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Exhibition review

How do we audience the artwork we see? A response to the exhibition *Grayson Perry: My pretty little art career*

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney

Curated by Rachel Kent

10 December 2015 – 1 May 2016

Reviewed by Rachael Ireland

This response reflects on my experience as a trainee art therapist attending the exhibition as a formal learning activity in the Master of Art Therapy program at Western Sydney University, and draws on my experience working as an artist educator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney. It considers audience engagement and the processes of viewing artwork and constructing meaning. In discussing my response to *Grayson Perry: My pretty little art career*, I also explore Gilroy's (2008) discussion on audiencing, and influences on art therapists' practices of looking and meaning-making.

My pretty little art career was a major survey exhibition of the work of British artist Grayson Perry (b. 1960), held at the MCA as part of the 2015–16 Sydney International Art Series. Curated by MCA chief curator Rachel Kent, the exhibition brought together Perry's work from a period spanning more than 30 years, encompassing ceramics, sculpture, drawing, prints, photography, and garments. Autobiography infuses Perry's practice and he has made much work that reflects upon his childhood and adult life experiences (Kent, 2015). His work probes personal and social questions of identity, exploring themes such as gender, sexuality, nationalism, and social and economic status (Kent, 2015).

Additionally, Perry describes therapy as a major influence on his practice, both through his own experience of six years in therapy,

and through discussions about the profession with his wife, a trained analyst (ABC, 2016; Kent, 2015). This is reflected not only in his artworks, but also in how he talks about his art practice. Perry states that his role as an artist is to notice things (Kent, 2015; Perry, 2014). He describes this as “delving into my own and the communal unconscious and bringing things I notice up into the light of awareness” (Kent, 2015, p.37). This process results in Perry investigating aspects of himself that are similar to other people, and exploring how personal experiences intersect with shared experiences in society (ABC, 2016). I contend that, in so doing, he has created artworks that reach out to audiences, inviting them to participate in a collective inquiry, and reflection, around social constructions of identity.

This aspect of the exhibition was significant for me. It prompted me to reflect further on the processes of viewing and interpretation when audiencing artworks, and the construction of meaning through relational experiences that connect artist, artwork, and audiences. It also led me to wonder about how, as art therapists, do we audience the artwork we see, and how do these processes differ or translate between museum and art therapy contexts. Working as an artist educator, my experience of audiencing is grounded in fostering personal connection and active participation in viewing and responding to artworks and artists' practices, and collaboratively constructing meaning.

