

8.1 Grayson Perry as Claire: a fashion iconic at the art world

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A b s t r a c t

This text we present an examination about the relationship between the English artist Grayson Perry and his alter-ego Claire, positioning them in the field of artistic creations that take the themes of the body and sexuality as expression and political practice. Since the second half of the twentieth century, art has been revealed through happenings, actions, performances, sensory experiences and varied artistic processes, important transformations on the perception that artists have had of their body. From these new procedures, two movements can be felt in the contemporary artistic field. First, the uniqueness of the body in art. Second, as contemporary artists have taken the body as one of the main arenas for debates around politics of identity and belonging, transforming it into place, where political, cultural and philosophical phenomena come together in different contexts. British artist Grayson Perry and Claire represent one of these new artistic configurations in contemporary art.

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Since the second half of the twentieth century, art has been revealed through happenings, actions, performances, sensory experiences and varied artistic processes, important transformations on the perception that artists have had of their body (Jones, 2006, p. 25). From these new procedures, two movements can be felt in the contemporary artistic field. First, the uniqueness of the body in art. Second, as contemporary artists have taken the body as one of the main arenas for debates around politics of identity and belonging, transforming it into place, where political, cultural and philosophical phenomena come together in different contexts (Jones, 2006, p. 26).

British artist Grayson Perry and his alter-ego, Claire, represent one of these new artistic configurations in contemporary art. Grayson Perry has been seen by critics of British art as one of the most provocative artists who have emerged on the international art scene since the 1990s. In 2002, he was the winner of the Turner Prize, which led him to be a part of the Royal Academy of Arts. At the moment, Grayson Perry is the most popular artist in Britain. However, Perry has divided the establishment of British curators, artists, and critics of art, raising doubts in certain segments of contemporary art in relation to his work, and also in relation to his person (Klein, 2009, p. 45).

His work is known mainly for the blend of various craft traditions, including pottery, tapestry and folk art, in a visual collage of icons to critique the hypocrisies of society through a wide variety of historical and contemporary themes (Klein, 2009, p. 47). Nevertheless, Grayson Perry and his work have been seen by the art world as “strange” things. What are the factors of these divergent views? What would be the discomforts and estrangements in relation to the person of the artist and his art?

Two reasons seem to be quite significant in this division of opinions. Perry, as we said, is a potter and upholsterer, and also a cross-dresser - a transvestite. The first reason may seem innocuous, since there are artists who have used pottery, candies, vaseline and ketchup in their works (Klein, 2009, p. 55). The second motif, conveyed by a part of British art criticism, understands that Perry's works are extremely accessible, and accessibility is often viewed by this universe as banal, being, on the contrary, intellectual impenetrability and the abstraction, extremely valued. We thus find a political division in the field of contemporary English art, where a set of practices and institutions creates a conflictual and hierarchical context. Movement considered by Nathalie Heinich (2008, p. 45), as intrinsic practice to the contemporary art.

Confirming the position of Perry's work as accessible, the artist Tracey Emin - the “enfant terrible” of the group known as YBA (Young British Artists), which emerges in the 1990s, and also winner of the Turner prize, with the installation *My Bed*, in 1999 - said with a wry smile, in an interview to the BBC, shortly after Perry's award: “Grayson Perry is very popular with the masses” (Klein, 2009, p. 87). Tracey Emin, who sold her \$ 10 million *My Bed* last year, according to the English newspaper *The Guardian*, is one of the English contemporary artists who compose the renowned group of British artists who graduated from the Goldsmith College of Arts, in the 1990s, which also included, among others, the artist Sarah Lucas, a feminist artist who discusses the mechanisms of visual representation about gender. In Sarah Lucas's work, the artist creates

the body of a woman, represented by a sofa, with two pumpkins representing a pair of exposed breasts on the back, and a vulva of raw meat in the center of the accent, and invites the viewer to feel the female body, declaring: "Try it, You'll like it - Try this, you will like it". The artist Damian Hirst, in *The Natural Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, research's death. For Damian Hirst, the work is a representation of death and speaks of something that was not there, but it was. The Sunday Times newspaper estimated the fortune of Damian Hirst two years ago at \$ 370 million (Thornton, 2014, p. 38). We have verified from the examples above that by winning economic capital with distinction, artists from Goldsmith College appear to conform the hegemonic group of the English artistic field.

