SHIFT: The Development of an Exhibition about Contemporary Craft

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**Introduction**

On Friday January 11th the exhibition SHIFT opened at the Black Swan Arts Centre to a packed house, so many in fact, that when the short opening talk began, people had to stand outside to listen. In the courtyard, another crowd gathered around a glowing furnace to watch glassblower KT Yun masterfully bend a treacly, luminous and beguiling material to her will, as if in a dance. For myself as curator, it was a great relief to reach this night without any major disasters and to have everything in place: artists, performance, people, music, refreshments and of course, the work. My aim for this exhibition was to explore ideas about craft in the context of contemporary art. The show featured nine artists whose work, in a variety of mediums, crosses the fluid boundaries between what may be considered art and craft.

In the following essay I will detail the development of the exhibition SHIFT and in so doing aim to highlight various curatorial roles and strategies.

**Background**

This opportunity to curate came from my participation in the newly formed programming group of Black Swan Arts - a small arts centre in the Somerset town of Frome. The group was tasked with developing a new programme of exhibitions for the Gallery that would raise its profile and revitalise flagging visitor attendance. As a group we worked with the BSA\(^1\) trustees on a series of aims and objectives, the outcome of which can be found in Appendix 1. Each member of the group then submitted ideas for an exhibition. I proposed SHIFT.

**What makes a Great Exhibition?**

Paula Marincola in ‘What Makes a Great Exhibition’ proposes that: “Exhibitions are strategically located at the nexus where artists, their work, the arts institution, and many different publics intersect. Situated so critically, they function as the prime transmitters through which the continually shifting meaning of art and its relationship to the world is brought into temporary focus and offered to the viewer for contemplation, education, and, not the least, pleasure”. (Marincola, 2006, p. 9) What I take from this and from my own practice, is that the exhibition is a complex construct. Artworks for example, while fundamental, and playing a vital role, may not function effectually in the world without a host of supporting roles that I can disseminate into:

- Physical, environmental structuring – How will the exhibition physically fit the location, taking into account space, light, architecture, power and technology;

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\(^1\) Throughout the essay BSA refers to Black Swan Arts
• Socio-political evaluation – How well the show aligns itself to pre-existing institutional aims or government directives or social mores;
• Audience consideration - What is the potential audience? How will the show interact with them, considering relevant cultural values, ethnicities, educational possibilities, information/communication styles;
• Critical aesthetic dialogue – Informed ideas, creative design and well-considered selection and display.

Defining a Theme

To come up with an idea for a show, I looked at the qualities and values of the institution and sought ideas that would consider this, together with my own interests as curator. As a long-term local to Frome, I already have pre-existing knowledge of The Black Swan and over twenty seven years have seen its fortunes and reputation rise and fall. The most recent hardships are a result of the gallery losing all arts and local council funding which led to the director and staff being made redundant. The gallery shop and all other spaces at the centre were also rented out to cover running costs. Despite this, there are some positive outcomes, as the centre survived entirely due to the active support of volunteers with a tremendous feeling of engagement. The community in effect now run the centre and respond to community needs. I am reminded of Eileen Hooper-Greenhill’s ideas about the ‘post-museum’ articulated here by Janet Marstine ‘The post museum actively seeks to share power with the communities it serves …it recognises that visitors are not passive consumers …Instead of transmitting knowledge to an essentialized mass audience, the post-museum listens and responds sensitively’ (Marstine, 2006, p. 19). I like to think the community of Black Swan Arts exemplify notions of the post-museum.

Early on, I came up with the idea for an exhibition involving craft. This seemed especially pertinent as at the very heart of the centre sit a row of artists’ workshops. At the time of writing there is a seamstress, an embroiderer and two jewellers. Artists ‘make’ there and the gallery ‘exhibits’ and I wanted to open up the landscape in-between. The following is a summary my considerations.

Venue

Traditional crafts, popular ‘vintage recycling’ and hobbyist shops seem to be thriving in the town and there are regular monthly ‘handmade’ fairs together with a growing number of galleries for craft as well as fine art spaces. The BSA workshops however seem totally disconnected from the gallery. One aim for this show was to initiate a dialogue between the craft spaces downstairs and the gallery space upstairs.


**Audience**

There are no empirical surveys of visitor type available at BSA\(^2\). From what I can see the audience consists of mainly over twenty-fives and older, well-educated people and families. It’s not a teenager’s hotspot. The shop and café mean that at least some visitors to the centre do not come to look at art. It’s likely that a number of visitors wander into the gallery to pass the time, perhaps because their partner is looking at gifts in the shop below\(^3\). The apparent popularity of the workshops, the shop, together with other galleries and shops in the town suggest that there is a local audience that has an appetite for craft or medium-based work.

