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REITH LECTURES 2013: PLAYING TO THE GALLERY

Presenter: Grayson Perry

Lecture 4: I Found Myself in the Art World

Recorded at Platform Theatre, Central St. Martins

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SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to the fourth of this year's BBC Reith Lectures. It's our last stop on the journey and we've come to a place where our lecturer feels very much at home. We're in the Platform Theatre of Central St. Martins, the HQ of the six colleges across London that make up the University of the Arts where he's now one of the lecturers.

His Reith Lectures are called *Playing to the Gallery*, and if you've heard what's gone before, you'll know that they've been a witty, forthright and revealing exploration of modern society's relationship with art and the art world in general.

Today we're striking a more personal note as our lecturer describes the sometimes painful process of becoming an artist and explores the nature of artistic identity. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the BBC Reith Lecturer 2013: Grayson Perry.

(APPLAUSE)

GRAYSON PERRY: *(makes movement)*

SUE LAWLEY: What is this, what is this movement?

GRAYSON PERRY: It's mime. I always feel like I should do mime when I'm in this outfit.

SUE LAWLEY: You can't do mime on the radio, Grayson. (GRAYSON PERRY LAUGHS) It doesn't go well on radio. Now it's here at St. Martins where the students make all of the wonderful outfits you wear as your female alter ego. I'm not sure whether you're female tonight or not. You're a kind of clown, you're a Pierrot.

GRAYSON PERRY: Yeah. Maybe it's sort of perverse of me, but I thought because I was going to talk about quite touching things today, I'd flirt with the cliché of the sad clown. Because, as I say in my lecture, clichés are something I have a real problem with, so I thought I would test myself.

SUE LAWLEY: So you're testing yourself in what? We should describe it.

GRAYSON PERRY: It's a kind of satin Pierrot outfit by one of the students called Wataru Tomagama.

SUE LAWLEY: And it's orange and green and purple and mauve and any colour you like really.

GRAYSON PERRY: Yeah it's in a pastel range.

SUE LAWLEY: In the pastel range. (LAUGHTER) The eyelashes are *not* in the pastel range.

GRAYSON PERRY: (*in French accent*) Orange.

SUE LAWLEY: (*in French accent*) Orange. With blue up above and pink up above that ...

GRAYSON PERRY: Yeah.

SUE LAWLEY: ... and the tears of the clown tumbling down the cheeks, huh?

GRAYSON PERRY: Yeah.

SUE LAWLEY: So it's a poignant moment, end of your Reith journey.

GRAYSON PERRY: It is and I am symbolising it in my make-up.

SUE LAWLEY: You ... (LAUGHTER) You told me the other day that actually preparing these lectures had really made you think about what you do and how you do it. What do you mean by that?

GRAYSON PERRY: I've had my career and I've been sort of chugging along quite nicely for quite a few years now, and to suddenly stop and really think about the business I'm in and all the possibilities that it offers - I mean you know art more than any other business offers possibilities - it's really made me think oh you know I'm on a tramline and there's this sort of vast plain on either side which I could venture off into. And so it's almost made me slightly sort of troubled in that my sort of position on my career track feels a little more tenuous. But that's quite healthy; I think that's good to do that. I mean you know Duchamp said clear your studio out at least twice in your life.

SUE LAWLEY: Okay, before we begin a reminder to listeners that you can join in or follow the debate on Twitter using the #Reith - R.E.I.T.H. So, Grayson, lecture number four is called *I Found Myself in the Art World*.

(APPLAUSE)

GRAYSON PERRY: Now I've called this lecture *I Found Myself in the Art World* partly because I want to talk about the experience of becoming an artist and the kind of psychological idea of finding yourself. You know that's maybe a bit of a cliché in the psychotherapy world. And also, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, I've kind of

found myself in this marvellous, interesting world - the art world. I've sort of landed here.

And I'm speaking in the theatre here in Central St. Martins behind King's Cross, and I think it's a brilliant stand-in for the Emerald City because you know the new art school here is one of the biggest in Europe, if not *the* biggest in Europe, and 'emerald' because it has a fantastic jewellery department run by Caroline Broadhead. So I think that it's a very fitting stand-in for that place.

