within an analysis of Perry's creative output, one also mustn't ignore his work in television, which often accompanies his art.

Complementing the research into the artist himself was a study and analysis of various sociological texts within the discourse surrounding populism, followed by an appliance of the relevant theories towards the sector of art and culture and specifically the artistic output of Grayson Perry.

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[19] Walsh 2016.

[20] Del Fabbro 2010

[21] Klein first published the book in 2009 and updated and expanded it in the years 2013 as well as 2020.

[22] The Holburne Museum 2020 (exh. cat.)

[23] Wendy 2007.

3. Populism

Before diving into the impacts that populism is having on the cultural scene and how Perry is appropriating populist mechanisms within his body of work, it has to be clarified how the term will be used.

As mentioned above, populism is a concept that is widely understood as adverse but is also often discussed in too narrow a definition.

Political sociologists have increasingly discussed the many aspects since the 1950s. While initially it was mainly addressed under the notion of fascism and right-wing politics, the parameters have since widened. In recent years writers have increasingly acknowledged the possibilities of populism as a tool to shape a pluralist democracy.[24] One thing about the populist subject matter is that populism in itself is not an ideology. It is a method, an empty vessel that the populist, as well as the intended audience, fills with meaning. As such, it is in need of a so-called "host ideology."

Populism is language-, or rather expression-based. Combined with the idea of populism as a container for a "host ideology," this means that anyone with an audience – not only politicians – can make use of it. And who is expression-based if not the artist?

If you follow Cas Mudde's definition of populism, it is "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite.'"[25] "The (pure) people" is not a fixed term, as is "the (corrupt) elite." The elite is one created by the populist as a common enemy for the people. In the case of the art world, this position would be held by the art establishment, collectors, directors, generally those with power to shape the scene, the ruling class of the art world. Although the populist himself is often rather a part of the elite as he is a part of the people, he is solidarizing with them, as is the case with the populist artist. The category of "the people," as they are the ones addressed, is much more imperative within this construct.

In his introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, Carlos de la Torre writes that an essential aspect of populism is "invoking the will of the people."[26] "The people" is a category crucial to the formation of a populism. As Laclau writes: "[…] There is nothing

[24] e.g. Mouffe, Chantal: For a left populism, London 2018, or McKean, Benjamin L.: Popularism, pluralism, and the ordinary, New York 2020.

[25] Mudde 2004, p. 543.

[26] De la Torre 2019, p. 1.

automatic about the emergence of a 'people.' On the contrary, it is the result of a complex construction process […]."[27]

Regarding this issue of the construction of "the people," de la Torre writes: "This category central to populism, nationalism, and democratic theory is one of the most abused and ambiguous concepts in political theory. It refers to the population as a whole, and simultaneously to a section of the population […]."[28]

This "section of the population" that the populist is trying to reach is something constructed by the populist himself. He is what binds those people together, responding to their general perception of being excluded from power structures and being governed by the people who make decisions for them– the dominant class/the elite.

Exclusion and inclusion are central terms when it comes to building "a people." Most populisms are at their centre inclusionary as well as exclusionary, depending on who the focus group is. Now, who are "the people" and who is "the populist" within a cultural context?

The artist, as the mediator, is the one who is in the position to "invoke the will of the people" if he chooses to. As such, he holds the superior position, since he is the one who actively expresses himself and has the power to direct the attention of his (for the time being) passive audience in a certain way, creating a power dynamic. Within the art world, "the people" are the audience, those who do not have the immediate ability to shape the art world, which is generally perceived as elitist, as something that is not created primarily for the "broad masses," but rather for the "art establishment." Still, the audience is ideally a diverse group of people with different backgrounds and different career paths. However, differentiation is not a part of the populist's toolbox.

Pierre Bourdieu wrote the following about art reception: "Every examination of works of art involves a conscious or unconscious decryption. […] If the requirements aren't given, misunderstanding is the norm. The illusion of immediate understanding leads to an illusive understanding, that arises from an erringly chosen key."[29] [30]

The artworld is an area often seen as elitist and exclusive towards people who don't have the "requirements for its decryption." In order to be able to decrypt a work of art, it is beneficiary

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[27] Laclau 2005, p. 200.

[28] De la Torre 2019, p. 1/2.

[29] Bourdieu 1997, p. 307/308.

[30] The thought of needing the tools for decryption to understand the arts can already be found in Schlegel's *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, in which he writes about higher and lower art and how lower art is made for and easily accessible by the masses. In contrast, high art is made for the sophisticated elites.

to have a certain amount of what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital,” meaning capital gained through education and socialization within our particular settings of origin, including manners and behavior patterns.[31]

Cultural scientist Niels Werber wrote about the necessity of a populist language: "Without popularisation, the experts would risk only talking to themselves instead of reaching their clients."[32] So how does the expert/artist reach his client/audience through popularized expression? American art historian David Joselit in 2012 published his book *After Art.*[33] In it, he is trying to establish parameters for art from a business standpoint.[34] He writes: "I will argue that images produce power— a current or currency— that is activated by contact with spectators. The more points of contact an image can establish, the greater its power will be."[35] Following the approaches of Werber and Joselit, an artist, in order to reach his audience, must establish these "points of contact" within his art. Since people are individuals, popularization is necessary to provide as many people as possible with these points of contact.

This thesis will show how Grayson Perry, in his art, is establishing those contact points to reach "his clients" and who those clients are. When you look at studies that analyse who the actual art audience is, the results show that by far, the primary audience consists of those who already work in the field or a related area.[36]

Perry’s focus, in general, lies more within the borders of the working class. Working-class people still make up the smallest amount of gallery or museum visitors. Perry is trying to navigate this issue by what, according to him, is “a more ‘working class’ aesthetic.”[37]

One dominant trait in populist expression is the use of (visual) "empty signifiers." An example of an "empty signifier" – a term popularized by Ernesto Laclau – would be a phrase that is formulated in a very general way but allows the audience to fill it with their own associations. “Given that we are dealing with purely differential identities, we have, in some way, to determine the whole within which those identities, as different, are constituted (the problem would

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[31] See: Bourdieu, Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, Cambridge 1984.

[32] Werber 2005, p. 150.

[33] Joselit, David (ed.): After art. Princeton 2013.

[34] Joselit is referring to Andy Warhol’s statement “Business Art is the step that comes after Art.”

[35] Joselit 2013, n.p.

[36] For comparison, see e.g.: Bourdieu, Pierre; Darbel, Alain; Schnapper, Dominique: The love of art. European art museums and their public. Stanford 1990; O’Hagan, John W.: Access to and Participation in the Arts, The Case of Those with Low Incomes/Educational Attainment, in: Journal of Cultural Economics 20, 1996, S. 269-282; Farrell, Betty; Medvedeva, Maria: Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums, Washington 2010.

[37] Klein 2013, p. 68.

not, obviously, arise if we were dealing with positive, only externally related, identities).”[38] Prominent cases of this are election slogans of politicians that are vaguely formulated to allow people to entrust it with a personal meaning.[39] As examples, “Make America Great Again” was one that certainly didn’t fail to lure people in but ultimately doesn’t convey any meaning or address a specific subject matter.

Apart from those techniques, populism is often using exaggerations and overstatement as well as an appeal to the audience’s emotions, rather than being factual.

To break it down, populist language is a mode of expression that can be understood by the largest possible number of people. It is a mode of “politics that claims to speak for ordinary people against elites.”[40]

4. Grayson Perry

4.1. Early days and London

Perry was born in 1960 in Chelmsford, Essex, and came from a working-class family. His father left the family when he was four years old after he caught his wife cheating with the local milkman. After he moved out, Perry lost contact with him for several years. The milkman became his new stepfather and quickly turned out to be abusive. In addition, Perry soon discovered that he was a transvestite, a fact he hid from his environment until the age of sixteen when his stepsister found his diary in which he had written about his transvestism.[41] These early childhood years, as well as his crossdressing, still play a considerable part in his art as well as his public image. For most public events, Perry appears as a female version of himself, called Claire. When asked whether his crossdressing was art, Perry said: "No, it's definitely not because I choose it not to be art."[42] Claire still plays a vital role in much of Perry's art as well as the staging of his artist personality.[43]

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[38] Laclau 2005, p. 69.

[39] See e.g. Laclau, Ernesto: On Populist Reason, London 2005.

[40] McKean 2020, p. 87/88.

[41] Detailed accounts of Perry’s childhood can be found in: Jones, Wendy: Grayson Perry. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl, London 2007.

[42] Reith Lecture 2013a.

[43] See chapters 6.2. Gender roles and 6.3. Camp.

According to his own accounts, growing up, there wasn't much cultural stimulation or exposure to art. So, he built worlds of his own in his bedroom, imagining fantasy realms and mythical battles, re-enacting them with his toys. It was there that Perry decided to become an artist.[44] After graduating from school in 1978, he went to a one-year foundation course at the Braintree College of Further Education, which was meant to help their students pick their area of specialisation – in Perry's case, painting. In 1979 he applied at the Portsmouth Polytechnic to do his bachelor's in fine art, from which he graduated in 1982. It was only afterwards, after a friend suggested it to him, that Perry started attending pottery classes at the Central Institute and eventually set up his first pottery studio in 1986.[45] Before that, Perry's body of work is more experimental. He tries himself in a wide variety of artistic media, but especially film. In his films, *Bungalow Depressions* (1981), *The Green Witch and merry Diana* (1984), and *The Poor Girl* (1985), Perry is already openly exploring his transvestism, playing the female protagonist himself.

As already mentioned, Perry grew up at a time when pop art was a central current in the art scene. While the movement originated in the 1950s and reached its peak in the 1960s, for over a decade afterwards it evolved from there into several underground cultures. In Britain, it should shape music and fashion and with it youth culture for the following decades. It can be connected to a relatively wide field of movements, such as New Wave, Glam Rock, and New Romanticism.

While still studying at Portsmouth Polytechnic Perry and his then-girlfriend, Jennifer Binnie went to London in the summer of 1980 to visit Jennifer's sister Christine. Christine back then was a squatter at an 18th-century building in West London. The house was occupied by several other members of the New Romantics movement, including Boy George and Marilyn.

Christine and Jennifer Binnie, together with their friend Wilma Johnson who were all part of the New Romantics scene, started the neo-naturists, a body-painting art collective. During those early years in London, Perry regularly performed with them (fig. 1). Neo-Naturist activities consisted of live performances in which the members were covered in nothing but paint. "They would perform on stage, chanting songs and throwing up their legs in an unruly version of the cancan. At other times, they'd simply flash at the crowd. Beneath their overcoats, they had

[44] Jones 2007, p. 96.

[45] A large portion of Perry's sketchbooks was published in 2016, including a lot of his early draftings, up until 1986.

perfected a number of looks painted directly onto their bodies, including trompe l'oeil lingerie, and wild, grinning faces that transformed breasts into eyes and belly buttons into nostrils."[46]
The Neo Naturists are a not very well researched movement and were never represented by a gallery. Nonetheless, accounts from witnesses suggest that their position within London's countercultural movements was an influential one.[47]
Although the members all came from a New Romantics background, the Neo Naturist movement itself cannot be defined as part of the same. While New Romanticism was all about expressing yourself through fashion makeup and a taste for campy artificiality, the Neo-Naturists were celebrating the natural form of their bodies.
"The Neo-Naturists were the last great hippie manifestation: they combined English village fête practicality with Girl Guide common sense, hippie idealism, the spirit of love, a child-like innocence and amateurism, all in a post-punk context."[48]

4.2. The art world

Starting from 1984, Perry was represented by James Birch, a prominent benefactor of ceramic art, who gave him his first two solo shows at his Waterford Road gallery in Fulham, London the same year. Birch, together with Paul Conran, opened a new gallery in 1987, Birch & Conan Fine Art in Soho, where Perry had three solo exhibitions over the following years until the gallery had to be suddenly closed, due to an abrupt rise of the rental costs. Successively Perry was represented by gallerist David Gill before signing with Antony d'Offay in 1994, who represented him until 1999, followed by Laurent Delaye until 2002. In the recently published catalogue to the "The Pre-Therapy Years" exhibition at The Holbourne Museum, Bath, Perry writes: "During the 1990s, while the YBAs rocketed to international stardom, my art career only inched forwards. I think someone at the time described me as an 'artist's artist.' Though I was popular with collectors and a growing audience, and despite being shown by the most powerful gallery in London, acceptance by the gatekeepers of fine art institutions was still several years away."[49]

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[46] Scott, in: Artsy Magazine, Aug 17, 2016.
[47] Boy George 1995, p. 134.
[48] Miles 2010, p. 361.
[49] The Holburne Museum 2020 (exh. cat.), p. 63.

In 2002 the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam put on an exhibition of his works, titled "Guerilla Tactics." It is said show that Perry credits with getting him the nomination – and subsequent win – for the Turner Prize the following year.[50]

2003 is also the year he settled for the Victoria Miro Gallery with which he has been ever since. By 2004 Perry was also to return to the medium of film - although not in an artistic way – by launching his television career with his first documentary "Why Men Wear Frocks," an exploration of transvestism and masculinity, for which the Royal Television Society awarded him with the RTS award for best network production. Other television programmes were to follow, most notably *All in the Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry* (2012) and *Grayson Perry: Who Are You* (2014) for both of which he won a BAFTA award for Best Specialist Factual. Other shows include *Grayson Perry: Divided Britain* (2014) and *Grayson Perry: All Man* (2016). Throughout his tv work, Perry investigates questions surrounding social issues, such as British identity, masculinity, and class. When asked about whether his television programmes were art, Perry simply replied: "No, it was telly and I made it with telly values."[51]

Since his Turner Prize win, Perry is exhibited regularly in group as well as solo exhibitions, such as *The Walthamstow Tapestry* (2009) at Victoria Miro Gallery in which he, for the first time, exhibited a major tapestry work. *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (2011), a monumental show at the British Museum that he also curated, *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012) at Victoria Miro, *The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!* (2017) at the Serpentine Gallery, London, or *Super Rich Interior Decorations* (2019) at Victoria Miro again.

Since 2011 Perry is a member of the Royal Academy and in 2013, he was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his contributions to contemporary art.

As mentioned above, popular is a word that often comes up when dealing with Grayson Perry's art, sometimes subtly, as inconspicuous writing on one of his pots (fig. 6), sometimes anything but, as in 2008 when Perry curated an exhibition from the collections of the British Arts Council entitled *Unpopular Culture* that toured the UK, or when in 2017 his show at the Serpentine Gallery was called "The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!"[52]

Perry is very outspoken regarding issues of the art market, most of all, its exclusivity.

In 2013 Perry was a speaker at the BBC Reith Lectures, where he talked about the state of the contemporary art world, how to produce art within its boundaries and how to mediate it to the

[50] Klein 2013, p. 93.

[51] Reith Lecture 2013a.

[52] See chapter 7.4. The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!

public. In his second lecture, Perry loosely quoted art philosopher Arthur Danto by saying, "an artwork is about something, has a point of view, […] a style, and it uses rhetorical ellipsis - i.e., that it engages the audience to sort of fill in the gaps."[53] For that to happen, the audience needs to be able to respond to the artwork, or rather the artwork needs to produce a reaction from the audience. Following the above-mentioned statement by Joselit, "that images produce power— a current or currency— that is activated by contact with spectators […]"[54] this could be achieved by establishing those "points of contact."

The talks were later adapted into his publication *Playing to the Gallery: Helping Contemporary Art in its Struggle to Be Understood*.[55] The book is a brief guide to the world of contemporary art and how to approach it and is aimed at people who are new to the art world. In it, Perry gives his viewpoint on questions surrounding the art world and its inhabitants, like: What is art? What (or who) is the art world? What is the future of art? How does one become an artist? The text is accompanied by humoristic drawings (fig. 2-5).

While referencing various artists and art professionals, Perry is trying to outline what one has to do to build a successful career within the mechanisms of the art world and names various "major boundary markers" to determine whether what you are looking at is art.

In the last chapter, Perry explains why he wrote it: "I did it so that people like the scarecrow and the tin man and the lion might enter the Emerald City of the art world a little smarter, a little braver, and a little fonder."[56] He is, of course, referring to characters in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.[57]

Considering the theories of political interpretations surrounding it, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a very fitting analogy, as it now is generally perceived as an elaborate metaphor on populism in America.[58] The world of "the great and powerful wizard" also turns out to be only make-believe, a description very fitting for the art world as well as it is all just a form of imitation if you follow Plato's conception of "mimesis."

In Perry's adaptation towards the contemporary cultural scene the scarecrow, the tinman, and the lion are the art outsiders, and the Emerald City with its "great and powerful" ruler is the

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[53] Reith Lecture 2013a.

[54] Joselit 2013, n.p.

[55] Perry 2014.

[56] Reith Lecture 2013b.

[57] *Playing tot he Gallery* even includes a sketch of Perry/Claire as Dorothy (fig. 5).

[58] Henry M. Littlefield was the first one to suggest parallels to populist movements in American politics. In 1964 *American Quarterly* published his essay "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism.", see: Littlefield, Henry M.: The Wizard of Oz. Parable on Populism. In: *American Quarterly* 16 (1), Spring 1964, p. 47-58.

artworld itself: Watched from a distance seemingly overpowering, superior and exclusive, if you don't have the tools to find your way around in it but not so strange if you know how to navigate it. This thesis is going to investigate in what way Perry is borrowing from populism within his oeuvre to make it more approachable to the art outsider[59] and how he is using those methods to mediate between the art world and the "tinman."

Perry is very self-aware of the position he holds within the art world and his role as a mediator of content. In the context of an exhibition, Perry said: “I am in the communication business and I want to communicate to as wide an audience as possible.”[60]

4.3. The art press

Perry’s Turner Prize win was widely reported as unexpected, and since then, he has increasingly been attracting attention with his garish, often kitschy works. Inherently detail-oriented, manifold, and thematically diverse, they are in times quite difficult to pin down or to classify stylistically. Even to topics of general interest, Perry very much has his own approach.

The voices surrounding his artistic choices have been controversial and, to this day, still are. While some describe him as a "huge talent"[61] or praise him as a "mad-cap iconoclast,"[62] some voices are far less welcoming. Jonathan Jones wrote in 2004: "The Victorians had teapots; the modernists had broken vases; we have Grayson Perry's clichés. Since the 16th century, it's been nearly all downhill for artistry in clay."[63] Adrian Searle phrased it a bit more carefully when he wrote in 2003 that "his pots are offbeat luxury goods, around which his life story, his childhood miseries and Claire herself create an aura."[64]

Despite some vehement pushback, Perry's works fill high profile galleries and museum spaces on a regular basis. Still, Perry holds some form of an outsider position within the art world. Grayson Perry is well aware of his status within the art world, and the criticisms that are directed towards him, and has been referencing it repeatedly within his oeuvre, as in his pot *Taste and Democracy* (2004) that contains quotes of things that were said following Perry’s Turner Prize

[59] The term of the art outsider will be further discussed in chapter 5.3. Outsider Art and Dargerism.

[60] Serpentine Galleries 2017 (exh. cat.), n.p.

[61] Boucher, in: The Guardian, 17 Oct 2004.

[62] Glover, in: The Independent, 5 Jun 2018.

[63] Jones, in: The Guardian, 5 Jun 2004.

[64] Searle, in: The Guardian, 8 Dec 2003.

win. In a sketch for *Puff Piece* (2016), a pot addressing the criticism Perry is receiving for is art, Perry quoted art critic Jonathan Jones, claiming that he called his art "suburban popular culture."[65] (fig. 6)

5. Popular Art and populist aesthetics

5.1. The Pop Art Movement

One way to allure to a non-elitist potential art audience is to use popular images.

Perry grew up in the 1960s and 70s, at a time when the pop art movement was flourishing. Initially established in Britain in the early 1950s, pop art evolved through an increased awareness of the influences of new technologies, mass culture, the entertainment industry, and the associated rise of Americanism.

Both stylistically and thematically, the British, as well as the American Pop Art movement, seems to have had a significant influence on Perry. Especially his early works have strong visual connections. When he did a one-year foundation course at Braintree College from 1978 to 1979, Perry was experimenting with different styles and still struggling to find his own artistic language. To please one of his teachers, he did some pieces that were stylistically embedded in the original pop art movement. One of them is *Why, Grayson Darling* (1978/79) (fig. 7),[66] which is a copy of Liechtenstein's work "Masterpiece" from 1962 (fig. 8). The only difference being that Perry changed the text in the speech-bubble to: "Why, Grayson Darling, this painting is a Masterpiece! You'll have all the B.A. colleges clamouring for your work!"[67]

Perry soon abandoned this sort of approach to moving towards a more collage-like style that can be found in his early sketchbooks.[68] What is noticeable is his extensive use of stock images, a habit that has lasted into his most recent works, and that is something that has been practiced by his pop art predecessors, such as Tom Wesselman, Richard Hamilton, or Eduardo Paolozzi.

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[65] Although there is no written record of the actual quote, In a 2016 article for The Guardian Jones is acknowledging that he might have said it, see: Jones, in: The Guardian, 10 Oct 2016.

[66] Jones 2007, p. 109-111.

[67] The original quote says "Why, Brad Darling, this painting is a Masterpiece! My, soon you'll have all of New York clamouring for your work!"

[68] Perry 2016.

It has to be said that while this early work does include references to aspects of mass culture like artists of the pop art movement used them, Perry's approach seems to reach even further back to Kurt Schwitter's personal interpretations of Dada. Schwitters created collage works under the name of *Merz*, from Kom*merz* (german for commerce), which in turn had their influence on said pop artists. Schwitters strove to depict a *Gesamtweltbild* ("total vision of the world"), by creating highly personal "psychological collages." His approach to these was fuelled by Dadaism. While Perry's collage work is generally more figurative, it also depicts the artist's inner landscapes. Its visual language seems hermetic to the outside viewer and not necessarily unambiguously interpretable to anyone else but the artist.

Collage fragments of advertisements and stock images are something you can find in Perry's work to this day, as in some of his latest pieces such as *Traditional Society* (2019) or *Empty Vessel* (2018), which were both exhibited as part of the *Super Rich Interior Decorations* show (fig. 9/10).[69]

One of the starting points of the original Pop Art movement was that at the core of our being - how we express ourselves and how we form opinions - we are strongly influenced by the output of our environment and, to a large extent by our consumption of pop culture. The artists of that time thought that what they had learned at university did not correspond to real life. So, they began to draw from immediately understandable images of the public sphere to create their works.

While the Pop Art movement has often been characterised as superficial, a purely image-based visual reflection of what surrounded the population on a daily basis, precise positions, and comments on this very society can be identified.

Through early pop artists, the trivial and banal were exposed as central to the formation of our own culture and further the art world. "The pictorial contents of pop art are rooted in everyday life, they reflect the realities of their times, they force and reflect cultural change."[70]

Incoherence with his early days within the art world, when pop art was still very much present in many artists' oeuvres, Perry draws a lot of his imagery from everyday life, such as the entertainment industry, advertisement, and current affairs. He continually plays banality off against profundity, touching on themes of social significance and using an artistic language informed by everyday objects that normally receive little attention in said discourse.

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[69] In all his pottery work, Perry exclusively uses the method of coiling. The chapter 8.3. Perry's ceramic work will explain his working techniques in more detail.

[70] Osterwold 2003, p. 7.

In pop art, brands are everywhere, and they are identified as a formative force of our identity. They, and with them consumerism in general, are what constructs us as a people.

Even though Perry's visual language developed since his college days, one has to acknowledge that pop art has had a lasting influence on his art. Throughout his career, Perry continuously uses imagery that is familiar, often simplified and emblematic in a manner reminiscent of Pop Artists in both the UK and the US. As in *Gulf War Dinner Service* (1991), a set of twelve plates commenting on American foreign policy (fig. 11-13). Perry is connecting symbols of death, masculinity, and American culture to create a terse and straightforward symbolism. One of the plates also seems to be a reference to Robert Cappa's 1936 photography *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*, commonly known as *The Falling Soldier* (fig. 14).

To this day, much of his artistic practice and iconographic style is based on Pop Art and its relatives. Perry's work has a strongly associative approach, enabling the audience to recognize certain aspects of his work as part of their own lives. His representations are emblematic, which makes them accessible and easy to understand. Perry is not afraid to work with simplifications and clichés, especially when it comes to gender roles and masculinity.[71]

Perry produces art that is pretty much readable on the first view, not only for the art expert but for everyone. For some of his more monumental works, Perry did extensive pre-field research into current issues of British society. Some of those efforts were documented in television series.[72]

The artist is communicating with the spectator through specific cultural codes of everyday life. Those codes are usually represented through brands and highly recognizable goods of consumer culture, such as sports cars or a pack of Marlboro cigarettes.

