

**The Sense and Sensation of  
Body Modification Practice**

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*Declaration:*

The work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

## Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which body modification is experienced as sensate and embodied. The term body modification refers to a group of practices that institute some transformation at the level of the body. Techniques include tattooing, body piercing, branding and scarification; also implanting or beading, the insertion of objects under the skin, and forms of minor 'surgery'. The thesis seeks to extend conceptions and analyses of the modified body and to develop creative ways of thinking about and communicating the experiences of body modification practice. It does so by way of an empirical focus on sensory *processes* of body modification, which yields detailed insight into the texture of modification experiences as they are lived. Through an in-depth ethnography that included accompanying individuals as they were modified, and interviews with body modification practitioners and participants, the thesis augments and expands existing literature on body modification and sense and sensation. It does this by focusing, in particular, on the sensate-led working practices of body modification practitioners, pain (and especially the implications of 'elected' pain), sensation, sound and the tactility of visibility (the haptic) as experienced by participants. Highlighting these important areas of body modification experience not only produces a sensate epistemology of body modification practice, but also makes significant contributions to debates on methodology, ethics and craft. This thesis explores: the need for creative and embodied research methods, particularly where the focus is 'the body'; how an 'immanent ethics' is created, through sensate experience, by body modification practitioners; and the implications of understanding custom body modification as a practiced and embodied craft activity. Tuning-into the experiences of the modified body not only expands what body modification is understood to 'be' but makes an important contribution towards the development of sociology as an embodied practice.

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## Introduction

Y' know when you go into a studio, and you smell that watered down sort of disinfectant, Dettol, that makes me go "Ooh yeah! Ooh yeah! I could have one done" [a tattoo]... The sort of watered down Dettol that you get, makes me more excited I think than the sound of the tattoo gun. The tattoo gun just reminds me of the dentist, it's the smell, it's the smell that really gets me. (*Henry, body modification practitioner*)

In this thesis I explore some of the sights, sounds and sensations of body modification practice and experience. Accounts such as *Henry's* above are suggestive not only of what it is to experience the body modification studio in sensorial terms but also how this impacts on the participant. In this instance the smell of disinfectant acts both as a sensate evocation of what it is to be tattooed and a lure for repeating the tattoo experience. Throughout this thesis I demonstrate what it is to be modified 'in the moment' of body modification practice, as well as what it is to live with body modifications on a day-to-day basis. I document some of the anxiety, excitement, difficulty and pleasure as well as some of the unremarkable qualities of being modified.

This thesis was created in part in the body modification and tattoo studio, at the tattoo convention, while observing participants getting modifications and by talking to modified participants about what it is to experience body modification practice. My research is an excursion into body modification experience as an active practice, presenting pictures, soundscapes, and accounts that resonate. I have focused on areas of body modification experience that have been largely neglected in body modification analyses: pain/sensation, sound and tactile/visual (haptic) experiences. Through valuing body modification experience, the sensorial and corporeal can be understood not simply as an adjunct to analyses of body modification, but rather to be at the heart of body modification practice.

The thesis is organised as follows: in the first chapter, *Body Modification Literature Review*, I focus on the key analytic themes that have emerged in both academic and ‘popular’ literature on body modification practice: individualism and difference, biographical narrative and class and consumerism. While such ways of approaching and conceptualising body modification practice have been valuable in positioning body modification as a social practice, I suggest that there is room for other approaches to body modification analysis. My focus on the sensate and embodied character of body modification practice and experience both augments and expands this body of literature and in so doing, makes a significant contribution to sociological understandings of body modification practice.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the field of sensory studies. In *Sense and Sensation Literature Review* I make links between my own research and the ways in which those working on the senses have broadened conceptions and analysis of the social world. This chapter explores areas of tension in the field and identifies some of the ways in which sensory studies could be developed including re-orientating the ways in which the senses have been modelled in hierarchical terms (wherein for example vision is understood to be the ‘most’ important of the senses and olfaction the ‘least’). I seek to neither reproduce nor invert hierarchies of the senses. This project draws on the strengths of sense and sensation literature in order to launch an epistemology of body modification practices as embodied and sensory.

Following my two literature reviews in Chapter Three, *Methodology*, I introduce the ways in which I researched body modification practice. I discuss my on-site ethnography at a body modification studio, *Star* my observation of body modification procedures: and the interviews that I conducted with ten body modification participants and practitioners. I provide a theoretical context for my methodological choices and debate issues such as access, the development of research relationships, sensitivity within the research setting and the insider/outsider status of myself as researcher. I also reflect on the embodied, intimate and reflexive nature of my research practice. The issues of sensationalism, over-observation and objectification were of particular concern to me, as I illustrate both in the practical ‘doing’ of the research and in the writing-up stage.

Chapter Four is my first data chapter. In *Sensate Reflexivity: The Creation of the Ethical Practitioner* I highlight the role and working practices of the body modification

practitioner as shaped by and grounded in their bodily experience of modification practice. Through an analysis of the practitioners at *Star* I identify that studio workers use their own bodies to create a sensate and reflexive collection of working practices that are designed to 'protect' clients and practitioners alike. These ways of working form what I have termed 'immanent ethics', conventions that arise from embodied practice rather than being 'enforced' from outside the studio. By acting as gatekeepers and decision makers and by assuming 'more' responsibility than might be expected of them, practitioners ensure clients receive what they understand to be 'appropriate' body modification practices. This chapter also examines the 'custom' character of body modification practice as producing bespoke body modification practices for clients. By exploring the role of 'custom' work as an embodied craft activity I again underscore the role of sensate experience to the body modification practitioner.

In Chapter Five, *Electing Pain and Choosing Sensation*, I identify pain and sensation as important elements of the sensory experience of body modification practice, while also arguing that such experiences are qualitatively different from the kinds of pain documented in pain theory: pain that is sudden, debilitating or chronic. I discuss how body modification participants *elect* and *choose* to experience sensation and pain and how this differentiates it from the pain associated with illness or injury. In particular, insofar as pain and sensation are elected, they do not represent a barrier to engaging in body modification practices. On the contrary, my approach yields the space to recognise participants' experience of pain (or not) in terms of registering sensation, whether that is experienced positively, negatively, or indifferently. I suggest that the ways in which individuals engage with pain and sensation through body modification practice marks a decisive departure from the ways in which pain might be said to be 'known'.

In Chapter Six I develop Murray R. Schafer's (1994) notion of 'soundscapes' and argue that the sonic is fundamental to body modification experience. *Exploring the Soundscape of Body Modification Practice* introduces my motif of the 'sonic venn', a concept that is intended to go some way towards locating body modification experiences as auditory, without limiting audition either in terms of scope or experience. The concept of the venn helps me to theorise the multi-temporal, spatial and corporeal dimensions of the auditory. I suggest that sound is important both in the moment of body modification practice (the sounds of the practice, of bodies and of the environment creating a soundscape), and beyond (through music for example). It is in this way that I

begin to account for how body modification practices are relived and remembered. I deploy sound both as an important part of the sense and sensation of body modification practice and as a methodological tool that enables ‘deep’ and ‘agile’ listening (Bull and Back, 2003: 3) to body modification participants.

The visual experience of body modification practice is addressed in Chapter Seven, *The Gaze and the Haptic: Producing Visual Process*. This chapter is concerned with addressing two contrasting aspects of visuality and body modification experience. I begin by exploring the concept of ‘the gaze’ and illustrate the ways in which research participants are familiar with being looked at and often judged on this basis. These ways of looking I argue are concomitant with the notion that the surface of the modified body is ‘excessive’ because it is modified and therefore requires explanation. By contrast I suggest that the visual experience of being modified can be rendered in rather different terms. Through ascribing *depth to surface* I suggest that research participants form significant engagements and relationships with body modification practices. One way in which to understand these experiences is through the ‘haptic’ as a method of seeing that makes connections with style, colour and pattern. I take the notion of ‘haptic visuality’ and develop it in relation to the modified body, suggesting that participants create haptic ways of seeing that ‘touch’ their own surfaces and those of modified others.

Closing with Chapter Eight, *Conclusion*, I reflect on some of the implications of the emphasis I have placed on the embodied and sensorial experience of the modified body. I also reflect on my research practice and consider the possible avenues of further research that might be opened up on the basis of the research undertaken here. I identify the interventions that I have made and position the thesis at the threshold of a new approach to body modification practice and experience.

This thesis communicates the substance of body modification by adopting a flexibility that accommodates and values body modification experience as varying and changeable. To get close to body modification experience is to acknowledge its nuances: its felt, auditory and visual qualities and how those sensory experiences are continually open to variation and change. Body modification practices feel different for all participants; indeed the same practices, like adding to a tattoo design or receiving another piercing, feel different at different times on the same body. Acknowledging the

sensory processes of body modification prohibits 'fixing' the modified body as any one thing. It is my intention not only to communicate what body modification 'is like' for participants but to also account for the dynamism of such experiences. I hope that by privileging the sensory and corporeal character of body modification my analysis in this thesis offers rich and lively accounts of modified bodies.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Body Modification Literature Review

### Introduction

In this chapter I explore the main themes that have emerged in discussions of body modification practices, both in academic<sup>1</sup> and more ‘informal’<sup>2</sup> literature. I am primarily concerned with how body modification has been conceptualised as a social practice. I focus on sociological, cultural and philosophical accounts of body modification practices. I have not addressed medical, clinical or what I have understood as overtly ‘pathologising’ literature (although there are some crossovers, most notably in the work of Armando Favazza, 1996, and Sheila Jeffreys, 2000, for a brief discussion of pathologising material see Karmen MacKendrick, 2006: 6). I introduce the key themes of individualism and difference, biographical narrative and class and consumerism in order to position the ways in which body modification practice has been established.

Identifying these themes also paves the way for the interventions that I make within the field and throughout this thesis. As well as discussing debates around individualism and difference, biographical narrative and class and consumerism, I suggest that these debates are augmented and enhanced by recognising the sensate experience of the

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<sup>1</sup> Academic literature on body modification is located mainly in the UK and the USA. Writing on body modification as a group of practices has emerged most strongly in the UK (for examples see Klesse, 2000; Sweetman, 2000; Turner, 2000; Connor, 2004; Crossley, 2005; Inckle, 2007; and MacKendrick, 2006). Although Pitts (2003) has published a comprehensive overview of body modification practice, academic literature in the US tends to focus more on tattooing (see for example Vail, 1999; DeMello, 2000; Fisher, 2002; and Sanders, 2008). Contributions have also emerged from Canada: Atkinson (2003) and Australia: Sullivan (2001).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term informal to describe more ‘popular’ literature that is either written by modified individuals or by those who have an interest in the subject. This literature will usually take a positive perspective on body modification practices and culture(s) and will often be accompanied by photographs of people and practices.

modified body. As well as body modification practices being understood as representational (of difference or of biography for example) they are also *sensate*. I propose that the experiences of pain and sensation, sound and tactile visibility (the haptic) are also significant when creating an epistemology of the modified body. I suggest that a focus on the sensory experience of body modification practice adds to existing literature on body modification while also suggesting new avenues of enquiry.

My purpose in this thesis is not to establish oppositional positions. Therefore I do not oppose the *sensate* body to the representational body (the predominant way in which the modified body is understood), as I do not oppose the senses to the mind, or indeed the senses to themselves, such as sight 'versus' audition or touch [see following chapter]. I suggest that the sensory experience of body modification practice underscores all of the main themes that will be addressed in this chapter, yet they remain largely unacknowledged (exceptions in academic literature include Karl Broome, 2006, and in informal literature include Maureen Mercury, 2000). Debates of body modification practice would be strengthened and developed if the experience of the body, that is the *processes* of body modification, were also developed alongside conceptual and representational analyses. I suggest that through bringing the *sensate* experience of body modification practice into focus, a different set of concerns emerge. These concerns have consequences not only for how we understand body modification practice specifically, but also for how we understand body practices more generally. While I position my project as one that is related to and positioned within body modification literature, it also pushes the limits of these approaches as they currently stand. Like the suggestion 'that the time for theorising the senses is *now*' (Bull et al, 2006: 6n1, emphasis in the original), so the need for a *sensate* and embodied approach to body modification practice is timely.

This literature review focuses on material that is concerned with the ways in which body modification practice has developed in the West and how it has been analysed in relation to Western bodies. This is not to deny that other important histories exist in relation to body modification practices - see for example Alfred Gell (1993) on tattooing in Polynesia, Adrienne Kaeppler (1998) on tattooing in Hawaii and Mark Gustafson (2000) on the history of tattoo in the Roman Empire - but rather they are beyond the scope of this thesis. Historically there has been more work focused on tattoos and tattooing than on other forms of body modification. This emphasis on

tattooing may occur in part because it has an older precedent and may be regarded as an 'art form', while other body modifications have not had such status. For example, piercings have only relatively recently emerged as either popular or visible, therefore as this literature review reflects literature as it presently exists, more weight is given to the discussions of tattooing<sup>3</sup>.

I begin discussion of the main themes of body modification analyses with an examination of individualism and difference that includes analysis of two body modification 'groups': cyborgs and Modern Primitives. This chapter contains a sizable discussion of the Modern Primitive 'movement'. There are a number of reasons for this: not only was this the most identifiable social 'movement' in body modification culture(s), but those involved in 'Modern Primitivism' were in large part responsible for making body modification practice more visible. The Modern Primitive movement has had considerable social significance and as such has also been a site of much academic discussion. Biographical narrative is located as a principal theme within body modification literature and I suggest that women's experience of body modification has been particularly conceptualised as expressive of biography. I finish with a discussion of class and consumerism and how these have figured within body modification debates. Before I begin discussion of these principal themes, I first provide a short appraisal of body modification history to serve as background to the main analytic themes that I identify in this chapter. This snapshot is neither meant to be comprehensive nor exhaustive, however it is intended to give a flavour of the development of body modification practice.

## **From Outlaw to Celebrity: The Rise of the Modified Body**

Body modification practice has often been identified in terms of delineating subcultures, 'tribes' or groups<sup>4</sup>. Whether in terms of those bodies that have been cast

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that there is more representation of all body modification practices, not just tattooing, in the informal literature, which will be reflected throughout the chapter. However informal body modification literature is often likely to be based around photographs rather than text (see for example Wroblewski, 1989 and 1995, and Musafar 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Not all body modification 'groups' are accounted for in body modification literature. Groups like 'The Temple Of Psychic Youth' for example are not identified (the exception being Vale and Juno, eds, 1989:

outside of society, such as convicts, or those who seek 'outsider' status, such as 'queer' or 'straightedge' groups, body modification practice has consistently been identified as separating individuals or groups from 'mainstream' society and culture.

### *The Outlaw and the Outsider*

The 'outlaw' body is often associated with the tattoo. The tattooed 'outlaw' is often perceived as being either outside of the law (the criminal or convict), or because they are associated with criminality (bikers, gangsters and gang members). These bodies have been understood as being 'deviant' to varying degrees because of their tattoos (see Benson, 2000, and Fisher, 2002). The tattooed convict is represented as the ultimate 'outsider'; this status is reinforced contemporarily through the use of heavily tattooed individuals in television prison dramas (see representations in *Oz*, HBO, 1997 and *Prison Break*, Fox, 2005). The notion of the prison or home-made tattoo is often delineated in terms of its quality and can be contrasted with the ways in which tattooing has become increasingly professionalized (for more on prison and outlaw tattooing see Governar, 1988; Steward, 1990; Hall, 1997; Schrader, 2000; and Baldaev 2003).

Circus and 'freak show' performers have also been consistently associated with body modifications, again most commonly tattooing, with the figure of the tattooed man or woman as a sideshow attraction persisting into the twentieth century (see the Great Omi in Burchett, 1958: 139-144). However, following body modification's resurgence in the 1990s, which emerged alongside musical festivals such as *Lollapalooza*<sup>5</sup>, there has been a revival of the 'human' circus with for example the *Jim Rose Circus*. Touring with *Lollapalooza* and independently, the *Jim Rose Circus* brought together characters such as heavily tattooed The Enigma, densely covered with tattooed blue jigsaw pieces, and Mr Lifto who lifted objects with pierced body parts (for more on circus, sideshow and 'freak' acts see Burchett, 1958; Vale and Juno, eds, 1989; Mifflin, 1997; and Governar 2000).

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164-181), although their role in popularising body modification practices in the UK in the 1990s was considerable.

<sup>5</sup> The *Lollapalooza* music festival began in 1991 in the US and was organised by Perry Farrell, himself pierced and tattooed, from rock band *Nine Inch Nails*. As well as music it introduced cultural events like the *Jim Rose Circus* to the bill.

## *Queer and Straight Edge*

In the early phase of the resurgent 'new wave' of body modification practice that gathered momentum in the 1980s and 1990s in the UK and USA, participants were often drawn from groups of S/M gays and lesbians (see for example Vale and Juno eds 1989 and Thompson 2001). Lesbian and gay modification enthusiasts not only heralded a revived interest in tattooing, but were also attracted to lesser-known practices such as piercing and scarification. Although gay and lesbian modifiers did much to popularise and therefore shift practices into the mainstream, some queer modifiers sought to maintain outsider status. This occurred particularly in relation to wider concerns with 'integration', both in terms of the increasing popularity of body modification practice and queer culture more generally:

And that's one thing I love about [body modification]. It's in your face. I will be different. This is my body. I will have it my way... I'm queer among queers. Because there's a big movement in the gay community to assimilate. (Matthew in Pitts, 2003: 105)

Another significant group who chose to identify outside of dominant culture were those that identified as 'straight edge'. Straight edge refers to a commitment to abstinence: refraining from drinking, smoking or taking drugs. Straight edgers were also often celibate and chose to be either vegetarian or vegan, and sometimes also caffeine free. It emerged out of the hardcore<sup>6</sup> music scenes of the UK and North America in the 1980s and 1990s and was also popular among certain political and activist groups, for example anarchist-punks. Straight edge is most popular in the USA yet it is not uncommon to see UK body modification participants with straight edge tattoos. They often include clear identification and sloganeering, from the single 'X', triple x ('xXx') or the abbreviation of the word straight edge, 'sXe', to 'poison free' and '100% pure'. Michael Atkinson (2003) states:

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<sup>6</sup> Often identified as a sub-genre of punk rock, hardcore is associated with bursts of short, fast and loud music. It is associated particularly with bands with overtly political lyrics, such as *Black Flag* and *Minor Threat* from the USA. *Minor Threat* are often identified as the originators of straight edge with their defining song 'Straight Edge' released in 1981.

As a ready-made and publicly recognisable symbol of cultural protest, Straightedgers exploit long-standing associations between tattooing and dissent in North America to call attention to their messages of corporeal purification. (2003: 208)

Linking body modification to sub-cultural styles and groups can be traced through examples like queer and straight edge that have gone some way towards associating body modification practice with the counter-cultural. However, as body modification has become more popular, so its currency as 'sub-cultural' has begun to fade. When one can purchase body modification practices easily and ubiquitously, the notion of body modification as a secret or 'underworld' practice becomes outmoded: 'the word 'subculture' is loaded down with mystery. It suggests secrecy, Masonic oaths, an Underworld' (Hebdige, 1991: 4). Those who are involved in body modification practice are too diverse and generally now too much a visible part of 'mainstream' culture to be identified as involved in sub-cultural activity<sup>7</sup>. This is largely due to body modification's increased popularity, which in part occurred due to its incorporation as a fashion aesthetic.

### *Becoming Fashionable*

The move from deviancy to popular fashion status is not without its precedents, as the incorporation of diverse styles from punk to hip-hop into mainstream fashion have illustrated. The incorporation of body modification practice into a fashionable style was greeted with dismay by many body modification participants in the 1990s. The tensions between fashion and body modification are noted by David Curry (1993) and Paul Sweetman (2000), however the currency that fashion brought to body modification practice is a legacy still in evidence today. Certain body modification practices have been singled out as being more fashionable and more transient than others. Sweetman (2000: 60) suggests for example that his research participants regarded piercing as more 'superficial' than tattooing. Piercings such as eyebrows and navels were understood to be more frivolous than genital or stretched piercings, which were perceived as

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<sup>7</sup> Some commentators however would disagree. Gans (2000) for example maintains that 'body modifications are carried out deep in the underground of our culture' (2000: 159).

illustrating commitment and were therefore outside the bounds of fashion. Many newspaper and magazine features in the 1990s were keen to emphasise the fashionable nature of practices rather than focus on any other aspect: 'More is read into it than it should be. It has become purely a style statement' (Alford, 1993). Such sentiments often upset participants who felt that the counter-cultural history of body modification practice was being eroded. However, body modification practice coming into the limelight served to introduce whole new sectors of the population to body modification practices.

### *Celebrity*

As if to confirm its acceptability and fashion status, the tattoo in particular has become associated with celebrity. It is common to see celebrities with tattoos: Angelina Jolie, Drew Barrymore, Johnny Depp and Cher are often included in profiles of celebrity tattoos (see Krakow, 1994: 103-115). In the field of music heavily tattooed figures are common, including for example 50 Cent and Pink. In the UK, Robbie Williams did much in the early to mid 2000s to popularise tattooing with his high profile collection of tattoos and his eagerness to talk about them. Additionally, some tattooists have become celebrities in their own right: Alex Binnie at *Into You*<sup>8</sup> for example is one of the most well-known tattooists in the UK who also enjoys an international reputation. David Beckham, who is heavily tattooed, even has his own tattooist<sup>9</sup> that he flies out whenever he or Victoria need. It could be asserted that tattoos in particular have never been so fashionable or indeed acceptable. In 2003 the tattoo and piercing studio *Metal Morphosis* opened a tattoo and piercing studio in the basement of *Selfridges*<sup>10</sup> in London as part of their *Body Craze* season. The venture proved so successful that they remained and *Selfridges* in Birmingham and Manchester also opened their own piercing and tattoo outlets. The rise in celebrity figures sporting tattoos is often detailed in the media and

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<sup>8</sup> *Into You* is perhaps the most renowned tattoo studio in the UK. It has branches in London and Brighton and was set up by Alex Binnie in the early 1990s. Binnie became well known as a talented tattoo artist and did much to develop custom tattooing in the UK. He continues to tattoo, although infrequently, focusing instead on his art projects.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Molloy is a well-known and respected tattooist in the UK. As well as operating a successful studio in Manchester, he has also been the lead figure in *London Ink*, an offshoot of the successful *Miami Ink* television series in which tattooists and clients are filmed within the studio.

<sup>10</sup> For a report on the opening of tattoo and piercing services at *Selfridges* see Rumbelow (2003).

even those who are heavily tattooed are not stigmatised. Clinton. R. Sanders (2008) reflects on this development in a somewhat derogatory way:

Despite the fact that most of the tattoos displayed by entertainers and (especially) athletes look as if they were done by eight year olds with magic markers, the fact that admired public figures were tattooed gave tattooing a certain popular cultural cachet. (2008: ix)

Body modifications, especially tattooing with its more established historical legacy, have moved from the province of the outsider to the mark of the celebrity by way of counter-culture. I suggest that the main analytic themes, which I detail in this chapter, are responses that have tried to make sense of the growth of body modification practice. While this work has been valuable I suggest that the time is ripe to begin approaching body modification in different terms. Invoking sense and sensation is a critical and vital means through which to discuss and assess body modification practices.

## **Individualism and Difference**

Amidst an almost universal feeling of powerlessness to “change the world”, individuals are changing what they *do* have power over: *their own bodies*. (Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 4, emphasis in the original)

This quote from V. Vale and Andrea Juno not only introduced *Modern Primitives* (1989) but also indicated a key theme that was to develop within body modification literature. The choice to modify the body has been understood as a way of asserting control ‘over’ the body by choosing to engage in practices that differentiate it from the ‘regular’ body, so enshrining the notion of difference within the modified body (see for example Mifflin, 1997; Benson, 2000; Randall and Polhemus, 2000; and Cummings 2001). The modified body is designated as asserting control through the ‘difference’ or ‘individualness’ that a change in surface is understood to represent. This difference is produced both through analyses and adopted by body modification participants. Before going on

to examine difference and individual-ness in more detail, it is worth briefly situating the modified body in relation to the 'unmodified'<sup>11</sup>.

### *How To Tell a Modified Body?*

Tensions between understandings of modified bodies and so-called 'natural' bodies abound in body modification literature. When modified bodies are the subjects of discussion they are often written through the foil of the unmodified body that is perceived to be naturalised, constant and ahistorical. Descriptions of the modified body are often couched in terms that suggest the 'inscribed' (i.e. modified) surface 'speaks' in comparison to the mute-ness of the 'blank' body. The modified body then 'completes' the body 'as a canvas to be painted or a lump of clay to be moulded' (Falk, 1995: 95). It is through the act of ostensible change that the modified body is recognised as coming into being. Therefore Eric Gans (2000) states that for those who weight-train or alter their body through exercise, 'their bodies remain works of nature, whereas the pierced or tattooed body exhibits the arbitrary and painful meaningfulness of the inscribed signs' (2000: 160). If the modified body is understood to be intrinsically more worked-upon, more cultural than the 'natural' body, it is also subsequently one that is perceived as being 'made' exciting through engaging with body practices:

Innately very dull creatures, human beings have always striven to and often succeeded at making themselves one of the most colourful and decorated of all species. (Randall and Polhemus, 2000: 11)

The 'before' body is also one that has been consistently presented, particularly in informal body modification literature, as one that is subjugated through its conditions of existence in the West:

The advent of cyberspace has created a rootless, placeless society, accessed by the seated and thinking. One's place is nowhere or anywhere. We communicate

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<sup>11</sup> 'Unmodified' is a term that may be used by body modification participants but it is not one that I either use or find useful. I understand all bodies to be 'modified' in some way by the cultural and social environments in which they live. Additionally I suggest that it is not possible to make distinctions about whether bodies are modified or not by making judgements on what can or can't be seen. This is further explored in Chapter Seven.

through an e-mail address and locate ourselves on personal home pages. The physical body never interacts with anyone. A result of this statelessness is psychic and physical numbness. Tattooing, piercing, implanting, and branding are means of jump-starting sensate functioning that has lost its capacity for feeling. (Mercury, 2000: 22)

Mercury (2000) positions body modification practices as existing in opposition to the 'stuck' technologised body of Western modernity. Operating from a Pagan perspective, Mercury clearly institutes a dualistic relation between body and mind. The notion that the modified body is perceived as fostering awareness, 'liberating' itself from the 'numbness' of Western life, is replicated in accounts from body modification participants:

This new awareness of the body may then (even for the masses) lead to desire for further exploration - of sexuality, ritual and what might lie beyond the boundaries of the body. And that remains a revolutionary possibility in the body-repressive West. (Wood in Randall, 2002: 7)

However in such body modification literature there is also clearly pressure on the modified body to perform. Paradoxically, while championing personal 'freedom', the modified body is presented as an attractive and fashionable body. Therefore 'body freedom' often resides in those bodies that are judged to be the most appealing and desirable (see for example Ted Polhemus and Uzi Part B, 2004: 51 and Housk Randall, 2002: 2). If bodies without modification have been positioned as somehow lacking, then it is perhaps unsurprising that there are those who have suggested that modified bodies are more 'enlightened' or 'evolved' than the unmodified. Some modified individuals have used the term 'plainskins'<sup>12</sup> in order to delineate these perceived differences. Modified individuals justify the use of this term because they state they have been subjected to ignorance or prejudice from those that they identify as unmodified.

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<sup>12</sup> Although it is important to note that 'plainskins' is not a term that has been widely used in the UK (nor could I find any references to it in body modification literature), it is one that has appeared on body modification websites such as *BMEzine.com*.

The practices that are enacted on the modified body are understood to not only express a body that is different and therefore individual, but also helps to complete the body developmentally, either through 'art' or technology. These claims made on the modified body satellite around the notion of difference.

### *I Choose Me*

Claims to individuality through body modification practice are key to both academic and informal discussion of modified bodies. The association of body modification with individual-ness is intrinsic to the recognition of the modified body:

For many their body modification defiantly expresses their individuality and their difference. (Klesse, 2000: 21)

Self inflicted scars, piercings and tattoos are confessions written on the body as overt symbolic expressions of self-concept. (Hewitt, 1997: 12)

...becoming tattooed or pierced can be seen as an act of 'self creation' that, through the modification of the body's surface, helps to construct a viable sense of self-identity. (Sweetman, 2000: 68)

A piercing, hidden or not, is like a full stop at the end of our own personally designed and built statement of being. (Goddard in Randall, 2002: 59)

Body modification then is understood as a way of communicating the individual and the personal and as such is perceived as a conscious act of self-making. Sweetman (2000) argues that body modification can be seen in terms of Chris Shilling's (1993) notion of 'body projects', wherein the body becomes a site of activity for the individual. In common with the concept of body projects Nick Crossley (2005) identifies what he calls 'Reflexive Body Techniques', in which the creation of the reflexive self includes activities from washing hair to being multiply pierced. However the reflexive self that body techniques help construct, at least in relation to body modification practices, falls within familiar terms, that is the modified body is made 'unusual'. Following a study on

involvement in a range of body techniques Crossley (2005) suggests that body modifications such as having a nipple piercing or having more than three tattoos were statistically rarer than other practices such as putting on make-up or bathing, therefore they fall into what he delineates as the 'marginal zone'. Again, through a discussion of the reflexive body, modification practices have their status as 'not normal' confirmed. Crossley's (2005) analysis suggests that many body modification practices are identifiable through their marginality and their expressive difference from everyday activities such as brushing teeth.

The rhetoric of individual-ness is adopted both as a statement of being as well as a mode of analysis. Expressions of individuality through body modification practice are often invoked in order to 'express the interior', or that which is perceived to be the 'real you':

We are desperate to find our own inner images of resonance that tell us who we are. We are searching, through our bodies, for the sounds and images of our own personal gods that have all but gone silent. (Mercury, 2000: 5)

Being 'yourself' is something that has been enshrined in the name of the foremost body modification website since 1994, *BMEzine.com*, where 'BME' stands for both 'Body Modification Ezine' and 'Be me' (Larratt, 2002: 5). In contrast to the 'fashionable' modified body mentioned earlier, marking out individuality is often seen as a way to counter and resist fashion. Once a commitment has been made practices are difficult, costly and sometimes impossible to remove<sup>13</sup>:

Young people today usually explain their obsession with tattooing and body piercing as ways to escape the pressures of the dominant fashion industry. The media constantly bombard them with images of beauty, and one of the ways in which to escape this enforced identification is to take real action-to mark the body in a way that cannot be changed. (Salecl, 2001: 31)

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<sup>13</sup> Piercing jewellery can be removed but a mark is often left; skin will usually show some scar or mark where implants have been removed; marks caused by scarring and branding may fade with time but cannot be erased; and the laser removal of tattoos often leaves the client with patchy results.

The notion of creating permanence is also identified in the work of Susan Benson (2000: 251). Tattoos in particular have been understood as in opposition to that which is transitory:

Fashion, by definition, has a fear of commitment. Consequently, the permanence of tattoos is terrifying. (Fisher, 2002: 102)

Therefore body modification commits the individual to his or her own specific and permanent look or style (further explored in Chapter Seven). In accordance with creating an individual look, discussion of body modification practice often identifies those that are understood to engage in 'extreme' forms of individuation. This usually takes the form of a visible transgression of 'accepted' norms and standards. Jane Caplan (2000) notes:

Despite their growing acceptability, both tattooing and piercing continue to be defined by many of those involved as oppositional practices. It is asserted (with some truth) that, given the attitudes of many towards the tattooed or extensively pierced, to engage in such practices is to place oneself 'outside society'. (2000: 242)

The emphasis on so-called 'extreme' practices reinforces the notion that the modified body is one of difference. Both analysts and body modification participants equate 'extremism' with an intensified individualism. This quest for individualism suggests in part that a need exists for participants to distance themselves from those they perceived as 'undedicated':

I wanted something more extreme [talking about implanted horns]... I kinda felt odd because any fifteen year old can come in here and get pierced and look exactly the way I do and I've devoted my life to body modification, so I wanted something that set me apart from everyone else, so the horns were something that could do that for me. (Louis Sanchez, *Modify* DVD, 2005)

The need to extend difference is achieved by visibly modifying areas that are impossible to hide, therefore Sanchez chooses implanted horns to both extend and commit to his sense of individual-ness and difference. Extensive modification of the face<sup>14</sup> is often understood to not only communicate devotion and dedication to a lifestyle that such a public stance implies, but expresses the wearer's 'unique-ness':

The decision to get my face tattooed was the greatest challenge I've faced in my whole existence. Certain events in life have led to this and now I would not feel complete, I wouldn't even feel like me, I wouldn't feel human if I didn't have this tattoo on my face. (Zulu, *Modify* DVD, 2005)

The desire for so-called 'extreme' individuation is something that has enabled more extensive body modification practices to emerge. As tattoos and piercings have become more popular and more accepted, the desire to be 'more different' has been an issue for those who equate modification with individuality. Individuality and difference are understood to be played out on the surface of the modified body, therefore participants such as Zulu suggest that his difference is one that ultimately makes him feel more himself or as he suggests completes his sense of 'human-ness'. If body modification experience is understood to make the modified body 'more' human, practices have also been used to set the modified body apart from the 'natural' that is constructing an added-to body, one that is individualised through technicity.

### *Cyborgs*

I really think that the human form is not finished. (Jesse Jarrell, *Modify* DVD, 2005)

The subject of the cyborg has become a figure in the popular imaginary, as well as a site of interest for academic writers (see Haraway, 1991; Featherstone and Burrows, eds,

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<sup>14</sup> Tattoo practitioners have traditionally been reluctant to decorate areas that are always on show such as the hands and face; among older and more traditional tattooists this still remains a taboo. Even among more 'contemporary' practitioners that are willing to tattoo 'public' areas, participants will often have to demonstrate a level of dedication before practices are translated on to the visible parts of the body, particularly the hands and face.

1995; Balsamo, 1996; and Hacking, 1998). As the figure of the cyborg has been open to interpretation, so body modification participants understand the notion of the modified cyborg or cyber body in manifold ways. It is used not only to loosely identify a body that incorporates technology, but also refers to a style [see Chapter Seven for discussion of style] that may have little or no connection with 'actual' cyborgs as human/machine hybrids. The notion that the modified body is particularly an example of a cyber body again suggests that the modified body is defined through its difference from the 'regular' body:

Jesse is considering more modification work, with his end goal being "complete alteration and evolution of the body". This goal stems from his belief in reinforcing human body parts with implantable foreign material to create a sort of living robotic. (Mercury, 2000: 67)

The cyber style is realised through practices like piercings and implants, objects that go into the body to create metal/Teflon/silicone skin hybrids, incorporation of robotics, wires, plates and metal, on top of and within the body and technological or biomechanical tattoos (see for example the popularity of H.R. Giger inspired tattooing). As a style<sup>15</sup> it was extremely popular in the 1990s, particularly at club nights such as *Torture Garden*, London, where it was exemplified by individuals such as Silver A-J who used piercings, implants, robotic attachments and silver make-up to create a 'futuristic' looking body (for A-J's image see Polhemus and Part B, 2004: 138-9).

Those participating in the more technological aspects of body modification such as the development of implant techniques have produced a narrative around the modified body that is post-human, prosthetic and technicised:

Cyberpunk is an aesthetic that pursues futuristic, high-tech body projects beyond the limits of fashion, history, and culture. Cyberpunk body artists are

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<sup>15</sup> Cyber as an aesthetic style has been less influential in recent years although it can still be traced in groups such as *Psycho Cyborgs* (UK) who perform suspensions and 'flesh events' where bodies are skewered, suspended and manipulated, usually incorporating objects like angle grinders for a technological effect (see *Psycho Cyborgs*, 2008). Figures like Sammpa continue to exemplify the cyber look: Sammpa is a body modification artist who has done pioneering work in the areas of surface piercing and transdermal implants. He is credited with inventing the 'Mad Max bar', a piece of jewellery made for surface piercing, and is also a member of *Psycho Cyborgs* (see Sammpa, 2008).

distinguished by their use of biomedical, information, and virtual technologies; by their interest in body experiments and inventions; and by discursively positioning the body as a limitless frontier of exploration. In cyberpunk fashion, they unblinkingly assume the technologised body and champion its possibilities. (Pitts, 2003: 153)

The notion that the modified cyber body pushed the limits of the 'natural' body is often associated with body performance artists such as Stelarc<sup>16</sup> and Orlan<sup>17</sup>. Within academic literature Stelarc and Orlan are often linked with body modification practices<sup>18</sup>, although both have refuted any links or allegiance with body modification participants and practitioners. In an interview with Robert Ayers (2000) Orlan for example is horrified that her 'bumps' are to be copied by others<sup>19</sup>:

...I wasn't surprised to be imitated by people who have body piercing and tattoos. I'm not against these things, but it's quite obvious that the majority of the people that are into those things believe that they are liberating themselves from the dictates of a certain society, but in fact it all boils down to the same thing because they are conforming to the dictates of a smaller, mini society. (2000: 182)

Body modification practices have increasingly moved into developing areas of technology and as such carry some risk. Experimentation with implant technology in particular, for example the positioning of magnets under the skin, has become a site of

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<sup>16</sup> Stelarc is an Australian performance artist who has participated in a number of hybrid body/machine experiments; these include *Exoskeleton* where he became part of a six-legged walking machine, the *Virtual Arm Project*, and the *Extra Ear Project* involving the creation of an ear on his arm. He has also participated in approximately twenty-five suspensions during his career. He continues to be involved in various body/machine hybrid experiments and performances.

<sup>17</sup> Orlan is a French academic and performance artist most well-known for her series of surgical *Interventions*. These involved undergoing plastic surgery on her face while remaining conscious; she often read from texts and engaged in conversation either with those present in the operating theatre or by video link. The surgery was performed in a clinical setting that was dressed with drapes, art and bowls of fruit. Her photo works such as *Self-Hybridisation* are created by manipulating computer-generated images of her face and were adopted when she was unable to continue with her surgical performances.

<sup>18</sup> In *Body Modification* (Featherstone, ed., 2000) the emphasis on Stelarc and Orlan is considerable: out of seventeen articles they feature as the subject of five and one of Orlan's computer generated face-images appears as the cover image. Stelarc and Orlan are also featured in Pitts (2003: 161-7).

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting however that implants were already being explored by those pioneering this work in body modification communities, see for example Jesse Jarrell in Pitts (2003) and Steve Haworth in Mercury (2000).

contention among body modification communities (see *BMENews*, 2008). Although body modification practice continues to be influenced by and involved in evolving technology, both in terms of practices and wearable material, the figure of the cyborg as a robotised machine/human hybrid is now perhaps, as a style, somewhat outmoded. As implantation techniques have developed there has been a greater trend to have objects (usually made from Teflon or silicone) inserted under the skin rather than fixed to the top of it. These have often favoured 'organic' symbols such as hearts, stars and suns rather than more technological motifs or looks. Additionally as body modification practices have become more technically evolved it is interesting to note that participants have often taken on more 'natural' images and personas. Therefore there are individuals who have transformed themselves into Stalking Cat and Lizard Man (both featured in *Modify DVD*, 2005), both extensively modified to resemble animals<sup>20</sup>. Techniques are used to reposition the septum, point the ears, file the teeth and split the tongue in order to create an animal-like persona. The connection of the cyborg with the 'animal' can also be traced via science fiction, where for example characters that might be called 'animal futurists' can be traced in comic and film figures such as Wolverine in the *X-Men* or Abe Sapien in *Hellboy*.

The modified body as a cyborg body is understood to have difference built in through body modification and technology, securing individuality through its contrast to the 'normal' body. Cyborgs commonly have a futuristic dimension that is a contrast to the 'going back' to so-called 'primitive' bodies and ritual, that I explore in the following section. The cyborg and the Modern Primitive however are both understood to establish difference from the 'regular' Western body, and as such these conceptualisations extend the schism between the 'normal' and the modified.

### *Modern Primitives*

I make a statement. I am part of this culture but I don't believe in it. My body modifications are my way to say that. (Idexa in Klesse, 2000: 15)

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<sup>20</sup> Sanders (2008) in his analysis of body modification practice reflects that he is often asked what is next for body modification: 'I usually make note of the rising popularity of full body tattooing and multiple piercings and less frequently encountered, and usually startling, alterations such as extensive facial tattooing and surgical implants or horns, feline like wire whiskers...' (2008: x).

The term Modern Primitives refers not only to the highly influential publication of the same name (1989) but also loosely refers to a group of body modifiers who in the 1980s and 1990s coalesced around the figure of Fakir Musafar<sup>21</sup>. The publication of *Modern Primitives* (1989) heralded the first in-depth examination of body modification practices, participants and practitioners. It included interviews and photographs of individuals who were engaged in tattooing, body piercing, scarification, branding and other modification practices. It was the first time that such material had been made available in such a widely distributed format outside of publications such as *National Geographic* magazine. This was a groundbreaking book in the early 1990s and those with an interest in body modification generally view it as a 'classic' today. Margo DeMello (2000) notes that 'for many readers, this book was the impetus not only to get tattooed, but to get tattooed with non-Western designs' (2000: 176).

