

# A Life Told in Ink: Tattoo Narratives and the Problem of the Self in Late Modern Society

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The phenomenon of tattooing became part of mainstream culture in the 1990s. The article analyses portraits that were published in *Tattoo* magazine, where the meanings of tattoos varied from self-adornment to a narrative structuring of life history and identity protection. Particular focus is put on how tattoos are used to plot life stories. The tattooed body represents a map that enables narration. Dramatic life changes are embodied in tattoos that help subjects to ease their problems. However, since problems are engraved into skin and flesh they are visible and also seen by other people. Subjectivities become visible. The analysis given in the article offers a view upon a paradox of subjectivity in late modern society. The human body is, at the same time, both a subject actively seeking meaning and a mere object to be judged.

## INTRODUCTION

He gets tattooed all the time, he says, averaging a couple–three sittings a week: ‘It’s personal gratification. I love the art. I’m able to change my body the way I want to see it.’

(Jason Spinelli, *Tattoo*, 2001/145: 30)

In the Peter Greenaway film *The Pillow Book* (1997), calligraphy on skin becomes a means to write life. The main character Nagiko has men practising calligraphy on her skin, while she herself practises her fetish on paper and on other people’s skin. Through this procedure they become a book of their own. Like the calligraphy as portrayed in *The Pillow Book*, tattooing puts a mark on the lives of late modern subjects. More than ever, the body has become an object which is shaped by gym practice and plastic surgery, and which is embellished with body piercings and tattoos.

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The tattooed, or modified body, thus always exists on a shifting boundary between subject and object. Just like Nagiko in Greenaway's film; the body is constructing a personal history of experiences on the one hand, while on the other hand it is as an object that is subject to the gaze of others. Only the desire and the demand to shape the body are present in both levels.

The history of tattoos as consumer products for the middle classes is quite recent, it emerged no longer than a few decades ago (DeMello, 2000; Sweetman, 1999a). Before the cultural movement from the 1960s onwards that has been termed 'Tattoo Renaissance' (Rubin, 1988; Sanders, 1989) tattoos had a long and conflict-ridden history. In the western world, tattoos have marked the bodies of slaves, criminals, prostitutes, deserters, primitive tribes and later deviant sub-cultures (Caplan, 2000; Castellani, 1995; Marenko, 2002; Le Breton, 2002). In public discussions, the ambiguity evoked by tattoos is easily channelled into a medicalizing moral panic about the health risks connected to tattoos and piercing (Pitts, 1999; Fisher, 2002).

The sociology of the body has recently started to approach tattooing as a form of self-expression and body politics, hence opening the way to a positive diagnosis of tattooing (Fisher, 2002; Le Breton, 2002; Pitts, 1998; 1999; Sweetman, 1999a; 1999b). The article analyses the autobiographical aspect of tattooing mentioned, for example, by Paul Sweetman (1999a). The key concept used in this article is *tattoo narrative*, which refers to the way that tattooed subjects plot their life through their tattoos. Tattoos function as points of reference or maps that enable life stories to be told. It is shown here that tattoos are used by subjects in order to control their lives when faced with the chaos of late modern society. A tattoo engraved into the skin represents a link to personal life history, as well as an opportunity for subjective security.

We shall argue that subjectivity is increasingly tangible and visual in late modern societies. The body enters the core of the social sphere as a surface for displaying subjectivity, but it also involves subjects having to negotiate between different symbolic orders (see Irwin, 2001; 2003). Subjects have to face the conflict that although they can modify and (re)write their bodies they cannot control the meanings that other people give to their tattoos. Therefore the visualized body is in itself a battleground of contradictory meanings. In the following, we shall first present our research material and further develop the concept of tattoo narrative, after which we shall provide a detailed account of how visual tattooed bodies are used by subjects to narrate their lives.

## NARRATING THE BODY

*Tattoo* magazine claims to be the world's best-selling publication on tattoos. Our analysis focuses on the portraits published in *Tattoo* magazine,

which are to be found under a section named 'Features'. These portraits are approximately three pages long, containing both text and photographs. The data comprises 34 issues (137–38, 140–62, 164–72) from the years 2001, 2002 and 2003. These issues contain altogether 280 portraits (848 pages). Additionally, we have utilized as background material two issues from both 1993 (44, 52) and 1999 (117, 120), which consist of 40 portraits (106 pages). The portraits are written by three men: Frank Booth, H.T. Booth and Paul Garson.

*Tattoo* magazine is highly visual. Each cover consists of a young woman pictured in the tradition of soft porn revealing tattooed skin. In the portraits, both women and men exhibit their tattooed bodies filled with images of animals, saints, devils, dragons and tribal designs that evoke the primitive. The imagery of popular culture from film stars to pin-up girls, vampires, comic-book characters and Star Wars motifs represents another important influence. Portraits constantly play with the stripping of the subjects who sometimes cover up their tattoos in everyday life: 'My tattoos are like a hidden identity of mine because, unfortunately, my job in and of itself and my employer frown upon tattoos in open view of the public', says Brian Doebler (*Tattoo*, 2003/162: 61).