Perry comes from a British former working-class background, and as such most of his works are aimed at a Western audience, mainly from the middle and working classes. His work is largely a commentary on society and shows the superficialities of his own consumer culture - as established in the Pop Art movement of the 1960s.

Visually, Perry adds various tropes to the emblematic character of Pop Art. Some of them, especially symbols of gender and war, are repeated throughout his work.

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[71] See chapter 6.2. Gender roles.

[72] Over the course of his artistic career Perry was invited to create several documentary series, such as Why Men Wear Frocks (2005), All in the Best Possible Taste (2012) or Divided Britain (2017).

As mentioned above, Perry knows how to combine the perceived banality of our consumerist culture with the profundity of some of the questions of life. One example of this approach would be *The Walthamstow Tapestry* (2009) (fig. 15). The tapestry was created for the 2009 exhibition of the same name at the Victoria Miro Gallery in London. With a size of three by fifteen meters, it can only be described as monumental.[73] Like so many of Perry's other works, it has a strong narrative factor. It tells the story of life in seven chapters, but through the lens of consumerism, while also drawing "from medieval morality tradition popularised by early Flemish weaving workshops in centres such as Arras and Tournai."[74] Morality tales, such as *The Summoning of Everyman* or *The Pilgrim's Progress*, usually sent their protagonist on a pilgrimage, encountering good and evil, and trials of all kinds, as is the case in *The Walthamstow Tapestry*. Looking at early sketches for the piece, the theme of the pilgrimage is actually far more visually dominant than in the final result.[75]

The seven-part story starts with the birth of the protagonist. In the following chapters, he is alternately represented as male and female, which allows him/her to assume an "everyone"-identity. After the birth, the protagonist is depicted as a little girl, in pigtails and yellow baby doll dress. The doll she is holding let's one think of depictions of Jesus on the cross. In the next stage, he is a young adult, seemingly looking for trouble. He is wearing classic greaser look fashion, a cigarette is hanging from the corner of his mouth. While he is holding a knife, Perry is also giving him a halo.

In the next stage, the protagonist is a middle-aged woman. She seems to have done well for herself. She is smartly dressed, wearing what appears to be designer clothes, a dress, and a headscarf while clutching her purse.

In the next chapter, he is a businessman in his 60s wearing an ill-fitted grey suit, holding his briefcase in one and a glass of red wine in the other hand. His head is slightly bowed, and his overall posture speaks of fatigue and weariness. He is standing in what appears to be a glass box.

Next, she is an old woman. Her posture is bent, and she walks on a stick while holding a large shopping bag with BBC written on it.

In the last chapter, the protagonist is an old man on his death bed. He is naked and bent in the foetal position, clutching his breast. The status of nakedness coincides with his first appearance

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[73] Perry's technical and stylistic approach to his tapestry works will be discussed in chapter 8.4. Perry's textile work.

[74] Lowe, Adam: Tapestry Decoded, in: The Vanity of Small Differences, London 2013, p. 103.

[75] see: Perry, Grayson: Sketchbooks. London 2016, p. 70.

as a new-born baby. Meanwhile, in the intermediate stages, he/she is given at least one attribute to hold on to; the message being that during our lifetime, we surround ourselves with objects and charge them with personal meaning that wasn't there before given to it. In death, those objects and the significance attached to them becomes irrelevant again, and we return to our natural self.

A multitude of miniature scenarios surrounds this central storyline. It is mainly people from different backgrounds in various stages of their lives. All of them are assigned to a brand name. There is a shopping nun with the letters "Topshop" written next to her, a boy in a wheelchair is labelled with "Nike," a man on a motorbike above the word "Liberty," to name just a few. Between the last two stages of the protagonist's life appears a depiction of a castle or fort from a bird's eye view. In it is a large devil's head. The devil is connected with the first chapter of the birth through two lines. One is a line of blood, and the other one is what seems to alternate between road and rail – one is nature, the other one is human-made.

The title is a nod to Walthamstow, the part of London where Perry had his studio while making the tapestry. It also happens to be the birthplace of William Morris, who was a crucial figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th and early 20th century in Britain.[76] Apart from that, Perry claims that it was inspired by the medieval *Bayeux Tapestry*.[77] The *Bayeux Tapestry*, with its 23-meter span, is even more monumental than *The Walthamstow Tapestry* and "is about the invasion of the Normans [while Perry's work] is about the invasion of marketing into our heads."[78]

Perry's version can be summarized under the slogan, "I shop, therefore I am," a phrase popularized by American pop artist Barbara Kruger. The piece is a comment on how our entire life revolves around brands and how they shape us and our habits.

The Walthamstow Tapestry is not the only work by Perry that places consumer culture at the forefront of human existence, but it is one of the most monumental and detailed to date. Other examples would include *We Are What We Buy* (2000), *Ultimate Consumer Durable* (2005), *For Faith in Shopping* (2008), or *Shopping for Meaning* (2019), all of which put consumer culture at the forefront of our existence (fig. 16-19).[79] In those pieces, as in all of his work, Perry is

[76] See chapters 8.1. Modern craftsmanship in its historical and theoretical context and 8.2. Craftmanship and the people.

[77] Unlike *The Walthamstow Tapestry*, the *Bayeux Tapestry* is embroidery.

[78] Klein 2013, p. 267.

borrowing from preceding artistic styles. Perry does so in a rather vague kind of way. While the connection to the respective style is usually easy to spot, Perry does take his liberties in the realisation of the work, implementing his own artistic choices and, in the process, often deviating significantly from the chosen stylistic model. This often leads to the fact that while, at first glance, his pots often almost appear like copies of a certain model, when looking closer, it actually becomes much harder to position them within a certain historical stylistic context. By applying his own artistic choices, the references often become much more vague as some of the writings on them lead us to believe. Perry doesn't make it any easier by frequently switching style, imagery, and format.

We Are What We Buy (fig. 16), for instance, is visually a relatively modern piece, alluding to simplistic modern designs, while *Ultimate Consumer Durable* (fig. 17), in its imagery, ornamental patterns, as well as its form, is referencing ancient Greek pottery. *For Faith in Shopping* (fig. 18), on the other hand, is a copper coin showing a depiction of the Virgin Mary, loaded with shopping bags, that shows visual similarities to coins of the Roman Imperial period, but without any real clues. *Shopping for Meaning* (fig. 19), again, is designed in a relatively modest and ambiguous manner, the only ornament being blue tendril patterns around the photographs of Perry.

Pop art has a visual simplicity that can also be found in Perry's works. Topically the connections between Perry and the original pop art movement are quite clear and can be found through Perry's whole body of work. Starting from an early point, his artistic imagery increasingly includes references to mass consumption and the influences that brands, merchandising, and capitalism have on us. Like the 60s movement, Perry's work is not necessarily opposed or in favour of such tendencies. A trait that runs through his entire creation is his ability to address relevant topics without positioning himself.

5.2. Kitsch

While pop art is generally regarded as a comparatively non-intellectual movement, it is certainly strongly influenced by the mindset and the subject matter that representatives of the Frankfurt

[79] By putting Perry's art in the context of consumer culture, we will also have to talk about 'the judgement of taste,' (chapter 7.3) but for now, we will concentrate more directly on the pop art movements in Britain and see how they influenced Perry's body of work.

School, such as Adorno or Walter Benjamin, dealt with. The notion of "high" and "low" culture is essential when discussing the theoretical background of pop art. Clement Greenberg wrote as early as 1939:

> "Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough-simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch:* popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc."[80]

The general conception is that Kitsch is simple, accessible, and therefore popular.
Every art form originates from being a counterculture to the dominant culture or artistic style until it itself becomes defining of its' contemporary currents. Pop art questioned its' predecessors, in this case, for its' highbrow approach towards art and matters of society, blurring the boundaries between “kitsch” and high culture as perhaps no other did. In that sense, it can be seen as more inclusive of so-called "popular culture" within the history of artistic creation than previous styles.
Perry is playing with our notions of Kitsch, how high and popular culture are playing off against each other, and our judgement of both. He is doing so through his use of ceramics, a material often disregarded as tacky and not up to certain artistic standards.
Greenberg, in writing about popular culture and equating it with “low culture,” wrote:
“Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its costumers except their money – not even their time.”[81]
The pop artists of the 1950s and 1960s were very much aware of this. Greenberg is not the only one to judge popular culture and the products of mass culture as inferior to, as he calls it, “genuine culture.”
The kitsch discourse is a polemically led discourse with a proper portion of superciliousness and depreciation. Contemporary art usually has the ambition to be inherently loaded with meaning. For Kitsch, you might say this meaning has to be given to it from the respective owner/collector/audience. Like in the first part of Perry’s television series *All in the Best Possible Taste*

[80] Greenberg 1989, p. 9.
[81] Ibid., p. 10.

(2012), where Perry met with a woman called Susan, who showed him around her house, that was packed with porcelain memorabilia. Perry quoted Greenberg's statement that "kitsch is art from which the soul has departed."[82] He then noted that through Susan's personal history with them, they were elevated to something meaningful. [83] Pieces of Kitsch become valuable to their owner by loading them with emotion.

Emotion is personal, direct, and firmly entwined with populist methods, as the populist prefers to appeal to the people's emotions. This doesn't necessarily mean that facts don't play a part in populist mediation, but they are not the first means to the purpose.

Perry strongly connects kitsch as an aesthetic choice with the working class. In 2003 he created a pot that he titled *Barbaric Splendour* (fig. 20). According to the Jacky Klein monograph, the title was inspired by Ernst Gombrich's *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, first published in 1979. In it, Gombrich opposed barbaric splendour, as something that is visually expressed through "ornamental profusion" with the aesthetic of "classical tradition."[84] When looking at Perry's piece, one can see how he is combining a classically shaped piece of pottery, showing a meander ribbon at the neck of the vase, with working-class imagery. The fields are reminiscent of what Perry calls "granny's front room taste."[85]

Perry commented on this piece as follows: "I am naturally what I would call a 'maximalist.' I make things that are incredibly ornate and shiny so perhaps they adhere to a more 'working-class' aesthetic."[86] This "working-class aesthetic" for Perry is closely connected to what most people would describe as kitsch: it's flashy, ornamental, decorative, and above all, ceramic.

5.3. Outsider Art and Dargerism

In 1979, during his foundation course at Braintree College, Perry went to the art brut exhibition *Outsiders: An Art Without Precedent and Tradition* at Hayward Gallery, which left a lasting impression on him and his perception of art.[87] The exhibition was created by Victor Musgrave

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[82] Serpentine Galleries 2017 (exh. cat.), n.p.

[83] Perry, Grayson: All In The Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry. Working Class Taste (1). Channel 4, 05.06.2012.

[84] Gombrich 1984, p. 18.

[85] Perry 2012a (Channel 4).

[86] Klein 2013, p. 68.

[87] Jones 2007, p. 123ff.

and Roger Cardinal and showcased 42 international artists of varying degrees of fame.[88] The press release stated: "Outsider art is not a movement, but in each case, a highly personal creation of individuals of prodigious talent whose work and even existence is usually unknown to each other, and for the most part little known even to the 'official' art world."[89] It was at this exhibition that Perry, for the first time, got in contact with works by American Outsider artist Henry Darger.[90]

Darger's most prominent work is the 15.000-page fantasy epic *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion,* often only referred to as *In the Realms of the Unreal* (c. 1910-1973). It contains several volumes and tells stories of war, rebellion, violence, and child abuse. Perry said that "in terms of his creative pathways, Darger is the artist he identifies the most with."[91] He also stated: "I found myself identifying with Henry Darger in a profound way. I felt a kinship in that I sensed we used similar channels to direct our internal emotional dramas into our art."[92] Both Perry and Darger, following a forced retreat into themselves, developed their own versions of elaborate fantasy realms.

In 2008 the American Folk Art Museum in New York put on a show with the title "DARGER-ism. Contemporary artists and Henry Darger." Grayson Perry was one of the shown artists. The exhibition was investigating Darger's ways of expression and how they might have influenced contemporary artists. Especially in the early 2000s, Darger gained a lot of recognition in the art world and was exhibited in multiple exhibitions across the US as well as internationally. Darger's oeuvre is a crossover of depictions of childhood innocence, perceived as precious and good, and the brutal spheres of violence and war that are created by men and forced upon the children. Darger's habit of using images he found in magazines and catalogues, tracing their outlines and combining those snippets to create his pieces, contributes to giving his work a storybook-like look, a trait that is also inherent in Perry's art. Both artists also have a habit of using speech-bubbles. Perry's fantasy worlds are appropriating a lot of the characteristics we find in "In the Realms of the Unreal," some are even directly quoting them.

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[88] The selection of artists was based on Dubuffet's definition of "art brut." However, Musgrave and Cardinal were more diligent to separate Outsider art from naïve as well as tribal and therapeutical art.

[89] Arts Council of Great Britain 1979 (press release).

[90] Jones 2007, p. 123.

[91] Jones 2007, p. 126.

[92] The American Folk Art Museum 2008 (exh.cat.), p. 35.

Revenge of the Alison Girls (2000) shows the rebellion of a group of girls, rising up against their violent parents (fig. 21). The title is a misquotation of the "Vivian girls" who rebel against child slavery. This theme of children, especially girls fighting for their freedom against adults, is a recurring one in Perry's and Darger's oeuvre. Both artists also depict some of the child protagonists as transgender.[93]

The pot *Us against Us* (2004) (fig. 22) depicts a great battle scene with British soldiers and little girls fighting. In contrast to Darger's battle scene of "In the Realms of the Unreal," the two groups aren't competing against each other but together against an invisible force. The confrontation seems to be going nowhere, a circumstance that is reinforced by the naturally round shape of the vessel. No matter how far the fighters advance, they will always arrive at the same starting point, or stab themselves in the back. Also, the backdrop of this vessel seems to be inspired by Darger, showing what could be a depiction of the American Midwest countryside, as it is depicted in some of his work (fig. 23). *Interior Conflict* (2004) shows a similar situation (fig. 24): There's a battle scene set in the backdrop of a Midwestern countryside. Soldiers and girls are running in the foreground, vast acres, and farmhouses in the background. The large unproportionate flowers that Perry added are a "direct copy from Darger's paintings."[94] (fig. 25) The way in which Perry dresses many of his characters – including Claire – in short babydoll dresses also closely resembles Darger's depictions.

Perry, like Darger, is creating mythologies. In doing so, he is often alluding to folk art, especially examples of naïve American art, like in *Recipe for Humanity* (2005) or *Mr and Mrs Perry* (2005) (fig. 26/27).

As someone who went to college and had an arts education, Perry's educational background doesn't apply to the parameters of what is traditionally described as an outsider artist.

All in all, Perry's work rather shows back-references to Art Brut or Outsider Art, especially Darger, than actually being in the position of being Outsider Art. Nonetheless, the term is used frequently in reference to Perry's art.

In an article published in 2016, when Perry was at the height of his success, the British news platform *The Independent* described Perry as "art's great outsider."[95] When you look through the articles written about Perry's work, this is a description that keeps popping up. But Perry himself is using those labels as well, which indicate that he wouldn't hold a prominent position

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[93] Perry's use of gender will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.2. Gender roles.

[94] Klein 2013, p. 200.

[95] Eshun, in: The Independent, 25th Feb 2016.

within Britain's cultural landscape. Given Perry's success in the art world, this may seem strange. Even now, more than a decade after winning the Turner Prize and being appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire, Perry continues to use terms like "outsider" and continually emphasizes his working-class background.[96]

By doing so, he is distancing himself from his professional surroundings. In an interview with British art historian Susan Jane Walsh, he said, that he is using those labels "as an identity weapon, because I know it gives me license, to keep me an outsider in the art world."[97] Especially in his documentaries, you can see how Perry is representing himself as "one of the people." In this way, Perry is solidarizing with the art outsider while actually being part of the art elite, a method appropriated by many populists.

6. Identities

6.1. Being British

Perry's art, especially the political pieces, is inherently British. As this is the case, much of it is made primarily for the British public. It responds to brands and icons of popular culture that are not necessarily exclusively but often particularly popular in Britain, similar to what he did in *The Walthamstow Tapestry*.

Many of his works allude to ideas of Britishness and British identity in general. *Head of a Fallen Giant* (2008) is the bronze casting of a giant skull (fig. 28) with a Union Jack on its front. The skull doesn't appear to be that of a modern-day human. With its relatively flat forehead, prominent cheekbones, and large sharp canine teeth, it rather seems to represent some sort of ape or, at the least, an earlier version of the *Homo sapiens*. Nails are driven through its skullcap, and when you look closely, there are signifiers of British identity: Queen Elizabeth I., the royal banner of arms, a cloverleaf, a British letterbox, British pound, and many more.[98] Many of the objects shown, like a London Bus with "BEST OF BRITISH" written on its side or a depiction of the London skyline in the form of a snow globe, rather allude to what one might buy in a tourist shop, insinuating that British monarchy today has turned into a tourist attraction itself;

[96] Interview with the BBC on The Pre-Therapy Years, Bath 24.01.2020.

[97] As quoted in: Walsh, Susan Jane: A Class Act: Class and Taste in the Work of Grayson Perry, The University of Hull 2016, p. 105.

[98] The piece was also made shortly after Damien Hirst created his work "For the Love of God."

the days of the empire are over, "the giant has fallen." Again, Perry is juxtaposing banality – in the form of tourist tat – with profundity.

Another example in which Perry is addressing the topic of British identity is *Comfort Blanket* (2014). (fig. 29) The three by eight meters tapestry is a portrayal of Britishness, British society, and British values. It is designed after the British ten-pound note. Like *The Walthamstow Tapestry*, it shows some of the brands that people live with. The term brand is not used as narrowly here as in *The Walthamstow Tapestry*. *Comfort Blanket* lists all those things that can be described as typically British. On the right side, next to a large portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. herself is a list of British icons, including Monty Python, Elizabeth I., Vivienne Westwood, Francis Bacon, David Bowie, Agatha Christie, or Elton John. In the upper right corner is a badge saying, “Fish and Chips.” Arranged around the Queen’s image, you can find terms like “The Blitz,” “Ben Nevis,” “The Sandwich,” “Stonehenge,” “Queuing” and “WM Hogarth.”

In the centre of the banknote is a depiction of a baby, titled “A British Citizen.” Similar to the depiction of “The Artist” in *The Rosetta Vase* (2011)[99], the body parts of this “British Citizen” are all labelled (fig. 30). On his forehead is the inscription “Typical!” which can be understood as an expression one might utter when unhappy with the way things are handled but also as a reminder that all those things Perry is naming are supposed to be "typically British." Other labels include “Polite Egalitarianism,” “Sorry,” “Please,” or “Carry On.” “The British Citizen” is surrounded by a sphere or labels that seem to represent what Britain as a state was built on. They include: “The Rule of Law,” “a free press,” “The Mother of Parliament,” “Tolerance,” “Liberty,” “NHS,” “Bobbies,” “Empiricism,” “The Welfare State” and many more. In the left upper corner is a Union Jack, that is again labelled with various identifiers of British society. The rest of the tapestry is also crammed with signifiers of British identity. Some stand out more than others, for example, “Fair Play,” “A nice cuppa tea,” “Moaning,” “The Archers,” “Rain,” “Bitter Irony,” “Shakespeare” or “Class Division.”

In the context of *Comfort Blanket*, those labels function as empty signifiers. Anyone in the UK can identify with them and fill them with their respective meaning. The fact that Perry is using writing, rather than visual metaphors just makes it easier to understand and approachable. Perry is constructing a mutual (British) identity in his works as a mechanism of unification.

Map of an Englishman (2004) (fig. 31) is another example of an attempt to do this while also using written words. It is one of several etchings that Perry did throughout his career. Visually

[99] *The Rosetta Vase* was created for the 2011/2012 exhibition *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* at the British Museum. The title refers to the Rosetta Stone, one of the core exhibits of the museum.

it is reminiscent of maps of early modern Britain (fig. 32) and even more full of details than *Comfort Blanket*. It shows a fictional island that is filled with little drawings of various buildings that are – similar to *The Walthamstow Tapestry* – all paired with writing. Some of the inscriptions are bigger than others, like "DREAMS," "MYTH," "FEAR," "SEX," or "CLICHÉ." Close to the centre is a pool of "CONSCIOUSNESS." Map of an Englishman is an inner landscape of the artist but is again very open to self-identification. It is not the only map that Perry created. Almost a decade later, he made *A Map of Days* (2013) (fig. 33), which again functions as a self-portrait of the artist's inner landscape in the shape of what, through its depiction of triangular bastions, appears to be an early modern European fortress (fig. 34). Others include *Large Expensive Abstract Painting* (2019) (fig. 93), *The Island of Bad Art* (2013)[100] (fig. 35) or *Red Carpet* (2017) (fig. 114).[101]

A more critical approach towards the question of British identity takes *Britain is Best* (2014), acknowledging the dangers of over-reliance on national identity as a source of pride (fig. 37). The dominant colours in this composition are variations of red and blue, as they are found in the Union Jack, depicted in the upper left corner. The motif is a strutting horse, wearing a crown and carrying five people, who portray Irish loyalists that Perry met during the making of *Who Are You?* (2014). One of them is depicted with a halo, while two others hold a military rifle and a staff. The arrangement is an analogy to loyalism and manifestations of patriotism and is set at the interface of nationalism, religion, and class inequality. Stylistically it also seems to be reminiscent of Russian icons of St. George or possibly St. Demetrius, specifically, through the horse's stilted artificiality (fig. 38).

6.2. Gender roles

As a figurative painter, Grayson Perry's imagery contains certain reappearing characters and motifs that, in parts, can be traced back to his beginnings as an artist. Some of it echoes in its emblematic simplicity the Pop Art movement, while others allude to Henry Darger's fantasy worlds.[102]

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[100] It shows a version of Jacopo de Barbari's famous map of Venice (fig. 36), which as the location of the oldest biennial in the world, is a centre for contemporary art.

[101] See chapter 7.5. Super Rich Interior Decorations and chapter 8.4. Perry's textile work.

Similar to Darger, a large portion of Perry's body of work is populated by his own civilization, which he developed throughout his life, originating from his childhood fantasies. Also in accordance with Darger, these characters are heavily gendered.

This civilization consists of a small group of personages. Each of them is highly typified and – as this is the case in mythology – a representative of something bigger, a vessel of meaning. We already discussed his emblematic depictions of war and conflict. One ever-present factor of distinction in his personage is gender. A lot of Perry's creative drive comes from him being a crossdresser, a fact that he explores in many of his artistic creations as well as his documentary *Why Men Wear Frocks* (2005). Therefore, gender identity and symbols of gender identity are frequently explored subjects in his work.

Generally, there are those characters representing maleness, those representing femaleness and those who cannot be affiliated with any of those two genders. Heteronormativity plays a significant role within Perry's world of images.

At a talk given as part of the *Inspiration Series*, hosted by the Sarabande Foundation said: "No one's as sexist as a transvestite. We like gender roles. I always describe myself as gender rigid. I signed up for a gender and I want them to be very clearly delineated so I know I'm dressing up in the wrong clothes."[103]

Early versions of Perry's gendered civilization were "the penii" or "penians." In 1982 he created the *Crown of the Penii* (fig. 39), which "combines ideas about maleness, religion, and monarchy."[104] Perry revisited them in *Village of the Penians* (2001). As the name implies, the "penians" are a group of society, worshipping phallic objects. Water fountains, hats, gravestones; all are phallically shaped (fig. 40).

In general, phallic images are present throughout Perry's entire body of work, sometimes focussing on it, as in *Portrait of Anthony d'Offay* (1998), sometimes as a subtle ornament, as in *Claire's Coming Out Dress* (2000) (fig. 41/42).

Apart from gendered symbols, Perry's civilization is equally defined through either the stereotypical feminine or masculine. One frequently reappearing character is the little girl, vested with babydoll-like dresses. Alluding to Darger's imagery, they sometimes show male genitalia. While a lot of Perry's characters are physically non-binary, they are portrayed in a way that

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[102] Perry's childhood as a trigger for his artistic work has been widely discussed. A detailed account of the events can be found in: Jones, Wendy: Grayson Perry. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl. London 2007.

[103] Inspiration Series lecture 2019.

[104] Klein 2013, p. 168.

affiliates them strongly with two genders rather than presenting them as belonging to none of them.

