

## **THE SKIN AS A CULTURAL MIRROR**

**How can artists explore the potential of skin as a mode of  
fascination, expression, and identity?**

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## Introduction

This inquiry will attempt to explore how the potential of skin can be seen as a mode of fascination, expression, and identity. Skin as the layer that covers the human body conveys the simplest understanding, placing boundaries and barriers on an all-encompassing topic. Why skin or as Donna Harraway argues 'why should our bodies end at skin?'

(Harraway,1985) Skin is incredibly important as it is a protective barrier against the environment, it protects internal organs from external elements, bacteria, and physical damage. Skin as a canvas has been used for centuries, first the skin of animals to keep the first humans warm. As the uses for skin have expanded so has the understanding that lies within and around it. Skin in its cultural, symbolic, spiritual, and mental capacity has been explored and utilised across the world. Many cultures use skin as a symbolic medium of expression and decorate it with stories of their history and symbols that represent a deeper understanding of the person or group. It is also used as an identifier for group members that share the same ideas or work for the same cause arguably making it a system of ownership or belonging. Skin is a fascinating medium due to the multi-faceted qualities it holds and its potential to be manipulated to express whatever the mind desires.

This enquiry will be broken down into several sections; Chapter one will explore the biological and physical meaning of skin and the importance it has as a scientific concept. Skin will then be examined in terms of the wider theoretical understanding that it encompasses with regards to tattoos and body modification used as a sign of ownership or belonging. Theorists such as Merleau-Ponty, Harraway, Saussure and Peirce consider the cultural significance behind skin modification making connections to symbolism and semiotics, as tattoos become a type of language. Hebdidge's theory of subcultures will begin the analysis on how tattoos and skin modifications have become a form of connection, uniting people from different backgrounds within social groupings and connecting cultures across the world. Chapter two will explore what skin means in terms of culture, the importance of tradition and the meaning of representation, considering Stuart Hall's theory

of representation. It will expand on Māori tattoo ceremonies, the representation of Myanmar neck stretching and the symbolism behind scarification and how it represents adulthood. Chapter three will examine the westernised interpretation of body modification considering the importance of breaking the boundaries between society and expression. Stelarc and ORLAN, extreme body modification artists, are presented as case studies exploring how body modification can create freedom of expression for the individual, ultimately enhancing quality of life through the possibilities combining science and skin.

## Chapter 1

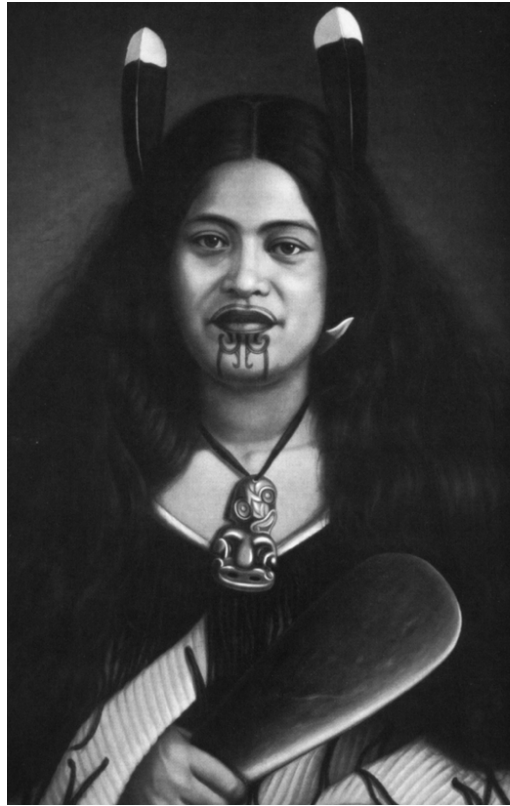


Fig. 1: *Māori woman, Pare Watene 1878*

Skin is scientifically understood as "the layer of tissue that covers the body" (Oxford Dictionary, 2021) and comes in many shapes, colours, sizes, and textures. Biologically, skin protects the body from harmful toxins and chemicals in the environment, helps retain moisture and keeps the body warm. It acts as a physical barrier protecting the inner body from the world and is an external boundary differentiating the inside from the outside. Skin as simply a physical construct designed to protect the body however is a simplistic definition and arguably does not allow for the multiplicity that skin entails. As a theoretical concept skin is multifaceted, encompassing symbolic and cultural understanding. Decorating the skin dissolves the boundaries by expressing one's beliefs as the forefront of a first impression. Skin portraiture enables this by showing the potential to embody the physicality of the mind through the body. "Skin portraiture does not limit itself to representations of skin" (Kellett, 2018). Skin becomes more than just a canvas as it enables the realisation of the mind to be expressed externally and can be considered a method of performance. Contemporary issues of body and boundaries challenge the "performative nature of the human subject"

(Shildrick, 2015). The person wearing the tattoo/modification is conveying the idea that thoughts and ideologies can be read across the body, enabling skin to become a metaphor for identity and expression; a performance of the mind externally on the skin.