Modern Primitives as a 'group' were people who followed Musafar's lead in engaging with various forms of body modification practice. Musafar used the term Modern Primitives to 'describe a non-tribal person who responds to primal urges and does something with the body...' (1989: 13). He cites *National Geographic* magazine as an early influence (this has become an oft cited way in which to discuss initiations into practices by body modification participants, see Eubanks, 1996: 78). Musafar from an early age engaged in a variety of forms of 'body play' including piercing, tattooing, constricting the body and so on. He states:

At age 13, for example, I made my first piercing in the foreskin of my penis. I think modern primitives are born not made. Early childhood experiences only open the door to what's already inside. (1989: 9)

Musafar clearly attributes the impulse to engage in modification practices as inherent and biological rather than attributable to any social or cultural factors. Consider for example:

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<sup>21</sup> Fakir Musafar effectively established himself as the 'founding father' of the movement and credits himself with being the figure responsible for popularising body modification practices in the West. Musafar was born in 1930 in South Dakota, USA, to white middle class parents. Musafar takes his name from the 'original' Fakir Musafar, a Persian Sufi living in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, who was said to have walked around for eighteen years with objects sewn onto and hanging from his body, including daggers, mirrors and padlocks. Musafar saw him featured in a 'Ripley's Believe it or Not' article and decided to take his name both as a way of 'honouring' him and creating an identity for himself (see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 8).

The more I look, the more convinced I am that the phenomenon wells up from some deep inner source - perhaps a behavioural archetype that may be encoded in our genes. (Musafar, 1996: 333)

Musafar has catalogued his interest in body modification practices in *Modern Primitives* (1989), *Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly* (1992-1999) and *Spirit/Flesh* (2002). He is well-known for helping to popularise not only large scale black-work tattooing, piercing and scarification but also 'body rituals'. Musafar took the body decorations, traditions and rituals from so-called 'primitive' societies and began to recreate them in the West, hence the joining of the terms 'modern' with 'primitive' as a way to both describe his practices and also to ground his philosophy. He has experienced and discussed, among many others, practices of the Ibitoe of New Guinea emphasising reduced waists, the Indian O-Kee-Pa ceremony where the body is suspended from hooks in the chest, and the mimicking of Sadhu practices such as penis elongation and bearing weights sewn onto the body:

I asked sympathetic friends to put me into the Kavadi frame, akin to that of Savite Hindus. I was pierced by ninety 4-foot-long steel rods in my upper chest and back. I danced for hours with this 50-pound load while I went into a state of ecstasy and drifted out of my body. It was sweet. It was bliss. I got to know what the Tamil Hindus had experienced probably 2,000 years ago. (Musafar, 1996: 327-328)

Explicit in Modern Primitivist rhetoric was a distancing from modern or capitalist ways of life. Musafar suggested that the body in the West had become underdeveloped, primarily because Western bodies did not experience 'primitive' body rituals and because, as suggested earlier in this chapter, Western life is perceived to stultify the body. By not participating in these rituals modern bodies lacked the tools to live a full and aware life. Through celebration of and 'going back' to the primitive, Modern Primitives questioned Western modernity and notions of progress:

I defy you to find one case where the people have been relatively pure, where there is any of this cruelty and ugliness we find in a civilised society. It does not exist until “civilisation” encroaches in on them. (Musafar, 1989: 21)

The Modern Primitive movement was one that valorised certain practices, bodies and indeed entire continents over others.

### *Critique*

Analysis of Modern Primitivism has been a key issue in academic body modification discourse (see Rosenblatt, 1995; Eubanks, 1996; Klesse, 2000; DeMello, 2000; Cummings, 2001; and Pitts, 2003). Christian Klesse (2000) states that:

The ‘primitive’ in the discourse of Modern Primitivism is a catch all without any geographic and historical specificity, a homogenising fantasy. (Klesse, 2000: 31)

As William Cummings (2001) notes, the ‘primitive’ or the ‘tribal’ becomes an ‘undifferentiated, generalised space’ (2001: 298) that is only defined through its contrast to Western culture. Modern primitives have been identified as creating racialised depictions that glorify the so-called ‘primitive’. Modern Primitivism heralded an interest in the practices and aesthetics of so-called ‘primitive’ traditions and as such Klesse (2000) suggests that the most important aspect of ‘primitive’ culture was the modification of the person or the group, rather than any other aspect of culture or philosophy. The cultural appropriation of non-Western practices, rituals and designs was inherent to the creation of the movement. Commentators such as Virginia Eubanks (1996), Christian Klesse (2000) and Victoria Pitts (2003) have suggested that Modern Primitivism relied on the deployment of the ‘other’ to exist, and that the use of the other was based on highly nostalgic and partial accounts. There are explicitly ‘our’ bodies and ‘other’ bodies. Klesse (2000) argues that the othering of the body results in both a fetishisation and promotion of Western desire on to non-Western bodies:

The radical critique of the repression of the body and sexuality in 'Western' thought and morality is coded in the celebration of the over sexualised bodies and practices of the 'primitives'. (2000: 34)

The modern primitive celebrates a body that is seen as being closer to the natural and the earth. Eubanks (1996) notes that Modern Primitives reinforce binaries such as the natural/the cultural, western/primitive and white/black. The romanticisation of the past, through past cultures and past bodies, merely serves to produce another colonial rendition of the 'primitive'. Modern Primitives clearly felt that they were signalling their opposition to racism, oppression and colonialism through their adoption of practices, and in so doing were also implicitly rejecting Western values:

By rejecting modern society through participating in the primitive rituals of tattooing, piercing, or scarification, participants feel that they aligning themselves with societies and worldviews that are more pure, authentic, and spiritually advanced than the traditional Western outlook. (DeMello, 2000: 175)

However Cummings (2001: 303) reflects that there can be no 'return' to the 'primitive' through body modification practice; Western culture cannot be 'left behind'. The notion that the 'primitive' or 'native' body was pure, outside of culture and 'untouched' by 'civilising forces' is a recurring theme in Modern Primitivism. The valuing of some bodies and cultures over others was identified as a crude attempt to simply reverse existing power imbalances:

In large part white urbanites enacting the traditional body practices of native cultures, modern primitives invert hierarchies of ethnicity by valorising the "primitive" as politically, culturally, and spiritually superior. (Pitts, 2003: 126)

In Modern Primitive material white bodies are often used to represent the modern, while black bodies are used to represent the primitive. Eubanks (1996) states that when black bodies do appear they are often approached as the 'most authentic'. This can be

seen for example in the cover story of Baaba in *Piercing Fans International Quarterly*<sup>22</sup> (hereafter *PFIQ*), 'The Tribal Aesthetic' (issue 47, 1996):

Baaba is of African descent, born, raised, and educated in America. He has reclaimed his aboriginal heritage and nature. In doing so, he physically and mentally embodies the primitive (primal/first) cultures and identities of *all indigenous peoples*. (1996: 30, emphasis mine)

The treatment of Baaba exemplifies Eubanks' (1996) suggestion that:

People of colour rarely appear in *Body Play* and other Modern Primitive texts, and when they do, they are treated mainly as fetishes, as representatives of these 'ancient' cultures, when often they have little or no background in these societies' beliefs and practices. (1996: 83)

If individuals like Baaba were valorised as embodying many or 'all' cultures then they also often characterised themselves as educators, particularly around environmental and ecological<sup>23</sup> issues, which were contrasted against the 'bad' development of Western capitalism. These notions resonate also with a desire to 'get back' to nature in order to protect the earth.

Eubanks (1996), in her critique of Modern Primitivism, is also drawn to the gender inequalities that she identifies within the movement. Eubanks (1996) identifies that in Modern Primitive material there is a lack of critique around practices such as foot-binding and corsetry (1996: 81). Eubanks argues that women were often encouraged to engage in practices for the benefit of men, undermining the notion that body

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<sup>22</sup> *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* (1977-1997) and *Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly* (1992-1999) in the USA along with *Body Art* (1988-1996) and *Piercing World* (1988-2003) in the UK were the first magazines to be produced for those with an interest in body modification practices. As the name suggests *PFIQ* concentrated mainly on piercing and was the only internationally distributed magazine on piercing that was commercially available. UK publication *Piercing World* was mainly distributed in the UK and Europe by mail order. *Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly* and *Body Art* had a wider remit and covered all forms of body modification.

<sup>23</sup> Baaba states: "We must look to the primitive... if we are going to survive the environmental catastrophe we have set in motion with our greed, technological and industrial interests fed by a total lack of appreciation and respect for the basic principles of life" (1996: 29).

modification practices empower women. She uses waist-training<sup>24</sup> as an example of a practice that women have been pressurised into following:

The modifications were not done for personal reasons but to please others. Despite Modern Primitivism's assertions that body modification can be a way in which women 'mark' their own bodies and structure a type of beauty and personal identity uniquely their own, on closer analysis one finds that many women have not even initiated the process. (1996: 82-3)

Eubanks (1996) clearly has a point when we review what Musafar has to say about the subject:

Helpless women with small waists is a sexual turn-on for men. It's also a sexual turn-on for women, if they adjust and take to this body training. (1989: 30)

Nevertheless I would be cautious about making generalisations that position all modified women as helpless victims, or that make women the 'cultural dupes' that Jeffreys (2000) for example would suggest. In order to contextualise the academic debate that began to appear it is of value to examine some of the publications that were made by those who were identified with the Modern Primitive scene. By analysing material from this time it is possible to identify and pre-empt some of the critiques that were to follow, particularly by tracing the ambivalence that so-called Modern Primitives themselves had in relation to the movement, for example those at the forefront of the Modern Primitive movement, including Jim Ward<sup>25</sup>. Ward expressed unease with the ways in which people were used and portrayed, which I do not think is recognised fully by writers such as Eubanks (1996) and Klesse (2000). Ward for example acknowledges that there are 'remarkably few pictures showing pierced people of colour, especially

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<sup>24</sup> Waist training involves the constriction of the waist to reduce its dimensions, either temporarily or permanently. For examples and discussion (see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 29-32).

<sup>25</sup> Jim Ward emerged out of the gay S/M piercing and tattooing culture of the 1970s. Based in the USA he was a founding editor of *PFIQ* and also opened the first dedicated piercing studio *Gauntlet* in 1978 in California, later opening studios in San Francisco and New York. These studios provided the model on which piercing and body modification studios are based today; they were professional, hygienic and used the latest techniques. *Gauntlet* studios were forced to close in 1998 due to bankruptcy. Jim Ward, like Fakir Musafar, retains the legacy of being a founding father of the modern body modification movement (see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 159-163).

non-tribal ones' (*PFIQ* issue 47, 1996: 5). However in identifying these internal critiques, the statements made by Modern Primitives in pursuit of 'analysis' serve only to compress further the kinds of conceptual and ideological attitudes that were later to be identified by others. In his editorial for *PFIQ* 47 (1996), Ward states:

It is wonderful that so many people are drawing inspiration from the body arts of indigenous peoples all around the world. But I think it's disrespectful when someone outside a particular group claims that they are somehow a genuine member of that culture by virtue of their imitation. Sure, you can get a full moko facial tattoo, but that doesn't make you a Maori. (*PFIQ* issue 47, 1996: 5)

He goes on to state that:

As bios written by this issue's models began to trickle in, we realised that many urban "neotribalists" share our apprehension of cultural appropriation. While each model in this issue clearly pays respectful homage to the world's tribal cultures, all voiced concern that they would be misconstrued as "stealing" or failing to understand their otherness. (*PFIQ* issue 47, 1996: 5)

Modern Primitivism has also been heavily criticised due to its middle class and high-brow associations. DeMello (2000) identifies the differences between Modern Primitives, which she associates with the middle class, and what she perceives to be the 'lost' history of tattooing:

Through the discourse of modern primitives, the working class history of tattooing in the United States has essentially been denied and a new history has been created. (2000: 182)

However working class tattooing is represented, especially for example through autobiographies of tattoo 'legends', George Burchett (1960) and Albert Parry (2006), and accounts such as Samuel M Steward's (1990). Although Modern Primitives were overwhelmingly middle class they did not simply erase the legacy of working class tattooing through their existence. Indeed the Modern Primitive movement clearly drew

on the artistic work of (working class) tattoo pioneers. The development of tattoo styles, particularly the black 'tribal' designs that were associated with Modern Primitives, emerged from 'traditional' tattooists pushing forward the boundaries of art-based tattooing (see for example Don Ed Hardy<sup>26</sup> and Charlie Cartwright<sup>27</sup>).

### *Tribal Tattoos*

Calling on the styles of Samoa, Borneo and New Zealand, tribal tattoo designs were documented informally in *Modern Primitives* (1989) (for more detailed social analysis of Polynesian tattoo traditions see Gell, 1993). Don Ed Hardy and Leo Zulueta were instrumental in bringing black-work tattoo styles to the West. Many of these designs and patterns were appropriated, restyled or given a 'Western' slant, either in relation to style or placement<sup>28</sup>. Designs were almost always done in black ink and favoured filled in shapes and motifs, or patterns that followed the shape of the body.

Musafar has stated that he was the first Western individual to have large black-work tattooing although these designs can also be followed in the designs and tattoos worn by Leo Zulueta and Greg Kulz in the 1980s (see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989). DeMello (2000) identifies the role of Leo Zulueta as key in the creation of and subsequent popularity of the 'tribal' style. Zulueta in conversation with DeMello reflects:

"Tribal tattooing is extremely popular now. I mean you can't go anywhere into any shop and not see some trace of it which... makes me feel proud to see that, that it had such impact." (2000: 86)

Zulueta suggests that he used tribal designs in order to create a springboard for his own style and in so doing he helped to spur on one of the most popular and widely

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<sup>26</sup> Hardy is an internationally respected tattooist who edited *TattooTime* magazine in the 1980s. He popularised tribal and art-based tattooing (see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 50-67) and mentored other tattooists who were pushing the artistic boundaries, such as Leo Zulueta (see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 96-100).

<sup>27</sup> Cartwright developed his artistic and fine line style of tattooing at his studios in California, working in the 1970s and 1980s (see Vale and Juno, eds 1989: 150-151).

<sup>28</sup> Wroblewski (1989) states: 'When I travelled through Borneo for example, certain Iban tribesmen pointed to their throats to suggest where my tribal design belonged, instead of my forearm, which is tattooed along its entire length' (1989: viii).

recognisable tattoo styles. Tribal tattoos hit a peak in the 1990s and although their appeal is still widespread they no longer have the cachet of being perceived as either particularly unusual or 'artistic' today:

Although tribal tattoos were once the ultimate elite, non-Western tattoo, they have become for many (who know how to read such tattoos) simply a relic of another era. (DeMello, 2000: 89)

Historically there was a link between black-work tribal tattoos and Modern Primitivism but the connection today is minimal, if it exists at all. The majority of those getting a 'tribal' style tattoo today may be completely unaware of its associations with Modern Primitivism or indeed where the designs have come from. The black-work tattoos that were championed during this period have now moved into the mainstream of tattoo designs and are evidenced in the flash available in any tattoo studio:

Furthermore, the modern tattoo is merely a cliché, borrowing from and adapting Polynesian patterns, Japanese motifs and Chinese military emblems. (Turner, 2000: 49)

The cultural appropriation of these designs is in a sense complete. Designs have been fully assimilated so that the 'tribal' style is one that exists as just one possible style in Western tattooing and has an association of exoticism that is not located anywhere. The 'tribal' aesthetic is one that is so general it has little identifiable meaning.

### *Legacy*

The Modern Primitive movement did not have an explicit structure although, as defined by Musafar<sup>29</sup>, it did provide social and cultural ways of defining the modified individual. The term 'second generation Modern Primitives' sometimes occurs on *BMEzine.com* but it is not widely used as a form of self-identification. The usefulness of

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<sup>29</sup> Fakir Musafar remains an important figure in the body modification movement and continues to perform at body modification events. Now in his seventies Musafar's performances remain popular in body modification circles though are no longer explicitly associated with Modern Primitivism.

the term Modern Primitive lies in its ability to define the early influences of the body modification movement and to track the social and cultural development of modification practice, as it exists today.

Although the legacy of the Modern Primitive movement persists, it often comes in for greater scrutiny, even ridicule, than it did in the 1990s. Don Ed Hardy in conversation with DeMello (2000) reflects:

“It’s intriguing to see it [primitivist rhetoric] used by people as essentially the new kitsch. They’re not very original designs [black-work tribal], but they pick up on this thing how it’s meaningful for them, how it’s a journey or a rite of passage and all that stuff, and it’s kind of incredible that that’s going on. You know it makes them feel better and they like it and that’s okay. I get so sick of hearing all that stuff, and of course I know that I started a lot of it because I started focusing on that in the first *TattooTime* just kind of to make people aware of it, but it’s just so corny now.” (2000: 182)

Although Modern Primitives and discussion thereof has been key to forming discourses on body modification practice, I suggest that as a movement it is now virtually historic. Very few individuals in the US or UK would describe themselves as Modern Primitives even if they felt an affinity with non-Western rituals, aesthetics or ‘tribal practices’. It is precisely the critiques of Modern Primitivism detailed here that make modified individuals wary about using such a term. Additionally many younger body modifiers may have never come across the term in any meaningful way, although elements loosely associated with the Modern Primitive group such as having stretched ears, adopting black-work tattoos or favouring ‘natural’ or organic materials and designs continue to be popular in body modification culture generally.

Modern Primitivism thrived at a point when information on body modification practices was hard to find; often one needed to be introduced to those who had reliable knowledge or who were able to perform practices. When Musafar and Ward made the film *Dances Sacred and Profane* in 1987 (re-released 2004) this may have been the first time that white Westerners had enacted and documented these rituals. These were rarely performed and valorised as special, spiritual events. It is now increasingly easy to

both see and take part in suspensions in clubs or at body modification events. Body modification practices are now ubiquitous and easily bought, with vast archives of knowledge available on the internet (see *BMEzine.com*).

However the rhetoric that defined the Modern Primitive movement persists in unacknowledged forms in informal body modification literature. Randall and Polhemus (2000) for example dedicate their publication *The Customized Body*: 'For the traditional peoples of the world from whom we still have so much to learn'. The introduction is accompanied by illustrations of variously modified 'traditional' people that are celebrated in the text. Although the notion of Modern Primitivism as a movement has faded in the face of critique, and in the ongoing development of body modification practice more generally, such sentiments still persist in insidious ways in body modification literature.

The cyber body and the Modern Primitive may be perceived as inhabiting 'opposite' ends of body modification practice and culture: the technicised, 'other-world' cyber body contrasted with the valorised body of the 'native primitive'. However both of these groups emphasise the 'regular' body, the body before modification, as one that is either lacking or left behind. Identifying the modified body as a different, individual body, in contrast to the already-in-existence body, in whatever way that is manifested, amounts to the same thing. Cyborgs and Modern Primitives conceptually share an emphasis on individuality.

In the following section I examine biographical narrative as a concept that has been used to explain the modified body. In so doing I identify women's body modification practices as ones that have been particularly conceptualised as adding biographies to bodies.

## **Biographical Narrative**

Through piercing, the body becomes a living record of one's personal history. My body is my own, the sole place on which I can with full justification inscribe my achievements. (Gans, 2000: 163)

If modified bodies are defined through their expression of individual-ness and difference then the modified body also requires explanation: 'Skin may be painted, tattooed and scarred... to convey an almost infinite number of messages and a host of meanings' (Synnott, 2001: 157). Biographical narrative has emerged as a key theme in the analysis of body modification practices. The notion that the modified body expresses a unique biography has been realised in those analyses that suggest that body modification practice signifies. Therefore body modification practices are perceived as having: '...the function of providing symbolic information about the bearer's personal interests, social position, relationships, or self-definition' (Sanders, 2008: 21).

The notion that body modification practice creates a physical diary has become a habitual theme within body modification literature. The use of body modification practice to mark certain events has reinforced the notion that the modified body is representational. The symbolism that is read into the image, the piercing and so on are suggestive of individual narrative:

Certain interviewees noted that they had deliberately become tattooed to mark *specific* events such as weddings, while one young female informant, for example, told me that although she had wanted a tattoo for some time, she finally decided to get it done on her 21st birthday, both as a marker of adulthood and as a celebration of the event itself. (Sweetman, 2000: 69, emphasis in the original)

Modified bodies then become embedded within biographical narrative. Sweetman (2000) identifies biography as a theme that exists in both what he terms 'lighter' and 'heavier' users of practices<sup>30</sup>. He suggests that for his interviewees tattooing in particular was seen as integral to the construction and maintenance of individual narratives:

...becoming tattooed might be argued to commit the tattooee to a particular narrative and at least one interviewee described his own tattoos as a permanent 'diary' that 'no one can take off you'. (Ibid)

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<sup>30</sup> Sweetman (2000: 73) identifies heavier users as having three or more of either tattoos or piercings. However he notes that if a participant had several ear piercings this would not put them in the 'heavier' category, whereas someone with a single large tattoo back piece would be counted as heavily tattooed.

The body is understood to powerfully express its singular biography. The turn towards making the modified body biographical is linked to a perceived need for ritual for the Western body. Therefore in order to make the body different, unique and personal it needs to carry a physical mark that can be directly related to the bearer, one that is reinforced through the technique of narration:

In a culture in which there are few rituals or rites of passage outside religion, the tattoo can serve... as a physical mark of a life event. These life events are interpreted as significant by the bearer, if not by society, and can vary from the winning of a sporting event or competition to the completion of a divorce to the remission of cancer (becoming a 'cancer survivor'). (Fisher, 2002: 100)

If the body is one that is immersed in biography, it is also accompanied by a narrative that gives good reason for body modification choices. Mercury (2000) uses case histories of body modifiers in order to present modification narratives<sup>31</sup>. She introduces one of her interviewees, Oren, by stating: 'His body is a rich landscape of his life experience reflected by numerous tattoos and piercings. Oren believes that each tattoo and piercing marks the healing of a psychic wound, or a grid point on the map of his spiritual journey' (2000: 96). In this account Oren's body not only elicits and illustrates his own biography but the narrative of his spiritual journey is put in place. Mercury (2000) goes on to describe one of the images he has chosen, a black 'tribal' style lizard amidst a blue and green flaming sun:

There are several aspects to Oren's first tattooing experience that can be amplified. His personal situation and state of mind at the time he chose to get his first marking directly influenced his design, colour choice, and tattoo placement... Thus it is not surprising that, his situation being "up in the air", he would choose to actualize the three elements that were missing for him: earth (the gecko), water (the blue and green colours), and fire (the sun image). (Mercury, 2000: 98)

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<sup>31</sup> It is common to use case histories when discussing motivations for body modifications (see also DeMello, 2000; Pitts, 2003; and Rush, 2005).

Biographical narrative is understood as being responsible for the design and image that Oren chooses, so narrative and biography also shape its dimensions. Therefore body modifications are not only author-ised through biography but aspects such as placement, colour and design are based on actualising these concepts. This coherency provides not only narrative and meaning but is something that can be developed along the modification 'journey'. The technique of narrative has become a powerful trope for analysing body modification practice:

Collecting the stories was relatively easy. People like talking about their tattoos and, as I have mentioned, are used to doing so because they're so frequently *asked* about their tattoos. (DeMello, 2000: 159 emphasis in the original)

'Telling stories' has effectively become ingrained in the ways that individuals think and discuss their body modifications. As narrative is repeatedly performed by body modification participants it becomes habitual and therefore individuals come to expect and initiate this kind of discussion. Participants become well versed in utilising these themes to frame their experiences. As I suggest in Chapter Seven, because participants are so often called upon to give good reasons for their modifications, they are compelled to provide narratives whether they are relevant to their own experience or not, indeed whether they want to or not. Throughout this thesis I suggest that asking different questions means that different responses are heard. So instead of collecting stories in expected, even 'easy' ways it can also be useful to approach modified bodies from a different perspective. Although all modified bodies are frequently 'narrated' I argue that this is particularly apparent with regard to women's bodies.

### *Women and Body Modification Practices*

Women who engage in body modification practices have always been subjects of interest, from the tattooed lady as circus freak or sideshow attraction (see Mifflin, 1997: 10-32) to Modern Primitives like Idexa (Klesse, 2000: 15). In her history of women and tattoo, Margot Mifflin (1997) suggests that women's status in tattooing has been hidden and suppressed and that women have often had to present themselves in particular ways to garner acceptability (Mifflin, 1997: 158-60). As body modification practices

have begun to move into the mainstream so its take-up by women has gained momentum. Accompanying this growth in involvement by women has been the attachment of narrative to women's body modification practices:

No form of skin modification is as layered with meaning as tattooing. As a largely representational, symbolically charged permanent mark, it tells stories about female experience and triggers reactions that underscore cultural expectations of women. (Mifflin, 1997: 7)

Biographical narrative operates more intensely on women's bodies because they become the objects of a double narration, this occurs in part through 'reclamation' narratives. Women who have experienced abuse, whether physical or sexual, have suggested that engaging in body modification helps to 'reclaim' the body from abuse. The act of reclaiming the body is understood to reside in the action of body modification practice, which in itself is understood to represent an empowering and transformative experience (see Hewitt, 1997; Mifflin, 1997; DeMello, 2000; Mercury, 2000; Pitts, 2003; and Inckle, 2007). Pitts (2003) states:

Women body modifiers have argued that modifying the body promotes symbolic rebellion, resistance and self-transformation - that marking and transforming the body can symbolically "reclaim" the body from its victimisation and objectification in patriarchal culture. (Pitts, 2003: 49)

The creation of the 'real you' (as discussed earlier in this chapter) has been important within body modification analysis. In relation to women, this narrative has been constructed in order to create new opportunities or 'new selves'. Raellyn Gallina<sup>32</sup> was one of the first to introduce this theme during an interview published in Vale and Juno, eds (1989):

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<sup>32</sup> Raellyn Gallina emerged from the USA lesbian S/M community and was one of the most prominent and well-known women body piercers and scarification artists in the late 1980s and 1990s. She was often associated with integrating ritual into her piercing and scarification practices (see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 101-105).

Sometimes women have had a traumatic experience and they'll want to reclaim their sexuality in a way by having a nipple or a labia piercing; this becomes a *reclaiming ritual* that helps undo a lot of *shit* from their past. And from that moment forward they can go on. Sometimes that happens. (1989: 105, emphasis in the original)

Women therefore are often understood to participate in body modification practices for different reasons than men, in part due to the ways that Gallina suggests. In reclamation narratives body modifications are used as an externalisation of a healing journey, which helps women deal with trauma. Consider for example one of Pitts' (2003) interviewees:

And of course coming from a very physically abusive background, and sexually abusive, the thing I really discovered is that the only thing I have true control over in this lifetime - everything else can fall apart - the only thing I have even the semblance of control over is my body. And how it looks. So I can make it bigger, I can make it smaller. I can scar it. I can pierce it. And some of those things I can make go away. (2003: 62)

Body modifications then become *instrumental* to the narrative, if practices are experienced as healing they also become part of the participant's story. This can be seen in the following from Mercury (2000):

Kathleen chose to place her tattoo on her lower back near the base of the spine. This turned out to be a healing placement for Kathleen because the energies around sexuality, reproduction, fertility and creativity, and generation of new life located at the base of the spine (the base chakra) needed release from their blockages. (2000: 95)

Notions of reclamation therefore narrate the body in significant ways. Body modification becomes the symbolic mark of a personal history, event or time that is, as with all body modification narratives, repeatedly revisited in the telling of the body modification 'story'. In terms of reclaiming the body this narration may be understood

to be part of the healing process itself. Both the body modification and its associated narrative become imbued with transformative possibilities.

Pitts (2003) also discusses the possible limits to women's reclaiming that are also addressed by women tattooists (see Mifflin, 1997: 109). Pitts (2003) argues that:

Women's marked bodies exemplify both the praxis of culturally marginal body projects and the limits of that praxis. As I see it, they highlight the female body as a site of negotiation between power and powerlessness, neither of which are likely to win fully. (2003: 81)

Pitts (2003) suggests that there are limits to both notions of reclamation and that these acts of reclamation should necessarily be sited in women's bodies. Through reclamation narratives women's bodies are rendered alternatively as power-less or power-full. The notion that power and control can be taken away or reinstated is based on a simplistic model of power. While reclamation narratives have been important for some women body modifiers I suggest that this approach is one that has, conversely, limited women's experience of body modification practices. Many women body modifiers were unhappy with the 'abuse' narrative that was attached to women's involvement in body modification. I suggest that this narrative carries less weight now that body modification practices have become more popular and fashionable, however it is an approach that continues to define women and practices (see Mercury, 2000, and Pitts, 2003). In a rather different turn, reclamation discourse has also been fiercely criticised by radical feminists such as Jeffreys (2000). Jeffreys (2000) identifies body modification practices as 'self mutilation', engaged in particularly by those who have suffered under a patriarchal system:

'Body art' needs to be understood... as being a result of, rather than resistance to, the occupation of a despised social status under male dominance. (2000: 410)

Jeffreys (2000) utilises the concept of false consciousness in order to explain the resurgence of body modification among women, and suggests that post-modern body theorists have played a role in justifying what she understands as abuse:

A feminist political understanding of self-mutilation needs to be developed which rejects both the individualist explanations of self-mutilation offered by psychology and the liberal intellectualizing of postmodernists. (2000: 425)

Jeffreys' (2000) account of women's body modification practice positions women's bodies as socially and culturally written into their oppressed status. Women body modifiers are understood to be either author or victim of body modification practices. In this final section I turn to class and consumerism as themes that have impacted on how the modified body is conceptualised.

### **Consumerism, Class and Body Modification Practice**

The appropriation and incorporation of body modification practice into consumer culture is invariably at odds with how many participants view the 'scene'. When discussing participants' reasoning for body modification, Mike Featherstone (2000) includes the oft-cited stance against consumer culture: the championing of the individual 'I' by body modification participants. Body modifiers position their individualism as in opposition to the growing acceptability and indeed marketability of body modification practice and style. Featherstone (1991) states that capitalism is engaged in a '...constant search for new fashions, new styles, new sensations and experiences' (1991: 86). Identifying the need for individuals to express particular forms of 'individuality' through consumption encouraged the commoditisation of body modification practices to develop into what has become a hugely profitable business<sup>33</sup>. As early as 1989 the commodification of body modification practice was being noted by participants and viewed critically:

...a recent issue of New York Woman reported the marketing of *non-piercing* nipple rings ranging from \$26.50 to \$10,000! No doubt further attempts at

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<sup>33</sup> This can be witnessed in developments like the ever expanding range of body jewellery now available as well as items such as 'themed' clothing in tattoo styles, jewellery, accessories, magazines, books, artwork and so on. Additionally, as well as having long waiting lists, some renowned tattooists now charge up to £250 an hour, making it a potentially commercially lucrative business.

commercialization lie just around the corner... (Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 5, emphasis in the original)

Bryan Turner (2000: 40) states that tattooing in particular adds cultural capital to the skin's surface. However I suggest that tattooing may be seen as accruing capital in some areas, while not in others: a heavily tattooed face will not have the same degree of cultural capital as a tattooed arm. Consumerism also operates partly through the notion of scarcity: if everyone has a tattoo sleeve by a renowned artist it begins to lose value, hence more finely tuned distinctions are needed, calling on individuality to be expressed through ever more sophisticated products and services. Consumerism again raises issues of difference, precisely because individuality and difference are key, almost unavoidable, dimensions of body modification practice.

The emergence of piercing and tattooing in the early 1990s (it was usually just these two forms of modification at this stage) heralded body modification as not only more popular but a conspicuous subject of media interest (see for example Forna, 'The Hole Truth', 1992; Edwards Jones, 'Here's Mine, Where's Yours?', 1993; Alford, 'A Point of Style' 1993). The movement from body modification being understood as a private activity, perhaps only shared with like-minded individuals, to a visible presence on 'public' skin also presented more opportunities to co-opt what was once perceived as an oppositional activity into a money-making prospect<sup>34</sup>. Jill A. Fisher (2002) suggests that 'semi-permanent body modifications are ideal in a capitalist structure because there is always already space for the next body modification' (2002: 102). As one modified individual states: 'it's addictive, like buying clothes. You always want new ones' (Genea in Randall, 2002: 72). The notion that body modification practices are styles that can be bought and sold is also linked with the notion that such choice heralds new kinds of 'freedom':

What makes the tail end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and start of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries so distinctive is this: never before have there been so many techniques and styles from which to choose and - crucially - never before have we had such freedom in making these choices. (Polhemus and Part B, 2004: 143)

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<sup>34</sup> Appropriation has been theorised widely with regards to a number of different phenomena, for example punks (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976, and Hebdige, 1991).

Polhemus' (2004) claim that lifestyle choices are open to all, supposing that all techniques for self-transformation operate equally, is problematic. It ignores the multiple social, cultural and economic constraints that may be exacted on individuals in the exercise of such 'freedoms'.

The issue of class has emerged as a distinct theme within analyses of body modification (see for example DeMello, 2000; Back, 2003; and Pitts, 2003). Gell (1993: 10) in his discussion of Polynesian tattooing suggests that in the West there has been a configuration of tattoo with 'ethnic Other', as tattooing 'came from' outside Europe, which then morphed into a 'classed Other' as it became established in the West. Echoing Gell (1993), Les Back (2003) reflects that the stigmatisation of the tattoo has effectively classed bodies:

In working-class life, tattooing has provided a way of reclaiming and aestheticising the body. At the same time, these marks sketch the outline of a "class Other", a target for respectable society to recognise and stigmatise, be it in the form of a press gang, officers of the law, or today's bourgeois moralists. (2003: 29)

The issue of working class and middle class adoptions of tattooing has been a popular theme in body modification literature. Juliet Fleming (2000) makes the assertion that: 'Western tattooing is now divided against itself in terms of class' (2000: 61) and that there is a vast difference between tattooing as 'high art' and prison and home-executed tattoos. The tattoo 'Renaissance' has been identified as occurring due to a middle class movement away from the staples of working class tattoo symbols and meanings:

Once the inscription tool of rebellious working-class subcultures, the tattoo is now used as a tool of individual self-actualisation. (Pitts, 2003: 32)

DeMello (2000) identifies middle class sensibilities (and those that she aligns with the middle class: those gay and lesbian S/M participants that created their own relationships to tattoos and piercings during the 1980s and 1990s) as transforming the legitimate history of body modification practice into something 'new'. Pitts (2003) also

suggests that there is a parallel between predominantly middle class groups such as 'self-help' and 'new age' movements and body modification, which also helped to shift class interest in tattooing.

Demarcations between classes have also been made with regards to custom<sup>35</sup> and flash<sup>36</sup> tattooing, although these groups are by no means exclusive. Historically tattoo flash has been the predominant way in which tattoos have been transferred onto the body. Custom tattooing has emerged in the last twenty years and has been associated with those that seek 'one-off' designs. Custom tattooing has grown up at a point when the boundaries of tattoo design were becoming more expansive. In turn these developments began influencing clients who became more adventurous and demanding about what they wanted to have on their body. I return to the subject of custom tattooing in Chapter Four, where I suggest that body modification practice has evolved into a 'craft' activity, one that cannot be drawn simply in terms of class for example.

Historically there has also been a separation between tattooing and piercing that has in part been drawn along class lines. This can be traced for example through the promotion of so-called 'family friendly'<sup>37</sup> atmospheres at tattoo conventions. As DeMello (2000: 180) notes this was introduced in the USA in order to discourage piercing, especially visible piercing, becoming part of the convention. This was instituted because visible or 'extreme' piercing was associated with gay, lesbian and S/M sexuality and the 'middle class' newcomers which many tattoo enthusiasts did not want to be associated with. It also served to discourage those that traditional tattooists understood as 'corrupting' the scene from attending, namely lesbian, gay and S/M tattoo and piercing enthusiasts<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> This style of tattooing is understood to be more art-based, as individuals give ideas or designs to the tattooist, or give them free rein and have something made especially for them. Although generic tattoo images may be used (anchors, birds, skulls and so on) the design is created individually for the client.

<sup>36</sup> 'Flash' is the term used to describe generic designs that are ready-made and chosen by the client, usually from examples on the studio wall or from a book. These include standard tattoo images and are usually, compared to custom work, inexpensively priced.

<sup>37</sup> Although it should perhaps be noted that throughout the 1980s and 1990s tattoo conventions were not ever genuinely 'family friendly' as there was often 'adult entertainment' such as strippers booked.

<sup>38</sup> Although DeMello (2000) describes tattooing in the USA the differences between the tattoo world and piercing world can sometimes still be delineated in the UK. Due to the high degree of integration between the two it is often at the edges of practices that we can identify unease. Therefore while some tattoo conventions embrace other body modification practices and may have a suspension show, others have been more hostile to demonstrations of suspension and what are perceived as more 'extreme' body modifications.

## Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter has been to outline the predominant themes in body modification analyses in order to position my own contribution to this body of literature. Although key to mapping body modification practice, the themes of individualism, difference, biographical narrative and class and consumerism have also become what I would call 'monoliths'; grand narratives around which modified individuals have become drawn. These grand narratives have had consequences for the way we approach and analyse body modification practice. Therefore while we recognise that women's involvement in body modification practices can be understood in terms of a narrative of empowerment or reclamation, these are not the only ways in which women experience practices. I suggest that there are areas of analysis that are concealed when modified bodies become 'grooved' into pre-prepared and pre-conceived ways of knowing.

As well as a lack of emphasis on sensate experience there are also other areas that have been significantly under-theorised in body modification literature. It is important to note that there is very little written on race, aside from discussions of Modern Primitivism, something that is also noted by Fisher (2002) and MacCormack (2006). Further I suggest that the significant take up of body modification practices, especially in areas such as South America, has yet to be addressed. Although this suggests that much work regarding representation needs to be done, the focus on representation itself is not the sole solution. Instead of reading or extracting information from modified individuals in pre-determined ways, for example using familiar questions such as "why?" that invite a familiar response, what is revealed when these questions are *not* asked is significant. What participants and practitioners say outside of these main themes is as important as what they say when discussion 'fits' within these categories. Therefore, while I continue to value participants' stories (which are, after all, what this thesis is based on), I suggest that narrative need not only be delivered in relation to representation.

Alternative approaches to the well-trodden themes that I have outlined do appear sporadically in body modification literature. Consider for example Patricia MacCormack (2006) who uses Deleuze and Lyotard to approach the subject of women

and tattooing, and the work of Nikki Sullivan (2001) who departs from the theme of seeking to 'know' the modified body. Sullivan writes:

I found - whilst writing this book - that my journey into the world(s) of tattooed bodies did not, and would not, allow me to (re)present the illustrated skin as a premise, and the knowledge of what (in)forms it as a conclusion. (2001: 10)

Throughout this chapter I have established the principal ways in which body modification practice have been set. I have also suggested that the experience of the body involved in body modification practice has been an ever-attendant yet silent presence in many of the discussions of body modification practice. In this thesis I argue for a development and extension in the way that body modification practices are experienced and approached; as such I turn my focus towards a differently weighted set of epistemological concerns. This first chapter has positioned my own project in relation to body modification literature; in the following chapter I establish the ways in which this thesis calls on the strengths of sense and sensation literature, while also identifying areas of tension and recognising potential opportunities for development in this field.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Sense and Sensation Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Literature on sense and sensation is a rapidly developing area with work on smell (Corbin, 1986; Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994; and Classen, 1998), taste (Korsmeyer, 1999) sound (Corbin, 1994; Connor, 1997; Bull and Back, eds, 2003; Sterne, 2003; and Drobnick, ed., 2004), touch (Classen, ed., 2005, and Manning, 2007) and vision (Jay, 1994; Jenks, ed., 1994; and McQuire, 1997) establishing what can be broadly termed a contemporary sensorial field. As well as containing empirical analyses of the senses in historical, social and cultural contexts, these analyses suggest that the senses are also epistemological concerns (see Howes, 2003, and ed., 1991 and 2005). Sensory analysis therefore is not only limited to discussion or analysis of a single sense or the senses as discrete, but extends to incorporate and generate knowledge of the social world:

The senses gather information but also contribute to the definition of that information, that is, participate in sense making. (Rodaway, 1994: 26)

Focus on the sensory illustrates ways of experiencing, and in turn how we understand and represent that world. David Howes (2003, and ed., 1991 and 2005) in particular has worked towards raising the profile of the senses in order that their place as cultural, social and political rather than 'biological' or 'psychological' entities is made clear:

Just as meanings are shared, so are sensory experiences. That is why it is not enough to look at the senses as ‘energy transducers’, ‘information gatherers’ or ‘perceptual systems’ they must also be understood as cultural systems. (Howes, 2005: 4, references omitted)

The senses are recognised as shaping and being shaped by historical, social and cultural systems. As the introduction to the first issue of the journal *Senses and Society* (2006) suggests, the re-orientation of the senses from the individual to the cultural has had a profound and powerful effect on the way in which the sensory has been approached:

The *sensorium* (meaning: “the entire perceptual apparatus as an operational complex”) is an ever-shifting social and historical construct. The perceptual is *cultural and political*, and not simply (as psychologists and neurobiologists would have it) a matter of cognitive processes or neurological mechanisms located in the individual subject. (Bull et al, 2006: 5, emphasis in the original)

My focus in this literature review is two-fold. I provide a brief historical overview of the epistemology of the senses in order to identify contemporary work on the senses and the themes, strengths and potential problems in utilising sensorial approaches. My focus therefore is on the epistemological and methodological implications, while in my data chapters I will refer in more detail to specific studies. Identifying the main themes in sense and sensation literature enables a location of the field as it currently stands, and allows me to position myself within this field. Throughout this thesis I suggest that the sensate experience of body modification practice is one that speaks not only of the sensory body within modification practice, which is significant, but that the analysis of these practices have more general implications for the corporeal understanding of bodies, objects and environments.

