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From Outsider to Established – Explaining the Current Popularity and Acceptability of Tattooing

Michael Rees *

Abstract: *»Vom Außenseiter zum Etablierten – Erklärungen zur aktuellen Popularität und Akzeptanz von Tätowierungen«.* Tattooing is a practice long associated with social outsiders – sailors, criminals, bikers and women of disrepute. In recent years, however, the practice has become increasingly popular, and acceptable, in mainstream culture as these marks of distinction appear on an ever greater number of bodies. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, academic literature, and content analysis of popular media, I propose that four inter-related developments have contributed to the redefinition of tattooing: the increasing importance of the body as a site for constructing identity; processes of cultural diversity and globalization; the increased visibility of the practice in popular culture; and attempts to legitimise the practice as an acceptable art form both within academia and popular culture. By drawing together these inter-related developments this paper demonstrates how Elias' theories of established-outsider relations provides an understanding of the processes that lead to changing statuses for certain cultural practices.

Keywords: Sociogenesis, established and outsider Relations, Elias, tattooing, identity, sociology of the body, popular culture, media.

1. Introduction

> *The biggest change […] that I have seen in tattooing has been its acceptance by mainstream society. Tattooing has lost its outsider status.*
> (Anonymous Tattoo Artist, 28 March 2015)

The above quote, from an article in *The Guardian* newspaper, highlights starkly the change in the acceptance and popularity of tattooing. Walk down the high street of most towns and cities and you will witness a variety of people 'inked' with permanent art on their body whilst the practice has also become ever more visible on the bodies of – to use the term coined by Van Krieken – 'celebrity society' who have a profound influence on the cultures they inhabit (Van Krieken 2012; see also Nayar 2009). However, though tattooing is enjoying a seemingly unparalleled level of popularity and acceptability, this has not

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always been the case. Traditionally the practice has been associated with social outsiders – carnival workers, criminals, gang members, prostitutes and the working classes – with those bearing such marks considered somehow deviant (Lombroso 1876, 1896; Favazza 1996; Braithwaite et al. 2001). The period since the late 1970s in contrast – a period that has been termed a 'tattoo renaissance' (Sweetman 1999a; DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Sanders 2008) – has witnessed an increasingly diverse clientele, notably incorporating young women and the middle classes, challenge this traditional stereotype and help move tattooing from the social margins to a position of relative normalcy. I propose that four inter-related developments have led to this redefinition: the increasing importance of the body as a site for constructing identity, the increased visibility of the practice in popular culture, processes of cultural diversity and globalization, and attempts to legitimise the practice as an acceptable art form.

The data presented throughout this paper is a result of mixed-method ethnographic research conducted for my PhD thesis consisting of participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews and media content analysis, which were chosen as the most effective means of obtaining as much information about the practice of tattooing as possible. The research followed a grounded theory approach whereby ongoing analysis of interview transcripts and participant observation informed the direction and development of further research for the project. Early on in the research process coding revealed respondents reporting a growing popularity and acceptability of tattooing which became a key focus of the research and the basis for this paper. The data presented below was a result of analysis of interview transcripts, research diaries and content analysis that were analysed for themes identified during early coding that explored the reasoning for this growth in popularity and acceptability and eventually led to the identification of the four key processes through which tattooing has become more established identified above. The quotations from research respondents used throughout have been chosen as they highlight the ubiquity of tattooing and the processes by which it has moved from the cultural shadows to inhabit mainstream culture.

2. Established – Outsider Theories and the Body

In *The Established and Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (2008 [1965]) Elias and Scotson demonstrated how differences in power between groups forming figurations was a result of unequal opportunities attributed to whether they were considered established or outsider groups. Established groups are more embedded within established-outsider figurations, often because they have a longer history within the figurations, and as a result they have greater access to economic, political, moral and cultural power; outsiders in contrast are less embedded in positions of power and excluded

from participation in socially influential power structures. As reflected in other areas of Elias' work (2000, 2006, 2012a, 2012b), Elias and Scotson's study of established-outsider relations reveals how "social standards […] protect the interests of established groups" (Atkinson 2003a, 162) and their theories have been used to interrogate a wide variety of social inequalities including race and ethnic relations, gender inequality, relations between homosexuals and heterosexuals, and relations between parents and children (Mennell 1992; Van Krieken 1998; Kilminster and Mennell 2003; Wouters 2004, 2007).

