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Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self? Body Modification, Fashion and Identity

PAUL SWEETMAN

Introduction

The last 20 to 30 years have seen a considerable resurgence in the popularity of tattooing and body piercing in the West, a process which has involved not only a remarkable growth in the numbers involved, but also their spread to an ever wider clientele (Armstrong, 1991; Armstrong and Gabriel, 1993; Armstrong et al., 1996; Blanchard, 1994; Curry, 1993; DeMello, 1995a, 1995b; Mercer and Davies, 1991; Myers, 1992; Rubin, 1988; Sanders, 1989). The popular image of the tattooee as young, male and working class is now increasingly outdated, as more and more men *and* women, of various age-groups and socio-economic backgrounds, choose to enter the tattoo studio. Piercing too, though once associated with particular marginal or subcultural groups, is now popular with an increasingly heterogeneous range of enthusiasts (Curry, 1993).¹

These trends have accelerated since the mid- to late-1980s,² a period which has seen increasing numbers of tattooees and piercees become heavily involved with either one or both forms of body modification. Through their high profile in certain key publications, such as 'hardcore' body modifiers – some of whom have been termed 'modern primitives' (Curry, 1993; Dery, 1996; Eubanks, 1996; Klesse, 1997; Myers, 1992; Pitts, 1998; Vale and Juno, 1989) – have done much to popularize the new styles of tattoo and piercing which have emerged in recent years. These include a variety of neo-tribal styles and techniques based more or less directly on the indigenous traditions of Polynesia and elsewhere (Curry, 1993: 76; Sanders, 1989: 20).

At the same time, the last ten years have also seen the partial incorporation of both forms of body modification into consumer culture. Numerous celebrities now sport tattoos and piercings, and related imagery is frequently featured in advertising copy, as well as in the work of designers such as Jean-Paul Gaultier (Alford, 1993; Menkes, 1993). Together with their increased popularity, this has led some to dismiss contemporary tattooing and piercing as little more than a superficial trend, one instance among many of the incorporation of 'the exotic' into the fashion system (Craik, 1994: 25; Steele, 1996: 160–1).

Such a position is attractive, not only because of such practices' increasing visibility on the catwalk and in the media, but also because it accords with characterizations of postmodern fashion as an eclectic free-for-all, a 'carnival of signs' (Tseelon, 1995: 124), where anything and everything is up for grabs in what some have described as the 'supermarket of style' (Polhemus, 1995). It is also, in one sense, largely irrefutable if one accepts the basic tautology that what is fashionable is what is popular, and anything that rapidly increases in popularity can thus be referred to in these terms.

There are, however, several difficulties with characterizing practices such as tattooing and piercing as fashionable *per se*, in part because of their status as permanent, or 'semi-permanent', modifications to the body (Curry, 1993: 79). Indeed, for writers such as Polhemus, 'any permanent body decoration . . . is as anti-fashion as it is possible to get' (Polhemus, 1995: 13), 'true fashion' being defined as 'a system of continual and perpetual . . . change' (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: 25).

The following examines both sides of this debate, looking first at the extent to which the resurgence of tattooing and piercing might be seen not only as fashionable, but also as a manifestation of the more or less superficial eclecticism that many argue is a key characteristic of the postmodern scene. Drawing – as throughout – from interviews with a variety of contemporary body modifiers,³ this section will suggest that for some tattooees and piercees, there is indeed an extent to which their involvement can be described as little more than a fashionable trend. Even among these 'less committed' body modifiers, however, there is also evidence to suggest that their tattoos and piercings are perceived and experienced as more than mere accessories.

The article then goes on to explore these areas in more detail, focusing particularly on the permanence of tattooing and the pain associated with both forms of body modification, before considering whether such practices might instead be characterized as a form of anti-fashion. It is suggested that, for many contemporary body modifiers, an involvement in tattooing or piercing represents not so much an appropriation of the cultural detritus adrift within Baudrillard's 'carnival

of signs', but rather a reaction to such superficiality: an attempt to lend corporeal solidity to expressions of individuality.

As corporeal expressions of *the self*, tattoos and piercings might thus be seen as instances of contemporary *body projects* (Shilling, 1993): as attempts to construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body and, more particularly, the body's surface (Featherstone, 1991). This is explored in the final section of the article, where it is argued that contemporary tattooing and piercing can indeed be interpreted in these terms, as attempts to anchor or stabilize one's sense of self-identity, in part through the establishment of a coherent personal narrative.

A 'Carnival of Signs'?

As was noted above, certain commentators have dismissed the current popularity of tattooing and piercing as little more than a fashionable trend. Craik, for instance, argues that 'the popularity of tattooing has been revived in western fashion since the 1980s' before going on to suggest that, together, improved techniques of tattoo removal and the introduction of fake (transfer) tattoos, 'have alleviated some of the stigma attached to tattooing and enabled it to become a component of high fashion . . . that is desirable because of its exotic associations' (Craik, 1994: 25). Steele, similarly, points out that, '[t]oday tattoos and body piercing have become increasingly stylish; even fashion models get delicate piercing, and modern bohemians sport pierced lips, cheeks, nipples, tongues, and genitals' (Steele, 1996: 160).

For some, then, tattooing and piercing – as previously 'classed', 'raced' and gendered practices, associated strongly with specific marginal and subcultural groups – have now become so 'mainstream' as to almost be considered 'passé' (Steele, 1996: 161). This arguably accords well with characterizations of contemporary fashion as an eclectic and self-referential system, which freely quotes from any and every source, transforming the phenomena thus appropriated into more or less meaningless cultural ephemera: 'floating signifiers' that refer to nothing but themselves (Falk, 1995: 103).

As Tseëlon points out, for writers such as Baudrillard, postmodern fashion can be characterized as 'a carnival of signs with no meanings attached' (Tseëlon, 1995: 124), an eclectic mish-mash of once potent styles and devices, desperately appropriated from a variety of sources in a vain attempt to lend authenticity to that which is no longer imbued with meaning (Tseëlon, 1995: 132; see also Falk, 1995: 103). Postmodern fashion no longer refers to anything but itself, and this lack of external referentiality means that everything is up for grabs: we can all wear what

we want, with the proviso that what we wear is no longer indexical of anything other than our participation in the fashion system.

There are a number of problems with this position: just because contemporary fashion has accelerated and fragmented, for instance, such increased complexity does not necessarily indicate the *absolute* self-referentiality that Baudrillard's position implies (Tseëlon, 1995: 134). Following Foster, however, Tseëlon distinguishes Baudrillard's 'postmodernism of resistance' from the 'postmodernism of reaction' associated with commentators such as Jameson (Tseëlon, 1995: 132). From the latter perspective, postmodern fashion – however 'playful' and fragmented – retains a definite if tenuous link with an external social reality: it 'still alludes to a reality of signification' (Tseëlon, 1995: 132).

