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Performing professionalism|Validating artistness

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As the professional online persona becomes ever more ubiquitous, those who create them must negotiate increasingly diverse audiences and purposes. For artists, whose role is (in Schiebe's terms) as much granted by their audience as attained by the individual, whose work is often solitary, and who do not require specific training or accreditation to claim the title, presenting a "professional artist" persona is particularly complex. By adapting the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology, I have investigated the experience of online persona creation, asking what it is like to create an artist's persona online, defining an online persona as the presentation of the self on and through digitally networked spaces, where the self that is presented is a reflection, extension and distillation of a particular individual.

This paper will explore the experiences of online persona creation by eight artists from four art forms that sit outside the boundaries of the traditional art world: tattoo, street art, craftivism and performance poetry. These eight artists use a variety of strategies and tactics to both present themselves as "professionals" in unregulated (and often unpaid) work environments, and validate their status as "artist". Drawing from (and oftentimes opposing) "the artist" as it has been defined socio-culturally, these artists have created online persona that balance strategy and happenstance, specialisation and diversification, visibility and self-protection, the self and the collective, and work and play. Understanding how these individuals experience this process of persona creation gives insight into the wider issues of presenting the self in public.

As a professional online persona becomes ever more ubiquitous, those who create them must negotiate increasingly diverse audiences and purposes. For artists, whose role is, in Schiebe's (1998) terms, as much granted by their audience as attained by the individual, whose work is often solitary, and who do not require specific training or accreditation to claim the title, presenting a "professional artist" persona is particularly complex. In order to examine the experience of this persona creation process, I have used persona studies as a theoretical framework. Persona studies is developed from cultural studies and celebrity studies, and has a focus on the individual as the locus of meaning in contemporary prestige economies (Barbour and Marshall, 2012; Marshall, 2013, 2010a).

Although conceptually similar to a brand, for my purpose a persona links to a specific individual rather than to a product or service, and does not commodify the individual or their work. Persona's may be multiple or singular, may exist offline, on only one online space or across a number of digitally networked platforms, and may be simple or complex representations of an individual's sense of self. In 2010, David Marshall stated that through the development of presentational media "Individuals are encouraged, invoked, and seduced into more elaborate constructions of public presentation", and are "drawn into a performativity that operates as a continuous marketing of the self's value" (Marshall, 2010b). These elaborate constructions are the core of this research into the artist's persona. I therefore define an online persona as the presentation of the self on and through digitally networked spaces, where the self that is presented is a reflection, extension, and distillation of a particular individual (Barbour, 2014).

Just as the creation of persona online becomes more ubiquitous, so too does the study of identity creation online. These studies can be found through multiple disciples in the academic community, including psychology (Walther et al., 2011), Media and Communication studies (Buckingham, 2008), education (Koschoreck, 2011), cultural studies (Hine, 2000), philosophy (Ellis, 1993), and marketing (Brown et al., 2007). This multi-disciplinary interest in online identity from within academe suggests that any study of online identity or persona must draw on a range of disciplinary approaches, and therefore an interdisciplinary approach has been adopted in this research.

Persona studies utilises concepts familiar to a range of disciplinary areas within the humanities, such as performance and performativity (Butler, 1988; Goffman, 1959), subjectivity and agency (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1991), presentation and representation (Hall 1990), mediation and identification. In structur-

ing my use of these concepts, I have placed at the centre Goffman's dramaturgical analogy as laid out in the seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). A persona can be understood as a form of role play (Goffman, 1972), where the role is one that draws on existing systems of representation. In a recent study of the use of images on Facebook, Farquhar (2013) identified the use of "identity pegs" – visual shortcuts that give cues to a person's likes and dislikes, social position, and identity type. In this research, I conceptualise an online persona as made up of a wide range of potential acts or identity pegs that make up the performance of a particular social role. These acts are diverse enough that an individual may pick and choose the aspects of the role that best suits their intended performance. This performance allows for a demonstration of a social role or construct – that of the professional artist – that is both sincere (Goffman, 1959) and allows for individuality. The individual is adopting a social front, a "collective representation" which has become

> institutionalised in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks that a particular social role may require (Goffman, 1959, p. 37).

This paper explores the ways that artists working on the fringes of the traditional art world – specifically street artists, performance poets, tattoo artists, and craftivists – perform elements of the collective representation of the professional artist in order to validate their own position as an artist through their online personas. By drawing on identity pegs that have become associated with 'artistness' – the quality of being an artist – the eight participants in this project work to validate their self-identification as professional artists despite their marginalised status.