The theory of established-outsider relations is useful for the analysis of tattooing as it informs us how cultural standards, including those of bodily norms and display, are promulgated by individuals of established groups and coalesced around shared images of identification through which certain forms of bodily comportment are more valued than others. In utilising theories of established-outsider relations to explore the current level of popularity for tattooing a key understanding is a recognition that power is not static and one sided, and power balances between interdependent groups fluctuate. While tattoos once existed on the cultural fringes as marks adopted by members of outsider groups, as these individuals became assimilated in established groups longstanding negative associations of tattooing underwent processes of redefinition and the practice "became chic for the middle and upper classes" (Atkinson 2003a, 44). By utilising established-outsider relations as a framework for the discussion in this article I attempt to demonstrate how these processes of redefinition take place through the key developments highlighted in the introduction. To begin I explore the increasing importance of the body as a visible identifier of the self.

3. The Body as a Site for Constructing Identity

In *The Court Society* (2006) Elias first demonstrated the importance of the body as a bearer of social value. Indicating how members of European courts dressed in appropriate ways to impress others and always took account of their body language in order to secure success, Elias exhibited a concern with the body long before Foucault (1980, 1995) or Bourdieu (2010). Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging that the importance of the body is not new, the post-Second World War growth of consumer culture in the West has witnessed the body become increasingly central to an individuals' sense of self to the point where it is considered by a number of theorists as the principle resource utilised in the construction of identity (Giddens 1991; Featherstone 2007; Turner 2008; Shilling 2012). We are bombarded daily with images of young, slim, fit and healthy bodies, as the body is used to sell a vast array of products, from perfume and shaving foam to cars and airline tickets, while newspapers, magazines and television programmes regularly inform readers and viewers of the

latest diets or fitness regimes aimed at creating the perfect body. Membership of health and fitness studios is a multi-million pound industry and is complemented by the production of self-help books, dietary supplements and exercise plans, with the promotion of healthy bodies inextricably tied up with the desire to look attractive and cosmetic surgery procedures such as face-lifts, liposuction, breast augmentation, tummy tucks or nose jobs – which have entered public consciousness as normative, acceptable and regular occurrences – providing individuals with more permanent ways of restructuring the body.

As the body becomes an increasingly central resource upon which identity is founded, individuals become familiar with a plethora of ways in which to reshape themselves and with dieting, keep-fit regimes and cosmetic surgery increasingly common place, individuals perceptions of the work done to the body are redefined, particularly in relation to pain, traditionally something to be avoided in Western culture. To be a member of contemporary Western culture is to be encouraged to construct your identity through the body and as a result of widespread media access and processes of globalization that will be further discussed below individuals also come into contact with what Myers (1992) coined 'nonmainstream body modification': modifications such as non-conventional piercings (piercings not in the ears or nose), scarification, and tattooing. Sweetman (1999a, 1999b, 2000) has demonstrated how these modifications can be considered body projects of individuality by those who undergo such forms of corporeal alteration and though I agree with Atkinson's (2003) contention that we should reconfigure our understanding of individuality as constructed in relation to social figurations within which individuals are enmeshed, much of what Sweetman found was reflected in the narratives of my respondents who repeatedly discussed how they perceived the body as central to the construction of identity with tattoos a component of an overall project they wished to achieve:

> I'm going to get sleeves done, then worked on to my chest, both of my legs done do at least my knees so like full leg sleeves as well […] I'll probably start at my feet and work up. Eventually when I've got all that done I want to get my full back done but I don't know what I want on my back (Chuck,[1] 24).

> I'm always thinking of new stuff, something new will come to mind. My next piece […] is a quite large leg piece that will come from my hip down to my knee on the one side (Trevor).

In these and numerous other examples respondents discussed their bodies quite literally as projects in the process of becoming. Within their narratives respondents repeatedly discussed how the incidence of more normative body projects was pervasive, and coalesced their understanding of tattooing as an equivalent form of body modification. Nevertheless, many respondents were

[1] This is a pseudonym as are all others used throughout.

aware that although tattooing had become more acceptable some members of established groups still associated it with deviant others and their reaction to this was often one of indignation:

> you get doctors that will do breast implants, you get doctors who will do tummy tucks […] if you say you want a tummy tuck because you've had children and your stomach's flabby people are like, oh yeah […] Why doesn't somebody get those people (who have conventional surgery) and put them in therapy and say why do you feel the need to do this, why are you trying to conform. It's just that women should have a flat stomach, that's the perfectly acceptable norm, yet I think that's more psychologically damaging than people who've made the decision to change their bodies for art. Because that's not conforming is it [...] it's saying that I don't want to conform, I want to be different, in the same way that breast implants are seen as perfectly fine and tattoos aren't (Esther, 33).