This is important for a number of reasons, not least that it helps to explain the current fascination with all things 'retro', the appropriation of 'bygone styles' representing a vain effort to lend 'historical depth to a world of surface signifiers' (Tseëlon, 1995: 132). Similar arguments apply to the appropriation of 'ethnic' and 'subcultural' styles, and as a system that freely quotes from any and every potential source, contemporary fashion can thus be described as 'a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm' (Jameson, quoted in Wilson, 1990: 223). Indeed, even if one rejects the more extreme theoretical position occupied by writers such as Baudrillard, it is generally accepted that – at the very least – contemporary fashion is characterized by 'a blurring between mainstream and countercultural fashions: all fashion has become "stagey", self-conscious about its own status as discourse' (Wilson, 1990: 222).

Truly 'postmodern' or not, contemporary fashion thus problematizes the notion of sartorial strategies of resistance, as detailed, for instance, in the work of writers associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies during the 1970s and beyond (see, for example: Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1988). Quite simply, if everything is 'quotable' and more or less divested of meaning, if there is no dominant dress code or hegemonic standard by which one's sartorial conduct might be judged, then it arguably makes little sense to speak of subcultural or counter-cultural styles of dress (Gamman and Makinen, 1994: 73; Wilson, 1990: 233).

Certain writers within fashion and 'subcultural' theory reject this position, however, suggesting that while contemporary fashion has indeed become increasingly diverse and fragmented, a 'mix & match' of any number of past stylistic devices, this does not necessarily negate the subversive potential of such counter-cultural or subcultural styles (Gottschalk, 1993; Polhemus, 1995). But while Gottschalk, for instance, argues that American counter-culturalists' appropriation and re-contextualization of 'various historical styles and ethnic traditions'

(Gottschalk, 1993: 367) is both creative and expressive of the 'Freaks' 'social-psychological and ideological' dispositions (Gottschalk, 1993: 369), he also notes that his interviewees '*recognized that existing deviant styles were clichés that could no longer be adopted to express one's rebellious position*' (Gottschalk, 1993: 366–7, my emphasis; see also Lind and Roach-Higgins, 1985; Polhemus, 1995: 12).

To the extent that everything is now more or less up for grabs, it could thus be argued that Gottschalk's (1993) informants' 'mix & match' strategy represents a last-ditch attempt to retain a sense of subcultural style, a rearguard action which, through a process of *bricolage* (Hebdige, 1988: 102–6), attempts to squeeze the last drops of meaning from what are, in reality, increasingly empty signifiers. In this respect, though indicative of the current validity of subcultural or counter-cultural sartorial strategies, such studies could also be said to signal their impending demise.

To some extent, then, even the arguments put forward by writers such as Gottschalk (1993) and Polhemus (1995) are supportive of the notion that sartorial strategies of resistance are increasingly redundant: that even if one refutes the more extreme argument associated with writers such as Baudrillard, clothing, fashion and appearance are increasingly being absorbed into a *more or less* free-floating 'carnival of signs'. In relation to the increasing popularity of tattooing and piercing, one might then ask whether such forms of body modification should also be seen as all but empty signifiers, once marginal or subcultural devices that have now gone mainstream, thus joining the ranks of the other ephemeral products available in the 'supermarket of style'.

Mere Accessories?

In support of this position, it should be noted that several of the lightly tattooed or pierced⁴ informants interviewed for this study appeared – *in at least some respects* – to view their tattoos and piercings as little more than fashion accessories, on a par, for instance, with more standard forms of jewellery or other items intended to enhance a particular 'look'. Lightly tattooed and/or pierced interviewees, in particular, often regarded their own tattoos and piercings in primarily *decorative* terms: 'I thought it would look nice', or words to that effect, being a common response to enquiries regarding their motivation to acquire such forms of body modification.

When asked what she most liked about having her navel pierced, for example, one young interviewee noted the way in which 'we like to change our bodies', before adding, 'all girls like jewellery, don't they, and it's sort of an extension of that I think'. Although she felt that it was 'a bit more special' than necklaces or

earrings, for example – thanks to its location ‘in an unusual place’ – the same interviewee reinforced this sense of treating her piercing as a fashionable accessory by noting her tendency to change the jewellery ‘every couple of weeks or so . . . when I get bored with it’, and, when asked if she deliberately wore clothes that would show off the piercing, replying: ‘Erm, in the summer I do, but . . . I wore skirts that cut below my belly first, and then I had the piercing, to sort of fit with that, rather than the other way round.’ The same woman also volunteered that having the piercing done was something of a ‘treat’: ‘a bit like going into a really posh salon and having your hair done’.

More surprisingly, perhaps, certain lightly tattooed interviewees appeared to view their tattoos in similar terms, one young woman with two small designs – one on her back, the other on her ankle – noting: ‘it’s nice choosing your outfit depending on whether you want to show off your tattoo or whatever, and, I dunno . . . I just think it’s kind of like an extra accessory kind of thing’.

At a number of points throughout the interview, the same woman also noted that becoming tattooed was ‘not such a big deal’, although at one stage she added, ‘well I suppose it is kind of, ’cause it’s there for the rest of your life, but . . .’. Another young woman, also with two tattoos, noted that both these and her nostril piercing were mainly for show: ‘recreating how I want to be on a certain evening or something, whether I’ve got my nose ring in or not, and whether I’m showing my tattoos or not’. When asked if her decision to become tattooed was a response to fashion, she replied, ‘I suppose it is partly’, though she subsequently added, ‘[b]ut I don’t think it’s something I’ll ever think has gone out of fashion and I wish I hadn’t got them’.

At the same time as describing their tattoos or piercings as decorative accessories, however, nearly all of the informants in this category *also* regarded tattooing and piercing as ‘different’, ‘original’ or ‘out of the ordinary’: when asked what they most valued about being tattooed or pierced, ‘being different’ was by far the most common response.

Often expressed rather vaguely, where ‘difference’ was specified in anything more than very general terms, being tattooed or pierced was seen to distinguish the interviewee either from the bulk of non-tattooed or pierced individuals, or from those within their more immediate peer group. One young male interviewee, for example, saw his nipple piercing as ‘a distinction from people who don’t have things like that’, while a young female tattooee told me, ‘it’s just nice to be a bit different from my friends’.

Others were a little more cautious, recognizing a degree of tension between their perception of such forms of body modification as a mark of individuality – ‘other people are just skin’ – and their acknowledgement of tattooing and piercing’s

increased popularity: 'I do feel a bit different in some ways, but, you're surprised how many people have got tattoos'. Certain interviewees managed this apparent contradiction by referring to the timing of their tattoo(s) or piercing(s), and asserting that this preceded any current trend to which *others* may have been attracted.