The two main characters in Perry's oeuvre are Claire, a depiction of the artist's crossdressing self, and Alan Measles, his childhood teddy bear (fig. 43). Within his artistic creations, both protagonists can be seen as gendered manifestations of Perry himself, functioning as a kind of vessel for (according to the artist) predominantly female or respectively male characteristics.[105]Although they have been part of Perry's body of work for years, they are not set characters. Their roles and ideology are fluid and shift according to the topicality of the artwork they are a part of. The only consistent thing about them is their affiliation with their gender.

Claire

Claire especially takes on a wide range of personalities while playing with gendered stereotypes.

In real life, Claire is Perry's crossdressing self; in his art, she is an embodiment of gender. Although Perry experimented with Claire's look over the years, her fashion can generally be divided into two styles: One can only be described as conservative and restraint, reminiscent of the 1970s (fig. 44). "In her earliest manifestations (and the connections to Perry's own mother can hardly be overlooked), Claire was the very embodiment of an Essex housewife. (…) In the 1980s and 1990s, Claire often appeared with coiffured blonde hair, prim suit, headscarf, and pearls – part Margaret Thatcher, part Camilla Parker Bowles."[106] Starting from the year 2000, there is a shift in Claire's fashion style. It was then, the same year, Perry had a coming-out ceremony at the Laurent Delaye Gallery, that Perry discovered that his transvestism "was not about wanting to be taken for a woman but about desiring and provoking certain responses from those around him."[107] From then on, Claire is frequently depicted, clothed in babydoll dresses, similar to those which used to be fashionable for little girls in the 1960s. This is also the style Perry generally uses when appearing as Claire. In her early manifestations, Perry either bought Claire's outfits from shops or designed them himself. In 2004 he started an annual competition for the students of Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London. The students

[105] It has to be noted that both characters also do exist outside of Perry's artistic work. The characters they play within Perry's oeuvre cannot be confused with the position they hold within reality – although they still are closely connected.

[106] Jones 2007, p.124.

[107] Jones 2007, p.124.

would each design a dress for Claire – encouraged to make them as "bizarre and exciting" as possible – and Perry would review them, award prizes, and eventually purchase his favourite. Claire's shoes are designed by Natacha Marro.

Occasionally Perry, as Claire, appears as part of his art in clothing inspired by a wide range of cultures, aligning with Perry's interest in historical fashion. *Claire as the Mother of all Battles* (1996), is a photograph taken of her in a folkish dress inspired by Balkan folk attire (fig. 45) and topically set within the Bosnian conflict. For the "The Charms of Lincolnshire" exhibition, Perry dressed up in a Victorian costume (fig. 46).

Alan Measles

Alan Measles is Perry's childhood teddy bear, given to him by his aunt (fig. 43). Alan Measles was at the centre of Perry's fantasy realms, but in contrast to Claire, Alan appears relatively late in Perry's works. In *Grayson Perry: The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* Perry writes: "In the course of visiting a psychotherapist I was to discover that Alan was of course more to me than a mere cuddly toy or even a fantasy leader."[108] Perry started therapy in 1998, and it is only afterwards that Alan is found increasingly in his work, prominently featured at the centre front of Claire's 2000 *Coming Out Dress.* (fig. 42) Alan takes on a wide variety of roles:

> "He was an unbeaten motor racing driver, a military pilot and leader of the resistance against the occupying Germans. He was my prime candidate for deification and I set about making works that celebrated his heroism and his holy qualities. The idea of Alan as a god, like so many ideas, began as a joke. But know I see him as a kind of test bed on which to run the idea of inventing a cult. (…) He was my surrogate father. Onto him I projected all the positive male characteristics that I found lacking in my real world."[109]

Alan has become a central figure in several of Perry's projects. In the 2007 exhibition "My Civilisation: Grayson Perry" at Kanazawa, Japan, Alan Measles took on the role of a god or a spiritual being. *Wise Alan* (2007) (fig. 47) was likely inspired by a 13th-century fritware vase from the Islamic Middle East, exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (fig. 48).[110]

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[108] The British Museum 2011 (exh. cat.), p. 19.

[109] Ibid, p. 19.

While the use of the Islamic model was purely secular, in Perry's version Alan becomes something of a prophet. This figure was accompanied by the *Shrine to Alan Measles* (2007) (fig. 49), which, like so many of Perry's works, was inspired by several cultures or cultural habits. Part of it came from the Japanese habit of building Shinto shrines to accommodate holy spirits. "The shrine also has a picture of the Twin Towers in New York and another of lady Di, as a nod to the numerous memorials that have been set up to her."[111] In the upper part of the shrine are smaller teddy figurines in gold. Their raw texture reminds one of Lucio Fontana's ceramic work.

Several other examples put Alan in a religious context. There is the tapestry *Vote Alan Measles for God* (2007) (fig. 112)[112]. There is *Grumpy Old God* (2010), a glazed ceramic vessel in the shape of a Greek amphora with black-figured painting on it, typically used between the 7th and 5th century before Christ. Alan is depicted as an angry warrior god who came down to this world in physical form just to be ignored by the people around him (fig. 50).

In 2010 Perry undertook a "pilgrimage" through Germany with his custom-built motorbike, the *Kenilworth AM1* (fig. 51). The bike functions as a mobile chapel to Alan Measles, as a sort of "Popemobile."[113] At the front, there is a silver mascot of Alan Measles on a horse; at the back, there is again a shrine for the teddy bear. The trip was called "The Ten Days of Alan," and they mainly toured the South of Germany, visiting places like Neuschwanstein, the Wieskirche near Augsburg, famous for its Rococo interior including a tromp-l' œil fresco, the Nürburgring and the *Steiff* teddy-bear factory near Stuttgart. For the trip, Perry also created the *Pope Alan Stamp* (fig. 52) as a sort of fake souvenir, alluding to pilgrimage stamps that you would put in your pilgrim's passport when doing the Road to Santiago. In the work, Alan is portrayed as an inter-faith god, sitting on a large throne, a lotus flower on his forehead, holding a rosary in one and Claire in his other hand.

Similar to the exhibition in Kanazawa in 2007, Alan was also the central figure of worship in the *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* exhibition at the British Museum in 2011/2012. In fact, many of the works originally created for the 2007 exhibition were shown there again. The show was curated by Perry himself from pieces of the museum's collection and some of his own works, some newly made for the exhibition, some dating back to Perry's starting-out in

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[110] While Perry only mentioned a general reference to a bottle in form of a man, that he saw at the Victoria and Albert museum, it is likely that he meant the one in fig. 48.

[111] Klein 2013, p. 184.

[112] See chapter 8.4. Perry's textile work.

[113] Klein 2013, p. 258.

the 80s. The overall concept was to create Perry's own mythology and to show appreciation for all those craftsmen in the collection whose names aren't known to us nowadays. Alan again held the position of a godlike entity. *Shrine to Alan Measles* (2007) was again exhibited as well as *Wise Alan* (2007). Also, a piece called *Alan Measles on Horseback* (2007), that showed the teddy bear as a military leader (fig. 53), visually inspired by pilgrim badges that Perry saw at the museum's collection (fig. 54). Alan is also taking on the role of the "tomb guardian," in a piece of the same name that was specially made for the exhibition (fig. 55).

One of the later works, including Alan, is *Sponsored by You* (2019), exhibited at the *Super Rich Interior Decorations* exhibition at Victoria Miro Mayfair in 2019 (fig. 56). The piece is a woodblock print showing Alan next to a young woman in a driving sportscar, a stereotypical image of male status.

World Leaders Attend the Marriage of Claire Perry and Alan Measles (2009) shows the unification of both characters as they are getting married (fig. 57). The flying figures in the background look suspisciouly like either depictions of a Nike or Perry's version of a crossdressing Eros (fig. 58).

Over the years, the repetitive use of both Alan and Claire transformed them into an allegory-like entity, not unlike a Nike or depiction of Muses.

Especially Alan has become something of a commercialised icon, a piece of merchandise. When you go to the museum shop after visiting a Grayson Perry exhibition, you are likely to find Alan Measles merchandise in the form of balloons, badges, fridge magnets, and many more. Additional to this, he represents an obsolete type of man, a signifier of male status, a symbol for authority, the ultimate populist leader.

Gender-duality and the juxtaposition of male and female qualities through his crossdressing is an essential part of Perry's life. This is mirrored in his art. His characters are often emphatically affiliated with one gender or specifically highlighted to be binary. Perry doesn't shy away from cliché and overstatement. None of those characters seem to be complicated or three-dimensional. Like Perry's imagery of war and violence, they become emblems of a simplified representation.

6.3. Camp

When speaking about gender identity and transvestism within the arts, the question of a queer aesthetic comes to mind. When trying to position Perry within a queer aesthetic, one must talk about *Camp*, as it is particularly closely connected with transvestism.

Susan Sontag's essay *Notes on Camp* is probably the most cited piece of writing about *Camp* aesthetics to this day. An early draft of it, published in 1958, was actually titled "Notes on Homosexuality."[114] Sontag describes Camp as "a sensibility (as distinct from an idea)" as which it is hard to pin down. Sontag tries nonetheless to do so within 58 theses. "To start very generally: Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization."[115]

While the etymological origin of the word is disputed, the most common theory is that it derives from the French "se camper," as in "to portray" or "to flaunt." Its emergence originated in the stylistic expression of queer subcultures and started as early as the 18th century. Philip Core, while not stipulating homosexuality as a precondition writes that the "phrase (camp) encompasses not only specific homosexuals who behaved exaggeratedly because of social displacement but also those figures whose solecisms were not necessarily sexual but whose desire to conceal something and to reveal it at the same time made their behaviour bizarre to our way of thinking."[116]

Sontag also writes that "allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms."[117] Now, while homosexuality or queerness isn't a necessary requirement for Camp, it is inherent in its formation process and still plays a big part in today's Camp aesthetic. In the depiction of Claire – and her appearance in real life – and other characters that Perry uses frequently, this "exaggeration of sexual characteristics" as well as the "personality mannerisms" are features that can be found consistently. Those protagonists who are depicted with a strong affiliation to one gender are depicted as such in such an exaggerated manner that the mode of depiction itself seems to question its own form of representation. Characters with strong female

[114] Moser 2019, p. 186.
[115] Sontag 2018, p. 4.
[116] Core 1984, p. 9.
[117] Sontag 2018, p. 9.

or male features become caricatures of themselves. Perry's protagonists, with their exaggerated gender identities, become precisely that.
Another aspect of Camp is its humoristic approach:

> "Humour constitutes the strategy of Camp: a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity. This humour takes several forms. Chief of this is bitter-wit, which expresses an underlying hostility and fear. Society says to gays (and to all stigmatized groups) that we are members of the wider community; we are subjects to the same laws as "normals"; we must pay our taxes, and so on; we are, in short, "just like everybody else." On the other hand, we are not received into society on equal terms; indeed, we are told that we are unacceptably "different" in ways that are absolutely fundamental to our sense of self and social identity. In other words, the message conveyed to us by society is highly contradictory: we are just like everyone else, and yet…we are not. It is this basic contradiction, this joke, that has traditionally been our destiny."[118]

The general agreement is that the camp aesthetic originated from marginalized subcultures trying to articulate themselves within hostile environments, through a humourized and exaggerated mode of expression. Perry grew up in an environment that was hostile to him being a transvestite, and he is compensating by overstating and distorting reality into mannerisms and exaggerations.
For this, Susan Sontag is using the term "frivolous": "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely: Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious."[119] In a lot of Perry's work, like *Aspects of Myself* (2001) (fig. 59) or his 1992 comic book *Cycle of Violence* (fig. 60), he explores the frivolous seriousness or seriousness frivolousness. *Cycle of Violence* tells a semi-autobiographical tale of violence, neglect, and perversion. It is kept in black and white throughout, which, combined with its sexual imagery and visual language, reminds one of British

[118] Bergman 1993, p. 27.
[119] Sontag 2018, p. 26.

illustrators of the Art Deco, such as John Austen or aestheticist Aubrey Beardsley (fig. 61).

Perry is a great admirer of Beardsley, who, to this day, is still seen as the epitome of camp art. In 1994 Perry created the pot *My Heroes* on which Beardsley was prominently featured (fig. 62).

One difference between Perry's oeuvre and the camp phenomenon is that Camp is supposed to be inherently unpolitical, while a lot of Perry's work is based on current politics and issues in society. However, through exaggeration, mockery, and at the same time simplification, Perry is breaking complicated topics down to their very core.

7. Social storytelling

7.1. Perry as a storyteller

In the recently published catalogue for the "The Pre-Therapy Years" exhibition at The Holbourne Museum in Bath Catrin Jones writes about his early work: "The iconography is frequently shocking – often deliberately so – yet has an intricate connection to histories: from Perry's own personal story, his transvestism and his exploration of identity, to the history of the medium he has explored most frequently, ceramics, and those of wider civilization and the artist's role in forming culture."[120]

The telling of stories is a central objective that runs through his entire body of work. This is facilitated by the frequent use of written words, a habit that can also be traced back to Perry's beginnings as an artist. While Perry uses speech bubbles in some of his works, similar to comics, their use in other cases is somewhat reminiscent of illustrative prints made popular in early modern England by artists like William Hogarth.[121] Almost every one of Perry's pots has at least some bit of writing on it. Some sketch out a complete story, while others only give us glimpses into short anecdotes. Some might be settled in reality, while others probably are entirely fictitious or part of Perry's fantasy world that was discussed previously. In his written stories, he gives us little flashes of moments that might or might not have happened. Of some, we know that they are – although often fantastical in their execution – inspired by Perry's own

[120] The Holburne Museum 2020 (exh. cat.), p. 37.

[121] Hogarth is usually described as the central figure in the emergence of the illustrative print, see in: Sillars, Stuart: Visualisation in popular fiction, 1860-1960. Graphic narratives, fictional images. London/New York 1995.

life story or part of the narratives, he spun as a child. What all these stories have in common is that they usually respond to some form of social injustice and often focus on members of society that generally aren't represented within the gallery space.

7.2. Perry in the tradition of social commentators

Through his art, Perry has talked about a wide variety of social issues. The telling of stories is thereby a central method that runs through Perry's entire body of work.

Perry's depictions of society – especially in his earlier years – often have a tendency towards the crude and vulgar, evoking the course humour of early British caricaturists. Jacky Klein stated that "in its bawdy humour, his art recalls the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century caricaturists William Hogarth, James Gillray and George Cruikshank."[122] Gillray was best known for his political cartoon, satirizing politics; as was Cruikshank, additionally to his work as an illustrator.

Other than these, Perry's works have been compared to works of German expressionists like Otto Dix or George Grosz. Dix and Grosz are primarily known for their depictions of German society between World War I and World War II. Both were representatives of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, an art form that opposed its contemporaries through being figurative, objective, and realistic.

Perry's approach to storytelling is, again, inherently British. In the field of British artists, who are also social commentators, no one seems to have influenced Perry as strongly as William Hogarth. His observations of Great Britain in the 18th century continue to provide timeless and poignant insights into British society and the class system today. English art critic Lawrence Alloway named Hogarth as one of the few artists who connected popular art with fine art: "Hogarth worked for a socially differentiated public, with painting intended for an affluent and sophisticated audience and prints aimed at a mass audience."[123] Inherent in his work is an appreciation for the insignificant. While pop artists chose to represent those "banalities" through simplified forms of expression, Hogarth clings to a narrative approach. Perry combines both of those techniques.

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[122] Klein 2013, p. 10.

[123] Alloway 1997, p. 167.

He also references Hogarth, whom he called "one of his favourite artists"[124] several times in his artworks. He writes: "From early on, my work has been referencing Hogarth. There's something about the warm, working-class element of his work that appeals to me; there is a 'man-of-the-people' aspect and a Britishness to him. I sympathize with the feeling of much of his work."[125]
In 2004 he created a pot called *An Oik's Progress* (fig. 63), which is one out of two works that refers to Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* by Hogarth (fig. 65-72) – the other one being *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012) will be discussed in the next chapter.
According to Klein's publication, the painting on *An Oik's Progress* was inspired by Toile-de-Jouy patterns.[126] Toile-de-Jouy is a type of printed cotton that became very popular in France during the 18th century (fig. 64). They first emerged in the mid-1600s after the British Empire, through the East India Company, began to expand its trading relations – and thus its colonial power and (cultural) exploitation. Through this process, both Indian printed cotton and Chinese imagery were imported into Europe, which eventually led to the Toile-de Jouy design patterns.[127] The patterns are traditionally kept in one colour, usually red, green, or blue. Perry, in his adaptation, is combining two of these but sticks to the original comparatively pale shades and the layered depictions of multiple figurative and delicately designed scenes.
In this example, it becomes evident how Perry is commenting on the cultural theft and appropriation of the British Empire and, on a small scale, repeating it.

7.3. The Vanity of Small Differences

While *An Oik's Progress* is a relatively concise piece of work, at least in terms of format, in 2012, Perry had a solo exhibition at Victoria Miro, titled *The Vanity of Small Differences*, showcasing a series of large-scale tapestries of two by four meters each, again inspired by Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*.
A Rake' Progress was originally created between 1732 and 1735.[128] It is a series of eight scenes, telling the story of Tom Rakewell, a social climber in 18th century Britain. Through the

[124] Perry, Grayson: All In The Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry. Working Class Taste (1). Channel 4, 5th June 2012.
[125] Klein 2013, p. 77.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Riffel, Melanie; Rouard, Sophie: Toile-de-Jouy. Printed textiles in the classic French style, London 2003.

experiences of his protagonist, Hogarth tells a tale of upward social mobility and the seemingly unavoidable subsequent downfall.[129] *The Vanity of Small Differences* is concerning itself with issues surrounding class and upward social mobility while alluding to multiple art historical tropes and motifs (fig. 73-78). In the work, Perry is also referencing various famous pieces of art history, mainly Renaissance paintings using "the audience's familiarity with the Christian narratives depicted to lend weight to (his) own modern moral subjects."[130] Perry is again using the medium of monumental tapestries, something usually reserved for the depiction of history-changing events to portray ostensible banal scenes of contemporary life. The format loads the composition with meaning traditionally reserved for religious or mythical representations. In this particular work, a lot of Perry's visual language builds upon pre-existing iconographies, most commonly those of Christian traditions.

The flirtation with Christian iconography is something that has also been detected in Hogarth's series. In his 2010 book Hogarth's Hidden Parts, the author Bernd W. Krysmanski writes: "In his Rake's Progress series […] Hogarth denigrated central acts in the Christian iconography in that he antithetically (and blasphemously) confronted significant themes in the Passion with what were thoroughly profane and indecent themes."[131] Krysmanski assigns one particular iconographic representation to each of Hogarth's panels:

> "The first scene (showing the Rake coming into the inheritance of his father, a notorious miser) seems to imitate a Raising of the Cross, the second scene (where the wasteful Rake keeps his own private "retinue") parodies a Flagellation of Christ, followed in the third plate (the Orgy at the Rose Tavern) by the preparation for a washing of the Feet at a rather "obscene" Last Supper. Next, in plate 4 (the Rake's arrest for a debt), comes a persiflage of Christ's astonishment in Hans Holbein's *Noli me tangere* (Hampton Court) and of the Soldiers drawing Lots for Jesus' Cloak. In the interim, in plate 5 (the Rake's marriage to an ugly but rich old spinster) we

[128] There exist several print versions of the series, but the original paintings are in the Sir John Soane's Museum in London, where they have been since 1802. They usually aren't on display but Perry was allowed a visit during the making of the documentary.

[129] Perry also isn't the first one to do his own version of Hogarth's series. In 2014 *The Vanity of Small Differences* was exhibited alongside *A Rake's Progress* at the Foundling Museum, accompanied by other interpretations of Hogarth's series from artists David Hockney, Yinka Shonibare and Jessie Brennan.

[130] Victoria Miro Gallery 2013 (exh. cat.), p. 13.

[131] Krysmanski 2010, p. 253.

> encounter a parody of a Florentine Marriage of the Virgin, that is, a scene which would normally *precede* the Nativity. This is followed in scene 6 (the gambling den) by a mocking of Raphael's famous *Transfiguration*, the figure of Christ here literally gone up in smoke, and the kneeling Rake at the same time, and ironically, corresponding to Raphael's lunatic child and a person on a South Sea playing card who similarly falls to his knees for having lost his money during the South Sea Bubble. The seventh Rake scene (in the Fleet Prison) alludes to the Response of Christ or Christ's Imprisonment, with some details additionally borrowed from a temptation of St Anthony or a Harrowing of Hell. The pictorial drama then closes with the Lamentation scene in Bedlam."[132]

Perry is doing something similar in his version through which the actual depicted scenes, though mostly banal and ordinary, become elevated from their mundanity. The six tapestries that all show the protagonist at different stages of his life become something almost religious themselves, grounded within their own belief systems of upward social mobility, like a modern-day martyrdom – and a modern version of Hogarth's series. While Krysmanski calls Hogarth's referencing of Christian iconography "blasphemous," in the case of Perry, this can hardly be applied anymore. It is to be assumed that Hogarth wanted to provoke with his work, while Perry's work rather seems like a homage to beloved idols.

Apart from Hogarth and Christian iconography, Perry is also taking inspiration from social theory. The title *The Vanity of Small Differences* is also a reference to Freud's notion of 'the narcissism of small differences, mentioned in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1929-30). It is based on the idea that "we often most passionately defend our uniqueness when differentiating ourselves from those who are very nearly the same as us"[133] or "people that a lot of people hated the most were the ones that were almost the same as them."[134] Before discussing this piece in detail, especially, it has to be mentioned again that Perry is not shy of using a fair share of superstition in portraying his characters.

In preparation, Perry did extensive research on societal structures and boundaries in modern-day Britain. He went to several different locations, meeting with people, affiliated to different

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[132] Ibid, p. 253/254.

[133] Victoria Miro Gallery 2013 (exh. cat.), p. 12.

[134] Reith Lecture 2013a.

parts of the modern class system. His experiences can be viewed in the three-part documentary series *All in the Best Possible Taste* with Grayson Perry (2012), which were produced for Channel 4 and eventually won a BAFTA award. The locations that were chosen "because they are already strongly identified with the social classes"[135] were Sunderland, Royal Tunbridge Wells, and area and the Cotswolds. Sunderland is a former shipbuilding and coal-mining centre in the North-East of England. Although the shipyards closed long before the documentary was shot, a large portion of the community still consists of proud working-class people. In the second part of the series Perry went to King's Hill and Royal Tunbridge Wells. Tunbridge Wells is a health resort in the South-East and the "quintessential middle-class place." There he met anthropologist Kate Fox, who said that the actual characteristic of "social affiliation is not judged by your income or your occupation but "on speech, manner, and taste."[136] For the third and last part of the documentary, Perry went to the Cotswolds, a rural area in the South-West of the country and home to a lot of Britain's old and new upper classes.

He aimed to learn about "each clan's taste," to look for "social rituals" that were used do define oneself within one's social surroundings. During his stays, Perry took photographs that later helped him with the sketches for his final work.

His explorations resulted in a series of six tapestries. As in many of his earlier textile works, Perry created the design digitally, which was then modified and optimized by *Factum Arte* and ultimately woven at *Flanders Tapestries*.[137]

Like the already discussed *The Walthamstow Tapestry*, *The Vanity of Small Differences* is reminiscent of medieval morality tales. Similar to Hogarth, Perry's series tells the story of an initially young protagonist who rises through the social classes just to die a tragic death eventually. Perry's central character's name is Tim Rakewell. He starts his life as the son of a single working-class mom. Growing up in a former shipbuilding town, he manages to go to College, where he meets his future wife, who is a member of the middle class. Through a very successful career, he accumulates enough money to become a part of the wealthy elite but, in the end, dies in a car accident –"from humble birth to famous death."[138] Although Tim is the main protagonist, each tapestry is told from the point of view of one of his supporting characters, like the mother, the girlfriend, and others.

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[135] Victoria Miro Gallery 2013 (exh. cat.), p. 13.

[136] Perry 2012b (Channel 4).

[137] For a more detailed description of the process, see chapter 8.4. Perry's textile work.

[138] Perry, Grayson: The Vanity of Small Differences - Grayson Perry. London 2013, p. 13.