Esther's indignation was fuelled by comparisons with invasive plastic surgery procedures such as tummy tucks and breast implants which fall within the acceptable norms of society and we witness in her narrative an admission that tattooing may be viewed as 'not conforming,' thereby falling outside the bounds of established norms concerning the corporal alteration of the body. This is not to say that all respondents felt the same level of indignation; for some, like Esther, tattooing was adopted instead of other body projects, especially where they felt they were unable to partake in such projects, whereas others discussed how tattooing formed part of an overall body project that also entailed more normative corporeal projects such as weight lifting and dieting: "I like to maintain my muscularity and everything works for a function, creating an image" (Damian, 41).

Whilst tattooing's status as a fully accepted body practice is still in flux, as invasive body practices such as cosmetic surgery come to be considered regular occurrences, dominant social codes concerning the body undergo processes of social change contributing to the redefinition of what exactly a body is and how it is implicated in the construction of identity. This has had a profound impact on the acceptability and popularity of tattooing; as Rosenblatt states "the popularity of tattoos has paralleled a general cultural preoccupation with the body that has led to widespread obsessions with diet, exercise, and plastic surgery" (1997, 310). Consequently, as body work comes to be an established part of contemporary culture those bearing tattoos suffer less stigmatization and are no longer automatically considered to be social outsiders. The key reason for this move to a more established body practice is the increased visibility of the practice that I discuss next.

4. The Increased Visibility of the Practice

The increased visibility of tattooing in celebrity society, who have significant power in shaping cultural norms regarding the appearance and display of the body (Pitts-Taylor 2007; Shilling 2012; Van Krieken 2012) has, in my opinion, been the most important development in challenging the outsider status of the practice. As tattoos are found on the bodies of sports stars and celebrities in ever greater numbers and tattooed models appear regularly in the adverts for consumer products, the practice becomes increasingly visible in the public domain, this was something discussed by all respondents:

> People who are like that (celebrities) are the reason it's become popular […] I think it's so mainstream like people like Cheryl Cole etc., famous people have tattoos so like normal regular people that aren't into all that sort of thing think it's alright, like she's got a tattoo so why can't I have one (Chuck, 24).

> I'm trying to think why I first wanted a tattoo way back when, I think it's because maybe it was coming in and more fashionable, celebrities were starting to get them more often and I thought that wouldn't be a bad thing to get. So I guess you could say TV/Celebrities influenced me a bit in that respect (Daryl, 35).

> When I first started getting tattooed […] 10-11 years ago, even then it was very different […] it definitely wasn't as popular. It became popular about 5 years ago. David Beckham is probably partly responsible (James, 31).

These are just some of the sentiments that demonstrate the extent to which tattooing is becoming visible in popular culture. As James highlighted, David Beckham, one of the most prominent celebrities in contemporary culture, has done much to popularise the practice over the past 10 years and his highly visible body markings have introduced millions of people to the possibility of pursuing this form of body project. This is not to say that David Beckham's tattoos have been universally accepted,[2] but as the statements above demonstrate, the increased visibility of the practice in popular culture has led to redefinitions concerning its acceptability and has influenced a growing number of individuals to become tattooed themselves as they seek to mimic those they admire and acquire similar marks of distinction (Bourdieu 2010).

As the visibility of the practice has increased in consumer and celebrity society there has also been a rise in media devoted specifically to tattooing. Tattoo magazines such as *Skin Deep* and *Total Tattoo* are circulated globally and easily accessible TV programmes such as *Inked, Tattoo Hunter* and the '*Ink'*

[2] See for example complaints made about an image tattooed on the stars arm deemed too 'racy' following Sainsbury's supermarket sending out promotional material featuring Mr. Beckham: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2122801/Wont-somebody-think-children--Sainsburys-apologise-sending-promotional-posters-Beckham-featuring-revealing-Posh-tattoo-47-000-schools.html> (Accessed April 14, 2012).

series (which now includes *Miami-, LA-, London-* and *New York-Ink*) are regularly available on TV networks and DVD. In her analysis of cosmetic surgery Pitts-Taylor (2007) acknowledges that the increased visibility of cosmetic surgery in the form of shows such as *Extreme Makeover* has made the practice more socially acceptable, a claim ratified by the cosmetic surgeons she interviewed who "readily attributed media exposure with the recent market explosion" (2007, 121). This is paralleled in tattooing with the aforementioned television programmes rapidly increasing the visibility of the practice as culturally meaningful, normative, and artistic:

> I think Miami/LA Ink […] have made tattoos incredibly fashionable (Katherine, 22).
>
> If you look at the programmes you get on TV, Miami Ink, and LA Ink that have made it a mainstream, acceptable thing. There's got to be a relevance to the fact that getting a tattoo has become so fashionable all over the world, the UK included (James, 31).
>
> And now you get celebrity artists with TV shows like Miami Ink, London Ink etc. it does put it out there and make it more seen and more mainstream (Damian, 41).