In certain cases, such claims were rather questionable, but the extent to which the majority of lightly tattooed or pierced interviewees *perceived* their own tattoos and piercings as 'different' or 'out of the ordinary' arguably militates against a reading of such forms of body modification simply as 'free-floating' fashion accessories, *at least when viewed from the perspective of those involved*. So too does the seriousness with which many lightly tattooed or pierced interviewees appeared to take the decision to modify their bodies in this manner.

One lightly pierced interviewee, for instance, told me that he had 'toyed' with the idea of having his nipple pierced for some months before finally taking the plunge, or, as he put it, a 'massive step into an area I'm afraid of anyway . . . and I had no experience or knowledge of'. For him, the act of becoming pierced appears in itself to have been quite profound, his subsequent experience of a fractured shin described as 'nothing' in comparison to having 'a dirty great needle shoved through one of the most sensitive parts of my body'.

While not true of all, a number of the lightly tattooed interviewees similarly told me that they had spent some time building up to having a tattoo, either because they hadn't previously 'had the guts' to go ahead, or because they saw it as a serious step that demanded careful consideration. Thus one young tattooee told me that she had contemplated the decision for a 'couple of years', or long enough 'to really think seriously about it', a process that had also involved reading through several tattoo magazines to find out more about the process itself and the sorts of designs available. As she put it: 'I really wanted to look into it, 'cause its permanent, and I did think about it as a long-term sort of thing.' As will be discussed more fully below, such extensive 'background research' was also common among the more heavily tattooed and pierced interviewees, belying the popular perception of tattoo acquisition, for example, as a universally impulsive and ill-thought-out process (Foster Wallace, 1997: 206–11).

On the one hand, then, the tendency of certain of the more lightly tattooed and/or pierced interviewees to describe their tattoos or piercings as decorative accessories lends support to the notion that such forms of body modification are now just another product in the 'supermarket of style'. At the same time, however, a number of factors appear to contradict such an interpretation, not least the way in which most interviewees regarded their tattoos or piercings as 'different' or 'original', and the seriousness with which many approached the decision to modify their bodies in this manner. Among the tattooees, such caution was in

large part thanks to the tattoo's permanence, though both tattooees and piercees also alluded to factors such as the pain involved in the acquisition of such forms of body modification.

Permanence, Planning and Pain

It was noted above that while certain less heavily tattooed or pierced interviewees appeared to regard their tattoos or piercings – to at least some degree – as decorative accessories, factors such as the permanence or 'semi-permanence' of such forms of body modification, and the pain involved in their acquisition, meant that they were also experienced as distinct from other, more ephemeral products in the 'supermarket of style'. Drawing now on interviews with both heavily *and* less heavily tattooed and pierced interviewees – but primarily the former – the following will expand upon these points before considering whether, rather than dismissing contemporary body modification as a superficial trend, it might instead be more appropriately viewed as a form of 'anti-fashion'.

To turn first to the more indelible of the two procedures, the bulk of those interviewed during the course of this study intimated that there was a 'fashionable element' to contemporary body modification, but several also pointed to the permanence of tattooing as problematic in this regard. When asked whether tattooing could be said to be fashionable, for example, one heavily tattooed and pierced female interviewee replied; 'I think it is going that way, but I don't think that's what it's about':

Because . . . fashion is a passing thing isn't it? What's fashionable at the moment is not gonna be fashionable next year, or in a couple of years' time. So that's totally the wrong reason for having it done.

All of the body modifiers interviewed for this study regarded their tattoos as permanent modifications to the body, however, and while some had had designs re-worked or 'covered up' – and others intended to do so – none referred to the improved techniques of removal which Craik (1994: 25) suggests have contributed to tattooing's increasing popularity. Indeed, several interviewees saw the permanence of their tattoos as a 'very important' element in their overall appeal. A young, heavily tattooed and pierced male interviewee, for instance, argued that '[a] tattoo, whether it's good or bad, is very, very permanent, so it's making a statement of sorts', adding, '[t]hat's why I like them'. Another, lightly tattooed, interviewee distinguished between her tattoo and other modes of self-expression as follows: 'I don't know . . . before, I could express myself in clothes and things like that, but now it's actually something that's permanent and that's definitely me.'

At the same time as regarding the permanence of their tattoos as key to their overall appeal, however, a number of interviewees also noted that this was cause for a degree of caution. As had some of the more lightly tattooed interviewees, several of the more heavily tattooed informants indicated that they had thought for some time before acquiring a tattoo, with one now heavily tattooed and pierced female interviewee telling me:

I wanted tattoos done ever since I was a kid, but I wanted to leave it until I was old enough to not make a mistake, because I think a lot of people have them done young and . . . regret it.

The same interviewee went on to tell me that in her opinion, the permanence of tattoos 'makes them really special, 'cause you've got be really sure of what you . . . put on yourself'. Another heavily tattooed and pierced interviewee told me that he had 'wanted tattoos' since he was 13 or 14, but though normally 'quite impulsive': 'with tattoos it was very permanent and I thought, "Well", you know, "I'm not gonna get it done unless I actually want the design."'

Like certain of the more lightly tattooed interviewees, several of the more heavily tattooed informants had undertaken a considerable amount of research before going ahead with their first tattoo. One younger male tattooee and piercee told me that he had 'found out' a good deal about the process before going ahead – a tactic which included investigating the various hygiene procedures employed by contemporary tattooists – while another, older interviewee described the way in which he chose his first tattooist as 'a really dull . . . mechanical process', which involved visiting 'fourteen studios within a certain radius of where [he] lived' and scoring them all according to the personality of the tattooist, the quality of the work and the apparent cleanliness of the studio: '[a]nd the one that came out on top in points terms, I went to'.

As one might expect, such 'background work' does not necessarily stop after the first tattoo. While certain tattooists continue to offer a 'walk-in' service, many now work by appointment only, and some are also selective about the sorts of design they will tattoo, the former point necessitating that sessions be booked in advance, and the latter demanding a certain amount of negotiation between tattooist and tattooee. Unless the tattooee prepares the design themselves, or is happy to give the tattooist free rein, *custom* work can also demand a good deal of collaboration between artist and client. Such background work need not be perceived negatively, however. One interviewee told me that he gets 'a lot of enjoyment out of' planning what to do next, and, indeed, out of 'the whole process of booking it, finding a design, going up there, [and] chatting to the artist'. He also noted that he enjoys the healing process, or 'looking after' his new tattoo,

and that the procedure as a whole leaves him with a considerable sense of achievement, in part thanks to his necessary involvement at all stages of the creative process.