Based on Tracey Emin's observation of the awards and the person of Grayson Perry, the question is: why and how is Grayson Perry popular with the masses and unpopular with certain segments of the English art scene?

Before going on a tour of the artist and his work, it is important to note that Grayson Perry's artistic and life trajectory is very different from that of the artists who made up the YBA-Young British Artists generation. Firstly, Grayson descends from a family of the English working class. The artist did not attend schools of Fine Arts, such as the Royal School of Arts or the Goldsmith College of Arts, but studied in the outskirts of London, in the Polytechnic of Portsmouth (Jones & Perry, 2006, p. 21). In the 1980s, Grayson moved to London and got involved with different cultural groups, including Punk counter-culture groups, filmmakers, poets and performers. Period in which the artist says to have been "Dickensian", given the poverty in which it was (Jones & Perry, 2006, p. 22). We start from the hypothesis that Perry's creations appear to be the result of research on a set of everyday practices that range from the sexual fantasies of his childhood to social criticism from the punk culture. Therefore, we consider that Grayson Perry speaks of himself in his work, and, I believe we can say that his works are "self-portraits".

Grayson Perry, for many critics, is an artist who sits between punk aesthetic and craftsmanship: as a result, his works are seen as domesticated and overly decorated. Perry's ceramics dialogues with the Greek, in the form, and the decoration of the pieces have a thematic, whose narrative is erotic, grotesque and critical to contemporaneity. Themes that are also part of your tapestry (Thornton, 2009, p. 24). According to the artist, his visual representations are meant to be burlesque and consist of reversing order: getting rid of art with a capital A, which, he says, pretends aestheticism (Jones & Perry, 2006, p. 34).

The decorative imagery of Perry's objects addresses a severe critique of consumer culture, mass culture, and an exploration of bizarre sex. Their objects are filled with sadomasochistic scenes, presenting images of desert individuals in unusual and pornographic landscapes, focusing on the imaginary representation of fellatio and masturbation, showing these sexual practices as usual, being far beyond the domain of polite and courteous society (Klein, 2009 p. 51).

The second aspect relates to Perry's cross-dressing: Claire - her extravagant dressing suggests a dangerous blend of boundaries between masculine and feminine, intellectual and sensual, serious, and comical. The artist says he likes to dress like a girl since he was seven. However, Perry has been married for 25 years (Jones & Perry, 2006, p. 15). The important question to be discussed, in our view, about the artist's alter ego is whether the masculinity and femininity of the person Grayson Perry, evoked in Claire's representation, are

mechanisms that together act in the construction of his art, or if Claire is a creation disconnected from his work.

A first response leads us to understand Claire as a creative device that subverts all gender markers by manipulating some diacritical signs, such as clothing, ornaments, but especially body, gestures, and performances, which make up a hybrid identity, where feminine and masculine are juxtaposed (Jones, 2006, p. 34). In this sense, we can say that Perry has used his body in a performance construction that disarms traditional conventions, creating a new identity configuration that stimulates provocations around the constructions of gender and the expression of sexuality, understanding that an identity implies the establishment of a difference, which is often built on a hierarchy (Buttler, 2015, p. 19). In analyzing his images, we perceive that the affirmation of difference, through androgyny, is the precondition of an "other" that constitutes its "exterior": presented in drag identity, when wearing extremely stylized women's clothes.

The contestation and subversion evoked by Claire seem to translate an opposition not only to gender codes, but also to normativity, thus bringing art to politics. The persona Claire is itself a political device that on the one hand points to a reconfiguration of paradigms that touch the world of art, and, on the other, draws attention to a rupture in the mechanisms of representation of the figure in the art itself (De Lauretis, 1997, p. 32). The protest contained in Claire - especially in her body in performance - arises as a form of confrontation with artistic precepts and approaches political and social movements - in this case, LGBT movements.

