

## INKED:

### THE FORMATION OF IDENTITIES AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN A DUNDEE TATTOO STUDIO

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#### *Finding a Way into the World of Tattooing*

I consider myself very lucky to have met Bea and David, the two tattoo artists working in the studio where I conducted my research, especially after my difficulties to find a tattoo studio where I could spend time observing and asking questions. I had been refused in a number of studios in Dundee and Edinburgh until the owner of one tattoo parlour in Dundee pointed me to David, who, I was told, had been tattooing in Dundee longest. The reason why David, contrary to many others, allowed me to 'hang out' in his studio is likely to be his established position within the Dundee tattooing scene, as well as his longstanding experience. Bea, on the other hand, agreed to be part of my project due to her enthusiasm about the fact that something she was passionate about would receive academic attention. Reasons for many tattooists' hesitation or refusal to participate in my project had included lack of space, health and safety issues, intrusion into the privacy of the customers, and some simply and understandably did not feel comfortable being watched while working. Once in the field, I intended to apply these initial experiences. I did not want to pose a major disruption in the tattooists' working routine, and I wanted to respect the fact that their clients might be in a vulnerable situation in which they have to expose parts of their bodies and endure varying amounts of pain. Consequently, during the tattooing process itself I mostly observed without asking many questions. Furthermore, I wanted conversations to be situational, relevant to the context, and less formal. This is why I chose not to record the conversations but rather took notes at the end of them.

Talking about my own tattoo and my experience with other people's reaction to it was also a good way to encourage people to relate their own stories. In what follows, I will relate some of these stories. I will briefly outline recent developments in the Euro-American tattooing practice, before delineating both the tattooist's and the client's motives and objectives in order to analyse how these inform their interaction. I will argue that the client seeks out the expertise of the tattoo artist for the latter to form and define the former's 'body projects' which serve as a means of identity formation and expression.

### Of Sailors and Shoppers

Writing in 1989, American sociologist Clinton Sanders remarks that purposive body alterations such as tattooing signify one's defiance of cultural appearance norms in most of Euro-America (1989: 2). While a substantial amount of Euro-Americans would certainly adhere to this stance, the practice of tattooing has become increasingly normalized. Over the last decades, the tattoo has been undergoing a transition from a socially deviant commercial craft to fine art (*ibid.* 34). David, who has been in the tattooing business for over forty years, observed that a lot has changed during that time. While it was mostly sailors and bikers that had tattoos back then, today 'everybody' gets tattoos. Tattooing, indeed, experienced somewhat of a renaissance between the 1970s and 1990s, especially in North America. Due to the influx of artists and clients who increasingly saw the body as a means of expressing and creating identity, tattooing moved away from being a deviant or even criminal practice (Atkinson 2003: 42). Furthermore, an increasing amount of women were involved in tattooing and used their bodies as a site of their agency, self-determination, liberation, and emancipation (*ibid.* 43). Consequently, the demand for more feminine motives and personalized treatment further contributed to the transformation of the practice. Clients were increasingly drawn from the middle classes, and tattoo artists often had a university and art school background (*ibid.* 44-45).

Recently, the tattooing world has entered what Atkinson calls the 'Supermarket Era.' People seeking to be tattooed are faced with a range of choice among a number of tattoo studios in most Western urban centres, and the business has, therefore, become increasingly competitive (*ibid.* 46-47). Bea once remarked that yet another tattoo studio had opened up in Dundee and observed how popular tattooing had become. At the same time, David and Bea seek to distance themselves from providers of cheap and low-quality tattoos, as well as so-called 'tattoo shoppers.' A sign on the wall in the entrance area of David's studio says, 'Good tattoos are not cheap, cheap tattoos are not good.' This sign stated the moral of the story of a young woman and her mother who entered the studio one day. The latter wanted to have an old tattoo touched up, as she was extremely unhappy about the colouring and the faded outline. She had it done very cheaply by a tattooist in Dundee, who

had illegally set up his parlour in his own living room. She showed it to us, and David commented that, in the end, you get what you paid for.

There are several strategies tattooists have developed to protect themselves from so-called 'tattoo shoppers,' clients who ask for the cheapest tattoo or what they can get for a certain amount of money. David and Bea only work on an appointment basis and do not allow for 'walk-ins'. This also helps them to gain greater control over their working hours and reduces the time spent waiting around for customers. Both Bea and David have, thus, established a base of returning customers, who value high quality tattoos and who entrust their tattoo artist with realizing their very own body projects.

### *Being and Becoming a Tattoo Artist*

With my initial experiences in mind, I found myself wondering how one becomes a tattoo artist. Learning to tattoo appeared to be highly problematic. Who would be willing to teach you? How do you practice? Is tattooing an occupation that is systematically sought out and pursued? David and Bea had very different stories to tell about this subject. David was in the navy when he became interested in tattooing, having always had a passion for drawing. Thus, he learned to tattoo by practicing on friends and on himself. Entering into the tattoo milieu was very hard at that time, as there was, and still is, not an established practice to apprentice with another tattooist. He admitted that today people have a ready access to tattooing equipment, which can be bought of the Internet. Back then, one had to know the right people to be able to buy needles and a machine. Yet, there remains the difficulty of learning how to use it, of finding a studio that takes you on, or setting up your own studio. David has his regular customers, and he has made his name in Dundee through word of mouth. New tattooists, however, struggle to advertise themselves, and they often have to take on other jobs besides tattooing.