Pierre Bourdieu and the Judgement of Taste

We already mentioned how real experiences and art historical examples were an inspiration in the making of the work. But there also is one particular social theory – apart from Freud's "narcissism of small differences" – that can be applied to Perry's underlying interest in doing this work. This is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "social distinction of the judgement of taste."[139]
In his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, first published in France in 1979, he writes:

> "There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic. Sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate."[140]

Perry's tapestry work is full of such "cultural goods."
Bourdieu bases his theory on the assumption that our taste is not something naturally given to us but shaped through our upbringing and social surroundings, through what is considered "tasteful" in our social circles. Within this theory, "cultural capital" that is largely dependent on our upbringing is pivotal when speaking about the formation of taste. Bourdieu defines cultural capital in distinction to "economic" as well as "social capital." Therein, the economic capital of a person contains all their material resources meaning possessions, assets, and general income. Social capital is describing all the resources which are available to a member of society on the basis of their social contacts and relationships. Cultural capital, conversely, is strongly connected to education, meaning the knowledge and skills acquired during socialisation as well as the manners and behaviour typical of the respective milieu of origin. Cultural capital is something we acquire from day one, that we adopt from our parents and later pass on to future generations. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is the main influencing factor when it comes to the formation of our judgement of taste, resulting in the thesis that taste corresponding to and with cultural capital is also passed on through

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[139] Bourdieu, Pierre: Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste, London 1984.
[140] Bourdieu 1984, p. 6.

generations, which is something that Bourdieu calls the "habitus."[141] Within Bourdieu's cultural theory, cultural capital and, with it, taste become the central means of distinction between the different social classes.

As cultural capital influences us from the start, *The Vanity of Small Differences* tells the story of the protagonist's life from the beginning. It tells the tale of upward social mobility and "how our feelings and prejudices about taste reflect our own class journey in life."[142] It starts with him being a baby and being depicted within social surroundings for which Perry's experiences at Sunderland were the primary source of inspiration.

Perry's artistic implementation of the topic is highly detail-oriented; the composition is incredibly dense. Although Perry is very much telling a story, the individual tapestries of the series can rather be read as collages of moments and impressions of specific points in the protagonist's life.

The Adoration of the Cage Fighters

Especially the first tapestry, titled *The Adoration of the Cage Fighter*s (fig. 73), has something of a patchwork carpet of memories from his early childhood. The predominant figure is Tim's mother, from whose perspective this first piece is told. This not only comes apparent through her prominent positioning but also through an inserted line of inner monologue, written from her point of view:

> "I could have gone to Uni… but…I did the best I could… considering…his father upped and left…
>
> He was always a clever little boy, he always knew how to wind me up! My mother liked a drink, my father liked one, too. Ex-miner a real man. Open with his love and his anger. My nan though is the salt and the earth, the boy loves her.
>
> She spent her whole life looking after others.
>
> There are no jobs round here anymore, just the guys and the football. My friends they keep me sane, take me out…listen…a night out at the weekend in town is a precious ritual…

[141] Ibid, p. 169-225.

[142] Perry 2012a (Channel 4).

> A normal family, a divorce or two, mental illness, addiction, domestic violence…the usual thing…"

The tapestry is containing her, Tim, her grandmother, four of her friends, and two cage fighters.[143] The grandmother is portrayed in a medallion-like picture field in the centre of the composition, reminding one of a thought-bubble in comics, while her friends are ready to take her out for a night in the town. Tim's mother is holding him in one arm while looking at her phone. Tim, in turn, is holding a Mickey Mouse cuddly toy. When looking closely at his baby rompers, you can see that it is full of the male gender symbols. Compared to the other tapestries, the question of gender differences is much more dominant in this first piece. The men and women are shown very much in stereotypical gender roles: The men are fighters, the women are at home dressing up. When you look closely, you can even see that the two depicted genders are separated through the lettering appearing in two different spheres. Only Tim as a baby is an exception to this, possibly referring to the fact that as a baby, he is not yet forced to identify with certain gender roles. However, the romper is an early indicator of the position he is supposed to take up and the fact that he is already conditioned to do so. After all, the way in which we perceive judgements of taste to be "typically male" or "typically female" is something we also acquire from day one.

Another part of the set of childhood memories are the two cage fighters in the centre that this part of the tapestry cycle is named after. They are kneeling and holding up a miner's lamp and a football shirt in a sacrificial-like manner as kind of icons of tribal identity, the tribe being Sunderland's working-class. In this constellation, Tim and his mother are assuming the iconographical roles of Jesus and Mary.

Perry, while in Sunderland, did meet with cage fighters, former miners, and football fans. The football shirt is a Sunderland A.F.C. shirt, which can be seen in the documentary, as can the tattoos on one of the fighter's backs. The way of depiction is – as the title already suggested – a reference to the biblical iconography of "the nativity of Jesus," putting Tim and his mother in the position of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Perry names Andrea Mantegna's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (c. 1450) (fig. 79) as an inspiration for the composition of the scene.[144] While "The Adoration of the Kings" is probably a more prominent element of Christian iconography that happens to have a very similar arrangement of figures, the use of the shepherds as a

[143] Cage fighting is a form of mixed martial arts in which the two opponents fight each other in what is usually some form of cage or cage-like enclosure.

[144] Victoria Miro Gallery 2013 (exh. cat.), p. 66.

reference opposed to the kings is more fitting with the working-class background that *The Adoration of The Cage Fighters* finds itself in. Similar to Perry's tapestry, Mantegna's tapestry shows the shepherds as two gaunt and rather rough-looking figures, about to pay their respects to the newly born child.

The offerings of the cage fighters already tell a story of the strong affiliation to the working class, but looking more closely, the whole scenery is surrounded by items of class identification. One of the most obvious is the picture of the shipyards on the far wall of the room. This first part of the series is strongly inspired by the people the artist met at Sunderland and by the things he experienced there. The apartment is fitted in a way that Perry calls "granny's front room taste," memorabilia, and other "knick-knacks" similar to what he found himself in, growing up in the working class.[145] Again brands can be found like the Red Bull can or the pack of Marlboro cigarettes.

Tim is portrayed twice in this first tapestry. He can be found a second time in the background on the right of the work, looking anxiously at the scenery before him.

The Agony in the Car Park

The second part *The Agony in the Car Park* (fig. 74) still takes part in the working-class surroundings of Sunderland. On the narrative level, Tim has grown to be a teenager, depicted in his school uniform, with an interest in computers – as the brochure in his Adidas shoulder bag tells. This scene is narrated from his stepfather's point of view. He is a nightclub singer,[146] adored by Tim's mother, who is depicted kneeling to his feet on the left. The stepfather is standing in front of a crane with the letters N.E.S.L. above it, which is short for North East Shipbuilders Ltd., another reference to Sunderland's former primary employment sector. Here the iconographical predecessor was "The Crucification of Christ." The crane is the crucifix; therefore, the stepfather is occupying the space of Jesus Christ, adored by Tim's mother on the left, whose position and posture would align her with the Virgin Mary again. He is throwing his head back in ecstasy, while Tim is covering his ears in agony.

The line of inner monologue in this one says:

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[145] Perry 2012a (Channel 4).

[146] Inspired by the singer Perry met at Sunderland's social cub during the making of the first part of the series "All in the Best Possible Taste."

> “I started as a lad in the shipyards. I followed in my father's footsteps. Now dad has his pigeons and he loves the boy. Shipbuilding bound the town together like a religion. When Thatcher closed the yards down it ripped the heart out of the community. I could have been in a rock band.
> I met the boy's mother at the club. I sing on a Saturday night between the bingo and the meat raffle.
> Now I work in a call centre, the boss says I am management material. The money's good, I could buy my council house, sell it and get out. I voted Tory last time.”

As in *The Adoration of the Cage Fighters,* Tim is depicted a second time in this one. He is seen to the left of the central scene playing with an airplane model and – as the description tells us – his step-father’s father.
The backdrops surrounding those main scenes are taken from settings in Sunderland. There is a gathering of cars in the courtyard of "Heppies," the Hepworth and Grandage Social Club on the right, similar to the one Perry went to during the making of the series. Allotment gardens are on the left and a wall mural, spelling FUTUREHEADS in giant red letters. *The Futureheads* are a punk band from Sunderland. However, in the tapestry, the last three letters vanish behind the hill, the main scenery is taking place on, only reading FUTUREHE, possibly in reference to the stepfather's dream of becoming a rock star.

Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close

The third act, *Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close* (fig. 75), finally shows Tim's ascent into the middle class, together with his new girlfriend. On the left are his mother and stepfather again, who did well for themselves, being equipped with status symbols of the newly found wealth – a Range Rover, a golf outfit. Nonetheless, Tim and his girlfriend flee this scene and enter the middle-class living room of her parents' house.
The girlfriend's inner monologue says:

> “I met Tim at College, he was Such a Geek. He took me back to meet his mother and stepfather. Their house was so clean and Tidy, not a speck for dust… or a book, apart from her god, Jamie. She Says I have turned Tim into a Snob. His parents don't appreciate how bright he is. My father laughed at

Tim's accent but welcomed him into the sunlit uplands of the middle classes.
I hope Tim loses his obsession with money."

Her parent's living room is furnished with what Perry describes as typical for the wealthy middle class. There is a bookshelf on the rare wall, some of the book titles you can read: One says "A.R.T. – A Force For Good" while another one reads "LATIN." Perry also included one with "Cultural Capital" written on its spine, as a direct reference to Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of social distinction.
There is art around the room: One large abstract painting, that Perry says is a "Ben Nicholson cafetière picture"[147] and vaguely Chinese looking pottery in the background. On the dinner table, there is another book, Dennis Potter's *Stand Up, Nigel Barton!*, which also tells the story of a young man and his upward social mobility.
The wall tapestry we see shows a design by William Morris, namely the *Willow Boughs* ornament that he designed in 1887.[148] Tim is now holding an Apple iPhone.
The iconographical model was "The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden." Tim's girlfriend is also holding a copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Her posture alludes to Michelangelo's version of "The Expulsion" in the Sistine Chapel (fig. 80).

The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal

The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal (fig. 76) shows the protagonist as a middle-class family man. He is a father of two, his house seems modern, and the surroundings suggest that its owners are privileged enough to enjoy a certain amount of "cultural capital." The bookshelf got bigger, and the cultural references to middle-class habits denser. There are three *Penguin Books* mugs in the scene that all reference books whose titles suggest a connection to issues surrounding class, like the one saying "Class Traitor."
On the table in the foreground, under a bunch of seemingly organic vegetables,[149] there is a newspaper edition of *The Guardian*, featuring a story about Tim Rakewell himself, titled "A Geek's Progress." The key element of the scene is to the right of a *Cath Kidston* handbag.[150] It is a tablet with an open tab of a *Financial Times* article, telling you that Rakewell sold his

[147] Klein 2013, p. 278.
[148] MacCarthy 2014, p.6.
[149] Tunbridge Wells, where the second part of the documentary was shot is famous for its farmer's markets.
[150] The Cath Kidston brand appears repeatedly in the documentary.

business to a company called Virgin for 270 million pounds. While the tablet is there to tell us, the audience about the events, Tim is informed by his business partner on the centre of the left side of the tapestry. Looking at her, it becomes even more apparent what iconographical typus is the archetype for the fourth episode of the cycle: "The Annunciation of the Virgin Mary." The business partner is depicted as an angel. Again, Perry's version is less reminiscent of one specific example in art history, but rather alluding to the iconographical typus in general.[151] This central element of the scene is reflected in a round mirror in the centre of the tapestry, in reference to Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1435) (fig. 81). Although not immediately recognizable, but as a note in Perry's sketchbooks tells us, the "abandoned shoes" in the lower right corner were originally also intended to be a reference to the same work.[152] Another quote of an artwork is the jug of lilies on the left, being a direct copy of the pitcher you find in Robert Campin's *Annunciation Triptych* (c. 1425). (fig. 82)

The inner monologue – from the perspective of the business partner – says:

> "I have worked with Tim for a decade, a genius, yet so down to earth. Tim's incredibly driven, he never feels successful. He's calmer since his mother died. He's had a lot of therapy. He wants to be good."

The scene shows Tim on the threshold of social advancement to the upper classes. On the rare right wall hang pictures of Steve Jobs and Bill Gates to underline that Tim is now part of the tech-elite.

The room is again full of additional cultural signifiers, starting with the pillow on the couch, saying, "Bourgeois and Proud," the organic vegetables or the recycling bins under the kitchen sideboard. It is worth looking at the art in this scene. For instance, the pot on the bookshelf is clearly supposed to be a Grayson Perry original, showing a depiction of Alan Measles as well as his potter's stamp.

The other piece is the rug the daughter is playing on, to the far left, which is alluding to Afghan war rugs.[153]

The key chain on the car key is a Mexican folk style skull, possibly forebearer of how Tim is going to die in the end.

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[151] As one can see, when looking at earlier sketches for the tapestry, its design has changed considerably, see: Victoria Miro Gallery 2013 (exh. cat.), p. 62.

[152] Perry 2016, p. 112.

[153] Perry's references to Afghan war rugs will be discussed in chapter 8.4. Perry's textile work.

The Upper Class at Bay (or An Endangered Species Brought Down)

The next scene depicts Tim and his wife a couple of years later. They have since moved at now live in a large country house and are portrayed walking their dog through a large field adjacent to their home. The scenery is rural, but nearby mansions suggest that it is an affluent area.

The scene is called *The Upper Class at Bay or An Endangered Species Brought Down (fig. 77)*. It is less detail-oriented than the other chapters of Tim's life. The tapestry – specifically with the addition of the nameplate at centre front – is designed in a way that reminds of museum showcases, suggesting that the depicted "species" – meaning the upper class – is an obsolete and "endangered" group on the brink of extinction and better suited for the museum than the real world. Also, *The Upper Class at Bay* is the only part of the series that is not including a written monologue.

In the foreground, there is a depiction of an anthropomorphic stag. Not only is said stag portrayed with a human head, but his fur also seems to be made of tweed that was patched several times. The animal is being hunted and brought down by five dogs, four of which have something written on their bodies. The writings say "Tax," "Social Change," "Upkeep," and "Fuel Bills." Behind the stag, there is a gathering of protesters. They set up camp in front of Tim's mansion and hold up signs saying, "Rich is Bad," "Tax is Good," "Pay up Tim," and "No War But Class War." The protester holding up the last one is positioned in such a way that he is standing between the antlers of the stag and in front of the setting sun. Perry writes that this "refers to paintings of the vision of Saint Hubert, who converted from the leisured life of a nobleman on seeing a vision of a crucifix above the head of a stag."[154] Perry also compares his depiction of Mr. and Mrs. Rakewell in this tapestry to Thomas Gainsborough's "Mr. and Mrs. Andrews" (c.1750). The stag also reminds one strongly of Frida Kahlo's *The Wounded Deer* (1946), although this reference seems somewhat out of place within the context of this series and also Perry's oeuvre in general.

#Lamentation

The last scene, *#Lamentation* shows Tim minutes after a fatal car crash (fig. 78). His limp body is held by the paramedic and a passer-by who is cradling his head. The scene is set in an urban area, surrounded by high-rise buildings, a gas station, a McDonald's, a Kebab House, and other stores. A large sign on the left suggests that there is a mall somewhere close to the happenings.

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[154] Victoria Miro Gallery 2013 (exh. cat.),, p. 74.

The red Ferrari that Tim was driving is a total loss, crashed against a street post with a one-way traffic sign. A blonde woman in a blood-stained dress is standing between Tim and the crashed car. A magazine in the bottom left corner tells us that she is Tim's new wife. There are policemen and firefighters around, documenting the crash and waiting to clear the scene. In the background, there are already onlookers taking pictures, and on the right, the ambulance car is being prepared for the transfer of the body. The happenings are told from the passer-by's perspective:

> "We were walking home from a night out, these two cars, racing each other, speed past. Middle aged men showing off, the red one lost control. The driver wasn't wearing a seatbelt. He didn't stand a chance. The female passenger was ok but catatonic with shock.
> I'm a nurse. I tried to save the man but he died in my arms. It was only afterwards I found out that he was that famous computer guy, Rakewell. All he said to me was 'Mother.' All that money and he dies in the gutter."

In the catalogue accompanying the first-time exhibition of the cycle, you can read that the model painting was Rogier van der Weyden's *Lamentation* (c. 1460). This would also align with Krysmanski's interpretation of the last scene in Hogarth's story being a version of a Lamentation scene.
However, it has to be repeated that Perry's works rarely reference only one artwork but rather the general type of depiction, alluding to traditional Christian iconography.
Looking at Perry's approach towards "the individual" and "the mass," there can be found parallels to the original pop art movement, discussed earlier. Perry's protagonists are rarely depicted as individuals but as types. Types of certain tribes influenced and directed by their cultural surroundings – the businessman, the mother, the angry white man. While - in this case - they are inspired by real people, by associating them with objects of consumer behaviour bound to certain norms, for the viewer they become "a certain kind of people" and lose their individuality. Even those characters who are trying to become separate from the mass, fall precisely because of this strive, back into it.
Through this simplification and typification of his protagonists, they gain more force than a more particular portrayal would have granted them. Those depicted – the people that Perry met during his research – still recognize themselves, but at the same time, everybody else can find themselves within the artwork. Especially in combination with the use of Christian iconography, they reach a certain universality that is relatable.

The Vanity of Small Differences is an example of how Perry is connecting storytelling, class issues, and social critique while using a mix of traditional methods, long-established iconographies, and modern technology.

7.4. The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!

In 2017 Perry had a solo show at the Serpentine Gallery in London, which he called "The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!" Perry said about the title: "When I came up with [it]I liked it because it chimed with one of my ongoing ambitions: to widen the audience for art without dumbing it down."[155]
The gallery's description of the show includes a quote by Perry himself:

> "I am in the communication business and I want to communicate to as wide an audience as possible. Nothing pleases me more than meeting someone at one of my exhibitions from what museum people call 'a non-traditional background.' The new works I am making all have ideas about popularity hovering around them. What kind of art do people like? What subjects? Why do people like going to art galleries these days? What is the relationship of traditional art to social media?"

One of the central topics of the exhibition was Brexit. In preparation, Perry met with both factions of British society – the Remainers and the Brexiteers. His experiences were filmed and made into the Channel 4 documentary "Divided Britain." They also resulted in the central artwork of the exhibition: *Matching Pair* (2017), a pair of two pots, one representing the people who voted to remain in the EU, the other one showing the side of those who voted to leave (fig. 83). They were both each about half a meter in height with the Leave-pot being slightly larger, responding to the favourable outcome of the election the year before. For the images on the pots, Perry asked people on social media who identified with one of both sections to send him

[155] Perry, in: The Guardian, 27th May 2017.

pictures of themselves. Perry then chose the images that would go on the pot. Most of the selection reflected on their identity as British people.

As in a lot of his work, and responding to the differences found in the two Brexit camps – a large part of the Leavers consisted of working-class people that felt left alone by the British government and EU politics[156] – there are pieces in this exhibition that respond to the class system and class war.

Matching Pair was positioned within the exhibition in front of a large-format tapestry entitled *The Battle of Britain* (2017) (fig. 84). The work is about seven by three meters in size and shows a flat rural landscape, including allusions to conflicts, specifically class conflicts in British society.

The Digmoor Tapestry (2016) depicts a map of Digmoor, a district of the town of Skelmersdale in the North West of Britain (fig. 85). Together with *King of Nowhere* (2015) that also was in the exhibition (fig. 86), it was made after talking to young men from that area, who were "defending their territory," the Digmoor estate, against other gangs.[157] The tapestry has a size of 215 by 265 cm.[158] In terms of colour, the map is held in dirty brown and beige, with large bloodstains on it. It is also scattered with depictions of graffiti that Perry found at the scene: one says "little Kev," others include obscene drawings and the letters "FTP." Perry also included a lottery ticket issued for the 15th of June 2005 and a depiction of a rose. The rose is the national flower of England, usually standing for beauty. In this context, though, the red blossoms integrate into the bloodstained background of the tapestry. The whole depiction of the area alludes more to war zones than to the English suburbs. The war depicted is the war of a cut-off class of angry young men.

Complementary to this work, *King of Nowhere* was made. An 89cm high figure of a man, made of cast iron and various found objects.[159] The man is wearing a cap and an earring made of a tin flap. The work was inspired by African power figures that were used for various rituals (e.g., fig. 87).[160] Like many of the African models, Perry's work has metal objects driven into it, like knives and scissors. You can find brand names and logos on him, such as "Adidas" or "The North Face."

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[156] See for example: EU referendum: full results and analysis 2016, in: The Guardian, 23rd June 2016.

[157] Serpentine Galleries 2017 (exh. cat.), n. p.

[158] Produced in an edition of 6 plus 2 artist's proofs.

[159] Edition of 5 plus 1 artist's proof.

[160] Many of Perry's works are responding to ritual figures, e.g. *Outsider Alan* (2017), *Our Father* (2007), *Our Mother* (2009) or *Head of a Fallen Giant* (2008).

Additionally, he is holding a cord with beer caps on it. He is surrounded by bottles of alcohol as well as candles, reminiscent of the original ceremonial purpose of such figures. In the context of the exhibition, this work, like *The Digmoor Tapestry,* becomes a symbol for a disconnected group of working-class men.

Death of a Working Hero (2016)[161] is dealing with the same subject matter (fig. 88). The, with 250 by 200cm, large-scale tapestry is depicting two men, one in coal miner's gear, the other one in boxing outfit.[162] The coal miner has the word PROVIDE written on his belt; the boxer's waistband shows the word PROTECT. Between them stands a little boy with Alan Measles in his arm, possibly a depiction of the artist as a boy, referencing his working-class background. The three of them are surrounded by a banner that says:

"A TIME TO FIGHT A TIME TO TALK A TIME TO CHANGE
WE WORK FOR THE FUTURE AND GRIEVE FOR THE PAST"

The first line presumably is a modification of a Bible quote that is frequently referenced in political speeches as well as books, movies, and a variety of pop culture references:

> "1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
> 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; 5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; 6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; 7 a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; 8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace."[163]

With the last part, "A TIME TO CHANGE," Perry might also refer to the slogan for a British campaign to end mental health discrimination. Mental health, not being something that is openly discussed within a male-driven working-class background.

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[161] Edition of 6 plus 2 artist's proof.

[162] Perry is using the same technique, that he is using in all his large-scale tapestry works, which will be discussed in chapter 8.4. Perry's textile work.

[163] Kohelet 3, 1-8

Beneath the two workers and the banner is a funeral scene set in Durham, a town in Northern England, formerly known for its coal mining industry. Durham still holds an annual labour festival, the Durham Miner's Gala. Part of this festival is a ceremonial parade with union banners, which inspired *Death of a Working Hero.* The flags were paraded through the town to the cathedral, where they were blessed in a ceremony. Perry commented that "the blessing in the glorious setting of the cathedral accompanied by mournful music seemed to be a funeral for a certain sort of man."[164]

The kind of man that is grieved for is not only the working-class man but also the stereotypical man in his role as protector provider of the family. The coal mines in Durham were closed, and a lot of the traditional labour market has vanished since then. Since the 1970s, a lot of the North English working-class communities are diminishing. Nonetheless, those left still hold on to the heritage of the "Old Days."

Much of Perry's artistic ouput, but especially *The Vanity of Small Differences*, as well as *Death of a Working Hero* are stylistically close to works of the New Objectivity.

Like Perry, the artists of the New Objectivity rejected abstraction for a more figurative approach, and some of them, like George Grosz, had a strong admiration for Hogarth. In this context, Hans-Jürgen Buderer writes. "In the figures, but also in the pictorial narrative, it is not individuals and individual behaviour that are portrayed, but the individual figure and the pictorial event become a metaphor for the overall social situation of the time."[165] The same sentiment can be applied to all of Perry's art. As mentioned before, his characters are strongly typified and can rarely be seen as individuals but as representatives of a certain tribe of people. Especially Grosz's works contain an almost brutal forcefulness combined with an apathetic voyeurism that can be found in much of Perry's imagery, for instance, in *#Lamentation* (fig. 78). *Stützen der Gesellschaft* (1926), perhaps Grosz's most famous work, also strongly relies on the use of symbols and signifiers to convey the affiliation to a certain group of people.

[164] Serpentine Galleries 2017 (exh. cat.), n.p.

[165] Hans-Jürgen Buderer: Neue Sachlichkeit. Bilder auf der Suche nach der Wirklichkeit. Figurative Malerei der zwanziger Jahre, Mannheim 1995, p. 109.

7.5. Super Rich Interior Decorations

As Perry is climbing the social mobility ladder, his subjects of depiction are changing, from the working class to the mega-rich or those who can actually afford to buy one of his pots.