This does not mean that the acceptance of tattooing has been universal. The docu-drama *My Tattoo Addiction* (2012), for example, demonstrates that long-held associations between tattooing and psychopathy do still remain, and as a practice that arguably moves the body further away from, rather than closer to, the cultural ideal of the young, slim and attractive body, its acceptability is more contested than cosmetic surgery. Nevertheless, the increased visibility of the practice has significantly contributed to the growing popularity and establishment of tattooing as it moves from the cultural shadows to become mainstream cultural practice.

Throughout the research respondents offered discussions about how the popularity of tattoo-focused programmes had helped not just in redefining the outsider status of the practice, but also in making it appear fashionable. Tattooing has been accorded a place in both fashion and advertising for many years with designers such as Jean Paul Gautier and brands including Nokia and Toyota using tattooed models in their advertising campaigns, and tattoo imagery increasingly appearing on the catwalk, but this trend has intensified in recent years. We should be cautious about equating the use of tattooing in fashion as a universal acceptance of the practice; a recent television advertisement for the fragrance 'Homme Wild' by 'Joop!' for example uses a tattooed model who is seen on a motorbike in a traditional bikers' leather jacket and the voiceover tells us "it's so good to be bad," whilst a similar advertisement for the fragrance 'Only The Brave-Tattoo' by 'Diesel' features an enigmatic tattooed model with the voiceover asking "what are you hiding behind your tattoos." In both these examples the brands use tattoos associations with 'bad boys' (Stewart 1990), or with shady and enigmatic characters, to sell their product as

'edgy.' Nevertheless advertising campaigns such as these have increased the visibility of the practice and allowed for the possibility of alternative definitions with the outsider status of the practice challenged by successful multi-million pound brands using tattooed individuals to sell products aimed at middle class individuals with disposable incomes.

As well as the adoption of tattooing by fashion houses and marketing firms there has also been what I term a 'celebritization' of tattooing itself. As Damian's earlier statement suggested, "you get celebrity artists with TV shows like Miami Ink, London Ink etc." and this was reflected in the narratives of most respondents who were familiar with the artists featured on the shows that included Kat Von D, Ami James and Lal Hardy. Other high profile artists, who had been learnt about through tattoo magazines or internet research, also frequently topped the lists of specific artists that respondents wished to be tattooed by and were spoken about in celebrity like terms; as one respondent pointedly stated – "it's interesting, like celebrity chefs we've got celebrity tattoo artists" (Kate, 28). Whilst the high media profile of tattooing and the almost limitless availability of information on the internet mean it is not unusual that respondents – who were all tattooed – would be familiar with particular artists and grant them a celebrity like status, there has also been an encroachment of tattooing itself on consumer culture. The increased incidence of tattoo imagery on t-shirts, ashtrays, drinks coasters etc. may not be surprising – consumer culture has a long history of co-opting outsider styles since punk became high street chic in the 1970s (Hebdige 1979; Muggleton 2000) – but more recently there has been the establishment of tattoo artists as brands in their own right. In 1999 Ed Hardy and Mike Malone set up Sailor Jerry Ltd. to produce clothing and other items such as training shoes, playing cards and most famously Sailor Jerry Spiced Rum while Hardy himself licensed a line of clothing based on his own art to be produced by Ku USA Inc. in 2002, going on to sell the brand to fashion designer Christian Audigier for a rumoured $10m in 2004. Though it is difficult to demarcate a clear boundary between tattooing's encroachment on, or adoption by, fashion, the crossover testifies to the increased visibility of the practice in consumer culture and furthermore underlines how the outsider status of tattooing is being redefined as it is increasingly viewed in mainstream culture.

The increased presence of tattooing in consumer and celebrity culture has introduced millions of people to the possibility of adopting this form of corporeal alteration, with the popularity and thirst for information relating to tattooing leading to the introduction of tattoo focused media. As demonstrated in studies about plastic surgery (Pitts-Taylor 2007; Elliott 2011), the increased visibility of such practices on television helps shape their social acceptability and narratives of respondents were replete with references to the acceptability and/or popularity of tattooing being demonstrated by tattoo-centred television programmes. The increasing use of tattooed models to sell consumer products

and the blurring of the boundaries between fashion and tattooing have also catapulted the practice into mainstream habituses and contributed to the cultural redefinition of the practice. In the words of one of my respondents:

> I think it's just the way society is, it really is. The more things you see on TV, in music, especially music, and film, it becomes more and more acceptable. You see more and more people on screen with tattoos it becomes acceptable and society adapts to the role models who get forced through your TV screen (Cliff, 33).