Through a person's skin the very nature of 'what is human' can be questioned, taking into consideration Harraway's question "Why should our bodies end at the skin?" (Shildrick, 2015). The notion of skin as a metaphor opens it up as a surface to be manipulated, demonstrating identity and self-expression. The meaning and purpose of skin is embodied in interpretation and perception, with some leaving it in its natural state, while others want to decorate, manipulate, and modify it to express their identity or culture. Bodies are a project of nature but also a product of culture. Heidi Kellet discusses the boundaries that body modification pushes regarding skin.

Skin, then, can be seen to have both antagonized and, more recently, radicalized portraiture, permitting the arts and humanities to better understand the often-elusive experiences of embodiment – such as empathy, reflexivity and relationality – that shape our identities (Kellet, 2018).

Skin and embodiment become tangibly connected as one can be used as a visual reference to the other. Through practising art on the body, it psychologically forces a person to consider the intention behind the designs and the purpose; an audience are invited, willingly or not, to pass judgement, questioning the reasoning behind the modification. Kellet describes this as skin portraiture, it "erodes the boundaries between subject and object" (Kellet, 2018). As the boundaries are eroded it opens up the possibilities for skin to be used as a new art form for fascination, expression, and identity. Skin in essence becomes the extension of a person's culture and identity, a means of self-expression. "Inner perception is not possible without outer perception" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p.xvii). This means that in order to understand the subject you must first see the exterior in order to fully grasp the means of the interior. "To understand is to take in the total intention, not only what these things are for representation but the unique mode of existing expressed in the properties" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xviii). To understand the meaning of the tattoo, the viewer needs to consider the reason behind it and the representation it possesses. That is what it means to understand the subject.

According to Merleau-Ponty, a blind man uses his cane as an extension of his self-embodiment (1962, p.203). In comparison skin could be an extension of personality, culture, and identity. Symbols decorate the surface representative of cultural awareness and identity. Those who choose to modify their body see skin as a canvas, a medium to reveal belonging and ownership to themselves or others. In terms of semiotics the skin signifies the physicality of the object and is significant of the imagery which is being portrayed on it. Semiotics is the study of signs, how signs convey to language. Body modification is a physical sign/representation of a particular feeling or identity that the person wants to convey. Human language initially consisted of symbols and physical signs, and this became a method of communication between humans. In contemporary culture this same connection can be echoed by symbolism on the skin, creating a physical and symbolic connection between humans. Saussure's (1959) theory of signs places the emphasis on cognitive thought process or activity of human minds, in structuring the physical (material) or intangible (abstract) signs of their environment or surroundings (Yakin, 2014, p.6). Peirce (Peirce on Signs, 1991) claims that signs consist of three inter-related parts: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. The sign being the tattoo or modification, the object being the skin and the interpretant is what the sign translates to. The idea is that the interpretant provides a deeper description of the sign, allowing a more complex understanding of the sign's object. A clear example would be initiation tattoos in gang's and communities.

In gang culture tattoos are symbols, "sign systems...reflective of sensory, emotional, actual intellectual composition of the human body and the human psyche" (Yakin, 2014, p.5). This is demonstrated within the Hells Angels gang with members wearing the Hell's Angels patch as part of a strict dress code (see figure 2). Having certain symbols becoming part of the body invokes a sense of pride and/or fear, depending on what the symbol depicts; an initiation tattoo or a tattoo to symbolise the murder of someone. Even the image of the gang trademark invokes fear onto rival members and non-members.