Peter Brooks (1993) states that unveiling is a central feature of narratives. An old scar enables the recognition of Odysseus when he comes back to Ithaca. It is a body that reveals the identity of Odysseus to the others. In the same way, visual stripping in *Tattoo* magazine is revealing. However, the trick with tattoo narratives in *Tattoo* magazine is that thoughts are stripped as well as clothing. For example, Tsae Lee Dow refers to her tattoos as footnotes of herself and as a personal history in her skin. She has a tree tattooed in the back of her neck in memory of her brother who at of age of four accidentally hung himself from a tree. 'I was the only one there ... and I was only three, but I still remember it' (*Tattoo*, 2002/159: 29–30). Becoming tattooed can be seen as a form of a permanent diary that no one can take away (Sweetman, 1999a).

Tattoo narratives involve subjects narrating *with* their body and *of* their body. In other words, there are stories on the body and the body in the story (Brooks, 1993). Of course not all the subjects reveal their life as far as Tsae Lee does. Ted Mitchell (*Tattoo*, 2002/160: 61) describes his attitude: 'The meanings overall are very personal, and I don't tell anyone what that is.' This statement refers also to the general problem of our data. Portraits are modified through interaction between journalists and tattooed subjects and certainly not all the participants were willing to reveal their lives within the pages of a popular magazine. Many of the portraits describe more artistic matters and things related to the tattoo community. It is worth noting also that it seems to be that not all the tattoos are taken

as representations of serious personal issues. Some of them have been taken just for fun – but not all of them.

It all began in kindergarten, believe it or not. My father had some motorcycle friends and I remember images with traditional wings and eagles. But I was twenty-six before I was finally able to get my first.

(Debbie Byrne, *Tattoo* 2001/138: 60)

Although some people say that they are tattooing themselves for purely aesthetic reason, tattoos appear to situate life in most of the tattoo narratives. The prior stages of life are expressed through images inscribed on the skin. Tattoo narratives frequently begin in childhood with memories and dreams, which are strongly associated with tattoos: ‘Since he was a kid Scott Buffington has experienced visions. More specifically, ink dreams’ (*Tattoo*, 2003/167: 59). Mark Epstein explains his relation to the tattoos as follows: ‘I knew that I was going to be a tattooed person very early on. In Seattle, I was surrounded by friends with tattoos, so I was in the environment as well. Most importantly, my body didn’t feel right without ink’ (*Tattoo*, 2002/150: 37). On occasions, the tattoo narratives almost gain a semi-religious tone, as the fuzzy tattoo-related memories of childhood are linked to ‘one of those primal urges’ (*Tattoo*, 2001/137: 29) or ‘previous life leaking ink through to the next’ (*Tattoo*, 2002/156: 67).

As shown by Brooks (1984), narration involves plotting that covers both story elements and their ordering. ‘I try to just put a lot of thought into my tattoos and relate them to what I’m doing and to things in my life’ (Kevin Williams, *Tattoo*, 2001/141: 29). In tattoo narratives, individual tattoos are plotted into a life story. It is important to underline that in tattoo narratives, life gains a new coherence through the modified and tattooed body. Experiences and life events are seen in the skin, but also tattooed pictures also seem to tell the stories of their carriers. Their relationship between tattoos and subject is dialogical. Therefore we shall throughout this article, refer to bodies as experiencing, living bodies, which means seeking bodies as analysed, for example, by Merleau-Ponty (1945) in his phenomenological study on the body.

When writing about plots, Brooks (1984) refers to their spatial dimensions. The term plot can also mean a small piece of ground for example. Tattoos resemble these kinds of ‘plots’ also in terms of delineative charts; they are delineated and spatialized engravings on the body. The tattooed body can be seen as a map that helps subjects to narrate their lives. Tsae Lee Dow describes the importance of placement of her tree tattoo: ‘It was always in my face and in my head,’ she explains, ‘So by putting it on the back of my neck, I put it behind me’ (*Tattoo*, 2002/159: 30). Tsae Lee Dow’s description shows why the tattooed body should be seen as three dimensional and not only as a text or as a collage of two dimensional

pictures. A tree in the back of her neck is something physically present and at the same time surpassed. Hence, tattoo narratives involve multidimensionality: they bridge space, time, memory and affects together.

### NEGOTIATING TATTOOED SUBJECTIVITY

In tattoo narratives, the acquiring of the first tattoo is a significant turning point that appears as a part of the process of becoming independent. Tattoos work as personal rites of passage from childhood to adulthood (Le Breton, 2002). 'The image symbolized an overall progression of overcoming my childhood, growing up and becoming independent,' Rick Sprague describes the phoenix in his chest (*Tattoo*, 2003/166: 138). Old tattoos are usually later despised. Josh Brunner who got his first tattoo at the age 14 describes it as 'absolutely horrible' (*Tattoo*, 2003/170: 33) and Chris Hartgraves who got his own at the age of 15 uses almost the same words: 'It was a horrible tattoo, the worst!' (*Tattoo*, 2003/161: 29).