Planning, collaboration and after-care are not the only factors that can lead to a sense of achievement, however. When asked why she had felt 'proud of herself' after having her tattoos done, for instance, one lightly tattooed and pierced interviewee replied: 'Cause . . . it's quite painful . . . you know . . . it does hurt, and I was like, chuffed that I'd . . . sat there and done it.' To return to the process of being tattooed, then, a further factor which suggests that tattoos should not be viewed as free-floating products in the 'supermarket of style' – and which, in this case, applies to all tattoos, regardless of whether they are carefully planned custom designs, or a 'name' tattooist is employed – is the *pain* involved in their application. As one, heavily tattooed and ex-heavily pierced interviewee put it:

. . . you can't, well you *can* buy it, but you can't like, go to the shop and try it on and say, 'I'll have one of them', and just walk out with it. You've gotta sit there for hours and put up with the pain. So even if you're really rich, if you can't stand the pain, you can't get tattooed.

In this sense, tattoos differ remarkably from other, sartorial modes of expression:

. . . people can buy an expensive outfit or, you know . . . a leather jacket, but, you *can* buy a tattoo, but you've still gotta put up with the pain and the process. . . . There's a lot more that goes into it.

As will be elaborated on below, the same could also be said of piercing, but in contrast to tattooing, most interviewees regarded the former as comparatively superficial. When questioned about the relative importance of her tattoos and piercings, for instance, one heavily tattooed but less heavily pierced female interviewee told me that she didn't 'really feel anything about piercing', adding, 'it's not permanent, so I really don't give it that much thought'. The same interviewee later described her septum piercing as 'just a fashion accessory'. Such responses were not confined to those with greater involvement in tattooing than piercing. One heavily tattooed *and* pierced interviewee, for instance, noted that his piercings were: 'kind of superfluous, 'cause I can take them out at any time . . . they're a lot less permanent, so they don't mean as much to me.'⁵

That is not to say that all piercings are regarded as equally superficial, however: certain interviewees distinguished between the more popular piercings – eyebrow and navel piercings, for instance – and those that were considered to be more 'extreme' or 'hardcore'. The 'extreme' category tended to include both genital piercing and various forms of 'stretch' piercing, with the former evaluated as distinctive thanks to their location, and the latter because of both the degree of

commitment required to achieve the enlarged piercing and the relative permanence of the modification thus acquired. One heavily tattooed and pierced male interviewee, having described how he had stretched one of his genital piercings to thirteen millimetres in diameter, compared the process to becoming tattooed and argued that: 'there's as much validity, probably even more, in achieving that, because you have to do it yourself, you can't get there any other way'.

As a generic term, however, 'piercing' was considered by most to be more superficial than tattooing, thanks primarily to the ease with which most piercings can be discontinued. While the bulk of piercings *are* impermanent, however – and as such may not indicate the same level of commitment as implied by the decision to become tattooed – they still demand that the piercee experience a certain level of pain and/or discomfort while the piercing is applied, and that they indulge in the necessary after-care to ensure that the piercing heals successfully. Although the attendant preparations may take some time, the actual process of *being* pierced is generally over in a few seconds and, in contrast with tattooing, any pain is usually dulled by the use of local anaesthetic. The initial meeting of metal and flesh can still be painful, however, and while the pain associated with tattooing lasts only as long as the tattoo session itself, the pain, discomfort and attendant anxiety associated with piercing can extend well beyond the time one spends in the piercing studio.

One interviewee noted that while he was quite relaxed *prior to* his first genital piercing, things changed somewhat once he was actually in the studio: 'I wasn't too bothered, but . . . once you get in there [you see] all this like, . . . shiny, metal equipment, . . . and you think, "Shit, am I doing the right thing here?"' However much you read up about things beforehand: 'you don't really appreciate it until you see it done; what's actually involved, and how thick the skin is, or how thick the tissue is. It does take a . . . lot of force to push it through sometimes.'

As well as being a more invasive process than tattooing, piercing is also more likely to lead to short- or long-term complications once one leaves the studio. Referring again to his first genital piercing, the interviewee quoted above also told me that:

. . . the Prince Albert⁶ bled like mad the night I got it done. The anaesthetic wore off, and I woke up about three in the morning absolutely saturated in blood, like all over my boxer shorts, all over the bed, I thought I was dying, you know, it was gushing out. . . . And, that was like, 'Shit, what have I done?' [laughter], you know, 'Fucking outrageous, I've just stuck something through my knob, I'm either gonna get done or it's gonna fall off' [laughter].

Unlike tattoos, then, which generally offer little in the way of physical discomfort following the actual process of application, piercings can be painful – and bleed considerably – for some days after their acquisition. A further contrast lies

in the fact that while one can be pretty sure about the time it will take a tattoo to heal – generally around two weeks – piercings can not only take far longer, but the healing time is also more variable, with certain piercings refusing to settle however long one lavishes them with care and attention. Several interviewees told me that they had reluctantly abandoned their navel piercings because, after a period of months, the piercings had refused to settle, and when asked if she had ever removed any of her piercings, one heavily tattooed and pierced interviewee replied: '[n]o . . . [but] the nipple piercings [are] still very sore, and I've had [them] done over a year now . . . I don't regret having them done, but, they do get quite sore.'

Anti-Fashion?

As I hope to have indicated above, tattoos and piercings arguably differ from other 'free-floating' commodities, not only because of their status as permanent or 'semi-permanent' modifications to the body, but also because of the necessary physicality of their production. In respect of the former, several commentators have drawn a distinction between *fashion*, as characterized by continual and systematic change, and those more fixed modes of dress which are relatively static, conservative and resistant to change (Davis, 1985: 22).

Polhemus and Proctor (1978), for instance, distinguish between fashion and *anti-fashion*, noting that the latter term 'refers to all styles of adornment which fall outside the organized system . . . of fashion change' (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: 16). This definition encompasses 'traditional' forms of dress, as well as uniforms, subcultural styles and so on, all of which are united in their conservatism and opposition to change. While fashion suggests some degree of social mobility, however illusory, anti-fashion is characteristic of relatively 'fixed . . . social environments' (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: 14), its adoption in a modern social context representing a deliberate attempt 'to symbolically defy . . . change' (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: 22).

For Polhemus (1995) and Polhemus and Proctor (1978), tattooing, along with other permanent forms of body modification, can be described as 'the ultimate' in anti-fashion (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: unnumbered), its irreversibility rendering 'change difficult if not impossible' (Polhemus, 1995: 13). As Falk has also noted (Falk, 1995: 102), such *irreversible* body-marking is 'antithetical to the mechanisms of fashion change' (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: unnumbered), and, for Polhemus and Proctor, tattooing, scarification and the like are thus used to maintain the illusion, if not the reality, 'of social and cultural stability' (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: 16). This helps to explain not only the widespread use of

tattooing in 'traditional' or pre-modern contexts, but also the adoption of such techniques to indicate subcultural allegiances in the West. Tattooing and other forms of permanent body modification are typically employed:

... in situations where people feel ... [the] need to preserve their individual and social identities and to advertise ... the would-be permanence of their allegiances, values and beliefs. (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: unnumbered)

There are, of course, considerable problems with the notion of 'anti-fashion' if one accepts Baudrillard's argument regarding the 'free-floating' nature of contemporary signifiers. In this context, however, it is equally important to note the potential difficulties associated with Polhemus and Proctor's (1978) designation of tattooing as the 'ultimate' in anti-fashion. While it is noted elsewhere that anti-fashions of various sorts are regularly co-opted by the fashion industry (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: 17–19), the argument surrounding permanent body modification appears to suggest that such practices are so 'antithetical to the mechanisms of fashion change' that they would, or could not be so appropriated. This is certainly the position adopted by Curry (1993), who accepts Polhemus and Proctor's fashion/anti-fashion distinction, and argues that whatever its current popularity, tattooing 'can never be a true fashion ... because tattoos cannot be put on and left off by the season', adding, '[t]he same is true for body piercing ... with the proviso that piercings are semi-permanent rather than permanent' (Curry, 1993: 80).