And the basic question I want to ask is: how do we become a contemporary artist? And I think the popular idea of the artist is that they sort of spring fully formed, almost genetically gifted like mythological creatures from the womb, ready to go, and they've got this sort of urge that they're born with. And perhaps the most famous quote about becoming an artist is from Pablo Picasso and he said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." And I think what he's trying to say is that you know a child has this unselfconscious joy of creativity and they're always playing and painting and making things without a thought in the world, and then as we get older of course we become aware of art history and that what we're not doing might not be very good and so it makes it harder and harder and harder as we get older. That self-consciousness is crippling.

But I think there's another aspect that is sort of part of becoming an artist, if you like. And I don't want to add to the cliché of the suffering artist in his garret, but I think there is a thing where the human being, the human mind has this amazing capacity to transform traumatic events; and so artists who've had quite significant difficulties in their upbringing, often they're able to transform this by some sort of amazing process in their mind that turns kind of like terrible events into gold and into marvellous masterpieces that we can all appreciate.

And the clinical scientist Raymond Tallis, he said, "Art is expressing one's universal wound - the wound of living a finite life of incomplete meanings." And I like that idea - that you know it's quite a sort of noble journey we're on.

But not every artist has some terrible, terrible event in their past. I mean there's many artists, I do believe - I've not met that many of them - who are happy (LAUGHTER) and they haven't got this sort of terrible thing in their past that they feed on. But most artists probably have a kind of crux event some time in their early life which they can sort of self-mythologize about why they became an artist.

And perhaps the most famous example of this is Joseph Beuys, the German artist in the mid-20th century. He was in World War Two and he was a gunner on a Stuka dive bomber on the Eastern Front and he was shot down over Crimea. And they crashed and he was thrown from the wreckage and he was in the snow and he says he was found by some Tatar tribesmen, and he was very badly injured and they got his injured body and they covered it in fat and then they wrapped it in felt blankets and they kept him warm and alive until they could get him to hospital. And this is the reason, Joseph Beuys says, why he uses fat and felt in his sculptures - they're his signature materials - and his interest in Shamanism, which was of course the Tatars' religion.

My signature material is clay, so my mythologizing story, if you like, involves the fact that when I was about nine, I had my first ever pottery lesson. And I'd probably been a little bit naughty in class and I was put with the girls - yeah, you can see where this is going (LAUGHTER) - and to make pottery, I had to wear a PVC smock buttoned up the back with snappers. Mine was a little bit tight and it was light blue and very shiny, and they had a very pretty teaching assistant who snapped it onto me. And I can remember feeling quite sort of turned on by this whole scenario at the age of nine and I made my first coil pot in this state. (LAUGHTER)

Now I don't want to extrapolate any sort of thing about this - why I went on to make pottery that had you know often sexual imagery on it - but, you know, maybe there's something. Or maybe I'm doing what Joseph Beuys did, which is to twist the truth quite a lot to mythologize his own past because the story that he gave wasn't quite as it happened.

But art when you're growing up, it's serious play. And when I was a child, my fantasy

world that I had where my teddy bear was the king in my fantasy world and I used to sort of always play in this big, elaborate scenario - it was my escape place, it was my survival place where I could go during frightening times in my childhood.

And art, like play, can have a very serious purpose because I think one of the most serious purposes that art can have is helping children deal with the difficulties in their lives.

This year, I went to visit a charity, a marvellous charity called The Art Room. They have these very beautifully equipped art studios attached to schools and the children who are having extreme difficulties in the school can come to this art room. And the teachers there, who are also trained counsellors, they can help them and they can provide a refuge, a calm refuge where they can do some nice creative work, and they can glimpse their own creative power and perhaps reflect on the chaos of their lives.

And I loved The Art Room because it seemed to formalise my own take on the relationship of therapy and art. And it's a very pragmatic thing as well. You know they didn't necessarily do the sort of typical things you do where you just do a painting that ends up being tacked to the fridge at home, you know or maybe lost. They gave them things like they would get some old furniture and get them to decorate it and then take that home, or a lampshade. And of course these children often come from houses where there might not be much furniture - so that idea of presenting the family with this object that you've made and the pride and the kind of feeling that they've changed the world a little bit, I think that's a very powerful thing. Because art's primary role is not as an asset group and it's not necessarily about urban regeneration, but its most important role is probably meaning making.