Every drop of Melissa Christensen's ink is saturated with meaning on a very personal level. For her, it's always been that way, from the very first, small piece she received in her boyfriend's bedroom at the tender age of 14. 'He had a homemade tattoo gun,' she explains.

(*Tattoo*, 2001/141: 9)

Particularly with women, the experience of getting the first tattoo is associated with losing of virginity. Later, the initial marking on the skin has either been removed or is left in tact 'as a quirky signifier of the state of mind of an 18-year-old woman hot to get her first tattoo' (*Tattoo*, 2001/140: 11). The tattoos taken in one's teens or early teens are described as tentative first steps preceding the better-thought-out and more refined attitude to the tattooed body in maturity.

When I turned eighteen, I wanted to get my first one, but knew that I wanted to think long and hard about what I wanted, because it was only going to be on my body for the rest of my life. So it took me six years before I finally went for it.

(Arlene Acosta, *Tattoo*, 2001/140: 75)

Some younger tattooees, who are already heavily tattooed, hide their tattoos from their parents. The journalists of *Tattoo* often play around with the idea that young tattooees who cannot expose themselves to their parents exhibit their tattoos to them. 'So, as I said before, should you find yourself reading this article and you're anywhere near the Belgian town of Brugge, please, for Joeri's sake, make sure his dad doesn't get to see these pages' (*Tattoo*, 2003/170: 10). In later age, parents seem to be

replaced by bosses or conventional circles of the job that often force people to cover up their tattoos (see also Irwin, 2003: 37).

My tattoos pose no problem at work, and at school, it's divided between people who are frightened by them, and those who want to get to know me because of them. Now, on the other hand, my father still offers to pay to have all my tattoos lasered off.

(Shannon Utz, *Tattoo*, 2001/144: 30)

Despite the commodification and commercialization of tattoos, the stigma character of tattoos plays a relevant role in tattoo narratives. Women in particular describe the reactions generated by their environment in the following terms: 'My mom just wants me to keep the ink off my arms until I become a lawyer' (Tracy Dailey, *Tattoo*, 2002/156: 59). As observed by Katherine Irwin (2001), subjects are forced to use legitimation techniques to maximize the benefits of the phenomenon and to minimize the negative meanings associated with tattoos. Though tattoos are currently 'in', they still retain an element for the middle-class flirtation with forbidden fruit.

Susan A. Phillips (2001) argues that social class defines how tattoos are perceived. While middle-class tattooing seems to be a partly safe way of expressing the self, a lower-class status can change how other people read the signs of the body; the self-expressive status of tattooing as art can turn out to be the mark of criminality. The risk to be misinterpreted is at least virtual for the middle-class subjects (Irwin, 2003). On the one hand, it can perhaps be even an enjoyable form of voluntary and rather harmless risk taking. On the other, it can turn out to be repressing for the self which might end in having to cover up the body. At least in some respects a business man who is wearing his 'full body suit' under his suit resembles a prisoner who tries to tattoo himself in secrecy.

The regularly repeated slogan about the 'world of ink' in the portraits serves to construct a sense of community that seems to be a narrative solution for the problem of deviancy. Although tattoos problematize some social relationships they enable others. 'I've been lucky. Good choices. Good people. I really did grow up in a world of ink' (Miss Dee Dassen, *Tattoo*, 2002/154: 86). *Tattoo* magazine frequently cites stories of couples having found themselves through tattooing. Family bounds are also strengthened through ink. 'All of my brothers, my dad ... everyone born into the McKay clan ... has that tattoo' (David McKay, *Tattoo*, 2002/157: 90). In late modern society, ink may occasionally obtain the function of blood: 'You could say they are indeed a family linked by ink' (*Tattoo*, 2002/154: 58). Tattooing provides a feeling of belonging and of retaining some connection to others (Le Breton, 2002). The imaginary interface joining the individual to the community is inscribed directly into the person's skin.

'A world of ink' seems to refer generally the problem of modern subjects. Our life spaces are increasingly 'lifted out' as Scott Lash (2002: 21) points out, like McDonald's restaurants, the Internet, theme parks and airports. Richard Sennett (1994: 349) states that an airport waiting lounge is an architectural emblem of our age. According to Bryan S. Turner (1999), airport departure lounges capture the temporary and fleeting nature of modern social relationships, and also uncertainties of modern life, its ennui, anxiety and fragility. Subjects wait in boredom but on the other hand flights run risks to be delayed or cancelled. The pointless leisure and alienation of airports seem to be captured also in tattoo narratives. Subjects are at risk of being exposed, yet happy that they have taken their risks. Body marking is the uniting factor of a social world. In a sense the technological age seems to call for a new kind of primitivism – when life is too distancing, the skin and flesh start to speak.

### THE VISUALIZATION OF SUBJECTIVITY

Visual and aesthetic issues play a crucial role in tattoo narratives that stand sometimes very near to the values and standards of the Western culture of consumption. The portraits frequently highlight youth, sexuality, individuality and handsome white bodies. Tattoos function as foreplay. When it comes to women, images situated on the hip, the lower back, or the upper chest frame areas generally considered erogenous. As far as men are concerned, the tattoos adorn biceps and shoulders, traditionally seen as phallic symbols.