One of his most recent exhibitions, held at Victoria Miro Mayfair from September to December 2019, was titled *Super Rich Interior Decorations*. The title is both an acknowledgment of the difficult status that pottery holds within the contemporary art world, and a self-conscious commentary on the absurdity of the pricing policy of the same. Perry acknowledges his position as a successful contemporary artist, whose pots are auctioned off at six-figure sums but also sees the problematics that come with it: "An artist's job is to bite the hand that feeds him, but not too hard."[166]

The whole exhibition again was a portrayal of the British class, though this time, Perry depicted and spoke to the "elite." Right at the entrance of the exhibition, the first work that one encountered was *Vote Tory* (2019). *Vote Tory* is a vase with a marbled green backdrop showing miniature images of stars, flowers, and Tory politicians (fig. 91). On it, written in bold red letters, are the words "Vote Tory," an appeal to vote Great Britain's establishment party. Other ceramic works in the exhibition include *Shopping for Meaning* (2019) (fig.17), which shows Perry as Claire in multiple locations across London's Mayfair district, standing before designer shops, or *Thin Woman with Painting* (2019), showing a woman at her home surrounded by pieces of modern art (fig. 92).

Super Rich Interior Decorations also exhibited a new tapestry by Perry, *Large Expensive Abstract Painting* (fig. 93). The fabric was again weaved digitally but evoked at first sight the image of being painted in the style of abstract expressionism. It also functions as a stylized map of London. Perry labelled said map with classifications that for him could be aligned to the richer London community. Some examples are "private tutor," "entitlement," "organic," "elite university," "gentrification," and again, Bourdieu's "cultural capital."

The most provoking work of the exhibition must be *Don't Look Down* (2019), a two to three metre carpet (fig. 94). The work shows a homeless man lying in his sleeping bag, surrounded by empty bottles, cans, syringes, and other litter. It uncomfortably brings the dark reality of more than 300.000 people in Britain in the gallery space.[167]

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[166] Grayson Perry, quoting Nam June Paik, see: Perry, in: The Financial Times, 20th Sep 2019.

[167] According to research by the housing charity Shelter, see: Butler, in: The Guardian, 22nd Nov 2018.

Through its form, the carpet is posing the question of who would by such a piece and how it would be exhibited in the owner's home.
The criticism or rather satirization of the art elite isn't new to Perry's oeuvre, but it is rarely implemented so prominently.[168]

8. Grayson Perry as a craftsman

8.1. Modern craftsmanship in its historical and theoretical context

In 1961 Rose Slivka, then editor in chief for the magazine *Craft Horizons* wrote the article "The New Ceramic Presence."[169] In it, she tries to position modern-day ceramic movements within the landscape of postmodern art movements and the industrialized world. As American art historian Howard Risatti writes in "A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression," "Slivka's article came at the beginning of a wider debate about the status of craft vis-à-vis fine art."[170]
Craftmanship conveys associations of domesticity and decorativeness that do not seem to fit into the contemporary perception of "high art."
Relating to this, it is often seen as kitsch, as something that needs to be loaded with emotion and personal meaning to gain value, while high art usually stands on its own.
The history of art and the history of craft are generally treated separately. As Risatti writes," 'A fixed hierarchy of the arts still lingers,' a hierarchy in which fine art rests on the top."[171] The image of pottery, in particular, is apparently difficult to merge into the contemporary art world. This is partly due to its perceived conservativism and inclination towards certain formal standards that do not go well with the openness of the idea of art.
Ceramic experts generally share the view that craftsmanship and art must be distinguished from each other. If art and craft are two separate things, how can they be identified, and how are they or are they not part of Perry's oeuvre? Perry stated that for him, "the essential

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[168] One of the view examples that predate this exhibition is *The Island of Bad Art* (2013). It shows a version of Jacopo de Barbari's famous map of Venice (fig. 36) , which as the location of the oldest biennial in the world, is a centre for contemporary art. Perry's adaptation is again full of writings. They say things like "Just plain dull," "Fear of getting it wrong," Ooh, shocking" (fig. 35).

[169] Slivka 1961, p. 31–37.

[170] Risatti 2007, p. 1.

[171] Risatti 2007, p. 4. Risatti is quoting Donald Kuspit, as quoted in: Kangas 2004, p. 107-112.

distinction between art and craft is that art has an emphasis on feelings and ideas and the crafts have an emphasis on technique."[172] However, in the sphere of craft experts, this issue of how to define craft – usually in opposition to art – has been and still is discussed widely. Risatti is also finding fault in a lack of intellectualism within the context of ceramic criticism, stating that "despite […] pleas for a more intellectual approach to the field, writing about craft is still largely devoted to practical issues such as materials and techniques. Lack of a critical and theoretical framework within which to ground the field helps explain its generally low prestige (aesthetically and otherwise) […]."[173] He is putting this in stark contrast to the discourse surrounding the fine arts, which for him, is at least part of the reason why fine art is so popular and prestigious.

While craftsmanship is a discipline, closely connected to the fine arts, to see a piece of pottery in exhibitions of contemporary art is quite rare.

As a potter, Perry does hold an extra position within the art world. While it is widely acknowledged that Perry is as much a potter as he is an artist, the craftsman side of his oeuvre is often neglected. Critics usually focus on the imagery on his pots rather than the form, which is probably at least partly due to the lack of craft professionals within the guild of contemporary art critics. While Perry's works - in view of his profile - have relatively rarely been the subject of scholarly discussion from an art-historical point of view, this is all the more true from a craft perspective.

One of the key points to why there is so few writing on Perry is that as a potter, Perry is not inventive but relying on traditional methods.

Perry doesn't use a pottery wheel but exclusively uses the method of coiling. This means he starts at the bottom and then puts one layer of clay on top of the next, merging those coils within the process until the surface is smooth enough. The exterior is then fitted out with the respective motive, glazed and fired. The completion of one pot can take several months. While there are a lot of ceramic artists in the 20th century who experimented greatly with the possibilities of clay, especially the shape, Perry's approach generally sticks to a conservative form: "For me the shape has to be classical invisible: then you've got a base that people can understand."[174]

Most people probably wouldn't think of art museums at all when thinking about ceramics but rather their kids' art classes or the kitchen cupboard. The closest craftsmanship usually comes

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[172] Perry, in: Th Guardian, 5th Mar 2005.

[173] Risatti 2007, p. 3.

[174] Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 2002 (exh. cat.), p. 14.

to be shown in art museums is if there is a design exhibit. Nonetheless, from time to time, pieces of pottery do pop up in exhibitions of contemporary art.

American gallerist Garth Clark, who also gave Perry his first and so far only solo exhibition in the US in 1991,[175] is one of the few contemporary curators and critics who is actively dealing with and promoting the subject of modern pottery.

Again, the meaning of craftmanship as a philosophical term has been shifting and requires clarification. American artist and studio jeweller Bruce Metcalf wrote:

> "So I'll say that "craft" is a cultural construction, not some independent fact. And, parallel to Arthur Danto's idea of the artworld, I'll also say that there is a craft world, and that the institutions of the craft world effectively get to decide what the word means. Finally, I would say that the meaning of the word "craft" changes as societies change, and people tailor the word to their specific needs and desires."[176]

So within a contemporary craft world, craft objects must be evaluated within their own history and the history of their medium.

If you follow this statement, Perry's works should be evaluated not only from the perspective of the art world but also from the craft world's point of view. In terms of form, most of Perry's pots remain "classically invisible," which means that for many of them, contextualization in terms of style is neither necessary nor possible. However, craftsmanship has its own theory that is worth exploring.

Metcalf positions modern-day craftsmanship within its historical and theoretical framework as follows: "I could reasonably claim that modern craft was invented by William Morris when he decided in 1856 to furnish his apartment on Red Lion Square." Now, William Morris was a British artist, craftsman, and writer who was at the very centre of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain. He is referenced in some of Perry's work, such as *The Walthamstow Tapestry* (2009) or *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012).

Morris was born in 1834 in Walthamstow, Essex. During the course of his life, he became pivotal within the movement, not only setting theoretical frameworks in his essays on the

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[175] Previously Perry had been exhibited in New York as part of a group exhibition at the *Galozzi e La Placa* gallery in 1985, see: The Holburne Museum 2020 (exh. cat.), p. 163.

[176] Metcalf 2011, p. 13/14.

subject but also being a forerunner in his practical artistic process. In 1956 – as Metcalf mentions – he started to furnish his apartment at Red Lion Square, which was an important milestone in what was about to become a new theory of craftsmanship. Three years later, in 1859, he started the building of the "Red House" for him and his wife Jane Morris, née Burden, in 1859. The house was built as a collaboration of artists and artisans, at the centre being Morris himself and his architect friend Philip Webb. The construction took over a year, and the Red House became something like a workshop for Morris and the artists surrounding him, such as Edward Burne-Jones, Philip Speakman-Webb, or Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Following those joint experiences Morris – together with six other partners – set up an interior-design business in 1861, named Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.[177]

It was this circle of artists and artisans around Morris that formed the Arts and Crafts Movement.[178]

Metcalf argues that before said movement craft was simply defined within three parameters: pieces of craftmanship were objects that were either product of skilled work, decorative artisanry, and something that he calls "trades and folkways."[179] While those are still part of the definition of craftsmanship, in the course of the development of the Arts and Crafts Movement, the field of application has widened.[180] Said movement was founded during a time when traditional craftmanship seemed under threat through the Industrial Revolution and the options of mass production that it brought with it. The prevailing fear was that the possibilities of mass production and the chance of infinite duplications would destroy originality in art and individual craftsmanship. It is important to note that industrialization wasn't seen as something harmful altogether, but it was certainly observed with reservation. Over time though, the values of modern production methods were discovered, and artists integrated it into their work.

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[177] Kelvin 1987, p. 228.

[178] An essential role model for Morris's involvement in craftmanship played the medieval guilds. The contemporary developments of industrialized labour and upcoming possibilities to mass-produce art were something that he saw as dangerous and, at its worst destructive of the creative force, for the sole purpose of accumulating money.

[179] Metcalf 2011, p. 14.

[180] The movement was already pre-empted by artists such as Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin who in 1836 published his book *Contrasts. Or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day. Shewing the Present Decay of Taste*,[180] which was one of the earlier examples of this apotheosis of the middle ages. The book, in parts a rather eristic treatise on the then-current state of the arts, was in favour of a return to Gothic styles as well as then common structures of society and labour. While Pugin and Ruskin played decisive roles in the development of the theoretical framework, the person that is usually set at the centre of the movement is William Morris.

8.2. Craftsmanship and the people

Oscar Lovell Triggs writes in his 1902 publication: "The primary motive of the arts and crafts movement is, as the name implies, the association of art and labour. Initially an English movement, it has been slowly emerging from the general industrial field for about forty years. However, its differentiation into a distinct phase of industrialism belongs to the last ten years."[181]
This "association of art and labour" is not only something that the artists of the movement did through their craftsmanship but also through their literary practice.
Morris' physical artistic work comes with his extensive writings surrounding his practice. Throughout it, he is underlining emphatically the importance of creating "an art made by the people, and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the user."[182] Morris endeavours to address the outsiders of the artworld. In his lecture "The Art of the People," given in 1879 at The Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, Morris specifically stated the importance of including the "public in general" as opposed to artists and those who are already educated within the field. [183] Looking at it from today's viewpoint, though, one has to say that Morris's ambition and efforts to include a new demographic, in the end, turned out to be unsuccessful. While his work had a great impact on craftsmanship and design, his reach remained limited to people of more traditional art backgrounds.
The movement around Morris strove to promote craftsmanship as equally important and valuable to the creative sector as the fine arts. It was a highly theorized period within craft creation. Metcalf sees the impact that Morris had on the re-formation and theorization of craftmanship as follows:

> "I would suggest that Morris created a new category of objects. These things were not only luxury interior decor, nor were they only the products of a trade. They are craft in the fully modern sense. They had several important characteristics, which were fleshed out over the next forty years of the Arts and Crafts movement.

[181] Triggs 1902, p. 2.
[182] Morris 1882, p. 64.
[183] From William Morris' lecture "The Art of the People," delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, February 19, 1879; in: Morris 1992, p. 28-50.

> First of all, they were theorized. They were both the product and subject of discourse. (…)
> Secondly, while Ruskin[184] was speaking about the dignity of labour, Morris practiced it. (…) I think Morris broke an important barrier, for he made it possible for his many followers to engage in work that had previously been reserved for the lower classes. He gave handwork a classlessness that survives to this day. Not only did Morris pull handwork out of the working classes, but he put women's work on an equal footing with men's. (…)
> To me, the most important contribution of the Arts and Crafts movement was to tie aesthetics to social awareness. (…)"[185]

Following this, it was thanks to Morris and his circle that it became possible to combine objects of craftmanship with a social critique.
Metcalf sums contemporary craftmanship after Morris up as follows:

> "Craft still stands against the anonymity of mass-production and for the personalized object.
> Craft still stands against ugliness and, on occasion, for beauty.
> Craft still stands against big-money capitalism and for small-scale entrepreneurship.
> Craft stands against corporate labour, where most workers are replaceable parts in a bureaucracy, and for individual self-determination.
> Craft stands for the rich potential the human body at work and against disembodiment in all its forms.
> Craft continues to be a social movement, often intuitive and without leadership. I see craft as a collective attempt to relocate personal meaning in a largely indifferent world. As a teacher and observer, I constantly see how craft

[184] John Ruskin was a British art critic who first published *The Stones of Venice* in 1851. In it, Ruskin calls for a re-evaluation of the position we grant the craftsman in comparison to the one the artist finds himself in, that ideally should result in equating them: "Now it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity," in: Ruskin 1852, p. 170. In a way Ruskin was a champion of labour and the working class - In 1854 he accepted an offer to teach at the Working Men's College, a Christian institution, designed to provide artisans with theoretical frameworks - although one should mention that from today's viewpoint "his view of society was essentially paternalistic," in: Naylor, Gillian: The arts and crafts movement. A study of its sources, ideals and influence on design theory, London 1980, p. 30.

[185] Metcalf 2011, p. 15/16.

> functions as a vehicle to construct meaning and how it gives substance and dignity and grace to individuals' lives. Furthermore, I suggest that any history of contemporary craft would have to account for this fact."[186]

If we go through this statement and compare it with the observations of the previous chapter on the influence of Pop Art on Perry's work, it might seem that Perry's positions are contradictory. In fact, Perry uses these conflicting positions in such a way that they ultimately complement each other. Like Morris, Perry combines a distrust of mass products with a desire to democratize the aesthetic field.

To this day, Perry is a special case. Craftmanship is still not what one would expect in an art museum, which probably helped Perry in achieving his status as the "outsider potter."

A certain amount of conservatism is immanent in the arts and crafts movement. Its methods strongly rely on historic traditions, while visually, it tends to strive for decorativeness and appropriateness. Design and ornament are two of the striving forces within its creation. Especially William Morris can be credited with designing numerous popular ornamental patterns that are still used to this day and were also referenced by Perry in *Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close* (2012).

Perry says that he wants "to make conservatism radical in some way. In the arts, there's an assumption that you're progressive. (…) There's no better way to wind up the arts establishment than by posing as a conservative."[187]

The fact that Perry is using the medium of pottery while insisting on labelling himself as a potter distances him from the perceived elitism of the art world and makes him more approachable. After all, the craft world does not contain the same stigma as the art world regarding notions of elitism and high-mindedness.

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[186] Metcalf 2011, p. 16/17.

[187] House/Perry, in: *The Economist*, 21st Jan 2020.

8.3. Perry's ceramic work

Although Perry's pots are, above all, intended to function as a blank surface, they are referencing various historical and international ceramic styles. There are, of course, strong connections to British craftsmen.

While his ceramic works mainly consist of pottery, there are various examples where he chose a different surface, especially in his earlier years as a ceramicist. *Kinky Sex* (1983), his first ceramic work, is a glazed ceramic plate (fig. 95). Stylistically one can find similarities to English slipware[188], such as the works by Thomas Toft, Ralph Simpson, or William Talor (fig. 96/97). The plate shows a Christ-like figure – arms stretched out, legs crossed at the ankles, small markers where usually the nails would be – at the heart of the composition. At its centre Perry put a metal coin that melted in the process of firing, leaving a dark smudged stain that is covering the figures' body.

In this piece, one can also find an early version of what was to develop into Perry's potter's stamp[189] (fig. 98). As the year of production, it is stamped on with hand-made seals.

Especially the frame section with its sharp umpteen zag lines responds to commonly used ornamental patterns in the late 17th century. This habit of directly quoting preceding artistic styles within the edge zone or, respectively, jug necks is something that can be found throughout all of Perry's work and not only in his ceramic works but also in tapestries.

But Perry is not the first potter in the 20th century to quote this specific style of early English slipware. While the 19th-century movement focused strongly on furniture, tapestry, and textile design, the 20th century found with Bernard Leach, a prominent agent of the pottery craft.[190]

According to the Jacky Klein monography, Perry is referencing Leach in his pot *Strangely Familiar* (2000) (fig. 99): "The shape was taken from a Bernard Leach pot: quite sturdy, sort of respectable old English. The dominant brown colour is superficially wholesome."[191]

Bernard Leach, who was highly influential on contemporary ceramic styles and is regarded as the "Father of British studio pottery" created a few pieces throughout his body of work that reference the same artists and techniques that Perry references in his early ceramic works (fig.

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[188] Klein 2013, p. 26.

[189] Before Perry's Turner Prize his potter's stamp consisted of a W above an anchor, afterwards he added a crown to it. All three symbols have already been used by various ceramicists and ceramic companies before him.

[190] Leach was born in 1887 in Hong Kong and spent much of his earlier years – until 1920 – in Japan. Leach's works demonstrate an appreciation of simplicity – in form as much as in décor. Therefore, his artistic practice was substantially influenced and defined by the local pottery practices there and the Japanese folk-art movement.

[191] Klein 2013, p. 150.

100). Pieces which in turn seem to be quoted again by Perry (fig. 101). Though Leach's philosophical approach to pottery is inherently different from Perry's,[192] his style seems to have had some influence on Perry's body of work. Especially in his more colour-reduced works of the 1980s, 1990s, and a bit into the early 2000s, stylistic references can be found. According to him, his 2005 work *GM* was again inspired by artists of the 17th century,[193] but the motive reminds one much more of slipware works by Bernard Leach. In 2005 Perry also made the plate IKEA (fig. 102), which according to the Klein monograph is a "complete rip-off from early nineteenth-century American folk pottery."[194] Researching American folk pottery, it's apparent that Perry can only mean Conrad Kolb Ranniger's plate from 1838 (fig. 103).

In 1985 he made a series of 30 commemorative plates but giving them a personal touch (fig. 104). He is depicting his personal landscape, responding to childhood memories of Essex and places like his grandmother's home. In the recently published catalogue "Grayson Perry: The Pre-Therapy Years," Andrew Wilson writes that "there is a scorched quality to his line that is especially reliant on Kiefer,"[195] who in the 1970s and 1980s created various paintings of emotionally charged landscapes (fig. 105).

Perry also seems to have a particular fascination with East Asian ceramics, above all Japanese, where the craft movement, called Mingei, reached its own peak under Yanagi Sōetsu.[196]

Western Art in the Form of a Saki Bottle (1992) was designed after traditional Japanese teaware of the Edo period (fig. 106). *Butterflies on Wheels* (2001) combines images of contemporary youth culture with traditional Japanese imagery (fig. 107). In *Westfield Vase* (2009), as well as *The Huhne Vase* (2014), Perry used the traditional method of mending broken ceramic objects with gold lacquer, as it was common in many Asian cultures (fig. 108/109).

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[192] Leach was in his works strongly influenced by Japanese craftmanship and their philosophy of utility and simplicity.

[193] Klein 2013, p. 58.

[194] Klein 2013, p. 59.

[195] The Holburne Museum 2020 (exh. cat.), p. 18.

[196] Sōetsu Yanagi, together with Kawai Kanjirō and Hamada Shōji, is one of the pivotal figures in the folk-art movement in Japan, called *Mingei*. He was a close friend to Bernard Leach and conducted extensive research within European art movements. One of his main theses on art was that "the power of the individual sis weaker than that of tradition" (see: Yanagi, Muneyoshi: The unknown craftsman. A Japanese insight into beauty, London 1989) therefore folk art with its long history of habitual practice would be superior than the one born out of one artist and only that artists personal judgement of beauty. He was in his writings influenced by Morris and his predecessors.

I dunno (1999) (fig. 110), on the other hand, is, according to Perry, "a copy of an African pot that would have been fired in a bonfire."[197] The same thing seems to be true, for *I've never been to Africa* (2011) (fig. 111).

8.4. Perry's textile work

Another increasingly significant part of Perry's craftmanship is tapestry. Tapestry – in a European context – is usually associated with monumental wall hangings of hunting scenes or historical battles or scenes that reflect on the superior social status that its owner held.

Since Perry created his first tapestry, his production process evolved. While *Vote Alan Measles for God* (2007) (fig. 112) was still needle-woven by hand since *The Walthamstow Tapestry* (2009), Perry has moved on to digital weaving (fig. 15). This technique, also known as Jacquard weaving, was named after Joseph-Marie Jacquard, who invented the first mechanical loom in 1804, opening the market up to mass production. *The Walthamstow Tapestry* is a monumental work, spanning the enormous area of three by fifteen meters. As it marks an early example of Perry's work in tapestry, he still drew the initial black-and-white sketches on A1 paper sheets, which were then scanned and further digitally modified and coloured via Adobe Photoshop. In his later works, such as *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012), he already drew the initial sketches directly on a computer screen. The files are then given to *Factum Arte*, a digital mediation studio based in Madrid, which straightens out errors in the data and makes sure no aspects of the work get lost in the digital processing. The actual weaving is done at *Flanders Tapestries* in Wielsbeke, Belgium, which has worked with various artists, such as Marina Abramovich, Anish Kapoor, or Urs Fischer. In the process of test weavings, which can take months, around twelve primary colours are chosen to make out the general colour scheme, supplemented by two to four tones for the weft yarns.[198] Those weft yarns will not be immediately visible on the tapestry surface but affect the visual outcome of the primary colours.

As Perry's ceramic works, his textile art draws heavily from various cultures and artistic styles. His first tapestry *Vote Alan Measles for God* was created in 2007. It was commissioned by Suzanne and Christopher Sharp, founders of *The Rug Company*, London, as part of their

[197] Klein 2013, p. 52.
[198] Lowe 2013, p. 105.

Banners of Persuasion project, the results of which were first shown at The Dairy, London in 2008. It was woven by hand as a wool needlepoint tapestry – presumably by someone within the company – in an edition of five, plus three artist's proofs.

In the making of the work, Perry was inspired by Afghan war rugs, which can not only be seen in the colour palette but also in the world of images it displays (fig. 113). Afghan war rugs are an artistic phenomenon that developed in the 1980s as a response to the Soviet-Afghan war. The rugs were usually knotted by half-nomadic tribes who understood to combine the traditional art of carpet weaving with its classical geometrical shapes and floral patterns with increasingly martial imagery of war and destruction, some showcasing general warlike symbols, some depicting specific historical events.[199] During those years, a distinct visual language was developed. There are those depictions that are more apparent than others, and those who at first sight disappear behind the traditional visual language. Like most of Perry's work – across all media – at first sight, the actual content of those rugs isn't necessarily visible. They seem rather traditional, and it is only on closer inspection that the serious and often violent subject matter becomes apparent. *Vote Alan Measles for God* isn't the only time Perry made references to Afghan war rugs. In *Red Carpet* (2017) (fig. 114), a 2,5 by 2,5-meter tapestry, made for the *The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever!* show, he quite clearly references the style and imagery of the Afghan predecessors. Also, in some of his pottery, visual hints can be found, such as in *The Names of Flowers* (1994), which cites the Afghan habit of mapping the geographical zones of conflict and also shows some of the simplistic martial imagery (fig. 115). While the Afghan rugs were knotted by hand, Perry usually works within digital weaving.

In the centre of the tapestry is Alan Measles as a grim and aggressive war veteran or a religious fanatic. He's surrounded by weapons and symbols of destruction, war, and death. To his right is a depiction of Osama Bin Laden, and on his left is an image of Claire as a kind of angel of death. Next to her is what appears to be a London underground train, likely in referral to the 7 July 2005 bombings. Other sketches include a tv camera and a vehicle with the letters UN written on it. This 'war zone' is separated by a fence with barbed wire on top of it. On the other side of the fence, you can see the Pentagon. Alan himself is standing on the Twin Towers next to it. The whole composition is framed by writing, saying, "VOTE ALAN MEASLES FOR GOD" and "HE WILL SAVE US."