My second intention in this literature review is to critically assess the ways in which the senses have been written about by those who develop this ongoing field. Therefore I address vision and touch together and examine the ways in which the hierarchy of the senses have been not only identified but *reproduced* in the writing of sensory analyses. Through a discussion of smell I develop this theme and suggest again that the ways in which the senses have been conceptualised suggests there is room to develop a less

oppositional stance on the senses. Like Jonathan Sterne (2003) and his conception of the 'audio/visual litany' (2003: 15), where he identifies the ways in which vision and audition have been conceptualised in relation to their proposed differences, I suggest that we need neither adopt nor retreat into oppositional positions:

The audio-visual litany renders the history of the senses as zero-sum game, where the dominance of one sense by necessity leads to the decline of another sense. But there is no scientific basis for asserting that the use of one sense atrophies another. (2003: 16)

With this in mind I begin this chapter with a brief outline of how the senses have been epistemologically constructed.

## **Historical Overview of Literature**

This historical overview principally, but not exclusively, focuses on the subject of the senses. The ordering of the senses has formed the crux of the analysis of the sensory milieu. The differentiation between senses and their associative qualities has both defined analyses of them and also produced an analytic framework for the senses to emerge: 'The history of the senses has been, essentially, the history of their objectification' (Mazzio, 2005: 85). The division and categorisation of the senses is often identified as a product of the Greek classical era, with the hierarchy of five distinct senses attributed to Aristotle (2003: 189).

In the Aristotelian framework senses were structured in relation to their 'immediacy' and their worth based on this criteria. Aristotle judged that whereas sight and hearing were senses that occurred through the use of a medium, for example vision through the eye, touch was not located anywhere apart from occurring in the 'here and now'. Aristotle understood sight and hearing to be the least immediate, most intellectual of the senses and as such they occupied prized positions in his sensory lexicon. They were perceived to improve the individual, bestowing learning, refinement and the attainment of a higher soul, while also being capable of improving the world around them. Aristotle conversely suggested that touch and taste were the basest of senses because

these could also be found in animals. Although he recognised taste, touch and olfaction as enabling bodies to operate and function in the world, they did not allow for the enhancement of the individual. They were necessary but not noble. Aristotle also made the demarcation between body and mind, locating the mind as distinct from the sensory body:

That part of the soul then that is called intellect (by which I mean that whereby the soul thinks and supposes) is before it thinks in actuality none of the things that exist. This makes it unreasonable that it be mixed with the body – for, if so, it would have to have some quality, being either hot or cold, or indeed have some organ like the perceptive faculty, whereas it in fact has none. (Aristotle, 2003: 202)

Plato continued with these categorisations and further suggested that the sensory body deceived and misled due to the unreliability of its judgement. He suggested that the senses were subjective and contingent upon the individual, and therefore exterior to notions of objectivity. The senses therefore stood in opposition to the order and reliability that was to be located in the truths of geometry and measurement. Through his discussion of the theory of art in *The Republic*, Plato situated the variable sensory world in contrast to the abstract truths of measurement:

So also a stick will look bent if you put it in the water, straight when you take it out, and differences of shading can make the same surface seem to the eye concave or convex; and it's clearly all a matter of our mind being confused. It is on this natural weakness of ours that the scene-painter and conjuror and their fellows rely when they deceive us with their tricks.

True.

Measuring, counting, and weighing were invented to help us out of these difficulties, and to ensure that we should not be guided by apparent differences of size, quantity and heaviness, but by proper calculations of number, measurement and weight-calculations which can only be performed by the element of reason in the mind. (1965: 379)

By developing geometry as a framework for knowledge, rationality and objective scientific criteria were enshrined through the 'knowns' of quantification: 'pursued for the sake of the knowledge of what eternally exists, and not of what comes for a moment into existence, and then perishes' (White, 1946: 8). The senses were understood as operating in that perishable moment, always shifting and changing: in short, vaporous.

Rene Descartes built on Plato's legacy of mistrust of the senses in *Meditations* (1983). Descartes cogito '*I think therefore I am*' firmly asserted the distinction between mind and body, generating the desire for pure knowledge, that which would not be corrupted through the miasma of the senses. In his quest for the location of authentic knowledge, Descartes opens the third mediation with the lines:

I shall now close my eyes, stop up my ears, turn away all my senses, even efface from my thought all images of corporeal things... I shall consider them as being vain and false... (1983: 113)

Descartes used the renowned analogy of melting wax (1983: 108-112) in order to illustrate how the senses compromise the purity of objective truth and knowledge:

Certainly it could be nothing of all the things which I perceived by means of the senses, for everything which fell under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing, is changed, and yet the same wax remains. (1983: 109)

Thinking as the mode and locus of value for Descartes instituted a dualism that created a schism between mind and body. This legacy continues to have consequences for the ways in which the senses are understood and conceptualised. The separation of body and mind not only artificially disconnects the mind from the body but also denies the senses any epistemological value:

...we perceive bodies only by the understanding which is in us, and not by the imagination, or the senses, and that we do not perceive them through seeing them or touching them, but only because we conceive them in thought... (1983: 109)

However, mistrust and denigration of the senses was not necessarily replicated by all; both Thomas Hobbes (1962: 61) and John Locke (1964: 42-43) invoked the senses in their treatises in more positive terms. While the senses were not made the subject of their treatises, they were included as a vital constituent of the human subject. Hobbes invokes the senses as a foundation for man in *Leviathan*:

The original of the all, is that which we call SENSE, for there is no conception in a man's mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense. The rest are derived from that original. (1962: 61, capitalisation in the original)

Hobbes accounts for the importance of the senses, yet in so doing upholds the notion that it is the body that is the primary locus of the senses and that the senses can be distinctly categorised:

The cause of sense, is the external body, or object, which presseth the organ proper to each sense, either immediately, as in taste and touch; or mediately, as in seeing, hearing, and smelling... And this *seeming* or *fancy*, is that which men call *sense*. (1962: 61, emphasis in the original)

The senses continued to be implicated within much of 'modern' thought and in discussions of politics and society; examples can be located in the work of Charles Fourier and later Karl Marx in which the alienation of the senses of the working man became key.

Fourier contended that those who worked in factories were vulnerable to losing their senses, primarily due to the working conditions that he/she had to endure:

...far from offering any allurements either to the senses or the soul, is only a double torment even in the most vaunted of workshops, such as the spinning factories of England. (1971: 59)

Fourier's ideas for utopia were ones that sought to protect and enshrine the liberty of the senses. In his blueprints for society he paid particular attention to the need for good food and the creation of enticing working conditions for all members. Fourier maintained that care of the senses and the soul were necessary in order to create and uphold a harmonious and equal society. Both Howes (2003, ed., 2005) and Susan Stewart (2005) have identified the role that the senses occupied in Marx's work. Stewart (2005) states that Marx understood the senses to be of economic, political, social and cultural importance (2005: 59). As such they were instrumental in the forming of 'material memories' and therefore vital to how individuals experienced the world:

Such memories are material in that the body carries them somatically - that is, they are registered in our consciousness, or in the case of repression, the unconscious knowledge, of our physical experiences. (Stewart, 2005: 59)

As Marx understood capitalism to be the mechanism that divided man from himself, the alienation of his senses was understood to be the direct consequence of the institution of capital and private property. Capitalist relations therefore both effaced and stripped individuals of their senses:

In place of *all* these physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses-the sense of *having*. (1978: 87, emphasis in the original)

The disaffection of the senses, and therefore the body, estranges the individual from what Marx maintains should be its proper experience and status (1978: 87). One of the consequences of being emancipated from capital and property relations will therefore also be the freeing of man and his senses:

The transcendence of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and attributes... (1978: 87, emphasis in the original)

Marx's identification of sensory alienation within capitalism is something that also appears in contemporary writing on the senses. As we will see, modernity rather than

capitalism is often positioned as responsible for the negation of the senses. The following from C. Nadia Seremetakis (1994) clearly echoes the concerns of Marx:

The particular effacement of sensory memory in modernity, is mainly a consequence of an extreme division of labour, perceptual specialisation and rationalisation. The senses, in modernity, are detached from each other, re-functioned and externalised as utilitarian instruments, and as media and objects of commodification. (1994: 9-10)

Laura U. Marks (2000: 208) suggests that such a view can also be traced through the work of Howes (ed., 1991). This loss of sense and alienation through modernity is a theme to which I will return throughout this chapter.

The contemporary field of sense and sensation remains in its early stages. Anthony Synnott (2001) suggests that there has been a paucity of material dedicated to the senses in the social sciences. However early exceptions include the work of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong (both originally published in 1967) which introduced a renewed interest in the senses, Ashley Montagu's work on touch (originally published 1971) and Don Ihde's (1973) interest in the auditory. Since the late 1980s and 1990s there has been a regenerated interest in the senses giving impetus to this developing field. The majority of the work on senses has occurred in anthropology and it has perhaps had the biggest influence on the developing sensory field (see the work of Howes, 2003, and ed., 1991 and 2005; Constance Classen, 1998, and ed., 2005; Paul Stoller, 1995 and 1997; and Steven Feld, 1990). Feld (1990) and Stoller (1995, 1997) in particular have pioneered the use of sensory ethnography:

Anthropologists who have lost their senses often write ethnographies that are disconnected from the worlds they seek to portray (Stoller, 1995: 15).

In the field of sociology however there has been important work done by Synnott (2001), Michael Bull (2000) and Bull and Back, eds, (2003). In the field of geography John Poretous (1990) and Paul Rodaway (1994) engage in sensuous geography. The appeal of utilising the sensory as a way in which to know can be seen in a variety of studies detailed in Howes, ed. (2005), for example Dorinne Kondo (2005) analyses the

tea ceremony in Japan, Robert Desjarlais (2005) studies the homeless in Boston and Jim Drobnick (2005) addresses olfaction in architecture. Studies such as these gesture to the richness that accounts engender when the sensory is not only accounted for but utilised in expanding ways of understanding objects, bodies and spaces.

## **The Mind/Body Split and the Senses**

As this brief positioning of the literature on the senses has suggested, much of the writing on the senses has located the senses as exclusively of the body, while the mind has been devoid of sense. In so doing there has been a reflection of the familiar Cartesian mind/body dichotomy. Erin Manning (2007) notes:

In the varied work over many centuries that explore the senses, the body is regularly theorised in opposition to the mind, while the senses are located strictly in the body. (2007: xiv)

The perpetuation of dualism persists in contemporary work on sense and sensation. This can be traced implicitly for example in the words of Synnott (2001) where he suggests: 'Long before we are rational beings, humans are sensing beings' (2001: 128). The sensorial is opposed to the rational, suggesting that the senses not only 'come first' but they are somehow antithetical to rational thought. This implicit replication of dualism can also be found in the work of Rodaway (1994):

Touch is a kind of communication between person and world, a corporeal situation rather than a cognitive positioning. (1994: 44)

Instead of being an either/or position I suggest that the senses are both mental and physical. Touching is also a mode of 'thinking' and 'thinking' inimically involves touch. Following the work of Steven Connor (2004), touching and thinking can be understood as precipitating each other; skin and touch are implicated within the act of thinking, as skin and touch are integral to mental processes:

If you touch your skin - and think how hard it is to think without touching your skin, forefinger to lip, say - then you feel yourself and you feel yourself feeling. You are simultaneously an object in the world and a subject giving rise to itself as it advances to meet the world in that object. (2004: 41)

Thought does not occur independently of the body, nor does the body act in isolation from the mind. Attempting to undo them is a crude effort. To ratify the body over the mind or vice versa is to limit all mental and physical capacities, as such: 'the mind is necessarily embodied and the senses mindful' (Howes, 2005: 7).

Manning (2007) invokes the sensory body as part of a project to move away from what she terms the 'commonsense' approach to the body (2007: xii). She writes:

To write about the senses it is necessary to write against the grain of a mind-body, reason-senses model that continues to privilege staid readings of gender, biology, and politics. (2007: xii)

Manning (2007) goes on to state that: 'the challenge when working with the senses is to not presuppose that we already know what it means to sense' (2007: xii) She focuses on the sensing body in movement, looking to examples like tango to explore this theme (2007: 19-48). Stoller (1997) goes on to suggest that embracing the sensorial dimension of life helps to undermine the delineation between mind and body: 'To accept sensuousness in scholarship is to eject the conceit of control in which mind and body, self and other are considered separate' (Stoller, 1997: xvii).

While many studies have produced rich accounts of bodies and environments (see those of Feld, 1990; Stoller, 1995 and 1997; and Bull 2000), I suggest that there is room to augment work on the senses. Extending the ways in which we think and therefore feel and experience the senses, and vice versa, means that it is possible to unsettle the demarcations between the senses, something that I pursue throughout the thesis. Therefore in Chapter Four I suggest that the way in which practitioners think about practices is directly informed by their sensate, corporeal knowledge of body modification practice. In Chapter Seven, I suggest that vision need not be perceived as imposing a tyrannical default position in relation to the rest of the senses; indeed the

haptic, where vision and 'touch' meet, offers an example of the way in which the senses operate together.

Dualism between mind and body is something that I will return to, particularly in relation to the 'othering' of the body through sensory accounts that I identify later in this chapter. In the following section I take two of the senses, vision and touch, and explore the ways in which they have been conceptualised. Providing a sustained example of what I have already broadly outlined allows me to detail the layers that I identify as occurring in relation to vision and touch. Approaching vision and touch together rather than as discreet and unconnected senses allows me to move between the two, illustrating the parallels and differences that have been drawn between them. In doing so I suggest that the ways in which these senses have been positioned deserves a fresh evaluation, and through unsettling the categorisations to which they have been subject, we can unfetter past associations and pave the way for further work to be done.

## **Vision and Touch**

The subject of vision and its pre-eminence has dominated much debate of the senses, whereas touch has been understood to occupy 'lesser' status. Those working in the field of sense and sensation invariably centre themselves from the position that vision has been constructed as the primary sense. This is not surprising given the ocularcentrism of Western culture (see Jenks, ed., 1994 and Synnott, 2001). It is however from this defining assertion that the other 'neglected' senses are approached<sup>39</sup>: 'Ours is indeed a visual age. It would be difficult to say that is an olfactory or tactile or oral or aural age; if not impossible. Sight is supreme' (Synnott, 2001: 206). This position is also strongly asserted by Classen (1998) and Howes (2003 and ed., 2005). Classen suggests that: 'Modern western culture is a culture of the eye' (1998: 1). As such it is the very visuality of culture that is responsible for diminishing, even eradicating other sense histories:

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<sup>39</sup> Writers who establish the dominance of vision often invoke one of the other senses as their preferred means of analysis, for example Korsmeyer (1999) in relation to taste and Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994) in relation to smell.

The visualist regime of modernity, in-fact, prides itself on its transparency: everything can be seen, everything can be known, nothing is withheld from our inquisitive and acquisitive eyes... However, the very visualism of modernity has, so to speak, thrown a cloak of invisibility over the sensory imagery of previous eras. (Classen, 1998: 1)

The link that is made between vision and knowledge (see Tagg, 1988, and Jay, 1994) has helped establish the pre-eminence of vision in sense and sensation literature. Synnott (2001: 208) suggests that the visuality of culture is thoroughly infused with the primary-ness of vision as an object of truth that can be traced through the ocular nature of language (also identified by Jay, 1994: 1). All aspects of vision therefore are understood to both influence and pre-determine social life:

The high evaluation of sight in our culture is therefore not simply a matter of linguistic and folkloric interest, but has far-reaching implications for many diverse corners of our lives: in the devaluation of the other senses, but also for religion, science, language and social relations. (Synnott, 2001: 211)

The hypothesis that vision results in a literal narrowing of perspective or the de-sensitising of individuals to the rest of the senses both limits the ways in which the visual is experienced but also perpetuates the hierarchical model of the senses. By inverting the hierarchy, vision is established by many in the field of sense and sensation as a sense that needs to be put in its place.

Therefore I suggest that vision is often treated in ways that are analogous to how the 'suppressed' and more marginalised senses have been. This is not to deny the weight of evidence that has consistently elevated vision, but rather to point out that this demarcation need not be replicated in contemporary work on the senses. Rather than trying to reduce the position of vision or ignore it altogether, I suggest it makes sense to approach visuality in both more measured and also more innovative terms. Vision, like all the senses, works in relation to the others. Dividing, isolating and imbuing certain senses with particular properties perpetuates the value framework that the senses have so long been made a part; see for example McLuhan's (1997) distinctions between visual, literate and auditory, non literate cultures:

For until men have up-graded the visual component communities know only a tribal structure. The detribalizing of the individual has, in the past at least, depended on an intense visual life fostered by literacy, and by literacy of the alphabetic kind alone. (1997: 138)

One of the consequences of connecting visualism with dominance is that the remaining senses are somehow seen to provide a more authentic picture of social life; see for example Connor (1997) in relation to the 'hearing self'. Caution is required so that the 'purity' of the other senses does not become established in the face of a so-called visual hegemony. I suggest this is particularly important in relation to the way that visual dominance has been aligned with modernity. Often sensory studies suggest that the other senses have been lost due to the relentless drive of visual modernity. Through unsettling categorisations, vision need neither be made the master of the senses nor denigrated to the role of their servant. Moving away from notions of hierarchy and oppositionality need not deny the excellent work that has been done in exploring and analysing the senses; however, adopting a more nuanced approach unravels the contingencies on which knowing the senses is based.

Although vision has consistently been considered to be the leading sense I suggest that another hierarchy has begun to emerge in the field, namely in relation to touch. Studies of touch often assert, yet rarely critically acknowledge, the primacy afforded to touch. One of the ways that touch has emerged from the ranks of the 'lower' senses is through the association that is made with skin. Touch and skin are understood as inseparable, as such although other senses also need skin to function, they are far less likely to be connected with skin:

Our skin is what stands between us and the world. If you think about it, no other part of us makes contact with something not us but the skin. It imprisons us, but it also gives us individual shape, protects us from invaders, cools us down or heats us up as need be, produces vitamin D, holds in our body fluids... it's the largest organ of the body, and the key organ of sexual attraction... It's waterproof, washable, and elastic... For most cultures, it's the

ideal canvas to decorate with paints, tattoos, and jewellery. But, most of all it harbours the sense of touch. (Ackerman, 1990: 68)

Discussions of touch often begin with the identification of skin as the largest organ of the body, as considered by Diane Ackerman (1990), above, and also in Rodaway (1994: 43). Writers go on to cite the biological necessity of skin in order to live, affording the primacy of skin and touch to life:

A human being can spend his life blind and deaf and completely lacking the senses of smell and taste, but he cannot survive at all without the functions performed by the skin. (Montagu, 1986: 17)

Touch is the earliest sense to develop in the human embryo. It gives us our experience of depth and thickness and shape... Without the functions performed by the skin, we cannot survive. (Manning, 2007: 84)

We might lose any one or more of the other senses - sight, hearing, smell, for instance- but to lose an ability to feel, that is touch, is to lose all sense of being in a world, and fundamentally of being at all. (Rodaway, 1994: 41)

More than any other sensory deprivation, the loss of the sense of touch creates a feeling of being an orphan in the world. (Marks, 2000: 149)

If skin is equated with life, then touch as the sense nearest to it implicitly moves into an ascendant position. If skin and touch are perceived as the 'stuff of life', I suggest that one way in which this position is confirmed is through the difficulty that theorists have experienced in attempting to convey touch. Its 'mystery' elevates it; as such Carla Mazzio (2005) and Classen (2005) suggest that there is always something out of reach when we speak about touch. Mazzio (2005: 86) states touch 'may be felt but not fully grasped' while Classen (2005) argues that something of touch escapes when a move is made towards representing it:

We learn what to touch, how to touch, and what significance to give different kinds of touch. Laden with meaning and bound by rules, touch has what could be called a vocabulary and a grammar. When one thinks about of the immediacy of touch, however, language seems too formal and linear model for tactile communication. (2005: 13)

The positioning of touch 'outside' language also reinforces the notion that touch is beyond portrayal, therefore confirming the close link that is made between vision and representation. Mazzio (2005) suggests that touch occupies a central place in language yet still defies definitive description<sup>40</sup>. She notes that there is always inadequacy in defining touch partly because there is no one entity that can be labelled as 'touch':

'Eye' for vision, 'Ear' for hearing, and 'Tongue' for taste, but simply 'Touch' for touch; so that, in terms of basic forms of personification, here touch remains a sense without a synecdoche, a mode without a metonymy. (2005: 88)

Throughout this thesis I suggest that we not only use eyes for seeing, ears for hearing and so on, but that the lived experience of the senses suggests co-existence, not the occupation of discrete and bounded spaces.

Touch has also been regarded as a particularly emotional sense, literally more in touch with our sense of self than the other senses:

Many different emotions can be associated with touch - from caring and love to disgust and hate. It is therefore a highly significant dimension of the human experience, both in person-person and person-environment relationships. (Rodaway, 1994: 41)

In contrast Classen (2005) argues that the 'image of touch' is all around us but that this experience of touch is predominantly about the consumption of visual images rather

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<sup>40</sup> Touch has been both difficult to describe and conceptualised as impossible to measure. Mazzio (2005) suggests that touch cannot be quantified, contained or bounded: 'Quantitatively speaking, a 'touch' is a relatively insubstantial unit: not even a piece, or a part, but rather a point so small as to almost resist quantification' (2005: 92).

than experiencing or *feeling* touch. Classen (2005) suggests that touch mediates all of our lives yet has been significantly under-represented in analysis of social and cultural life:

Touch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies. The culture of touch involves all culture. (2005: 1)

However there are accounts of touch that suggest a rather different perspectival axis. Instead of isolating skin and touch in relation to the other senses, the sensing body is identified as a whole. Within these accounts the hierarchy of the senses however remains intact. Accounts produced by Michel Serres<sup>41</sup> (translated by and appearing in Connor, 2004), and Rodaway (1994) gesture to more imaginative understandings of the sensory body, yet also replicate the familiar touch/vision dichotomy. One of the most sensorial accounts of skin and touch can be followed in the work of Serres (2004) who conceptualises skin as 'an entire environment' (2004: 28). This environment is where the sensing body and the world meet:

I do not like to speak of the place where my body exists as a milieu, preferring rather to say that things mingle among themselves and I am no exception to this, that I mingle with the world which mingles itself in me. The skin intervenes in the things of the world and brings about their mingling. (2004: 29)

Serres' work on skin and touch moves towards an articulation of sensing in the world, explicitly evoking touch as a way of being. Yet skin is also re-established as that which makes the sense possible. Connor (2004) writes: 'Serres begins mapping the senses with skin because it is the milieu of the senses, a kind of 'common sense' (2004: 27-28). Although Serres draws the body as mingled, this mingling would seem selective as Connor (2004) suggests that he finally reaffirms the familiar notion that vision is 'bad':

Infact, vision has appeared throughout *Les Cinq Sens* as a negative reference point for the other senses. Where the other senses give us the mingled body,

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<sup>41</sup> The fact that Serres' work 'Les Cinq Sens' (1985) is yet to appear in English translation is itself as Howes (2005: 14n1) notes testament to the neglect of the senses as a serious subject.

vision appears on the side of detachment, separation. Vision is a kind of dead zone, as the petrifying sense, the non-sense, which it is the role of the other sense to make good or redeem. (2004: 328)

In another engaging account Rodaway (1994) suggests the ways in which touch and sensing come together can be traced through the implementation of what he calls 'sensual geography'. He discusses olfactory, auditory, visual and haptic<sup>42</sup> geographies in order to include the sensing body in geography and to extend the boundaries of geography as a discipline:

Focusing on the dimensions of touch in individual experience also reminds us that this geography is always, ultimately, in reference to a human body, our body, and each space and place discerned, or mapped, haptically is in this sense our space and because of the reciprocal nature of touch we come to belong to that space. (1994: 54)

Rodaway (1994) uses the term haptic to move away from the 'superficial connotations associated with the everyday word 'touch'' (1994: 41) and in so doing establishes that 'touch is more than the action of fingers feeling the textures of surfaces' (1994: 44). Invoking the whole body in the act of touching he writes:

As the central element of the haptic system, the skin combines with the muscles of the body, the mobility of the body and its size and proportions as an important reference point, to permit us to explore the tactile world and feel the intricate details of objects in that world. (1994: 44)

Rodaway (1994) locates the haptic in the movement of the body amid its environment, 'a combination of tactile and locomotive properties' (1994: 48). As such he suggests that because touch merges into the everyday, it is not fully accounted for:

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<sup>42</sup> It is important to note Rodaway's (1994) use of the haptic is based on actual physical touching, which is different to the notion of the haptic I follow in Chapter Seven; hapticity here is not based on physically touching an object. However, Rodaway (1994) does emphasise the entire body and movement in relation to touch and sensing, in common with my position.

Haptic geographies are often overlooked, since the tactile experience is such a continuous and taken-for-granted part of everyday encounter with the environment. (1994: 42)

Rodaway (1994) recognises the sensorial capacities of touching and seeing, that through the body help create a haptic sense of geography. However by invoking haptic touch to extend the ways we think about the senses, bodies and environments, Rodaway (1994) also instates touch as the pre-eminent way of knowing: 'Touch is direct and intimate, and perhaps the most truthful sense' (1994: 44). Attaching touch to claims of truth or authenticity again elevates touch, and also undermines the premise of his argument. In Chapter Seven I develop the concept of the haptic, not to reify it in relation to the other senses, but to underscore the interrelatedness of the sensing body. In identifying the creative quality of haptic-ness among body modification participants, the sensory experience of modification practice is expanded. Approaching body modification practice as a lived experience has suggested that attaching notions of hierarchy or claims to authenticity to the senses is not appropriate. I identify the haptic as producing significant visual/tactile experiences that operate alongside the other senses rather than dominating them.

We can trace both touch and vision as occupying contested positions. Touch is perceived as under-valued while being vital to life, while vision is understood as dominant yet is one of the least valued by many working in the field of sense and sensation. Moving on from touch and vision and focussing on the sense of smell, we can both chart a developing area and again question the ways in which the sense has been constructed. Olfaction is an example both of the way in which a sense has been theorised as 'lost' through modernity, as well as found; see Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994) and Marks (2000). Whether lost or found, the senses as a hierarchical model have had particular influence in relation to the sense of smell.

## **Smell**

Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994) suggest that smell affects individuals in vital social cultural, and physical ways (1994: 1), yet 'In spite of its importance to our emotional

and sensory lives, smell is probably the most undervalued sense in the modern West' (1994: 2-3). The role of smell and its cultural and social importance can be traced in the work of Corbin (1986), Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994), Classen (1998), and Marks (2000).

As well as being undervalued, smell has often been conceptualised as an unruly sense. Odour escapes, it cannot be contained or bounded, and therefore becomes intermingled with the other senses. As such, Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994) argue that there is an absence of ways in which to classify smell and descriptions rely on those of taste - sweet, sour and so on. Synnott (2001) suggests that: 'Smell is the least valued, and least reserved, of all the senses' (2001: 183). Smell is both uncontained and uncontainable, the least refined and cultivated sense, seen as without intellectual capacity. Alain Corbin (1986) discusses olfaction in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, providing a rich account that covers history, literature and medicine. He identifies the 'baseness' that is associated with the sense of smell:

Olfaction as the sense of lust, desire, and the impulsiveness is associated with sensuality. Smelling and sniffing are associated with animal behaviour. If olfaction were his most important sense, man's linguistic incapacity to describe olfactory sensations would turn him into a creature tied to his environment. Because they are ephemeral, olfactory sensations can never provide a persistent stimulus of thought. Thus the development of the sense of smell seems to be inversely related to the development of intelligence. (1986: 6)

Smell is also distinctly linked with memory<sup>43</sup> as it is understood to be both evocative and emotional, therefore like touch it is perceived as standing apart from the more 'reasoned' senses. Classen (1998) suggests that 'in modernity the sense of smell is usually associated with instincts and emotions rather than with reason or spirituality' (1998: 36).

However Classen (1998) argues that prior to the modern period smell was an important and powerful sense. It had particular influence in the realm of religious life,

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<sup>43</sup> Memory is often invoked in relation to smell. Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994) note that smells are often associated with emotional experiences that become powerful reminders of good or bad memories (1994: 2). Marks (2000) suggests that 'memories of smell endure much longer, even after a single exposure to an odour, than visual or auditory memories' (2000: 205).

where the 'odour of sanctity' (1998: 37) was contrasted with the viscous and ill odours of hell (1998: 48). Smell has also had a history of being linked to class, race and gender (see Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994: 161-179). Consider for example:

The working classes and non-Europeans, for example, were often typed as foul smelling in relation to the presumed fragrance or 'without odour' of the middle- and upper-class Europeans. (Classen, 1998: 66)

Classen (1998) identifies the protestant reformation as the point at which the importance of smell began to wane and the general 'decline' in both smell and its importance as a social sense began to take place (1998: 58). One of the possible reasons suggested for the demise of smell was that it had been contingent upon a 'merging' of the individual and the environment, while in modernity the individual was encouraged to occupy a more discreet and boundaried social space. This move suggested that the social world was to be known more through the other senses, principally that of vision rather than olfaction:

The devaluation of smell in the contemporary West is directly linked to the revaluation of the senses, which took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The philosophers and scientists of that period decided that, while sight was the pre-eminent sense of reason and civilisation, smell was the sense of madness and savagery. (Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994: 3)

Classen (1998) suggests that this tradition develops through the nineteenth and twentieth century when advances in cleanliness and hygiene mean that many more smells become 'deodorised':

No more did streets steam with putrid waste. No more were homes strewn with aromatic herbs. As a result, odour slowly evaporated from our modern consciousness. (1998: 58)

Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994: 180-205) suggest that in the West smell is more often than not absent; places and spaces are often either odour-less (which they identify

as a particular feature of modern technology) or scented in specific, artificial ways. They identify the commodification of smell in an era they perceived to be increasingly hostile to 'natural' smell<sup>44</sup>. Therefore we can identify the way that smells are used in potent ways in consumer settings, for example the piping of 'baking' smells into supermarkets or the use of aromatherapy essential oils to fragrance boutique clothes stores:

...smell in Western urban societies has been increasingly purged from its origins as much as possible and re-presented in packaged form. Now scents are sprayed into offices to stimulate workers, bottled at the Body Shop to soothe harried urbanites. (Marks, 2000: 244)

The prevalence of deodorants, perfumes and fragrances added to products and spaces suggest that individuals are more than ever before isolated and protected from natural smells:

Odours are rather eliminated from society and then reintroduced as packaged agents of fantasy, a means of recovering or recreating a body, an identity, a world, from which one has already been irrevocably alienated. (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 205)

Marks (2000) suggests that just because certain smells have been 'cleansed', it does not mean that smell has either disappeared or been irrevocably suppressed through modernity. Marks (2000: 210-23) for example powerfully discusses the olfactory experience of visiting a cinema.

The supposition that vision as a 'super sense' has ruled supreme at the expense of olfaction runs through sense and sensation literature. Marks (2000) reflects:

Hence my concern to "abase" vision and "elevate" smell, by showing that the one is embodied and intimate, the other cognitive and cultivated. By pulling at

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<sup>44</sup> Marks (2000) notes for example that bad smells are those that are understood to emanate from the body, while good smells are now more often than not man-made: 'Interestingly, in John Water's *Polyester* all the "good smells", with the dubious exception of hothouse rose, are synthetic - "new car smell", the flowery air freshener...while all the "bad" smells, such as farts and smelly sneakers, are of more or less natural origin' (2000: 245).

these two ends of the sensory hierarchy, I hope to realign all the sensory modalities that lie “between” them in value, in order to reconfigure this hierarchy from a scale of values to a wiggle of intensities. (2000: 203-204)

Although Marks (2000) consciously invokes the sensory hierarchy, she also replicates it through wanting to isolate smell as something that is valued over vision. This sentiment is paralleled in the work of Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994) where like Marks, they argue that ‘smell has been silenced in modernity’ (1994: 4). They argue that smell can be considered a post-modern sense, superseding a particular evocation of vision:

If sight – panoramic, analytic and linear – is the sense of modernity, is smell – personal, intuitive and multi-directional – the sense of post-modernity? (Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994: 182)

The hierarchies that have both been inherited and reproduced in the senses are ones that have consequences for sense and sensation analyses.

## **Sensing the Other**

One of the issues that I have identified in relation to sense and sensation literature has been the invoking of sense and sensation in the representation of the ‘other’. The field of anthropology has particularly prevailed in relation to sensory studies and as such discussions of sensory bodies and environments, are often other – to that of the body or environment of the researcher. This is not to suggest that researchers should be limited to certain areas, topics, themes, bodies or societies, but that making the non-Western society, body or landscape particularly, or excessively, sensorial is a danger. These risks can be identified in various sensory studies in the West that study non-Western societies. I suggest that the location of the researcher is an issue that those working in the senses need to be alive to and aware of in their analyses.

Stoller (1997) in *Sensuous Scholarship* embeds the sensory within his work, arguing for a place for sound and taste in his analysis. However Howes (2003) suggests that Stoller's situating of the sensory as opposed to the 'rational' results in a sensory-based dualism:

Thus the concepts of "reason", "text", and "Western" are grouped together and opposed to those of "emotion", "body and senses" and "non-Western". (Howes, 2003: 42)

Before continuing with this analysis I want to suggest the parallels that can be identified between the discussion that was made in Chapter One and the present analysis. In Chapter One I addressed the claim that the modified body was understood to be somehow more sensing and feeling than the 'unmodified'; additionally, through the discussion of the Modern Primitive movement we followed the critiques that identified the non-Western modified body as more 'authentic' or 'natural' than the Western modified body. The suggestion that modified 'primitive' bodies were therefore nearer to the earth, more in touch with themselves and their environments, and more enlightened and educated than the dormant Western body, instituted a kind of misplaced inverted hierarchy. Celebrating that which had been denigrated through colonial and racist attitudes only constructed another fetishised analysis of the non-Western body. If this theme was one that was critically met through the analysis of Modern Primitivism, it is one that is echoed in some Anthropological studies. Marks (2000) suggests:

Examinations of a particular cultural organisation of the senses are valuable, but implicit comparisons with the sensory devaluation of a monolithic "West" are counterproductive. (2000: 208)

The desire to escape modern trappings and stage a retreat to the 'primitive' was also something that was clearly identified in relation to the Modern Primitive movement. Although this is something that can be identified as implicit in some of the literature on sense and sensation, Howes (2005) rightly reflects that 'going back' exhibits, at best, partiality:

It has been customary to associate the senses with nature, whether 'innocent' or 'savage'. The senses in this case symbolise the antithesis of culture and thereby provide Westerners weary of the sophistry of civilisation with what seems like a welcome retreat into untutored sensation. The human sensorium, however, never exists in a natural state. (2005: 3)

Howes (2005) is clearly mindful of and sensitive to these issues yet some unease remains when some of these sensory accounts are read. When Classen (2005) for example describes the 'Tzotzil of Mexico' she discusses a group that is culturally, socially and psychically organised in relation to temperature, using a thermal analysis. Howes (2005) comments in relations to Classen's (2005) are italicised:

In their daily lives, the Tzotzil constantly experience the thermal order of the universe: through the encompassing heat of the sun, through the change of temperature from day to night, summer to winter, highlands to lowlands, through the heat they expend in working, through the offering consumption of 'heat' in ritual, through their positions around the household hearth, through the warmth of their very blood.

*Even when Tzotzil are speechless, cosmic meaning courses through their veins.* (2005: 3)

Classen and Howes (2005) are both committed to making room for sensorial accounts because they suggest they do not presume to know how it is for people to sense. However singly imbuing the Tzotzil with 'cosmic meaning' seems too close to those analyses of modified bodies that were venerated due to their assumed association with the earth. Classen (2005) continues:

The Tzotzil feel their cosmology through the temperature of their bodies, the Ongee breathe in theirs with every breath. The Desana see their cosmology in colours, hear it in music, taste it in their food. These sensory cosmologies make us aware of the many different ways in which cultures shape perception, and the inability of standard Western models to comprehend such sensory and symbolic diversity. When cultures are approached on their own sensory terms

rather than through the paradigms dictated for them by outsiders, what we discover are not world - views or oral/aural societies, but worlds of sense. (2005: 162)

Although it is clearly not what Classen (2005) wants to achieve, her analysis comes across as a 'complete' account. By refusing to enforce Western ways of analysing she suggests that alternate ways of sensory knowing are definitive and complete, paradoxically producing the kinds of accounts she seeks to preclude. Marks (2000) takes up the critique:

Yet they [Mauss and Howes] make the primitivist and exoticizing mistake of ascribing the fullness of sensory experience only to "non-Western" cultures (and to children). It is a mistake to believe that only some people have sense experience, and that only some objects have sensory histories. (2000: 208)

Marks' (2000) comments do not take into account the work Howes has done in Western settings, nor that he is alive to the danger of making assumptions about the implicit sensory nature of non-Western bodies. Yet she clearly makes an important point with regard to the way in which 'other' bodies, objects and societies become 'sensorised':

Often these critics argue that "we in the West" need to relearn how to inhabit our bodies, appealing to the embodied knowledge of non-Western cultures. Such arguments imply a kind of primitivist longing for another culture's sense knowledge; hence one must examine them critically. (2000: 207)

Classen and Howes' (2005) suggestion that analysis needs to develop alongside the subjects of analyses rather than be imposed on an individual or a group can also be identified in the work of Stoller (1997) who has produced studies on the Songhay people of Mali and Niger. Stoller (1997) suggests that utilising a sensory approach is important precisely because any analyses of non-text based societies need to reflect their social and cultural organisation as it is lived:

Such inclusion [of the sensory] is especially paramount in the ethnographic description of societies in which the Eurocentric notion of text - and of textual interpretations - is not important. (Stoller, 1997: xv)

By refusing to privilege text Stoller (1997) suggests that he is identifying and removing bias that he perceives as prevailing when 'non-literate' societies are portrayed in text.

Stoller's (1997) identification of representation leads me to consider the debates that have occurred in relation to how best to represent the work of the senses, and this I address in the conclusion. By identifying what I perceive to be a critical issue in sense and sensation literature, we can trace not only problems with individual sensory studies but how sensory accounts replicate the ways in which the senses have been theorised.

How best to represent the senses in sensory studies is something that has also been an issue for those who want to represent sensory work in ethical ways. Howes (2003) has suggested that using language is the best way to communicate the senses, and that other forms such as film, as advocated by Marks (2000: 210-23), are not only less 'democratic' but potentially more risky in their method:

The argument is that film is a more evocative medium than writing and better able to convey sensory impressions... I can see how this might be true in certain cases, for example, when trying to convey the dynamics of dance. Yet it seems to me that, in a cinematic presentation of an olfactory ritual, the visual images would have a strong tendency to "overshadow" the aromatic evocations. Writing here has the advantage that no sensory data are directly presented by the medium itself (except, of course, for the visual nature of the printed word itself). This creates a kind of equality among the senses and makes it possible, for example, to describe an olfactory ritual primarily in terms of its aromatic elements. In some cases, therefore, I feel that writing is more effective than film in conveying sensory images and experiences. Writing also allows readers to realise that they are at a distance from the culture being described, that they are learning about it second-hand. Film, by contrast, because of the immediacy of its visual and acoustic representations, may give viewers the mistaken

impression that they are acquiring first hand knowledge about the society depicted. (2003: 57)

Therefore Howes (2003) suggests that reading text allows for a distancing that is proper in relation to the way that we approach the studies of others. Additionally Serematakis (1994) works towards representing the senses by using montage to unsettle traditional writing forms, in so doing both discussing and reflecting sensory fragmentation.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this literature review I have suggested that reproducing a framework of the senses as already in existence limits the work that can be done. Howes (2003) suggests that it is difficult to produce cross-sensory studies precisely because in modernity the senses have been put into 'self contained fields' (2003: 47). However it is up to those working in sense and sensation to (re)invent new ways of communicating sensory experience. Indeed Howes (2005) identifies that emphasis on interdisciplinary work in the senses (2005: 400) has enabled a broad basis from which to initiate scholarship on the senses.