**Popular Culture**

Over the last few years contemporary craft seems to have saturated popular culture. In 2003 when Grayson Perry hit the headlines for winning the Turner Prize with his ceramic vases, craft was given a real jolt of acceptance within the art world. Craft was headlining blockbuster shows such as the V&A’s Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular Craft in 2007 and later the British Museum’s ‘The tomb of the Unknown Craftsman in 2011-12. So many product advertisements, articles and television programmes now promote the virtues of the well-crafted, the handmade, the recycled and the vintage. ‘Handmade’ fairs and artisan markets are all the rage; with the popular television series’ Kirstie’s Handmade Christmas\(^4\) and Kevin’s Man Made Home\(^5\), making things, seems bang on trend. Are we in the throes of perhaps a craft renaissance?

**Personal Interest**

When I recently encountered a craft/art debate during a lecture, I was surprised that in our enlightened, post-modern, multi-layered, multi-ethnic multiverse there could be such a thing ...that anyone could easily appropriate a thing for a singular classification so easily, but I was wrong. Many people I have spoken with since have clearly fixed ideas about what craft is, and I’m not convinced by any of them. In a way, the personal element of this show is my curiosity about what craft means, if it is possible to clearly define, and how do craft practices relate to fine art?

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\(^2\) Since researching this, one empirical survey received information from 124 local arts and business related individuals, and shows that the majority of visits they made to the Black Swan were to view a specific exhibition – which is very heartening. Also, not only is the title ‘craft centre’ used in the survey but the word craft was often used in descriptions of how to improve BSA. Ref. BSA Stakeholders Survey Report - December 2012. (Black Swan Arts, 2012)

\(^3\) In my days invigilating the show, I have come across this many times.

\(^4\) Kirstie’s Handmade Christmas was part of a Channel 4 television series called Kirstie’s Handmade Britain where presenter Kirstie Allsopp explored the world of all things hand made. The show first aired in the UK on 19 October 2011 and the episode summary on the Channel 4 website declares that, Kirstie has ‘reignited the nation’s passion for crafts’ (Kirstie’s Handmade Britain, 2011).

\(^5\) Kevin’s Man Made Home was a Channel 4 (UK) television series that first aired on Sun 23 September 2012, where celebrity designer Kevin McCloud built a retreat (a kind of exotic shed) in woodlands near his home in Somerset. He built it from scratch using mostly recycled materials and engaging the help of local craftsmen in the construction. KT Yun, a master glassmaker helped him make the windows ...from sand (Kevin’s Man Made Home, 2012).
Further Research and Development

A first draft of a proposal was reviewed by the programming group and agreed for the reasons above but also because this would be the only curated and themed ‘group’ show suggested for the programme. Developmental stages mapped out loosely as follows:

Research into Craft

‘In the post-museum, the curator is not a mere facilitator but takes responsibility for representation as she or he engages in critical inquiry.’ (Marstine 2006) In the light of ideas about the post-museum I needed to better understand the craft debate to find a focus for SHIFT. There are dictionary definitions of the word ‘craft’ and they mostly involve some kind of making, often by hand using a particular skill, but I felt this didn’t really account for the many different appearances of craft on the contemporary cultural stage. It seems craft in the way we think of as ‘traditional’ today didn’t really exist much before the likes of Ruskin, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century (Adamson 2013). They rejoiced in craft as a pastoral idyll, a counter to the irrepressible and impersonal leviathan that was industrial manufacture and the division of labour. Glen Adamson in his book *Thinking Through Craft* breaks down ideas about craft into the following qualities:

**Supplemental** - The idea that craft is supplementary to the main work, a means to an end with no virtue of its own. An art work is carved in stone but the process of carving is secondary to the aesthetic of the form.

**Material** - The idea that craft is medium-based. The craft object is made of fibre, glass, wood, stone, metal and clay or it is the work of a medium-based artist such as a potter.

**Skilled** - That craft is about skill, a verb, with notions of master craftsmen and apprentices and the masterful manipulation of materials. Richard Sennett in his book *The Craftsman* focusses on craft as skill, and believes that “the craftsman represents the special human condition of being engaged.” Sennett sees one of the problems faced by craftsmen today, is that technical skill has been divorced from supposedly higher pursuits of imagination and ideas (Sennet, 2009, p. 21). Grayson Perry follows with ‘Craftsmanship is about learning a particular skill that can be handed down: it’s something that can be taught, apprenticed. That’s what separates craft from talent and creativity” (Phillips, 2011).