And for the young, that's quite a subtle process. I mean while they're making art, the meaning of their art and the message they're giving and their feelings is sort of sneaking under the radar. I mean I remember my art teacher, he probably saw my unconscious leaking like some sort of stain out onto my paintings, and he probably

thought art school for you. (LAUGHTER)

But art is not some sort of fun add-on. But if you go back to the Ice Age, the artists then, they still made art and yet they were constantly under threat from cold and starvation and from predators, and yet they still set aside hours and hours and hours to make art. It's very, very deep - this need to express.

And often the problem as we get older is access to that very primitive creative urge that we all have - particularly when you're a teenager, when you become all self-conscious, and particularly in the art world.

One of the groups of artists perhaps who don't suffer from self-consciousness as much as others are outsider artists. Since I was a teenager, I've loved outsider art. Outsider art is art done by people who haven't been to art school, probably don't even have much knowledge about the art world or the market or they've maybe not even been doing it for other people; they just do it for themselves and never show anybody.

One of the most famous outsider artists - he lived from 1892 to 1973 - was Henry Darger, and he had a very traumatic childhood and when he was an adult he became the janitor in a Chicago Hospital, but in his spare time, he spent all his spare time making paintings and he wrote a 19,000 page novel called *In the Realms of the Unreal* and these paintings were illustrations. And he was basically playing out the traumas and his internal weather, and there was like these seven princesses and there was a whole story of child slavery and the Civil War got woven in and Catholicism and he was fascinated by storms. And he spent most of his money. They've researched it. They found that he was so driven to create that he spent most of his money, his meagre income as a janitor, on having magazine illustrations photographically enlarged, so he could trace them, because he didn't think that he was very good at drawing. And this is fantastically moving - you know that in the pre-Photoshop age, he had to go through this elaborate process because he didn't think he was good at drawing. And he never lived to see that his paintings are now selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars. But art did give him one thing. It gave him an incredible rich life, I like to think.

Now I decided to become an artist at about the age of sixteen when my art teacher saw my unconscious leaking out onto the paper. And I think what I must have done is wrote 'I will be an artist' on an imaginary piece of paper and I tucked it under my imaginary mattress and I've never really had to re-examine that decision.

But ironically, about the same time as I made that decision to become an artist, I lost my ability to play. And I can remember almost to the day, my brothers had left some of their toy cars ... my younger brothers left some of their toy cars out and I can remember trying to play with them and I couldn't lose myself in the game anymore. When I was younger, I used to have very elaborate games and I would, you know like children do, they sort of whisper under their breath, "... and then the aeroplane flies over and then teddy rescues ..." (LAUGHTER) I couldn't do that anymore and it was quite a shock to me. I'd lost that ability to lose myself.

And now I'd like to sort of paraphrase Picasso here and I've got my little sound prop for this. "It took me four years," he said, "to be able to draw like Raphael, but it would take me a lifetime to regain anything like the joyful freedom I felt when I played with a box of Lego." And Lego for me is actually ... (*shakes box*) And I brought this along because I want to rustle this Lego here - this incredibly evocative sound. This is the noise of a child's mind working, looking for the right piece. I think it's almost creativity in aural form. I wanted to bring that along. I love that noise.

And also I loved drawing when I was a young man, but you know when I decided to become an artist, I don't think I knew what contemporary artists did really. You know I wasn't aware. I hadn't really been to many art galleries or anything like that.

Recently a friend told me that she was working on an education programme at the Whitechapel Art Gallery and at the beginning of the project she asked the children, she said, "What do you think a contemporary artist does?" And this very precocious child, probably from sort of Muswell Hill or somewhere like that (LAUGHTER), she put her hand up and she said, "They sit around in Starbucks and eat organic salad." (LAUGHTER) Now it was probably quite an accurate observation of many fashionable artists in East London, but I thought ... you know anyway. So then after

this, they spent some time looking at what contemporary artists did. And at the end of the project, she asked them again, “What *now* do you think an artist does?” And the same child, she said, “They notice things.” And I thought wow, that’s a really short, succinct definition of what an artist does. My job is to notice things that other people don’t notice.