The effort to separate the senses is something that has dominated much of the literature on them, both historically and contemporarily. Yet this artificial divide is increasingly challenged by those who recognise the senses operating in syntheses:

The effort to separate the senses out, displaying them adjacent to each other, like countries on a map, plan or table of correspondences, will be gently and repeatedly precluded by the requirement to knot them together. It will emerge that each sense is in fact a nodal cluster, a clump, confection or bouquet of all the other senses, a mingling of the modalities of mingling. (Connor, 2005: 323)

Although in this thesis I present my findings in relation to the areas of sensation, sound and visuality, I recognise the interplay of all these sensations within body modification experiences. Isolating one sense and asserting that it is more valid or powerful than another would not only produce a distorted sensory representation of body modification experience, but would also not develop the field in the ways that are

necessary. By maintaining that the senses cannot be predetermined within the traditional five-sense model we can produce accounts that are not determined by the sensory legacy.

The renewed interest in the senses has been more far reaching than just producing an additive model. However even in those add-ons, valuable extra dimensions are produced that develop existing knowledge. This can be traced for example in Bull and Back's (2003) discussion of the Panopticon. The Panopticon has been regarded as a highly visible example of surveillance, however Bull and Back (2003) identify the system as one that was auditory as well as visual. Through a series of tubes inmates within the prison would have been heard at all times. Knowing that inmates would be heard as well as seen fleshes out more fully what it would be to experience the Panopticon. Such accounts therefore develop and deepen our understandings of social life. Howes (2003) suggests:

Consequently, sensuous evocation is not just a way of enlivening ethnographic description, or of infusing scholarship with sensuality. It is an essential basis for exploring how peoples make sense of the world through perception. (2003: 43)

The issue of how the senses are received within the academy has been pertinent for writers such as Stoller (1997) and Howes (2003, ed. 2005). Howes (2005) suggests that the senses have generally been perceived as a subject not worthy of study. As such he suggests that those engaged in sense studies are still regarded with suspicion: 'Such scholars fear that an emphasis on sensation entails a loss of critical awareness and precipitates a slide into a morass of emotion and desire' (2005: 6). If those working in the fields of sense and sensation have been perceived as 'not intellectual enough', writers like Stoller (1997) have in turn suggested that academic writing could benefit from a more sensory approach. He identifies the absence of the body in discussions of corporeality:

...Even the most insightful writers consider the body as a text that can be read and analysed. This analytical tack strips the body of its smells, tastes, textures and pains - its sensuousness. (1997: xiv)

Stoller (1997) suggests that post-modern writing on the body in particular is formulated in 'disembodied' language (1997: xiv). Citing Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999) as an example of 'bloodless language' Stoller (1997: xv) suggests that such writing has produced intangible bodies, therefore the sensory body needs to be reinstated:

The analysis of complex philosophical and political issues usually requires intricate arguments expressed in a densely packed discourse. But such a requirement, I would argue, should not necessarily exclude sensuous expression. (Stoller, 1997: xv)

In common with Stoller (1997) I would suggest that there has largely been an absence of the modified body within accounts of body modification practice. Focusing on the sensate takes us in quite different directions from the ways that body modification practice is currently theorised, and as such makes the modified body both sensorial and substantial. In the following chapter I introduce the methodology I have used towards this end.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

“...ever since [getting those tattoos] it’s become a massive addiction for me. I mean smelling green soap, hearing tattoo machines...; it puts me in a total trance. You know, actually feeling the tattoo machine burning across my skin is an experience all of its own”. (Mercury, 2000: 102)

#### Introduction

This quote suggests what it feels like to be tattooed in multi-sensorial terms: the smell of soap, the sound of the machine and the sensation when needle and flesh meet. It prompted me to pursue research that explored the sensory experience of body modification practice. Although the interviewee discusses the sensory experience of being tattooed in evocative ways, it is not followed up by researcher and author Mercury (2000). Researchers rarely pursue the sensory and embodied experience of being modified even when participants discuss how bodies react to practices. My methodology is rooted in both sociological and sensorial concerns. As well as creating a methodology that can account for the sensate experience of modification practice, I wanted to acknowledge and explore the reflexive, embodied and intimate character of a research project where the focus is the body. Spending time in body modification studios, watching practices and interviewing participants about procedures necessitated a methodology that could sensitively account for bodies in the research process.

In this chapter I begin by introducing body modification as a research object and identify the practices that I will be including within this term. I go on to discuss my

methodology, I have principally used two forms of method to examine body modification practice. These were an on-site ethnography in a body modification studio and interviews with practitioners and participants within body modification 'communities'. Access to research participants and development of research relationships have been key to the project. Issues such as the insider/outsider status and 'presentation' of myself in the field have also shaped the research process. I pay attention to an embodied reflexivity in this thesis which is explored both in the practical 'doing' of research as well as in how these experiences are written up. Both of these different forms of engagement helped me to explore and position the potential difficulties and rewards of engaging with intimacy in the research process. Issues of intimacy and embodiment are also explored through the discussion of my decision to engage in a body modification practice during the fieldwork period. I also address issues that have become apparent during my project, coalescing around concerns of over-observation, sensationalism and the objectification of research participants.

## **Body Modification as Object**

The term body modification refers to a group of practices that are seen as instituting change at the level of the body. Techniques may include the relatively well-known examples of tattooing and body piercing. They may also include scarification, branding, implanting or beading (the insertion of objects under the skin) and forms of minor 'surgery'. A modified individual states:

I want more implants, want to put some silicone implants in my chest, planning on doing a trans-scrotum<sup>45</sup> on myself in the near future and am thinking of getting elf's ears<sup>46</sup> this summer. (*Skin Deep* magazine, August 2005)

Although I will not be engaging with debates on plastic surgery [see discussion below] it is important to note that some of the practices addressed here may be understood as

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<sup>45</sup> A 'trans-scrotum' is a piercing that enters the scrotum, usually from front to back.

<sup>46</sup> 'Elf ears' are the product of ear scalpelling where cartilage is repositioned at the top of the ear to form an elongated upper tip.

minor 'surgery' or surgical 'interventions'. This is particularly the case in relation to practices such as tongue-splitting and ear-reshaping or scalpelting. Increasingly other more extensive techniques in body modification practice have emerged, and these include procedures such as the removal or dramatic alteration of body parts, for example splitting of the penis or amputation of fingers. Although these kinds of practices are relatively rare (especially amputation) they do exist and are accepted, given sanction and sometimes celebrated by body modifiers or those with an interest in body modification practice (see for instance discussion at *BMEzine*). Body modification practices also increasingly involve performances and rituals, for example participation in suspensions and various forms of 'flesh events'<sup>47</sup>. Participating in events like suspensions has become a significant event in itself, with performances at clubs, festivals and parties (for examples of suspension conventions or 'suscons' and body modification orientated performances see *BMEzine*, *Torture Garden*, *Psycho Cyborgs* and *Kamehyan*). The rise in popularity of body modification practice and events has historically, although not exclusively, been associated with the Modern Primitive 'movement' which was discussed in detail in Chapter One. Body modification practices may also variously be understood as including beauty practices such as tanning, hairstyling, make-up and plastic surgery<sup>48</sup>. I will not however be including the latter within the remit of the term 'body modification' for this thesis.

I acknowledge the extensive work produced on plastic surgery particularly by feminists (see for example Balsamo, 1992, and Davis, 1995). These theorists have illustrated that plastic surgery is a process of modifying the body that seeks to conform to recognisable and 'conventional' beauty practices. However body modification practices are generally not used to conform to traditions of 'beauty standards' (see Chapkis, 1986). I am specifically interested in forms of body modification that have been used to conform to aesthetics of 'difference' rather than expected norms. These might include for example using scarification to create texture rather than prizing 'soft skin' or having stretched ear lobes rather than having 'regular' pierced ears. Therefore I focus on practices such as tattooing, piercing scarification and implanting rather than

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<sup>47</sup> These might include 'flesh pulls' where participants are joined by hooks and pull against one another. Other events might include temporary piercing projects where needles are used to create an effect or design on the skin, such as creating a 'corset' effect on the back by threading ribbon through temporary piercings.

<sup>48</sup> As well as the modification practices that I have outlined as pertinent to my study, in *Modify* (DVD, 2005) there are also features on drag, bodybuilding, permanent make-up and plastic surgery.

make-up or hairstyling. Body modification participants and practitioners involved in this thesis have experienced the practices describes in the table that follows.

*Practices Experienced by Research Participants:*

- *Tattooing*: both by tattoo machine and by hand, through the use of sticks and hand 'tapping'.
- *Body piercing*: 'standard' piercings, like navels, eyebrow, tongue, nipple and lip piercings.
- *Surface piercings, dermal anchors and microdermals*: Surface piercing includes practices such as the piercing of the skin on the forearm or hand, differentiated from 'standard' piercings because they are not (usually) permanent. Dermal anchors and microdermals are piercings that give the allusion of coming out of the flesh; a metal ball or stone sits on the surface and is held in place by a post under the skin.
- *Stretched piercings*: where piercings such as the ear or lip are gradually made bigger allowing larger jewellery to be worn.
- *Scalpelling*: may be used in various ways, for example extending the diameter of an ear or lip piercing, reshaping ears or in skin removal, creating scarification projects.
- *Branding*: either performed using an electro-cautery device that burns out a design on the skin, leaving surrounding flesh intact, or using a hot piece of sterilised metal quickly pressed to the skin, often called 'strike' branding.
- *Scarification*: usually performed with a scalpel to cut skin away. Scarring is promoted through loosening the forming scab, and depending on the desired effect, agitating the 'wound'.
- *Minor surgical procedures: tongue-splitting and transdermal implants.*
- *Suspensions, flesh events and rituals.*
- Also non-permanent modifications such as *play-piercing* and *corsetry*.

## The Studios and Research Participants

It is common for analyses of body modification practice to provide a breakdown of individual body modification choices, either to gauge participants in terms of 'lighter' or 'heavier' use of practices (see Sweetman, 2000), or to delineate their frequency in zones such as 'core', 'intermediate' and 'marginal' (see Crossley, 2005). I have not used such demarcations within this thesis. Although those involved in this project might be grouped into categories of 'heavier', 'marginal' or even 'extreme' users, categorising and identifying modified individuals in these ways was not something I wanted to replicate. I suggest that categorising adds little to the development and discussion of body modification *experience*. Imposing scales of body modification practice initiates a hierarchy and I did not want to make claims that those with 'more' body modifications had 'better' or more 'authentic experience' than somebody with a single modification. In turn I did not want to suggest that research participants were engaging in 'deviant' behaviour by labelling them 'extreme' or 'marginal'. I propose that imposing arbitrary demarcations serves only to foreclose the ways in which we engage with modified bodies.

Due to the nature of my research I have not included details of studios or personal information on participants in order to protect their confidentiality. For the same reason I have refrained from listing individuals' specific modifications, as this too could potentially reveal the identity of research participants, both to other participants and those who are involved in body modification communities. I do however discuss individuals' modifications in general terms throughout the thesis and discuss the practices that participants have engaged in. In cases where individuals could potentially be identified through their participation in less common practices I have not recorded the detail of the body modification; for example if a participant has a specifically shaped implant on their chest, I will refer to this simply as an implant on the upper part of the body, where the procedure could potentially identify the participant I have blocked out the practice in the text. Protecting the confidentiality of the studios and participants is built into my research design as I acknowledged that I was researching a fairly small group, many of whom have distinctive or 'unusual' body modifications. Pseudonyms have been adopted for both the names of individuals and of studios.

*Studios:*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Services offered</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Services offered</b>
<i>Star</i> studio, England.	Piercing, branding, scarification and scalpelling.	<i>Dragon</i> studio, England.	Custom tattooing, also flash tattooing if required.

*Participants In Ethnography (Longer Research Engagements):*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Research Methods</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>Duration</b>
<i>Andy</i>	Owner and full- time practitioner at <i>Star</i> .	Ethnography and multiple interviews.	November 2006-January 2007.	Approx 120 hours.
<i>Henry</i>	Full-time practitioner at <i>Star</i> .	Ethnography and multiple interviews.	November 2006-January 2007.	Approx 120 hours.
<i>Beth</i>	Part-time Practitioner at <i>Star</i> .	Ethnography and multiple interviews.	November 2006-January 2007.	Approx 120 hours.

*Participants In Observation (Shorter Research Engagements):*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Research Methods</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>Duration</b>
<i>Gary</i>	Owner and full-time practitioner at <i>Dragon</i> .	Tattooing.	Observation and interviews.	November and December 2006.	Observation: 12 hours. Interview: 1 hour.
<i>Fiona</i>	Client at <i>Dragon</i> .	Tattooing.	Observation and Interviews.	November and December 2006.	Observation: 12 hours Interviews: 4 hours.
<i>Colin</i>	Client at <i>Star</i> .	Branding.	Observation and Interviews	November 2006.	Observation: 4 hours Interview: 1 hour.
<i>Natasha</i>	Client at <i>Star</i> .	Scalpelling.	Observation and Field Notes.	December 2006.	Observation: 3 hours and field notes.

*Participants in Interviews Only:*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>Duration</b>
<i>Ellie</i>	Body Modification Participant.	November 2006.	1 hour.
<i>Jane</i>	Body Modification Participant.	December 2006 and January 2007.	2 hours 45 minutes.
<i>Hannab</i>	Body Modification Participant.	December 2006.	1 hour 30 minutes.
<i>Isaac</i>	Body Modification Participant.	December 2006.	1 hour 10 minutes.

Tattooing is a practice that is prevalent within the body modification community. *Fiona*<sup>49</sup> acted as initial contact and gatekeeper to facilitate an introduction to *Dragon* studio. *Fiona* has had a large-scale piece of tattoo work completed during the lifetime of this project. I accompanied *Fiona* on her initial visit to *Dragon* and also attended three tattoo appointments. Being involved in a 'repeat' tattooing experience was useful in a number of ways. Firstly, I was able to follow the 'life course' of the tattoo, as it took its initial shape in the planning and drawing stage, all the way through to the finished design. This gave me an opportunity to follow how sense and sensation occurred over time. 'Living-with' the tattoo became a mode of research engagement.

Access is a crucial issue for those wanting to engage in any form of ethnographic study. Observing *Fiona's* large piece of tattoo work provided a productive starting point to the gathering of empirical material. Running concurrently with this first phase of data collection I met *Andy* the owner of *Star*. We discussed the possibility of me spending time at the studio, recording interviews and attending some practices there. While on some levels my ability to access research participants can be viewed as fairly successful, particularly in relation to sections of the community that I identify as being 'over researched' (discussed later in this chapter), it is important to note that access, establishment of rapport and trust is an ongoing concern for the researcher. The fact that I am visibly modified also meant that my approaches to *Star* and *Dragon*, and research participants in general, were perhaps made easier than for those with no visible modifications (the insider/outsider status of researcher will be discussed in more detail in this chapter).

The notion that the interview can simply be used as a means to identify and 'understand' social relations has been widely critiqued (see for instance Scheurich, 1997). I take an approach that values the interview's ability to tell us something about the sensation of body modification experience. This approach is not one that is implemented in order to extract 'truth' or that perceives the interview to be a stepping 'outside' of social life. In my interviews with research participants there was a movement between discussing various body modification experiences and more general issues pertaining to body modification practice. My procedure for carrying out interviews included an initial meeting (if I had not already met participants and been

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<sup>49</sup> *Fiona* was chosen as an initial contact as we know each other and she was happy to have me follow the progression of this phase of tattooing with *Gary* at *Dragon*.

able to discuss the research), where I would explain my research, discuss matters of consent and confidentiality and also gauge the level of involvement that they wanted to have in the project. The initial introductory meeting ranged typically from thirty minutes to an hour. Interviews generally lasted for forty minutes to an hour, with any follow up interview lasting for thirty to forty minutes. The follow up interview, when it was possible, was useful for two reasons. Firstly, participants had the opportunity to add to their main interview, often having reflected on what we had discussed in the first, developing aspects of our discussion and clarifying points made. Secondly, after listening to the first interview I was able to follow up particular areas of interest, which further developed the content of our discussions. As well as carrying out separate interviews I also carried out interviews within *Star*, the location of my ethnography.

### **Being at *Star*: Creating Ethnography**

Ethnography privileges the observation and/or participation with individuals in their 'natural' group or setting. Conducting ethnography enables me to address body modification practice at the place in which it occurs: the body modification studio. Focusing on the studio provides a valuable starting point to both observe and participate in studio life:

Ethnographers argue, then, that it is necessary to learn the culture of the group one is studying before one can produce valid explanations for the behaviour of its members. This is the reason for the centrality of participant observation and unstructured interviewing to ethnography, since these methods promise to provide in-depth understanding of cultural perspectives. (Hammersley, 1991: 9)

Ethnography in sociology emerged through the work of the 'Chicago school' in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Much of this work, as Paul Atkinson (1990) notes, was concerned with the presentation of 'social worlds' (1990: 29). The emphasis of researchers was on studying communities within Chicago rather than travelling to other countries in order to engage in research on an 'other'. However Atkinson (1990) notes that the researchers from the Chicago school all too often continued to be drawn

to that which was viewed as 'exotic' or 'different' (see for example studies such as William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* 1993). Atkinson (1990) reflects that research often represented a 'preoccupation with 'under-life' in the city, the 'underdog' and the 'deviant' (1990: 29). Emphasis on researching the 'marginal' and 'subcultural' has become a long standing and well established tradition in sociology (see Hebdige, 1991).

Ethnographers often adopt an approach that is guided by a commitment to 'discovery' rather than the testing of a specific assertion, theory or hypothesis. Martyn Hammersley (1991: 2) notes that the adoption of an ethnographic method is not specifically differentiated from the ways in which we generally make sense of the world. Ethnographic approaches are often multilayered and rely on observation, discussion and an emphasis on experience as it occurs within the research milieu. These elements form the basis from which to discuss and debate research questions. It is in the work of Clifford Geertz (2000: 9) that the role of ethnography to produce 'thick descriptions' of social life has been realised. Hammersley (1991) reflects that 'the central goal of ethnographic research is often conceptualised as providing an analytic, theoretical, or "thick" description of social life' (1991: 23).

It is important to note at this stage the ways in which ethnography is produced. Hammersley (1991) notes that it is typical for an ethnographic study to use a varied collection of materials and resources that reflect the position of both researcher and participants. When carrying out my fieldwork at *Star* I collected various forms of data to produce a holistic account of the studio. It was important to make day-to-day recordings, write up field notes and note procedural conventions at the studio. However it was also valuable to identify other elements of studio life, the music that was played, being aware of the kind of environment that was created including the photographs and art work that hung on the walls, and to pick up on aspects that may seem inconsequential yet help us to consider the ways in which studio life is constructed and lived. One such example was the branding procedure that I observed at *Star*. Branding often emits one of the strongest smells of all body modification practices and before the practice began *Colin* warned his friend *Ellie*:

COLIN:        Yeah, it smells like pork...

ELLIE:        Pork? [Laughing] Ooh, weird!

COLIN: After about five minutes you stop noticing, at first it's like [does exaggerated sniffing] barbecue...

During the early stages of the ethnography I noted that *Andy* had a weak sense of smell. Not only could *Andy* not identify the smell of a blocked drain that was on one occasion wafting into the studio, but when he was involved in procedures that emitted particular odours he remained unaffected. He often had to be prompted by *Henry* and *Beth* to open a door or window when the smell in the studio became 'too much'. *Andy* therefore misses out on a particularly sensorial aspect of the branding practice. His ability to be unaffected by strong smells is not shared by others; *Beth* would often light an incense stick to remove the smell after a branding. *Andy* was concerned that I might find the smell off-putting, asking me: "it wasn't too smelly was it?". Having a poor sense of smell might also be understood as an advantage in these situations. *Andy's* clients are not necessarily aware that he might not be smelling what they smell, as *Colin* remarks: "Best thing of it's, *Andy's* vegetarian but he doesn't mind the smell of it all!" Taking note of these kinds of details helps us compile not only a picture, but also a fully sensorial account of studio life. Sense and sensation are intrinsic to the fabric of body modification procedures and therefore to an ethnography of its practice.

As much as possible I tried to fit in around the daily life of the studio and used the 'empty' times when there were no procedures taking place to have extended interviews and conversations with practitioners and/or participants. During the quiet periods I also factored in 'off-air' time as I did not want participants or practitioners to get 'interview fatigue'. Turning the recorder off meant that there were periods in which general chatting took place; this meant that sometimes I lost the opportunity to record some discussions, as inevitably when I turned the recorder off participants said something that I would have liked to pick up. Anxiety about getting 'good' material can damage reciprocity in these moments, and it would have felt clumsy to suddenly switch back to 'recording mode' when I had made it clear that it was a good time to have a break. This was where the field diary was invaluable. Additionally if the studio was very busy and studio staff were juggling a high volume of telephone enquiries or visitors, or were operating a queuing system for procedures, then I would often leave until things had quietened down. I was aware of the fact that they were giving up time during their

working day; not only did I not want to impact on their business, but as much as possible I did not want to add to the pressure they felt during busy periods.

## **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity in this project has been not only a desirable methodological standard but a necessity in order for the project to proceed successfully. Frederick Steier (1991) reflects that reflexivity involves a 'bending back' that acknowledges the importance of the researcher's role in the production of research knowledge:

In reflexive research, one issue that stands out across domains is that of a reflecting of process from reciprocators to researchers, and from researchers to reciprocators. This reflecting, or mirroring, takes place in different ways, as researchers can be seen to engage in reciprocator-like activities, and reciprocators in research like processes. (Steier, 1991: 173)

Steier (1991) and Ken Plummer (2001) suggest that research practice is a two-way process the researcher is implicated within, and helps produce knowledge with participants, rather than 'extracting' it from them:

Interestingly, if we begin to examine how we as researchers are reflexively part of those systems we study; we can also develop an awareness of how reflexivity becomes a useful way for us to understand what others are doing. (Steier, 1991: 3)

This circularity is something that in part defines reflexive practice. When the researcher engages in a reflexive relationship it is clear that the research itself is guided by the life of the researcher. Rosalind Edwards (1993: 191) and Frederick Steier (1991: 164) both maintain that researchers devise their research plans and strategies through drawing on their own life experiences. As such:

Reflexivity thus implies that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interest that these locations confer upon them. What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is or can be carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993: 16)

The importance of adopting a reflexive practice in research methodologies has been critical in feminist work (see Maynard and Purvis, eds, 1994; Mason, 1996; and Ward, 1999). Feminist criticism has coalesced around attempts to discredit objective 'scientific' research methods, instead putting an emphasis on the analysis of power relations (see Reinharz, 1992; Wolf, 1996; and Ribbens and Edwards, 1998), the importance of reciprocity and the sharing of knowledge within the research encounter (see Oakley, 1981, and Kennedy Bergen, 1993), and questioning the notion that there can be a separation between researcher and participants (see Reinharz, 1992, and Edwards, 1993). Feminist critique has engaged with 'advocating conscious partiality, a non-hierarchical relationship, and an interactive research process' (Kennedy Bergen, 1993: 201). Many of the feminist models for research practice have emphasised the importance of self-reflexivity, calling for self-disclosure through the production of a 'true dialogue' rather than 'interrogation' (Renzetti and Lee, 1993: 178). I have not assumed any natural or shared bond with modified individuals, in much the same way that the 'shared' experience of being a woman interviewing women (see Oakley, 1981, and Finch, 1984) has been critiqued for not acknowledging 'power and differences between women' (Skeggs, 1994: 80). Although I may volunteer information on myself if it is called upon or 'feels right', I make no assumptions about 'sameness' nor propose 'equalising' differences simply through sharing body modification experience with participants (I return to this issue in debates about my insider/outsider status).

The critique that feminists have applied to conventional research methods, as Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton and Linda Regan (1994) acknowledge, has sought to address some of the limits of research practice and the ways in which data is handled. However they do not assume that all feminist accounts automatically succeed in addressing the relational issues between researchers and researched:

Feminists have been stern critics of 'hygienic research'; the censoring out of the mess, confusion and complexity of doing research, so that the accounts bear little or no relation to the real events. But many of our accounts are full of silences too. (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994: 46)

Feminists have questioned the way in which research practices impact on participants (see Maynard and Purvis, eds, 1994) and acknowledged the ways in which feminist research practice might have unfortunate consequences for the researched (see Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). This has been highlighted for example by Julia O'Connell Davidson (2008) who debates the ethics of using material that she acquired from her 'subject' Desiree (I will return to this issue in the following section). O'Connell Davidson (2008) acknowledges that:

As time went on, I acquired a great deal of information and knowledge about Desiree's life and work in the context of our friendship, as well as through participant observation and more formal interviews. (2008: 54)

Discussing the reticence she now has about using her data, O'Connell Davidson (2008) suggests she got far more research material from Desiree than if she had been a 'traditional' researcher working within more bounded and even hierarchical ways. In seeking to establish equality and foster friendships, feminists may have unwittingly paved the way for more exploitative relationships to emerge. Diane Wolf (1996) notes that:

Thus, the kind of rapport feminists developed in an effort to reject cold, distanced, exploitative, and "male" methods may have backfired and produced a more intense version of what was being rejected. (1996: 20)

## **Intimacy and Embodied Practice**

The recognition of the body in sociology (see Fraser and Greco, eds, 2005) has been inspired by a turn that has recognised embodiment as key to knowledge construction:

The body and emotions have been reinstated as central topics in the critical assessment of knowledge, not as social and linguistic constructs, but as the ontological basis for the understanding of knowledge.... We might speak about a revival of the bodily basis of knowledge, a bodily turn. (Söderqvist, 1991: 150)

It is critical in a project that focuses on the body and body processes to recognise the importance of an embodied reflexive practice. Plummer (2001) focuses on the importance of embodied experience to the reflexive project. He is drawn in particular to 'life story work', a method that is based on producing stories through researcher/participant interaction:

We start to see that that the doing of life story research is also a personal, interactional, emotional, embodied work that can have implications for the self of the researcher as well as the researched. (2001: 213)

Plummer's (2001) emphasis on feeling and bodies in research projects signals the importance of sensate experience. Steier (1991) suggests that being attentive to the body within the research process enables a fully rounded research project to emerge: 'a reflexive researcher recognises the value of emotioning... in doing research' (1991: 179). Paying attention to the bodies and feelings within ethnography and the interview is vital to knowledge production and does not occur 'outside' the research relationship. In the following from Joan E. Sieber (1993), the adoption of embodied reflexivity on behalf of the researcher is not only desirable in terms of the relations it fosters between individuals, but is preferable in promoting and producing 'good' research:

Both ethics and politics are about the manifold of interests and feelings - one's owns and those of others - that must be recognised, understood and taken into consideration to achieve optimally good results. (1993: 14)

Although we may not necessarily adopt embodied reflexivity to specifically produce 'optimal results', I propose that it is crucial for research methodologies in general, and those which focus on the body in particular, not to 'lose' the body, both during the

active stages of the research when producing ethnographies and interviews and in the later stages when analysing material and writing up.

In her ethnographic study of prostitution, O'Connell Davidson (2008) discusses the relationship that developed between her and her research subject Desiree. O'Connell Davidson (2008) pays particular attention to the way in which both her and Desiree's bodies inhabited space, together producing 'the brothel':

Working in the brothel one day a week thus implied establishing a kind of emotional intimacy with Desiree. There was in addition a degree of physical intimacy involved in the work of the receptionist - the day was spent chatting to Desiree in various states of undress, sometimes helping her to dress, being called upstairs to fetch and carry when she had clients with her, and so on. (2008: 53)

O'Connell Davidson's (2008) participation requires not only an intellectual engagement but also a physical one. Acknowledging the kinds of relationships created between researchers and researched has been central to the development of my fieldwork. Although I have been able to build good research relationships with participants, it remained important to remind them that I was there as a researcher and not as a friend. These boundaries inevitably become blurred when rapport has been established, and researcher and participants engage in friendly exchanges. Although I wanted participants to talk freely I did not want them to forget that I was recording our conversations, and that something they said to me could eventually appear in this thesis.

One of the consequences of acknowledging embodiment in my ethnography was to pay attention to the ways that *all* bodies in the studio were affected by body modification practice. Once my fieldwork was over I was able to assess the ways in which participating in studio life marks participants, practitioners and researchers alike. It might be expected that exposure to practices would render them more familiar and less affecting over time. However as time went on I became more 'sensitised' to observing body modification procedures. I suggest that sensitisation is linked in part through a 'commitment' of all present to *engage with* the body as it is modified [see Chapter Seven for further discussion]. There is an investment by those present at the

body modification procedure for things to go *well* which implicates all within a 'willing along' of the practice. These experiences attune you more delicately to what the body has to go through in order to be modified. It is a tiring process, as a researcher I felt that it took something 'out of you' to be involved in body modification practices. This is a difficult feeling to account for, yet it is palpable in the studio when the exertion of the practice is over. There is something like relief that the procedure is finished and has gone well. The tiredness felt at the end of the working day at *Star* was perceptible in the bodies of *Andy* and *Henry*. After her tattoo sessions *Fiona* would often lie down for a couple of hours in order to recuperate. During our interview *Gary* also gestured towards the toll that tattooing exacts both mentally and physically:

GARY:           Having just had a couple of weeks off at Christmas, I almost didn't realise how tired, it is a build up, that you do actually need to take time off. 'Cos I only tattoo five days a week, if I was to do six days or seven days a week, I would burn myself out completely, it is a physical and emotional drain.

Sensitisation has in turn shaped the research that I have conducted. It is not possible for the body of the researcher to be either 'cool' or dispassionate at the points when another body is worked upon, either through the puncturing of the tattoo gun, the piercing of the needle or the burning of the skin. The researcher has to tune-in to the atmosphere and dynamic in the studio and move with and around the bodies in it. Bronwyn Parry (2008) suggests that unexpectedly coming across Iris Murdoch's brain at the Cambridge site of the Brain Bank 'transformed' her research philosophy and methodology (2008: 36). These moments of intimacy in research, whether it is in the remarkable encounter of Parry's (2008) or in everyday encounters with bodies, help us to proceed with methodologies with care. Acknowledgement of the bodies at the event of body modification practice is crucial, because this is the very stuff of research. To omit bodies means that accounts will have absences, whether in the leaving out of certain bodies, like that of the researcher, or in the disappearance of bodies altogether in the writing up stage.

## The Researcher as Insider/Outsider

- COLIN:                    So have you thought about getting it done [branding] or do you have some already?
- NATASHA:                No, I've only got a tattoo and piercings
- COLIN:                    So you're part of the movement, the modifying community...

My embodied and reflexive position during my fieldwork has in many respects produced some interesting findings. This excerpt from a discussion between *Colin* and myself identifies the insider/outsider position that I have been negotiating throughout the fieldwork process. *Colin's* question and my response gesture to some of the tensions and benefits inherent in the insider/outsider position. *Colin* includes me in the body modification 'scene' and community, which also signals an implicit assumption that I will be sympathetic to body modification practices because 'you're one of us'. However through his questioning *Colin* also seeks to place me in the community. Hammersley and Atkinson (1993) state:

Like gatekeepers and sponsors, people in the field will seek to place or locate the ethnographer within their experience. This is necessary, of course, for them to know how to deal with him or her. (1993: 80)

The exchange between *Colin* and myself also illustrates the potential tensions around the issue of 'sameness'. *Colin* implicates me in a community of which I may not be a part or have a very different relationship to than himself. I acknowledge that my research participants may make assumptions about me and my involvement, credibility and intent that I have little control over. Although I am perceived as an 'insider' my position within communities is also marginal as I do not generally participate in body modification events, nor do I have personal attachments within modification 'scenes'. Therefore I view my role as researcher to be on the 'edges' of body modification communities, where my knowledge and experiences of modification 'count', but I am removed from the kind of participation and connection that many of my research participants engaged in. Adopting an interested but 'marginal' position is often favoured in ethnography:

While ethnographers may adopt a variety of roles, the usual aim throughout is to maintain a more or less marginal position, thereby providing access to participant perspective but at the same time minimising the dangers of over-rapport. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993: 112)

The need to react sensitively to events as they occurred within the studio was extremely important. It is clear that the researcher often needs to perform a delicate balancing act. It was necessary for me to maintain an approach in the studio that was engaged but that did not get overly involved to the point where I moved from being a researcher to a friend. Nor did I want to adopt a persona that was 'blank' or uninvolved:

The cultivation of rapport and sound relations requires some attention to commonsensical practices of sociability. One way to gain rapport is to talk about those aspects of daily life that the researcher and subject have in common. Investigators who refuse to open up in this matter, even though they expect their subjects to do so, miss this opportunity to promote good field relations. Similarly, those who avoid participating in the subjects' activities, when it is possible to do so and makes good sense from the research standpoint, lose another opportunity. (Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991: 146)

During my ethnography I was often asked my opinion or invited to join in discussions about the design or practice that a client was considering. To have adopted a 'no comment' attitude for fear of 'affecting' studio life would have been unrealistic and indeed could have affected my credibility at *Star*. While researchers are guarded against establishing 'over rapport' or 'going native', it is often difficult to judge where one might draw the line. To some I may be perceived as 'overstepping the mark' before beginning research due to my experience of body modification practice. Yet it is this experience that has in part enabled me to carry out this project and is not something that can be 'left' before proceeding with interviews or ethnography.

As William Shaffir (1991) suggests, issues around self-presentation in the field affect all researchers. As someone who, no matter how problematically, will be identified as being 'part of a scene', I have been able to operate fairly easily in fieldwork settings. In

*Star* I have felt particularly comfortable as a researcher, for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is a certain amount of shared knowledge and perspective on the history of body modification practice between practitioners and myself. My ability to discuss the beginning of the popularity of the modification movement, particularly in relation to piercing and other body modifications, enables me to have a shared sense of placement with studio staff at *Star*. This has also been useful because it has allowed me to differentiate myself from other researchers that perhaps do not share this historical perspective [see following section]. Secondly there is an emphasis on an attitude that is anti-racist/-sexist/-homophobic in the studio, which I acknowledge has made carrying out my research a more 'comfortable' experience than it might have been in other places.

In initial encounters with clients and visitors to *Star* I have not been identified as an 'outsider' researcher. I have on more than one occasion been mistaken for a member of staff. During my ethnography I have been asked why I am conducting the research only once, and then it was assumed that this interest was a 'natural' one because I too was 'into' body modification practices. These experiences raise questions about 'authenticity' and claims of 'same-ness' which are difficult but necessary issues to negotiate within the fieldwork setting. It is possible for the researcher to find themselves in a 'trap'. On the one hand I am undeniably relying on my own modifications to help individuals feel at ease and (hopefully) secure their agreement to be research participants; yet relying on this kind of connection also suggests that the researcher, to some degree, relies on the recognition of 'same-ness'. As feminist criticism of methodology has made clear, assuming or relying on 'sameness' does not honour differences between individuals, nor is this a comfortable position for the reflexive researcher to assume.

The ease that I have experienced at *Star* and *Dragon* however is not necessarily transferable, and may not occur in other body modification settings. Sharing knowledge has enabled me to establish rapport with certain research participants but I also recognised that this knowledge may not be understood as having the same value for others. Indeed it may be viewed negatively and differentiate me from other groups. Being aware of body modification history may be irrelevant to younger modifiers and my status may be questioned through not having 'enough' modifications, having too many, or having modifications that do not add currency to encounters. I might be

perceived as too old, too young or have modifications that attach me to a particular era<sup>50</sup>. I may, in short, not have the same body modification 'cultural capital' (Turner, 2000: 40) in other settings.

David Fetterman (1991) notes that it is important to 'be yourself' in the field (1991: 89), and to not portray a persona that is radically different from your own. As Edwards (1993) illustrates, sharing specific interests with research participants engenders a relationship where 'the "giving of yourself" may be especially important' (1993: 193). However in the early stages of my ethnography I realised that it was not necessarily always best to 'give of myself'. I recognised that if I exhibited knowledge of body modification practice this could be treated favourably by some participants while also proving alienating for others. While my ability to share knowledge was invaluable with practitioners at *Star* and *Dragon*, I also recognised that it could create distance between participants and myself. I trod a fine line between showing that I had an understanding of body modification practice, while not wanting to be perceived as someone who already 'knew it all'. If it appears that researchers already 'know everything' then participants may be reluctant to share or discuss their experiences. Additionally, if as a researcher you are perceived as 'more modified' than your research participant it is possible that they may feel that their experiences are not as valid or valued by the researcher who appears to have 'been there and done that'. Experience is equated with knowledge of body modification practice. With this in mind I was careful to modify the presentation of my 'research persona' at *Star* and *Dragon* and during interviews when this was appropriate.

## **Over-observation, Sensationalism and Objectification**

During my fieldwork I identified that some participants in the modification community felt they were over-observed. Over-observation can make entry into the field more difficult for researchers as participants suffer from 'research fatigue' and are reluctant to

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<sup>50</sup> Modified participants who are in their thirties and forties often share anecdotes about these changes. For example, the placement and jewellery worn in the 'Madonna' piercing, a piercing above the top lip, is one that has changed over the years. Therefore the way that it is worn by an eighteen year old is different to a forty year old who was pierced in their twenties. Younger modifiers may also perceive the modifications of older participants, especially 'tribal' tattoos, as 'cheesy' and 'old-fashioned'.

take part in new projects<sup>51</sup>. The issue of over-observation was made clear in the initial email contact that I had with *Andy*, the owner of *Star*. He informed me that I was the fifteenth person to ask for help with research that year (at point of contact this was 1<sup>st</sup> November 2006). As he was currently committed to helping someone who was conducting research (filming a practice at his studio) he made it clear that if I was wanting to film clients then I would have to provide 'willing participants' (I had made no mention of wanting to film or take photographs in my initial contact). When I met *Andy* he explained that people usually contact him with a view to filming or photographing procedures. He said that he did not have a ready collection of clients that were happy to participate in film/photographic/research projects. This initial contact alerted me not only to the fact that body modification participants were potentially over-observed, but that research was often based on image-led projects. It was clear that practitioners were often called upon by researchers to assist them with access to participants. The issue of over-observation signaled to me the importance of distancing myself from other research projects that participants might have had experience with, in particular projects that were based on film or photographic content.

The desire to film and photograph body modification practices was something that *Andy* and I discussed at our initial meeting where I made it clear that this was not something I wanted to pursue. I felt that this in itself immediately helped to distinguish me from other students/researchers that had contacted him in the past. While *Andy* was not opposed to photography and film projects per se I believe he was tired of being asked to essentially facilitate such projects. The filming work that *Andy* initially referred to was carried out by a group of students for an MA project, who filmed a practice that was performed on *Henry*. *Henry*<sup>52</sup> said that when the students initially approached the studio he was happy to have them present and film the procedure. *Henry* was satisfied with the way in which the students conducted themselves and was pleased that they respected his requests, for example not talking among themselves when the procedure began. However, towards the end of the practice, *Henry* was finding the experience progressively more painful and as such he was becoming

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<sup>51</sup> In the initial stages of my research design I approached one body piercing studio that told me that they have so many people coming in wanting to do 'projects on piercing' that they no longer get involved in *any* research (source field notes).

<sup>52</sup> I couldn't record this conversation, as others were present in the studio, discussion noted in my field diary.

increasingly uncomfortable. He reflected that he was highly conscious that every time he moved his head the camera would click, whirr and swivel to catch his expression. Therefore in order to mask the way he was feeling he started pulling exaggerated faces for the camera. He suggested that he couldn't just 'go with' what he was feeling because of the intrusion of being 'followed' by the camera. *Henry* summed up by saying that although he was on the whole happy to have the MA students present, he found the experience difficult.

*Henry's* discussion gestures to the fact that even when research encounters are perceived to have gone 'well' the presence of the researcher has an impact on the participant. *Jane* was interested in taking part in this project precisely because it was not solely preoccupied with what she called the 'visual' nature of body modification practice: that is, explaining why she has chosen to look the way she does. I argue that not only is there a certain degree of 'research fatigue' within body modification communities but there is also, for some participants, an unwillingness to tread again the familiar ground of dominant research approaches. When discussing film projects at *Star*, *Beth* quipped that "lecturers must be getting sick of seeing it" as she had seen so many students make films of body modification for university projects. Research participants have provided the beginnings of critique about the ways in which researchers design their projects.