**Pastoral** - Ideas about craft that stem from Ruskin and Morris and from a romantic notion of the rural idyll, of the respected village potter and smithy. In later times becoming a reaction

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6 I have omitted development stages of budgeting and finance and administration, not because they are not important but because of limitations on the length of essay and in favour of talking more about the theme.

7 An opposite approach came from the ‘Process Art’ movement of the nineteen sixties that produced artworks that were all about the process, the end result was less important. (Stangos, 1994, p. 259)
against plastic disposable culture and political and economic unease; pursued within the ‘Hippy’ culture of the 70s.89

It seems that craft can mean many things to many people. Craft as an idea inhabits an altogether shifting topography where its horizons merge with other ideas and constructs, from art and design to performance and spectacle.

**Selection**

As the social identity of craft had shifted so did my understanding – almost daily, so ‘SHIFT’ as a title for the show seemed appropriate. I decided to concentrate on making the show an inquiry into the meaning of craft, and because definitions have boundaries, I started looking for artists whose work seemed to transgress boundaries between art and craft. This informed my selection. On approaching artists, I was surprised to find more than one who did not want to be associated with craft even though their work could easily have been classed as such. Perhaps craft really is seen as the poor brother to art.

**Selected Artists and Work:**

*Max Jacquard’s* life-sized, suspended figure of ‘Albion: Green Man’ a patchwork of green glass. The simple, light-drenched, almost effortless form is also an incredibly labour intensive feat of engineering.

*Meryl Ainslie’s* tiny silver surface casts re-present cracks and knots, details that convey a sense of personal legacy and value, are hugely evocative, and produced through a refined and meticulous process.

*Tom Bayliss’* work explores the world of the hobbyist model maker, a realm of near obsessive recreation of physical monuments in miniature scale using traditional materials.

*Anne Gibbs’* assemblages of delicate bone china displayed with found or natural materials, resemble elements of drawing, deconstructed and re-presented in three dimensions.

*Alison Harper* created an interactive textile sculpture ‘work in progress’ using yarn recycled from foil crisp packets. She deconstructs, unpicks and reworks mass produced ‘waste’ materials using low-tech domestic techniques such as knitting and crochet.

*KT Yun* worked hot glass from a furnace at the opening night. I wanted to highlight the materiality aspect as well as showing craft as performance.

*Mirka Golden-Hann’s* collaboration ‘Choreographed Vessel’ comprised a ceramic Greek styled vessel onto which a dance, generated in response to the form, was filmed and projected.

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8 I have often heard the term ‘yogurt weavers’ used to describe well meaning, anti-establishment, often vegan and organic food growing individuals with compost loos, with an inference that they were delusional.

9 To this I might add that craft also has a long history of association with domesticity and women’s labour and part of this realm overlaps with that interesting outpost of craft activity known as the Hobby.
Kate Rattray made a short video piece ‘Storm’ using the process of stop-motion animation to bring her mosaic works to life. These last two works highlight how new technologies are instrumental in promoting exciting cross-fertilisation between disciplines and generating new art forms.

**Design, Promotion and Visualisation**

Though fortunate enough to have the help of a trustee who promoted the show, I supplied most of the written text and realised the importance of defining the fundamental identity of an exhibition before embarking on any kind of promotion. The aim was to make texts work towards successfully representing both the show AND the artists intentions. The same needs to be said for graphics and design. For SHIFT I used a simple uppercase sans-serif font in the oblique to represent a movement, a shift.

Perhaps one critical role of the curator is creative visualisation. Imagining the work within the space and making aesthetic judgments of colour, space and position. Often without being aware of it, we come to the task of designing an exhibition display with preconceptions built into our culture. The gallery space in the modern western art tradition has for decades meant a white cube, or as close as we can get to it. Brian O’Doherty in the seminal critique of this phenomenon *Inside the White Cube* describes it as ‘Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics.’ (Doherty, 1999, p. 15). The BSA gallery does adhere to this modern aesthetic and for the purposes of SHIFT, I worked with it. Choosing to keep the number of works to a minimum and to give them plenty of space would perhaps encourage the viewer to ‘devote’ their attention. Using a schematic of the gallery (Appendix 2), I made sketches of potential layouts until I was happy with the arrangement.