[199] For more information on Afghan war rugs of the 1980s and 1990s, see: Passow, Till; Wild, Thomas; Frembgen, Jürgen W.: Geknüpftes Gedächtnis. Krieg in Afghanischer Teppichkunst, Berlin 2015.

The imagery is flashy, emblematic, and easy to understand, in which it is reminiscent of the propagandistic purposes of the historical model.

Simplified images of war, as depicted in Afghan war rugs, can be found throughout Perry's oeuvre. In *Portraits Of Our Prophets* (2006), the depictions of grenades, helicopters, and others in the background are alluding to the same genre (fig. 116).

Since then, Perry went on to produce numerous tapestries, usually in monumental format, many of whom were already mentioned above, like *The Walthamstow Tapestry* (2009). Perry says that in the case of *The Walthamstow Tapestry,* he was inspired by Sumatran Batik.[200] Sumatran Batik shows a predilection for small-figured depictions of, at the time, contemporary every-day life (fig. 117/118).

Perry has also worked in fashion and textile design, usually collaborating with British companies.[201] In 2008 Perry was asked by the London department store Liberty to design some fabric patterns. Liberty was founded in 1845 and is mainly known for its print collections for which it is frequently collaborating with renowned artists and designers, such as William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, or, more recently, Vivian Westwood. Perry ended up doing four different designs, which are all available in four different colour schemes. One of them is *Sissy,* a black and pink design consisting of patterns of puerile images – dolls, teddy bears, pacifiers, model airplanes– images of female domesticity – flower vases, perfume bottles, lady's shoes – mixed with images of war and violence – soldiers, guns, brass knuckles or hand grenades (fig. 119). Again, there is the contrast of ordinary, mundane objects and images of violence, as it can be found in many of Perry's works. The individual motives are intentionally gendered. Perry is using "boys' and girls' symbols"[202] – a peaceful female passivity against a hostile male aggression. With the flowery outline to each individual image, it reminds one of paisley patterns.

Perry's three other designs are titled *Cranford, Flo,* and *Philippa,* the former two after his daughter and his wife. The designs were all printed on Liberty's Tana Lawn Cotton. Perry has since done various collaborations with designer brands. In 2011 he did a store installation for Louis Vuitton, parallel to them sponsoring his show at the British Museum. As part of his 2019 exhibition *Super Rich Interior Decorations,* he worked with Osprey to design a handbag (fig. 120).

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[200] Klein 2013, p. 269.

[201] A large part of this has to do with his crossdressing self Claire and was discussed in an earlier chapter. Another example that would be *Artist's Robe* (2004), designed after the fashion of Japanese kimonos.

[202] Klein 2013, p. 157.

This again highlights how Perry is also part of the commercialized consumerist part of the contemporary art world. Something that a lot of other artists would describe as a “sell-out” of artistic creation. Perry’s art is walking a fine line between issues that so many critics of the contemporary art scene see as its downfall. Again, Perry is aware of those disputes and is claiming to deal with them through these very same collaborations with top companies. However, due to the regularity of these collaborations, it seems that for Perry, too, the question of profit is more important than dealing with the underlying problems.
One could argue that the combination of artistic creation and commercialization in inevitable in today’s art world because that is the way we are unavoidably heading. In the context of the central issue of popularisation of the art world and artistic creation all the more, because what better way to make art accessible than to commercialize it. However, this would again raise the question of who would really be able to purchase such pieces, which in the end would be the art establishment.

9. Conclusion

Looking at Perry's world of images, one can get a glimpse of his world view. His depictions waver between general observations and short-lived illustrations of his contemporary surroundings.
Now, to return to the assumption that a populist artist is one whose aesthetic is firmly settled within reality:[203] This doesn't have to go as far as in the earlier mentioned "Most Wanted Paintings" project, which, through subversive over-affirmation, undermines the idea of a popularization, in the sense of a complete democratization, of art. While Perry's artistic worlds are sometimes distorted or a mashup of several experiences, they are always firmly anchored within a visual reality, not least of all through his figurative approach. When commenting on today's society, Perry rarely speaks in metaphors but depicts everyday scenes that the average person is familiar with. This familiarization is further enhanced by the placement of common brands within the scenery, not unlike product placement in popular movies. Perry is establishing "points of contact" for the audience. These "points of contact," however, are formulated general enough to be accessible to a broad mass of people.

[203] Kirsch/Schillinger, in: New York Times, 13th April 2017.

Dichotomies and perceived contradictions characterize a lot of his oeuvre. Partly, this comes from notions of "high" and "popular culture" and the prejudices that exist against both, the way a lot of things that don't fit the parameters of contemporary art, because they strongly appeal to one's emotions are labelled as kitsch and at the same time how a lot of what is accepted as high culture is perceived as elitist.

Within this discourse, the pop art movement is an essential source of inspiration for Perry and influenced him from early on. As pop artists did, Perry also uses simplified and emblematic images as well as brands to reach a wide audience. Connected to how we label parts of our culture is taste. In *The Vanity Of Small Differences* (2012) and the associated television program *All In the Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry*, Perry is investigating how taste "is woven into our class system," following Bourdieu's theory of social distinction.

The series is immediately understandable for everyone – with or without art education – and contains multiple possible contact points for the viewer to identify with the protagonists. While it has its theoretical background, the audience doesn't need to be educated in that way to understand the piece. Still, for those who do know Bourdieu and his theory of class taste, it is evident, as it is portraying a detailed account of class mobility and social status, all grounded in taste and its mechanisms of distinction.

In connection with taste, kitsch and "high art" are treated differently. High art is usually treated as something that is independently valuable; the taste component as a means of judgement for everything visual is ignored. Different so with things deemed as kitsch whose value is given to it individually by its respective owner.

Benjamin L. McKean wrote in a recent publication that "the aesthetics of populist politics are shaped by this oscillation between the familiar and the uncanny, often lending it a flavor of nostalgic kitsch."[204]

A lot of Perry's work contains or depicts nostalgia for a time when the working-class was a strong force within the country, echoing experiences he had when meeting with people from such backgrounds for his documentaries, especially during the making of *Divided Britain* (2017) or *All in the Best Possible Taste* (2012), as well as his personal upbringing.

Perry also draws a lot of inspiration from historical examples when it comes to the visual realization, for example, Afghan war rugs, Christian iconography, or Chinoiserie, to name just a few.

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[204] McKean 2020, p. 89.

While Perry is often discussing complicated issues and his artworks are generally dense and detailed compositions, he is usually doing so in an intelligible way, using a simplified visual language and images everyone can relate to. By doing so, Perry is using what one might call "visual floating signifiers." They are understandable, relatable, but in the end, everyone in the audience can interpret them according to their own ideals. Within this simplified discourse, Perry is not shying away from depicting prejudiced clichés.

To speak in clichés also means that what is said might have more force as it would have if presented with all its differentiation. As superficial as they are, stereotypes make it possible for a larger group of people to understand what is said and to identify with it. While Perry does work that, in his own words, "adhere to a 'working-class' aesthetic," Perry is careful not to favour any group of people. Although his oeuvre involves plenty of political commentaries, Perry himself rarely tells us what he thinks himself.

Ambiguity is the keyword. Perry is often addressing politicized topics but without actually stating his own opinion.

The issue of class and class war is one that can be found in a large portion of his oeuvre. This also plays into his perception of the contemporary art world, which is another frequent topic with him. Perry's view of the art world is inherently bilateral, meaning that he sees it's superficialities and, at times, elitism while also praises its capability for inclusiveness and its capacity to give space to "the outsider."

Perry seems incredibly self-aware of his position within the art world and the conflicts and contradictions that come with it, as he made clear throughout his career, especially in the pieces that speak directly to his (future) collectors, as in *Pot Designed for a Wealthy Westerner with Good Taste* (1994) or pretty much throughout the whole *Super Rich Interior Decorations* exhibition from 2019.

He is also aware of the difficult relationship between the contemporary art world and traditional craftmanship. By having chosen pottery as his primary medium, he is again positioning himself as a kind of outsider to the former.

His being a potter – and insisting on that label –, might actually help in bringing the contemporary art world closer to the outside world. After all, "potter" or sounds much more approachable than "artist."

Since the 1980s, ceramics have been his primary medium of choice, usually in the form of pots, sometimes tapping into more abstract shapes. An appreciation that he most prominently showcased at his 2011 show at The British Museum "The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman," that Perry himself curated from the museum's collection and some of his own works. More than fine

art nowadays, craftmanship still stands in the tradition of beauty and decorativeness, a widely unpopular term in the contemporary art world.

In an interview for the Turner Prize retrospective in 2007, Perry said the following about pottery: "I like pottery, because it's humble, it's not kind of hubristic like a lot of contemporary art can be. I like the fact that it offers me a wide range of techniques to work with."[205] Perry is fusing this apparent pragmatism towards his medium of choice with a visual design that, at first sight, seems to completely lack the same.

The fusion of art and craft works as another apparent dichotomy in his work. While contemporary art is generally perceived as free expression with no boundaries, craftmanship is firmly settled within its historical traditions and is bound by a specific form.

Within the art world, craft pieces are not very common. They generally exist in two separate spheres, with separate discourses.

The British Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th and early 20th century, and the inspirations and theories surrounding it, had a significant impact on contemporary craftmanship nowadays. And while Perry is deviating from some of their principles by using modern technologies, he does share their primary objectives. Like William Morris, Perry is combining a distaste for mass-produced goods with an urge to democratize the aesthetic field.

Since 2007, he has also started to produce large-scale tapestries, with the first major work being *The Walthamstow Tapestry* (2009).[206] As in all of his work, Perry is again working with alleged contradictions, the confrontation of traditional craftsmanship with modern technology, like digital weaving.

An aspect that many of his works have in common is that they are narrative bound. Similar to American outsider artist Henry Darger, Perry, over the years, built his own fantastic storylines rooted in experiences he had as a child. Some of his pieces even remind one strongly of storybooks, often containing written content. After winning the Turner Prize, his works increasingly transformed into surveys of society, political issues, and the art market but still maintaining aspects of storytelling, with the difference that those stories became increasingly rooted in reality, touching on questions of class, capitalism, mechanisms of power, gender, and many more. His use of the written word, often but not exclusively in the form of speech bubbles, benefits the approachability of his works as it is easier to understand and, quite literally, easier to read.

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[205] Interview with Grayson Perry at the Turner Prize Retrospective 1984-2006, 1st Oct 2007.

[206] His first tapestry work was *Vote Alan Measles for God* (2007). Contrary to later woven works this was woven by hand.

He often is alluding to a storyboard style. This, in combination with his often coarse humour, is settled in the tradition of British social commentators of the 18th and 19th century, most of all William Hogarth.

Almost everyone of Perry's pots has at least some bit of writing on it. Some sketch out a complete story, while others only give us glimpses into short anecdotes. Some might be settled in reality, while others are likely to be completely fictitious or part of Perry's fantasy world that was discussed previously. In his written stories, he gives us little flashes of moments that might or might not have happened.

Perry is connecting traditional conservative methods and concepts with modern theory and contemporary experience. The combination of cultural heritage, with its conventional physical forms and popular culture with its logos, slogans, and visual signifiers, is something that is rarely seen in the contemporary art world.

Over the years, Perry's artistic language developed while holding on to a sense of sophisticated tackiness that also reaped him a fair share of critics.

He continually plays banality off against profundity touching on objectives of the Camp movement, which is combining personal trauma with overstatement and ridiculization of its own circumstances.

He has been described as an "outsider" to the art world as well as "gleefully anti-establishment."[207] Nonetheless, he is an established member of the same and has been for quite some time now. He was awarded some of the most prestigious awards of the British and international cultural scene. When asked about these contradictions, Perry said: "I can handle two contradictory ideas in my head at the same time. (…) I'm a very pragmatic person. As some politicians need to learn, you need to make compromises."[208]

This says a lot about how Perry sees the art world and the position of the artist in it, regarding the art establishment he is a part of but also the audience he wants to address. He has stated on numerous occasions that one of his aims is to make art more approachable to the outside world. Perry is trying to lure them in, appealing to their emotions by using a mix of familiar images, many of whom he takes from popular culture. An essential part of his appeal also is his self-staging as an outsider to the art world. To come back to Cas Mudde's definition of populism as "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite." Perry is staging himself as

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[207] Brown, in: The Guardian, 27th Feb 2020.

[208] Ibid.

part of "the pure people." In his oeuvre and his writing, he is repeatedly referring to his own working-class background, setting himself up as an outsider to the art establishment, while he has been part of it for close to twenty years.

Perry's art appeals to a populist aesthetic, negating a lot of the established notions of high art and scholarly elitism. His works are immediately understandable and can be "decrypted" by anyone without the need for a "key" – to come back to Bourdieu's writings on cultural capital. Perry is not anti-intellectual per se, as his works are alluding to numerous pieces of theory as well as art history. His works rarely contain direct quotes of cultural discourses, but looking at them, one cannot ignore its theoretical undertones, especially regarding his making of *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

Still, he never presupposes an amount of knowledge that would go beyond experiences anyone – no matter the amount of cultural capital – could make. In that sense, his art is inherently relatable to a wide-spread audience.

Leaves the question of whether Perry is achieving his goal of "widen(ing) the audience for art without dumbing it down."[209] His television programs certainly do have a certain reach. Whether this is true for his artistic work is yet to be determined.

Perry has claimed numerous times that one of his main objectives is to adhere to people who are from a “non-traditional background.” Perry pursues various tactics to achieve this. One of them is to “make things that are incredibly ornate and shiny so perhaps they adhere to a more ‘working-class’ aesthetic.”[210] This already leads us to the problem of the impossibility to define such a thing as a general “working-class aesthetic.” Following Bourdieu, there are certain judgements of taste that align us with our social background, but even those judgements are ever-shifting and vary in accordance with various other components.

This issue especially is a difficult one since it is usually attempted to be addressed by people who do belong to a “traditional background” themselves.

The general idea of populism is to get as large a group of people as possible to engage with a certain subject. This is done by breaking down a usually complex issue by using matters of language and expression that are easily accessible to the target group.

Perry’s works are theoretically certainly accessible. Still, the question remains whether they really reach their intended audience in the way it was planned. Perry himself is a well-known figure in Britain. This, however, doesn't necessarily ensure the same thing for his art. Apart

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[209] Perry, in: The Guardian, 27th May 2017.

[210] Klein 2013, p. 68.

from the issue of museum demographics, this, of course, also has to do with the problem of the "white cube," as described by Brian O'Doherty in 1976.[211] According to this, even if the excluded group is portrayed or addressed within a museum context, the institutional framework would function as an opposing force, forestalling any societal impact.

One could say that Perry is opposing those institutional forces in his television work, which gives people who do not tend to go to museums the possibility to join in on the topics his artworks evolve around and the process of making them. Most recently, Perry hosted *Grayson's Art Club*. The show, so far, consists of six episodes and was created as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each show had a different topic like portrait, the view from my window, or home. Perry invited the British public to send in their own contributions and then discussed them via video call. A selection of the best works will be exhibited once the pandemic is over.

Despite the efforts of many cultural workers to become more inclusive, there might still be people who don't see the value in building such spaces. The arguments being that if people don't try to become a part of it – the art world – maybe they just don't want to be, or the before mentioned fear of a loss of standards.

Cultural scientist Doris Sommer wrote regarding this discussion of a more inclusive cultural scene: "Misunderstanding, intentional or not, is also why foreigners help keep democracy dynamic, by asking unlikely questions that stimulate justification to reform."[212] In this way, the 'foreigner' is the non-professional, excluded spectator, whose diverse perspective might bring new insights with it.

Afterall the contemporary art scene is rather a lab of ideas and a forum for discussion than it is a plinth for the exposition of the most popular artworks – or at least it should be.

[211] O'Doherty 1996.

[212] Sommer 2014, p. 27.

10. Figures

fig. 1 Grayson Perry in Neo-Naturist performance at the Fridge, Brixton, London, 1982