Fig 2: *Hell's Angels members*

The tattoo is symbolic of belonging or ownership to a certain group. In relation to body modification, signs and symbols communicate ideas and ideologies and push the scientific boundary that skin is just an organ. How the body is manipulated is a sign that shows commitment and dedication. The application of the tattoo also means that it is hard to remove with the longevity of the tattoo providing evidence of commitment. The process of inking the body is timely and the healing process, a reflection period, giving time to think about how the tattoo or modification has made a lasting impact on their life. Removal of a tattoo results in scar tissue leaving a permanent reminder. The permanent reminder of a tattoo or modification still holds the representation of what used to be or what had resonated with the individual. The scar is what is left behind also from branding. The two have similarities that echo the same purpose.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, branding is “the action of marking the skin with an iron or the promotion of a particular company or product by a distinctive design” (2021). The physical action of inscribing the body immediately removes the boundaries between mind and matter. The symbol is being translated from the mind to the body being visible for the public to see thus, removing the boundary between individuals. In the form of branding, the individual is permanently marked designating belonging to another. During the slave trade in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, tattoos were used as a visible symbol of divine ownership; for slaves who escaped, the branding became a visible reminder to themselves and others that they

were not of good stock or to be trusted. The process of reducing someone down to a number/symbol dehumanises them and the tattoo then represents their whole being. “...what it is ‘about’ – its meaning – depends on how we ‘read’ it. It is as much constructed around what you can’t see as what you can” (Hall, 2013, p.43). The tattoo or branding provides a visible symbol however the understanding and ability to read this originates from the cultural or social significance that lies behind it. The tattoo becomes a language visibly understood by all; once branded for running away the slave would never be rebought or purchased by another. In contemporary terms however, branding is used to advertise a company or product using images, signs and slogans. The signs of branding are delivered with purpose having a specific meaning and thereby understanding alongside it. In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, every sign is interpreted as a sign. What is seen is the tattoo or branding, what isn't seen is the person or product behind the markings. The cultural or social significance is what is created by the branding or tattoo with a specific understanding directly associated with it. The actual product is not questioned as the branding or slogan is what is believed; fairy liquid for example provides soft hands as this is what we are taught just as the understanding associated with the tattoo can distort the identity of the person. Body modification has the ability to completely overlook an individual's identity just by observing the tattoo.

Tattoos have evolved over the years, as a mark of ownership during the slave trade, a mark of rebellion and more recently as a form of art. Some traditional body modification practises involve elongating the neck with gold rings and others involve purposely scarring the body to symbolise adulthood or bravery. In Myanmar, the women practise a centuries old tradition which involves stretching the neck with gold or brass coils (see figure 5). Body modification can also represent one's class and status, marriage, womanhood, or ownership.

The man or husband, in this case, gives these rings to his female partner, and they are worn as a seal of faithfulness, only to be taken off after her demise (Bidhaar, 2020).

The wrapping of these rings signifies the physicality of ownership, a metaphor that this woman is bound to her husband and in failure to uphold this promise would lead to the removal of the rings which strips her of status, belonging and dignity. In western society, the

symbolism of a ring represents the same message, the commitment to your partner and to stay faithful. The message and meaning are echoed across many cultures, however the method in applying these messages is different which is the result of clashing social norms and supposed beauty standards. Jewellery utilises the same concept as body modification often without the intense commitment, demonstrated by the Western traditions of exchanging rings. Acts of body modification are ultimately representations of their cultural beliefs. They are, what Hebdidge (1979, p.86) identifies as “representations of representations.” The act of stretching the neck symbolises commitment and a lasting reminder of their duty to their culture, a visual representation of the significance of tradition.

Body modification looks different to many cultures and countries. Typically, in western society, body modification is more commonly used to fit the current trends or beauty standards. There are similarities however between western, Māori and tribal; body modification is used to enhance and/or change one's appearance for cultural or aesthetic desires.

Western society have their own version of body modification, for example, dieting, tanning, and body building to fit into the beauty standards of society (Bradly University, 2021).



Fig. 3: *Queen Elizabeth I and her pale skin.*

Historically, to have bronzed skin meant you were a labourer and perhaps couldn't afford the luxury of having other people to work for you. In recent years, to have tanned skin means that you have the money to travel abroad and is more desirable than paler skin. "Bronzed skin was for farm labourers who toiled under the elements, while upper class ladies shaded beneath parasols and hats" (ELLE UK, 2018). In Greek and Roman times, women used lead paint and chalk to whiten their skin and in the Elizabethan era, women would paint blue veins to create the effect of translucent skin (ELLE UK, 2018). Even though women would modify their body with makeup, it is still conveying the idea of beauty and pale skin as a symbol of beauty and wealth at this time.

Body modification allows the individual to connect within themselves and their community and shared beliefs. This is seen throughout history. Body modification collectively shares the same ideals across the planet, its purpose is defined by the individual, whether it be for religious, beauty standards or a sign of adulthood. There are two ways to show how body modification uses the "Representation Theory" (Hall, 2013). Representations consists of organising ideals and ideas into various categories and establishing a coherent connection.