'Let's say I was your apprentice. How would you teach me to tattoo?'

'First, I would let you do a lot of drawing. And then, to get a feel for the machine, I would let you practice on food.'

'Food?'

'Yeah, like oranges. And then, maybe, I would let you do a small bit of colouring in on a customer. And next time a bit more. And so on. It would take years till you'd do a complete tattoo on your own.'<sup>1</sup>

The art of tattooing is, thus, heavily reliant on technical skill. Acquiring this skill takes time and bears a range of difficulties. Yet, especially custom tattooing requires more than mastering the craft. One of Bea's customers, James, once pointed out to me the important difference between the tattooist and the tattoo artist. Whereas the former may have the skills to tattoo, he or she lacks the creativity to make individualized custom designs and instead draws on fashionable and conventionalized images that the customer chooses from a catalogue. In contrast to this, the tattoo artist has the ability to create large scale individualized and highly realistic tattoos. This distinction between the tattooist and the tattoo artist, however, appears to be too simplistic. David once asserted that you have to be both. The fact that there was a catalogue with conventional designs for the customers to choose from in his studio shows that he is not reducing himself to custom tattooing. Yet, it can, I believe, be stated that different artists are inclined to different extents to either end. Bea can be considered as part of a new generation of tattoo artists with a university or art school background who see the tattoo as a new form of artistic expression and who creatively produce individual designs drawing on diverse artistic sources (Sanders 1989: 19). She takes the freedom to only accept requests for tattoos that she finds challenging and that allow for a certain creative freedom, whereas David prefers customers who have a clear idea of what their tattoo should look like. James, for instance, left Bea a lot of freedom in designing and executing his tattoo. Bea, indeed, worked in a very spontaneous way. She slightly varied the design while working on James' skin. At one point, she stood up and fetched a different colour that suddenly came to her mind and that she thought would render the tattoo more realistic. On another occasion, instead of applying a stencil, Bea drew the design free-hand and directly on her customer's skin with an indelible pen. In contrast to this, I have heard David assuring a customer that her tattoo will look exactly like the design on paper. While David certainly appreciated the artistic nature of his job, he did not refuse tattoos that were not challenging or to his taste. He emphasized technical impeccability and professionalism, and he identified less with the motives he was tattooing.

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<sup>1</sup> This part of the conversation is taken from my field notes. I do not reproduce the exact wording of it, but how I remember it.

Being a tattoo artist, thus, does not imply a unified narrative. All of them combine in their profession creativity, skill and commerciality, yet the emphases these aspects receive vary significantly. In this manner, the tattoo, as well as expressing a piece of their customer's identity, also serves as a site of negotiation of tattoo artists' own motivations and objectives. The tattoos they create unmistakably carry the artists' own signature, and, especially in the case of custom tattooing, parts of the artists' own conceptions and concerns are perpetuated on their customer's skin.

### Pursuing a Body Project

One morning, when I entered the tattoo studio, David was already busy tattooing the Route 66 sign on the upper arm of a young man, not much older than 18 years. On his left underarm he already sported a tattoo of a pin up girl, which had also been done by David. Later, during a break, he told me that he was pursuing an American theme with his tattoos and that he was working towards covering his entire arms. *Miami Ink* was blaring on the TV. The men did not talk, and David later told me that he prefers not to enquire into peoples' private lives. In fact, the TV as well as the sound of the needle (which is quite loud indeed) rather discouraged conversation. It occurred to me how different the scene that I was being part of at that moment was from what we could see on TV. *Miami Ink* is a well-known TV show in which the camera follows a few tattoo artists working in a tattoo studio in Miami. Customers come in with often unusual tattoo wishes, and, while they are being tattooed, they tell their entire life story, particularly the often highly tragic events that lead them to their decision to be tattooed. In contrast to this, the design that the young man got tattooed that day was rather conventional, and he was not particularly articulate about his tattoo choices. When asked why he chose America as theme, he just replied, 'I like America.'

'Have you been?'

'Once.'

Yet, this kind of response was far from new to me by then. A woman who intended to get a tattoo of a rose on her right shoulder blade had replied to my question that she just liked roses. Reflecting on my own tattooing experience, I realize that I would not have reacted differently. This is, I believe, due to the difficulty in translating a complex combination of vague feelings and multiple motives into comprehensible and coherent

ideas. Furthermore, I may have entertained wrong expectations and preconceptions about many people's reasons for being tattooed. While the design itself is often relevant to the person's interests and aesthetic ideas, the act of body transformation and adornment in and of itself seems to play an equally, if not more, important role in the decision for a tattoo.