It is useful to focus on why there might be such a drive to photograph and film body modification practices. It is clear that researchers are potentially demanding a lot from practitioners. I suggest that if researchers are not careful in how they implement their methodologies, participants and practitioners could feel 'used' by the research process. I am not suggesting that we should not make or look at photographs of modified bodies. However I do question where the interest in producing images of body modification practice comes from. In her discussion of racism and visual practices, Monica Moreno Figueroa (2008) discusses the ethics of using photographs in the dissemination of her research. Moreno Figueroa (2008) suggests that the process of honouring the connections she has made with research participants through the sharing of personal photographs takes shape in 'looking emotionally'. She makes a persuasive argument for *not* showing the photographs and reflects:

Photographs, discourses of race and beauty, and experiences of racism can be easily entangled with the pleasure of looking, forgetting their histories of formation and the material and symbolic meanings they have accumulated. (2008: 75)

I suggest that for some researchers the 'spectacular' nature of the event of body modification practice becomes the reason to document. Seeing (and recording) the practice as it happens and observing how the body reacts (for example *Henry's* discomfort) is often framed in lurid terms. Photographing and filming body modification practices often highlight the sensational aspects of what can happen to the body when it is modified, whether in pain, or illustrating the viscerality of the practice with shots of blood, or scalped flesh, which is well documented at *BMEzine* and in films such as *Modify* (2005). John Anderson reviewing the film writes: 'some people may faint, others retch and still others sit transfixed by this morbidly fascinating movie' (*Modify*, 2005). The spectacle of seeing burned or pierced flesh cannot be underestimated. As Mariam Fraser and Nirmal Puwar suggest, sensationalising what may already be understood as a 'sensational' subject means that the researcher needs to be more aware of issues of sensationalism and objectification:

The risks of being accused of sensationalism are especially exacerbated for researchers who work in sectors which are popularly understood to be zones of subterranean worlds, such as gang cultures, prostitution, drug taking; essentially, those areas that are classified as deviant... (2008: 9)

I am not suggesting that all image-based projects of body modification take a 'shock value' approach. Equally as a researcher I too asked participants to let me observe and record their practices. However to do this in visual terms *as well* would, I feel, have been an intrusion. What participants had agreed to give was already 'enough'. I took this approach to the modified body not because I suggest that looking at modified bodies is necessarily suspect, but rather that to do so involves a responsibility of a particular kind.

The issue of objectification of research participants is one that I was aware of throughout the research process. Research participants often become one-dimensional

in accounts, which is difficult to avoid when there is a focus on a single aspect of a participant's life. Participants become 'modified individuals' above all else, in much the same way that O'Connell Davidson (2008) identifies Desiree's enduring identification as 'prostitute' or 'sex worker':

Writing up the research means objectifying the subjects of the research, and thereby reifying certain aspects of their experience and identity. When I wrote up data from my research with Desiree, I turned her into 'a prostitute' on the pages of the academic books and journals to which I contributed. (2008: 56, references omitted)

Concerns about objectification were framed in my own project through thinking about the ways in which we represent others through body modification practice. O'Connell Davidson (2008) writes:

No matter how reflexive, non-hierarchical and ethically sensitive the researcher, ultimately her or his task is to transform research subjects into objects, to fix them in texts (or photographs or film) that will be exposed to the gaze of, and be consumed by, other people. (2008: 57-58)

How we write others and ourselves in research is a fundamental issue for the researcher. It is however impossible to 'solve' the issue of objectification because to do so would be to stop making research with people altogether.

## **Becoming a Subject**

Although writing about body experiences may be difficult, challenging or uncomfortable, without them there cannot be an ethnography, or indeed an analysis, of body modification practice. As part of my ethnography I made the decision to engage in a body modification experience. I felt that it would benefit the creation of a sensate methodology to experience something that I was asking others to allow me to participate in, record and discuss with them. I acknowledge that this might be perceived

as 'going native' or as a consequence of developing 'over rapport' with research participants; however my decision was neither based on the need to be accepted or to gain access to others. Nor did I believe that undergoing a practice myself would mean that I would then 'know' what comparable practices/experiences for others would 'feel like'. Engaging in a practice was a way for me to get closer to some of the tensions I perceived to be present in creating a sensate methodology.

The procedure I chose is commonly referred to as a 'scalpel and stretch'. This involves the ear lobe being cut horizontally with a scalpel, followed by the stretching of the two parts of the lobe apart to accommodate a plug, in my case a size of 10 millimetres in width. Aesthetically this would provide symmetry to my ears (one ear lobe was already 10mm in diameter), and would also be a new practice for me to experience. *Andy* from *Star* was the practitioner that I chose to perform the procedure. *Andy* and I discussed the practice beforehand and we talked through his experiences of performing scalpelling. He suggested that the procedure is one of the less popular body modification practices, mainly because he believed people associate the word scalpel with cutting and pain. *Andy's* discussion with me prior to the procedure detailed what I could expect in terms of the practical and sensate aspects of the practice. In so doing he not only readied me, but prepared himself for what was to come. This was further reiterated during the procedure as *Andy* talked me through the practice and informed me at each stage what he would be doing next [see following chapter for more detail on how practitioners inform and 'ready' clients]. *Andy* made sure that I was as aware as possible of all the sensations/effects that I might experience, before, during and after the procedure.

In preparation I lay down on the couch and *Andy* began to assemble the instruments that he needed. At this time *Henry* was in the room with *Andy* and myself, although *Andy* didn't need assistance with the procedure. Having an 'extra' person in the room allowed me to reflect on what it was like to have someone watch as you receive a practice. I felt that having someone else in the room created a feeling of being more 'on show' than if it was just *Andy* and myself. This is not to assume that clients would automatically experience the presence of others negatively, indeed the attendance of others was often welcomed by those undergoing practices. *Andy*, *Henry*, *Colin* and *Ellie* discussed the sociable atmosphere in *Star* and how interested people would often 'sit in' and observe procedures:

COLIN: [talking about previous visit to *Star*] A guy came in and he was... getting a cutting after, when I came in to get my branding done... [he said] "Can I come in and have a look?" and I was like yeah, don't worry about it.

These 'extra' bodies help to shape the dynamic of the experience. Indeed it may in part be due to this tradition that I was able to join participants when they received a procedure. This 'sitting in' also fitted with *Star's* reflexive practice, where there was an emphasis on sharing information and knowledge (practitioners reflexivity will be explored in more detail in the following chapter).

When *Andy* cut my lobe with the scalpel, the sensation wasn't immediately perceptible, certainly not painful or uncomfortable. It was difficult to locate the feeling although I knew what was happening procedurally because *Andy* was talking me through the process. I was most aware of the feeling of blood coming from my ear and the wetness as it fell onto my neck. After *Andy* had performed the cut some customers came in to the front of the shop and *Henry* left the studio to deal with them. *Andy* was wiping around my ear and trying not to let the blood drip onto my clothes. Only a few seconds passed before he said he was going to 'do the stretch' and he pushed the jewellery into the scalpelled area of the lobe. Again this wasn't painful as such, more of a burning sensation coupled with the feeling of someone pulling and pushing against my ear. As I had bled during the procedure *Andy* advised me to lie down for a while. At this time I felt quite queasy, my ear was burning and had begun to throb. *Andy* gave me an Arnica tablet to help with the swelling. I lay down for about fifteen minutes and we chatted. I then got up and looked at myself in the full-length mirror in the studio and examined his work.

On leaving the part of the studio where practices are performed I went out into the front 'public' part of shop. On seeing me *Henry* said something along the lines of 'now it's my turn to ask you what it felt like'. I suggest that it is significant that I cannot remember what I said; it may have been something about my 'ear throbbing'. After the procedure I was preoccupied with what my body was doing and how I was feeling; indeed, I felt that I was still 'in' the experience. My inability to recall this conversation after the procedure made me question the status of the interviews and observations that

I had received from research participants, not that the data that I had collected wasn't 'true', but rather that in those moments there is also intangibility. It is apparent from my field notes that I felt under pressure to give an account and making this experience immediately 'sensible' felt reductive. Undergoing a procedure helped me to identify that it was not enough with modification experiences, including my own, to look only at what was said in order to provide a narrative or 'explanation'. Paying attention to what could not be said was also an important aspect of data collection.

Thinking, and feeling, research practice has made me question the ways in which we write the experiences of bodies in research:

The smells, the sounds, the spatial confines, the tensions and the emotional demands are not readily laid out on the academic table. Yet these are the affective properties of research labour. (Fraser and Puwar, 2008: 4)

When these experiences are ones that change the body it seems to be even more difficult to 'write in' all the layers that are required, 'representing' a body process, the ethics of doing so and the tensions that arise from writing about experiences in an 'academically respectable manner' (Fraser and Puwar, 2008: 2). Indeed, writing about the experience transforms it in very specific ways. On reading my experience back it seems to be a more serious, even 'clinical' account that does not convey the warmth of the actual event. This may in part be a self-censoring mechanism so that 'the so-called unscholarly, anecdotal, irrational, and unscientific dimensions of the research process' (Fraser and Puwar, 2008: 4) do not emerge. The body modification practice also seems to become deceptively even when it is written; perhaps again this is due to concerns about making the experience too 'fleshy'. However, accounting for the experience of bodies in modification practices should not be denied, indeed cannot. Perhaps capturing the sensory and corporeal in ways that are more expansive requires an element of creativity in writing. We might understand this in the spirit of what Back (2007) suggests when he proposes that sociology be made 'more literary' (2007: 164). While we can clearly find the sociological in the literary, such as the excerpt from Derek Jarman's *Chroma* (1994) below, it is perhaps more difficult to realise the ways in which sociology might be enhanced by a literary approach. Jarman's (1994) discussion of his deteriorating sight not only gives a sense of how he lived with AIDS, but the mode of

telling the eye test communicates it as an experience rather than a 'bare' telling of events:

This is a hard wait. The shattering bright light of the eye specialist's camera leaves the empty sky-blue after-image. Did I really see green the first time? The after-image dissolves in a second. As the photographs progress, colours change to pink and the light turns to orange. The process is a torture, but the result, stable eyesight, worth the price and the twelve pills I have to take a day. (1994: 123)

I am not suggesting that sociology should either become, or make claims to be, prose or poetry, but rather that through intimacy, as Fraser and Puwar (2008) suggest, we 'challenge the boundaries between creativity and analysis' (2008: 1).

It is of value to note that although time has passed since the scalpel and stretch procedure, I still have difficulty listening to the recording in its entirety. I am not yet ready to experience the procedure a 'second' time. I suggest it is reliving the 'fleshiness' of the experience that is difficult, which leads me to consider how research participants would feel listening to their own recordings and indeed reading their own 'fleshy' experiences in print. These reflections on intimacy and corporeality are illustrative of some of the methodological tensions inherent in trying to record and write about body processes.

## **Conclusion**

Although the approach of the majority of body modification analyses has sought to isolate *why* the modification sits on or in the skin - the details of how that relates to, and affects, the experiencing body, have been little explored. I have used a mixture of ethnography, observation and interviews in order to develop the ways in which we can begin to address the sensate experience of body modification practice. To create research practices that recognise the difficulties of representing yet also value experience and less determinate 'states' (for example, how participants feel after procedures) is what I have tried to address with this project.

My recognition of the role of intimacy and the need for sensitivity within the research setting has shaped my methodology. Creating research practices with participants has also led me to explore the ways we represent the intimate, the sensorial and the corporeal in print. Disseminating research in ways that fully account for the ways in which it is made is important. Creating 'fleshy' sensorial accounts is a risk for the researcher, but to highlight these aspects of research while also 'writing in' bodies is key. To do this necessitates the 'thick description' of social life that Geertz (2000) advocated. In counterpart Back (2007) values the 'thickness' of research accounts; replying to the work of David Silverman (1997) and his adoption of a 'minimalist' style in sociology, Back (2007) writes:

However, minimalism can result in what I referred to as *thin description* or *flat sociology* bereft of vitalism or life or - and I hesitate to write this - any beauty. I am advocating a literary sociology that aims to document and understand social life without assassinating it. (2007: 164, emphasis in the original)

I suggest that focusing on sensation, sound and visuality in this thesis illustrate just some of the ways in which participants experience the sense and sensation of body modification experience. Writing accounts of these processes that provide a full and thick description of the ways in which experiencing sensation occurs will be at the heart of this thesis. Creating a methodology that allows for levels of 'feeling', 'hearing' and 'looking' enables ways into thinking about how bodies engage with body modification practices and the ways in which processes are *lived* (see Chapters Five, Six and Seven respectively). Experiencing body modification practice principally for example as a 'sound experience', as vibration through the tattoo needle, as 'internal' body noises, the crunching or popping of ear cartilage, or through music that 'lifts' or 'gets you through' are valued in this thesis as ways in which to understand the modified body, rather than being treated as either inconsequential or subsidiary events. Focusing on sense and sensation means that we begin from these starting points, so that as I suggest in Chapter Six, experiencing the body as a receptacle or 'conductor' for sound has consequences not only for how discussion of body modification is framed but also for the conceptualisation of corporeality more generally. The way of seeing, hearing or feeling bodies as ones of sense and sensation is a direct challenge to the idea of the

body as a bounded sovereign individual. Examining the sensation of body modification practice provides different ways of conceiving the body. To identify for example with the changing quality of the skin, through tattooing or scarring, the texture created by implants, or the incorporation of metal into the skin's surface, is different to relating to the body as a system of blood, bone and muscle.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Sensate Reflexivity: The Creation of the Ethical Practitioner

'You will live with those [body modifications] for the rest of your life, do you want those for the rest of your life?' (*Andy*)

#### Introduction

My focus in this chapter rests on the role and working practices of the reflexive body modification practitioner. During the time I spent at *Star* and *Dragon* I observed body modification practitioners at work and it was clear they took seriously the fact that they marked individuals 'for life'. Practitioners clearly considered the effect of the body modification holistically on the individual, which is echoed by Sanders (2008) where he suggests that the tattoo artist has an 'ethical concern for the impact of the tattoo on the social and psychological well-being of the client' (2008: 78). While practitioners' professional working responsibilities are guided by legal and industry codes<sup>53</sup>, I also recognised the adoption of a collection of unwritten and at times 'unsaid' codes of conduct. These were productive of what I have understood as *embodied* and *immanent* ethics. Rather than having rules and regulations enforced on them, practitioners produced their own set of working practices from their *own body* experiences of modification practice. I therefore identify immanent ethics as rooted in the bodies of practitioners, based on *sensate* body knowledge of practices, which in turn is used to establish the foundation of their reflexive and ethical practice.

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<sup>53</sup> These include not working on individuals who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs and for tattooing, not working on anyone under eighteen years of age.

More weight is given to the analysis of tattooing in body modification literature, as identified in Chapter One, and this is replicated when we turn to analyses of practitioners. Not only is the majority of literature on body modification practice focused on the participant that receives practices rather than the practitioner<sup>54</sup> that performs them, there is very little emphasis on practitioners who do not tattoo. I propose that analysing the practitioner affords valuable insights into body modification practice and experience that complements research on participants. Participants' reasoning and motivations are the dynamic upon which understanding body modification practice often occurs. Analysis of the tattooist as practitioner can be seen in the work of Krakow (1994), Cole, ed., (2006), Sanders (2008), and briefly in the work of Fisher (2002). What these studies don't identify however is how important the *body* of the practitioner is to the body modification process. Through participating in studio life at *Star* and *Dragon* I observed that practitioners' corporeal knowledge of procedures not only helped them to perform practices, it also informed how they assisted clients before, during and after the practice. The body of the reflexive practitioner informed all stages of the body modification process. Therefore the reflexive practitioner is not only something they are, it is something they do.

In this chapter I focus on six key areas that I suggest constitute the reflexive and ethical practitioner and which form the basis of reflexive practice. These are the creation of 'empathic sociality', 'decision making' (including the role of aesthetics in making decisions), 'gate-keeping', 'access to practices', 'saying no and putting things right' and the role of 'custom' in producing quality-driven work. Throughout this chapter I highlight the ways in which the sensate experience of the body modification practitioner informs and underscores all of these categories of practice. I position sensation as creative both of reflexive and ethical practice and individuals.

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<sup>54</sup> However, it is important to remember that practitioners are also participants as they are often extensively modified.

## **Adopting a Reflexive Practice**

### *Empathic Sociality*

Practitioners' creation of reflexive practice was based in part on what I have understood to be 'empathic sociality'. All body modification practitioners need to a certain extent to be able to deal with people, and be prepared to deal with clients and their concerns on a daily basis. The creation of a good working relationship between client and practitioner helps practices to run smoothly while also allowing for negotiation if there are any areas of disagreement. Sanders (2008) emphasises the need for the tattooist to have good enough social skills so that trust between the practitioner and the client can be established (2008: 78-82). A certain degree of trust needs to be forged so that the practitioner can work on the client successfully. Having good interpersonal skills are also particularly important when mediating the repetitive elements of the job:

...tattooists, for the most part, are quite patient about answering the questions clients ask with numbing regularity (pain, price, and permanence). This helps to put the recipient more at ease, smoothes the service delivery interaction, and increases the chances that a satisfied customer - who will recommend the shop to his or her friends and perhaps return again for additional work - will leave the establishment. (Sanders, 2008: 45)

Depending on who is being modified, and the practice that is chosen, dealing with clients concerns and anxieties take up a sizeable amount of the practitioner's day. Those that have never been modified will generally take up more of the practitioner's time, whereas those who have already received practices will (probably) need less of this kind of attention. However there are certain details that the practitioner will need to address with every client, as Fisher (2002) suggests:

Another important aspect of tattooing, which is harder to learn, is the tattooist's interpersonal skills. Many clients are frightened when they come for tattoos, and the tattooist must repeatedly answer the same questions: Will it hurt? What does it feel like? How much does it cost? In addition, many clients have very

specific ideas about the image that they will have tattooed, and the tattooist will have to negotiate these desires with the cost, feasibility, and the long-term psychological and social welfare of the client. (Fisher, 2002: 98)

Both Fisher (2002) and Sanders (2008) gesture to the corporeal nature of the tattoo experience, whether in terms of pain (Sanders, 2008) or feeling (Fisher, 2002). I suggest that interlinked with the need for good interpersonal social skills is also a need to exhibit understanding of the corporeality of body modification experience. The studio staff at *Star* and *Dragon* made it clear that they believed a good practitioner was one that was able to *both* empathise and communicate clearly with their clients. Skilled practitioners were ones that could also communicate what the client might *feel* in order for them to provide a fully empathic response to the client. During everyday life at *Star*, *Andy* for example, often told clients that he would usually not perform a body modification that he had not already experienced himself. In my discussions with *Gary* he made it clear that being able to empathise with clients was constituent on his experience of being tattooed:

NATASHA: Has doing tattoos made you feel different about getting tattoos yourself, do you think?

GARY: Perhaps the other way around. I think having tattoos has made a difference to doing tattoos on people, I feel quite sympathetic to people and their emotions. I'll always do my best to try and make it as much as a comfortable experience all round for them as possible.

*Gary* aims to empathise not only with how the tattoo feels for the client but suggests that their general well-being, and 'emotions' are acknowledged within the tattoo encounter.

Emphasising the sensation of practices to clients was something that practitioners at *Star* and *Dragon* did on a daily basis. There were many occasions in which practitioners used their own bodies to articulate their experience of body modification, and in doing so address clients concerns. One example of this can be seen in relation to discussing pain. Practitioners would often use their own heavily modified bodies in order to initiate conversations about pain and sensation, especially in relation to differences

between practices and how they felt on different areas of the body (explored in more detail in the following chapter). *Andy* would often advise clients that were having a first piercing that just because he was extensively modified it did not mean that he was impervious to pain, or that he was no longer nervous before receiving body modifications (again, for further discussion see following chapter). This discussion functioned on many levels. It reassured clients who might be worried about exhibiting nervousness in front of heavily modified individuals, perhaps feeling that they would be perceived as 'weak' or ridiculed by them if they were worried about feeling pain. It also gave them some space to voice any concerns they had about the practice. Lastly, if they hadn't fully considered that the practice might hurt or cause some sensation, it readied them for what was to come.

As well as empathising and communicating clearly about practices, practitioners also *anticipated* potential issues that the client may encounter. An example of this can be identified in *Henry's* advice on tongue piercing. While many clients who came into *Star* for a tongue piercing were worried about whether it would hurt, which practitioners also addressed, *Henry* was also keen to give information to clients that they had *not* asked for, questions that they would not know they needed to ask. He therefore draws attention to issues relating to dentistry and tongue piercing. *Henry* tells clients that if they agitate the piercing with their teeth, a common habit that participants can form, they can cause their teeth to 'grind down' due to the constant contact of metal with enamel. He shows clients his worn front teeth and cautions them against this habit so that they don't develop the dental problems that he himself has experienced. It is therefore *Henry's* experience of *living-with* a tongue piercing that enables him to fully inform clients that seek this practice.

Practicing immanent ethics not only directed individual working practices but also helped to create the atmosphere in the studio. At *Star* and *Dragon* practitioners were prepared to spend time with clients and discuss practices, even if it was apparent that clients may not be altogether decided about getting a body modification. This can be followed through *Henry's* experience with a repeat visitor to the studio. While talking with *Henry* one day at *Star* a young man came into the studio to get some information about a piercing that he was considering having. *Henry* spent some time with him addressing his questions before the potential client left. On leaving the studio *Henry* remarked that he was somebody who came into the shop usually about once a week to

ask about different practices, although he had yet to get anything done. Rather than being annoyed that this was someone who was wasting his time, *Henry* reflected that he didn't mind his repeated returns because he was, he suggested, 'trying things out'. Potential clients could use the studio as a place to 'try out', whether that is in terms of visiting the studio, interacting with practitioners and other clients, or in rehearsing what it might feel like to get a modification. *Star* recognised this as a need for potential, or perhaps never quite ready, clients. There is a level of responsibility and communication at *Star*, which is evidenced through the information that studio staff give to clients. They provide an all round service of care before, during and after practices, even as I have suggested to 'non-clients'.

Building a reflexive practice can be contrasted with those studios that treated individuals in ways that were judged by participants to be neither social nor empathic. Entering some body modification spaces can be an intimidating experience for clients or potential clients who are not visibly modified, or indeed have the 'wrong' kind of modifications. *Hannah* reflects on this in relation to both her own and others experiences of visiting body modification studios:

HANNAH: Some people... are really nice in them but some are really rude... [name omitted] went into one recently... and she came out saying... "They were so unfriendly"... wouldn't even talk to her, she felt it was a bit like 'cos she wasn't covered in tattoos... She wanted to talk to them about what she was thinking of having done and they just talked amongst themselves and didn't sort of say "hello, can I help you?" and sometimes... that can be the attitude in places like that.

That body modification participants and practitioners may create their own hierarchies in relation to levels of modification is perhaps not surprising. As we saw in Chapter One, this kind of sentiment can be both extreme, in the appearance of the term 'plainskins', or witnessed more subtly in practitioners' working practices. The negativity of the practitioners' assessment is keenly felt by *Hannah* and her friends. Through their extensive modification work such practitioners have become indifferent to those that do not share their level of involvement and experience of sensation. The attitudes of such practitioners are based on an embodied judgement of others. Rather

than be empathic to the physical experience of clients who are less modified than themselves, they are uninterested because they perceive in the unmodified, or not sufficiently modified, a body that does not share their sensate experience. The fact that practitioners are able to dismiss or filter out clients that they perceive as not worth spending time on also gestures to the increased popularity and demand for body modification practices. Practitioners who have an established reputation can, it appears, afford to turn work away. *Andy* acknowledged the aloof attitude that *Hannah* describes as being endemic in how some practitioners work. Through identifying these ways of working he is able to position himself apart from such working practices:

ANDY:           Essentially any client [who] comes in will get treated the same, it's not like, oh well you're a highly modified person: "Hi, welcome to the shop!". "You've got no piercings, you can sit there for ten minutes before I actually speak to you...". It doesn't work like that...

As well as informing the reflexive and ethical practice of practitioners, meeting clients and empathising with their experiences was cited by practitioners as one of the benefits of the profession:

ANDY:           It's quite interesting, I do see my job as a basically a psychology study of the human race, which is what I enjoy about it.

GARY:           The rewarding part of the job is seeing people really happy, both with the stresses and the strains of before, during and then after.

Connecting either with happiness or the opportunity to be with, even 'study' people as *Andy* suggests, is recognised as one of the benefits of meeting and working with clients. Empathic sociality ensures not only the well-being of the client, but also guards the practitioner against performing practices that s/he was not happy to perform. Creating a reflexive and embodied practice formed the basis for two key areas of concern for the reflexive practitioner: decision making and gate-keeping.

## *Decision Making*

The reflexive practice created by practitioners at *Star* and *Dragon* suggested that they were alive to the fact that clients may make what they judged to be potentially unsuitable or impulsive choices: 'Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should!' (*Henry*). *Andy* and *Henry* at *Star* spent much of their working day discussing the pros and cons of body modifications, both with the client and with their friends and family. Both practitioners were anxious to safeguard as much as possible against decisions being taken that might later be regretted. Sanders (2008) suggests that tattooists take issues of risk and regret seriously. Regret, as we can see in the excerpts that follow, is a central concern for the practitioners at *Star*. Throughout my participation in studio life at *Star*, *Andy* repeatedly returned to the fact that he actively tried to dissuade clients from participating in certain procedures:

ANDY:           Occasionally, I mean it doesn't happen so much here because I religiously go through with people loads of times, say to them, "the reason I'm also doing this is to let you know... Look, we are the only studio that tries to talk you out of doing these things..." I spend a lot of time trying to go "don't do it" or "be aware of what you're doing, [how it] affects your body...". It's trying to get people to understand, especially younger people, [they say] "oh, I don't care". No, of course you don't now, but I guarantee in five years you will.

Implicated in *Andy's* discussion of how he deals with client's requests is his emphasis on his own accountability in relation to the body of the client. He takes the modification of bodies as something that in effect becomes his responsibility. Because he perceives in some clients a lack of concern and maturity in how they relate to their own bodies, *Andy* effectively adopts the role of guardian, protecting the client from her/himself. Critically *Andy* also works on a multi-temporal level, not only accounting for the present but also for the future-to-come, an issue that is explored further in Chapter Seven. *Andy* assumes responsibility for factoring the 'later' into any modification decision; he estimates what an older client may find acceptable or not on their body.

Temporality becomes a background note to many of the discussions that *Andy* initiates with clients.

Practitioners' attempts to guard against impulsive decisions being made by clients occur before and even during any procedure; an example of this occurred during the final tattoo appointment that I attended with *Fiona*. During this appointment with *Gary*, *Fiona* asked, about halfway through their session, if he would be able to add on an 'extra' part of the tattoo. She wanted a small detail of the design that appears on her inner arm to be replicated on the inside of her wrist. This was a spontaneous decision on *Fiona's* part and it was not an element of the original tattoo plan, nor accounted for in the tattoo schedule that her and *Gary* had negotiated for the afternoon. *Gary* responded by suggesting that he wouldn't have time to do it during their appointment and that perhaps it was something that could be added at a later date. However when *Gary* finished the tattoo there was time 'left over' at the end of the appointment. When I later discussed this with *Fiona* she suggested that she thought that *Gary* did not want to do the extra bit of tattooing because it was 'spur of the moment'. *Gary's* way of building ethical practice into this situation is subtle and although *Fiona* spots *Gary's* intent, it could also be easily lost on the tattooee. Reflexive and ethical practice therefore operate both overtly and covertly in the body modification studio.

### *The Role of Aesthetics*

Practitioners' working practices were also guided by a desire to give the client the best-looking modification that was possible. This was particularly important in relation to tattooing. Tattooists will often have ideas about what looks good and the ways in which they can refine clients' ideas so that they receive the most aesthetic tattoo. Clients sometimes request tattoo designs that are too complicated, too small or ill thought out. Indeed it is not uncommon for clients to have ideas that would be impossible to translate into a good design. Tattooists generally build up a working knowledge of what 'works with' and looks good on the body. *Gary* reflected on how he executed a good tattoo:

GARY: I think having studied graphic design I think I always like to make things reasonably bold and simple, because I think that's what works

with most effectiveness as a tattoo and stands the test of time better as well.

*Gary* builds temporality into the practice of the modification, namely how time will alter the look of the tattoo. The tattoo needs to not only look good now, but also in years to come. Jonathan Shaw, a tattooist from New York, suggests: 'I have a certain aesthetic, a sense of balance and spaces. I think about how a piece will look ten years from now' (Krakow, 1994: 101). Following certain aesthetic guidelines also occurs with other design led modifications such as branding and scarification. These practices are often executed in clear and simple ways in order to maximise the 'cleanest', best design with most impact.

Letters, patterns and symbols are particularly popular designs when choosing branding and scarification. *Andy* often found that there were gaps between his and his client's levels of artistic 'acceptability', which were especially manifested when clients came into the studio with their own designs. *Andy* and I discussed one client that he found particularly difficult to work with, principally due to the client wanting what *Andy* perceived to be a poorly executed design. *Andy's* aesthetical concerns also merged with an ethical consideration of what it meant to 'disrespect' the particular symbol that the client had drawn. After meeting the client with their design *Andy* refused to put the design on the client's body until he had redesigned it. Feeling uneasy about the design, placement and what it would mean to him to reproduce the design badly, he reflected:

ANDY: I said "I've got to redesign it, 'cos I'm not prepared to do [it] the way you designed it and it needs to be redrawn." In the end, [he] ended up going to [another studio] and having it done. Which I then saw... if that's what he wanted fine, it's not what, it's quite bizarre. I was trying to say, "I understand this thing means something to you but it's quite a sacred symbol, it's really badly drawn so it's... very disrespectful to the symbol that you're having put on you... I'll redraw it so that it looks similar..." and he came back, "oh, it's all done now" sort of thing.

something that extreme, you'll be quite happy waiting ages to get it done. If you decided in a year you don't want it done then... you're very lucky I didn't do it..." I've had that with quite a few [REDACTED] "I want... [REDACTED]" "Yeah, okay, well hassle me for six months to a year and I'll think about it". Three months later: "do you still want [REDACTED]<sup>56</sup>?" "No". "Well it's a bloody good job I didn't... you told me that you really wanted it, and you knew yourself, and you knew your body, but I knew that you were full of shit, y'know. Because you were just saying [that] because you wanted it, you didn't really think about the consequences of your actions..."

*Andy's* discussion reflects his commitment to performing certain modifications only when he is completely confident that he is doing the right thing *and* if clients are as sure as they can be that this is something that they want. If clients are 'truly' committed to getting a practice and maintain their interest in ways that he perceives to be genuine, that is maintaining contact with him over *time*, they may then find themselves successful. The gate-keeping role is both temporally constituted while also fully embodied for *Andy*. Due to his corporeal knowledge of practices he infuses his decision making with the sensate repercussions of engaging in body modification practices; his attitude contrasts with the 'playfulness' advocated by Musafar (1989).

Reflexive practice often comes into focus when clients request practices that will be highly visible on the body. In terms of visible modifications reflexive practitioners often prefer to work on adults who are older and/or established in a career rather than embarking on 'heavier' work on younger individuals who may still be in education, not working and so on. Discussions of how body modifications were likely to be received in both personal and professional life were integral to practitioners' concerns. *Andy's* reflexive practice meant that he often denied clients' requests for a variety of reasons, as we have seen, but also due to concerns he had for their future employment; as will be explored in Chapter Seven, *Andy* is aware of the effects of 'the gaze'. *Andy* was extremely concerned that extensively or visibly modified individuals would face problems within their chosen (or not yet chosen) professions, as was illustrated in the following discussion between himself and *Ellie*:

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<sup>56</sup> Procedure omitted for confidentiality.

Considerations of aesthetics then merge with the personal responsibility that *Andy* feels in relation to replicating a symbol that he feels has a meaning that will be ‘disrespected’ if not properly executed.

All body modification practitioners have to engage in an element of decision making with clients; the placement of the practices on the body, questions of design and so on. Inherent within the decision making process was also a gate-keeping element where the practitioner gauged whether participants choice of practice, design and so on were appropriate for them.

### *Gate-Keeping*

The role of gate-keeper was clearly delineated in the working practices of studio staff at *Star*. The course of the working day was peppered with examples of their reflexive gate-keeping practice: they routinely suggested that it would be better for clients to wait a while before getting a certain practice, would offer alternative practices in lieu of the initially requested practice, or would effectively overrule clients’ requests. Because body modification studios recognise the need to regulate themselves, in part to guard against the risks of becoming more formally regulated, some body modification practitioners are overly careful about who gets access to services<sup>55</sup>.

One of the classic mantras of body modification practice is that the individual should be able to exercise control over their own bodies, as was explored in Chapter One. Asserting control over the body has been an organising principle for body modification communities; as such the ‘founding father’ of the Modern Primitive movement Fakir Musafar suggests: ‘It all comes down to: *it’s your body, play with it* (Musafar in Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 36, emphasis in the original). However, instead of sanctioning clients’ play and experimentation with the body, the practitioners at *Star* will effectively block clients’ wishes if they don’t think they are right for the individual:

ANDY:           It’s a very fine line between sort of saying, “well, yes it is your body, but we know better”, or at least, what my usual thing is, “if you really want

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<sup>55</sup> Regulation is an important issue in body modification communities. In California earlier this year a man broke his leg during a fall while doing a suspension. The ire of the local media was matched by that of body modification participants, who said that this kind of attention could result in a crackdown on body modification practices more generally (see *BMENews*, 2008).

- ANDY: I've branded police before... A friend of mine... I did a cutting on her before she was joining, but I knew she wanted to join the police, but I did like a [symbol]... She's not allowed to wear piercings. 'Cos she always says, "what can I have?" and I'm [saying] "you can't have stuff done! Let's be practical, you're on the floor, which means that someone's going to come up at some point and bundle you, so at the end of the day they're gonna catch all your things, you know, you really don't want..."
- ELLIE: And that's gonna hurt!
- ANDY: Yeah, and ripping stuff out. She's always going on about bits and bobs, "I'll get this done here", "yeah but how you gonna cover these brandings... you know, don't they mind?", "Well they haven't said anything", "Yeah, but if you want to go into this as a profession, you got to think a little bit about..."
- ELLIE: Fair enough if you're just a police officer but as soon as you get up to inspector or a superintendent...

Therefore *Andy* factors in the practical and professional implications of the client's request for body modification practices. *Andy* clearly believes that he makes decisions for the client's own well-being but in so doing he could also be perceived as removing their agency. *Andy* and *Henry* prioritise their knowledge and experience of modification practices over that of their potential clients; therefore their ways of working could be understood as both intensely responsible as well as repressive. The clients that *Andy* tries to talk out of getting modifications are often old enough to vote, drive, get married and make other important decisions for themselves. Further it is difficult for clients to challenge practitioners' decisions due to their embodied status as the ones with knowledge.

One way of creating access to more 'extreme' procedures was for clients to build up their collection of body modification practices. In so doing they would create a 'body of knowledge'.

## Accessing Practices: The Experienced Body

Historically, 'earning' access to certain practices has been a feature of the body modification 'scene'. Figures like Fakir Musafar were able to effectively act as gatekeepers, as discussed in relation to Modern Primitives in Chapter One, as there was not the dissemination of information on practices that exists today. Those who wanted to participate in certain body modification practices had to be effectively granted permission by those who had knowledge of them:

Since the late 1980s, I have had a number of people ask me to help them take the Spear Kavadi of the Hindus. One woman, a Christian, asked me dozens of times. I made her wait two years until I felt her motives were clear and she was appreciative of the Hindu tradition from which it came. (Musafar, 1996: 332)

Yet this notion of 'building up' to certain practices and events is not necessarily replicated in contemporary modification practice. *Andy* stated that:

ANDY: I came through from the thing where very few people had ever done suspensions. It was always something that you felt you were working up to... whereas nowadays they are done pretty much willy-nilly.

It was clear from the time that I spent at *Dragon* and *Star* that those clients who had built up a history with practitioners would receive services that the average client walking in off the street might not. Building up a collection of body modifications with one practitioner<sup>57</sup>, was a critical aspect of a reflexive practice that sought to do the 'right' thing for the 'right' client. Establishing these kinds of 'deeper' relationships with clients enabled practitioners to work in ways that would not be appropriate with the

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<sup>57</sup> Participants will often remain loyal to a particular practitioner so that their style is followed through on the participant's body; this is particularly the case for tattooing but also occurs in relation to other modifications. It has generally been considered 'bad form' to change your tattooist if you are someone who is getting more than a couple of pieces of work. However this may not always be the case if participants 'collect' work by various artists (see Vail, 1999, for discussion of tattoo collectors). Increasingly, modifications by those who do skilled implants, branding and scarification work are also collected by participants, however I have not found any studies that focus on collectors of these procedures.

average client. This is explored further in this chapter, where *Gary* discusses clients who give him full artistic rein in the creation of tattoo designs.

Practitioners' judgements about who would, or would not, get access to procedures was grounded in what I understood to be 'body knowledge'. Individuals that had demonstrated a certain degree of commitment to body modification practices would be far more likely to get 'extreme', invasive or visible practices than those with little or without certain modifications. Therefore having one or two piercings or a small tattoo would not be sufficient 'body knowledge' to then get a large scarification piece. Extensive tattooing for example would be sufficient body knowledge to live with the consequences of a tattoo on 'public' skin, such as the hands, neck or face. Those with experience of piercings, especially stretched piercings, would have sufficient body knowledge to receive surface piercings. These kinds of distinctions were not hard and fast rules but such demarcations were used to make decisions about clients' requests. Those who have extensive modifications, heavy tattooing, branding, scarification and implant work are understood as having knowledge of practices, and crucially of their own bodies, that those without these experiences did not. If clients were gauged in relation to their degree of modification practice, this was also something that could be used by the client to choose a practitioner. If the client judged the practitioner to have poorly executed body modifications, or conversely, if the practitioner had little or no modification work themselves, they might also find that clients chose to go elsewhere. This is reflected in the following from Gill Monte a tattooist from California who states: 'My advice: Don't get tattooed by someone who isn't heavily tattooed' (Krakow, 1994: 100).

Regular clients at *Star* garnered access to practices that for example had a higher rate of rejection, and therefore scarring, because they were trusted to have fully taken on board all the possible consequences of the procedure. Further, through repeat visits, they had shown themselves to be 'serious' about body modification and were therefore also prepared for the possible reactions and outcomes that might occur. These participants had also demonstrated a degree of loyalty to their practitioner, which clearly benefited the client and practitioner both. This is apparent in the following from *Andy* where we discuss a client who comes to him semi-regularly for piercings:

ANDY: I did... on her arm [with surface piercings] because she's an old client. I've done like loads on her neck. The problem is with so many of the areas, it's saying to people, "you do realise that this will possibly scar you?". If it moves, surface piercings can leave quite bad scarring because [of] the whole thickness of the bar coming out... And I say "no, I won't do anything here, no, it's a waste of my time, the money, it's a waste of effort, there's no point in me doing it...". If it's someone like [name omitted] who's had quite a lot of piercing done here with us, who's aware of the score a little bit more, then I will do it for them.

It is the familiarity and trust that *Andy* has built up with the client that gets her access to 'riskier' practices. *Andy* uses his knowledge of clients as a barometer by which to help gauge the suitability of a practice. This then forms an effective 'testing ground' from which to decide whether he should perform a particular modification.

If personal knowledge effectively guided *Andy* towards performing (or not performing) certain practices, it was by no means a guarantee of what he would feel comfortable with. This was illustrated when he discussed the only practice that he wished he hadn't performed:

ANDY: It's what she wanted, [redacted]<sup>58</sup>, she was a modified person... she'd been doing it for a long time. So I was like, "Okay, you know your body, you know yourself, you're heavily tattooed, if that's really what you want, okay, I'll do that for you." It's the only thing I wish I'd never done... It's since then I don't do what everyone else does. I do what I think is best... and you get the results that you're more happier with.

*Andy* clearly emphasises the degree of modification knowledge that his client had built up as being integral to his decision to perform the practice. *Andy* suggests that those who have a high degree of body modification experience are able to gauge more effectively their desire for extreme or invasive procedures. They effectively 'know' their bodies in ways that those without do not. *Andy's* discussion suggests that performing this practice has marked him in ways that may not be apparent to his client. Indeed,

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<sup>58</sup> Procedure omitted for confidentiality.

although *Andy's* client was happy with the result, his feelings of regret linger. His unhappiness with the practice may have, in part, propelled him towards developing his reflexive practice. In light of what he feels is 'right' he protects himself from feeling the effects of performing practices that do not sit well with him as a practitioner.