We have called this a 'system of representation.' That is because it consists not of individual concepts, but of different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging, and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them. For example, we use the principles of similarity and difference to establish relationships between concepts or to distinguish them from one another (Hall, 2013, p.3).

Representation is broken down into physical and mental meaning, for example, you think of a glass, you know what it is without it being in front of you or holding it. You know what it does or the potential and what it represents, a vessel that can hold liquids. In terms of culture, individual beliefs and practices can be interpreted in a similar way. Using body modification, appearances are changed to represent something, and the tattoo or scarification holds a purpose and expectation. Similar to the glass the tattoo will generate an immediate understanding, it will represent something to the person who sees it. In terms of semiotics, tattoos and body modification represent the signs and symbols of an

individual's or group's mind. The idea that the modification is visible to the public invites viewers to try and decipher the meaning and purpose it represents.

## Chapter 2

According to the Oxford Dictionary, culture is defined as “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group” (2021). Raymond Williams wrote that ‘culture is ordinary’ (1958) every human society therefore has its own interpretation of culture, its own shape, and its own purposes. Every person of culture expresses these facts in the form of art, literature, and performance. Williams uses culture in two senses, to mean the arts and learning and the special processes of discovery and creative effort (Szeman and Kaposy, 2011, p.54). In the sense of body modification and tattoos, there is a culture of learning regarding the application and the meaning of the designs. No matter what the traditions are, most societies live in similar conditions, meaning that there is a tradition to uphold and respect. The construct and understanding of culture is therefore worldwide.

There are many examples of cultural body modifications, each with their own purpose and meaning. ‘Tattooing the World’ by Juniper Ellis discusses the Māori facial tattoo as a symbol of integrity, upholding their century old traditions.

This is an aesthetic that continues unabated in contemporary moko one that encompasses design and identity, the patterns connecting the individual, through genealogy, and the sacred (Ellis, 2008, p.78).

Ellis argues that the symbols within the facial tattoo hold a key part of the culture and the physical representation of Māori tradition. There is a sense of honour to wearing the markings of their ancestors. The method in obtaining the tattoo is also a key part within their culture. Once the person is deemed ready, the person and other members of the community gather in the main hall and begin the procedure. There is a ritualist nature in receiving a tattoo during which they are reminded that they must withstand the pain, or it will bring shame upon their name, (see figure 3). It is a reminder of the trials and struggles one will face throughout their life and the tattoo is perceived as mark of achievement or a mark of bravery and pride that they are ready to become Māori (Skin Stories, 2003). The Māori community believe that beauty and morals within the facial tattoos represent something deeper than the aesthetic value.



Fig. 4: *Māori men performing Tatau (Tattoo) ritual.*

Figure 3 depicts the tattoo ceremony; the chief is present reciting prayers that their God is watching over them and accepting the man into adulthood. The tattoo artist is using techniques passed down from generations, which further makes tattooing a vital part of their culture. There is also music being played, perhaps to calm the man receiving the tattoo as it is a painful procedure.

Through a cultural lens people interpret the world in roughly similar ways. We are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. That is why culture is sometimes defined in terms of “shared meanings or shared conceptual maps” (Hall, 2013, p.4).

Tattooing and body modification may vary with different cultures, but they all have a link. The purpose is to connect oneself to their ideologies, cultures and to achieve their individual idea of beauty. Tattoos and body modifications are full of a multitude of social constructions in historical eras. They represent the current position in life that person is in, for example, tattoos represent the type of work they do. In the west, sailors have tattoos and Māori people have tattoos to represent that they work at sea.



Fig. 5: *Kayan woman wearing neck rings*

The stretching of the neck is the sign (Saussure 1959, Pierce 1867, Barthe 1968), the object are the rings and interpretant is the elongation of the neck. The physical distortion of the neck psychologically implies a deeper meaning to that person's reasoning behind the modification. The Myanmar tradition has been disregarded and looked down upon in recent years making this tradition instead part of a subculture within their country. As Hebdidge argues, cultures and subcultures have their trademarks and a "credible image of social cohesion can only be maintained through the appropriation and redefinition of cultures of resistance" (Hebdidge, 1979, p.85). These Myanmar women maintained their history by appropriating it and continuing the practice by protesting their country's authorities.