A first glance reveals that everything on Gina's body is not only in its proper place, but pleasantly arranged to boot. Upon second glance, the viewer notices that the owner of this corporeal abode takes considerable pride in decorating the exterior of her temple.

*(Tattoo, 2001/137: 29)*

The portraits indicate a powerful connection between tattoos and sexual fantasies. In the case of Gina Allman, the writer H.T. Booth invites the reader to look at Gina's body. The aim is to uncover the body, turning the portrait into something near to a striptease. Gina's knowledge of shiatsu philosophy is mentioned in the text with reference to her appearance. The inner conflict of the article thus is that despite the comparisons drawn to shiatsu philosophy, it still represents Gina herself as a temple looked at from the outside. The point of view is crystallized at the end of the article: 'Gina Allman's body is indeed a marvellously constructed temple and a highly effective advertisement for her chosen vocation' (*Tattoo, 2001/137: 30*). The magazine repeatedly associates the pleasure derived from tattoos with the gaze directed to the body.

In a consumer culture, gaining control of one's life starts to rely on embodiment of the visual (Featherstone, 1991). Subjectivity is much more prone to the gaze of the other, as in the case of Gina Allman, the construction of an own meaningful life is downplayed to the outward appearance. The magazine chooses to celebrate appearance and splendour, while subjects attempt to find sense and meaning in their tattoos. For example, H.T. Booth cuts short Arlene Acosta's discussion on the process of planning her tattoos: 'That's nice, Arlene, but let's get back to your strengths. You know, nakedness and sexuality. Could you elaborate a little more?' (*Tattoo*, 2001/140: 75). This seems to capture the basic problem of tattooed subjects who are at the same time both subject and object – the one seeing and to be seen (see also Marenko, 2002). Subjectivity becomes visualized as if there would not be a single action without an outer gaze to the body. In this sense the body as temple is not portrayed as if it would house a subject, but rather as a commercial tourist trap.

Women's tattoos are often viewed in *Tattoo* magazine within the register of beauty and sensitivity. Tattoos make them sexy. This seems to convey one important factor of the body in consumer culture: the body is seen as a collection of separate parts that are desired and constantly enhanced (Grogan, 1999; Stratton, 1996). Tattoo narratives manifest the sexual desirability of tattoos. According to Marc Blanchard (1994), tattoos are fetishes, since a picture inscribed into the skin is more desirable and more alive than the body itself.

After Jean Paul Gaultier's fashion show in Paris in 1993, the world of fashion announced that piercings and tattoos had become even more important than clothing (Hewitt, 1997: 93). One might even claim that tattoos are at a certain extent taking over the position of generating fetishes traditionally held by clothing. 'Tattoo is about revealing, being revealed and gazing upon the revealing,' Marc Blanchard states (1994: 295). Sometimes a single tattoo can be seen as almost living a life of its own. When Paul Garson asks his interviewee, Scott Risley, why he does not frame the original model for his tattoo and hang it on his wall, Risley replied: 'Why? I've got it on my back.' Garson concludes by saying: 'He's right, and that's better than any static wall display, his version is literally living and breathing' (*Tattoo*, 2001/144: 68).

The most important thing about my work is that it's all original art, completely original. ... I look at myself as a canvas on which I am letting artists express their talent on my body. I give them full creative freedom so that they can enjoy it to the max and put their heart into it.

(Erin Holly, *Tattoo*, 2003/169: 66)

*Tattoo* magazine frequently describes the body as a canvas on which artists paint their work. 'At 6'2" and 289 lbs., 26-year old Michael



presents quite an expansive canvas for his number one artist' (*Tattoo*, 2001/141: 55). This is one solution to the problem of positioning the subject as a mere visual target. Christopher Lasch (1979) points out that in a world of self-expression, life itself is becoming a work of art. This kind of aestheticization of subjectivity enables the subject to engage in narcissistic mirroring where he or she is looked upon by others:

I'll show my tattoos to anybody, or my piercings. I have no shame when it comes to them. I love them all, and they all mean something to me. It's just like any other masterpiece. I'm just the lucky one that gets to wear it for the rest of my life.

(Cyndi Zonneveld, *Tattoo*, 2001/146: 87)

In fact, the portraits often communicate unabashed exhibitionistic pleasure derived from 'tattoo posing'. Subjectivity is constructed only upon the appearances of the body. 'My tattoos don't necessarily have deep meanings, sometimes I just go for what I feel is really beautiful' (Tanja Nixx, *Tattoo*, 2001/137: 73). David Le Breton (2002) suggests that, for women, the function of tattoos is sometimes purely decorative, and that there is a tendency to refer to tattoos as modern-day jewellery. Sweetman (1999a) notes that it is usually lightly tattooed subjects who are willing to see their bodily marks in decorative terms.

