

The artist as alchemist, priest and flâneur:

Performance personas in the work of Joseph Beuys and Willem Boshoff

‘Everyone an artist’ is the clearest formulation of Joseph Beuys’ intention. It means a widened concept of art in which the whole process of living itself is the creative act. [...] As a sculptor, Beuys’ attempt has been to extend this sense of something more beyond the accepted field of art and into life, so that thinking, talking, performing, teaching – and above all living, which all of us do – can be seen as a process of moulding or sculpting (Tisdall 1979:7)

Beuys’ recognition that living, thinking and interacting with the world is an important aspect of creative production positions him as a flâneur, who is aware of and takes in every aspect of the environment he finds himself in. In a similar way, I am trying to identify and draw on the various roles I assume within my creative workings and, like the flâneur, mindfully interact with the space I am immersed in.

In the performance *How to explain pictures to a dead hare* Beuys spent three hours explaining his art to a dead hare (clutched in his arms) in a gallery closed off to the public. The performance was only visible from the doorway and street window of the gallery. With his head anointed with honey and gold leaf, Beuys performs an intimate yet futile unpacking of his own thinking processes – performing the role of both the anointed priest (a spokesperson of God) as well as the teacher. His revelations, however, are silenced due to the distance he places between himself and his audience. Just as one of his sculptures would be displayed silently in a gallery space, Beuys in this performance places himself as the artist, priest and teacher trying to break the silence.



Fig 5. Joseph Beuys, *How to explain pictures to a dead hare* (1965). Action.

In contrast to his live performance work are Beuys' shelves, one of which is *Barraque Dull Odde*, produced between 1961 and 1967. In this work Beuys displays a laboratory of objects and materials he collected and interacted with over a number of years. Tisdall notes that Beuys refers to the shelves as “action object[s]’ because [they contain] several components of his own actions” (1979:80). The objects stand metonymically for the presence and exploration of the artist with the objects and materials representing his thoughts and ideas. In this instance Beuys is performing both the artist and the scientist with his display being an “effort to bridge the gulf between creativity and scientific analysis” (Ibid.). The objects are not performed or used live, but rather are imbued with the actions Beuys has carried out on them. In a similar manner, my presence as journeyman is implied by or imbued in the objects, materials and drawings on display rather than being performed live. In doing so I am trying to bridge the silence between the printmaker labouring in the studio and the art object on display in the gallery.

In his work *Big Druid in His Cubicle*, South Africa artist Willem Boshoff also bridges this gap between the artist as scholar or researcher, the artist in studio and the art object on display⁶. Here Boshoff performs his life experiences through his persona as a druid in a six-day living installation in which “he does battle with shadows, aesthetic constructs and words” (Boshoff 2012:Online). Within his cubicle Boshoff “works on computer, writ[es] druidic dictionaries, plot[s] philosophical strategies and document[s] his experiences and large collection of diviners’ articles” (Ibid.). Boshoff both identifies himself as a druid as well as uses the persona to mediate and process his life experiences through a number of texts and artworks he creates during the performance. Through the living installation Boshoff puts his creative, thinking process on display by setting up a studio within the gallery space and performing the artist or druid at work.

My own mode of performance within this project is different to that of Beuys and Boshoff in that my presence is mediated by the prints and the process rather than being a live performance. My presence is silent and implied due to the fact that the technology of printmaking and its location within specialized studios forces a distance between the printmaker and the final product. This distance is as a result of a print being an impression or effect of the printmaking process and as such the printed product hides the process of producing the matrix. Unlike Boshoff working in his cubicle, my relationship to a studio space is alluded to through the artworks on display rather than setting up a functioning studio within the gallery. The absence of the printmaker and the removal of the labour intensive process when viewing a print is one of the driving forces behind this project in that I am trying to find visual forms to draw the printmaker into the gallery space and to show the process and

investment involved in producing a print. Objects such as the aprons, rollers, notebooks and chalkboards therefore become the surrogates or metonymic objects of my presence within and my thought process in making the work.



Fig 6. Joseph Beuys, *Barraque Dull Odde* (1961-67). Installation (detail).