5. Cultural Diversity and Globalization

The increased visibility of the practice discussed above can partly be attributed to globalization and the growing cultural diversity of Britain which has challenged established ways of knowing the world by exposing individuals to alternative understandings. Elias and Scotson (2008 [1965]) demonstrated that while established group have a profound influence on cultural norms within figurations this is not a one-way process as outsider groups also influence established ones. Interacting with outsider groups whose religious, ethnic, and cultural, habitus differs from their own, individuals' view alternate clothing, make-up, preference for body sizes, tattooing etc. and their understandings of acceptable body projects are challenged and redefined. In consideration of tattooing this influence is evident in the number of individual's choosing to have characters from other cultures inscribed permanently upon their body: "Tempestuous, it's Latin for storm […] Semper Fi means always be faithful [in Latin] […] And I've got some Chinese writing in there which means spirit" (Daryl, 35).

Similar themes resonated with other respondents and participant observation confirms the popularity of languages including Arabic, Chinese and Japanese, as script or characters choices for tattoos – "I'd rather have it in Chinese letters or Arabic" (Kev, 54). Images associated with other cultures were also popular tattoo choices that were frequently requested at the studios frequented for the research and espoused by respondents during interviews:

> I started getting an affiliation with Japan […] Everything I've got is related somehow to bits of Japanese history or current times […] The symbols I have are your traditional Japanese; bonsai, traditional Japanese Cranes, Fujiyama etc. […] On the bottom of my spine I have a 1000-year-old prayer that was said before Samurai before they went to battle (Luke).

> I've got a friend who's got […] a full Chinese dragon (Siobhan, 20).

> Its *le petit prince*, a French character, childhood story character (Daphne, 25).

Allied to the increased cultural diversity of Western countries are processes of globalization which have exposed individuals to a variety of body projects from around the world. Atkinson claims globalization processes to "constitute a

leading set of influences that are creating a collective distrust of intolerably rigid ways of viewing the world" (2003, 150). Resonating with Giddens' (1991) concerns about the decline of religious authority and grand narratives as providing meaning to life, and Shilling's (2012) of the growing distrust of science and medical professionals as sole guardians of knowledge about bodies (see also Featherstone 1991, 2000; Frank 1991a, 1991b), globalization processes have taught us to be tolerant of other cultures' meaning systems. In consideration of body modification this is perhaps most encapsulated by the philosophy of the modern primitive movement (see Vale and Juno 1989; Rosenblatt 1997; Atkinson and Young 2001) and though none of my respondents identified as such some did discuss tribal cultures:

> The whole body modification and tribal tattooing of indigenous people really fascinates me throughout the ages […] I didn't want to go for a Maori piece or Polynesian piece as I totally respect their significance (Damian, 41).

Even those who did not discuss specific tribal cultures regularly discussed the use of tribal imagery in tattoos:

> Tribal tattoos were my first two tattoos […] in the 90s tribal was where it was at (Chuck, 24).
>
> Some people like black and white, some like tribal, and they go the specialists and collect the designs they have (Hannah).
>
> I was in a museum in London and I saw this tribal drum that had this writing that went all the way around […] I thought that's really wicked and I wanted to do my own vibe on that (James, 31).

The regular referencing of 'tribal' is somewhat problematic as it was used, in most cases, as a 'catch-all' for all non-Western cultures. As a result many of the criticisms directed at the modern primitive movement (Rosenblatt 1997, Cummings 2001) were repeated as the myriad indigenous cultures were denied specificity by the casual adoption of 'tribal' as term for a *style* of tattooing. Nevertheless, the repeated reference to tribal tattooing, both as a style, and as a form of body practice of non-Western cultures, as well as tattooing practices of other cultures, notably Japan, demonstrates how processes of globalization have made tattooing a more visible practice as well as providing individuals with alternative world views upon which to draw in the construction of their own body projects. As processes of globalization have made the world a smaller place – what McLuhan termed the global village (2001, 2011) – interest in other cultures and their body practices has intensified. The exotic rituals of cultural outsiders, once the preserve of publications such as *National Geographic*, are now readily available for all through popular media forms such as the internet and television. Since its inception anthropology has promoted cultural acceptance, a notion readily promoted throughout contemporary Western cultures, and the practices of these outsider groups challenge the body norms promulgated by established groups within our own figurations. Consequently "Western discourses detailing appropriate body practice (including