fig. 2 Sketch from Playing to the Gallery, 2014

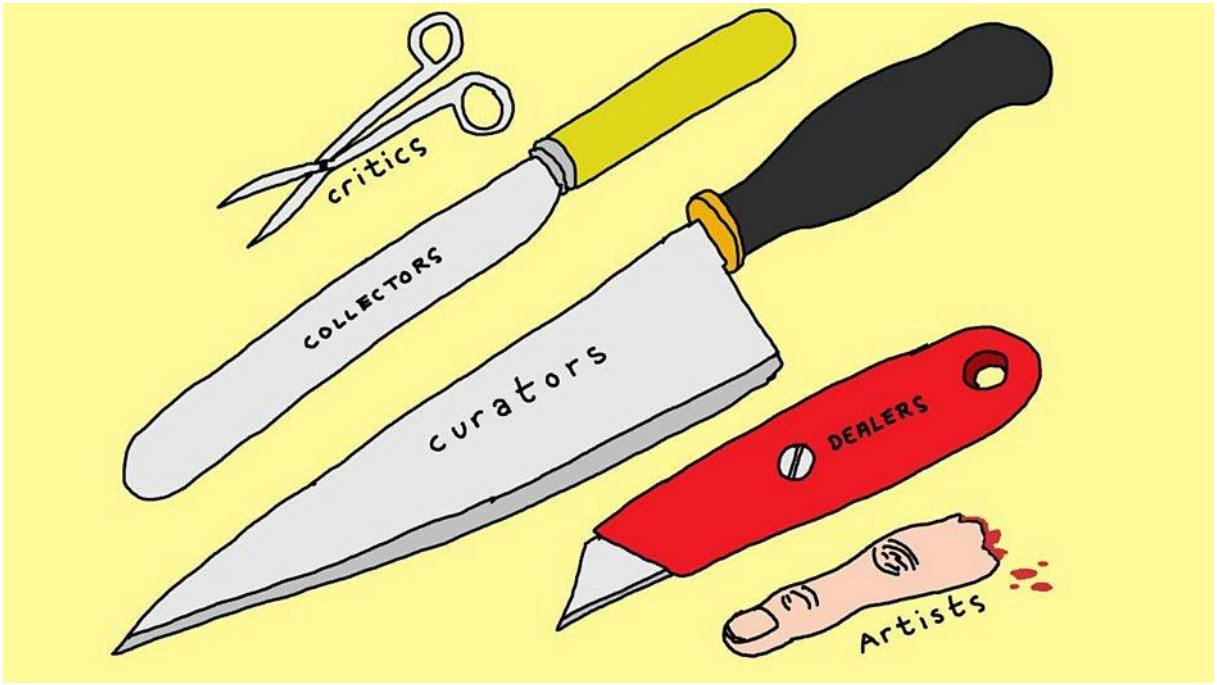

fig. 3 Sketch from Playing to the Gallery, 2014

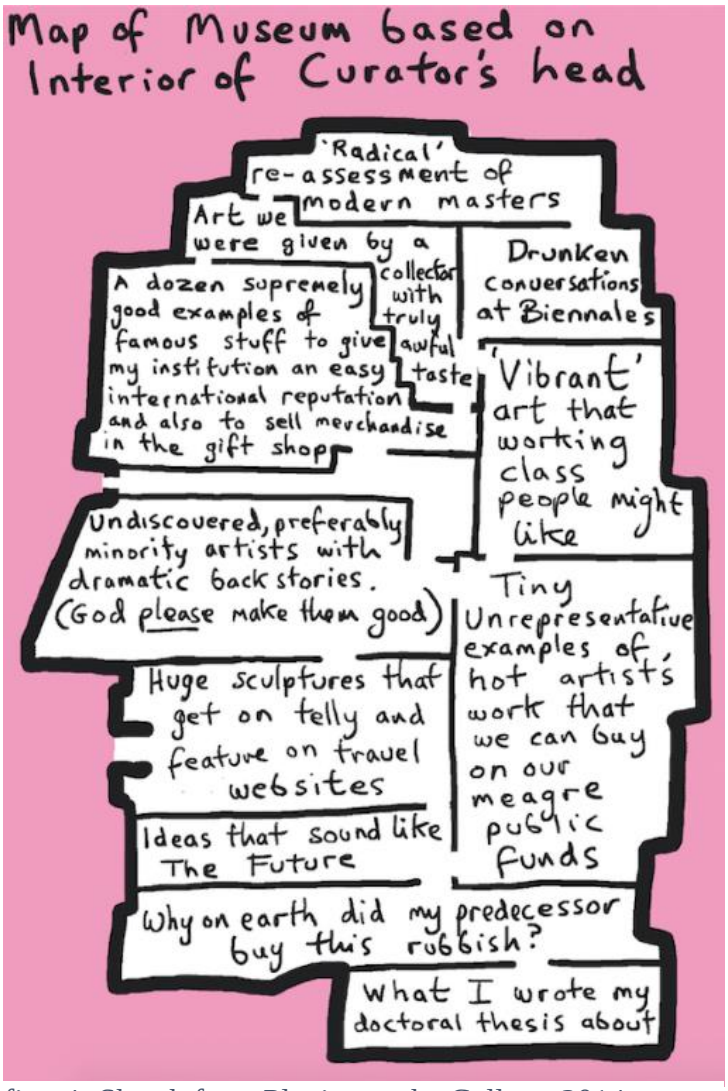

fig. 4 Sketch from Playing to the Gallery, 2014

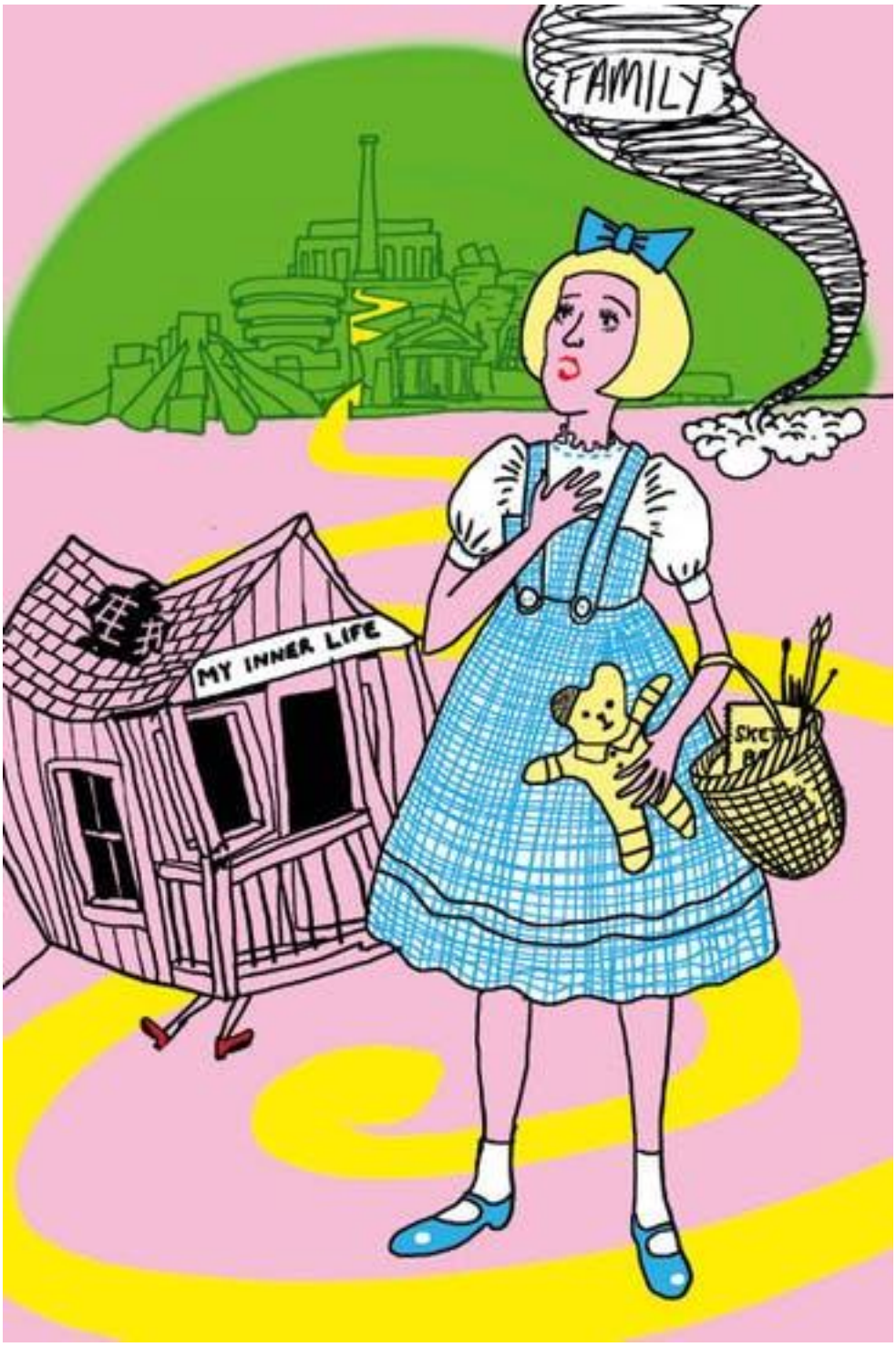

fig. 5 Sketch from Playing to the Gallery, 2014

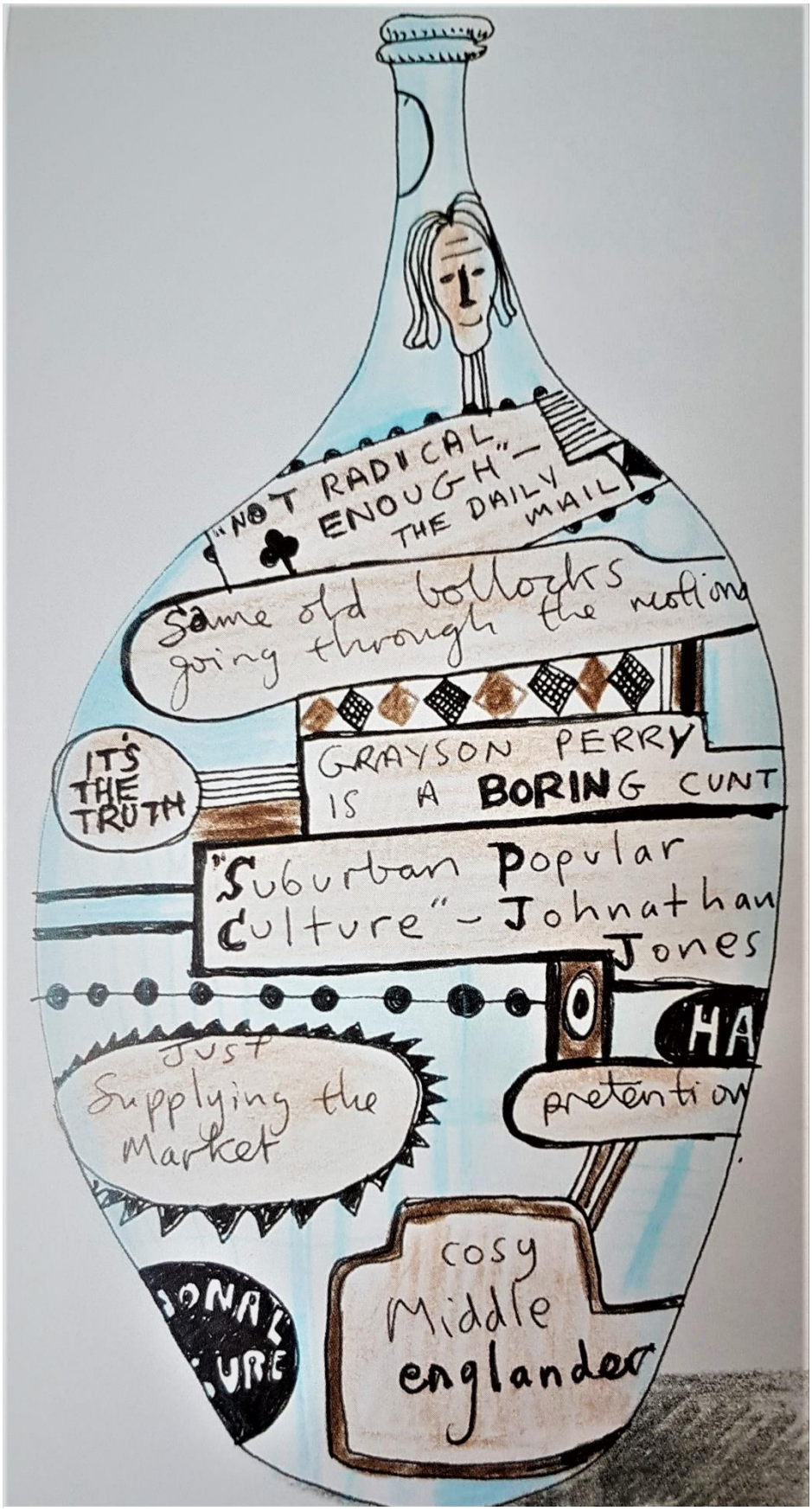

fig. 6 Sketch for Puff Piece, 2016

fig. 7 Why, Grayson Darling, 1978/79, from: Jones, Wendy: Grayson Perry. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl, London 2007, p. 109-111

fig. 8 Roy Liechtenstein, Masterpiece, 1962, oil painting, 137 x 137 cm

fig. 9 Traditional Society, 2019, glazed ceramic with metal, rope and crystal, 57 x 33,5 cm

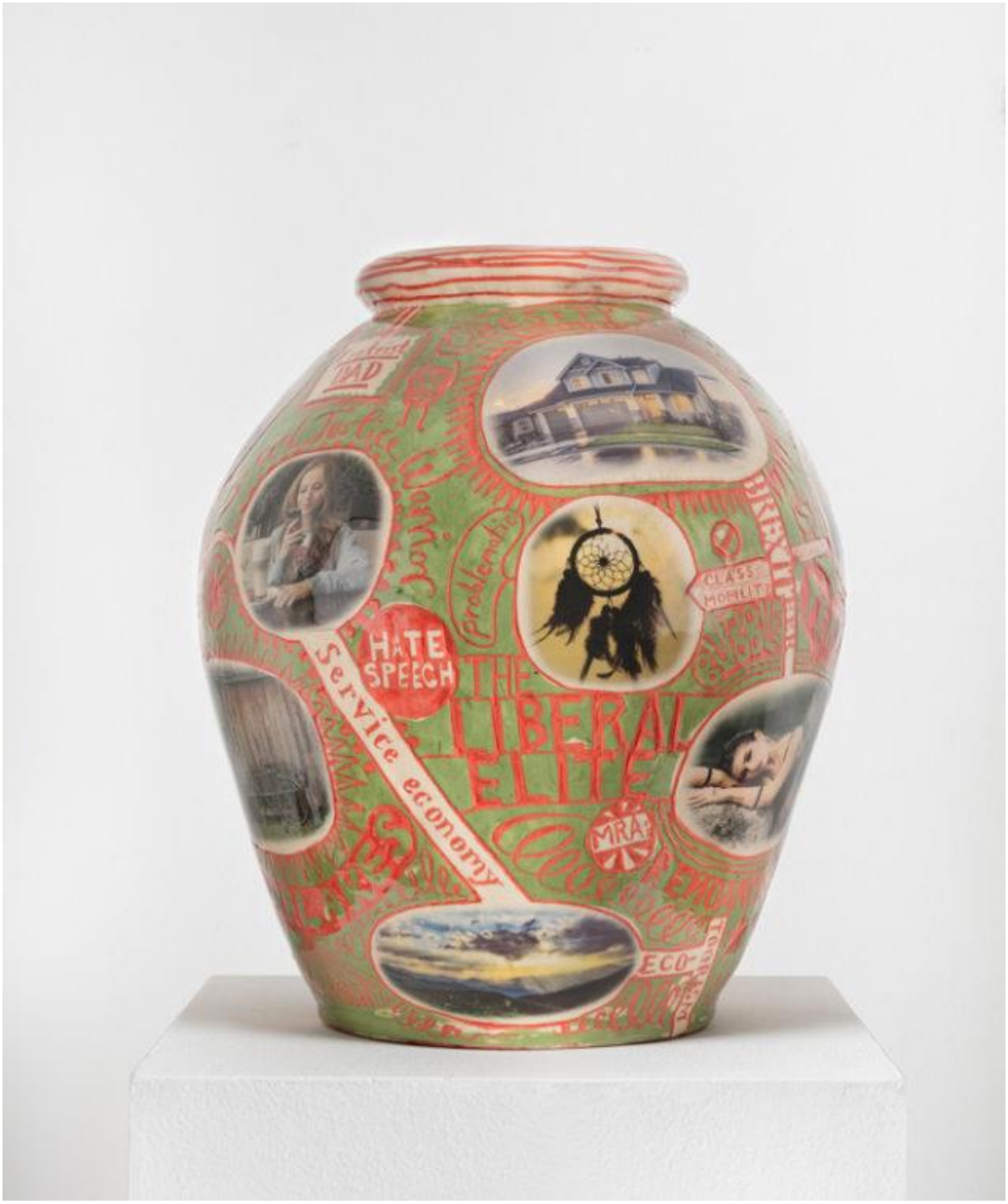

fig. 10 Empty Vessel, 2018, glazed ceramic, 45 x 38 cm

fig. 11 Gulf War Dinner Service, 1991, under-glazed painting on porcelain factory blanks, 26 x 34 x 2.7 cm

fig. 12 Gulf War Dinner Service, 1991, under-glazed painting on porcelain factory blanks, 26 x 34 x 2.7 cm

fig. 13 Gulf War Dinner Service, 1991, under-glazed painting on porcelain factory blanks, 26 x 34 x 2.7 cm

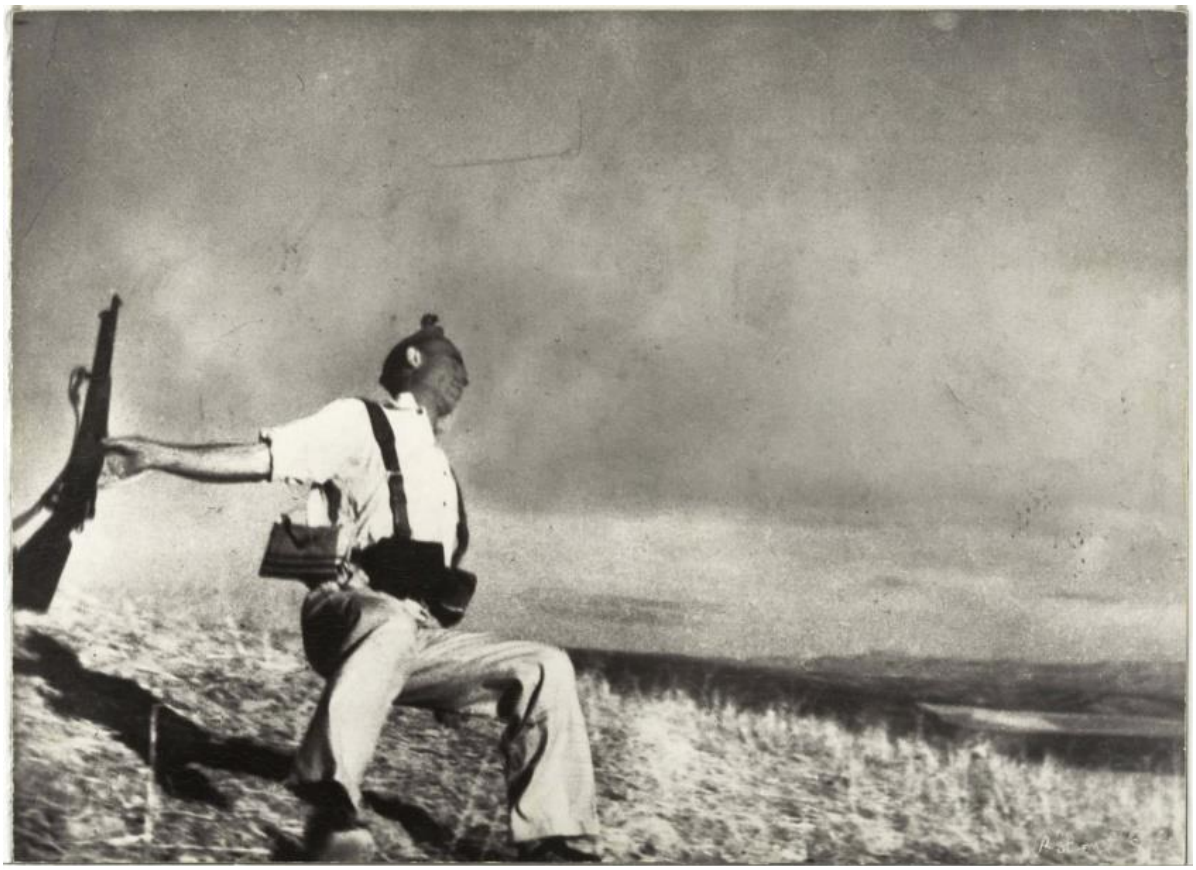

fig. 14 Robert Capa, Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5th, 1936 (The Falling Soldier), gelatin silver print, 24.7 x 34 cm

fig. 15 The Walthamstow Tapestry, 2009, digitally woven wool and cotton tapestry, 300 x 1500 cm1

fig. 16 We are what we buy, 2000, glazed ceramic, 50 x 22 cm

fig. 17 Ultimate Consumer Durable, 2005, glazed ceramic, 65 45 cm

fig. 18 For Faith in Shopping, 2008, struck copper, 6.8 x 6.8 x 0.6 cm

fig. 19 Shopping for Meaning, 2019, glazed ceramic, 81 x 48 cm

fig. 20 Barbaric Splendour, 2003, glazed ceramic, 67 x 35.5 cm

fig. 21 Revenge of the Alison Girls, 2000, glazed ceramic, 65 x 26 cm

fig. 22 Us against Us, 2004, glazed ceramic, 45 x 34 cm

fig. 23 Henry Darger, Spangled blengin, child-headed. All nations of Christian nature, ca. 1910-1973, watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on paper, 14 x 27 cm

fig. 24 Interior Conflict, 2004, glazed ceramic, 43.5 x 35 cm

fig. 25 Henry Darger, Untitled (detail), date unknown, from The Realms of the Unreal, mixed media on paper, 55.9 x 208.3 cm

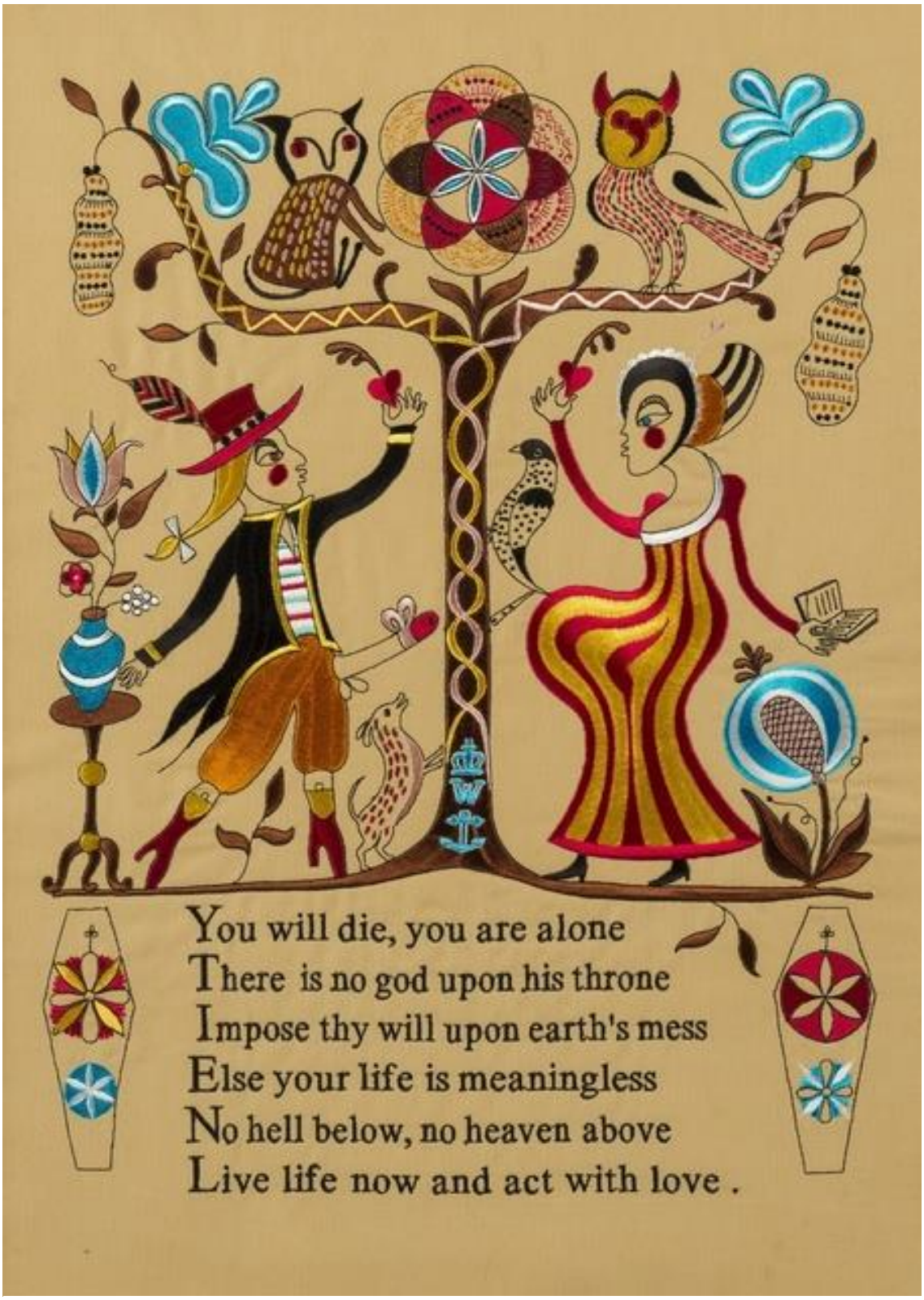

fig. 26 Recipe for Humanity, 2005, cotton and rayon, computer-controlled embroidery, 48.5 x 36.5 cm

fig. 27 Mr and Mrs Perry, 2005, linocuts on handmade paper, each 52 x 38 cm

fig. 28 Head of a Fallen Giant, 2008, bronze, 40 x 35 x 50 cm

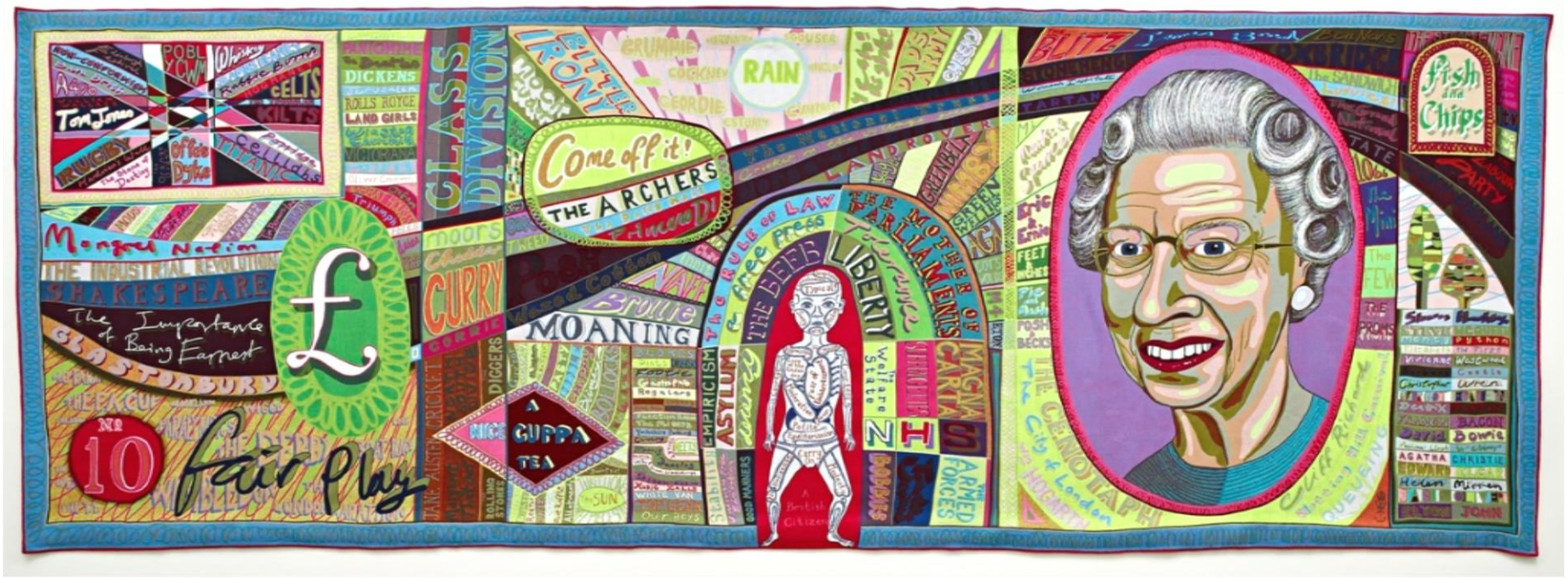

fig. 29 Comfort Blanket, 2014, digitally woven tapestry, 290 x 800 cm

fig. 30 The Rosetta Vase, glazed ceramic, 2011

fig. 31 Map of an Englishman, 2004, etching from four plates, 112 x 150 cm

fig. 32 John Speed, Scotland, 1611, from The Theatre of the Empire of Britain, etching, 38.7 x 50.8 cm