Fig. 6: *Scarification on the cheeks*

In the Edo state of Nigeria, the act of scarification is still practised. It is referred to as Ude. The practise involved cutting of a child's skin who suffers from an illness. The marks represent protection and healing, hoping that this symbol will cure them and make them stronger as an adult (The Guardian, 2018). Scarification can be argued to represent the hardening of the body and the mind. The procedure itself is traumatic and is thought to represent the child's transition into adulthood. If they can overcome the pain of scarification and remain dedicated to the cause they would be accepted as an adult. Typically, women in tribes are not allowed to go hunting, however, they still participate in body modification traditions. "Barabaig women in Tanzania wear dotted scars surrounding the entire orbital region to signal female perfection" (Garve et al, 2017) The scarring on the women's bodies is perceived as a sign of attractiveness. In relation to Stuart Hall's Representation theory, the marks are conveying messages. Signs and symbols are a universal language. The scars are demonstrative of what they have achieved or what they want to be perceived as. "This idea that physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse, is at the heart of the constructionist theory of meaning and representation" (Hall, 2013, p.29). When scarification has been put into existence, it is then made meaningful. Thinking about how culture is important and what it means to be part of a community is only half of the battle, to fully dedicate oneself to the cause they must undergo these procedures to become one with their culture.

### Chapter 3:

Two artists that dive deeper into the meaning of skin are ORLAN and Stelarc. They experiment with their bodies, pushing the boundaries of what bodies can do and the limits of acceptance; how society and humanity can push these ideals to improve the state of body and mind. Harraway argues for a skin that is more than what it biologically states; human beings are meant to be expressive in multiple mediums. “Art, in its many forms, is practised by almost all human cultures and can be regarded as one of the defining characteristics of the human species” (Gillian, 2009). Pushing and testing boundaries has led to discoveries of combining technology and organic materials such as skin, for example, prosthetic limbs. Modifying the body is taking ownership of the person's body, showing that what they are doing is intentional and has a bigger purpose.



Fig 7: *ORLAN with forehead implants*

ORLAN is a body modification artist that uses her own body to express political and emotional freedom. “The skin is deceptive” (Successful operation, 1990). She uses the notion that tearing and cutting the skin creates life, stating that life is a ‘recoverable phenomenon.’ This means that the act of sustaining composure and withstanding the pain

of the modification elevates your mind, body, and soul. She experiments with her body not to appear younger or to be beautiful, “it's about modifying the image, not the quality of the image” (Leddy, 2017) (see figure 8). She believes that there is more to the superficial meaning of body modification, there is more to it than looking beautiful or to fit beauty standards of society. “There is nothing inside the subject that says who it is” (Successful operation, 1990). ORLAN states that the human body itself holds no deeper meaning, no identification other than the features we were born with. The purpose of her modification is to question the status of the body in society, all cultural traditions, religious and political pressures that are framed around the body, especially the female body. ORLAN argues that nature is the original modifier as she states,

...because between the head of a baby, then a pre-teenager, then a teenager, then an adult, then an old man or woman, then an almost dead person, the transformations undergone are enormous and often we no longer even recognize ourselves (Leddy, 2017).

She wants to convey that nature has and will always be changing our bodies to adapt to our environment, mental and hormonal state. It is the natural way of developing, deconstructing, and rebuilding ourselves.

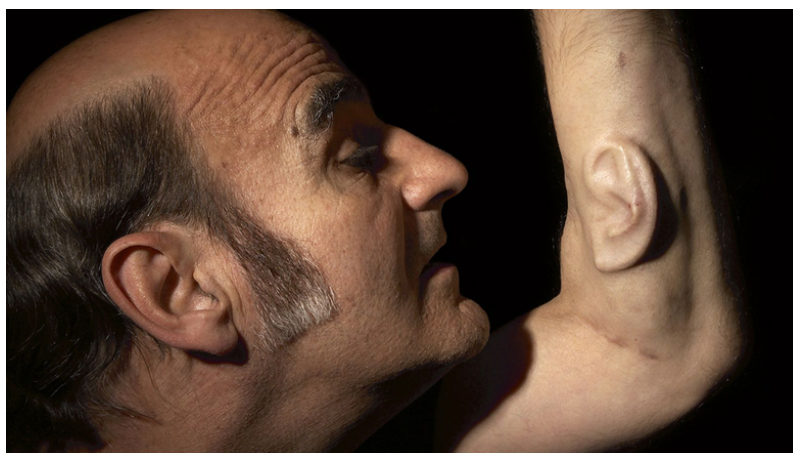


Fig 8: Stelarc and his 'ear on arm' project

Similarly, Stelarc believes that the body is both a medium of experience and expression. He believes that it is important to consider anatomical structures and alternate embodiments to enhance quality of life.