The key difficulty with this argument – at least in relation to tattooing – is that while the permanence of the tattoo mark may disallow easy revisability in line with the dictates of fashion, this does not imply that the *meaning* of such forms of body modification is also fixed. In other words, Curry (1993) and Polhemus and Proctor (1978) arguably conflate the fixity of the signifier – ink under the skin – with the notion of a permanent signified, but while the tattoo mark is more or less irreversible, its external referents can and do change.

This does not mean that Curry's (1993) and Polhemus and Proctor's (1978) argument should be entirely discarded, what it does suggest is that tattoos might become more or less fashionable – signifying, at the connotative level, little more than one's participation in the fashion process – even though this would leave those so motivated to become tattooed in a difficult position once the wheels of fashion had turned. The permanence of tattooing, in other words, means that it is extremely *well-suited* to employment as an anti-fashion device, but it does not imply that its meaning is fixed in these terms.

At the same time, however, a number of other factors intrinsic to both tattooing *and* piercing arguably militate against their full incorporation into

Baudrillard's 'carnival of signs'. Tattoos and piercings are not *only* permanent and/or 'semi-permanent' cultural products, they are also intrusive modifications to the body whose production involves pain, blood and the penetration of the skin in a non-medicalized setting, not to mention varying degrees of planning and 'after-care'.

In contrast to those free-floating signifiers that comprise the bulk of image-based products available in Baudrillard's 'carnival of signs', tattoos and piercings cannot be divorced from the manner of their production. One cannot simply purchase a finished tattoo or piercing in the same way that one might acquire a new sweater, the production and consumption of each form of body modification requiring the tattooee or piercee's active participation in the completion of what is, in effect, a combination of corporeal modification and cultural artefact.

As *corporeal artefacts* then, tattoos and piercings differ remarkably from sartorial accessories: part of the body rather than simply an adjunct to it, 'there is something in [both] which escapes the flow of commodification' (Blanchard, 1994: 292). Even in the case of standardized designs or piercings, 'the replication of the tattoo [or piercing, is] contingent upon its siting on the body of a specific subject' (Blanchard, 1994: 292), and the complete, or healed, tattoo or piercing is as much the work of the tattooee or piercee as it is of the tattooist or body piercer. In this sense, the modified body produces itself. A pair of jeans, or a new pair of training shoes, can be consumed and displayed as 'pure sign', in ignorance of the conditions under which the material product was fabricated. Tattoos and piercings, in contrast, *demand* one's presence as producer, consumer and living frame for the corporeal artefact thus acquired.

The invasive and painful nature of the modificatory process thus suggests that neither tattoos nor piercings can be consumed as 'pure signs'. Equally importantly, however, it also implies that however popular tattooing and piercing become, and however much tattooing and piercing *imagery* is appropriated by the fashion industry, real tattoos and piercings will continue to refer to the manner in which they are produced, and thus to resist full absorption into any free-floating 'carnival of signs'. While Curry (1993) and Polhemus and Proctor (1978) may be wrong to suggest that the permanence or 'semi-permanence' of tattooing and piercing *in and of itself* delimits their wider socio-cultural connotations, factors such as the pain involved in their application mean that, whatever their wider connotations, at the denotative level tattoos and piercings will continue to refer to the manner of their acquisition.

As Gell has pointed out, the underlying 'technical schema' of tattooing – as with body piercing – is 'external to culture as such' (Gell, 1993: 303), and while this may not entirely delimit the socio-cultural connotations of such forms of

body modification, it arguably ensures that such practices will retain a particular denotative impact whatever their wider significance. Tattooing's 'invariant processual contour' is such that it can always be broken down into three distinct stages: wounding, healing, and 'the subsequent acquisition of a permanent . . . mark' (Gell, 1993: 304). This is not to suggest a universal meaning for tattooing, but 'the integration of this technical schema into any given cultural matrix' (Gell, 1993: 303) acts to *invite* certain readings of the practice, with the dominant reading in any particular context dependent upon which of the three stages is most strongly 'focalized' (Gell, 1993: 304).

According to Gell, the dominant Western reading of tattooing contrasts strongly with the 'core Polynesian reading' (Gell, 1993: 307) in placing exclusive stress on the tattoo as completed artefact (Gell, 1993: 313). In traditional Polynesian settings, by comparison, '[t]he tattoo was significant, not so much as a thing in itself, than as a proof that the tattooing . . . had been done' (Gell, 1993: 305–6). As Gell *also* notes, however:

. . . the tattooing process . . . is always and everywhere submitted to in its entirety, not bit by bit. Hence differential focalization is always a relative matter; each distinct focalization carries all the others with it. . . . It is a matter of emphasis, not a complete break. (Gell, 1993: 304)

In other words, while the core Western reading of tattooing may emphasize the tattoo as completed artefact, downgrading the importance of the tattoo process, this is only a matter of *relative* emphasis: the tattoo, as signifying mark, will always refer to the inevitably physical conditions of its production. It can thus be argued that Gell overstates his case when he suggests that the core Western reading represents 'the *complete* triumph of artefactualization' (Gell, 1993: 313, my emphasis): when compared with tattooing in many non-Western contexts, contemporary tattooing in the West may be *relatively* free-floating, but as *corporeal* artefacts even the most playful and ironic of contemporary tattoos retain an echo of the pain involved in their acquisition (Blanchard, 1994: 288). The same is true of body piercing, which also follows an 'invariant processual contour', the key distinction being that the completed body modification is semi-permanent rather than permanent.