### Saying 'No' and Putting Things Right

*Andy* operates within what has become for him a highly developed and clear set of working boundaries. One of the ways in which reflexive practitioners marked out their practice as responsible was in relation to others that they understood as providing ill-executed (whether practically or ethically) work<sup>59</sup>:

ANDY: I've seen them [potential clients] come in with just like... no way, the age, with quite big pieces of work done, but you know, pwooh [exhales]... We try to talk people out of it, doing things, purely because I know that things change and you have to live with the repercussions of it.

Debates around what practitioners at *Star* were willing to do and what other practitioners were willing to do framed many of the discussions between clients and practitioners within the studio. It was common for individuals to come into the studio and get advice about a particular practice from *Star*, decide that what was on offer there was too expensive, and go elsewhere for cheaper services. Individuals also often came into the studio to get a second opinion on the modification work that they were to receive/had received, or more crucially if they needed something 'fixing':

ANDY: I still get some stuff that really is... it's beyond me why they let them walk out the door with it or did they not realise, y'know? Like with

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<sup>59</sup> An example of poor work could be identified in bad tattooists, also sometimes known as 'scratchers'. The work of scratchers may be defined through many factors such as the poor quality of inks used and design or a lack of hygiene in their execution. This is reflected in the fact that they may not have permanent or sanitary premises. Amy Krakow (1994) in her 'Lexicon of Tattoo Lingo' states: '*Scratcher*: Ugh. Don't go to one. A scratcher is a bad tattooist' (1994: 224).

navels, where it's not even in the navel... In this day and age when there is so much information... there is no excuse for it. There is so much stuff on the internet that you can literally go and get a step-by-step guide that tells you exactly what to do... Y'know, it's very much why I... slowly build my reputation up... on sounder foundations, I didn't want to be known as the cheap place, want to be known as like, if you go for experience then go there.

'Experience' then is the quality that *Andy* wishes to associate with himself and his studio. Maintaining quality work and attracting repeat clients helps to guarantee the longevity and prosperity of the business. However 'experience' suggests that the reflexive practitioner perceives good quality work to be achieved in part through practice over time. It is a quality that is also valued by his clients:

NATASHA: Where did you travel from?

COLIN: From [about 100 miles away]... this is *the* place to come to, it's worth travelling to come to ... [they've] got the experience.

Generating a reflexive and ethical practice clearly has an impact on the professional life of the studio as a business, consider the following from Sanders (1988):

This guy came in and wanted me to tattoo something on his forehead, I refused to do that... The society doesn't accept it, and I don't want my name associated with something like that... If someone wants "fuck you" written across his forehead, I don't want it known that I was the one that did it. (1988: 230)

Refusing to do certain designs or modifications is an important aspect of reflexive practice. Both *Star* and *Dragon* would not perform designs that they felt to be offensive, not only because they were something that practitioners were ethically opposed to, but because they had the power to actively damage the reputation of the practitioner:

Clients might request tattoos of swastikas or overt racist or anti-social phrases, and the tattooist must learn to negotiate with these clients or refuse to do the

tattoo. Most of the time, tattooists are unwilling to do tattoos that they are morally opposed to because they are fearful of getting a reputation for this type of tattoo, having to do more of them, increasing their own occupational stigma, and perhaps losing other business as a result. (Fisher, 2002: 99)

*Andy* has clear ideas of the kind of studio that he wants to create at *Star*. One of the practical ways that he institutes this is through the adoption of a fixed price structure. Every day at the studio the pricing structure was an issue for clients; some potential clients would try to bargain a cheaper price by saying that a rival studio would perform the practice for less. This never had any impact on practitioners at *Star*. Sanders (2008) touches on this issue for tattooists where he reflects that they often have to deal with clients that want to know ‘what can I get for 25\$’ (2008: 106), the problem of bartering is one that both *Andy* and *Beth* discussed:

BETH: I used to work at [another studio]... so many people coming in from [a rival studio] with a bad tattoo... Really cheap, wanted a cover up... [they] chose a tattoo... and you tell them how much it's gonna cost, they're like, "I'm not paying that" and walk out. That's why you got what you got in the first place! [the original tattoo]... Or they come in... younger people... with their parents, got some money for their birthday... "I've got this much... what can I get for this?" Why don't you save your money or buy a voucher and come back in a month and get what you want instead of just trying to buy a cheap tattoo...

ANDY: I thought the best one ever was that woman... who said "oh, what can I get for twenty quid, fifteen quid?" and you were like "no, I cant", you said "I'll do a name", so she said "I want a name done, fifteen quid". Beth was like "no... I'll do you a nice name in a scroll on your foot, with the words inside the scroll, it'll be twenty five pounds", "oh I'm not paying that". So she, there used to be another tattooist up by the station, so she went up there, he said "I'll do it for you", so what he did, he didn't do a scroll just wrote the word, a child's name but he spelt it wrong! [Laughter]. You paid fifteen quid! And he's going "no, that's

what you wrote down”, so I don’t know who had made the mistake him or her but anyway she ends up paying fifteen quid for this thing, spelt wrongly. Then she comes back to Beth... has to give her another fifteen quid just to black, the... square on her foot. Cost her more than Beth was going to charge for a nice scroll with a name in it, but she didn’t learn...

The unfortunate experience of this client suggests that opting for a cheap tattoo is one that can, though by no means always, retain a permanent mark of its quality. Explicit in *Andy’s* comments is that this experience is one that should have effectively taught the client a lesson - she has to live with a permanent and sensate reminder of a decision ill made. *Andy* and *Beth* clearly have little sympathy with those who go for either the quick or cheap option, or those who do not cultivate responsibility in their body modification choices. However, as we will see later on in this chapter they do not necessarily ‘blame’ flash tattooing for producing bad quality tattoos. *Andy* and *Beth* acknowledge that their refusal to work cheaply is something that denies them custom, yet it also generates income as they pick up the ‘fixing’ work from other body modification studios. They are also aware that if they refuse an individual work they could quite easily visit another studio that may work in a different way to their own.

However *Star* and *Dragon’s* adherence to set prices also affords them legitimacy among what might be perceived as more ‘committed’ participants. Such clients will seek out more established studios who often have higher prices as a sign of a reputability. Those who visit a dedicated body modification studio would be unwilling for example to go for a piercing in a shop or studio that advertises ‘ten-pound’ piercings, as this suggests that the level of the work may be substandard or the quality of the jewellery poor.

### **The Custom Studio: Producing Quality**

In this final section I want to outline the rise of the custom practitioner, how they become skilled, achieve custom status, and how they sometimes become recognised as ‘masters’ of their profession. ‘Custom’ is often drawn as the counterpart of ‘flash’ and I

discuss the relationship between the two in this section. The custom studio is a site of practice where practitioners learn on both themselves and on others<sup>60</sup>.

Aside from the immediate body modification community of practitioners and participants, body modification is rarely understood as an activity that requires skill: 'piercing requires no talent and little cash' (Gans, 2000: 161). It is only through engaging with studios, practitioners and participants that we can bring to light the skills of the custom body modification practitioner.

### *The Rise of Custom*

Custom work is predominantly identified with tattooing. Sanders (2008) suggests that the development from flash to custom tattooing has orientated the way that tattoo culture is organised today:

The changes in style that have been occurring recently have been primarily the result of the incursion of a new breed of tattooist with a markedly different perspective, and the concurrent expansion of the client pool by collectors from diverse social backgrounds who have tastes and views of the functions met by the tattoo/product that are very much unlike those of the traditional tattoo consumer. (2008: 27)

While D. Angus Vail (1999) has discussed the role of the custom tattoo collector and Sanders (2008) has reflected on how the role of custom tattoo has changed the tattoo landscape, other body modifications have not been identified in custom terms. I suggest that this is short-sighted considering the changes and developments in all body modification practices that have occurred in the last decade. At *Star* scarifications, brandings and piercings are individually tailored to clients, and are by their very definition 'custom-made'; they are designed to work with the client's body, shape and musculature as well as satisfying their own wishes and ideas. It is not possible for example to get a scarification 'off the peg' in the same way that you could with a tattoo design<sup>61</sup>, because this needs to be made to 'fit' with the individual's body. However the

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<sup>60</sup> See also Broome (2006) for discussion of practice and tattooing.

<sup>61</sup> Although it is important to note that the 'same' tattoo will be different on different bodies.

experience of custom tattoo suggests that getting tattoos to fit a particular body is a key element of the experience:

JANE: I'm very into... having tattoos that work with your muscle structure, and your bone structure, and it was quite important to actually see the design going on to see whether it would work. To fit in round the ankle bone or round the wrist... it allows for like minute alterations to be made... I think it's a lot nicer way of having a tattoo because you get a chance to really shape the way that it works on your body... or you can come up with ideas on the flight which is something else I'm really quite interested in.

Custom is suggestive of a particular level of skill. The work of custom practitioners is usually more artistically and technically advanced than would be expected at a flash tattoo studio or when getting a standard piercing in a piercing studio. Custom practitioners spend *time* on clients, which is not generally the case with flash tattooists or those who perform 'regular' piercings. Custom practitioners have to come up with ideas and concepts and spend time designing artwork or practicing with materials. Custom is therefore a bespoke service.

The rise of custom practice in body modification services has transformed what it is possible for practitioners to do and for clients to receive. Custom-led body modifications have also created a new breed of client, one that is more knowledgeable about what is possible, and also more demanding. More body modification participants engage in custom work and on a bigger scale than has ever occurred before. Custom work has also extended the role of the collector (although it is important to note that custom and collecting are not synonymous with each other). A collector is a particular kind of modification enthusiast who collects pieces of work from a variety of (usually well-known) artists. Not all of those with extensive body modifications are collectors and being heavily modified is not the same as being a collector. The terms custom and collector however suggest a certain degree of 'exclusivity'. Sanders (2008) suggests that custom work is principally the province of the middle class and wealthy:

They concentrate on the production of unique and expensive “pieces” for an upscale clientele that understands the relevant artistic rationales and for whom tattooing has overtly aesthetic meaning. (2008: 34)

I suggest that there is much more diversity in custom tattoo than this. It is undoubtedly true that custom work is more expensive than flash, however there is a strong tradition of ‘saving and waiting’ among custom participants that *Andy* and *Beth* referred to earlier in this chapter. After his branding at *Star* *Colin* states that he will ‘start saving up for the next session’. There is an understanding that the price paid for a modification also signals your intent and dedication to custom work.

### *Becoming Practiced: The Custom Practitioner and Participants*

The craftsman represents the special human condition of being *engaged*. (Sennett, 2008: 20, emphasis in the original)

Being engaged is a quality of the reflexive and ethical practitioner. It is also a condition that is created in the space of the studio. The atmosphere at *Star* and at *Dragon* is one that is interested, participative and reciprocal. It is very different to the atmosphere that *Hannah* and her friends experienced (described earlier in this chapter). It is however important to note that not all custom studios exhibit the kinds of qualities that I have identified at *Star* and *Dragon*. The experience that *Hannah* retells occurs in a custom studio and it is precisely their ‘stand-offishness’ that alienates potential clients. Just because custom studios are custom, it does not mean they will be welcoming or approachable. They may in fact be particularly unwelcoming if they are well-regarded and busy, enabling them to pick and choose clients. It is the sensate, ethical and reflexive practices created by practitioners at *Star*, rather than the fact that they are simply a custom studio, that builds the studio’s working practices and atmosphere.

Custom practitioners put in the hours to become skilled at what they do. This develops their reputation as a custom artist and also ensures that they will be in demand. It is through *practicing* their skills that the custom practitioner comes into being: ‘skill is a trained practice’ (Sennett, 2008: 37). It is important for the custom practitioner to also be recognised for the *quality* of work that they produce - this is how

they achieve status and also how they build a reputation and generate income. Like all those involved in developing skills body modification practitioners employ technique in order to be able to carry out practices well:

Technique has a bad name; it can seem soulless. That's not how people whose hands become highly trained view technique. For them, technique will be intimately linked to expression. (Sennett, 2008: 150)

Richard Sennett (2008) studies the craft of musicians, cooks and glass blowers and we could also add body modification practitioners to that list. They develop a particular relationship between the hand and body; working with skin creates a relationship to the material on which they work. The development of skills, both technical and artistic, is not identified in separate terms for the body modification practitioner. To deliver a custom modification well there also needs to be good technical skill or technique. It is not enough to just be artistic or creative. The modified bodies of practitioners at *Star* and *Dragon* are objects of their craft; it is common for practitioners to practice on their own bodies before they perform practices on others (also identified by Broome, 2006: 335). Technicity then becomes bound up with corporeality.

If developing a craft and becoming skilled involves time and taking the 'long view' (Sennett, 2008: 295) this can be traced in the body of the body modification practitioner. The practitioner's body is dedicated to practicing, and also needs time to heal. Healing cannot be hurried along and is a critical aspect of adding to sensate knowledge. Sennett (2008) suggests learning to become a craftsman occurs when we become absorbed, 'no longer self-aware, even of our bodily self. We have become the thing on which we are working' (2008: 174). The sensate knowledge of the needle, the gun or the scalpel forms the basis through which practitioners learn to manipulate the skin of another. Practicing on oneself is a means towards being able to work on another: 'Doing something over and over is stimulating when organised as looking ahead' (Sennett, 2008: 175). Hours of tattooing or repeatedly performing piercings are what help the practitioner to hone their craft. *Henry* discusses his practice with the cauteriser:

HENRY: I did a branding on my leg, it was alright, and Andy was watching and helping... me through it.

Explicit is the empathic sociality that occurs between himself and *Andy*. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, the studios at *Star* and *Dragon* create an atmosphere that is engaged, participative and empathic, one that takes care of clients and practitioners alike. Sennett's (2008) discussion of the workshop as a place where one practices one's craft reflects the qualities of the reflexive and ethical studio. It is a place where, as *Henry* indicates, individuals not only practice but also *learn*:

Sociable expertise doesn't create community in any self-conscious or ideological sense; it consists simply of good practices. The well-crafted organisation will focus on whole human beings in time, it will encourage mentoring, and it will demand standards framed in language that any person in the organisation might understand. (Sennett, 2008: 249)

The working practices that are shared by *Henry* and *Andy* underscore the reflexive and sensate practices in which each are engaged, both in their own practices and the communication of these practices to their clients. The immanent ethics created through studio life is explicitly weighted towards doing things *well*:

This is the absorption into tacit knowledge, unspoken and uncodified in words, that occurred there and became a matter of habit, the thousand little everyday moves that add up in sum to a practice. (Sennett, 2008: 77)

In the working practices of *Andy*, *Gary*, *Beth* and *Henry* we can discern the commitment to doing *good* work. This is not to suggest that reflexive and ethical practitioners will *only* do good work, rather that it is more difficult to perform practices badly because practitioners would prohibit themselves from performing poor or substandard work. To do so would be to damage their sense of themselves as a custom practitioner:

The desire to do something well is a personal litmus test; inadequate personal performance hurts in a different way than inequalities of inherited social position or the externals of wealth: it is about you. (Sennett, 2008: 97)

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, the reflexive and ethical body modification practitioner wants to create a reflexive client; they are *as* interested in developing good and rewarding relationships as they are in doing good work:

ANDY: I get really nice clients, that's one thing I'm eternally grateful for, my clients are really, really nice people, very few egos, it just doesn't really happen.

It is the interchange and reciprocity between individuals that the custom practitioner is dedicated to fostering. The idea of the custom artist producing good work also tallies with a desire to treat individuals well. Being a custom practitioner then encourages an engagement with creating an entire package for the participant: 'the value of experience understood as a craft' (Sennett, 2008: 288). *Andy* suggests that the crafting of experience is a two way process and suggests that clients are also prepared to wait to get practices from him:

ANDY: I mean a lot of famous modifiers... have got that, worship thing and collectors who just want a piece of work... Most of my clients [who] want work done, they've searched me out, they come and they're not usually interested in collecting... They will often wait for me to work things out... before they get things done... "I could get it done by that person but I'm not interested... I'd rather wait till you've sussed something out."

I am not suggesting that significant relationships can only occur between participants and practitioners who engage in custom work. Rather that the studios and participants that I got to know were engaged in custom practices. The relationships between participants and practitioners can form lasting and life-long bonds, particularly with

those who understand themselves as having body modification ‘careers’, that are added to over time:

ISAAC: I think the tattoo thing is something that will just go on now as I’ve got a good thing going with my tattooist... I wouldn’t go elsewhere ‘cos we sort of know each other quite well now and I trust him... I’ve invested in them [the tattoos].

Research participants committed to custom work from one practitioner also felt they could take their relationships to another level. Engaging in custom work builds trust between participant and practitioner, as clients trust the skill of the practitioner to give them the best quality modification they can. *Gary* discussed how he particularly enjoyed working on styles and designs for regular clients, as he was able to build a particular kind of tattoo relationship:

GARY: There’s a woman that I’ve tattooed quite a lot... I did a large tattoo on her back... she gave me quite a free rein on the actual design... we came together we worked out a very loose brief... I sort of did more or less what I wanted to do, but, obviously working with her, making sure it was what she wanted as well... Having tattooed her quite a few times she was sort of trusting enough to know... that what I’d come up with for her would be good... I think that quite often leads to the best pieces.

*Gary* has developed a relationship with his client that is based on trust and confidence in his abilities. *Gary* is able to use his skills to create designs that the client may not be able to envisage herself. I am not suggesting that trust relationships only develop in relation to custom work. However *Gary’s* interaction with his client is one that has developed due to the custom nature of their relationship; *Gary’s* opportunity to work ‘freely’ would not occur in a flash studio. Custom is usually indicative of an engagement over time whereas flash suggests a quicker process, clients choose designs from a pre-made selection of designs, ‘the flash’, and can have the tattoo done there and then.

### *Custom and Flash*

Custom work often appears diametrically opposed to flash, but I suggest it is worth looking at the relationship between the two more closely rather than adopting an either/or position. Sanders (2008) suggests that custom practitioners:

...consistently refer to themselves as “tattoo artists” and their establishments as “studios”. They take great pains to disassociate themselves from “scratchers” who are technically unskilled and “stencil men” who are incapable of doing creative custom work. (2008: 34)

I do not necessarily perceive the kind of gulf that Sanders (2008) suggests between custom and flash, although clearly many custom tattooists believe that they do better, more artistic and ‘worthwhile’ work than flash tattooists. There is however flexibility in the custom practitioner which is not fully accounted for, nor is there always a snobbish attitude by custom tattooists toward flash practitioners. *Gary* does not turn down flash work although he does value creativity in tattoos and therefore, according to Sanders (2008), might be expected to do so:

Most tattoo artists focus their energies on the creation of large-scale, custom-designed pieces and typically turn down requests to inscribe traditional images. (2008: 27)

It is perhaps misguided to suggest that custom tattooists only do work that sets them apart from ‘traditional’ tattoo work and imagery, particularly when this imagery is what custom is built on. It may be tempting to see custom work in ‘all or nothing’ terms. Yet I suggest that practitioners often worked in far more pragmatic ways. Unless something offended their sensibilities, as was discussed earlier in this chapter, in relation to offensive or inappropriately placed images, practitioners will deliver images that they may not personally like, or indeed that may not ‘fulfil’ them as an artist. Describing his tattoo work *Gary* states that he does:

GARY: Mainly custom but... tend not to turn work away really, I'm not elitist really. If people want something then I do it for them.

*Gary* also needs to fit his work to his market, by suggesting that he is 'not elitist' he gestures to the fact that he is open to all work. *Andy* and *Beth* at *Star* have criticised some flash tattooists for doing bad work but they also recognise the work that good flash tattooists produce. I suggest that they recognise the *craft* quality of what other tattooists and practitioners do. Indeed, in the following *Andy* places the responsibility on the client and their choice of practitioner rather than 'blaming' the quality of the tattoo on the flash tattooist:

ANDY: I had a girl come in here recently who had a piece of work done by [name omitted] down the road and she came in and she was "I'm not sure I should go back and complain". I was a bit like... "Why? What's wrong with it?". And it was a couple of tiny little lines that... he'd overshot. But I was like, hang on a minute, you haven't gone to a custom tattooist, you've gone into a flash tattoo studio where you've paid about forty-five pounds for what any other studio would tell you is incredibly cheap... If you walk into a flash studio basically it's on speed and turnover... You can't expect, it's a bit like buying a copy of a painting and then moaning that's its not the real painting. Well it won't be, it's a photograph, it's a poster, that's what you pay seven pounds fifty for, you pay seventy-five quid for the real one. There's a difference between the two.

*Star* studio operates on friendly terms with the flash tattooist nearby, referred to in this excerpt. *Star* for example have cards in their studio to advertise their neighbour's services. *Andy* and *Beth* suggested that it was important to maintain good will between the two studios and adopt working practices that worked for both of them and could be sustained in the long term.

Sanders (2008) suggests that the work of doing custom tattoo is more satisfying than the work of the flash tattooist:

Rising to the position of being able to concentrate solely on producing custom designed tattoos is valued over and above the fact that it allows the tattooist to escape the monotony of standardised and routine production. (2008: 86)

However it is important to note that custom work can also have its own pressures and that it too can get boring and repetitive. It is also challenging to have to always come up with new or 'original' work for clients. Custom is generally prized over flash and this trend is replicated in the documentation of body modification culture online in *BMEzine* and in magazines like *Total Tattoo*. It would be unusual to have a model on the front of *Total Tattoo* that was covered in flash; it will always be custom work. I would not suggest that flash is 'dying out' but the balance between the two is far more evenly matched than ever before. One such example of this can be seen in Brighton, where there are now more custom tattoo studios than there are flash studios. Additionally, flash tattooists increasingly present themselves as if they are custom studios, in terms of décor (having art hanging on the walls) and name (increasingly the word 'custom' appears in the title). These 'designer' features are employed in order to suggest a particular kind of space. Custom work has become so ubiquitous that it has now become synonymous with the mark of a 'good' practitioner. It is clear that in some respects the roles of custom and flash have effectively been reversed. Instead of being a rarity, custom tattooing is as easy (if not easier) to access as flash.

### *The Master Craftsman*

Tattooing in particular has been associated with the notion that there are people who have become 'masters' at what they do; these practitioners are revered within body modification circles. However I suggest that practitioners specialising in other areas of body modification practice are also increasingly also perceived to be 'masters'. Sennett (2008) states that 'about 10,000 hours of experience are required to produce a master carpenter or musician' (2008: 20). *Andy* hopes that people will recognise the quality of his work, and as such this also becomes a way of attracting repeat or new clients:

ANDY: That's the best... ██████████<sup>62</sup> I've done definitely... I've got a couple of [people] coming in who have seen that to get theirs done now, I think I'll probably have quite a bit of that...

There is sometimes a crossover between the body modification practitioner being recognised as accomplished at their craft and having 'celebrity' status. An example of the tattooist as celebrity/master craftsman can be seen in the example of Louis Molloy (first introduced in Chapter One). On his website he informs clients that he is booked up until March 2009 (posted beginning of September 2008). He is able to choose the type of work that he undertakes because he is in constant demand. He states: 'please note that I am not really interested in doing tribal style or cover ups'. One of the interesting things that we can identify in the work of Louis Molloy is that he illustrates the way in which custom tattooing can sometimes be replicated so that it 'becomes' flash. Molloy is well known for designing and executing David Beckham's tattoos, one of the most famous being the 'guardian angel' that Beckham has tattooed across his back. In an earlier 'news' post (see Molloy, 2006) he writes that if individuals are booking in to have 'the angel' they need to provide a two hundred pound deposit. 'The angel' then has moved from the status of a one-off custom piece to a lucrative piece of flash that has now been replicated many times over<sup>63</sup>.

## Conclusion

Observing studio staff at *Star* and *Dragon* at work provided an insight into the ways in which modification practices are mediated, experienced and subsequently understood by body modification practitioners and participants. As well as being responsible for the practical execution of body modification procedures, practitioners are also actively mediating issues that are social (will the client face discrimination from others due to their modifications?), economic (will modifications hinder potential job prospects or cause problems in their chosen profession?) and 'psychological' (will clients regret

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<sup>62</sup> Practice omitted for confidentiality.

<sup>63</sup> This also ties in with the notion of a 'celebrity culture'; anybody can have the same tattoos as David Beckham.

choices in the future?). Underscoring all of these concerns is how the sensate is implicated within all of these considerations. In order to deal with these complex issues the practitioners at *Star* have developed a reflexive and ethical practice that effectively gauges each individual client and assesses how they feel about performing each and every request. In order to make the 'right' or 'safe' decision the practitioner acts fundamentally as a gatekeeper to practices and services. When clients are afforded access to products and services, the kinds of work that practitioners perform is tied into their reflexive and ethical practice. Making decisions and producing good quality work is embedded within the embodied practice of the practitioner.

I suggest that there are some parallels between the reflexive researcher and that of the reflexive practitioner. As was discussed in Chapter Three, Steier (1991) and Plummer (2001) both emphasise the roles of feeling and emotion in the work of the reflexive researcher. These concerns can also be traced in the body of the modification practitioner. Plummer (2001) suggests that paying attention to how the researcher's body feels within the research setting is vital to a fully reflexive practice. This was adopted too in the body of the practitioner, where awareness of how body modification practices impact both on the participant and practitioner was built into working practices. Practitioners were aware of how their own body affects and is affected by those around them, which I provided my own perspective on as researcher in Chapter Three, acknowledging how tiring it was being party to participants' body modification practices. Sieber (1991: 14) suggests the position of the ethical researcher produced 'good' research, therefore in the reflexive practitioner we can also identify a determination to do 'good quality' body modification work, which has been an aim expressed by practitioners throughout the chapter.

The reflexive and ethical practitioner appreciates the temporality and 'life course' of modification practice and adopts a holistic approach to the body that will be modified. Body modifications are therefore understood by the reflexive practitioner not as one off 'events' but practices that potentially have a lifetime of consequences. I have suggested throughout this chapter that temporality is a key component in the reflexive and ethical practices of practitioners. This enables a more extensive understanding of the temporal dimension of the modified body to emerge. When temporality occurs in relation to body modification discussion it is often invoked in simple and stark punitive terms: namely the 'what if you regret it when you're older' argument. These kinds of

concerns are clearly adopted by the working practices of reflexive practitioners, yet they approach this decision in a more holistic way. Rather than see body modification as a 'mistake' made they consider the consequences of making decisions in terms of social, economic and embodied terms. There is however little recognition of this work that practitioners perform in order to fully think about and consider how the modified body moves through time.

It could be argued that practitioners are effectively creating elites, with some participants getting access to modification practices which others are denied. However these elites are not 'closed' to potential clients. Although *Andy* makes it clear that he will refuse clients certain practices, he also states that if they are committed to wanting a particular practice, if they 'stick with it' and 'hassle him' on a regular basis, he will change his mind. If a client can demonstrate perseverance and commitment over time their requests to receive a particular modification will usually be met. This suggests that the practitioner to a certain extent seeks to mould the behaviour of the client.

I suggest that in practitioners' reflexive and ethical practices, they also hope to create a reflexive client. Through their practices and ethos, reflexive practitioners suggest the right and wrong way of doing things: when it is best to wait for a practice or when to caution clients who want visible work. Creating a reflexive client engenders the possibility that they will carry reflexivity with them in relation to their body of work. The subtleties of ethical and reflexive practice produce a client that learns the difference between good and bad practice. There is then an 'educational' role that is played out by the practitioner.

The reflexive practice of the practitioners at *Star* and *Dragon* clearly constituted a fundamental aspect of their working lives. *Andy*, *Henry*, *Beth* and *Gary* are practitioners who are aware of the history and development of body modification communities. They have observed body modification practices shift and evolve, going from being underground and 'secret' to being popular and relatively mainstream. They have adopted practices that regulate the ways in which they work, although others working in the industry may not replicate their codes of practice to the same degree. In terms of considerations of consumerism and the increasing 'marketisation' of body modification practice that were discussed in Chapter One, it is interesting to note that those working at *Star* and *Dragon* will actively turn work down. In terms of other 'service' related industries this kind of practice is fairly unusual. Although consumerism has clearly had

an impact on the development of body modification goods and practices, the reflexive practitioner does to some extent appear to operate outside of this lexicon. There are few other services where practitioners, through their ethical and reflexive responsibilities, actively turn work away<sup>64</sup>.

Examining the role of the practitioner puts sensation at the heart of the matter. By paying attention to sensate experience, the reflexive and ethical practitioner creates ways of working that value the bodies of clients and practitioners alike. The reflexive practice of the practitioner could not have developed without their participation in, and their appreciation of, the corporeal experience of body modification practice. Therefore the role of the reflexive practitioner is not simply to route a design or practice onto the body, but to recognise the ethical and embodied quality of doing so.

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<sup>64</sup> I acknowledge that ethical decisions are made in areas of medicine, health and perhaps closest of all in terms of body modification practice: plastic surgery. However I understand these highly regulated areas of decision making to be quite different from the immanent practices that I witnessed at *Dragon* and *Star*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Electing Pain and Choosing Sensation**

'In the future if they created a way where you could just have tattoos on your body without any pain or anything, don't know if I'd be interested really, so there must be something connected to the actual experience...'*(Fiona)*

Pain is a universal human experience. This makes it both very easy and very difficult to talk about. (Szasz, 1975: xi)

#### **Introduction**

Body modification practices are ones that break the skin. As such they are often experiences associated with feeling pain. Feeling pain constitutes a complex set of associations, thoughts and experiences for modified individuals. Discussions around pain, whether between participants, between client and practitioner or through the reactions to modified individuals from others, put questions of pain at the forefront of any analysis:

ISAAC: I used to get quite tired of being asked if it hurt [laughs]. I used to get that more a few years ago, not so much now. I s'pose its more common isn't it. Did it hurt, and "what does it mean?". It's the classic! [laughs].

In this chapter I will illustrate the ways in which the pain and sensation experienced in body modification practices do not sit comfortably with already existing notions of

pain. 'Intuitive' and lay notions of pain, pain management and social and critical analyses of pain as subject rarely apply to the experiences of body modification participants.

Discussions of pain address torture and war (Scarry, 1985), chronic illness (Bendelow and Williams, 1995, and Ahmed, 2004), 'psychological' reasons (Szasz, 1975) and pain treatment and management (Kotarba, 1983; Melzack and Wall, 1988; and Vrancken, 1989). Pain is not unexpected, sudden or 'unknown' for body modification participants but *elective*<sup>65</sup>. Pain and sensation derived from body modification practices is usually temporary and fleeting<sup>66</sup> and is rarely debilitating, even for short periods. Further, the knowledge that there is possible pain or sensation to come does not stop individuals from engaging in body modification practices. It is at this juncture that departures between existing social, critical and lay discussions of pain and the pain of body modification practice occur. Whether the pain or sensation of modification practice is experienced negatively or positively, or as a necessary by-product to arrive at the end result, a choice is made to engage with it and its attendant consequences. This is clearly at odds with the way in which pain is generally understood. Pain is perceived as singular in its ability to produce the desire to act when it occurs, an impulse to move away or 'solve' pain, that sets it apart from other stimuli:

Pain is the very concretization of the unpleasant, the aversive. It places upon the sufferer what I will term an *affective call*. One's attention is summoned by the gnawing, distasteful quality of pain in a way that it would not be by a more neutral stimulus. (Leder, 1990: 73, emphasis in the original)

Pain felt by body modification participants is qualitatively different from such forms of pain, particularly when that pain is described in terms such as 'suffering', 'debilitating' or 'torturous'. Studies of pain have historically focused on the chronic-ness of pain,

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<sup>65</sup>I acknowledge that other procedures such as cosmetic surgery may also be cited in relation to choosing procedures that come with pain 'attached'. I suggest that cosmetic surgery is different to body modification for a number of reasons [see Chapter Three for discussion]. The majority of cosmetic procedures involve anaesthetic, which suggests a quite different relationship to pain and sensation than that which is evidenced through the participation in body modification practices.

<sup>66</sup>Although I characterise the pain of the body modification practices that I have encountered during this study as temporary, I acknowledge that pain experienced in other modification practices may be quite different. For example skin removal, amputation, and insertion and extraction of implants may move pain into experiences of a more prolonged duration and intensity.

which can be seen in Joseph Kotarba's *Chronic Pain: Its Social Dimensions* (1983) and Ronald Melzack and Patrick Wall's *The Challenge of Pain* (1988).

The approaches of Kotarba (1983), Melzack and Wall (1988), Bendelow and Williams (1998) and others are directed towards resolving the problem of chronic, unwelcome and life-affecting pain. Indeed Gillian Bendelow and Simon Williams (1998) suggest that in order to resolve the chronic-ness of pain, meaning has to be established, without which there can only be 'loneliness, isolation and despair' (1998: 163). Chronic pain is the focus because it presents a problem for those who experience it<sup>67</sup>. The elected nature of pain and sensation means that for body modification participants the 'cause' of pain is grounded in the practice, therefore the search for 'why' there is pain is not relevant. My intent is neither to create a hierarchy of pain experiences nor to articulate body modification practices in terms of a 'soft' pain; however making distinctions between pains and how they are conceptualised is vital. Pain that is not perceived as acute has little in the way of explanation, and 'transient' pain is often touched on only very slightly, yet still within a context of being 'unwanted' (see Melzack and Wall, 1988: 34).

The majority of body modification practitioners and participants agree that there is always some form of sensation or feeling that is key to experiencing body modification practices. Body modification participants often discuss feelings of pain, hurt and discomfort that they do not categorise as 'pain' per se. Pain as a term of description acts as a block - it blunts because it is inadequate to describe all the different forms of sensation that participants experience. Describing feelings of sensation gesture to experiences that are quite different from standardised perceptions of pain, ones that provide 'living' accounts of the elective experiences of pain and sensation. Pain is turned into sensation through electing the practice.

Although pain is an oft-recognised aspect of body modification experience, Cyril Siorat (2006) acknowledges 'the first question that most non-body-modifiers ask when confronted by a tattoo: namely, "did it hurt"' (2006: 370), has little in the way of detailed focus. This may simply reflect the turn that has occurred in relation to theorising the modified body, one that has emphasised representation rather than

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<sup>67</sup>Focus on pain management through studies of clinics, centres and hospices (see Melzack and Wall, 1988; Baszanger, 1989; Vrancken, 1989; Csordas and Clark, 1992; and Bendelow and Williams, 1996) is geared towards helping those with 'pain careers' (Kotarba, 1983: 57) out of chronic pain.

sensation. However Siorat (2006) draws attention to tattooing and pain in *The Art of Pain* (2006). He states that pain is integral to the tattoo process, although he does not emphasise tattoo pain in terms of 'suffering' (2006: 367). Siorat (2006) does not suggest that the pain of body modification is differentiated from other forms of pain, in common with Elaine Scarry (1985) he suggests:

Pain is a highly antisocial event. It is experienced by the individual at the level of consciousness that renders usual modes of self-expressions particularly inadequate. (2006: 374)

Siorat (2006) characterises body modification pain as being understood as 'wasteful': it is not 'medical pain', nor that of the 'wounded soldier' or the 'tortured terrorist suspect' (2006: 368). The elective nature of pain is touched on by one of Siorat's (2006) participants yet is not explored in detail:

On one level, many people consider a tattoo shop a safe location to engage with their suffering because, as M, a tattoo enthusiast from Sheffield, puts it: "in a tattoo shop, you consciously decide to be in pain. It is your decision, your choice of place and time and after all the pain you end up with a beautiful tattoo, so pain becomes something positive and almost welcomed". (2006: 376)

In common with welcoming pain, Sweetman (2000) proposes that for some of his participants getting through pain was perceived as an achievement (2000: 60). Siorat (2006) also suggests 'Pain can, to an extent, be conceived of as a tool for self knowledge' (2006: 374). 'Evolving' feeling pain is not unique to body modification practice, yet it has only been briefly gestured to by those discussing pain, often in terms of spiritual and physical transformation; for example the yogi that bears pain (Leder, 1990: 73), the flesh-hanging ritual (Melzack and Wall, 1988: 15-17), or in 'childbirth or physical, emotional, artistic and spiritual achievements' (Bendelow and Williams, 1998: 163).

The ways in which modified bodies experience either pain or sensation raises important questions for the epistemological concerns of body modification practice. As such felt processes, for example experiencing adrenaline and endorphins, have as much

importance to body modification practices as discussions of them as signifiers. In this chapter I will focus on four main areas in relation to pain and sensation as it is experienced by body modification participants: the elective nature of pain, the body-knowledge that results, pain thresholds and how conceptions of bodies and minds are constituted. These subjects satellite around the notion that pain for body modification participants is a *variable* experience.

## Elective Sensation

### *'I Chose It'* (Fiona)

In this chapter I utilise sensation as the means through which to examine how the modified body feels pain. Although discussions of sensation in relation to pain are not new (see Buytendijk, 1962 and Szasz, 1975), sensation is usually deployed in relation to specific contexts such as medical diagnosis (see Bendelow and Williams, 1998). Sensation is invoked as a stepping-stone on the way to explaining pain, rather than being the 'end' in itself.

Sensation in relation to accounts of pain can be seen in detail for example in the McGill pain questionnaire (1987), discussed by Melzack and Wall (1988: 39-44). The questionnaire has been used in order to resolve the problem of pain and work towards its effective relief. Isolating sensation in order to diagnose and administer cures has led to sensation being twinned with the medicalising of pain (see Bendelow and Williams, 1996). Sensation as a diagnostic tool can be traced back to specificity theory. Originating with Descartes, the 'rope pulling' effect of pain (we feel something that causes pain, a message travels to the brain and we move away) has evolved into what Bendelow and Williams (1998) call the 'standard medical model' (1998: 156). They suggest that sensation is emphasised over other factors, such as emotion, in order to provide a measure that disciplines pain within a regime of medical management. Accordingly the emphasis on sensation over the emotion of pain leads to accounts that Bendelow and Williams suggest are 'unnecessarily limiting and reductionist' (1998: 159).

Pain therefore is the conclusion of sensation, and as such it gives qualification while also requiring a context, namely that pain is a problem to be described and then resolved. Removing the denouement of pain allows pain and sensation as *chosen* to be

illuminated. Sensation varies and cannot easily be categorised as any one thing. It also emerged as something that research participants had thought about and discussed with other participants and practitioners:

ISAAC: I was talking about pain the other day with... my tattooist, different sorts with tats and that... Sometimes you're just sort of getting on with it, getting through it, like with some of the tattooing, depending on where it is. You want to think about anything else but the pain... but sometimes you can notice it a bit more, or kinda like coast with it a bit... we were talking about, why does pain feel different, there's different sorts of pain that feel different, so is it all pain or is it something else?... I won't go off on one, but, it's like the Eskimos have loads of different words for snow, it's not just one thing is it?

*Isaac's* discussion gets inside the texture of pain. It is precisely the elective nature of entering into such states that allows discussion to take place. The conversation between *Isaac* and his tattooist may not have occurred if *Isaac* was experiencing chronic or unexpected pain. The electiveness of pain experiences allows participants to discuss and ruminate, even at times have exploratory or experimental relationship with feeling pain:

FIONA: I remember having this sort of thing about, 'well what is pain?', y'know, what is that? And once my brain started exploring it whilst it was happening it... it's generally a state that you desire not to be in, so you choose to be in it and then tune into it a bit.

As *Isaac* and *Fiona* suggest there can be different kinds of feelings experienced and explored at different points during body modification experiences. Therefore the ability of elected pain and sensation to be variable contrasts with notions that pain is constantly 'bad'. Pain is usually conceptualised 'evenly' in that there is little variation in its routine negativity:

The first, the most essential, aspect of pain is its sheer averseness. While other sensations have content that may be positive, neutral, or negative, the very content of pain is itself a negation. (Scarry, 1985: 52)

The notion that pain is something that we react to, socially and 'biologically', in ways that we can predict, features in the characterisation of pain as inherently negative. This impulse is one that Drew Leder (1990) suggests is 'hardwired' into bodies:

The sensory aversiveness and world disruptions effected by pain cry out for removal. The goal is built into our body's neuromuscular circuitry; we reflexively withdraw from a pain stimulus. (1990: 78)

Body modification practices as ones that are chosen and welcomed provide opportunities from which to think through such notions of pain: how do bodies react to such 'negative' sensations when they are understood as neither aversive nor affective?

*'How's it feeling?' (Beth)*

Body modification participants gave accounts of 'pain' experience that found ways of describing discomfort beyond 'it hurts' or 'it's painful'. They also realised the potential that exists for describing physical processes that side-step standardised and generic accounts. The words that participants used provided a shift from generality into specificity. Such accounts give experiences texture and in doing so illustrate the sensorial capacity in feeling pain and sensation. The following three accounts describe the ways in which sensation is experienced:

HENRY:       Implants feel different in the way that when they go in you get the burning sensation, of the skin being lifted rather than piercing which is that sharpness...