In the tattoo narratives of men there is clearly a defined understanding of the division between 'girlie stuff' and manly tattoos. Men distance themselves from the association of feminine beauty and self-adornment, although they still view their tattoos as art. The majority of men tend to choose tattoos displaying a truly male iconography: symbols of power, sexist imagery and characters from popular culture. Macho-masculine tattoos are characterized by the aesthetics of violence, in which the enforcement of action, strength and heterosexuality plays a major part. Superheroes, different variations of the devil and biomechanical monsters belong to the mainstream of men's tattoos. The gaze on the male body does not seem to make it passive. Their tattooed bodies are associated with street-credible masculinity.

Although the magazine makes women the objects of the masculine gaze, it also opens up a possible challenge to the rigid boundaries of the feminine body. In the portraits, tattoos become a part of a street-credible appearance and way of life. 'I can express myself in a feminine way and still have the edginess' (Shannon Utz, *Tattoo*, 2001/144: 30). According to Irwin (2001: 55), tattoos offer women a means to display hardness and strength. 'It all started with rock 'n' roll ... I sort of turned myself into the bad girl ... but in a good way. I thrive on the male energy, which I try to turn into feminine sexuality.' Toughness

is needed, since a woman wearing large tattoos violates more western beauty ideals than a man.

I never dress girly. I never use make-up. I don't ride my bike like a girl. But I do have a girly tattoo.

(Kelli Davis, *Tattoo*, 2001/142: 57)

Despite the fetishist and commercial character of tattoos, tattoo narratives show that tattoos can be used in terms of feminine identity politics in the same way as high heels and corsets in the gothic style (see also Stratton, 1996; Wilkins, 2004). However, the increasing visualization places the subject under constant negotiation. If subjectivity is built on visual appearance, it is constantly subject to the gaze and criticism of others, and there is a risk that the subject is forced into stereotypical positions. In a thoroughly commercial world, even ideas that are presented as one's own are shared. Ramona Nations talks about the impulse that led her to inscribe her whole body with fruits: 'I wanted something different, and just then the Fruit of the Loom commercials were coming out on TV, and I just thought that was catchy' (*Tattoo*, 2003/165: 37).

Tattooed subjects are like travellers in the airport waiting lounge, gazing at commercial advertisements, looking at the bodies of other people and eventually being gazed at themselves. However, as Victoria Pitts (2003) notes, late modern bodies should not be taken as ontologically free to play the cultural play and narrate about themselves. The fundamental paradox of tattoos remains that what is defined as personal is, in reality, shared (Le Breton, 2002). The crucial question is to what extent subjects are able to create their own meanings and situate their personal feelings and experiences. As shown by Sweetman (1999a), tattooing should not be approached in an exclusively commercial fashion. Viewing one's body as art is used to refer to its lasting nature – no matter how consuming current culture is.

### TUNING UP THE BODY

Many tattoo narratives view tattoos in the light of dramatic life experiences. Significant memories, radical life changes, losing loved ones and looking for a new direction in life are all manifested through the marking of the body. 'When I got that piece, it was a critical point in my life, where I was in college trying to figure out who I was and what I was doing with myself' (*Tattoo*, 2001/140: 11). The connection between tattoos and life stages is emphasized by showing how the tattooing process can lead to significant changes in understanding and experiencing the self (Sweetman, 1999b). Life is constantly discussed in relation to tattoos that serve as memory maps and tool kits helping subjects to structure their

experiences. In a metaphorical sense the body is like an instrument that life is playing. When it goes out of tune, it has to be tuned 'up' (i.e., modified) again.

I always think that a tattoo also connotes something like a period in one's life ... When I had good times, the tattoo would turn out colourful, and in bad times they were black-and-grey.

(Ralf Reich, *Tattoo*, 2002/154: 11)

Images, colours and symbols reflect transitions and provide the structure for life history. They function as reminders for their bearers' history and they serve as lived memories remaining on the surface of the body. Some of the stories are coloured by self-hatred directed to prior life stages. The 28-year old Chad Rice decided to have a phoenix etched on his right shoulder, 'when I quit drugs and started to do things my own way about five years ago' (*Tattoo*, 2001/140: 11). The symbolism is conscious: the bird phoenix serves as a cathartic sacrifice purifying its carrier of earlier life stages and becomes the manifestation of a new beginning. Dan Massey describes battling dragons on his right shoulder that he took on as a result of his divorce:

I got into a whole bunch of trouble etc., etc., and the image represents my attitude at the time, me being the one kicking the other dragon's ass. Then I met my wife, Melanie, with whom I've been seven years now. After I met her I added the swords that represent me slaying the dragons and my internal dragons as well since she helped me calm down a lot.

(*Tattoo*, 2003/171: 59)

Tattoo narratives are characteristically personal and confessional. Sari Näre (1999) uses the concept 'intimization of the public' to refer to a process where the intimate personal aspects of life, such as sex and emotions, are becoming part of mainstream publicity. The tattooed body, too, represents the intimization of the public, since it renders subjectivity as visual and public. Although the meaning associated with tattoos may vary according to the onlooker, the portraits of *Tattoo* magazine present the relationship between the tattoos and the subject as iconic: 'To look at Shannon is to look at an open book' (*Tattoo*, 2001/140: 29). Committed to a narcotic/alcohol-free lifestyle, Jeremiah Hanzey has the words 'Drug Free' inscribed on his abdomen (*Tattoo*, 2001/144: 9). The 23-year old Mark Postema's chest displays a cross as a sign of his religious conviction (*Tattoo*, 2001/148: 87). Kevin Williams, a vegetarian, has opted for an artichoke on his leg (*Tattoo*, 2001/141: 29). Carlos Sanchez, Jr states that he wears a collage of his Mexican heritage (*Tattoo*, 2002/155: 57).