Journeyman as Alchemist

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘alchemy’ as “the medieval forerunner of chemistry, concerned with the transmutation of matter, in particular with attempts to convert base metals into gold or find a universal elixir”, as well as “a seemingly magical process of transformation, creation, or combination” (2013. Sv ‘alchemy’). Within the practice of alchemy, and by extension within the figure of the alchemist, there is a tension between two modes of operation: the scientific and the magical. Alchemy, entrenched in material experimentation and transformation, began laying foundations for a scientific (empirical) inquisition as well as made use of a magical (chance, intuitive, pseudo-scientific) approach. The alchemist is therefore both controlled scientist and magician, whose ‘tricks’ seem to defy conventions.

Within the realm of printmaking, the journeyman also inhabits both the expressions of the alchemist. Many of the techniques within printmaking rely on basic scientific principles and reactions, such as the corrosive action of acid on metal being determined by the exchange of metal ions. In addition to the chemical reactions between substances, knowledge of the chemical compositions of the various materials itself becomes important when handling them in various combinations. Many of the techniques in printmaking can therefore be reduced down to empirical methods, which can be controlled. My own ethos within printmaking is that the greater the knowledge of the scientific principles and chemical compositions at work, the greater the range of possibilities that are opened up in terms of material experimentation and the development of new techniques. A large part of my project has been to demystify certain aspects of printmaking for myself by learning and understanding the chemistry behind the processes. This pursuit has also allowed me to experiment with the materials used within printmaking as well as with substitute materials, in order to develop different working methods. In the same instant, though, the science of printmaking can also become the magic of printmaking. To the uninitiated, chemistry can appear as something magical or mystical, despite the fact that the ‘magic’ can be empirically explained. For example, I am still struck by the magic of immersing a copper plate in an acid and watching the metal getting bitten away, despite understanding the chemistry involved. Apart from the sense of wonder experienced by the uninitiated, most of the magic of printmaking is contained in the handing over of control to the technology of printmaking. It is within these same moments of printmaking (such as etching a copper plate or running a plate through the press) that ideas such as intuition, trust, faith and hope become part of the way in which I interact with the process. I am therefore becoming the scientist whose drive is to know empirically and to control, while at the same

time becoming the magician who can be both bewildered and bewitched by the performed trick. The journeyman as alchemist is therefore the custodian of both a practical and theoretical body of scientific knowledge, while at the same time appearing to be the magician.

Journeyman as Priest

In this reflection of the journeyman I draw on three aspects of priesthood to speak to the sacred, ritual and devotional aspects of printmaking and of this project, namely: the priest as custodian, the priest as the performer of rituals and the process of vesting as an act of preparation.

One of the roles of the priest is as the custodian of a system of rituals and beliefs which the priest is charged to practice, protect and teach or preach. The archaic term for “a minister with pastoral responsibility” is the *curate*, a term with the Latin root *cura*, which means ‘to care’ (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2013. Sv ‘curate’). The priest as custodian is the one who cares for that which is under his responsibility. The journeyman as priest is therefore the custodian of the traditions, techniques and history of printmaking, while at the same time being the one with an attachment and devotion to the practice that extends beyond a technical and theoretical knowledge of the field. In this project the enacting or performing of the rituals in printmaking becomes an act of devotion showing my attachment and glorification of the process as something valuable and worthy of the labour required. Where the scientist seeks to demystify, strip down and streamline, the priest recognizes and celebrates the mystical, labour-intensive and rhythmic aspects of printmaking.

Apart from the religious connotations of the word *ritual*, the word also denotes “a series of actions or type of behaviour regularly and invariably followed by someone” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2013. Sv ‘ritual’). The journeyman as a custodian within printmaking is thus the custodian of the series of printing actions, which are often repeated and, due to their systemic nature, need to be carried out in particular sequences. The act of making a print (both in creating the matrix and in producing the print object) therefore becomes a series of rituals, which must be learnt and performed in order to become a printmaker.