The construction of Claire was giving progressively. From the age of seven, Grayson was already dressed in his mother's and sister's clothes and was out walking through the cemeteries of his town, Chelmsford, south of London. In the 1980s, when Grayson is already in London, Claire embodies a critique of the ridiculous and conservative character of London bourgeois housewives, where Claire is photographed at the station of Saint Pancras, in London, wearing a 1960s dress, in a black suit, gloves, a vintage purse and a headscarf. This criticism of the conservatism of bourgeois women later became apparent in the public images of Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister of Great Britain in the 1980s, and Camilla Parker Bowles, Duchess of Cornwall and current wife of the Prince of Wales (Jones & Perry, 2005). Claire ridicules the bourgeois aesthetics of Margaret Thatcher and Camilla Parker - with tidy hair, out of the hairdresser, wearing a ceremonial coat, neckerchief, and pearl earrings.

But a major change in Claire's appearance occurred in the 2000s when the artist claims to have experienced a certain epiphany, realizing that being a transvestite did not necessarily have to do with being a woman. Perry then creates an icon dress for Claire: a "doll dress" - feminine and childlike (Klein, 2009, p. 102). For the artist, a classic girl dress is definitely the incarnation of a femininity that attracts attention and affection - the absolute antithesis of the male. For the construction of this new appearance of Claire, Perry did a thorough research on the history of cross-dressing in Victorian London, starting with the famous impersonators - theater artists in Victorian London who wore the opposite sex - such as Ernest Boulton (nicknamed "Stella") and Frederick Parker (nicknamed "Fanny"). Claire seems to indicate a creative process that draws on the history of English transvestism. Therefore, Claire is a performance that uses the constructions of the body and the psyche of the artist around his sexuality, which is structured in a repetition of feminine acts, that, when they

stop a historicity, they become devices of contestation (Butler, 2015, p. 44).

Currently, Claire appears regularly, in baby doll outfits and Bo Peep sets. In the work *The Artful Dresser*, Claire poses on the porch of the British Museum, after performing the exhibition *The Tomb of Unknown Craftsmen - the Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* - in February 2011, which we see to the right. The Tomb... is a memorial to craftsmen, in which Grayson has juxtaposed 30 objects he has created to 170 pieces of the British Museum's historic collections. Since Perry's artisans are artists at the service of his religion, his master, his tribe, and his cultural tradition.

We realize that two perspectives come together in Claire's construction. The first, we notice that he refers to the construction of an alterego of the artist, who, from the use of his dressing-up, through the streets of London, seems to mock binarism of gender, calling attention to the multiplicity of uses of the body. So some British art critics have seen Claire as a work of art in and of itself (Thornton, 2014, p. 34).

The second perspective, Claire, at the entrance gate of the Tate Gallery, the artist ridicules the world of art, dressing as one of the English suffragists of the 1910s, raising the flag, "No More Art" - art no more. Grayson Perry, through Claire, ironizes art with capital A, seeming to expose to ridicule the art produced by groups of hegemonic artists. Claire is an expression of the politician, while simultaneously criticizing the artistic canons and oppressive social mechanisms.

We believe that these two perspectives become elements that make of Grayson Perry a transgressor, controversial artist, who arouses divergences and dissensions, in portions of the art world, that still accuse him of being "a pseudo intellectual facing a world that is very busy to look at, and too distracted to feel: an artist for people who cannot be bothered with true art", as the critic Jonhatha Jones put it in the English newspaper *The Guardian* on 10 October, in 2009. Despite the criticisms, Grayson Perry and Claire are loved by the public: Grayson is currently considered a "national treasure" which means national consecration, pride of the British people.

By way of conclusion, we understand that the works of Grayson Perry and his alter-ego Claire are loved by the masses, according to artist Tracey Emin, because they are artistic expressions that transgress and denounce the norms established by the world of art and the social universe, pointing to new paradigms of art, as Nathalie Heinich calls attention, when he says: "Postmodernism", "post-vanguard", "plastic arts" instead of "arts", "plasticiens" instead of "artists" are new names that emerge to designate not only new styles or artistic movements, but a new period of art or a new way of practicing it. They indicate a paradigmatic change" (Heinich, 2014, p. 34). Thus, the ironic critiques and smiles against art and the person of Grayson Perry by certain critics and artists seem to point to a fierce contest of power in the field of contemporary English art. Finally, as a work and as an expression of the artist's alter-ego, Claire is not only a hybrid identity, but a gestural artistic object, which has been detached from the frame and launched into social contexts, breaking with static categories and suggesting new artistic expressions.

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