Alain de Botton, writer about philosophy, in his book *How Proust Will Change Your Life*, he talks about people, literary tourists, looking for Combray, the fictional village where Proust set his masterwork. And he said in many ways they’ve got it kind of wrong because if they want to have a true homage to their hero, Proust, instead of looking at his world with their eyes, they should look at their own world with Proust’s eyes.

So my job as an artist in many ways is to help people to make new cliches. That is my job. That is the definition. But becoming an artist is not just a process of having low impulse control or a burning unconscious desire to express yourself. There is a point, a fixed rung if you like, on the greasy pole of becoming an artist; and it does feel - many artists here will probably say - it does feel like a greasy pole. There is a fixed rung and that is going to art college because anybody can become an artist without going to art college - I mean outsider artists are a fantastic example of it - but it’s very difficult to make a *career* as an artist.

And of course many people would say art is a *non-career*, but you know in many ways by defining ourselves as contemporary artists, we are kind of also saying I’d quite like a career because the idea of an untutored genius seems quite quaint to me now in the 21st century, particularly in the West. Maybe in countries with more developing contemporary art scenes, there’s still these undiscovered geniuses. Here in the West though, it feels like that idea of a person suddenly springing up and being a brilliant contemporary artist never having been to art school seems weird and a little bit you know naïve.

And one of the things that is very troubling, of course, is that art education in many ways is an advanced course in self-consciousness because you have to become very

aware of the business you're going into. A central irony is that the very enemy of expression - that is being very 'oh my god, am I doing the right thing?' - is tortuous necessity to enter the art world.

So when I said to my mother, "I'm going to go to art college", I got the usual reaction - as you would get from a working class family - which is, "It's not a proper job." And in many ways, she's kind of right. Is my hat falling off? In many ways, she was right.

I mean on page thirty-one of the Department of Innovation and Skills Report, *The Returns of Higher Education 2011*, there's a rather stark graph. I feel quite bad almost bringing this up in an art college, but I thought I have to confront this situation, which is that compared to someone who's never been to university at all, the average art student will make just 6.3 per cent more money than that person. Women though will make 11.7 per cent more; men 1 per cent less than if you never go to art college. And that's quite a shocker. But in many ways, I find it almost heartening because I think people still want to go to art college! And we're always talking about arts, not about money or anything like that. So if these people, they still want to go to art college even though statistics staring them in the face are telling them they're probably perpetuating their poverty by doing it, (LAUGHTER) I think that's lovely. I think that's a good thing. We almost need to celebrate it. But for an individual, there is no guarantee of making money in the art world.

The skip outside an art college I think is a repository of the ugliest objects on earth (LAUGHTER) because they're not just ugly objects; they're ugly objects trying to be art. A skip is sort of like a pot pourri of broken dreams. (LAUGHTER)

But that's how it should be! You know an art college is a place to experiment, is a place of unique freedom, a place to get it wrong, to make mistakes. The art critic Martin Gayford, he said this. He said, "Mistakes are as big a part of art as scholarship or truth. The Renaissance, for example, was based on a creative misunderstanding of classical antiquity. A great deal of 19th century art derived from an incorrect assessment of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance."

So art history is a kind of long chain of Chinese whispers and I think that's the fascinating, brilliant thing about it - people get it wrong. The essential thing that one learns at art college is very difficult to condense. In many ways, one of the most important things is you're exposed to a kind of sensibility of what it's like to be an artist. You're a kind of trainee bohemian and you're there with fellow travellers on this journey with facilities and tutors on hand.

And I think that's very moving - you know the kind of kindred spirits that you're with. And in this series of lectures, I've mocked the pomposities and contradictions of the art world, but it's been a bit like teasing my best friend because in reality when I joined the art world, you know through the art college, it felt more like arriving in Kansas than in Oz.

So for young people perhaps who feel a bad fit with their families or with wider society, you know the acceptance and tolerance of their difference and their imagination is a profound thing and I think it should be celebrated really. You know it's a subtle experience being at art college because what you pick up at art college is an understanding, a bodily understanding of the time and place you are as an artist. You know people say, "What do they teach at art college now?" It's a complex thing.