That the process of becoming tattooed or pierced remains significant to those involved, however much emphasis is ultimately placed on 'the subsequent acquisition of a permanent [or semi-permanent] . . . mark' (Gell, 1993: 304), has already been illustrated above (see also: Sweetman, 1999a). That tattoos and piercings are denotative of the manner of their acquisition to the wider population of non-body modifiers, on the other hand, is evidenced by the standard response offered by those confronted with such forms of body modification. As several interviewees

told me, and as has also been pointed out elsewhere (Miles, 1997: 4), one of the questions most frequently asked of contemporary body modifiers by those who have not so modified their bodies is as follows: '*Does [or Did] it hurt?*'

Body Projects and Expressive Individualism

While Curry (1993) may be wrong to suggest that the permanence of tattooing and the 'semi-permanence' of piercing in and of themselves mean that such forms of body modification can never become 'a true fashion', the invasive and often painful manner by which such corporeal artefacts are produced adds weight to the argument that it would be misplaced to interpret tattoos and piercings simply as superficial accessories. The comments of several interviewees also suggest that while their meaning may not be entirely fixed in these terms, tattoos in particular are frequently perceived as distinct from other, more 'free-floating' fashion items, as, to a lesser degree, are piercings, thanks to the pain involved in their acquisition. Certain piercings are more permanent than others, but the ease with which most can be discontinued means that they are generally regarded as *relatively* superficial. As with tattoos, however, one cannot simply purchase a complete piercing: 'you've . . . gotta put up with the pain and the process'.

Such comments suggest that both forms of body modification, but tattoos in particular, may be employed by some as a form of 'anti-fashion': that even though their meaning is not fixed in these terms, they may be employed by certain body modifiers as a means of symbolically defying change, 'preserv[ing] their individual and social identities and . . . advertis[ing] . . . the would-be permanence of their . . . values and beliefs' (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978: unnumbered).

To the extent that this is the case, such forms of body modification might be argued to share certain affinities with the subcultural 'uniforms' adopted by skin-heads and others in the 1960s and 1970s (Clarke 1976; Cohen, 1997; Hebdige, 1987). In contrast to such subcultural styles, however, contemporary tattoos and piercings appear to act less as markers of group identification, and more as expressions of the self. Few interviewees linked their tattoos or piercings to 'membership' of *specific* subcultural groups, and those who did express an affiliative impact or intention behind their adoption of such forms of body modification tended to refer to this in loosely 'tribal' terms. This was not true of all interviewees, and it should also be noted that 'label-rejection' may have been adopted by some as a strategy to deflect suggestions of 'conformity to a group image' which, as Muggleton notes, 'invites accusations of conventionality by outsiders' (1995: 4; see also Muggleton, 1997: 9).

As discussed further below, however, several interviewees stressed the *personal*

nature of their tattoos and piercings, and that both tattooing and piercing are popular among a range of 'subcultural' types, *and among many who appear not to identify with any particular subcultural group*, was confirmed by attendance at several tattoo conventions during the course of this research. Events such as Tattoo Expo and Bodyshow attract an extremely varied crowd, apparently united only by a shared interest in tattooing, piercing or related modificatory practices. Tattoo Expo, in particular – as the largest and longest running annual UK convention – is remarkable for the way in which Hells Angels rub shoulders with rubber-skirted SMers, glamorous fetishists, punks, goths, skinheads and clubbers, not to mention the rest of the international crowd of attendees, most of whom are heavily tattooed or pierced, but the majority of whom are not easily slotted into a particular subcultural group.

Observational data, then, lends tangential support to most interviewees' implicit rejection of specific affiliative intentions, while at the same time supporting arguments that we are witnessing a move 'towards affinity based on heterogeneity', or a form of 'neo-tribalism', which, as Muggleton notes, 'implies an alliance' of sorts, but one that 'can be contrasted with the more sharply defined and strongly collective connotations of "subculture"' (Muggleton, 1995: 8; see also Maffesoli, 1996). A further reason for accepting the majority of interviewees' rejection of any specific affiliative *intention* behind their tattoos or piercings lies with the strong emphasis that many placed on the personal nature of the modifications acquired. Several tattooees told me that they had chosen motifs that were expressive of personal interests or their own biographies, and many noted that they had gone for custom designs in order to ensure that 'no one else would ever have the same tattoos'. As one, lightly tattooed female interviewee put it: 'I saw various designs I liked, but I thought it would be more personal if I had something that was a design of my own.'

A number of interviewees also described their tattoos as 'a sign of [their] personality', but whether or not this was the case, both tattoos and piercings were frequently described as 'very personal' by virtue of their location on, or rather as part of, the body. Several interviewees also stressed that their tattoos or piercings were primarily for their own consumption, and were not intended to be widely displayed. One lightly tattooed and pierced interviewee, for instance, told me that she had chosen to locate her first and only tattoo on her back because she 'didn't particularly care about whether it was ever gonna be seen by anybody else, it was definitely just a personal thing for me'.

To the extent that contemporary tattooing and piercing act as expressions of self rather than as markers of group identification, they might thus be described as a form of 'expressive individualism' (Muggleton, 1997: 11) which, in attending

to the body and its appearance, shares considerable affinities with other forms of contemporary 'body project' (Shilling, 1993). Writers such as Shilling (1993) and Giddens (1991) have recently emphasized the increasingly tight relationship between the body and self-identity, as manifest in a growing tendency to treat the body as a 'project' through which a sense of self-identity is constructed and maintained. While in traditional or pre-modern societies identity was relatively fixed, and the size, shape and appearance of the body accepted more or less as given, in late-, high- or postmodernity, identity is *increasingly* fluid, and the body is mobilized as a plastic resource on to which a reflexive sense of self is projected in an attempt to lend solidity to the narrative thus envisaged.

From this perspective, the rise of dieting, 'keep fit', and other corporeally oriented practices reflects the increasing tendency to treat the body as constitutive or expressive of the reflexively constructed self, and the growing popularity of 'non mainstream body modification' (Myers, 1992) might similarly be argued to reflect this trend. Like the forms of 'body project' considered by Shilling, for example, tattooing and piercing have the effect of transforming the exterior surfaces of the body 'in line with the designs of its owner', and can allow a 'wholesale transformation' of the body along these lines (Shilling, 1993: 3). Indeed, as well as regarding their tattoos and piercings as very personal, many interviewees also referred to such forms of body modification as marks of individuality; as 'a way of standing out [and] saying, "Look, I'm me, I'm an individual."' Some also suggested that becoming tattooed or pierced could be seen as an act of 'self-creation'. As one heavily tattooed and ex-heavily pierced interviewee put it:

... it makes you feel individual ... you know like, everyone's born with roughly the same bodies, but you've created yours in your own image [in line with] what your imagination wants your body to look like. It's like someone's given you something, and then you've made it your own, so you're not like everyone else any more.

Several interviewees also spoke of increased self-confidence as a result of having become tattooed or pierced, some because of the way in which they had endured the physical process itself, but others, because of the way in which it brought them closer in line with their own self-image. One heavily tattooed interviewee, for instance, told me that he felt 'a better, more rounded, and fuller person for being tattooed', more 'in tune with the person [he] really thought [he] was rather than the ... shy, pleasant, reserved ... kind of individual that [he had previously] portrayed'. Others simply noted that they felt 'more complete'.