Understanding "artistness"

In order to identify how these tattoo and street artists, performance poets and craftivists perform artistness through their online personas, the artist as abstract social role needs explication. The varied elements that make up this role constitute artistness, the institutionalised "collective representation" referred to by Goffman. The "artist" is a social role that exists outside of any particular individual creative practitioner; it is a trope, a descriptor, a construct. Griselda Pollock (1980, p. 59) sees the artist as a discursive subject, stating that:

> The construction of an artistic subject for art is accomplished through current discursive structures – the biographic, which focuses exclusively on the individual, and the narrative, which produces coherent, linear, causal sequences through which an artistic subject is realised.

Pollock has identified the construction of the artist (both specific and general) through writing, and the artist's online persona as created in digitally networked spaces is similarly constructed through status updates, images, likes, friends, favourites, retweets, and comments. Similarly, Codell (2003) outlines a typology of artistic subjects that were either enacted by or imposed onto artists through writing in her analysis of the "lifewriting" (biographies, autobiographies, personal journals, and reviews) of British artists in Victorian England. These constructs of artistness – Prelapsarian, Clubby Bohemian, Degenerate, Professional – draw from and react against a rich history of narratives of artists lives, from which the "myth of the artist" has developed.

The myth of the artist is the most pervasive of descriptions of artistness. This myth includes, in Alison Bain's words, a

> tendency to rebel against established norms – to repeatedly question, challenge, and defy the limits of acceptability – [which] may have become the defining feature of what it means to be an artist in contemporary society (Bain, 2005, p. 30).

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Bain posits that working artists play into the artists' myth, as it allows them a way to define themselves as professional in an unregulated, unlicensed work environment that may exist for the majority of the time as a solo endeavour. She comments that

> many contemporary artists have consciously or unconsciously sought to preserve their symbolic marginalization (social, economic or cultural) and their mythologized alienation (Bain, 2005, p. 29).

The psychological characteristics of artistness which Steptoe (cited in Bain, 2005, p. 30) identifies, such as hypersensitivity, preoccupation with work, intolerance of order, and emotional intensity, are still ascribed to artists living and working today, as are behavioural and presentational characteristics associated with bohemianism and deviancy. The characterisation of the artist seen in the artist myth is what makes up artistness as a social and cultural collective representation, and it is from these characteristics that working artists start to draw in order to create their personas.

Although the myth of the artist still forms the basis of artistness, the creative industries discourse adds other defining characteristics. In this discourse, artistic identity is defined through a relationship with the labour market. Frey and Pommerehne (1989) outlined a list of criteria for use in determining whether someone could identify themselves as an artist. These criteria include how much time is spent on artistic work, income generation from artistic work, reputation and recognition as an artist by either the public or other artists (or both), quality of artistic work, membership of professional groups or organisations, art qualifications, and self-identification as an artist. Despite including both objective and subjective criteria, the combination of elements that make up Frey and Pommerehne's definition of the artist shows a distinct shift from the highly subjective, historically grounded understandings of the artist's myth. Gone are behavioural and presentational expectations of artistness, and in their place appear the economic and labour motivations that fed into the creative industries policies which developed at the end of the 20th century. These policies began with the definition of a creative worker by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in the United Kingdom (Flew, 2012, p. 9), and spread through North America, Australasia, and parts of Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Flew, 2012, p. 34). Despite this "official" definition of artistness through government policy and census taking, characteristics of both the artist as heroic-genius-madman as constructed by the myth of the artist, and of the artist as a creative labourer contributing to economic development as in the creative industries discourse, can be identified in the performance of professional artistness described below.

Methodology

In order to investigate persona creation and the performance of artistness, this project uses an adapted form of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Briefly, IPA is a phenomenological research methodology developed within psychology, which aims, in Hinds' words, to "understand an individual's personal perceptions of their experiences" (2011: 193). Researchers using IPA come to understand their participants perceptions through structured interpretative analysis of narratives of experience (Smith et al., 2009). The IPA methodology and method – which is detailed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin – is particularly well suited to the phenomenological study of persona as it makes clear that the role of the researcher is interpretative rather than experiential. Additionally, IPA specifies the process of analysis and interpretation in a step-by-step fashion that allows comparable studies to be conducted with different participant groups.

Data was collected two ways. Each purposively sampled artist was interviewed once in a face-to-face setting of their choice, with the unstructured conversations lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participant for approval. Additionally, the period between January 2012 and December 2013 was spent engaging in online listening (Crawford, 2009) on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and the participants' blogs. The online listening consisted of following each participant's online persona across these platforms recording examples of experience with screen shots.