**Structure and Display**

Finally the first day of hanging arrived and I felt prepared, but when the work started to arrive and the real scale and presence of pieces materialised, some plans needed rethinking. I hadn’t considered the galleries uneven wooden floors, three oddly shaped windows, and the beams. I had planned to hang the green man from the beams, but they occupied such a strange conflagration of odd angles, that I spent the next two days scribbling different layouts before placing the work (Appendix 2).

There were also “hot” and “cold” spaces in the gallery. With only one entrance it was easy to determine the first part of the gallery that a visitor would encounter on entry. This was a “hot” locations, perhaps colouring a visitor’s whole experience. At this stage should I worry about where the artist wants to place his/her work? Lawrence Alloway believes that ‘As artists become, in a sense their own curators the museum curator is forced to narrow his ideas to those that are agreeable to

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10 These ideas relate to Carol Duncan’s theories on ‘the ritual of citizenship’ where cultural institutions such as galleries and museums are designed in such a way that they have a ritual ‘civilising’ effect on anyone entering them. The hush of the modern art gallery and the positioning of artwork to give them almost religious, iconic attention are symptomatic. (Duncan, 1991)

11 I use the terms “hot” and “cold” spaces to differentiate between the parts of an exhibition space where the character of the architecture among other contributing factors such as position of doors, projected visitor flow etc. contribute to the amount of attention that space gets. More attention = hot, less – cold. There are exceptions, for example if the theme of a show was about finding something hidden, then the hot spot may not be obvious or dominant in the spacial field.
the artists’ reading of their own art. This constitutes one more problem for the curator who wants to control his own shows” (Alloway, 1996)

I prefer to believe that working with artists and respecting their ideas can enhance the curatorial approach leading to interesting and more informed choices. Alloway’s attitude harks back to colonial sentiments a whole world away from contemporary practice. In hanging SHIFT my plans changed as a direct result of discussion with the artists about the positioning of their work, but finally everybody, including the curator, was happy with the arrangement.

How Much Information?

How much information to include in the show is a critical decision, too much can be off-putting and alienate visitors and too little can be frustrating. I decided on:

- Short information on small foam boards next to the work to include the title and medium.
- Short artists’ statements on laminated sheets at locations near the artist's work.
- One short essay about the nature, theme and intentions of the show, laminated and in the gallery.
- A selection of books available for more in-depth reading relating to the theme. The books were displayed on a shelf in the gallery and were for sale.
- Detailed instructions to invigilators that included how to turn off and on audio visual equipment, what could and could not be touched, how to handle or clean any of the exhibits and selling procedures.

12 I was frustrated by the lack of information on my visit to the British Museum exhibition 'The Tomb of The Unknown Craftsman' (Appendix 4).

13 I was in a dilemma when it came to the price. Would putting the price devalue the work and reinforce the idea of craft as material object for sale? (even though fine art is marketable they already have the aesthetic upper hand). But then if I don’t put the price, am I preventing a sale and not supporting the artist? Another curator advised that it was my duty to try to sell the work and that I should put the price. In the end I decided rightly or not to exclude the price and instead make a separate catalogue that would be in the gallery.
**Review**

I invigilated on Saturdays of the exhibition run, along with one of the artists Alison Harper who instigated interaction between visitors and her work. The days were very busy, full of interesting and incredibly diverse people. Children especially enjoyed Alison’s ‘Work in Progress’ that could be touched and manipulated. By the end of the exhibition they had covered the piece with little messages. An elderly retired man was so excited by the ideas we discussed that he went home and returned with a rag rug he had made with ten thousand pieces of cloth (we know this because he told us), designed in the form of a local hill. Points of note:

- On my days at the gallery I noted that most visitors didn’t pick up and read the information sheets, but they were on quite a low plinth so perhaps not accessible. Maybe information on the wall next time.
- One of the volunteer invigilators complained that there should be more accessible work in the gallery (such as the Aardman show14) and ‘esoteric’ stuff in another gallery. Although it is not the remit of the gallery to put on shows to entertain the stewards, perhaps a greater effort can be made to engage them with the shows. Maybe further discussion between programmers and invigilators, and for new shows, a prepared sheet outlining the aims of the show for stewards to take home and read.

Shift ran from January 11th until February 16th 2013 and attracted over 900 visitors. I found it an enjoyable and rewarding experience, especially invigilating, learning about the artists, visitors, and taking from this engagement ideas about what craft is. What I conclude from my experience is that although craft practices have made their presence felt in the contemporary art space, there are still many ideas that tie craft to the past and inhibit full appreciation of the work. I think the relationship between perceptions of art and craft is still very much shifting.