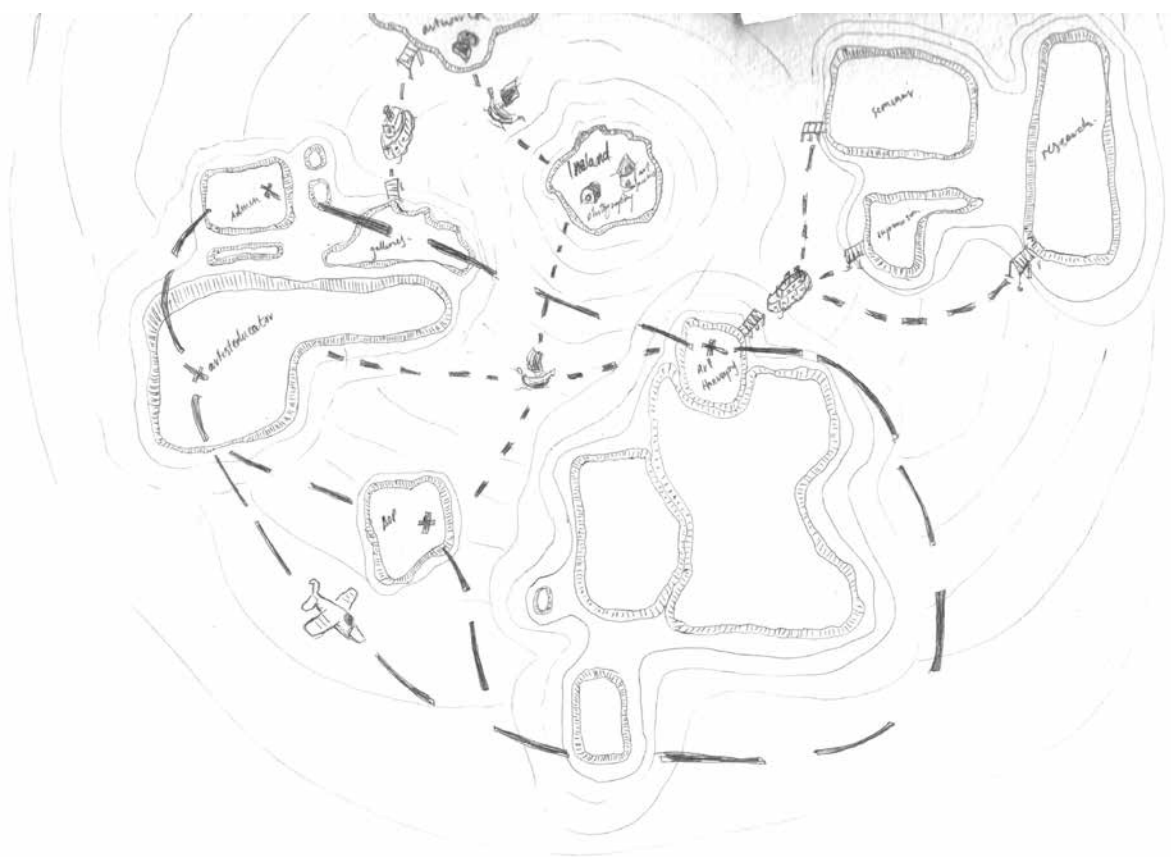


Figure 1. Rachael Ireland, *Map 2*, pen on paper, 210 × 297mm.

In discussing audience engagement and the construction of meaning, Gilroy (2008) reaches beyond this immediate relational experience to include the social context in which audiencing occurs and the discourses that inform how audiences look at and think about art. I find this significant, considering that for art therapists the social contexts of workplaces, and the discourses active in them, can diverge greatly from those of art museums and galleries. Gilroy (2008) suggests that the cumulative effects of these workplace differences have the potential to cut art therapists off from what she considers to be an essential engagement in discourses of art history and visual culture, and to erode practices of audiencing.

Following this, to reflect in more detail on my experience as an audience member attending Perry's *My pretty little art career*, it seems appropriate to begin by considering the context in which I was looking, and discourses that might inform this looking. I visited this

exhibition along with other art therapy students enrolled in research units. While it was a self-directed exploration of the exhibition, it was also a component in a formal learning activity.

As I went about my looking, I was conscious of the task of drawing out connections between this exhibition, and theories and practice of research and therapy, with a particular focus on reflexivity and visual experience. This seemed to jostle and contend with my being present to viewing. Here I draw connections with Gilroy's (2008) use of the phrase 'effort after meaning' to describe how we glance, focus, and visually gather or discard information according to what we are looking for, whether consciously aware of this or not.

Moving in closer to view the art, I became interested in Perry's prints, vases and tapestries that depicted maps or referenced mapping practice in relation to construction of identity. As I reflected on my experience of looking at these prints, and in particular *Print for a politician*,¹ I was struck by the simultaneity of

being able to locate or position oneself within the specificities of the map, but also remain an external viewer, present to what the map is depicting in its entirety.

Here I felt I was sharing in Perry's interest for bringing or mapping things into conscious awareness. In response to Perry's work, and to further extend this new way of seeing and thinking, I drew several maps over the following weeks. For me, these basic maps served a specific purpose of bringing clarity to the beginnings of my clinical placement experience and mapping into consciousness how I was navigating my multiple art-related professional identities and locating myself as a trainee art therapist. (Figure 1).

Endnote

1. Image of the work discussed, *Print for a politician*, can be viewed at <http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/work.aspx?obj=33471>

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