On the one hand, then, becoming tattooed or pierced can be seen as an act of 'self-creation', that, through the modification of the body's surface, helps to construct a viable sense of self-identity. As the comments of several interviewees

indicated, however, tattooing, in particular, can also assist in the construction of a coherent and *consistent* self-narrative.

Several interviewees told me that their tattoos acted as permanent reminders of particular periods or events, and as one heavily tattooed female interviewee pointed out, tattooing 'has . . . a lot to do with memory' because the tattoo itself 'will always remind you of the time . . . you had it done'. Certain interviewees noted that they had deliberately become tattooed to mark *specific* events such as weddings, while one young female informant, for example, told me that although she had wanted a tattoo for some time, she finally decided to get it done on her 21st birthday, both as a marker of adulthood and as a celebration of the event itself. Her eyebrow piercing was similarly intended to mark and celebrate a specific event, in this case the offer of her first full-time job.

Others noted that tattoos, in particular, served as an indelible connection with specific periods in their lives. As one young tattooee put it: 'It connects me with like, my . . . teenage years really.' Another lightly tattooed interviewee, told me that he regarded the two Native American designs on his upper-arms as 'a commitment to [him]self' and explained that:

By marking myself I thought I could . . . keep . . . what I felt when I was 18, 19, for the rest of my life, 'cause I'd always remember the time. Because having a tattoo done is such a special thing, there's the pain to begin with, and then there's like the high you get afterwards when you first have it done. . . . But, just looking at them reminds me of that time, and hopefully it will stop me from forgetting who I am, when life starts to get, you know, kick the door in a bit more. The older you get, mortgage, kids, whatever.

In this sense, becoming tattooed might be argued to commit the tattooee to a particular narrative, and at least one interviewee described his own tattoos as a permanent 'diary' that 'no one can take off you'. Others suggested that their tattoos could tell a story, with one heavily tattooed interviewee, for instance, suggesting that once he was completely tattooed, 'the realistic parts of [his] body suit [would] tell some kind of story about [his] view of the world'. The extent to which others would be able to read this text would depend on their ability to 'piece it all together', however, and as another heavily tattooed interviewee pointed out, while 'there's gonna be bits you can pick up', what can be gleaned from another person's tattoos is likely to be fairly limited. For the interviewee in question, tattoos *could* tell a story, but like other forms of diary, this was inherently personal:

It's like the New Zealand *moko* is the story of the life, isn't it? That sort of thing. Kind of like that. But, I mean, it isn't an outward story of your life, you just remember it because you can see it on yourself, do you know what I mean?

Conclusion

Tattooing and piercing can be seen as postmodern practices in their eclectic appropriation of techniques and imagery from a global scrapbook of design sources and procedures, and it could be argued that their current popularity represents nothing more than the continued incorporation of 'the exotic' into the 'super-market of style' (Craig, 1994: 25; Steele, 1996: 160–1). As was noted above, tattooing and piercing imagery is increasingly fashionable, and certain of the tattooees and piercees interviewed for this study did appear to regard their respective body modifications as little more than fashionable accessories. From this perspective, the contemporary popularity of tattooing and piercing could be seen not only as supportive of notions of a postmodern shift in a general sense, but also as evidence of the strength of such a shift, the incorporation of such once strongly connotative symbols into a more or less free-floating 'carnival of signs' indicative of the scope of the developments in question.

As was also indicated above, however, factors such as pain and permanence figure strongly in contemporary body modifiers' understandings and experiences of such corporeal artefacts. Despite the tendency of certain lightly tattooed or pierced body modifiers to describe them as accessories, among those involved, tattoos and piercings are not, generally, perceived simply as superficial products in the 'carnival of style'. Indeed, were tattoos and piercings regarded solely as fashionable accessories, then it would be difficult to see why anyone would become tattooed or pierced at all: in this context, stress would lie exclusively with the finished body decoration – as a purely visual signifier – and a tattoo-transfer, or clip-on piercing, would be as meaningful (if not as durable) as the real thing.⁷

To the extent that this is their intended argument, Polhemus and Proctor (1978) and Curry (1993) are arguably wrong to suggest that the permanence of tattooing – and in Curry's case the semi-permanence of piercing – guarantees the 'anti-fashion' status of such forms of body modification: a permanent or 'semi-permanent' signifier does not in and of itself imply a fixed signified. As *corporeal artefacts*, however, tattoos and piercings will arguably continue to refer to the manner of their production, and in this sense to resist full incorporation into Baudrillard's 'carnival of signs', however popular related imagery becomes. The comments of tattooed and pierced interviewees also suggest that whether or not their meaning is fixed in these terms, tattoos, and to a lesser extent piercings, are often employed as a form of 'anti-fashion', or at least valued in terms of their contrast with more superficial, sartorial accessories.

In this sense, such forms of body modification can be argued to share certain affinities with the subcultural uniforms of the 1960s and 1970s, but in contrast

with skinhead style, for instance, contemporary body modification appears to serve less as a marker of group identity, and more as an expression of the self. It might thus be argued that while the skinheads' adoption of an exaggeratedly macho style was as a class-specific response to a particular and 'localized' crisis, the growing popularity of tattooing and piercing among an increasingly diverse clientele can instead be seen as a similar, but more diffuse, response to a set of crises and insecurities that are now more felt by a far wider section of the population (Muggleton, 1997: 13; Rubin, 1988: 255). That this is expressed via the adoption of permanent or semi-permanent forms of body modification, rather than, say, a particular clothing style, might in turn be explained by pointing to the increasing redundancy of sartorial markers of identification.

This would accord with the characterization of contemporary tattooing and piercing as 'body projects', as practices dedicated to the construction of a coherent sense of self-identity, and it was noted above that certain interviewees did indeed regard their involvement with such forms of body modification as a form of 'self-creation'. It was also noted that the permanence of tattooing, in particular, meant that it was well-suited to the establishment of a consistent personal narrative.