Kim Wood
February 18th 2013

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14 Last year the Black Swan hired a touring show about Aardman, the creators of the popular fictional animated characters Wallace and Gromit. Aardman work in clay-like materials and ran a workshop for children during the exhibition.
APPENDIX 1 – Black Swan Arts Gallery Aims

Introduction

Frome is a town that is full of vibrant arts, crafts and music. The crafts scene of Frome is visible through examples such as the independent retailers of Catherine Hill, Cheap Street and the regular Artisan Market. The Black Swan Arts Centre plays its part in this scene through its letting out of studio spaces to artisans and hosting of the shop, Seed. The rent of these spaces and Divas Café fund the running of the centre.

The Black Swan Curatorial Committee believes that there is an opportunity to develop the Black Swan Gallery into a space that positions itself into a vibrant art scene. Over previous years the identity of the Black Swan Arts Centre has been unclear through inconsistent programming, mixed use of the two gallery spaces, and no clear strategy to develop a strong identity.

The Committee feel that creating a strong identity for the gallery by redefining its purpose, its name and raising its profile will allow the public to engage with exciting contemporary art debates, education and workshops.

Aims

We aim to:

1) Raise the profile of the black swan to be a vibrant and challenging space with a national reputation.
2) Programme art that engages the local community and national audience
3) Facilitate conversation between public and contemporary art debates.
4) Promote a community education program arising out the exhibitions.
5) Appoint curators of all disciplines to fulfil the committee’s aims.
6) Create an experimental programme with exhibitions ranging from 1 day events, to 6 week shows.
7) Enthusiastically market to local and national media, with a refined and targeted marketing strategy.
8) Seek out co-operative arrangements with other galleries (local and national) and travelling exhibitions.
9) Raise the profile of the Black Swan to attract significant finance and sponsorship.

By running more events and exhibitions, we will be able to take risks with the programme, but also keep the gallery lively and exciting. We intend to invigorate the critical potential of the gallery and make it a place to be respected and admired.
APPENDIX 2 – Gallery Schematic and Display Plan Sketch
APPENDIX 3 – SOME VISITOR COMMENTS

‘I like the feeling of sacred objects of some pieces against the playfulness of others’

‘The G Perry Books - Nice. How about an expo!? Nice bowl’

‘I love it being interactive’

‘Thank you Alison Harper. You made my little boy's (19 months) day - his first co-creation! on show!’

‘Interesting There could have been more.’

‘Is it aft or is it crart?’

‘Exquisite pieces by Anne Gibbs

‘Lottie (4 ¾ ) likes the green man’

‘Beautiful - I really love the dancers on the bowl’

‘Some really thought-provoking artists' statements. Beautiful, contemplative pieces.’

‘Amazing artwork could work on the techniques though. Hope to see the same amount of 'better' work next time!! not trying to be rude but I really do think that, my opinions.’

‘Beautiful work, witty and poetic’

‘Brill Thanks!’

‘Interesting Ideas’

‘Good to see crafts – more textiles please!’

‘Unexpectedly good’

‘Certainly raises the question What is art?’
APPENDIX 4 – Exhibition Review

Exit Through The Afterlife: A Visit to the Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman.

‘The end is the beginning and the beginning is the end’...this was the thought that played through my mind as I examined the 250,000 year old prehistoric tool laid out in the fabulous funerary boat named ‘The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman’ not co-incidentally the name of the show I was visiting at the British Museum. This goat sized vessel was perched on wooden blocks in the centre of the last room of the show and directly in front of the exit through the gift shop. The boat was cast in iron so destined for the bottom of any water, and adorning its sides were small casts of objects, Perry’s artworks from the show, his treasures going on with him to the afterlife. I say I was visiting the exhibition but it did at that moment feel quite like the end of a pilgrimage.

Rewind to the beginning and sitting outside the entrance to the show was Grayson’s glorious pink wonder of a motorbike that he and Alan Measles (his deified teddy) had taken on pilgrimage to Germany so that Perry could lay to rest the ghosts of his childhood fears about Germany and the war. It felt like I had arrived at the holy place, hot on the heels of Perry and teddy. From the bright kitsch pinkness outside, I passed into the darkened space of the Museum (and felt a bit like Indiana Jones) to encounter an array of strange and wonderful things like ancient artefacts sitting in glass cases. The objects were actual artefacts from the British Museum’s vault intermingled with contemporary objects from the ‘one-man civilisation’ known as Grayson Perry. The theatricality of the lighting made the objects appear sinister as strong shadows lay over some pieces and others appeared to hang in the dark like religious apparitions. The first object I met was a large ceramic vessel entitled ‘You Are Here’. I was immediately comforted by the familiar Perry style, all glossy glaze, adorned with colourful illustrations of modern life. Perry imagined that people would come to his show as pilgrims and he depicts them here with little speech bubbles announcing their purpose.

