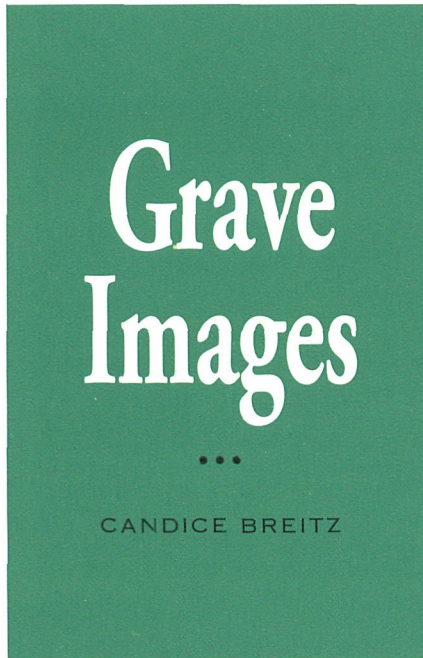


## REVIEWS

In the 1990s, tattoos are variously described as symptomatic of the entropy of culture, as a surviving folk art form, as a pop cultural blight, as decorative art, as ritual performance or as fashion fad. When Soho galleries take an interest in any form of cultural production, it's a sure sign that such forms are no longer taboo. The last decade has seen the appropriation, by art institutions, not only of graffiti, but also of the art of the insane, the homeless and the incarcerated. Common to these forms is their connection to marginalized social groups. What distinguishes tattooing from the latter, is the fact of its inscription *on* the body. The collector of the tattoo can only own it and truly appropriate it, by choosing to have it engraved into her flesh. There's something unbuyable about the tattoo in our "civilized" society. While it is conceivable that one might soon be able to view designs for tattoos or flash sheets in the sanitizing art museum - alongside graffiti-on-canvas and the paintings of John Wayne Gacy and Dr. Kevorkian - it remains unlikely, that one will encounter tattooed *skin* in this context.

Unless, of course, one takes into account the likes of Bob Flanagan, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Orlan and Ron



Athey, to mention but a few. The inflated cultural currency of tattooing in the late twentieth century runs parallel to the frenzied proliferation of body art. In the work of the aforementioned artists, the body is identified as the last site of resistance against the commodification of art. Beyond the debates which are characteristic of art institutions, the body is increasingly identified as the last possible site from which the twentieth-century individual might forge a meaningful identity. Existing body theory is, however, inclined to sketch an oversimplified Us (the powerless) and Them (the powerful) scenario, in the face of a perceived sense of the loss of the bodily autonomy of the modern individual. Such discourse tends to call for a redemption of the grotesque body as

against the tame, classical body which modernity endorses as normative. In "To Destroy Sexuality" (1981), Guy Hocenghem offers the following call to resistance against the disciplining of the body in modernity:

*We can no longer stand by idly while we are robbed of our mouths, our anuses, our sexual members, our guts, our veins... just so they can turn them into parts for their ignominious machine which produces capital, exploitation and the family. We can no longer stand by idly while they control, regulate and occupy our mucous membranes, the pores of our skin, the entire sentient surface of our body;... We can no longer not "come" or hold back our shit, our saliva, our energy according to their laws with their minor, tolerated infractions. We want to explore the frigid, inhibited, mortified body that capitalism wants so desperately to make of our living body;... (1)*

Hocenghem viscerally reiterates Marx's essential objection to Capitalism: that is, that Capitalism alienates one from one's own body. One's right to do as one would with one's body was, however, usurped millennia before Capitalism became the favored scapegoat of many a counter-culture; Judeo-

Christian laws have long held the body to be a sacred temple. The bible expressly warns us against defiling the body in *Leviticus 19:28*: "You must not gash yourself in mourning for the dead or tattoo yourself. I am the Lord". The bible also delivers injunctions against the spilling of seed, incest, homosexuality, bestiality and other practices through which the body is, by implication, distracted from "normal" bodily practices such as reproduction and, of course, from the higher purpose of properly spiritual reflection on the magnanimity of the Lord. To mark one's body is to violate the vessel in which one's soul temporarily resides. (2)