The data analysis process took the form of repeated close readings of each interview transcript. Through these readings, emergent patterns were identified and thematically coded into complementary pairs. These

five pairs were strategy|happenstance, visibility|self-protection, specialisation|diversification, self|collective, and work|play. Screen shots were coded similarly, allocated to one of the five thematic pairings. However, at this point in the analytical process, it became clear that the thematic pairings were not sufficient to understand the persona creation experience. Therefore, an additional analytical layer was added by associating the experiences described within each thematic pairing with one of three registers of performance: professional, personal, and intimate. Of the three registers of performance, the professional was the most extensively discussed in interviews, and is the focus of the discussion below.

Performing the professional artist

The self-presentation by the artist as a professional, a working artist whether paid or not, I am calling a performance in the Professional Register. The term professional here is used as a synonym for occupation, but as can be seen in the discussion that follows, the working artist may also see their role as vocational. In choosing the term "professional" to describe this register of performance, the contested nature of what counts as professional in an unlicensed, unregulated work environment is acknowledged. Indeed, as Smeby et. al. outline, even outside of the arts the definition and use of the term is disputed: in everyday terms professional can be a synonym for occupation, as with a "professional hairdresser" or "professional chef"; it can be used descriptively to indicate people who use expert knowledge in their work, such as doctors or lawyers; or 'professional' can indicate the adoption of normative models of quality and ethics, such as in journalism or public relations (2011, pp. 1–2). Codell (2003) identifies a professional category in her typology of Victorian artists, where professionalism was judged on the basis of membership to specific clubs or societies, or inclusion in shows and events. More recent creative industries discourse of artist identification as professional includes these Victorian elements along with a requirement for income generation for the artist, self-identification as an artist, and art-making is the individuals primary role (Frey and Pommerehne, 1989).

For the purpose of this study, I am identifying a performance register based on the artist representing themselves as an *artist*; their performance is directly that of artistness. In terms of behaviour, the participants speak about their work, their process, and their struggles and successes in relation to their role of artist; experientially, the participants recount what it is like to be a working artist. Therefore, my use of the term professional is closest to that of the everyday understanding of an occupation, with the caveat that an artist does not need to be drawing income from their professional practice in order to meet the definition of professional artist.

What follows is an exploration of the experiences of the eight artists in performing professional artistness. Presented through the five thematic pairings that emerged through data analysis, the professional personas of the craftivists, performance poets, street and tattoo artists provide insight into how the socially constructed artist role is adopted in order to validate an individual's self-identification as an artist.

Strategy | Happenstance

Performance poets Maxine and Ben make strategic decisions about the types of material they share online when developing their online personas. Although Maxine has been running her poetry blog since 2008, she made a decision early on to post only the text of her poems, rather than posting audio recordings or videos from her live performances. She argues "it's been a wise decision, just because I feel like so much of spoken word is actually being there, and actually being in the room and experiencing it, rather than through a screen". Maxine's strategic choice forces people to attend her live performances to see and hear her poetry the way she wishes it to be experienced, and although she began including audio recordings of some of her poems on her blog a few months after we spoke, the vast majority of the material she shares online remains text only.

By contrast, it is possible to not only hear audio of Ben's spoken word performances online, but also view video clips posted to Vimeo or YouTube. This is a good example of the artist mixing happenstance with strategy: Ben has not recorded or uploaded any clips himself, but takes advantage of others' labour by collating a "top ten" list of recordings on his website. Of his use of the web, Ben comments "I think I use the web quite haphazardly at the moment. I'm trying to be a bit more organised about how I do things".

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The role of strategy in an artists performance in the professional register can also be seen in the way that digital networks are used for the maintenance of both personal and professional relationships. Amanda describes the three main platforms she uses (Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook) as "a good source of inspiration and also networking". She connects with other artists via digital networked spaces to keep up to date with the work they are doing, but also to keep track of the physical location of people whose work she admires. Tattoo artists travel between countries and studios frequently, and this online network allows Amanda to set up guest spots in international studios before leaving home. Additionally, as a tattoo collector herself, Amanda travels to places where particular artists are based in order to get tattooed by them. She commented that whenever she plans a trip "usually I have a hidden agenda to get tattooed". The strategic use of digital networking platforms allows her to mix the professional and personal, as she does while travelling in physical space.