15 “Indiana” Jones is a fictional film character developed by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg who created the character in homage to the action heroes of 1930s film serials. The character first appeared in the 1981 film Raiders of the Lost Ark where Jones plays a maverick and thrill-seeking archaeologist.

The show then is laid out in several small rooms with clusters of objects based on a series of themes. This reminds me of the historical collections from the 16th century ‘cabinets of wonder’ and Victorian collectors with their strange and wonderful classifications like the topologies of Pitt Rivers.

At first glance it was often quite hard to tell which was the bone-fide ancient thing and which was the modern reliquary spawned from Perry’s fetishistic imaginings. The whole thick religiosity of the resulting melee was a bit exciting, and a bit unsettling.

What was the show all about? Perry obviously has a fascination with other cultures, beliefs and even ancient crafted objects but ideas about craft seem somehow largely irrelevant. The emphasis here felt a deeply personal and spiritual one. We have Alan Measles, Perry’s very own god performing as deities throughout history, with themes of death and ritual coming to the fore. We lose sense of time and alien cultures become familiar as the brotherhood of humanity comes together in its quest for meaning. On a more mundane level the show exemplifies how themes and styles recur in different cultures with interesting and often darkly humourous crossovers like for example the African bone carving with an incongruous depiction of an English Victorian family; and where the contemporary avant-guarde art meets ritual magick\(^\text{17}\) as in Grayson’s miniature coffin complete with his own severed pony tail. Perry says:

‘One of the creeds that I am bringing to the Museum is the creed of contemporary art, in all its beliefs and rituals, like I am a kind of witch-doctor of the contemporary art world. I have come out of the white cube temple and gone into the more muddy waters of the historical museum. With a contemporary art exhibition the aesthetic is the headline priority, and then perhaps the political and the commercial, whereas with the BM I should think it is historical, educational, then tourism... aesthetic might be fourth, or maybe it might be fifth behind cultural diplomacy.’\(^\text{18}\)

The show fits the museum well. It replicates normal museological display, using actual museum relics, but with the addition of unorthodox content that stimulates a little excitement but is still pretty safe. It is a nod to sensationalism but without too much controversy, although I suspect the

\(^\text{17}\) Magick with a ‘k’ refers to the title given by Perry to one of the themes running through the show. This is the archaic English spelling later adopted by occultist Aleister Crowley during the esoteric revival of interest in magic in the early part of the twentieth century (http://oxforddictionaries.com)(Crowley, Aleister. “A Lecture on the Philosophy of Magick”. The Revival of Magick.)

display of an ornamental earing complete with actual shrivelled ear may have incited some debate amongst the human remains specialists. I found the whole thing really enjoyable in a burlesque, freak show kind of way. I imagine (well it’s obvious from the queues) that this kind of show is good for museum attendance and fills the coffers, so perhaps this show has nurtured another creed, one rich in followers and bearing gifts of wealth. Who better than the adorable and uber-famous, Turner Prize winning, sensationallly cross-dressing practitioner of ancient crafts ...Grayson Perry and his equally illustrious teddy, to bestow upon the museum - the cult of Celebrity. The British Museum and Grayson Perry are a marriage made in heaven or ‘various versions of the afterlife’.

For me I would have loved more background information about intentions and meanings, some meaty textual descriptions to have and to hold and to take forward on the train home. Even if these came in the form of a pamphlet to take away at the end without having to pay thirty pounds or so for the accompanying book in the gift shop. Travelling through the show from light through dark to light again was a kind of rebirth a passage through time and timelessness. Arriving at the boat bearing its precious cargo was a bit of an anti-climax as the boat was so positioned that when one stood on the full side of it, the brightly lit souvenir shop entirely dominated the ambience. Was this intentional? I thought, and is this the future of our craft? ...as I purchased a commemorative mug, my very own holy relic.

Kim Wood 2012

19 ‘Various versions of the Afterlife’ is the text on the depiction heavenly spheres that forms part of Perry’s large tapestry in the central room. The tapestry depicts holy places of pilgrimage (according to Perry) and at the centre is situated The British Museum with places like Mecca and Glastonbury as satellites.
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