As Elaine Scarry stresses however (in her book *The Body in Pain*), the presence of learned culture in the body is not only imposed from without but also perpetuated from within. This is partly due to the "refusal of the body to disown its own early circumstances, its mute and often beautiful insistence on absorbing into its rhythms and postures the signs that it inhabits a particular space at a particular time". The human animal is in its early years "civilized," learns to stand upright, to walk, to wave and signal, to listen, to speak, and the general "civilizing" process takes place within particular "civil" realms, a particular hemisphere, a particular nation, a particular state, a particular region." (3) The body's loyalty to political and religious power resides in a number of fragile gestures which are deeply embedded in the unconscious.

Scarry notes, for example, that one's citizenship most often demands one's physical presence within the country of which one is a citizen. In "civilized" society, punishment consists of depriving the individual of what she considers to be her "basic human rights", the right to govern her own body, the body which she has been taught to think of as *personal property*. Foucault points out that the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle has been attributed to a

Thus, while the political technology of power in which the body exists may have coherent results, it is diffuse and cannot be simply localized within the state or any other one institution. Relations of power "define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations." (4) One might conclude then, that opposition to such



The Drawing Center. Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos.

process of "humanization" and of increased "civilization". But, as gruesome punishment of the body is rejected as barbarous and irrational, punishment takes on new guises. It is not just that authority inscribes itself in the body, but also that the citizen consents and opens herself to such inscriptions. The ultimate form of such mutual consent is demonstrated by the soldier who heroically dies "for his country".

power must itself be diffuse. Tattooing in these terms, might be read as a momentary reclaiming of the body of the individual. It is not just social transgressors who are caught up in the political technology of power. All social beings and institutions are constantly produced and subjected within a political field. This applies too, of course, to the tattooing industry itself. Tattooing has been illegal in NYC since



point, according to the claims of “Modern Primitivism”, that the repressed, “primitive” impulse returns to confound sanctimonious modernity. The coining of the term “Modern Primitivism.” (8) to collectively describe tattooing, piercing, branding, self-mutilation, scarification etc., evokes the desire felt by those who perform such acts to escape modernity. It is, like much of the discourse in favor of tattooing, deeply humanist. (9) The celebration of materiality which lies at the center of the current tattoo renaissance is, according to this narrative, a gesture at recapturing the self from an increasingly alienated world. “Modern Primitivism” largely leaves the notion of “primitivism” unproblematized. The casting of the tattoo as the symptom of the return of the repressed, primitive impulse, of the desire to relinquish a lost connection to nature, rests on the assumption that tattooing itself is a practice which exists outside culture: beyond the artificiality of the Society of the Spectacle.