However, the visualized subjectivity is not necessarily determined by the signs on the body, for tattoos can gain new meanings with altering life

phases. According to Vilma Hänninen (2000), narratives have a tendency to form a dialogical relationship between personal life experiences and narration. Analogically, tattoos are reinterpreted in relation to new life experiences. Marenko (2002) points out that the narrative feature of tattoos should not be reduced to the symbolic level alone, for the tattooed body is more adaptive than static by nature. In other words, although the picture on the skin has a relative permanence, the affects connected to it change with the flow of life.

Although permanence is commonly seen as perhaps the most central feature of tattooing, the portraits clearly state that individual tattoos are not necessarily permanent: '[The tattoo on] the belly is the only thing that's gonna stay there, and everything else is getting totally reworked' (Jason Roderick, *Tattoo*, 2002/154: 35). Like the sense of community created by tattoos, the permanence of tattoos is thus a shifting notion. Old tattoos have either been covered by new ones or removed by laser. Paul Garson's concluding remark on his interviewee, Wes Grissom, having covered his ex-girlfriend's name with a new picture motif, carries a deeper meaning: 'Sometimes girls come and go, but ink is forever, right?' (*Tattoo*, 2002/156: 86). Since life is constantly changing, the tattooed body cannot be static. Only the will to engrave the skin seems to remain, or 'get tattoos 'til I die', as Michael Shook puts it (*Tattoo*, 2002/150: 68).

Tattoo narratives represent the acquisition of new tattoos as a cathartic process. Pitts (1998), who has studied people with scarification, talks of tattoos as a liminal space between the old and the new. In the tattooing rituals analysed by Pitts, a new, strong identity is claimed to replace the former weak one.

I'd like to get part of my female anatomy tattooed on the appropriate place on my stomach. ... I had my right ovaries removed a couple of years ago, so this would be a way of getting them back.

(Shannon Lamm, *Tattoo*, 2001/140: 30)

The ritual character of tattooing can be seen to involve a power that serves to unify and restore the body. In the case of Shannon Lamm, a defective body is symbolically restored by marking the skin. In this way, the body is tuned up closer to the ideal self with the aim of regaining the harmony lost. According to Pitts (1998), one of the functions of tattooing is the symbolical reclaiming of the body. In Pitts's study, women who had acquired tattoos and piercings described how their tattoos provided a means to reclaim their own bodies (see also Benson, 2000; Fisher, 2002; Irwin, 2001).

The tattoo narratives can be viewed as a reflective body project (see Shilling, 1993; Sweetman, 1999a). The body is constantly worked and reworked and it is tuned up in relation to life itself. When there are

dramatic changes in life, there are new tattoos on the body. The metaphor of tuning 'up' does not only refer to music and establishing harmony between the body and the various life stages. Since the body is a product of life, goal rationality becomes another important aspect in addition to the more affective and intimate sides. Therefore body tuning refers to the maximization of the visual capacity and appearance of the body. The body is like a machine that is constantly improved and adjusted (Featherstone, 1991). The body is the product of careful planning and perfected craft, which is measured in the portraits, for instance, by stating the exact number of hours spent on the pieces. Besides aesthetic gains, the pleasure associated with tattoos also springs from the sense of control achieved by body modification.

### TATTOOS AS SHIELDS OF SUBJECTIVITY

Tattooing is a lot about helping people, the changes that the person will go through after they've have been heavily tattooed. The transformation of ink often restores their confidence that they may have lost along the way.

(Ted Mitchell, *Tattoo*, 2002/160: 63)

In addition to serving the purpose of exhibiting and tuning up the body, tattoos also have protective functions for the subjects. Some describe how tattoos protect the body by forming magical armour on the surface of the skin: 'We're working on some wasps for my waist line, because I'm allergic to them. They'll be a sort of protective symbol' (Kevin Williams, *Tattoo*, 2001/141: 31). According to Le Breton (2002), the potential of tattoos is directed towards the future. A mark tattooed on skin serves as talisman or shield that enables the subject to look ahead in life.

At the time [of the first tattoo] I moved to a job that was overwhelming. I couldn't go back to my old job because it was eliminated. ... I was off for four or five months, and during that time I developed a really bad depression. Tattooing helped me get through that difficult period. You could say it was an alternative to doing something stupid. It took my mind off what I was going through.