And at the end of it students hopefully emerge having found themselves and hopefully feeling very unique. But, as the old saying goes, originality is for people with very short memories.

It does of course exist and that shock of pleasure is one of the you know greatest things that anybody who's interested in art can experience, but the best artists, they take quite a while to find their voice. It takes a long time. I mean an art career is a marathon, it's not a sprint.

And I think one of the best descriptions of that process is by a guy called Arno Minkkinen, a Finnish photographer, and he had this thing called - The Helsinki Bus

Station Theory, he said. And when you're leaving art college, he said, and you choose your style and what path in the art world you're going to take, it's like going to Helsinki bus station. There's about twenty platforms and each platform, maybe ten buses leave from it, and you choose your bus and you get on the bus. And each stop is a year in your career. And maybe after about three stops, you get off and you kind of walk into a gallery and you show them your work and the people look at it and they go, "Oh very nice, very nice. Reminds me a bit of Martin Parr though."

(LAUGHTER) And you go, uurrrgh!! (*exasperated sound*) I'm not original, I'm not unique, and you get really cross. And you get a taxi back to the bus station and you get on a different bus. And of course what happens is the same thing - you get off at three years and the same thing happens. What you need to do, says Arno Minkkinen, is stay on the effing bus! (LAUGHTER)

And I think that's a marvellous description of the process, you know, because our originality is not ... You know all the buses for the first ten, twenty stops away from the bus station, often they're on the same road. The same as we copy something, we're going to be influenced by something as artists for the first ten years of our career. I didn't start making any money until I was thirty-eight, so I was well down that road you know before I got going.

I left college with a 2.1. Nobody's ever asked. (LAUGHTER/APPLAUSE) From Portsmouth Polytechnic. I was interviewed recently by a radio journalist and she very cheekily thought that Portsmouth Polly was one of my female alter egos.

(LAUGHTER)

I did what many people did when I left college. I immediately applied for an MA because I was terrified of the wide world you know that suddenly spat out - oh my god, I'm an artist. So I applied to Chelsea for an MA. They didn't want me. And I quote their kind of feedback, which was I was "too much of an artist." (LAUGHTER) Not enough of a student - which I kind of understand, but ooh it galled at the time.

But that most difficult moment I think for a young artist is that moment when you leave art college after all those years of education and suddenly it's just you and the world - unprotected, undirected, nowadays of course very much in debt.

And I always think it's very poignant as well when you see the parents at the degree shows - those people who perhaps come down from a long way away, you know, and they've come to see what little Billy or Jilly's been up to and they're very worried about how Billy or Jilly's going to make a living tying string round the banisters or making warships out of cardboard or videos of shadows. (LAUGHTER) Oh my god, it's very frightening, but it's also kind of poignant, you know.

And then there's that boundary, you know the boundary between being a student and becoming an artist. And I think that moment often happens to you at a party. You're at a party and someone says to you, "Oh what do you do?" and you go, "Errrr ..." and you have to summon up the courage to say it and you go, "I... I'm an artist." And I think that's quite a poignant moment. You know you've crossed that boundary, you've started out on that hazardous path.

And may I risk a dark sincerity at this moment that I think it's a very noble thing to be an artist. You're a pilgrim on the road to meaning. It's the central motif of my proudest achievement, which was my show at the British Museum, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. That was almost the thread going through - was this idea that we're all on this pilgrimage to find meaning.

A conversation really stuck with me many years ago I had with the gallerist Sadie Coles. And I asked her, I said, "What do you look for when you're looking for artists to sort of bring into the gallery?", and she said, "Commitment! Commitment to being an artist!" And I thought that's a really interesting thought.

And most of the artists that I've met, most of the successful artists I've met are very disciplined. You know they turn up on time, they put in the hours - and that idea of us all being a bit chaotic and shaky, I think it's a myth. Artists are doers! They don't want to be artists. You know they don't want to be artists. They want to make art,

they enjoy making art. And that's often why, as I say, this reminds me of a quote from Kierkegaard. (LAUGHTER) "In the old days, they loved wisdom. Nowadays they love the title 'philosopher'."