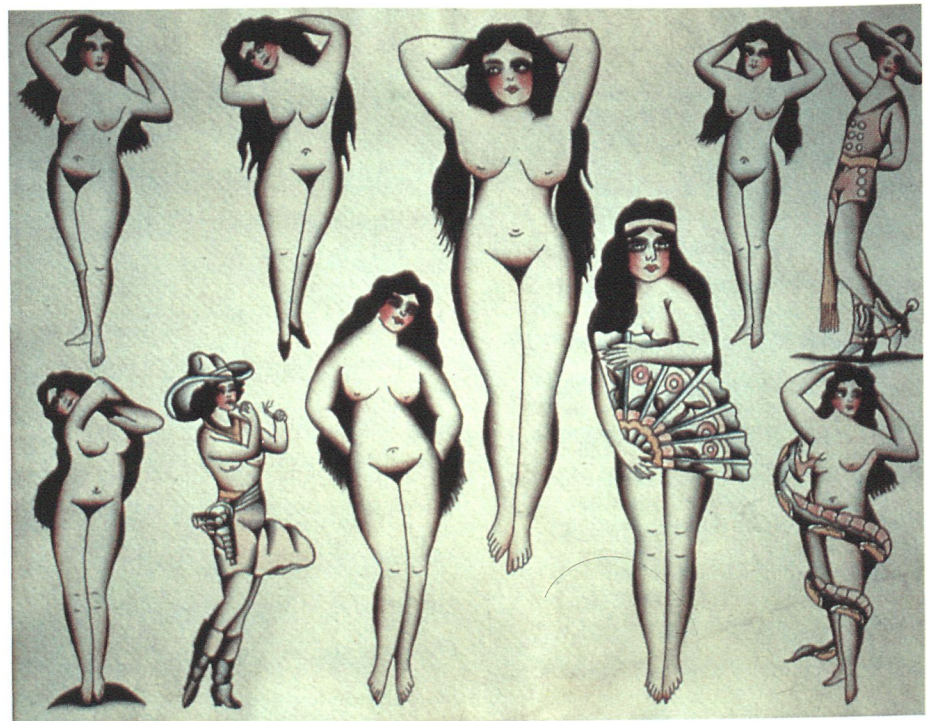
The tattoo industry was not, however, unaffected by the burgeoning culture industry of the post-war period. Along with the extreme rationalization of other forms of culture in the twentieth century, came a concurrent technologization and commercialization of the tattoo industry. The industry was boosted by a broader range of pigments, efficient autoclaves, the mechanical reproduction of sheets of flash and

specialized magazines (*Tattootime*, *Tattoo Revue*, *Tattoo*, *Skin Art*).

Interestingly, it was in this same period, when the use of the electric tattooing machine (first patented in 1891) became more common, that a fierce discourse of originality and authorship grew within the industry. The twentieth-century tattoo artist promotes his wares by means of elaborate business cards, emblazoned with slogans like: “I originate- others imitate”. Tux Farrar’s drawings for tattoos are stamped “ORIGINAL”, “ALL RIGHTS RESERVED”, “FREE AGENT”. In concordance with the relatively recent valorization of the *customized* tattoo, the tattooist is no longer shrouded in anonymity. The tattoo enthusiast is able to recognize the distinct styles of artists like Don Ed Hardy, Lyle Tuttle, Sailor Jerry, Hanky Panky, Jonathan Shaw,

Leo Zulueta, Vyvyn Lazonga and Michael Malone.