The final important aspect of the priest, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church, is that of a vested figure. The vestments of the priest are an important signifier of the office of priesthood as well as the rituals that are performed. The act of putting on the vestments before a mass, for instance, is the preparation for performing the role of the priest in the service. As a

printmaker, the apron holds the same significance for me as the vestments of a priest. The act of putting on the apron becomes the preparation ritual for performing the role of the printmaker. The aprons are my visual markers of the printmaker but also, in an expanded sense, the markers of the performer of rituals.

Journeyman as Flâneur

The term *flâneur*, from the French *flâner*, which means to saunter or lounge, refers to a man who wanders around observing society (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2013. Sv ‘flâneur’). It was used to describe the wealthy, educated men who strolled through Paris in the nineteenth century. Marx described the flâneur (in response to the poems of Charles Baudelaire) as a person intoxicated by the city and the crowds and who had the “incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes” (cited in Benjamin 1997:55). The flâneur constantly shifts the conception of self or the persona based on the surroundings, performing his or her identity through a number of figures. As a nomad of the city, the agency of the flâneur centers on the mobility of this figure as a generator of journeys in order to indulge in, collect and experience the city and the people as an observer. Walter Benjamin, in his work *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, also writes of the flâneur and the fascination with the city as something mysterious and phantasmagorical; and “regardless of [the flâneur’s] sober calculations, also participates in fashioning the phantasmagoria of Parisian life” (Benjamin 1997:41). Baudelaire speaks of the magical fascination with the city as the “‘the big cities state of religious intoxication’, the commodity is probably the unnamed subject of this state. [The state of intoxication is] ‘that holy prostitution of the soul which gives itself wholly, poetry and charity, to the unexpected that appears, to the unknown that passes’” (Ibid.:56).

Within the figure and the actions of the flâneur there is a sense of ambiguity between exploration and discovery. The agency of the flâneur lies in the organic way in which different and sometimes contradictory aspects of culture are assimilated, constituting the flâneur as a complex cultural product. In his work *Relational Aesthetics* Nicolas Bourriaud writes of two understandings of the *artist*. The first, based on the writings of Benjamin Buchloch, is defined as “a ‘scholar/philosopher/craftsman’, who hands society ‘the objective results of his labour’ [... and is] represented by Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana and Joseph Beuys” (Bourriaud 2002:108). Bourriaud extends Buchloch’s definition into the contemporary moment by stating that “[t]oday’s artist appears as an operator of signs, modeling production structures so as to provide significant doubles.

An entrepreneur/politician/director. The most common denominator shared by all artists is that they *show* something” (Ibid.). Bourriaud’s contemporary definition of the artist connects with the figure of the flâneur as a negotiator of signs and “production structures” (Ibid.), while at the same time retaining the scholarly, philosophical and craft-based aspects – particularly within my use of the journeyman as flâneur.

As a sauntering observer, the flâneur experiences his or her current environment with an investigative curiosity. It is this sense of curiosity which drives my material experimentation and research into new and different ways of handling familiar processes and materials. My approach to art-making, in light of the journeyman as flâneur, is based on journeys through a variety of media, techniques, references, experiences, academic fields, writings and various modes of cultural production, all coalesced into art objects.

In addition to the flâneur as the inquisitive gatherer, the journeyman as flâneur expresses the communal involvement of the printmaker. A large aspect of working in a communal studio is the need to negotiate working with or alongside other printmakers. Observing different working methods, learning other people’s techniques, solving problems together as well as discussing ideas, philosophies and artworks all form part of the way in which I think about printmaking and myself as printmaker. In this way the flâneur is a student of his or her environment, while at the same time bringing the accumulated knowledge back into the studio.

⁴ Within guild structured society printmaking would have been viewed as a trade skill alongside carpentry, glass blowing, masonry, textiles and many others. It is therefore important to make the distinction between the function of printmaking within a medieval guild setting (as a reproduction industry) and the function of printmaking as a post-Renaissance Fine Art discipline.

⁵ In *The Guilds*, Braddon notes that journeymen did not complete or produce their masterpiece due to a lack of means to establish their own workshop and due to these constraints “a journeyman might remain so for life” (1925:6).

⁶ Boshoff performed *Big Druid in His Cubicle* during the Basel Art Fair in 2009 as part of Art Unlimited. (Boshoff 2012: Online).