But as my reputation grew in the 80s and 90s - and, as I said, I didn't start making enough money to make a living until I was thirty-eight - my earnings passed this point when I thought I'm no longer in the realm of a kind of appropriate wage for a skilled labourer. It started to get into this sort of airy-fairy whatever anybody will pay for it kind of arena, and that's a very strange moment.

And at that moment, you start getting what I call "Picasso Napkin Syndrome" (LAUGHTER) and this is after the mythological power of that famous artist. He could sort of pay for an expensive meal by just doodling on the table linen. And it's a very dangerous blessing that an artist can get - that Picasso Napkin Syndrome - because it's like the Midas touch. You're suddenly tempted to churn out your signature works because there's a big collector demand for it and anything you sign is worth money! I mean literally artists like Andy Warhol literally did that. He would just sign you know a dollar bill and then suddenly it would be worth a hundred dollars. And that temptation to churn it out is very dangerous.

The artist Marcel Duchamp said, "I could have made a hundred thousand ready-mades in ten years, easily, and they would have all been fake." He said, "Abundant production can only result in mediocrity."

But anyway now we've been sort of chugging along in our art career for a while and we've somehow managed to keep that sort of burning, precious, childlike glimmer of creativity burning, people you know when I'm at a party, they ask me, "What do you do?" and I say, "Oh I'm an artist." And they go, "It must be fun! What fun that must be - all that sculpting, pottery. Must be great fun!" (LAUGHTER) And I go, "Imagine this." I say, "Imagine this. You know big museum, big museum. They've offered you an exhibition and there's a big room there - open white room waiting for you to fill it. And in a year or two I've got to fill that with work and all the people are going to come and look at it, maybe loads and loads of thousands of people, and then all the

press are going to come and they want to write about it and talk about it, and then I've got to sell it. I've got people - you know their reaction to it, my income depends on it. And also maybe the income of several other people you know working at the gallery or assistants or someone like that. And then on top of that, I've got to create it with a kind of carefree joy of a child." (LAUGHTER) That's quite ... you know it's quite a tricky act to pull off. Art's quite a serious business really.

But one thing that I'm glad about is that you know in sort of kicking the can down the road of my career, I have kind of found myself I suppose, you know, and that's a beautiful thing that the art world has given me. I think all artists carry within them in a way this sort of glowing, indistinct ball of their creative energy. Then they nurse it through the assault course of the art world and it's quite difficult to talk about because it's a very tender thing - you know what keeps you going, what keeps you making year after year. It's a delicate organism and the art world can be very corrosive. Caustic atmosphere. I protect my ball of creative energy, I protect it with a shield made of jaded irony. (LAUGHTER) A helmet of mischief and a breast plate of facetiousness. And I wield my carefully crafted blade of cynicism. Because the part of me I want is so ... it's too vulnerable, I can't expose it. It's quite delicate.

I have a list of banned words: passionate, spiritual, profound. I mean these are all words I could describe - this tender part of me, the tender part that many artists have, you know what keeps them going - but I have an acute allergy to cliches. In fact my mother ran off with the milkman. (LAUGHTER) This is why I have such an intense allergy to cliches and I have to protect that part of me from becoming a cliché.

And in the course of my intense Reithian Googling in preparing for these lectures, I came across this woman called Jennifer Yane. I don't know who she is, but she had this quote. It was, "Art is spirituality in drag." (LAUGHTER) I'm not going to say it, but it could be you know what you're looking at in a way.

But the metaphor that you know most best describes what it's like for me being an artist is a refuge, a place inside my head where I can go on my own and process the world and its complexities. It's a kind of inner shed in which I can lose myself.

And I was reading recently this psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz. He writes of a patient and during his course of therapy quite often he'd mention this house he had in France and he said oh he enjoyed thinking about how he was going to decorate it and refurbish it and arrange the furniture and it was one of his great pleasures when things got a bit troubling for him; that he would think about this and it would be very relaxing to him to think about these marvellous plans he had for his house in France. And then at the end of his course of psychotherapy, just as he was leaving he sort of turned and he said, "You know Mr Grosz," he said, "there is no house in France. You do know that?" And I completely crack up at that because it really echoed with me about that place that he goes: his refuge where he's an artist.