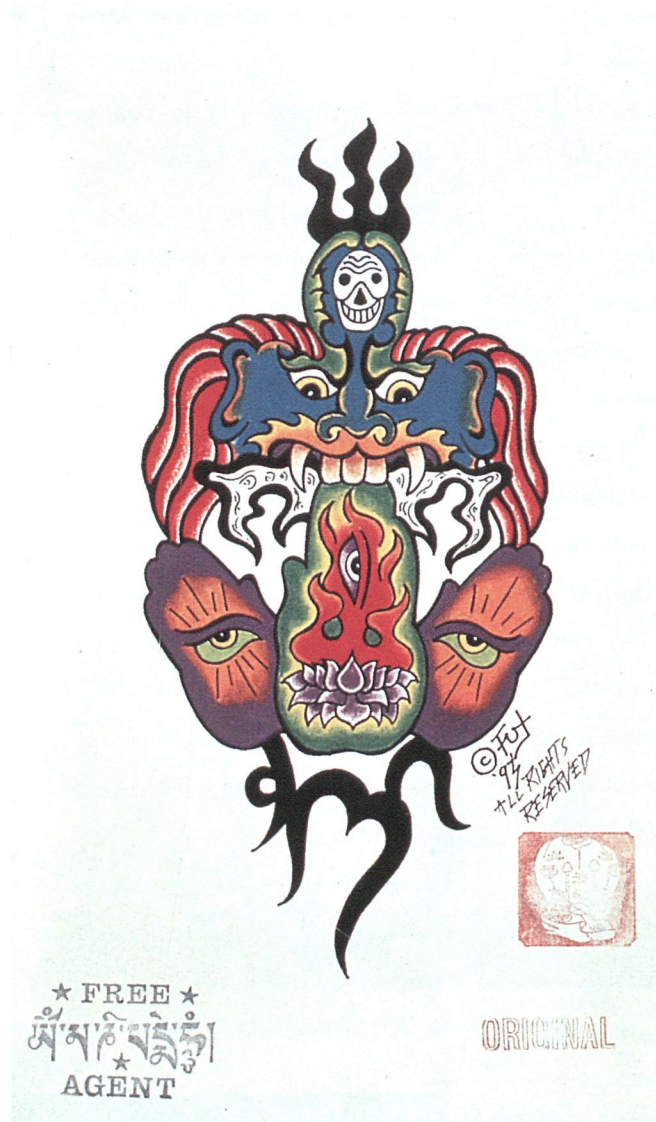
The tattoo appears whenever the individual’s control over the body is minimized, at moments of war and in lives in which the struggle for survival lends focus to one’s mortality. This accounts in part for their traditional association with the soldier, freak, sailor, biker, prisoner and worker. That tattoos have temporarily become fashionable and in some cases, even bourgeois, is not inconsistent with this suggestion. The proliferation of tattoos is attributable to the fragility of the body in late twentieth-century, western culture. In “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, Benjamin asserts, in his characteristically messianic tone that “[Fashion] couples the living body to the inorganic world. Against the living it asserts the rights of the corpse.



The Drawing Center, Owen Jensen, Private Collection.

Fetishism, which is subject to the sex appeal of the inorganic, is its vital nerve.” (10) Marking the body has become an obsession at precisely a time in which we are experiencing an unprecedented sense of detachment from our corporeality.

As the body is eroded by diseases like AIDS, dissipates into fragments in postmodern texts, or is dissolved into nothing more than a virtual whisper or simulacrum in both the arena of theory and the pop-cultural imagination, alienation and anonymity reach an apex. The allegedly progressive mechanization of modern life asks us to do nothing less than relinquish our bodies. “Modern Primitivism” protests. It recognizes the site which is threatened (the body) as the potential site of resistance. It desires more than virtual experience in a virtual body, or the cyber-experience of the automaton. Both the virtual body and the body of the cyborg, escape the traumas of origin and of demise. It is precisely these traumas which the Modern Primitive reclaims, traumas of fleshly experience. The tattoo underscores our mortality, forcing us to confront the inevitability of death, and it is only through confrontations of this nature, the Modern Primitive contends, that we might begin to encounter hidden urges: repressed instincts that might offer an alternative to modern alienation. Renowned tattoo artist Don Ed Hardy characterizes tattooing as a primal urge which is fulfilled in opposition to the disintegration of the



The Drawing Center, Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos. Tux Farrar, 1993. Ink and colored pen. Collection of artist.

philosophical and religious precepts of the west. He suggests that tattooing is an act through which a positive identity might be forged in defiance of the normative identity prescribed by authorities. Tattoos are, for him, a psychic armor which enables one to visualize a future, and to declare a commitment in a world of fragmentation and loss of identity. He suggests that the uncertainty of the future prompts the desire of the individual to inscribe eternity on her body.

Needless to say, the tattoo is

neither inherently affirmative nor can it automatically negate the circumstances against which it protests. Despite the current enthusiasm for tattooing, (11) and the embracing of the tattoo by exhibitions like “Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos” (at the *Drawing Center* in New York), the present surge of tattooing can not merely be dismissed as a passing fashion. What defines the tattoo, is its permanence, the very principle against which fashion must perpetuate itself. The tattoo lies on the surface of the