In conclusion, however, it should be pointed out that while the permanence or 'semi-permanence' of tattoos and piercings, and the pain involved in their acquisition, lends itself well to such a project, it also renders problematic any subsequent attempts to reflexively *revise* one's sense of self through *re*-attention to the body's exterior. As one lightly tattooed interviewee put it: 'you cannot run away from them, you can't stop being a tattooed person'. In this sense, tattooing, and some types of piercing, can be argued to differ from other forms of contemporary body project, their lack of easy revisibility perhaps indicative of a rejection of the ideology of social mobility which practices such as 'keep fit' vigorously pursue. Postmodern practices in that they involve the 'refashioning of personal identities out of cultural materials' (Tseëlon, 1995: 123), tattooing and certain forms of piercing differ from other forms of 'identity project' in representing an attempt to fix, or anchor one's sense of self through the (relative) permanence of the modification thus acquired.⁸

In a recent article on 'body marking', Turner described contemporary tattooing and piercing as 'playful and ironic': 'empty signs' that fail to refer to one's wider social-status, and can instead be read as 'parodic messages to the self' (Turner, 1997, see also Turner, this volume). While it is undoubtedly correct to note that contemporary body modification no longer refers unambiguously to one's class, gender or sexuality, however, the above has indicated that such markings can – on at least two levels – be argued to be less 'empty' than Turner suggests. *Relatively* free-floating, when compared, for instance, with traditional

'marking' in non-Western contexts, contemporary body modification continues to signify at the denotative level, even if its connotative message is increasingly ambiguous. Taken together, factors such as the relative permanence of such forms of body modification, the pain involved in their acquisition, and the active role played by the tattooee or piercee in their completion, also suggest that it would be misleading to label contemporary tattooing and piercing simply as fashionable products in the 'supermarket of style'. As American tattooist Don Ed Hardy points out, while 'there *are* elements of fashion to it' (Hardy, in Vale and Juno, 1989: 58), '[i]t's on your body, it's permanent; you have to live with it; and it hurts' (Hardy, in Vale and Juno, 1989: 61).

Notes

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1. No accurate figures are available, but a number of authors have noted the increasing popularity of tattooing (Armstrong, 1991, Armstrong and Gabriel, 1993; Armstrong et al., 1996; Blanchard, 1994; Curry, 1993; DeMello, 1995a, 1995b; Rubin, 1988; Sanders, 1989) and piercing (Curry, 1993; Myers, 1992), as well as their spread to an increasingly heterogeneous clientele. Several writers have pointed to the growing numbers of middle-class and female tattooees (Armstrong, 1991: 215, 1993: 107–8; Armstrong et al., 1996: 412; Blanchard, 1994: 287; Curry, 1993: 70; DeMello, 1995a: 73, 79, 1995b: 48; Mercer & Davies, 1991: 380; Rubin, 1988: 235; Sanders, 1989: 28–9, 160), while Rubin (1988: 235) has also noted a rise in the number of older clients. Curry (1993: 75) notes that piercing is no longer 'confined to any class, age group or sexual proclivity'.

These points can be supported by a wealth of circumstantial evidence. During the course of this research, for example, several UK-based tattooists confirmed the increasing popularity of the practice since the late-1970s, as well as an increase in the number of middle-class, female and older clients (see also Dixon, in Bradberry, 1997: 21; 'K', 1995: 49; Knappett, 1997: 29; Papworth, 1998: 12; Potton, 1996: 34; 'Rabbit', 1997: 20–5; Treharne, 1996: 37; Venus, 1996: 45). A number of informants also pointed to an acceleration in these trends since the mid- to late-1980s (see also 'Mark the Wanderer', 1998: 47; 'Annie', in Wainwright, 1996: 2). Similar confirmation was provided in respect of body piercing, with interviewees noting its growth in popularity since the early to mid-1980s, the acceleration of such trends since the late 1980s/early 1990s, and the increasingly diverse nature of the clientele: the practice is no longer confined primarily to those with an interest in the SM or fetish scene, and is popular among a range of age groups and occupational backgrounds (see also Grant, 1995: 15, 18; 'Barry', in Rowlands, 1998: 13).

The increased incidence of both tattooing and piercing is also indicated by reports of their popularity in the broadcast and print media (see, for example: Bayley, 1996; Bellos, 1996; Brooker, 1994; Garner, 1998; Grant, 1995; Millard, 1995; Moorhead, 1998; Mullen, 1997; Rowlands, 1998; Ryle, 1996; Wallace, 1997; Ward, 1998; Williams, 1996). Many of these articles have called for tighter regulation of body piercing, itself a further indication of the practice's recent rise in popularity: the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 relates only to ear-piercing, reflecting the low incidence of other

forms of piercing at the time the legislation was framed (Stokes, 1996). Following a recent Department of Health consultation exercise (Department of Health/Welsh Office, 1996), however, proposals have now been put forward to introduce relevant legislation, albeit alongside the deregulation of other forms of 'skin piercing' (Department of Health, 1998).

2. See note 1, above.

3. The article forms part of a wider study of contemporary body modification, for which in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 tattooed and/or pierced informants, as well as with several professional tattooists, body piercers and other key informants. The study also draws on observation conducted at a number of tattoo conventions and tattoo and/or piercing studios, as well as analysis of the popular literature devoted to the forms of body modification in question.

The 35 core interviewees were recruited in roughly equal numbers at tattoo conventions, through advertisements in a UK-based tattoo magazine and local student publications, and through introductions provided by existing informants, though three were already known to the author. A variety of methods was employed in order to allow contact with a range of contemporary body modifiers. The bulk of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, though seven took place by phone. Interviews were recorded, and ranged in duration from 20 minutes to approximately 3 hours.

Of the 35 tattooees and/or piercees interviewed, 15 were women, and ages ranged from 19 to 40 among the women, and 20 to 60 among the men. The mean ages for each group were 24 and 32 respectively. Occupations ranged from the unemployed and students to credit analysts, local government officers and company directors. Most of the interviewees were white, and while this was not an intentional outcome of the sampling methods employed, it does reflect a lack of ethnic diversity in the tattoo and piercing community. Around 40 percent of the women and 70 percent of the men were heavily tattooed and/or pierced, which generally implies that they had three or more of either form of body modification. This is a fairly loose definition, however: several standard ear-piercings, for example, would not place someone in the heavily pierced category, while someone with a full backpiece as their sole tattoo would certainly be counted as heavily tattooed.

4. See note 3, above.

5. Certain lightly pierced, but non-tattooed informants also offered this as their rationale for choosing the former body modification rather than the latter. When asked if he had ever thought about getting a tattoo done, for instance, one male piercee replied: 'Err, no. Now that was another consideration for getting the piercing done over something like a tattoo, in that if I ever get fed up with it, it just comes out and heals over.'

6. A ring-piercing that enters through the urethra, and exits at the base of the glans. See Myers (1992: 300–1) for illustration and further description.

7. But however realistic their appearance, 'Stick on tattoos are not tattoos' (Curry, 1993: 70), and the very popularity of tattoo-transfers, while indicative of the popularity of tattoo-based *imagery*, also suggests that, for some, a *real* tattoo is simply not an option to be considered. A recent edition of *Tatler* carried an article extolling the merits of small, discrete and *tasteful* tattoos, before going on to suggest that 'temporary-tattoos' were perhaps a wiser option (Green, 1997: 55).

8. As I have suggested elsewhere, there is also an extent to which tattooing and piercing can be said to be resistant of gendered norms of appearance, in part because they move the tattooee or piercee further away from, rather than closer towards, the youthful, slim, and *unmarked* body that is the hegemonic Western ideal (Sweetman, 1999b; see also DeMello, 1995b).

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