Like the young man with the Route 66 tattoo, many of the customers I encountered were not first-time clients, but had either several distinct tattoos on different body locations or a continuous design often covering the entirety of their arms ('sleeves'). These individuals, predominantly men, furthermore, were returning customers, and their bodies existed in a continual process of becoming (Atkinson 2003: 4). They were pursuing an ongoing 'body project,' a project that was being 'worked out and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity' and integral to the production of the self (Pitts-Taylor 2003: 31). At the same time, these body projects were non-verbal negotiations of the relationship between identity, body, and popular culture (*ibid.* 35). As such, some body projects featured the stereotypical images of other countries and so-called cultures, such as the United States or Japan, or famous musicians such as John Lennon and Oasis. In this manner, both client and artist often become what Lévi-Strauss might call cultural bricoleurs (cf. Lévi Strauss 1972 [1962]). They reassemble existing images, be it images from the Internet or photographs. Often, customers came in with various separate images that they wanted the tattoo artist to fuse and arrange into a new design, suited to the customers' lives, identities and personalities. Thus, while being productions of the self, body projects are also historically located in time and space and reflect norms of gender, ethnicity and class (Pitts-Taylor 2003: 34-35). They are "part of, but also beyond, the intelligibility of the individual selves" (*ibid.* 48).

### The Tattoo Relationship

The tattoo is a permanent body transformation and removing it would require a painful and pricy laser treatment. Hence, each tattoo involves an immense responsibility on the side of the artist and requires the client to extend sufficient trust to the former. This is particularly apparent with some of Bea's clients who go as far as leaving the design conception process into her hands. The relationship between client and tattoo artist begins with the former's entrance into the tattoo studio. In defining the tattoo setting, the artist

organizes and controls the interaction within the studio (Sanders 1988: 219). The walls in the entrance area of the tattoo studio I frequented were covered with signs reminding the customer of the shop etiquette and of the fact that minors under the age of 18 as well as people under the influence of alcohol and drugs will not be tattooed. Customers, right from the moment of entry, were thus clearly informed that the space they are entering is one of strict rules and regulations and that they can expect good quality tattooing (which will be accordingly pricy). The studio's white walls, shelves, and linoleum floors evoked a sense of cleanliness and professionalism. The latter was also achieved through the display of all sorts of framed certificates attesting to David's membership in various tattooing foundations and societies, as well as to his successful participation in tattooing conventions. In this manner, the studio setting forms an essential part in the building of a trust relationship between tattoo artist and client.

In the course of one or several sittings, a tattoo artist comes to intimately know the client's body. Bea once told me how the characteristics of the skin differ on different parts of the body and among different people. Tattoo artists develop an intuitive and detailed knowledge about the human body and the human skin in particular, which serves as the canvas for their artistic production. They know about its elasticity and thickness, about sensitive and less sensitive spots on the body. They have to plan the tattoo design with respect to body curvature, as well as adjust tattooing techniques and machinery to the characteristics of the skin.

This physical closeness rarely goes hand in hand with a close personal involvement. What connects artist and customer is the latter's body project, but the tattoo acquires different meanings for these two parties and is invested with different interests. While the artist is concerned with the nature of the skin, the technical execution, but also with artistic challenge and perpetuation, the client seeks personal expression in an embodied and unalterable form. Due to these different levels of meaning the tattoo acquires, in the instances I was able to witness it did not constitute the basis for personal exchange. David's appointments, at least those that I was part of, usually passed without much talking. Bea did engage in casual conversation, but it often did not relate to the tattoo. If it did, it would concern technical aspects, her progress or her next steps. These tattoo relationships are tied to the place in which there are played out and rarely go beyond it. They are relationships of

responsibility and trust enacted within a structure of unequal skill and knowledge (Sanders 1989: 108). Interaction, hence, mostly remains on a professional level.

### Conclusion

Marking one's body with a tattoo changes one's personal bodily experience, but it also has significant potential for altering social interaction. Although the tattoo's reputation has been immensely improved over the last decades, its association with deviance occasionally remains. I myself have often experienced how people who have known me for a while and subsequently learn about my tattoo are very surprised, as they cannot reconcile their prejudices about tattooed people with their picture of me. This is, I believe, due to their lack of knowledge on the subject. I hope that with my essay I was able to provide a small glimpse into the proceedings of a tattoo studio and thus contribute to a better understanding of the tattoo's role in identity negotiation, and of the diversity of stories, objectives and motives that are involved in the tattoo interaction. Rather than marking one's alienation from or defiance of society, the tattoo allows for the exploration of subjectivity, individuality, and the body-self relationship (Pitts-Taylor 2003: 31-32). The tattoo artists I encountered dedicated many years to acquire their skills and strive to provide tattoos of high quality. They combine in their profession artistic endeavours and commercial considerations, and they develop an intimate knowledge of the human body. When creating custom design tattoos, they turn into cultural bricoleurs, collaborating with the client to form and define the latter's body project and, by extension, identity. Unless actively removed or covered up, the tattoo is an unalterable sign of identity. It endures as long as the person who bears it lives, and it passes along with its owner.



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