FIONA:        I would say that it was a pulling on the skin, but it was more a sort of tearing, but then it doesn't get to the final sort of tear. But the sensation of... to pull on a piece of paper but it doesn't actually come to the rip,

but the kind of tension of the pull, that's sort of like particularly in the more sort of painful bits.

ISAAC: I s'pose the way you'd describe the scalpelling as kinda quick and sharp... or more sort of slow and like dull... the odd ache, with stretching.

These descriptions of sensation form an end in themselves without being used as a qualification in relation to something else, for example the legitimising of pain as a negative category. The pain and sensation of body modification practice can be used as an opportunity from which to experiment. Participants' contextualised experiences of pain also related them to other feeling states, something that would rarely be an option for those experiencing chronic or distressing pain<sup>68</sup>. Pain is often presented as isolating, both in relation to others and also in relation to an individual's own body (see Scarry, 1985). The pain of body modification practice allows for *integration*. Pain could be included with other body experiences. This ability to attach pain to other feeling states is made possible due to the individual's choice to engage with pain and sensation:

JANE: ...there are times when I feel really quite relaxed about what's going on... afterwards... well it is just pain... I think it's all pain really [laughter]... that's quite a hard one... the over-riding feeling is that... everything else seems to be blocked out... I mean, it is uncomfortable, but sometimes it can be quite relaxing work depending on where you're being tattooed.

COLIN: It is relative to everybody, some people might think that getting a tattoo done is unbearably painful, but I'll quite happily sit through three hours of tattooing. I nearly fell asleep when my back was being done, so [laughs] nice and relaxed.

*Jane* alternates between articulating her experience of pain with the relaxing nature of being tattooed, which intuitively may not be two areas of feeling that would be brought

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<sup>68</sup>Intensive pain is often characterised in relation to its ability to be all-consuming (see Ahmed, 2004: 27).

together. *Colin* suggests that the experience of getting tattooed was so relaxing it was soporific; indeed Siorat (2006: 376) notes that he has seen a tattooee fall asleep while being tattooed. Pairings that suggest there can be feelings of calm and relaxation as well as pain, illustrate the ways in which sensation is experienced by body modification participants. These accounts also create more descriptively detailed and sensory pictures of the experience of body modification practice.

### *Showing Pain*

Choosing sensation was also tied into participants' accounts of 'showing' the effects of pain and sensation. Examples of bearing pain are more extensive and prolific now than they were ten or fifteen years ago. The popularity of websites like *BMEzine* and the prevalence of 'flesh events' like suspensions and performance, discussed in Chapter Three, means that there are more images of the body, both in and apparently untouched by pain. Within some body modification communities there exists an element of bravado in relation to pain. This suggests that in order to be a committed body modification practitioner there also has to be a conquering of, and sometimes also a denial of, experiencing either sensation or pain. Managing pain is also tied into ideas of what it means to 'bear' pain and how this affects the body modification experience and others to come. Body modification participants tread a fine line between bearing the pain and appearing impervious to it.

Individuals can feel conflicted about showing pain because they have chosen to be 'in' this state. Ambiguity therefore can also form part of the experience of elective pain. Ready individuals for pain and 'presenting' pain was important for the set of practitioners at *Star*. *Andy*, *Henry* and *Beth* are keen to show the realities of body modification experience: there is and can be pain, and participants need to be prepared for it to occur. They also illustrate the ways in which making decisions about accepting pain were read and interpreted by others. In the following discussion *Andy* describes the process of documenting a [REDACTED]<sup>69</sup> and a friend editing photographs for his collection:

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<sup>69</sup> Practice omitted for confidentiality.

ANDY: He just changed the order, and he didn't tell me and I was "you changed the order!", "is that a problem?" and I said "yeah mate, 'cos it showed the whole stage of me grimacing the whole thing..." He left the grimace ones out, "oh, I didn't think you'd want those ones up there", "well why not?", "well 'cos it looks like you're in pain", "well yeah!" And I was like "well yeah, but that's because I probably was, that's why I'm doing that face". I don't want to hide it from people, I've got no problem. There's this thing sometimes... we can never admit that things hurt, if you're in the business you've got to [be] almost this sadistic... [adopts macho voice] "I really love pain"... Whatever, I want people to know what the experience is like, and that's what it was like for me.

The assumption that a committed practitioner and participant such as *Andy* would want to be portrayed as if he wasn't experiencing pain also reveals something about the ways in which such individuals are perceived to react to pain. They are believed to be somehow impervious to and 'outside' 'normal' pain thresholds and what can be endured, which will be explored in more detail in this chapter. There can also be elements of competition in relation to pain that *Andy* alludes to. As a practitioner he identifies certain industry codes that mean that individuals can feel under pressure to participate in certain conventions of behaviour, for example 'shrugging off' pain and exhibiting machismo. These attitudes are tied into the voluntary nature of being in pain, that is if you chose it, you also have to deal with it. This resonates with the notion of the autonomous liberal individual, where informed choices carry with them the effect of full responsibility. Bodies are characterised by others in ways that classify them as 'brave' or 'weak' according to how they bear pain. This information about the bodies of others meshes together with pain experiences as productive of body knowledges, which will be explored in the following section.

## Making Body Knowledge Through Pain

How bodies reacted to modification practices were realised in two ways for participants – the first in relation to accumulating body knowledge through pain, and the second through the experience of adrenaline and endorphins in pain control.

Body modification participants often refer to the body as a collection of parts that react in certain ways to particular procedures. These ideas coalesce around examples of what is painful to get and where. Sensations associated with procedures are for the most part linked to degrees of intensity. An ear piercing for example would be understood as existing in a different ‘league’ to an ear scalping. As such a loose ‘map’ is envisaged that consists of body parts and the effects of procedures upon them:

GARY:           The main difference I find as far as the pain goes is probably whereabouts on the body you’re having it as well. Certain areas are far more sensitive than others and that’s a really big factor in it.

This ‘map’ was compiled in relation to experiences that provided information on the parts of the body ‘in pain’, pain then is used as means from which to accumulate knowledge: ‘The way in which we gain knowledge of organs during painful illness is perhaps a model of the way we in general arrive at the idea of the body’ (Bendelow and Williams, 1998: 155).

Body modification participants fragmented the body into areas that were understood as either ‘difficult’ or ‘easy’. An individual wanting to arrange their first tattoo may be advised by their practitioner to place it on a fleshy part of the body rather than a bony area. These areas are regarded as more difficult - that is, painful - as they have less fat and less protection from feeling the tattoo needle on the bones: ankles, elbows, hands and heads:

GARY:           I mean most people assume tattoos on the head might have been the most painful because it’s very bony - bony areas aren’t pleasant.

Fleshy areas such as legs and arms were generally understood as being easier and more suitable for first time tattooees. Upper arms are one of the most common body parts

on which to receive a tattoo and as such they elicited a range of responses from participants:

FIONA: Most of that bit sort of on the underside of my arm where it's so tender just felt really relentless...

GARY: It was quite painful, and it was quite a large tattoo to get as my first one... On my upper arm going right round the inside, which was a fairly tender area anyway... I think it was quite a painful experience to start with.

ISAAC: Inside of the arm is a killer... it seems to be the insides more, maybe... the skin isn't as thick? 'Cos it's on the inside, it doesn't need to be so hard-wearing or something... it definitely feels softer and a bit more gacky, maybe there's more nerves.

In participants' accounts there exists a tension between the accumulation of body knowledge through pain and sensation and the notion that experiences of pain are unique to the individual. If experiences are intensely individual then how can pain also provide common and comparable experiences? If pain experiences are distinct for each individual it is impossible to make universal claims from these experiences, even if a particular notion is ubiquitous. Pain experiences may suggest that something is the case, but such claims can also be undermined by and through other experiences.

The formation of body knowledge therefore also takes into account expressions of difference. Expressions of body 'inconsistencies' that contradicted perceived wisdom were also readily accepted by body modification participants. Therefore at *Star*, *Beth* discusses a friend who can "sit there and take" tattooing on her armpit (generally perceived as a very painful area) but who finds tattooing on her arm (a more common and 'less' painful area) far more difficult to bear. Embodied in participants' accounts were the ways in which ideas both accorded with and challenged the notion that 'truths' in corporeal knowledge existed. The notion that body responses can be collected and ordered into a 'standard' is challenged by expressions of body diversity. Examining the

experiences of *Jane* we can see the ways in which modified bodies both uphold and challenge ideas about body parts and pain; discussing her foot tattoo, she states:

JANE: ...it's a physical pain, 'cos obviously you've got needles that are being scraped across... continually drag them across your skin over and over and over... it's an intense physical pain.

*Jane's* experience with foot tattooing appears to concur with established ideas about tattooing and placement. The foot is a bony area and therefore a difficult place to get tattooed. However *Jane* qualifies these experiences by moving on to discuss her experience of getting tattoos on her calves:

JANE: I mean I said that parts of my foot are the worst place... maybe it was location, and a combination of... what he was doing, but the backs of my calves - oh my god, I have never experienced pain like it... More painful than my foot and my ribs, which, that was quite bad, but the backs of my calves was just - and you'd expect that... it's a nice fleshy part of the body, would be fine - no... it's all lies! [laughter]... it was really horrible, I was like, chewing on my fists.

*Jane's* expectation that she was going to have an easier experience with this body part is confounded by her experience. Whilst experiences of pain such as *Jane's* allow for a collection of body knowledges to emerge they also allow for its dismantling. Such knowledge becomes both a guide and a source of mis-information. Constructing body knowledges was not only confined to the surface of the body but also emerged in relation to how the insides of bodies reacted to modification practices. This was mediated particularly in relation to participants' discussions about adrenaline and endorphins as body processes.

### *Adrenaline and Endorphins: the Dynamic Duo*

Research participants understood adrenaline and endorphins as 'facts' that existed 'in' the body and which had effects that could help deal with and alleviate pain. It was clear

that research participants regarded such hormonal responses as occupying a central role to their sensate experiences. These hormones also had various actions and effects associated with them, including having dynamic, analgesic, addictive, dangerous and pleasurable properties. Adrenaline and endorphins were understood as being able to be and do all of these things.

The properties given to the hormones adrenaline and endorphins articulated a powerful collection of ideas about their characteristics. Lived experiences crossed over with 'biological' ideas that together were used to describe participants' experiences. Adrenaline and endorphins were interchangeable terms for participants, understood to do the same thing, or at least be so similar that each could stand in for the other without the need for qualification or differentiation:

COLIN: Adrenaline obviously it carries you over afterwards, sort of adrenaline, endorphins or whatever.

If adrenaline and endorphins were understood as being the 'same', this served only to double their capacity as pain alleviators. It also solidified the notion that they were a dynamic pair that worked together. As 'active' substances adrenaline and endorphins were presented as leaping into action when the body was in pain or discomfort. The ways in which individuals experienced the feeling of adrenaline and endorphins were reflected in the words that were used to describe them. This can be seen in relation to the following excerpt from my ear scalpel procedure:

ANDY: You lie and relax now, it's the adrenaline, kicking through, you're going to have quite a big adrenaline rush on this one... Producing more adrenaline, it's a reminder, consequently now that it wasn't so bad your body's relaxed and so now that adrenaline is flooding your body, that is what can give you that really light, light-headed feeling that you get [sound of snapping off of gloves, bin opens and shuts]...

*Andy's* conversation illustrates the highly physical language commonly used by participants when discussing the effects of adrenaline and endorphins. Adrenaline and endorphins are described in ways that make them vital and active: they 'kick', 'rush' and

'flood' the body. These descriptions illustrate their dynamism and ability to produce intense body reactions. *Andy* suggests that after I have had these hormones flooding my body I need to rest, that the effects of adrenaline and endorphins are so powerful he believes I need to take myself 'out of the frame' for a while and lie down.

*'It's not a normal thing to do [get tattooed], it's not like an everyday occurrence'.*

*(Jane)*

Adrenaline and endorphins were understood as powerful substances that were capable of 'shaking' up and interrupting the body. Bodies were characterised by participants as being in a 'normal' state before hormones began to act:

ANDY: Take your time, it takes a few minutes for the adrenaline to balance out... y'know, adrenaline is incredibly powerful... when it does kick in it just overrides everything that's sort of normal instincts of your body.

Knowledge about normal and 'abnormal' body states is created through such discussions. Adrenaline and endorphins themselves were understood to occur when the body was engaged in un-normal activities, whether this involved being in a fight, receiving an injury or taking part in a body modification practice. Leder (1990) states that it is in these atypical moments that the body in pain is highlighted:

Pain asserts itself not only via its sensory intensification but through its characteristic temporality: that which I term its *episodic structure*. We usually notice in the ongoing stream of sensation that which stands out as episodic and discrete. This is frequently the case with pain. It is not a constant accompaniment of normal bodily activity but tends to arise at times of unusual stress and trauma. (1990: 72, emphasis in the original)

When participants identified the appearance of adrenaline and endorphins they felt they had to, almost immediately, rein them in to subside their effects. The right conditions were instrumental to controlling adrenaline and endorphins, therefore as *Andy* suggests, clients need to take it easy and rest in order to allow the body to return to 'normal'.

Adrenaline and endorphins are therefore conceptualised as being mediated through and balanced by the rest of the body. 'Normality' has to be returned to the body once adrenaline and endorphins have fulfilled their functions. This process of neutralisation is reached when the effects of adrenaline and endorphins have receded and the body is brought 'back' to standard. The idea that the body is maintained at a constant level and actively works towards producing regularity is predominant in biomedicine and in lay understandings of health. Lynda Birke argues that the notion of a 'constant state' (1999: 43) is constructed as a natural aspect of body systems:

And it is that message of constancy, which, I suggest, has become culturally predominant. In part, it is sustained by the deep commitment to normalisation within the theories of biomedicine; stability equals normality equals health. Instabilities threaten chaos, disease, and death'. (1999: 153)

Body modification practices were recognised by participants as occasions that could interrupt the routine of the regular body; practices offered an experience that was not 'usual' or 'everyday':

ANDY: Sometimes it's quite good to just scare yourself every so often. Y'know, to really get that zest for feeling again, life and what things are about... That's why I like suspensions... it puts things back into perspective. I've got two arms and two legs, I'm at the moment healthy... what... have I got to be stressed, moan or complain about, y'know... that's why it's nice to do rituals sometimes, to put that back into perspective.

Participating in suspensions allows *Andy* to do something that is not routine but which reminds him of the importance, value even, of his everyday life. Adrenaline and endorphins in part initiate this reconnection. Sensation is responsible for creating the conditions in which feelings can come to the fore, through the conduit of the body. Mariet Vrancken suggests that pain experiences can essentially obliterate the life of the individual in pain: 'everyday life is pushed into the background and the body has come to the foreground' (1989: 438). Pain is conceptualised as becoming the centre of the world for the individual, because of its power to banish other feelings and body states.

Vrancken states that the body assumes this position due to the negativity of pain: 'Pain hits in the first place as a breach in the continuity of existence' (1989: 438). *Andy's* body comes to the foreground but for rather more positive reasons. The negativity of pain experiences for Vrancken (1989) make the world recede for the individual, however for *Andy* the world is brought 'forward'. Instead of causing a break in his existence, the sensation of suspension reinstates it.

Disrupting the normal and expected could also be understood in relation to a visual manifestation of adrenaline and endorphins in the body. Although during my ethnography it was unusual to see bodies that were actively expressing pain, I was able to identify certain physiological changes in participants. Observing bodies that were tense, elated and relaxed can all be implicated in the roles that adrenaline and endorphins were ascribed. The 'readable' manifestation of adrenaline and endorphin was perceived in relation to my own experience of ear scalpelling<sup>70</sup>. After the procedure I get up to look in the floor length mirror that *Andy* has in the studio. On looking at my reflection I suggest to *Andy* how the experience of receiving modification often 'shows up' on my face, with my skin looking a mixture of red, yellow and grey. *Andy* immediately attributes this colouring of my skin to the adrenaline that produces, if only temporarily, an imprint:

NATASHA: I've got my blotchy face like I always do...

ANDY: Yep, that's the adrenaline kicking in.

Adrenaline is understood as manifesting itself through the blood that rises to the surface of the skin; as such it is an interruption to how I normally look, my 'regular' face. Body modification practices precipitate change, even if this is only fleeting. The concept of thresholds and duration was inimically tied to notions of pain and sensation for participants, whether in relation to a three hour tattoo session or the seconds involved in getting a 'regular' piercing.

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<sup>70</sup> See Chapter Three for a more detailed discussion of ear-scalpelling.

## Constructing Pain Thresholds

The notion of pain thresholds has been important both to studies of pain and in participants' discussions of body modification practices. Pain thresholds, like the experience of pain itself, were understood to be 'individual'.

### *Pain as Individual*

Scarry (1985) maintains that experiencing pain is unique to the individual and as such is alien to others: pain is in fact 'inexpressible' (1985: 3). Hearing of another's pain becomes a 'deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography' (1985: 3). Experiencing pain is something that is alien and alienating if not experienced directly. Scarry (1985) suggests that although there are bodies around us that experience pain it is hard to imagine this pain for ourselves (see also Melzack and Wall, 1988: 41). We cannot do this precisely because we do not *feel* another's pain:

Vaguely alarming yet unreal, laden with consequence yet evaporating before the mind because not available to sensory confirmation... the pains occurring in other people's bodies flicker before the mind, then disappear. (1985: 4)

As the quote from Thomas Szasz (1975) at the beginning of this chapter states, pain is a 'universal' but is conceptualised as a resolutely individual experience (see also Scarry, 1985; Melzack and Wall, 1988; Leder, 1990; and Ahmed, 2004). If pain is so highly individualised and exclusive to each of us it is impossible to know another's pain:

Pain perception... is a highly personal experience, depending on cultural learning, the meaning of the situation, and other factors that are unique to each individual. (Melzack and Wall, 1988: 15)

If the experience of pain is understood to reside both in qualities of universality and uniqueness, such notions were also reflected in the ways that body modification participants perceived pain thresholds. These facts were understood by participants to be both individual to themselves and universal to other bodies. Thresholds were

conceived in terms of pre-existing facts while also being variable and forming an intrinsic role in managing pain experiences:

GARY: But I still believe people do genuinely have different pain thresholds. Some people obviously just don't physically feel the pain as much as others. I do get a very small percentage of people that for some reason almost don't feel pain, you could almost do anything you like to them, they'd just be perfectly relaxed and perfectly happy with it... Whereas other people, you could be as gentle as you like, over the smallest of things, they'd be in complete turmoil over it.

Managing pain knowledgeably is crucial not only in order for the practice to proceed, but for the individual to have a 'good' experience, which is what participants were always aiming for. These were not necessarily experiences without feeling, but those that occurred within an acceptable pain-range.

The notion that there are thresholds is a statement that there are capacities and limits. These limits vary between individuals and practices over time, and crucially over the same body over time. Participants understood thresholds as 'facts' yet through their experiences revealed how such thresholds fluctuated and changed. As such, thresholds are both 'static', in that they are used by participants to gauge pain and sensation, while also proving to be erratic. Participants' experience of feeling pain and sensation were often underscored by the attribution of hormonal processes. These working thresholds were weaved into body modification practices. The structure of the tattoo process is built partly upon an axis of 'typical' hormone response:

GARY: You'd generally have the line work first and then colour in or fill in or shade the tattoo afterwards...

NATASHA: Get the worst bit out of the way first?

GARY: Yeah. So that really, on the plus side it tends to kick the endorphins in sort of big time, which is where a lot of people have problems... fainting or passing out [laughs]. Which can happen really quickly, anything from literally nought minutes to up to ten minutes. Once you

get past the ten-minute period the chances of anyone passing out is very, very minimal.

*Gary's* account relies not only on the notion that all individuals experience the 'kick' of endorphins but that these will occur within a given timeframe. The expectation that individuals could generally only sit and be tattooed for a limited amount of time is built into the three-hour tattoo structure, which is common to the vast majority of tattoo appointments in the UK:

GARY: I think most people have got a limit of about three to four hours, which is generally the amount of time-span that your body can produce endorphins for. You've got a limited supply, and when they run... out it quite quickly seems to get far more painful.

When the participant begins to tire and the levels of adrenaline and endorphins were depleted and running 'thin', 'lighter' activities would follow. The tattoo experience is understood to get progressively more difficult as time goes on so that, by the end the practitioner has to reassure clients:

FIONA: He [Gary] said to me... "we're on the home straight now", 'cos I was kind of like nearly had enough. So I think he will sometimes work faster to get the last bit in before you go "no more!"

Duration was therefore important in relation to the body's supply of adrenaline and endorphins. That there would come a point at which pain would become unbearable was a familiar motif running throughout participants' discussions. Adrenaline and endorphins were often experienced in terms of depletion or excess, and as such were understood as being successfully 'stored' or not within the body.

### *Too Much and Too Little*

Participants understood adrenaline and endorphins as powerful substances that produced significant effects within the body; as such they identified that sometimes

there was 'too much' or 'too little' of them. *Gary* discussed instances of individuals who had fainted due to what he perceived as having 'too much' adrenaline and endorphins present in their body. These hormones are understood as having the ability to wash over and flood, move and fold the body. The effects of having 'too much' adrenaline in a body was something that *Gary* recognised as an early experience of his career:

GARY:           When I first started tattooing, I was extremely nervous for a long time, I used to get quite bad shakes [laughs]... I'd be fine... up until I was about to start... [then] an uncontrollable physical reaction would come over my body, which is really me coming to terms with my emotions of what I was doing, knowing that it was an important responsibility I was undertaking. But now I don't get it at all. So my emotions have overcome my body<sup>71</sup>... I'm glad I got over that because I don't think it'd be particularly reassuring for people to have someone [mimes shaking hands, laughs], not that it actually affected the end result... I think it's adrenaline really as well... it was always quite a big deal, what I was doing, so it just came out of my body really.

*Gary* experiences adrenaline as excess that he identifies in his shaking hands. If excessive adrenaline and endorphins were experienced in negative ways, they could also be positive. *Andy* associated doing suspensions with a 'massive adrenaline rush'. Experiencing excessive adrenaline for *Andy* enables him to have an 'out of body' experience, that is delivered through the rush of adrenaline.

Participants stated that they often begun to experience 'trouble' with pain thresholds and their levels of adrenaline and endorphins as their collection of practices grew. The roles given to, and the capacity for adrenaline and endorphin to react, were questioned through experiences that suggested to participants that 'stores' of adrenaline and endorphins were depleting. Comparing experiences of adrenaline and endorphins also had consequences for assessing how practices felt 'now' compared to 'then':

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<sup>71</sup>*Gary* suggests that he has been able to train his body to be reliable. This conception of 'mind over matter' will be explored in more detail in the section that follows, 'Thinking Into Pain'.

ISAAC: It wasn't... until I got more tattoos, I didn't realise how easy my first one had been. Just, not so painful in the same way. But that might have been the endorphins kicking in for the first time and then after that it's not as much.

If, as participants claimed, pain thresholds were constructed over time, then individuals who were extensively modified might be assumed to have built up a high pain threshold. However body modification practices were understood to 'use up' the body's store of pain relief. Participants suggested that thresholds can be reached and pain can become too much to bear. *Gary* and *Jane* both discussed the difficulties in managing and maintaining pain control as they began to get more tattoo coverage:

GARY: I think that people who are wanting to get complete coverage, when it gets nearer the end, it can become a bit of a chore... you find you kinda almost get weighed down by it... because you've had so much of the pain, almost you've had enough... A lot of people that I've spoken to that have a lot of coverage, kinda just say, "oh, it's too painful now"... you assume that... you must be immune to pain, but... it doesn't seem that way.

Those who want full body coverage might struggle to 'finish' because they have experienced as much pain as they can manage. Thresholds have therefore diminished instead of increasing over time; individuals have become more sensitised to the experience of pain not less. This also resonates in the following excerpt from *Jane*:

JANE: I'm still unconvinced about my levels of endorphin release because everyone says, "oh yeah after a while you know it gets easier"... sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it can get worse and worse... Recently I've felt a lot crabbier and I don't know whether that's cos I'm getting older... I can't understand it because I'm not doing anything differently. We're having the breaks... I get home... I end up shivering in bed, it does feel like I've got the flu... I think maybe there is a limit... maybe I've just hit my limit.

*Jane's* judgements of her hormonal capacities are used as a way of talking about how her body copes. *Jane* states that she may have reached a limit, however reaching that limit does not necessarily signal an end to involvement in body modification practices. Pain thresholds suggest that the modified body isn't impervious to pain and cannot be endlessly experimental or 'playful'. There can be pain and sensation, there are thresholds and there can be limits. The modified body is not an over-extended body, that is, a body that is always pushed and expected to perform beyond its capability.

It is clear that modified bodies often have to mediate intensive and difficult sensations. However, engaging in challenging experiences was often subsumed within a greater need and compulsion to carry on with modification practices. Even extremely painful experiences would not put participants off from continuing to get body modifications in the future:

GARY: My most painful area I've been tattooed is right on the side of my body... I'm very reluctant to actually get more work there but I probably will. But that makes me very... apprehensive about getting tattooed there... I will do it anyway, because my aim is to have, y'know, nearly complete coverage really.

ISAAC: If I want something tattooed I'm gonna get it done, whether I think it's gonna hurt or not. You know, you just grit your teeth.

JANE: ...if it was so bad you wouldn't... keep going to have it done and I certainly don't intend stopping... I'll have another one day, I'll be "shit, this really hurts, why am I doing this again?".

Body modifications seem to be positioned at interesting junctures: how is it that an experience that can be painful and difficult to endure is then repeatedly sought? The pain that *Gary*, *Isaac* and *Jane* experience may be intense but this does not impact on their desire to get more coverage. Tattooing and piercing were particular examples where participants detailed a compulsion to 'get more'. The notion of compulsion and

'addiction' as an emerging identity is discussed by Eve Sedgwick (1992). Her identification of the anchoring of addiction within the overly fit body suggests that:

...if exercise was addictive, nothing couldn't be; the exercise addict was really the limit case for evacuating the concept of addiction, once and for all, of any necessary specificity of substance, bodily effect or psychological motivation. (1992: 584)

As such body modification practices are ones that can be seen in relation to a body that is not propelled by the needs of drugs or alcohol, the familiar totems of addiction, but instead compulsion takes the form of 'the body itself' (Sedgwick, 1992: 583). The individual who has full tattoo body coverage, extending out onto hands and the head, or those that have multiple piercings and begin to 'run out of room', could be understood to illustrate a degree of compulsion within their body projects. However the aim here is not to 'finish' in the sense that participants want their body to be 'complete'. There is a need for body modification practices to remain a 'work in progress' to some extent. The idea that there is a finish point could be difficult for participants for whom body modification practices have become a sensate signature. I don't suggest that this compulsion is necessarily related to notions of pleasure and pain as comparable, yet there is clearly something in experiencing body modification practices that welcomes repetition. *Gary* suggests this compulsion is linked to the effect of endorphins:

**GARY:** Once you've had a few tattoos you get a strange desire to get more tattoos. I think there is an addictive nature of getting tattooed, I think it's possibly even down to the endorphins, the chemical your body seems to like to experience... If you're enjoying the experience and you like the end result and you're happy with that, it just seems natural to want more of it. It does to me anyway [laughs].

Adrenaline and endorphins are suggested to be substances that are not only powerful but also habit forming. The potential for 'addiction' to things that make you feel good. That compulsion is linked into feeling adrenaline and endorphin signals the idea that

these in themselves can be addictive substances. Jeff Goldberg (1988) traces the emergence and identification of endorphins and suggests that there is capacity for 'natural' endorphins produced by the body to themselves prove 'addictive': 'endorphins, while quickly broken down under normal circumstances, could themselves be addictive if their action was artificially prolonged' (1988: 180). Body modification participants could be understood to prolong such effects due to practices that are 'artificial'. Yet this is not an explanation of compulsion, although it may seem persuasive to participants like *Gary* who understand adrenaline and endorphins as 'addictive'.

### **Thinking Into<sup>72</sup> Pain**

'I think I deal with the pain in my head rather than... my body's doing something'. (*Jane*)

Although pain was understood to be experienced 'in' the body it was clear that research participants also had ideas about the ways in which the mental and the physical related to each other when experiencing pain. Therefore 'thinking into' pain was a familiar concept for body modification participants. The process of preparation that participants engaged in necessarily involved a re-reading of themselves for what was to come, whether that was recognised as mental and/or physical.

### ***Separation and Control***

The notion of a separation between the body and mind was implicated in many of the accounts from research participants. The mind/body split has been a substantial philosophical preoccupation, which as was explored in Chapter Two, has had a significant impact on the sensory body. However the pervasiveness of binary ways of thinking is something that Leder (1990) suggests continues to be a critical source of explanation for individuals. This occurs in part because lived experience emphasises body 'absence' (1990: 3). In participants' accounts the absence of the body in relation to

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<sup>72</sup>I am borrowing a term that *Jane* used in an interview.

pain and body modification practices is clear where participants suggest that pain could be isolated and then dealt with through cognitive processes:

FIONA: I didn't really have today what I've had at other times, which is being able to experience it [pain] but be very removed from it. And feel like you could get into some kind of interesting state with it... objectively observing the pain as something quite separate from you and not really something that affects you...

The concept of the Cartesian split in relation to experiencing pain persists, and continues to provide explanations for why the body in pain feels and operates in the ways that it does:

Whilst at an *analytical* level the study of pain and human suffering demands the dissolution of former dualistic modes of thinking in drawing attention to the relatedness of self and world, mind and body, inside and outside, it must also confront and account for the enduring power and qualities of these dichotomies at the *experiential* level of suffering. (Bendelow and Williams, 1998: 160, emphasis in the original)

The notion that pain would be controlled through the mind rather than be managed through less tangible distinctions was clear again in the following from *Gary*:

GARY: So there's a lot to be said for overcoming your fears of pain, and just being able to control the mind to be able to relax. It's a lot easier said than done, if you know you're going to be experiencing some form of pain. It's just about channelling your emotions, almost telling yourself that it's not going to hurt or that you're going to be fine with that pain.

Tuning into what happens at the level of the body might appear to suggest that there is 'equalisation' of the two but as *Gary* suggests these actions are understood to originate in the brain, which again emphasises control. However the notion that there was a

hierarchy between mind and body was not without tensions, that *Fiona* qualified in discussing her pain experiences:

FIONA: A bit of mind over matter with it, breathing with it, not even mind over matter 'cos you're not kind of denying that there's pain or feeling...

The notion that there should or could be a denial of what individuals felt is at odds with how participants often discussed pain and the feelings that they produced. These tensions between the body and mind persisted in experiences of body modification practice.

### *Watching or Not*

I suggest the Cartesian split is also apparent in relation to watching, or not, what is happening to the body. Relating visually to procedures was understood in contradictory ways by modification participants: looking at needles, the cauteriser or the tattoo gun was understood to both help deal with and intensify feelings of pain.

During her tattoo procedures *Fiona* discussed the difficulties she encountered when she watched what was happening. If she was fully 'engaged' and watched the tattoo process this effectively increased the pain that she experienced. *Fiona's* comments occurred both during and directly after the tattoo appointment:

FIONA: It seemed easier to shut out some of the painful stuff with my eyes closed. Which would make you think that you would tune into it more 'cos you'd have less sort of stimulus or whatever but it didn't... I don't look at the needle when he's doing it.

Looking, then, for *Fiona* directly correlates to the amount of pain that she feels, although she expresses concern that what she feels is not 'right' and that it cannot make a 'real' difference. Yet her experience of watching is associated with intensifying pain:

FIONA: It was interesting looking at the needle today though. I couldn't look at the needle when it was really hurting, but when it didn't hurt it was

quite interesting to look at it. I'd had this sort of fear of looking at it before, as if looking at it would make it hurt more, which is obviously silly.

Returning to her 'natural' state of not looking, *Fiona's* self-awareness around the contradictions inherent in engaging in something that she can't look at happening is clear, she suggests also that it is a 'strange form of denial'. However for *Jane* looking at the tattoo gun not only helped her to deal with pain but was also central to her experience. If she was not able to visually engage with the modification practice she felt that she was not able to fully participate:

JANE: I'm one of those people who... whenever I go and have a blood test they always say "oh, look away"... "no, I want to see what's going on!"... So to watch the needle going into the skin... it's important for me to see what's happening... You've got that feedback... you can see... you can feel the pain... it's important for me to see what's going on so I can deal with it in my own way.

*Jane* has been admonished for looking in medical contexts so she uses the body modification experience in order to watch. Further this has a purpose, in that it helps her manage her feelings of pain. Seeing and feeling then are inimically tied together in her experience.

Looking has traditionally been associated with rationality and reasoning whereas concentrating on feeling alone - 'it's enough to hear and feel it without seeing it' (*Fiona*) - is understood as a less solid and reliable source of information. As was explored in Chapter Two, such notions can be traced back to Descartes where the senses were routinely approached with suspicion, whereas 'seeing acts as a tool both of confirmation and evidence' (Jay, 1994: 70). This has important consequences in relation to experiencing pain. Pain is sometimes only felt once it has been seen and registered. Not looking or not being able to see means that participants deal with pain in different ways. *Jane* reflected that she did not enjoy the experience of scalpel mainly because she could not watch the procedure. However it was seeing blood that turned it into a traumatic experience:

JANE: I said earlier about wanting to see, being quite visual and wanting to see things happening, and obviously you can't because they're completely in the wrong place [her ears]... I just bled everywhere, I had blood all down the side of my neck and all over my clothes, it just looked really hideous, really hideous.

Recognising the significance of embodied accounts is, as Elizabeth Wilson (2004: 8) suggests, a way of expanding the ways in which bodies are conceptualised. The body acts independently, even when participants emphasise the capacity for the mental to control the physical. Body processes continue. This can be seen in the continued functioning of the body even when intentional acts that 'harmed' the body occurred:

FIONA: I think the blood rushes to the area, 'cos it knows it's being attacked and... there's a kind of injury... even if the brain knows it's a deliberate one... the blood cells rush to defend and heal...

As the body is involved in a constant cycle of response and re-creation this illuminates the impossibility of instituting 'breaks' between mental and physical processes:

Meanwhile, our internal organs and tissues also make and remake themselves... implicit in these systems is *active* response to change and consistency, bodily interiors that constantly react to change inside or out, and act upon the world. (Birke, 1999: 152, emphasis in the original)

My purpose here is not to take a position in relation to a binary, body or mind, asserting that one position is better or more apt at explaining than another, but that there is a shortage of possibility in adopting an either/or position. Bodies and minds operate beyond, and in spite of, boxed categories. Body modification participants illustrate the ability to engage both in dualistic modes of thinking, as well as offering some opportunities from which to think things in different ways. The reliance on the Cartesian model is as Leder (1990: 155) states unsurprising when it can be used so readily to 'explain', yet the basis for this explaining also illuminates its inadequacy.

## Conclusion

This chapter has established that although literature on pain tends to adopt a specific analytic focus on pain, the notion of chosen and elected pain cannot be theorised within these parameters. Further, pain is not always an accurate or broad enough term through which to articulate participants' accounts. Instead sensation is utilised in many ways in order to capture experiences that could be understood as 'painful'. The electiveness of body modification practices is what changes the conditions of pain and sensation.

Participants have shown the ways in which feeling states can be transformed from the negative into the positive. This is possible on the understanding that the pain that is experienced by the participant will end - that is that the practice will be painful for a finite amount of time, as long as the piercing or tattoo takes - and that pain will after this point fade. This enables pain to be managed within a predicted time frame and gives individuals the opportunity to experience it in their own ways, be they ritualistic, ecstatic, with difficulty or without comment. This kind of pain allows individuals to explore what it is to be 'in' pain. There can be 'freeness' in pain, in going with it, finding ways of accommodating it or testing out ways in which it can be felt and thought about. When pain was experienced as intense or difficult, individuals could transform these experiences into acceptable, even fond, memories.

Due to the electiveness of practices, feelings of pain are transformed through both the memory of the experience and the 'object' of the modification in and on their body. Through isolating the feeling of welcome intent, individuals can transform challenging experiences. *Gary* reflects: 'Although I loved the end result [of scalpelling] I didn't particularly enjoy the experience, it was a bit too intense for me... but... no regrets!'. 'Tuning into' a pain that has been welcomed and which will certainly recede clearly marks out pain experiences from those that are chronic and more importantly, unchosen. It also moves pain away from the areas of 'disease and dysfunction' (Leder, 1990: 70).

When pain is perceived as something not experienced negatively, it is often understood in terms of will and heroism: 'Man is inclined to be overwhelmed and led away from pain, but a person who is motivated is able to halt this by an act of will' (Vrancken, 1989: 439). Therefore walking across hot coals, bearing weights or

suspension are acts that are perceived to occur on bodies that are marked outside of what is 'normal'. These 'outsiders'<sup>73</sup> are presented as being impervious to what 'regular' bodies could endure. Their separateness is emphasised for example through using terms such as 'yogi' (Leder, 1990: 73). The experience of body modification participants suggests that bodies do not need to be polarised in such ways. Bodies that choose to experience potentially painful acts are not outside what is possible. They are not 'superhuman' or stoic bodies, nor are they demonstrating extraordinary acts of will. Instead they are bodies that accept pain and sensation because it has been chosen.

In terms of methodology, listening to participants recalling experiences of pain has at times been challenging and uncomfortable for me as a researcher. Although valuable, witnessing bodies in pain and sensation left me feeling tired and drained [see also discussion in Chapter Three]. Consequently it was something that I had to acclimatise myself to. Researchers present during body modification practices are involved and participating; there are concerns for the well-being of participants that I found to be impossible to disengage from, even when individuals were at ease and accepting of the process that was taking place. Witnessing bodies in pain/sensation is undoubtedly different from observing bodies that are in repose. The situation I was in as a researcher was unusual, observing and participating within spaces where individuals chose pain and sensation. The generosity of participants in inviting me to be part of their experiences allowed this engagement with pain and sensation to occur.

Being present when individuals were in pain/sensation and discussing their feelings gave insight into the ways in which bodies in pain behaved. During these procedures it was uncommon to see overt verbal or intense physical expressions of pain such as shouting, screaming or recoiling when practices occurred. However other significant actions including sweating, colouring of skin, closed eyes, looking away, looking at and participants taking deep breaths. The notion that I as a researcher was anticipating or hoping to see unequivocal expressions of pain surfaced in the following exchange between *Colin*, *Ellie* and myself:

NATASHA: Thanks for letting me sit in, Colin

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<sup>73</sup> Accounts of positive pain in analyses are rare. When such accounts of pain are presented they often occur on non-white, non-Western bodies. Melzack and Wall (1988: 15-17) for example discuss flesh hanging rituals from India and East Africa that they suggest do not generate 'pain' for participants.

- COLIN: No worries. I don't know if I was much help really... no screaming or anything like that.
- ELLIE: Highly disappointing actually... [laughter]
- COLIN: I didn't even swear!... I'm just sorry there wasn't any shouting, or swearing or whatever.

There is an anticipation on both *Colin's* and *Ellie's* part that I might be disappointed with the lack of pain and discomfort that Colin expressed. Their expectations of what they thought I wanted to see are manifested in the doubts expressed that they have given me 'good' material. However *Colin* may simultaneously feel pleased that he has demonstrated an ability to deal with the procedure well, without obvious indicators that he has been in pain, which he tacitly acknowledges in his comments.

The notion that pain is individualised and unique presents certain dilemmas in drawing conclusions about pain. However, theorising about something that is understood as the most individual experience does not mean that we cannot interrogate concepts of pain that are social, cultural and biological. The role of hormones for example has been important to participants' narratives of pain and sensation. As such these body processes need to be addressed by sociological accounts that have the 'living' woven into them. Experiencing body processes like adrenaline and endorphins adds to the literature, particularly that written by feminists, which seeks to interrogate notions of 'the' body, not only as a cultural and social object but also as one of biology:

...Emerging theory about embodiment - important though that has been - tends to treat the body as an inscribable surface, on which culture acts. For some phenomena - such as body piercing, that may be a valid approach. But it leaves the biological body and its inner processes apart, left in the rag-bag category of 'the biological'. (Birke, 2003: 41)

I suggest that the biological needs to be accounted for in those acts that are seen as perhaps *the* most socially constructed on a surface level: body piercing, tattooing and all body modification practices. Body modification practices are predominantly understood as operating at the surface of the body, as indicated by Birke (2003). That there has been little consideration of the physiology of the body in relation to

modification practices is perhaps unsurprising in light of the way that surfaces have been privileged in body modification accounts [see discussion in Chapter Seven]. Such perspectives mirror the ways in which the body has been understood predominantly as a surface (see for example Gatens, 1996), leaving 'depth' to biology. Critiques such as those offered by Wilson (1999, 2004) have identified this to be an issue and suggested that we look to the interior of the body *as well*.