And in this series of lectures, I've tried to answer some of the fundamental obvious questions about the art world. And I've not done this to expose the workings as some kind of trick like ripping the curtain back on *The Wizard of Oz*, but because I thought people might be intrigued. 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. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: You do know you've made the whole audience cry now?

(LAUGHS)

GRAYSON PERRY: I hope so.

SUE LAWLEY: Thank you very much, Grayson. So here at Central St. Martins in King's Cross, London, we have an audience of curators, dealers, commentators and of course arts students all keen to investigate your path to success and your insights.

Okay.

FRANCES: Hi Grayson.

GRAYSON PERRY: Hello.

FRANCES: My name is Frances and I study fashion print. And as a final year student myself, I'm interested to know how you made the transition from the wonderful bubble that is art college into the art world and onto becoming such an influential artist? And what were the steps that you took that maybe your classmates at art school didn't take?

GRAYSON PERRY: It's a succession of events and what you've got to do is take every opportunity as a young artist or a designer, whatever you take, every opportunity. If somebody offers you some little exhibition or little part in a group show or a little opportunity, you take it, you take it, you take it because you never know. And every artist here you know who's successful will probably trace back their career to something that was fairly insignificant because that led onto meeting someone, and then you know I had a show and then a curator picked it up. I mean the thread of my one would be I picked up ... I had an exhibition. Someone from a museum bought one of my pieces very cheap. That got put into the basement that was then discovered by the curator when they did a show, and then she liked the show and then I had another big show and it kind of went like that in a kind of family tree.

SUE LAWLEY: Okay.

IAN WALTER: Hi, Ian Wolter and I'm a student with the Cambridge School of Art. I was wondering, Grayson, did you ever have a moment when you considered a different career?

GRAYSON PERRY: Yes, I did. I always had a Plan B. I think that's quite a healthy thing to have - is Plan B - and it's got to be a Plan B you quite fancy doing. And mine was to go into advertising. (LAUGHTER) I really fancied it.

SUE LAWLEY: What as a copywriter?

GRAYSON PERRY: As a copywriter or you know an advertising artist. I just thought that would be fun, you know, because I could really let rip my cynicism then. (LAUGHTER) But somehow I always made just enough money from each exhibition to sort of keep that idea at bay, but I think if there'd been a turning point you know it would have been some time in my late twenties, I might have gone down that route and I would be much wealthier now. (LAUGHS)

SUE LAWLEY: Total condemnation of the advertising world - you know that they're all cynics. Not necessarily the case, huh? Unless you do it with a whole heart, you can't do it, surely?

GRAYSON PERRY: Yeah, okay, whatever. What Evs. (LAUGHTER)

SUE LAWLEY: Rap over knuckles. *(to Ian Wolter)* You want to come back on that? No? No, he's happy. Okay, I'm going over here and then there's a question waiting back there.

NICK WARE: St. Martin student, Nick Ware. I was just wondering. You said you were talking about defining moments that sort of led you towards being an artist and you talked about being a child quite a bit. I was wondering whether you thought it was quite intrinsic to being an artist that there's a sense of recuperating what you had as a child? That sense you wanted to draw forever, is that something that you need to have? Is there always a relationship with childhood that comes up in art?

GRAYSON PERRY: Playing is an important thing because you know you've got to kind of let yourself go to be creative and you've got to allow the ridiculous things to happen. You know one of my favourite quotes about creativity is from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and he says ideas are like little furry creatures coming out of the undergrowth, you know, and you've got to be nice to the first one. So you've got to kind of play and be a bit ridiculous and be non-judgmental about it and just sort of like oh, this is such fun; and then suddenly that ridiculous idea that you're having, that's like your next ten years of really serious money making work. You know and that's how it happens. You know you've got to have that sense of open

receptiveness to we're in a weird business and so to try and load up. You sort of see people going, "Oh my god, I've got to have an important idea for this exhibition." I don't know if that's the right way to go about it. I mean my technique is to drink beer and watch *X Factor* and get me felt pens out (LAUGHTER) - you know trick myself into being childish and get back to that sort of (*makes baby sound*) ... get back there.

SUE LAWLEY: Question over there.

BRONTE: Hi, I do ceramics down at St. Martins, third year.

SUE LAWLEY: Can you give us your name, sorry?