sound body modification) no longer dictate how individuals should relate to their bodies" (Atkinson 2003, 154) as individuals learn to become more tolerant of other cultures body practices and begin to experiment with them. Having examined how the body has become an increasingly important marker for the self, the rise of tattooing in popular culture and processes of globalization that have brought tattooing into the public consciousness I now with to turn to the final inter-related development that has been responsible for challenging the outsider status of tattooing – the consideration of the practice as art.

6. Tattooing as an Art Form

Without exception respondents referred to tattooing as art, bodies were repeatedly posited as canvases and tattoo practitioners were rarely referred to as anything other than artists. Through interdependencies with tattooed others and tattoo artists, respondents learnt to define the practice as artistic, and on many occasions also discussed how tattooing sat alongside more conventional forms of art and allowed artists to find gainful employment in a competitive art world. This is enforced through the referral of the practice as art in both academia and popular media which has had considerable affect in shaping discourse around the practice which frames it within artistic terminology (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Sanders 2008; Lodder 2010). Yet, the practice's status as art has not always been so accepted as during the formative years of the modern tattoo era tattoos were generally viewed as "a decorative cultural product dispensed by largely unskilled and unhygienic practitioners from dingy shops in suburban slums" (Sanders 2008, 19) with "the average tattooist a man of little imagination or artistry" (Ebensten 1953, 70). However, the period since the tattoo renaissance of the 1970s has witnessed the practice, like modern art and graffiti before it, undergo processes of redefinition as a result of which it has begun to enter the established art world. This is not to say that is has been completely assimilated and accepted, just like the practice itself its status as fully established is challenged, yet as it becomes increasingly displayed and discussed as art its status as such is more secure. This can be attributed to three inter-related developments: the influx of traditional artists into tattoo figurations, many of whom continue to be involved in traditional art mediums; the display of tattooing in art galleries and museums and the related display of traditional art in these locations by tattoo artists; and the discussion of the practice in academia.

Since the 1970s there has been an influx of artists with "university or art school backgrounds and experience in traditional artistic media" (Sanders 2008, 19) into tattoo figurations. These artists brought knowledge of "physiological and social principles pertaining to corporeal movement, aesthetics, and display" (Atkinson 2003, 45) to the practice, and in co-operation with new clientele who demanded unique, custom designs, contributed to the develop-

ment of new techniques such as fine lining, shading and highlighting. This continues today with practitioners continuing to refer to themselves as artists and respondents repeatedly referring to them as such too:

> It's allowed a lot more artists to work really because before if you were good at art, and so many of them are very good, what did you do? You might get a few people who are designers but you wouldn't get many because the fields so competitive […] its allowing people who've got talent to work in their chosen field (Esther, 33).

> What you have to remember is that these people are artists but rather than painting on a canvas they're just using your skin to do their work (Daryl, 35).

Several older respondents also discussed how the artistic nature of tattooing had changed:

> For me now, I think tattooing has gone from so much what it was like when I started to what I see on you now and I see total body art on you whereas compared to what I've got which is just so antique you know, it's like the Flintstone's have been doing this one me! (Bill, 56).

> It's more art now; you can see now it's done by professional people and years ago it was just people trying to make money […] it's more artistic today, it's a lot better than it was (Deb).

However, respondents were cautious about labelling *all* practitioners as artists and drew upon their knowledge of the practice to make judgements about the artistic merit and skill of individuals:

> Zeke (a tattooist) did that cherry branch freehand on my back […] and you think that's talent; it's not just sticking something on and going over lines. And he designed the phoenix whereas before you'd just get them to stick something on you and go over it, it was never their design (Esther, 33).

> If it's custom work that makes it art. If a tattoo artist is getting it off the wall, like a flash design, then it's not really art (Lizzy, 19).

Finally, during the course of my research tattoo artists with whom I came into contact repeatedly discussed their involvement in other art forms – "When I'm not here I'm drawing all the time, I make sure I draw at least a couple of times a week" (Bob, 18, tattoo apprentice) – which they sometimes sold to supplement their income,[3] and tattoo magazines regularly contain features on tattoo artists' other art projects. Their involvement with more traditional forms of art lends legitimacy to the claim that they are 'genuine' artists by demonstrating their range of skills and creative talent. As tattoo artists come to be viewed as genuine artists in their own right, and become associated with more traditional art forms, they challenge stereotypes about the practice and assist in its shift from an outsider to established art form.