body in a space which is neither absolutely natural nor purely cultural, between pain and pleasure and at the threshold between the past and the future of the material body. It speaks both of our mortality (the impermanence of the body that will soon be past) and of a disavowal of death (the permanence of the tattoo is a commitment to the future of the body). It is a personal inscription by means of which one defends one's memories and memories-to-be. Despite the increased popularity of customized tattoos and the unprecedented claims to originality made by tattoo artists, tattooing remains inextricably intertwined with the specter of death. The centrality of death to tattooing is evidenced by the persistence of motifs like the Death's Head, the skeleton "taking" the maiden, the vainglorious, grinning skull, the gory crucifixion, the oozing sacred heart. And then there are the banners: "Death before Dishonor", "In Memoriam of.....", "INRI", "Till Death Do Us Part". The multiplicity of buxom beauties that have been tattooed onto the arms of generations of tattooees point no less to the transience of earthly life, to the inevitable transformation of the worldly beauty into the rotting corpse. Historically, the tattoo has had complex eschatological significance. It has been worn, in some instances, to ward off death. Sailors believed that a pig tattoo on the heel would prevent them from drowning and also sometimes wore tattoos of the cross or Christ on

their chests and backs to avoid being flogged to death. Tattoos are especially popular during wartime because of the uncertainty of survival which gives rise to a sharpened sense of mortality. Guardian motifs such as "Lady Luck", "Florence Nightingale" and "Death before Dishonor" proliferate at such times.

Regardless of whether the chosen tattoo is explicit about its obsession with mortality or not, it is poignantly related to the *vanitas* still-lives of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, to the medieval *danses macabre*, to the "live fast, die young" attitude of the Hell's Angel who emblazons himself with emblems of impending doom. The popular tattoo motifs of rising phoenix or resurrected Christ (both of which point to a desire for immortality), are only the corollaries of the *memento mori* tattoo, by dint of which the tattooee declares her resignation to the inevitability of the body's disintegration. (This is most strikingly iterated in Diamanda Galas' tattoo which reads: "We Are All HIV+", or in an equally sinister register, by Stalin's tattoo of a Death's Head.) The tattoo evokes the complex interplay between Eros and Thanatos, between the acknowledgment of decay as the point towards which the individual invariably moves; and the striving for self-preservation. We are all slowly dying. And nothing reminds us more of this grueling fact than the permanent mark cut into the impermanent body.

## NOTES

- 1 Guy Hockenghem. "To Destroy Sexuality" in Francois Peraldi (editor). *Polysexuality [Semiotext(e) #10]* 1981, p. 261.
- 2 One may not be buried in a Jewish cemetery if one is tattooed; thus to be marked in a concentration-camp suggests a double dehumanization of the Jew: she has been deprived not only of the right to live as a self-determining individual, but also of the potential to escape the bodily hell of earth, by being buried in accordance with religious law.
- 3 Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. p.109.
- 4 Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. p. 27.
- 5 Ibid, p. 308.
- 6 Adolf Loos. "Ornament and Crime" in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*. New York: Arts Council, no date.
- 7 Clearly, there is still a stigma attached to marking the body. Zach Parsi claims, in a recent issue of the *New York Press* (August 30-September 5, 1995), that every tattooed person he's ever met "has a range of expression bounded on the one end by the moronic and on the other by the banal" and that "tattoos are as good an indicator of boring cretins as the mongoloid's protruding tongue is of a chromosomal deficit".
- 8 See, for example, V. Vale and Andrea Juno (editors). *RE/search #12: Modern Primitives*. 1989.
- 9 Ironically, such discourse is reminiscent of Clement Greenberg's humanist call for a pure (read "abstract") art that might transcend the culture industry (kitsch). The potential to escape a reality ravaged by WW2 and depleted by consumerism, was central to his formulation of the need for art to strive for autonomy.
- 10 Walter Benjamin. "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" in Peter Demetz (editor). *Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books, 1986. p.153.
- 11 Prominent tattooees include Cher, Julia Roberts, Michael Jordan, Christy Turlington, Melanie Griffith, Henry Rollins, Drew Barrymore and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.