There's always been an interest in the body not as a site for the psyche nor for social inscription but merely as a structure. The body not as an object of desire but an object that might be re-designed (Fernandez, 2018).

In contrast to ORLAN, Stelarc sees the body as a foundation for anatomical creations. He states that there is more that the human body can offer with the help of science. Stelarc has pushed the boundaries on his own body. He has taken videos of his intestinal tract, has been suspended by his skin and grew an ear on his arm which later will be connected to the internet so that the public can hear Stelarc's surroundings. "The body is seen as a sculpture, and with the suspensions the stretched skin becomes a gravitational landscape" (Fernandez, 2018).

Skin, being the body's largest organ presents itself as a canvas to both Stelarc and ORLAN. Stelarc views the skin as a mode of possibilities, the tactility and how malleable it is can influence how his modifications will react, which then is used as research and can determine the next steps in body modification.

"body sculptures" erased the artificial distinction between mind and body. Overwhelming pain — the kind you might experience hanging from metal hooks — forces us to experience ourselves as physical bodies, to recognize that we are our bodies' (Fernandez, 2018).

Stelarc states that the boundary between mind and body is dissolved immediately as soon as one inscribes their thoughts to the body. Stelarc is a body art performer and uses his own experience of hanging from his skin to make a deeper connection, that our bodies are one with our mind. The imagery created either physically with ink or through manipulating the skin creates a symbolic gesture representative of something that words perhaps cannot describe. The image or visual representation is needed to fully comprehend the importance of the message (Saussure 1959, Pierce 1867, Barthe 1968). Stelarc states that, "We are no longer bounded by our skin and by the local space that we inhabit" (Fernandez, 2018). Using his skin as a canvas Stelarc demonstrates that a person's mind is not bound by the physical border of skin and thoughts. Alongside physical symbolism, Stelarc challenges the boundary

of skin as an external covering. Skin can become a method of connecting the planet using the internet; biological senses combined with technological advancement, the internet, could be a way of educating others on different cultures and different ways of life.

## Conclusion

Skin as a cultural mirror expands the biological understanding of skin as a one-dimensional item with a singular fixed purpose, to protect the body from external damage and the environment. Skin as explored within this inquiry is multi-faceted, understood in terms of symbolism, cultural and social meaning, and as a medium for distortion, manipulation, and exploration. As questioned at the beginning, 'why should our bodies end at skin?' (Harraway, 1985), this alternatively can be seen as the start; skin need not be considered simply in terms of a boundary or barrier but instead as an opportunity for exploration. Skin provides a method of connection, a way of uniting people from diverse backgrounds into groups; a sense of belonging or ownership. As Hebdidge argues 'representations of representations' (Hebdidge, 1979, p.86) - the methods used to decorate the skin represent something to the individual but also to wider society. Gang culture facilitates the use of tattoos as a method of ownership and belonging, a rite of passage; the symbols representing words and actions. Skin is a medium to convey messages and to invoke fear into rival gangs. Through semiotic analysis and understanding it becomes apparent that inking one's skin is a method of expression and identity, a method of communicating to the world who you are and what you stand for. Each symbol can be dissected to uncover the true meaning, every symbol represents something more than what the symbol is portraying. Culture forms a significant part in understanding skin as a medium, as a canvas; the use of skin becomes a method of expressing cultural identity. The case studies convey a different meaning to skin; Myanmar women use the elongation of the neck as a sign of beauty, the Edo tribe uses scarification to express accomplishments and a symbolism of growth into adulthood. The Māori people use tattoos as a spiritual rite of passage. The tattoo represents bravery, and the people strive to uphold and honour the tradition. The symbolism of tattoos in gang culture represents the gang but also belonging, a sense of community and family. That is why tattoos and body modification is fascinating, it can create a new idea of self and community.

As an artist, it is important to understand where body modification originates from and the significance of the symbols that the designs make. Stelarc and ORLAN have been using body modification to express their ideas and to push the boundaries of the audience to show that there is more to skin than just as a barrier. Stelarc pushes the boundaries to combine

technology and the human body to perhaps in the future improve quality of life and ORLAN uses her body as a platform for self-expression, by showing that the body is a 'recoverable phenomenon' (Successful operation, 1990). In conclusion, artists can use the skin as a mode of fascination, expression, and identity simply by understanding and accepting that the skin is multifaceted and that it has been used as such for many years across the globe and by many cultures.

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