(Ken Nantais, *Tattoo*, 2001/138: 56)

The story of Ken Nantais elucidates the protective nature of tattoos. The body becomes a reliable anchor for subjectivity. The subject avoids plunging into distress by tattooing himself. As the social world disperses, the tattooed and pierced body is created as a controllable miniature world. Subjective experiences are made controllable through the act of attaching them to the surface of the skin (Le Breton, 2002). In his analyses, Le Breton (2002; 2003) emphasizes the sense of control derived from

tattooing, body piercing and cutting. The subject may experience the feeling of living and being in control of life through the skin. It is important to remember, however, that the protection offered by tattoos does not necessarily refer to control, but to peace of mind and release from self-control. Janet Kearns, for instance, speaks about the dragon images covering her wrists: 'While it's difficult to tell that story, I'm also very proud of those tattoos. Also, during the time they kept me from thinking of re-cutting [my wrists]' (*Tattoo*, 2003/167: 86).

Tattoos as shields of subjectivity function in the context of war and peace: 'On my left arm I have the sign for protection, home and faith, with hope, survival, and endurance runes on my right arm' (David McKay, *Tattoo*, 2002/157: 89). Tattoos can serve as fortifications and armour used in the battle for subjectivity. For instance, the violent tattoo images of some men can be interpreted as symbolic warfare for the purpose of appropriating masculinity. According to Calvin Thomas (1996), masculinity is defined by the struggle against the threat of feminization and the fear of weakness and disempowerment. Constructing a street-credible look through tattoos can be interpreted as masculine armouring (see Theweleit, 2000). For example, Eric Baer, who works in the security business, has acquired a large Superman tattoo on his back (*Tattoo*, 2002/154: 89–90).

For the second context of subjectivity protection we will use the metaphor of peace. In contrast to the above-described state of war, this implies a pursuit of a homely state of security and peace of mind, as in the story of Janet Kearns. In the portraits of *Tattoo* magazine, this form of protection is dominant. Tattoos are associated with the ideas of familiarity, intimacy and home. For Paul Giconi, who has numerous tattoos inspired by the comic book characters *Calvin* and *Hobbes*, the skin-inscribed adventures of the comic book heroes do not imply simply a keen interest in the art of comics, but are associated first and foremost with the experiences that he and his loved ones have gone through. The images on the skin remind their bearer of the durability of human relationships as well as the hardships encountered in life. The comic book stories inscribed on the skin serve as a script for a future that appears uncertain (*Tattoo*, 2002/157: 33).

Some time ago, it came to me that what I enjoy the most about tattoos is the permanence of them. I've lost both parents, people who were close to me, and I realized that things that I hold important in life are sometimes fleeting, but my tattoos are permanent. ... It's something that can't be taken away.

(Hank Maffetone, *Tattoo*, 2001/140: 72)

The portrait of Hank Maffetone, a clown tattoo enthusiast, stresses the unpredictability and uncontrollability of life. Against this backdrop, his

tattoos are construed as permanent objects. For Jessica Perozzi who has a Catholic family background, a tattoo of the Virgin Mary represents something that will last for all time (*Tattoo*, 2001/141: 33). A similar notion of permanence is central in memorial tattoos, where dead family members are marked in the person's skin through names, facial portraits, or symbols representing them. The 35-year-old Alexia Phillips has devoted an entire arm to symbols representing family members: 'My left arm is my "tribute arm"', she says (*Tattoo*, 2001/141: 60). The tribute arm displays the name of her daughter and a nurse figure representing her grandmother. The meaning of memorial tattoos is to create a firmer link to loved ones than is possible through immaterial mental images. Memory is anchored to tangible pictures.

My daughter, my mother, and myself went to visit my mother's grave. We were walking toward the grave, and I said, 'Hey, Dad, I don't want you to be offended by this, but I did something, a memory piece for Mom.' ... When I took off my shirt, my daughter started weeping immediately. I waited for my dad's reaction. I was expecting him to punch me in the face and storm off, but he reached out and touched it. Then he said, 'This artist really captured your mother.'

(Daniel Bueller, *Tattoo*, 2002/152: 30)

Daniel Bueller has a tattoo portrait of his dead mother as a saint with a sword on his back. Images of saints stand, according to a psychoanalytical interpretation by Marja Tuominen, for the longing for the ideal object. The visual presence of the caring, emphatic and all-sacrificing mother's function is to bring back the good object, but at the same time it also opens up a possibility to let go (Tuominen, 2001). In the narrative of Bueller, the oedipal drama between son, father and dead mother is solved by the admiration of the tattoo. 'It was a special day for both of us' (Daniel Bueller, *Tattoo*, 2002/152: 30). The tattoo joins the family together so that they are able to both grieve and glorify the lost mother.

## **PAIN AND NARRATING**

Elaine Scarry (1985) discusses physical pain as a state that lacks an object in the external world. There are no words that could express it. Grief that is not processed functions in the same way. It stays silent. Socio-cultural changes have an impact on our capacity to cope with pain. According to Richard Sennett (1994), contemporary society has through its structuring of time and space alone aimed to diminish feelings of pain and disturbance, at the same time also decreasing our opportunities to feel. Scott Lash (2002) argues that among other factors, the technologization of life functions to create chaotic presence, where the subjects may find

it difficult to grasp reality. They do not have time or space for critical distance. According to Lash (2002), the times of the narrative are clearly over.