[3] For example, an artist at one studio where I conducted ethnography drew tattoo related prints which he would frame and sell, often to other tattoo artists.

The second development that has led to the redefinition of tattooing as an art form is the display of tattoos in art galleries and museums as well as the display of traditional art by tattoo artists in these places. Early tattoo artists of the tattoo renaissance such as Ed Hardy displayed "drawings, watercolours, and prints in galleries on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles and [participated] in group exhibitions that were national in scope" (Rubin 1988, 242); this is a practice that has intensified in the intervening period. In the UK, numerous museums and art galleries display tattoo collections; the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, the Horniman Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, are just some of those that host exhibitions focused on various forms of body art including extensive displays of tattoos.[4] There are also museums and galleries that focus exclusively on tattooing including the Tattoo Art Museum and Hall of Fame in San Francisco, the Tattoo History Museum in Oxford, the Liverpool Tattoo Museum and the Amsterdam Tattoo Museum, among others. The traditional mediums created by tattoo artists also often feature in art gallery exhibitions and the majority of tattoo conventions also offer areas where tattoo artists exhibit more traditional work. There have also been several books published, for example Jo Waterhouse's *Art by Tattooists* (2009), which are dedicated to work in traditional mediums created by tattoo artists. Taken together, the increasing display of tattoos in art galleries and museums, and the display of traditional art by tattoo artists in these places, has led to increased cultural diffusion as the practice becomes redefined as art and mainstream audiences became familiar with it.

Finally, the interest in tattooing from academia has also contributed significantly in redefining the practice as art. One of the first books published about tattooing, Albert Parry's *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art* (2006 [1933]) referred to the practice as art even the content of the book was not always favourable towards the practice. However, it is interest in the practice from sociology and cultural studies since the 1980s that has lent most legitimacy to the claim that tattooing should be considered art. The first book length treatment on the subject from these disciplines was Clinton Sanders' *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, originally published in 1989 (revised and expanded edition with Vail 2008), and the period since has witnessed the publication of hundreds of books and articles from these disciplines that have continued to refer to the practice as art. Paradoxically, tattooing has received little attention in "writing which takes an explicitly art-historical or art-critical approach" where the term 'body art' is most commonly used to indicate a "broad category of the visual art work in which artists foreground their own

[4] For a more detailed consideration of tattooing in art galleries see Lodder (2010, ch. 5).

bodies within their work" (Lodder[5] 2010, 4-6). Nevertheless, sociology and cultural studies have gone some way to establishing a tradition in which tattooing is discussed as art despite the fact that publications from these disciplines are usually devoted to uncovering the social and cultural dimensions of the practice. In this respect, Sanders book is unique in that it does go some way to addressing directly the *social* redefinition of the practice as art. In doing so, Sanders identifies four factors that he claims moves the practice from a craft to an art through the "conflictual, cooperative, and negotiative process of social interaction" (2008, 150): creative, institutional, formal and organisational.

For Sanders, tattooing becomes art rather than craft on creative grounds when the artisan is able to "emphasise the aesthetic features of their work (especially uniqueness and beauty)" (2008, 24). To take this further, Lodder states that

> tattooing makes this step from craft into an art when it involves a measure of originality, aesthetic worth and technical skill, and when it is understood by practitioners, wearers and cultural discourse in aesthetic rather than solely semiotic, socio-cultural or psychological terms (2010, 114).

When considering institutional factors, tattooing becomes art because museums and academic discussions have begun to discuss it in such terms, these are both trends that have exacerbated over the intervening years as I have already addressed. The formal factor is that the process of inscribing a tattoo on the skin mimics the production of already established artistic methods such as drawing and painting; the tattoo is essentially a drawing on the skin, something apparent by continual reference to the skin as being a 'canvas' by respondents and in both popular and academic discourse. Finally, the organisational grounds is based on the fact that books, tattoo focused media, tattoo conventions, tattoo artists themselves and the culture they inhabit "have coalesced around a self-determined structure they refer to as 'tattoo art'" (Lodder 2010, 115). In Sanders' words:

> Information directed at the general public by tattooing organizations and tattooists who have a vested interest in expanding the artistic reputation of tattooing emphasizes conventionally accepted values. Promotional material refer to tattoo *studios* and tattoo *art*, display exemplary work exhibiting aesthetic content and technical skills, stress the historical and cultural roots of tattooing […] and emphasize the academic training and conventional artistic experience of key practitioners (Sanders 2008, 157, original emphasis).