fig. 33 A Map of Days, 2013, etching from four plates, 119.5 x 161 cm

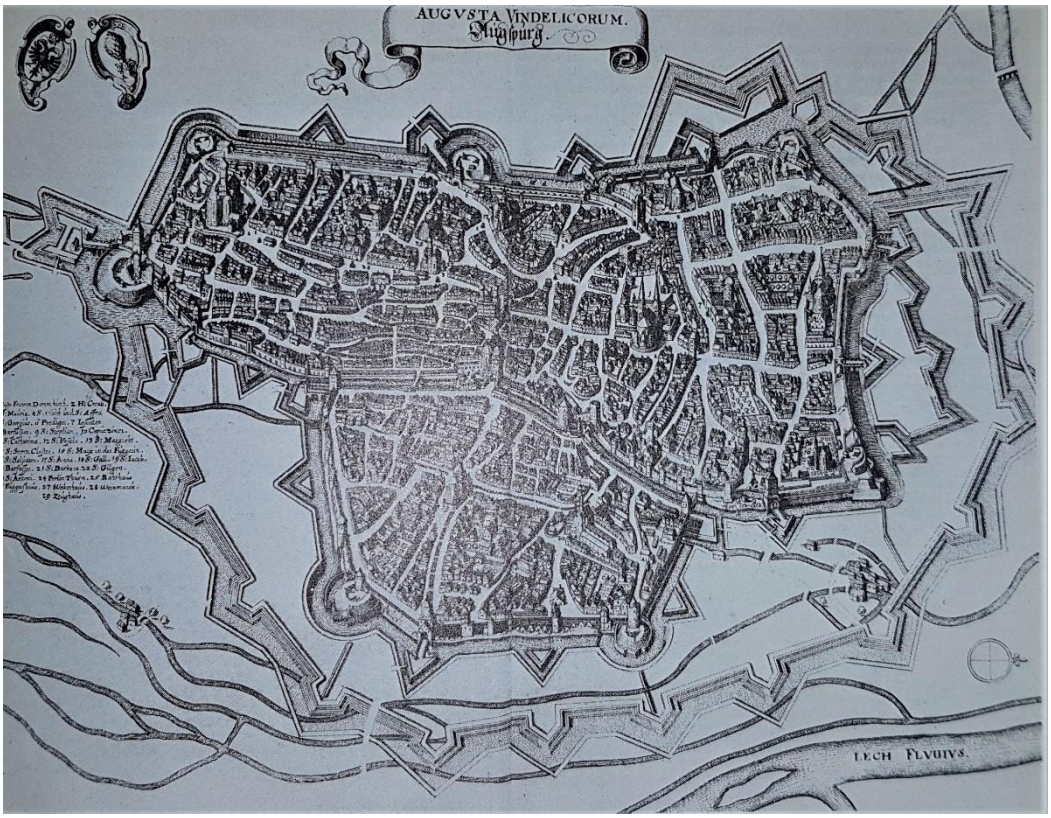

fig. 34 Zeiler, The Swedish fortification at Augsburg, 1643

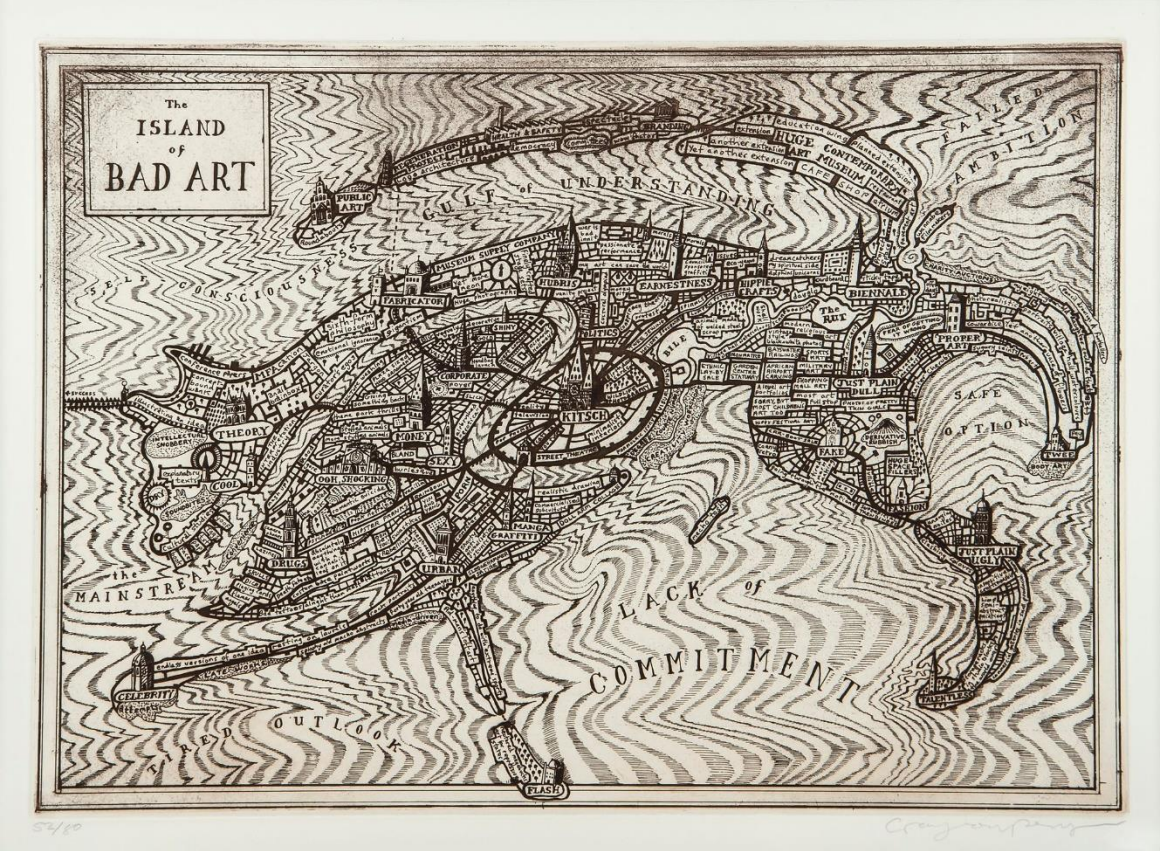

fig. 35 The Island of Bad Art, 2013, etching printed with tone on woven paper, 41.2 x 59 cm

fig. 36 Jacopo de' Barbari, mappa di Venezia, 1498-1500, woodcut print, 133 x 278 cm

fig. 37 Britain is Best, 2014, hand embroidery, 120 x 100

fig. 38 artist unknown: The Miracle of Saint George and the Dragon, 1800-1850, Russia, painted wood, 40.40 x 35 x 3 cm

fig. 39 Crown of the Penii, 1982, bronze, steel, leather, ceramic, and found objects, 12 x 24 cm

fig. 40 Village of the Penians, 2001, glazed ceramic, 50 x 24 cm

fig. 41 Portrait of Anthony D'Offay, 1998, glazed ceramic, 42/44 x 13.4/15 cm

fig. 42 Claire's Coming Out Dress, 2000, silk satin, rayon and lace, 125 x 80 cm

fig. 43 Alan Measles, mixed media

fig. 44 photograph taken at a transvestite weekend in Bournemouth, 1999

fig. 45 Claire as the Mother of all Battles, 1996, photographic print, 71 x 48 cm

fig. 46 photograph taken for The Charms of Lincolnshire exhibition, 2005, 25.4 x 20.3 cm

fig. 47 Wise Alan, 2007, glazed ceramic, 97 x 56 x 45 cm

fig. 48 artist unknown: Vase in the form of a seated man holding a glass of wine, Iran (probably Kashan), about 1220, Fritware, decorated with under-glaze colours and lustre, 19.9 x 11.6 cm

fig. 49 Shrine to Alan Measles, 2007, clazed ceramic, 72 x 66 x 52 cm

fig. 50 Grumpy Old God, 2010, glazed ceramic, 71 x 44.6 cm

fig. 51 Kenilworth AM1, 2010, custom motorcycle, 159 x 126 cm

fig. 52 Pope Alan Stamp, 2010, Ink on scrap paper, 12.5 x 10.1 cm

fig. 53 Alan Measles on Horseback, 2007, cast iron, 86 x 69 x 20 cm

fig. 54 Pilgrim badge with a circular frame and standing figure of St Thomas Becket, England, 13th or 14th c., 7.5 x 6.5 cm

fig. 55 Tomb Guardian, 2011, glazed ceramic, 77 x 60 x 60 cm

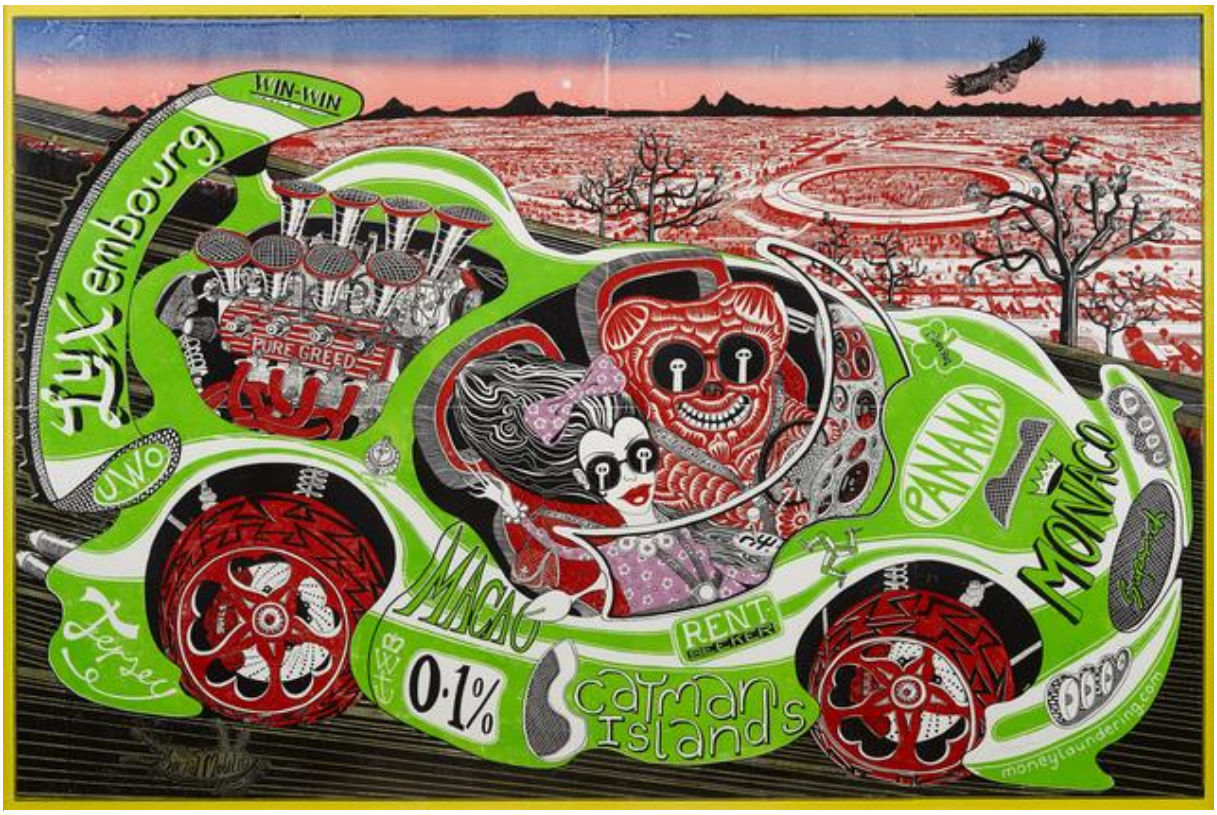

fig. 56 Sponsored by You, 2019, woodblock print, 215 x 320 cm

fig. 57 World Leaders Attend the Marriage of Claire Perry and Alan Measles, 2009, glazed ceramic, 52 x 32 cm

fig. 58 artist unknown, Eros and Nike, 470-400 BC, red-figured askos, 6.35 x 8.89 cm

fig. 59 Aspects of Myself, 2001, glazed ceramic, 55 x 41 cm

fig. 60 from Cycle of Violence, 1992

fig. 61 Aubrey Beardsley, Of a Neophyte and how the Black Art was revealed unto him, 1899, lithography, n.m.

fig. 62 My Heroes, 1994, glazed ceramic, 30.4 x 31 cm

fig. 63 An Oik's Progress, 2004, glazed ceramic, 44 x 26 cm

fig. 64 Unknown artist, Furnishing fabric of toile de Jouy plate-printed cotton 'Plaisirs Maritimes', Jouy, c. 1900, 95 x 78 cm

fig. 65 William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress: The Heir, 1732-1735, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm

fig. 66 William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress: The Levée, 1732-1735, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm

fig. 67 William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress: The Orgy, 1732-1735, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm

fig. 68 William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress: The Arrest, 1732-1735, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm

fig. 69 William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress: The Marriage, 1732-1735, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm

fig. 70 William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress: The Gaming House, 1732-1735, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm

fig. 71 William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress: The Prison, 1732-1735, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm

fig. 72 William Hogarth, A Rake's Progress: The Madhouse, 1732-1735, oil on canvas, 62.5 x 75 cm

fig. 73 The Vanity of Small Differences: The Adoration of the Cage Fighters, 2012, wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester, and silk tapestry, each 200 x 400 cm

fig. 74 The Vanity of Small Differences: The Agony in the Car Park, 2012, wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester, and silk tapestry, each 200 x 400 cm

fig. 75 The Vanity of Small Differences: Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close, 2012, wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester, and silk tapestry, each 200 x 400 cm

fig. 76 The Vanity of Small Differences: The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal, 2012, wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester, and silk tapestry, each 200 x 400 cm

fig. 77 The Vanity of Small Differences: The Upper Class at Bay, 2012, wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester, and silk tapestry, each 200 x 400 cm

fig. 78 The Vanity of Small Differences: #Lamentation, 2012, wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester, and silk tapestry, each 200 x 400 cm

fig. 79 Andrea Mantegna, The Adoration of the Shepherds, c. 1450, oil painting, 40 x 56 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

fig. 80 Michelangelo Buonarroti, The Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden, 1509-10, fresco, 280 x 570 cm

fig. 81 Jan van Eyck, The Arnolfini Portrait, 1435, oil painting on wood, 82 x 60 cm

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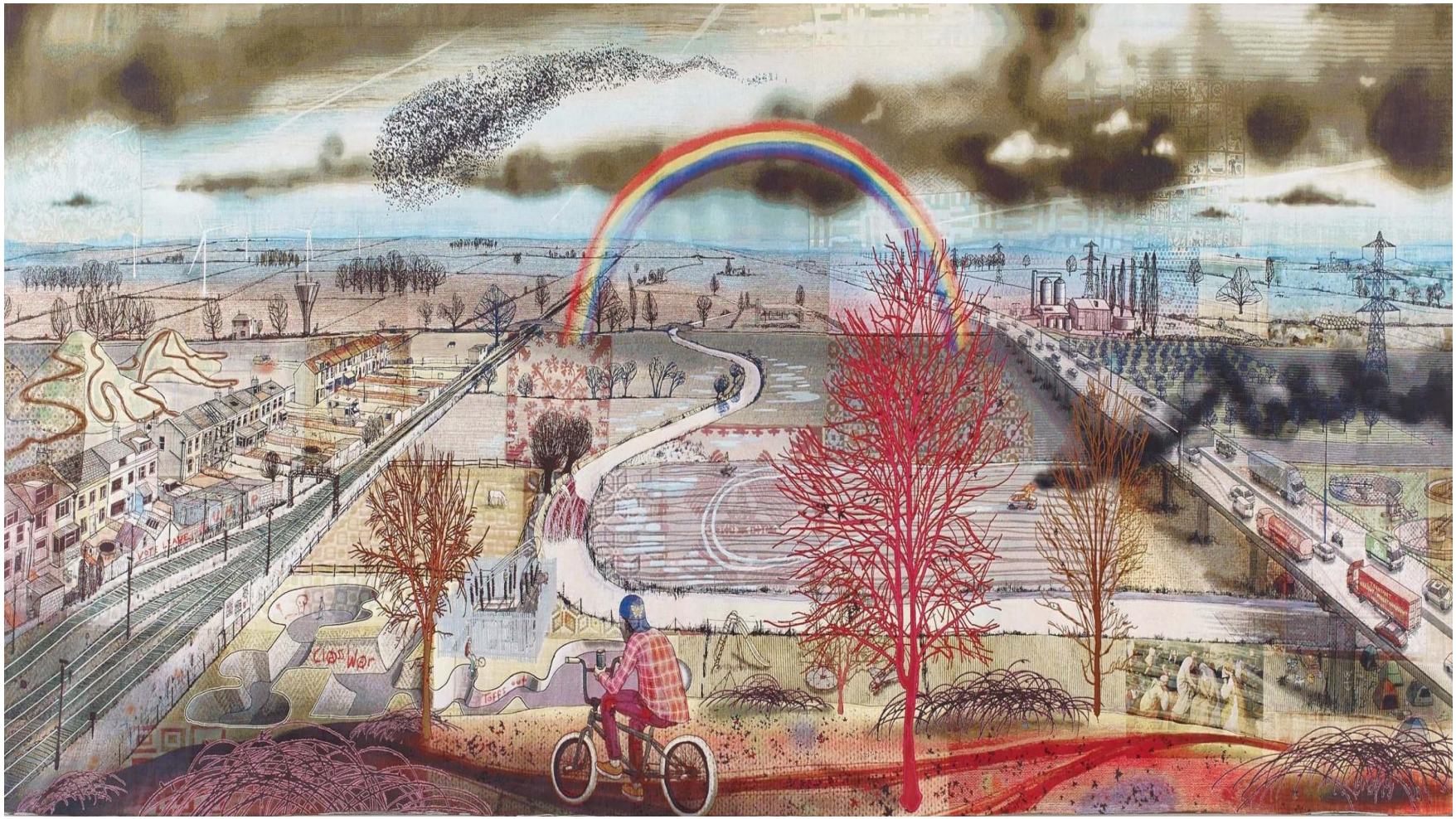

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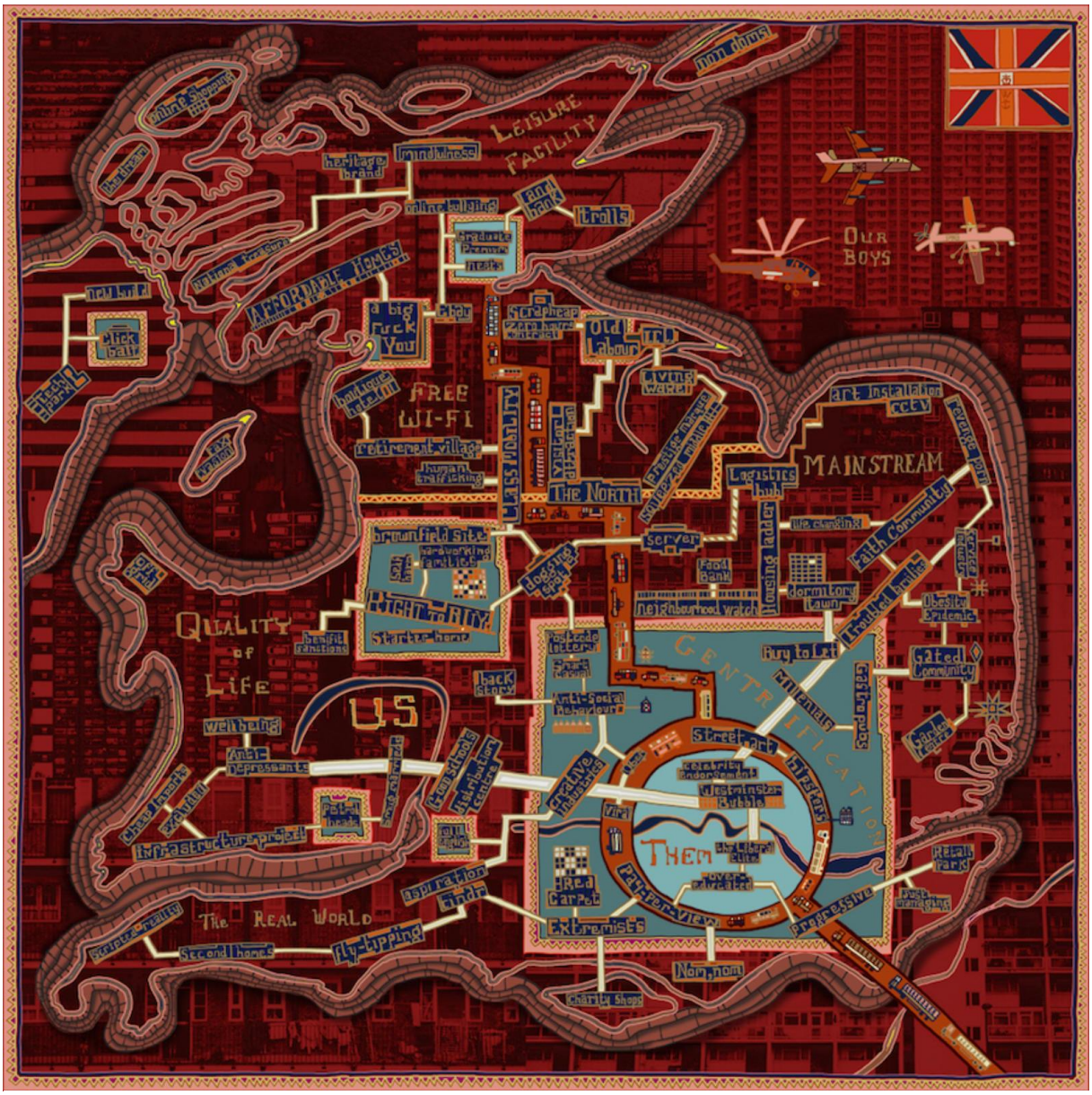

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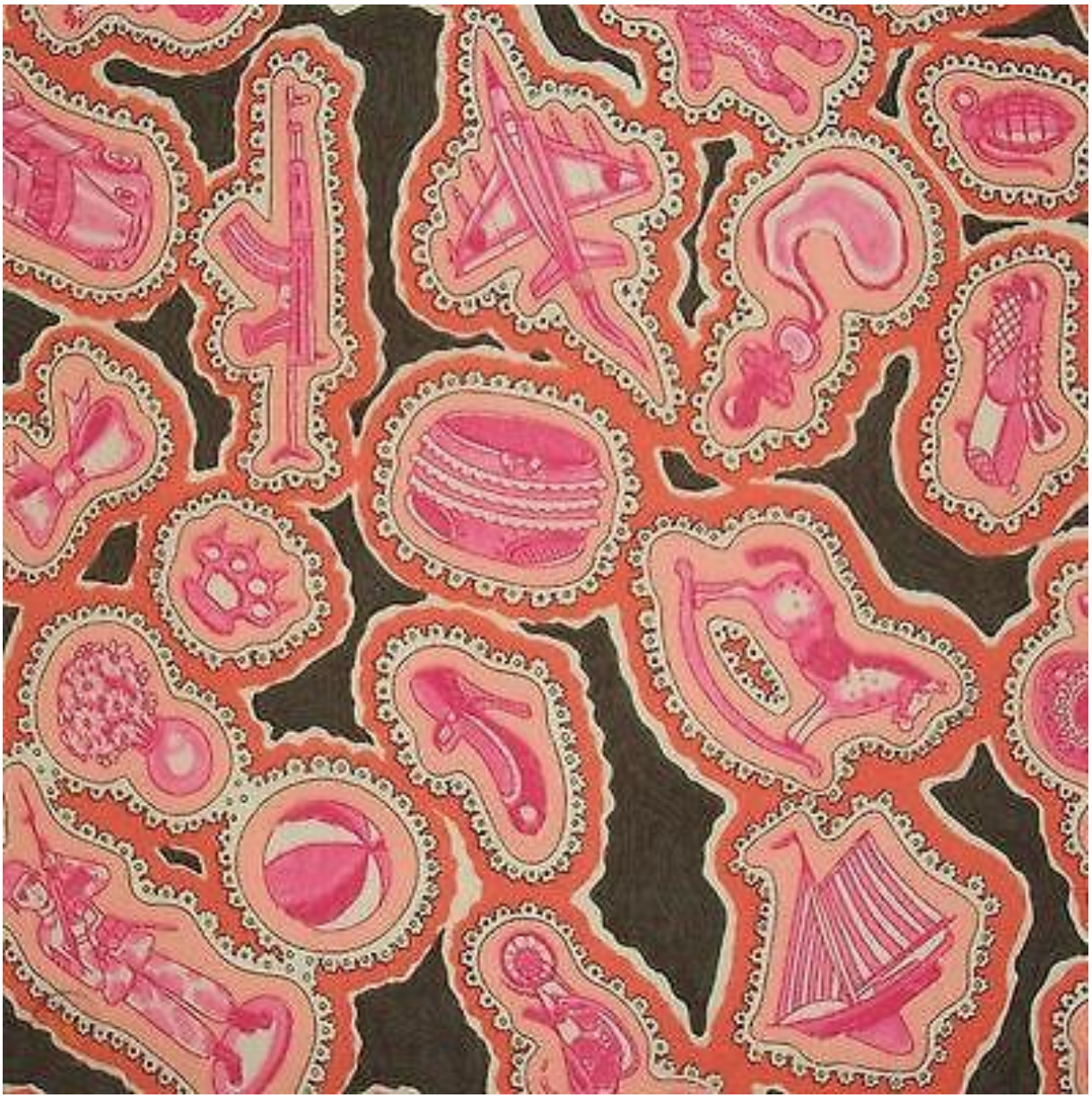

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14. Abstract

Grayson Perry, der spätestens, seit ihm 2003 der Turner Prize verliehen wurde, mit seinen grellen, häufig kitschig anmutenden Arbeiten Aufsehen erregt, beschäftigt sich seit den 1980er Jahren mit Aspekten der Populärkultur, sowie Ideen von Popularität und Populismus. Viele seiner Arbeiten befassen sich damit, wie diese in die zeitgenössische Kunstszene integriert werden können, welche doch gemeinhin als elitär wahrgenommen wird – als etwas, das nicht vorrangig für die „breite Masse“ geschaffen ist/wird, sondern vielmehr für das oftmals als elitär kritisierte “art establishment.“

Obwohl Perry in Großbritannien zu den populärsten zeitgenössischen Künstlern zählt, sind wissenschaftliche Arbeiten zu seinem Schaffen begrenzt. Diese Arbeit befasst sich nun mit seinem Oeuvre und versucht es in einen kunsthistorischen und sozialgeschichtlichen Kontext zu stellen. Perrys Bildsprache schöpft aus verschiedensten Kunstrichtungen, die alle auf ihre Weise in Zusammenhang mit Fragen von Popularität, Populärkultur und Populismus stehen, beispielsweise mit der Pop Art Bewegung und deren Rezeption im britischen Raum oder dem Arts and Crafts Movement des späten 19. Jahrhunderts.

Im Zusammenhang mit diesen Überlegungen muss auf die verschiedenen Anwendungsbereiche in der Kunst von Grayson Perry eingegangen werden, in die Populismus Einzug halten kann und es auch tut. Perry setzt sich nicht nur konzeptuell und thematisch damit auseinander, sondern auch durch die Wahl seiner Materialien, durch die Art der Präsentation seiner Arbeiten und nicht zuletzt durch das Einbringen seiner eigenen Persönlichkeit und seiner „Selbstinszenierung.“