In the context of this reading, it is significant that tattooed subjects portrayed in *Tattoo* magazine are able to discuss even highly dramatic events in their lives. Their stories are not characterized by chaos; the pain does not rub out the narrative (see Frank, 1995). Tattoos seem to situate pain in a way that enables the person to discuss distressing experiences (see Alford, 1997). 'I just remember the pain. They say you don't remember the pain, but I found a couple spots on my back that had especially good memories,' as one man describes his experience of getting a tattoo (Paul Merrick, *Tattoo* 2001/143: 68).

Just as there is pain in childbirth, a pain that bonds the mother to her child, there's a similar thing going on in tattooing, the pain, the bonding of ink and imagery with your skin, a very personal thing that I call my own.

(Anna Pasternak, *Tattoo*, 2002/160: 71)

The process of tattooing is described as a powerful and purifying experience. 'For me, getting tattooed is definitely a form of acupuncture. It's very relaxing and vents all the pent up frustrations and aggressions. It's very therapeutic' (Erin Holly, *Tattoo*, 2003/169: 65). Dave Reynolds refers to pain therapy when talking of the process of tattooing (*Tattoo*, 2003/170: 168) and Sarah Weyant states: 'Tattoos are a great source of strength for me and have enhanced me. I think they're very therapeutic and good for your soul' (*Tattoo*, 2003/161: 58). There seems to be an almost intimate connection between physical pain caused by the tattooing process as Anna Pasternak notes. Ink makes bonding possible.

Marenko (2002) makes the Nietzschean point that physical pain signifies self-expression and a transition beyond fixed identity. According to Kim Hewitt (1997), physical pain may have pacifying and harmonizing functions. Even forms of self-mutilation can be seen as a means of regaining force over one's own body and letting out feelings that one was not allowed to feel (Favazza, 1996; McLane, 1996). Tattoo narratives, too, are affected by the notion of 'good pain'. Pain is a positive affect, as it guides a person out of chaos and towards security and a grasp of life. In this sense tattoo narratives are often plotted as quest narratives where the narrator changes character through suffering (Frank, 1995). Tattooing serves for subjects as a path to find a voice of their own.

Susan Benson (2000) observes that tattoo narratives do not constitute parades of postmodern flexible and amoeba-like personalities, instead, they appear to address issues such as the uncertainty of the future, the blurring of boundaries, and the fear of fragmentation of subjectivity. Benson goes on to state that tattoos do not communicate, but they declare



what is permanent in the flesh. In the portraits of *Tattoo* magazine, this aspect is visible in their iconic character in relation to life itself. Yet, unlike Benson's claims, tattoos also open up an opportunity for communication. The subject tells his or her life story in relation to them, situates pain and charts life experiences. The tattoo narratives are construed as powerful existential experiences, where life events are integrated into a narrative form via the body.

### **RETREAT TO THE BODY**

Tattoos are one example of the vast field of body modification that spreads out around us, incorporating phenomena as varied as body building, eating disorders, plastic surgery, piercings, implants, self-mutilation and amputations. According to Pasi Falk (1995), the spread of body modification does not mean that the notion of the natural and unmarked body would be disappearing in the West. In fact, it may even be enforced. The consequence of this is a constant negotiation as to which phenomena of body modification are socially acceptable and which are not. Tattoos form a part of this moral battleground of defining what we should and should not do with our bodies.

Sheila Jeffreys (2000) argues that self-mutilation, piercings and tattoos are the outcomes of subordinate positions in society and experiences of exploitation. Jeffreys perceives body modification in a pathological light, comprising first and foremost a manifestation of a subordinate position and acknowledges no possibilities for emancipation. In contrast to this view, the portraits of *Tattoo* magazine highlight agency and bodily autonomy in the plotted form that they take. Tattoos articulate as memory maps written in flesh that enable life stories to be told.

Tattoo narratives reinforce the sense of self-control that does not turn out to be too restrictive. Rather tattoo narratives are plotted as quests in order to find balance with the self. Tattoos function as shields for subjectivity when everything else seems uncertain. With the help of tattoos subjects help themselves to confront the unpredictability of the future. In this sense, body modification fights against chaos. Hewitt (1997: 94) makes the apt observation that self-mutilation, eating disorders and tattoos are not the worst thing that could happen: 'A stigmatized, emaciated, abraded, or tattooed identity is better than a fragmented ego, and perhaps more attractive than other alternatives our society offers.' The spread of the practices of body modification should be observed primarily in relation to society and the limitations imposed on the lives of the individuals instead of perceiving it as part of individualistic psychopathology.

As the portraits of *Tattoo* magazine show, the societal landscape is becoming increasingly corporeal. The body serves as a mediator between

the subject and the social world. As noted by Bryan S. Turner (1996), we live in a somatic society where social and personal problems are increasingly expressed through the conduit of the human body. Tattoos are not used to cover up identity, but it is rather the subjects who use their bodies to declare who they are although their ways to express themselves would be in the core of commercial society. The body is modified and tuned in relation to life so that it is always both something permanent and something to be transformed. In late modern society, which gives rise to impulses that are causing unstableness and insecurity, marking the body brings comfort. The conflict between the individual and the social is engraved into the skin.

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