Taken together, these four factors[6] have contributed to the social redefinition of the practice as art. Lending legitimacy to tattooing by discussing it as art in academia has helped in moving the practice away from its outsider status by

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[5] Lodder's thesis *Body Art: Body Modification as Artistic Practic*e is written with the aim of overcoming the lack of writing about tattoos and adopts a specifically art-historical and art-critical approach.

[6] For a more in-depth discussion on these factors see (Lodder 2010, 114-6).

attempting to remove the deviant associations and promote the practice as normal, meaningful, and adopted by individuals across the social spectrum.

Whether the practice can truly be considered art by the art-world is still a matter of some debate. In 2009, 20 years after the original publication of Sanders book, Waterhouse claimed "tattooists are *receiving* recognition as 'fine artists,' their work hanging on the walls of some of the top galleries in the world" (2009, 4, my emphasis), suggesting that the status of tattooing as a genuine art form is still in flux. Nevertheless, the *social* redefinition of the practice as art has continued apace since the publication of Sanders book and is routinely considered art in popular and academic discourse. As Sanders states, art is an:

> honorific label that comes to be applied to certain objects or activities by certain agents operating in the *social* world surrounding artistic production, marketing, consumption, and appreciation (see Dickie 1974; Danto 1964; Becker 1976). From this perspective, *art is a matter of constructing consensual definition*. Objects that look like art, are discussed like art (especially with regard to some extant tradition and theoretical perspective), bought and sold like art, created by social actors who consider themselves to be artists, and presented for appreciation or sale in settings (for example, galleries and museums) in which art is typically displayed or marketed have the greatest likelihood of being defined as art (2008, 23-4, my emphasis).

7. Tattoos: From Outsider to Established

The long-held stigmatization of those bearing tattoos stems from the power that established groups within figurations have held over those who bear such marks and the ability of the former to label the latter. In particular academics and medical professionals – well-educated, often wealthy – belonging to established groups wrote damning articles that linked tattooing to criminals and the presence of numerous psychopathies. Those who traditionally bore such marks in contrast were outsider groups with little social, financial or cultural power – sailors, fairground workers, prostitutes – who were unable to resist the negative labels attached to them and associated with their tattoos. As previously stated, the tattoo renaissance that began in the 1970s has had considerable scope in challenging the negative connotations of tattooing and moving the practice from the cultural fringes to a more established practice. The rise in the number of individuals bearing tattoos since this period has led to a wave of academic interest in the practice *because of* its increased popularity (Sweetman 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; DeMello 2000; Sanders 2008) but there has not been enough work that has explored *why* it has become so popular, and as a potentially unin-

tended consequence also more acceptable.[7] Elias and Scotson's theories of established-outsider relations demonstrate that when the balance of power is uneven the established are able to stigmatize outsiders through processes of group disgrace in ways that are often fantasy-laden (Mennell 1992, 138); this is witnessed in the association of tattooing with criminals, sailors, prostitutes, and those with mental illness since the beginning of the 20th century and the stigmatization of these groups as a result of being tattooed. However, as the balance of power becomes more equal these fantasy-laden images are challenged and become more realistic. Tattooing has undergone this process as a result of the ongoing sociogenetic developments discussed throughout this paper.

Key to these developments has been the rise of various emancipation movements of the twentieth-century including workers-, women's-, black-, and gay-rights movements that have challenged established groups in figurations across the world and which have gained great momentum since the 1970s – a period that does not coincidentally correspond with the tattoo renaissance. Many members of emancipation groups adopted tattooing as part of 'identity politics' (Dunn 1998) aimed at challenging conservative and oppressive ideologies prevalent during the period and as these individuals became more assimilated in established groups, they also challenged cultural associations between tattooing and the social underbelly contributing to the redefinition of long-standing negative associations of tattooing. As individuals are increasingly expected to partake in identity construction through the body, are exposed to tattooing body projects through their increased visibility in consumer culture, are taught to be tolerant of, and become familiar with, other cultures body practices, and come to consider tattooing to be artistic practice, the cultural definition of the practice as one of social outsiders is challenged and it becomes more established. This is not to claim that tattoos have become completely normative, as they still retain an aura of deviance, but the developments discussed through this paper have had considerable scope in moving the practice out of the cultural shadows. As the anonymous tattoo artist quoted at the beginning of this paper has claimed – "tattooing has lost its outsider status."

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[7] Atkinson (2003) is an exception to this though his work focuses explicitly on Canada and (to a lesser extent) North America.

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