BRONTE: Bronte. I admire the way that you say it's important to remain a child, but when you said something about you went to evening school and you learnt about what earthenware and what stoneware is, whether you were just interested in whether skill and technology paralyses creativity or whether it gives you creativity?

GRAYSON PERRY: (*over*) Oh no, not at all, absolutely not. You know I mean it's a great joy because as soon as you learn a technique, you start thinking in it. That's the great thing, you know. When I learn about a new technique, suddenly my imaginative possibilities have expanded. So when I first encountered digital tapestry suddenly I was having all these ideas in digital tapestry and it was amazing and it was like kind of my databank suddenly went (*makes exploding sound*) and it was brilliant. And so I think that skills are really important to learn; and the better you get at a skill, you know you have that confidence and fluency. I mean a phrase that I like is "relaxed fluency" you know when you get into the zone and you've done your 10,000 hours and you've become really skillful. And it might be the traditional skills are there, but also you might be skillful at you know negotiating to put up something in a car park or you might be skillful at operating unusual patterns on social media. But you know these are different skills, but you just put in the time.

SUE LAWLEY: Right, I'm going to take another couple and then we must come to an end. The woman in the gallery whom I've consistently ignored.

OLGA SMITH: Hi. Hello, hi. My name is Olga Smith. I work at a gallery. I agree with you that art is a wonderful thing. However, to the society at large which is going through an economic downturn at the moment, what is the responsibility towards supporting art and artists?

GRAYSON PERRY: The art world's got to take the hit along with everyone else you know when it comes to cuts and things, but it's quite a tiny proportion of the government budget - you know the arts. And when you think of the kind of good feelings that come from you know experience to culture, I'm sort of torn. There's some bits of me that enjoy the kind of devil's advocate thing of saying well maybe you know art will survive even if you sort of don't give it any money. And I've made art on the kitchen table out of scrap, but I don't think that's true. I can see you nodding your head, shaking your head. And so the counter argument is that if we cut the funding from it, it would be very, very difficult to get it back again, you know, so we've got to keep it going through the hard times. It's like keeping the fire alive. You know you've got to kind of keep stoking it to get it so that when the summer comes again, we've got it. I don't know.

SUE LAWLEY: We must come to an end. Yuh, question here.

HATTIE LONGFIELD: Hello. I'm Hattie Longfield. I'm a singer/songwriter. I was really interested in the quote about spirituality and drag. I'm interested to know is the spirituality within the work in drag or is it just the artist that needs to be in drag in order to protect their vulnerability?

GRAYSON PERRY: No what she said was art *is* spirituality in drag ...

HATTIE LONGFIELD: Okay.

GRAYSON PERRY: ... so it's sort of like the idea that it's a kind of performance of spirituality, it's a dressing up, and it's kind of like a way to accessing spirituality perhaps by stealth almost - you know being tricked into all the colour and loveliness of the art. You know we look at it and suddenly we're having a spiritual moment, you

know. But, like I say, I'm not allowed to talk ...

HATTIE LONGFIELD: (*over*) Because I'm very aware you know you create obviously a separate persona for yourself as someone who wears drag and makes yourself separate from the work that way or protects yourself in a certain way, but I think maybe every artist needs to do that - needs to create a persona that protects them, protects their vulnerability. Do you think that's true?

GRAYSON PERRY: It depends how brave and you know open they are. There's no recipe for being an artist. That's what's good about it nowadays - you can be any sort of artist. I mean one of the great side products of dressing up like this when you have an exhibition, people know you're the artist. (LAUGHTER) I always feel sorry for guys in t-shirts. You know like "Oh nobody came up to me and said they like my painting." Well how do they know you were the artist. You know at least theme yourself a bit with your art. (LAUGHTER/APPLAUSE) I recommend that.
(LAUGHS)

SUE LAWLEY: We're going to leave it there and let you get back into your inner shed.

That brings to an end this series, which has undoubtedly given us a fresh perspective on the contemporary art scene and our relationship with it. Remember the phrase that you came up with in the first lecture, which is "You don't have to like it all"? It's a good phrase, isn't it?

Our thanks to our audience here at Central St. Martins and of course a big thank you to our Reith Lecturer 2013: Grayson Perry.

(APPLAUSE/CHEERS)