Visibility | Self-protection

All eight artists spoke about the need to have an online persona of some kind in order to ensure visibility, whether with audiences or other artists. However, this is balanced by the need to protect themselves, whether by denying the connection between the artist identity and the legal identity as with street artists (Barbour, 2013), or by trying to maintain some level of control over the spread of images and other material. The need for public visibility of a professional identity is related to the conceptualisation of the artist as a creative labourer: in order to demonstrate that you are an artist, you must be seen to be engaging in artistic labour and connected to other artistic people. The sharing of evidence of art making, along with the final art work, is perhaps the core of the experience of the creation of the persona for these artists. Where there were images or descriptions of the artist at work, the role play shifted from performance to performative: the artist does not just make art, but is an artist *because they are making art*. Within this participant group, however, impression management strategies for the most part made invisible the labouring elements of the art making process by showcasing only the final outcome, or focused on the process as a part of the work itself, so that the performative labour becomes the art more than the thing being made. In either case, the visibility and self-protection thematic pairing give insight into how the artists experience the performance of their artistness, along with the decisions taken on where and how that performance might be seen.

Casey's focus on the reclamation of the word "cunt" from its use as a particularly negative insult, to reflect "its rightful place in our lexicon as a descriptor of things warm and lovable" (Jenkins, 2013), both aids and hinders her visibility. On the one hand, the word itself gains a lot of attention when it is used, but the restrictions placed on the use of "offensive" words by the corporately owned social media sites she uses (Facebook, Twitter, Blogger and iTunes) make it difficult to keep the public presence she desires. Although she has set up pages on Facebook with the word cunt in the title, other users have reported them as offensive, and they have been shut down. Similarly, the queer feminist podcast she started with two friends, titled Cunts in Space, cannot be linked to from Facebook or listed on iTunes for distribution. Casey comments that "there's so many restrictions on the internet […] and I'm starting to compromise", although she does so unwillingly. One way of getting around the restrictions involves Casey's use of the Craft Cartel profile to promote and distribute other parts of her craftivist practice. Originally conceived as a collaborative project between Casey and Rayna, the Craft Cartel built a substantial presence on Facebook. Casey has taken primary responsibility for the group, and she describes using the site to organise protests against the incarceration of Russian punk band Pussy Riot. The visibility that Craft Cartel offered provided the justification for its use: "I did it under Craft Cartel, because Craft Cartel has all the followers, and we've done workshops before, and it was the easiest thing I could think of". By capitalising on the existing visibility of the Craft Cartel name, Casey was able to organise craftivist activities with a sympathetic audience, while protecting her personal identity from potential repercussions.

Specialisation | Diversification

The desire to create a strong professional artist's persona was reported as leading to two contradictory experiences: the need to specialise in order to present a consistent persona, and the need to diversify in order

to appeal to a range of potential audiences. This reflects the conflict inherent in the two core representations of the artist outlined earlier – the artist as heroic genius driven by inspiration (specialisation) and the artist as the creative labourer who responds to market demands (diversification). Some of the artists described the experience of needing to balance both ends of this spectrum, while others located themselves firmly in one camp or the other. Although the size of this sample makes generalisation problematic, I noted that even within these fringe art forms, the more socially acceptable and financially viable the art form, the greater the focus on specialisation. For the participants working in art practices that generate little income but do attract criticism from those outside the art world, such as illegal street art or craftivism, diversification was most common. When, in Mike's case, the illegal street art leads to commissions and gallery shows, a shift towards specialisation occurs.

Tattoo art, with its diversity of styles and imagery, and as a commission-based, highly commercially focused industry, would seem to run counter to the trend described above. Interestingly, however, both tattoo artists participating in this project describe themselves as specialists. Benjamin's desire to work solely in realistic and portrait tattoos leads him to turn down other types of tattoos, and he comments that "portrait is sort of like the hardest thing to do. I just like rendering 3D shapes rather than flat". Amanda states that she does "about 95% custom work", and that this is a welcome change from her early experience in the industry: "when I first started tattooing people were really set on one thing. […] They'd looked at all the flash, that was the one that they wanted. You could not talk them out of it, right down to the colours having to be exactly the same as the ones on the wall". Now however, "most of the time people are really open to changing their ideas in order for it to work better". Likewise, Benjamin comments that it was "pretty easy" to convince a recent customer to go from a single, mid-size tattoo on a forearm to a full themed sleeve, demonstrating that the specialist tattoo artist can maintain a sense of control over the types of work they produce. One potential problem with this type of specialisation is that the artists cannot deviate from the style for which they are known. Amanda gives an example of this in relation to her painting practice: "[clients] don't understand that you can do other art that's not based on tattoos. And if you put something like that up in the same kind of realm as your tattooing work, they just don't get it". This means that Amanda is not able to include artwork outside of her tattooing style, even if the medium itself is different, in conjunction with her tattoo artist persona without confusing her audience of potential and current clients.

Self | Collective

The artist has historically been conceptualised as a solitary figure, and it is this heroic genius, working (and starving) alone that drives the myth of the artist as described above. The individuality of creative practice can also be seen in Codell's (2003) typology of Victorian artists, is the basis of Foucault's (1991) development of a corpus of work, and is at the centre of discussion of Pollock's (1980) "artistic subject". However, the experiences described in this research demonstrate that, at least for these artists, their practice oscillates between the self and the collective. When performing in a professional register, the artists online persona must adapt to the requirements of both self and audience, self and client, self and network, self and community.

The community focus of craftivism is one example where collaboration is the norm rather than the exception, with Rayna focusing on connecting with others and building networks and relationships through her practice. For Rayna, this extends to the way she writes online, and she comments that "a lot of the language is about 'us' and 'we'. It's really community based language, it's sort of speaking as a member of the community rather than 'hi, I'm and expert on this stuff, so you should do what I say because I'm cool'". Discussing her early efforts, Rayna states "I used Facebook and then Twitter and then things like Etsy and communities and Flickr to find people mostly, not necessarily to organise them, but certainly finding them and getting people involved and finding their work and finding ways to promote one another". This collaborate focus took advantage of Rayna's visibility to build an international network of craftivists.

Work | Play

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The final thematic pairing of work|play describes the relationship of the artists to their professional identities, and the ways that they see themselves reflected back from their clients, audience or fans. Amanda describes the tension inherent in tattooing, where she may not be seen as an artist at all: "I think that a lot of people still see us as just another tradesperson, you know? 'You give me a quote, I'm giving you the money, and you'll get the job done'". The upside for tattoo artists is that they do, at least, get paid for their work. For street artist Mike Maka, getting to the point where he can get paid for his work has been "a slow kind of process", while poet Ben comments "I haven't really figured out how to do that, how to finance this work, how to get people to pay for something that is ostensibly kind of free". Ticketed performances, whether as part of a festival or standalone events, are too rare to support a performance poet, and the sale of books or CDs is equally problematic. For those trying to make a living from a creative practice that exists outside of the traditional economic system of the art world, monetising ones art is a complex practice.

The alternative approach, where financial gain is not the aim, can be seen in Casey's practice. Casey stated outright that continuing the craft market run by Craft Cartel wasn't of interest to her "because it was based around the commerce of it, making and selling stuff, and the stuff that we were making wasn't very saleable". Rayna agrees that craftivism isn't a self-supporting career option: "If I was trying to pay my rent, I wouldn't be selling radical cross stitch patterns!"

Whether through the influence of post-modern thinking in artistic practice, or as a way to alleviate some of the less desirable aspects of being an artist (particularly an artist on the fringes of the traditional art world such as those involved in this research) there is also a consistent theme of art as play or as a source of fun. The closest anyone came to openly identifying this point was Ben, who, in discussing the way that he mixes traditional poetry forms with his own performance elements drawn from music and comedy, says "You get to indulge your baser instincts while at the same time congratulate yourself on being clever. And so it's enjoyable on different levels". This sense of enjoyment, of play, of not taking yourself, your practice or your self-presentation too seriously ran as underneath discussions with Rayna, Casey, Maxine, Ben, Mike, and GHOSTZz. It could be this struggle to find a way to continue to work, or to support themselves financially, drives this playful approach; unlike for tattoo artists Amanda and Benjamin, there is no guaranteed income from each art work created so alternative forms of reward are required.

Implications

Performing in the professional register of artistness is, as seen above, experienced as a balancing act. The participants primarily enacted the creative labourer through their online personas. This was achieved through the strategic selection of imagery to build online portfolios as with the tattoo and street artists to demonstrate skill, productivity, and an understanding of what their market wants. Likewise, the collation of performance recordings uploaded by others by poet Ben, or the celebration of awards won by tattoo artist Benjamin, can be connected to the need to demonstrate professionalism through external validation. Through these presentational practices, the artists mark themselves as skilled, hard working, prolific, and recognised in their field both by other artists and by the cultural gatekeepers more usually associated with the traditional (such as award committees and reviewers).

The other side of the balancing act required an engagement with the behavioural and representational expectations associated with artistness through the artists myth. The artist as provocative, as challenging to established norms, is performed through the choice of creative practice as with the craftivists. By creating an online persona that contains characteristics of both the artists myth and the creative labourer, the participants demonstrate sufficient artistness to validate their self-identification as artists, despite their position on the fringes of the traditional art world.

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