Body modification practices occur on and *in* a body. As experiences of pain and sensation have illustrated, participants do not divide between the inside and outside of the body, even when modifications are understood to be predominantly surface practices like the tattoo. As I go on to illustrate in Chapter Seven, we can understand the surface of the body as having 'depth', thereby expanding the experience of the modified surface beyond the visual limits placed upon it. To leave the body, both as surface and of depth, out of modification accounts denies the dimensions of body modification experience.

Leder (1990) states that in emphasising the lived body we can 'be more attentive to experience, uncover phenomena that were concealed, explain what the Cartesian framework renders inexplicable' (1990: 155). The ability to reconsider pain, make it manageable, or a positive experience, illustrates the capabilities of bodily and mental processes. Pain becomes less a monolithic category than a collection of specific and differentiated sensations. Leder (1990) suggests that the body inhabits 'awayness' (1990: 70) because 'our organic basis can be easily forgotten due to the reticence of visceral processes' (1990: 69). However body modification practices can give the individual the opportunity to engage with and relate to their body in vital ways. Instead of reticence there is intensity. Participants' experiences of body modification practices call into question how bodies in pain and sensation 'are'. Their accounts need to be included in embodied and sociological discussions of pain.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Exploring the Soundscape of Body Modification Practice

'When I'm being tattooed I like the sound because it's like sort of humming'.

(Henry)

It is to the invisible that listening may attend. (Ihde, 2007: 14)

#### Introduction

Body modification practices present opportunities to listen, to create and to tune into the body's capacity for sonic production. The environments of body modification practice - studios, conventions and the bodies that make up these spaces - produce sonic 'soundscapes'. I borrow the term 'soundscape' from Murray R. Schafer (1994) who uses it to delineate 'the sonic environment' (1994: 274). The soundscape is a spatial-sonic milieu where music, machines, instruments and bodies meet. Attending to sound, as Ihde (2007: 14) suggests, highlights one of the less visible aspects of body modification practice. I propose that the sense and sensation of sound around, on and within the modified body is a vital constituent of modification experience.

During my ethnography at *Star* and my visits to *Dragon* I appreciated how the modification experience was, partly, sonic. 'Listening in' became a way of inhabiting and relating to these spaces. Using sound as a methodology appears in the work of (Stoller, 1984; Bull and Back, eds, 2003; Feld, 2005; and Back, 2007), and in relation to tattooing, Broome (2006) acknowledges the sonic quality of the tattoo experience. Michael Bull and Les Back, eds (2003) call for a 'deep' or 'agile' listening (2003: 3)

which draws attention to sound and what it can tell us about experience. They suggest that thinking ‘through’ sound gives us the opportunity to ‘re-think our relational experiences, how we relate to others, ourselves and the spaces and places we inhabit’ (2003: 4). I adopt such an approach to investigate the sonic life of body modification practices. This enables me to use fresh perspectives in order to approach the subject of body modification and supplement existing work on body modification as a predominantly visual process [see Chapter Seven for discussion of visuality as theme].

One of the ways in which sound has been theorised has been in terms of how it configures, and in turn how we imagine space. Sound and its relationship to space has been key (see Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960; Ihde, 1973 and 2007; Connor, 1997; Ong, 2000; and Sterne, 2003). The conceptualisation of sonic-spatial environments as ‘spherical’<sup>74</sup> has been a recurrent theme in studies of sound (see Ihde, 1973 and 2007). Conceiving of sound through such spatial ‘co-ordinates’ provides ways in which to conceptualise sonic experiences. Ihde writes:

Were it to be modelled spatially, the auditory field would have to be conceived of as a “sphere” within which I am positioned, but whose “extent” remains indefinite as it reaches outward toward a horizon. (Ihde, 2007: 75)

I take the work of Ihde (2007) as a point of departure and suggest that the sphere, without boundary or indeed explicit ‘form’, is a way of understanding the sonic patterns of body modification practice. The defining aspect of the sonic sphere is that through it sound *inhabits*: moving and shifting, incorporating auditory life but not containing it:

It’s a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. (Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960: 67)

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<sup>74</sup> Sterne (2003) has characterised the sonic ‘as sphere’ in what he has termed the audio – visual litany: ‘The audio-visual litany...idealizes hearing (and, by extension, speech)... It alternately denigrates and elevates vision: as a fallen sense, vision takes us out of the world’ (2003: 15). He identifies that sound as sphere has been ‘opposed’ to the directionality of vision.

Although Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (1960) implicitly denigrate the visual in relation to the auditory, it is useful to think of sound moving and inhabiting space in these ways. Taking the sphere as motif I suggest that body modification environments, using a somewhat visual metaphor, produce what I term a 'venn diagram' of sound. A series of interlocking spheres, the 'sonic venn' is porous, it can be multiple and shifting in the ways that Ihde (2007) and Carpenter and McLuhan (1960) have suggested. Sonic venns move and puncture sonic spheres, overlapping, extending and shrinking as sounds are made, pass and then disappear. Conceptualising sound in this way enables the dimensions, duration and character of sound to emerge. The sonic venn can also account for the ways in which bodies participate, create and react acoustically and how corporeality is experienced in auditory ways. Connor (1997) and Drobnick, ed. (2004) both suggest that sound can prompt a fully integrated notion of physical experience: 'The act of listening is not an activity done remotely; it inevitably invokes corporeality, it envelops listeners' (Drobnick, 2004: 10). The body is implicated in the venn, it is what we can see, touch and hear. I have used the venn to develop the concept of the sphere, allowing us to plot the dynamism of the sonic spatially, temporally and corporeally. By invoking the venn I have suggested that we move beyond the 'solidity' of the sphere and its definition as a 'single' encompassing entity. The venn demonstrates that there are many ways in which the sonic is experienced, moving and overlapping through differing spaces, times and bodies. The venn illustrates the multiplicity of the sonic not exclusively through 'one' space, *the* sphere, but many permeable spheres that move, link and break away from one another.

The venn as multi-temporal and spatial aids our understanding of how sonic life is experienced and as such is an organising motif within this chapter. Using this core concept I explore the sonic spaces of body modification, the studio, the convention and atypical spaces (such as outdoor locations). I attend to the sounds that are heard in and produced by modified bodies, and how participants react to and feel about these sonic experiences. Accompanying these environmental and corporeal soundscapes I trace music as a sonic experience that underscores both enjoyment and unease with body modification practices.

## The Studio as Sonic Venn

Participating in studio life at *Star* and *Dragon* enabled me to appreciate the extent and fullness of sonic life within the studio environment. These studios created and inhabited distinctive sonic patterns that led me to characterise sonic life in terms of venns. These studios emitted sounds that were of the 'everyday' as well as producing site-specific sounds which, following Schafer (1994), I have identified as 'keynotes' (1994: 9). Schafer (1994: 9) uses the term keynote to describe a significant sound present in any sonic location:

It is the anchor or fundamental tone and although the material may modulate around it, often obscuring its importance, it is in reference to this point that everything else takes on its special meaning. (1994: 9)

The keynotes that characterise the space of body modification studios resound through and around the modified bodies inhabiting these spaces. The keynote sound of the tattoo studio is recognisable through the tattoo gun that emits a staccato 'drill', which produces an amplified buzz. Broome (2006) in his study of home tattooing identified how the sound of the tattoo gun framed the tattoo experience:

As he lowered his foot onto the pedal, the buzzing sound of the machine started, and at that precise moment the buzzing was the only noise that could be heard in the house. (2006: 338)

The tattoo keynote 'fills' the space so that those in close proximity to the machine have to acclimatise themselves to it, while consciously tuning into the soundscape to hear other sounds. The sound of the tattoo gun has the capacity to sonically immerse the practitioner and participant. The sonic venn of the studio is punctuated by the pauses and breaks taken by the practitioner and their tattoo gun.

Though the tattoo machine offers a clear example of a keynote sound, keynotes need not be only the loudest or most enduring sound, or that which commands the most space. In counterpoint to the tattoo machine there are defining sounds that emerge in relation to other modification spaces. Sonic signatures also became apparent within the

body modification studio: the hum of the steriliser and the autoclave, the clinking of instruments and the rustling of the paper roll as each participant sits or lies down on the couch. The practices themselves, if not eliciting a keynote, help to create the layers of the venn. The practice of piercing sounds like the crackle of plastic as a new needle is produced and the 'pop' of skin when it goes through flesh. Scarification can be characterised almost through an absence of sound; the meeting of scalpel on flesh, once the gloves are on and a fresh blade is unwrapped, is perceptible mainly through vibration. Branding emits a hiss that is created as heat meets skin and the occasional hair. All practices are accompanied by the squeak and rubbery sound of gloves. The modification studio even when empty continued to 'hold' the reverberation of sounds. After watching procedures I was often the last to leave and it seemed as if the sonic presence of what had occurred lingered on in the empty space.

Additional sounds in *Star* and *Dragon* were peripheral yet not inconsequential as they would satellite around the context given by keynotes: a kettle boiling, music, chairs being pulled across the floor, a phone ringing all mingled into the soundscape. These spaces are also filled with bodies that emit sounds: breathing, shifting, and engaging in conversation and laughter. These sounds were variable and were experienced, and contributed to and created, by those that used these spaces - the practitioner, client and visitors. Listening into and paying attention to the soundscape of the modification studio allowed the sonic venn to come through. The sonic venn then is created in part through keynotes, peripheral sounds and the soundings that are produced in and by bodies. These sounds are linked together by the interactions that occur between the individuals within these spaces. These frameworks of sociability that I observed and participated in at *Dragon* and *Star* produced the means through which the keynotes were given meaning: through the bodies that come together to perform and receive modification practices. Although body modification participants entered spaces that featured medical grade products and 'clinical' standards of hygiene, individuals behaved as if they were using an informal space such as a café. As such the sonic venn of the studio is a social one, in contrast to the hushed and constrained spaces of waiting rooms and clinics.

Sound was continuously produced in the studio environment including, it is important to note, through myself. The sonic trace that I left through my interactions with others and objects produced one of the clearest 'footprints' of my presence as a

researcher. Discussions with research participants and interactions with those who came in to use the space meant that I affected and was affected by the sonic life of the studio. Venns were created anew when people were present and then absent from the studio environment, as individuals moved into the private backspace of the studio and emerged out again. These soundings marked body modification experiences and the shifts and changes of studio life:

FIONA: Sound was a really, really massive thing, I have no idea what that whole thing would have been like in complete silence with no sound at all... and not just if people weren't speaking or there wasn't music, and obviously the tattoo gun... But there were loads of sort of external sounds that all become part of the experience... and it's sort of a weird influx of things, like whenever she went out [the receptionist] you heard the door going, car alarms going in the street... traffic going past, sirens, you could hear the cars on the road because... it was wet. You could really hear the tyres and you could every now and again hear a bit of rain out in the garden.

The sonic-spatial environment then consists of overlapping spheres, the immediate tattoo environment, the garden, the waiting area, the street and surrounding area, all of which compose the sphere of the tattoo experience. *Fiona* isolates the components that contribute to the sonic experience of her tattoo. In doing so she illustrates that through focusing attention on listening we get more of a sense of the occasion beyond a machine inking skin. The sonic diversity detailed by *Fiona* hints at an experience that is more complex and rich and which finds a parallel in work of John Cage (2004):

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise... When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. (2004: 25)

Therefore sounds that are both immediate and peripheral move together to produce a soundscape. In relation to the characteristics of the sonic venn, *Fiona's* discussion of her tattoo experience additionally gestures to the movement inherent in sound experiences:

The auditory field, continuous and full, penetrating in its presence, is also lively. Sounds “move” in the rhythms of auditory presence. Here we approach more closely that first listening which detects in sound an essential temporality. The fullness of auditory presence is one of an “animated” liveliness. (Ihde, 2007: 82)

The sonic venn is in constant movement, shifting and changing, affecting the environment and the bodies within it, it is multi-temporal and spatial, a fundamental way to imagine the organisation of sonic space. The sounds associated with body modification practice not only feature the ‘here’ and ‘now’ but instead incorporate with and form other experiences, creating overlapping spheres of connection. Consider for example:

JANE: The album that I bought after that particular tattooing session... it sort of reminds me of that time on so many different levels. Not only just the whole tattooing thing, it’s just the fact that it was a special time for us as well, but it’s nice to be able to share my feelings being tattooed with him [her partner], both at the time and like sort of, y’know, we sit there listening to this album, and he’s going “oh yeah, that was a particularly bad bit, I remember the grimace on your face” and I’m like “yeah, you don’t need to remind me” [laughs].

This excerpt from an interview with *Jane* suggests that body modification practices have the capacity to also be significant musical experiences, a theme I will return to later in this chapter. In *Jane’s* account the sonic becomes a mixture of both the present and the past illuminating the temporal and spatial synchronicities of the venn. *Jane* uses the album as an aid to relive the event, not only creating what is a fond memory, despite the discomfort that she feels, but as a visceral event too. The corporeal reminder of the tattoo through the music itself is relived and extended through experiencing it in the ‘now’. The venn that ‘contained’ *Jane’s* initial tattoo procedure reaches out to the present moment where she once more relives the experience through music, and as such, the experience has the capacity to be ‘played’ many times over. Through the music the venn not only stretches in relation to time but also from one space to the

next, from the tattoo studio to her home, or indeed anywhere else. The sonic experience is one that incorporates the 'old' with 'new' times and places, and as such the venn incorporates all of these sonic events.

The multi-temporal and spatial qualities of the venn can also be understood in relation to bodies that have already experienced body modification. I suggest that previously modified participants experience the sounds of modification practice as 'hooks'. The drill of the tattoo gun is linked to the feel of needles on the flesh and the hum of the autoclave exacts an anticipatory presence on skin about to be pierced. These sounds create an important dimension of the venn. They remind participants of their experiences while also signalling the possibility of other practices that will follow. As discussed in Chapter Five in relation to pain, individuals that have experienced body modification practices often feel compelled to repeat their experiences; as such the role of the sonic in the practice 'to come' is crucial:

JANE: I always get a tingle down my back whenever I walk past the studio and someone's getting work done. Hear the needle... the buzz of the machine... it always makes me look forward to the next session... sometimes it [is] just sort of like, it's the tap on the shoulder to say, you know, you need to... get some more work done...

The sound of the tattoo gun manifests as a corporeal tingle, the buzz of the needle, which is invoked within her own body through hearing other tattooed bodies. This bodily 'shiver' is a 'hook' that is created through both hearing and recalling feeling. The layers of the audio and the corporeal overlap in both space and time. They are both immediate and enduring - it is 'in' the here and now but also is of the past and what could be to come.

The body is a manifestation of the sonic and as such it can make visible the multi-temporal and spatial qualities of the venn. The modified body moves forward while also holding a collection of experiences and memories. Recognising the body as the manifestation of the venn allows us to appreciate the ways in which the body modification experience need not be either only one of sound *or* visuality but rather that the senses implicate each other. One of the ways in which the modified body is

materialised as sonic is through the effects of keynotes: the buzz of the tattoo needle or the high-pitched beep of the cauteriser, which vibrate in and on the modified body.

### *Corporeal Keynotes*

Keynotes help define the sonic venn of the studio. I suggest that the keynote in the piercing studio is the snap of latex gloves<sup>75</sup> as they are put on and discarded many times a day. The noise of the gloves being snapped on and off is not continuous, loud, or one that necessarily dominates space. It does however form a kind of rhythm, a punctuation that begins and finishes each piercing procedure. As such 'snapping' acted as a sonic frame to procedures and featured repeatedly in my recordings, yet these snaps are also sounds that could be 'lost' in the sonic mix of the studio:

Keynote sounds do not have to be listened to consciously; they are overheard but cannot be overlooked, for keynote sounds become listening habits in spite of themselves. (Schafer, 1994: 9)

The snapping of gloves may be an 'unconscious' sound experienced many times a day for practitioners, however it also defines the sonic venn of the body modification studio.

The keynotes of body modification practice are ones that *resonate*; they affect environments and bodies. One of the ways in which the sonic alters bodies is through the vibration of keynotes, which constitute both a felt and heard experience. Vibrations touch, when the scalpel cuts against the grain of the skin for example, or when the piercing needle meets resistance. It is also through tattoo needles that the sonic shaping of bodies can be traced. The tattoo machine is in itself a machine of vibration, it connects the tattooist and client through the buzzing of the needles:

COLIN:        You can feel the vibrations, down your tendons and into the front of your hands.

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<sup>75</sup> This is a sound that is also present in other modification spaces, as all practitioners should wear gloves when carrying out procedures. However it is in the piercing studio in particular that these snapping sounds create a constant and familiar soundscape. During busy periods at *Star* up to three or four piercings could be performed in an hour, which means that a lot of snapping is heard.

FIONA: It really... rumbles... the needle, you feel the rumble right inside your body it rrrrrrrrs... it was kind of making me think of machines... It was sort of like, a lawnmower seemed the best, 'cos then I was thinking of like a washing machine, and I was thinking, no it's like a lawnmower because of the kind of vibrations.

The vibrations that are experienced by *Colin* and *Fiona* alter the surface but also affect the interior of their bodies. Sound and feeling is located not only on the surface of the skin and transmitted to the ear, but is also created in bones, tendons, and skin. Connor's (1997) notion of the self as a 'sonic membrane' is useful in conceptualising how sound is experienced by the modified body. Connor (1997) reflects on the importance of sound to any consideration of corporeality:

The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture built but as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel. (1997: 207)

The modified body as a 'channel' gestures to the auditory capabilities of the modified body as one that incorporates and expels sound. There is no moment when the body is not engaged in some form of vibration, even when the body is still. Sterne (2003) writes that:

As part of a larger physical phenomenon of vibration, sound is a product of the human senses and not a thing in the world apart from humans. Sound is a little piece of the vibrating world. (2003: 10)

The body modification environment shapes the hearing and bodies of those who are practitioners or regular visitors to the studio. Those that are continually exposed to the intensity of keynotes, such as the tattoo gun and the cauteriser, soon become attuned to these noises:

ISAAC: I have got used to the sound of the tattoo gun now, I know some people don't like it but I do, it's quite... familiar now I s'pose...

FIONA: You are more aware of a machine kind of making this really... loud noise and you can feel it going papapapapapap on your skin...

It is interesting to note that *Fiona* resorts to using sounds to describe the sensations and noises that she experiences during her tattoo experiences. The sounds of the internal rumble and the sound of the tattoo gun on skin are used to describe the experience as if it is difficult to communicate it in any other way.

The ways in which keynotes impact upon participants and practitioners suggests that their bodies are shaped through a repeated engagement in practices which have sonic consequences. Schafer (1994) suggests that keynotes are important in relation to shaping groups, individuals and the environment:

Keynote sounds are those that are heard by a particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived. Examples might be the sound of the sea for a maritime community or the sound of the internal combustion engine in the modern city. (1994: 272)

Clients' bodies are shaped through hearing and feeling keynotes that produce in part the end product of modification. However it is in the bodies of practitioners that the effects of keynotes over time can have the most dramatic effects. Body modification practitioners often spend large portions of the day holding themselves in tense poses, and this is exhibited no more so than in the 'hunched' frame of the tattooist. Through sound and vibration the tattoo machine shapes not only the hearing but also the body of the practitioner. Tattooists often suffer from deafness and from bad backs due to the nature of their working positions. The vibrations of the tattoo gun can also produce effects of tingling and numbness in their fingers and hands. The sonic has corporeal effects:

For example, industrialisation and urbanisation decrease people's physical capacities to hear. One of the ways in which adults lose the upper range of their

hearing is through encounters with loud machinery. A jackhammer here, a siren there, and the top edge of hearing begins to erode. (Sterne, 2003: 13)

If practitioners become widely known and celebrated as an artist, the pressure to work can be intense and they ultimately have to take more breaks, work less or move into semi-retirement (see for example Chris Garver at *Miami Ink*<sup>76</sup>). Watching *Gary* at work it was clear that he often had to change positions and rest parts of the body that had been over used. This was also the case at *Star* when practitioners often had to hold their bodies in tense or 'unnatural' poses in order to successfully carry out the body modification practice<sup>77</sup>. Because practitioners have to be precise, whether in putting in a line of ink, the placing of a piercing, or the scalpelling of a design, the bodies of practitioners bear this investment in their profession. Custom practitioners may be particularly, although not exclusively, prone to sonic effects. As was discussed in Chapter Four, developing skills is a lengthy and involved process for the custom body modification practitioner; to become skilled they need to practice, and practice has a corporeal and sonic print. The effects of keynotes illustrate how the audio and the corporeal affect each other within the sonic venn.

I will now attend to the body as a soundscape in more detail and examine the ways in which research participants experienced the sounds of the body.

*'The sensations come in waves and it's not always welcome'. (Fiona)*

Body modification practices involve procedures that resonate both on the 'inside' and 'outside' of the body. The penetration of surface and the hitting of bone during branding ('Oh there's the bone, I remember now!', *Colin*) or the shifting of implants under the skin ('I had the silicone one... that had to come out, my skin just doesn't give... around it...', *Henry*) produce soundings within the modified body. Body modification procedures enable the sounds of the body to come through. In much of the material that has appeared in relation to the 'sonic turn' (see for example Drobnick,

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<sup>76</sup> Chris Garver is a well-known and respected tattooist who works at *Miami Ink* in Miami, Florida, US. *Miami Ink* is also the name of the reality television programme that films clients getting tattooed at the studio. The series has also chronicled Chris Garver's problems with pain, in particular the back-pain that has forced him into semi-retirement.

<sup>77</sup> This would be particularly the case if they were carrying out an intricate design or if they were working on a difficult to reach part of the body.

ed., 2004) sound had been cast in terms of its capacity to illuminate and explain social worlds. Although I have identified sound as integral to the sense and sensation of body modification practice, its ability to 'invoke corporeality' was not something that research participants necessarily welcomed or enjoyed. The body noises that were heard and felt were often a source of discomfort for participants. They were associated with difficult experiences because the auditory detracted from what they generally hoped to be positive experiences. In the following excerpt *Jane* describes the experience of receiving a large gauge ear piercing:

JANE:            Yeah... that wasn't too bad actually [the dermal punch<sup>78</sup>], I thought it was be going to be absolutely agonising but... it's okay at the time but then your ear starts throbbing and it can be throbbing for weeks. It's like being... I've never been punched in the ear, but you can imagine someone really punching you very hard in the ear, and it just throbs, you feel every... pulse of blood that goes through your ear capillaries... It does feel like your ear is like pulsating every time the blood passes through it... it's weird, that's something else I don't really want to go through again.

*Jane* discusses the feeling of being aware of hearing and feeling every 'pulse of blood' due to effects of the procedure. Attention is drawn to what is happening underneath her skin and the 'pounding' sensation that is produced. She not only feels the blood running through her veins but experiences its amplification. The pulsing of blood can be heard and felt in 'everyday' moments in the body but it is through the modification practice that such processes are emphasised.

As we saw in the previous chapter, pain is not necessarily related to illness or disease, and everyday experiences are transformed so that the exaggerated sound of pumping blood creates a moment that we may not ordinarily hear. The fact that these auditory modification experiences are ones that are rejected may be precisely due to the fact that they are not familiar or everyday. The 'regular' self is frequently understood to be

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<sup>78</sup> A dermal punch operates much like a hole-punch and it perforates a hole in the ear, usually inside the ear, but sometimes also used on the lobe. It allows for a bigger gauge to be made than with a piercing needle.

generally mute to the workings of the body and 'unconscious' to its actions. This is illustrated in the following from Ackerman (1990):

We rarely hear the internal workings of our body, the caustic churning of our stomach, the whooshing of our blood, the flexing of our joints, our eyelids' relentless opening and closing. (1990: 178)

And Connor (2005):

Proprioceptive hearing, the hearing of one's self, the gurgling of the viscera, the cracking of the bones, the thudding and pulsing of the blood, even the firing of neurons, to which all of us are continuously exposed and that for most of the time... we integrate unconsciously without effort. (2005: 325)

In the moments when there is a conscious engagement with listening to the body, and particularly if one is shielded from surrounding noise, the body is one that sensorially produces its own soundscape. When, in 1951, John Cage visited an anechoic chamber at Harvard University he had expected to hear 'silence'. Instead he states:

There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact try as we may to make a silence we cannot... (I) heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. (2004: 4)

Body modification practices offer not only the opportunity to engage with sonic activities occurring in the body but also initiate sonic events:

FIONA: I find with tattooing that you really feel it in your bones sometimes or maybe it's just the sound of gristle... Yeah, and it was quite unpleasant... but you could feel the needle working on the gristly bits, kind of, it was a really odd sensation... It was like sort of if you had a... row of ball bearings under your skin or something, and kind of then

grated something against... and you kind of feel it... I dunno, maybe hear it [laughs], it's really nasty, it was really odd...

*Fiona* is describing being tattooed on the underneath of her arm, an area that is often characterised as particularly sensitive. The tattoo process here is predominantly sonic, where the machine meets bone and gristle, and it is not one that in this instance she enjoys. The sound and feel of 'ball bearings' is used to conjure up and describe a difficult experience; there is a likening of feeling to hearing, the grating that is imagined against the skin. This tattoo is experienced in relation to abrasiveness. The uncomfortable nature of the sonic could be traced through other body modification experiences:

GARY: I had some scalpel skin removal... it was a very full-on experience for me... which I almost found too much to bear really... the feeling, the sound [long pause]... perhaps not so much sound, but you could almost feel... the actual vibrations or the actual cutting sensation on the skin.

In this excerpt *Gary* communicates the intensity of the scalpelling as a sonic, tactile experience; he almost reaches out for sound as a way to describe his experience, then retreats. It is almost as if he finds it hard to define what is heard and what is felt. Others are able to effectively pinpoint exactly the way that sounds are heard and felt by comparing them to other known sounds:

JANE: When I had my ear [dermal] punched you must have heard about the crunching apple sound [laughter]... Yeah, that was probably one of the worst, thinking about it now, it was probably one of the worst sounds I ever heard in my life.

By using the comparison of sound with physical practice it is possible to create new notions that mix sound and corporeal experience together. The sound of this piercing which 'explodes' cartilage is characterised as "one of the worst sounds" *Jane* has ever heard. It is also an experience that she expects others who have engaged in this

procedure to share. In these excerpts we can trace the ways in which the practices are perceived to be negative in part due to the sounds that they produce.

Sound has consistently been positioned as that which best communicates the internal: 'sound is a special sensory key to interiority' (Ong, 2000: 117). However, internal soundscapes were, as we have seen, neither a desired nor well-received sensation by participants. Although body modification procedures provide an opportunity to engage in all sorts of body sounds it does not mean that they are welcomed. It is as if some noises and sounds are 'too much' and remind participants too readily of what is occurring inside their bodies. It is perhaps the lack of choice in hearing such sounds that proves problematic for participants. Individuals cannot shut sound out. Connor (2005) states that sound is often thought as the 'most libertine and promiscuously sociable of the senses' (2005: 323). Schafer (1994) extends this sociability metaphor: 'The sense of hearing cannot be closed off at will. There are no earlids' (1994: 11). Schafer's (1994) parallel drawn with the eye is no accident; vision is framed as having the discerning mechanism that hearing lacks. While participants can look away from difficult or painful experiences, as was discussed in chapter four, you cannot block out the sound: 'We can shut out the visual field by simply closing our eyes, but we are always triggered to respond to sound' (Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960: 67). The sounds of body modification are in part difficult to hear because there is no way to escape them.

## **Sonic Venns and Music**

'I certainly couldn't get tattooed without some sort of music on... I'd rather hear 'Napalm Death' than nothing'. (*Jane*)

Music is an example of the way in which sonic venns affect individuals through the modification process. The study of music is vast and I do not intend here to produce an analysis of music history or theory<sup>79</sup>. Music was however woven throughout the fabric of body modification encounters, either as a carefully chosen accompaniment or as an unselected background noise. In his study of home tattooing Broome (2006) notes how during his visits to watch Marcus at work: 'I could hear the sounds of hip-

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<sup>79</sup> See Attali, 1985; Leppert and McClary, 1987; Young, 2002; and Cox and Warner, 2004.

hop music blending with the buzz produced by the tattoo machine' (2006: 340). The venn of this experience incorporates hip-hop music with the sound of the tattoo machine. The impression that music created within the space of the studio and how it impacted on participants experience was significant. *Hannah* reflected on her impressions of music within the studio:

HANNAH: There... was music... I imagine there was some sort of heavy rock or techno... I know at the time I sort of used to think those places were quite cool and the people who worked in them were, and y'know, whereas now I couldn't really give a shit [laughs]... they... did have some sort of music like that I think... whereas if you were going... for some other sort of bodily treatment, if you were going for a massage or some sort of beauty therapy<sup>80</sup>... if they were gonna have any music it would be whale music and it would all be quite soft colours and things, y'know, it's completely the opposite...

Sonically, body modification studios, especially tattoo studios, are identified as being brash and loud. Their sonic pattern is used to reinforce their 'cool' status, not the kind of places where individuals expect to hear 'whale music'. Music is also understood as deterring those that might not be perceived as suitable for modification practice. Aided through music the sonic venn reinforces the identity of the studio as somewhere that is potentially not open to all.

Questions around music choice could also create particular social dynamics within the studio. This was multiplied if more than one person was being tattooed at the same time:

JANE: You're basically at someone else's whim really, it's up to them what they listen to, and the tattooists that I have met have all had completely eclectic taste in music from... punk and rock and... ska... I mean all of which can work but some of it doesn't... It's difficult when you go somewhere because you may have three or four people being tattooed

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<sup>80</sup> This was the only example of a participant likening the modification practice to any other kind of body treatment. For the vast majority of participants body modification practices were understood to exist outside of beauty practices.

at the same time, trying to satisfy everybody, you know, it's just not going to happen. I know that... the tattooists take turns in what music they listen to... I have made my own CD to take along and half the time the other tattooists... it's not what they want to listen to, but y'know, I'm the one being tattooed... and it would be nice to listen to something that I want to listen to, and it's nice when you get a studio that will allow you to do that...

Tension is implicit in *Jane's* account and the notion that there can be competition over who gets to play their music and what is played is clear. *Jane's* discussion of the different styles and potential debates around music gestures to these spaces as sonically rich with sound 'filling up' the space of the modification studio: "The essential feature of sound, however is not its location, but that it be, that it fill space. We say, "the night shall be filled with music"" (Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960: 66).

There are clearly distinctions that need to be made with body modification studios and music, where music is used to either 'move along' practices or to create a more calming experience. Music was also important in relation to body modification experiences where it created a sonic 'backdrop'. At *Star*, the intent with music to create a relaxing environment is quite different from the abrasive sonic atmosphere that *Hannah* referred to above. Music in the tattoo studio has to be loud in order to compete with the tattoo machine but when there is cutting or piercing taking place music was generally used in a restorative capacity, less loud and more 'soothing', producing a particular kind of musical venn. During the time I spent at *Star* I was often aware of hearing the same music, both in the shop section at the front of the studio and in the studio at the back. I recognised that through this background music a familiar 'wallpaper' to my recordings emerged. At *Star*, *Andy* and *Henry* discussed the use of music in the studio as something that was used to help participants during modification procedures, to combat nerves and anchor clients attention. Clients were directed by *Andy* to 'focus on the background music to relax'. Music therefore was used to 'sedate'. During the scalpel and stretch procedure that *Andy* at *Star* performs on me he suggests specifically that I concentrate on the music in order to try and relax. Procedures such as those using a scalpel are also based on precision, so the potential for slip-ups to occur is greater than with other procedures. I suggest that the music calms and focuses the

practitioner too. Jacques Attali (1985) addresses the subject of 'background' music. Although Attali (1985) is discussing in particular 'non-spaces' such as shopping malls and lifts he recognises the role that background music takes. Attali (1985) suggests that background music 'anesthetises' individuals, effectively obstructing sensation:

Today, it is unavoidable, as if, in a world now devoid of meaning, a background noise were increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security. (1985: 3)

Andy uses background music to encourage clients to 'tune' into what they are feeling, therefore music can enhance sensation as well as 'deaden' it. It would be very unusual to visit a body modification studio and for them to have no music playing at all. Background music was understood by participants to both affect and mask tensions around sociality, lessening the possible strain that might arise in the moments when individuals have to touch. In this sense music is used to serve a purpose, as a means to offer 'protection' to the practitioner and participant during procedures:

JANE:           You're spending quite a lot of time with someone who's tattooing you and you can't talk to them all the time. I know I can't talk to [name omitted] because he really has to concentrate<sup>81</sup> and it's just nice to have that, I was going to say barrier, but it's not a barrier, it is a barrier and it's not, y'know. Its there to protect you both from talking shit to each other, but it's there to sort of bring you together with them as well. Because obviously they're hearing the same things and they're there with you, and they know when you're feeling crappy and they know when you're not feeling crappy. It sort of binds you together but it also puts a barrier between you so that you can keep things a little bit separate...

Background music is understood as something that joins the practitioner and participant together, through the shared bond of the sonic experience. However sound also simultaneously separates and binds. The use of music in seemingly contradictory

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<sup>81</sup> *Jane's* tattooist has suffered from a stroke. She knows that he may now be unable to execute 'perfect' tattoos and recognises his need to perhaps concentrate more than the 'average' tattooist.

ways illustrates the critical role that music plays within the studio environment. Music has a plasticity that means that it can be used to fulfil diverse functions, whether mending 'holes' in the social fabric or forging feelings in common. The sharing of music becomes a mutual experience. Attali (1985) suggests that background music has had an all-pervasive effect on social life:

Therefore, it has replaced natural background noise, invaded and even annulled the noise of machinery. It slips into the growing spaces of activity void of meanings and relations, into the organisation of our everyday life... musical repetition confirms the presence of repetitive consumption, of the flow of noises as ersatz sociality. (1985: 111)

The body modification studio is a very specific space with clearly defined functions, opposed to the non-places that Attali (1985) describes. The substitute for sociality that Attali (1985) refers to here resonates with the conditions that are created in the studio yet I suggest that there is also 'genuine' sociality here too. Within the body modification studio music was used to create a background but this was not one that negated or denied relationships within the studio. Music was used to enhance experience, both of body modification practice itself and for those who participated in studio life.

*'I had some noisy electronic stuff with me, [it] just helps you zone out a bit...'*  
(Isaac)

Music, as *Isaac* suggests, allows practitioners to get into certain kinds of states, and to create particular body modification experiences. Therefore 'zoning'<sup>82</sup> in and out was just one of the ways in which participants used music to either deal with challenging experiences or to focus attention on something that was 'exterior' to them. Participants clearly felt that music 'moved' them during their practices and as such was key to how they felt in these spaces. Music had the capacity to either aid or detract from their experiences; it became a cipher for how body modification experience was felt.

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<sup>82</sup> 'Zoning' along with 'coasting' were words that I heard participants use within studios in order to describe the ways that they reacted to the tattoo experience.

Research participants discussed music and their modification experiences in powerful terms and routinely made CDs to take into procedures with them<sup>83</sup>:

RECEPTIONIST: Did you bring this music?

FIONA: Yeah, it's tradition now...

GARY: Yeah I expect it! We regularly listen to your offerings.

Music is used to frame body modification practices and as *Gary* suggests musical choices had the potential to 'carry on' into other studio and tattoo environments. Musical choices were made to reflect the ways in which individuals wanted their modification experience to proceed:

FIONA: I just like to make good compilations of songs that won't grate... energise... light-hearted... not too intense but have a bit of rhythm, good lively energy.

*Fiona's* intent with making the CD illustrates how her choice of music contrasts with the ways in which she has experienced some of the sensations of the tattooing experience, as unpleasant, grating and so on. The music then is used as a tonic for points of discomfort. Research participants understood music as being able to get them through the difficult moments of the modification practice, it was used to 'raise spirits' and enhance the experience of procedures. Music and body modification practices together create 'felt' experiences. The power of music to 'lift' operates powerfully in the work of Oliver Sacks (1991). Recovering from a fall on a mountain that badly damages his leg, Sacks (1991) uses music to aid his recovery in hospital. Indeed music also helps to lift him out of a depression and 'reconnect' with his leg that he fears has become inanimate:

Suddenly, wonderfully, I was moved by the music. The music seemed passionately, wonderfully, quiveringly alive - and conveyed to me a sweet feeling of life. I felt, with the first bars of the music, a hope and an intimation that life would return to my leg - that *it* would be stirred, and stir, with original

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<sup>83</sup> *Fiona, Jane* and *Isaac* all made CDs to accompany tattoo appointments.

movement, and recollect or recreate its forgotten motor melody. I felt - how inadequate words are for feelings of this sort! - I felt, in those first heavenly bars of music, as if the animating and creative principle of the whole world was revealed, that life itself was music, or consubstantial with music; that our living moving flesh, itself, was 'solid' music - music made fleshy, substantial, corporeal. In some intense, passionate, almost mystical sense, I felt that music, indeed, might be the cure to my problems - or, at least, a key of an indispensable sort. (1991: 87)

The subject of music being able to 'raise emotions' is a familiar motif in studies on sound and music and can be found in the work of (Gonzalez Crussi, 1989; Attali, 1985; and Ackerman, 1990). Ackerman (1990) notes:

Like pure emotions, music surges and sighs, rampages or grows quiet, and, in that sense, it behaves so much like our emotions that it seems often to symbolise them, to mirror them, to communicate them to others, and thus frees us from the elaborate nuisance and inaccuracy of words. (1990: 206)

Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler (2005) however problematise the notion of music invoking sentiment and as such they question what it is that music can be said to produce: 'It has always been said that music releases or gratifies the emotions, but these emotions themselves have always been difficult to define' (Adorno and Eisler, 2005: 75). If music was able to bring out the pleasure of procedures it could also conversely make difficult experiences worse:

JANE:           The right music can, get you over a particularly painful bit of tattooing and... the wrong music can really sort of make it worse, it really does affect you like that...

The experience of hearing the wrong music and how this created unpleasant experiences was further evidenced through the final tattoo appointment that I attended with *Fiona*. She had as usual compiled a CD of music to take with her. However while she was being tattooed the CD ended and was changed. The issue of sonic

'competition' touched on by *Jane* earlier meant that the music that followed provided a faster and louder accompaniment to the tattoo. It seemed as if the tattoo process itself was one that was speeded up to 'match' the tempo of the music. I discussed this impression with *Fiona* when she was resting after her procedure:

NATASHA: When *Muse*<sup>84</sup> came on... and there was one song that was really Raah! Raah! Raah! ... And he [*Gary*] was doing the shading bit quite fast ... and you were really grimacing... The whole thing together was making it seem a bit crazy; it was quite odd to watch ... because it felt like this music came on really fast and he started shading really fast...

FIONA: I know! I really didn't like *Muse* at all, it made everything worse.

*Fiona* also reflected that this tattoo experience was more uncomfortable and she was in more pain than she had been at other appointments. The music then became a negative filter through which she experienced the most challenging part of the tattoo experience. The fact that she had no choice but to listen to this music also reinforced her feelings of pain. *Fiona* reflected that she was on the verge of ending the tattoo appointment precisely because it was becoming too much of a gruelling experience. She described the sensation as 'freewheeling' rather than something that she felt she had control over, which tied in with the way in which she experienced the music.

Playing fast music may also be tactical on the part of practitioner, a way of moving the tattoo along quicker and making sure that the appointment neither overruns or that the participant reaches her limit. Music can literally mark the time of the tattoo procedure; it accompanies but also provides a temporal structure that helps to get the tattoo completed:

JANE: ...it depends on how you're feeling, and if a track comes on that's sort of quite uplifting, or y'know the tempo increases... I have noticed that... it can affect how they work... how fast they work and how gentle they are... it also affects you as well... it is very strange the way that you can be affected by music.

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<sup>84</sup> *Muse* are a stadium rock band who play loud, fast music.

*Jane* suggests that it is odd or perhaps surprising that music affects her and her tattoo experience in such ways. As Broome (2006) suggests in relation to Marcus and his home tattooing, his chosen sonic environment reflected his increased abilities and confidence as a tattooist. Broome (2006) notes:

As Marcus became more confident in his practice, he spoke more as he worked, and was able to tattoo while listening to music without feeling distracted:

It's funny, when I first started [tattooing], It had to be dead quiet otherwise I felt put off. Now listening to music seems to help me get into it more. (2006: 339)

The quality of the tattoo is dictated, in part, through the sonic soundscape surrounding the tattooist. Although participants recognised that music formed an important part of their modification experience it was also positioned as an 'outside' element of the mechanical requirements of getting the tattoo. However I propose that it is possible for music to affect the look and quality of a modification, as the quote from Broome (2006: 339) suggests. Music can be literally played out on the skin, where the sonic manifestation of the modification is made visual. Accounts by research participants illustrate how music within the sonic venn clearly shapes the experiences and bodies of participants engaging in modification practice.

## **Experiments in Sound: From Quiet to Loud**

### *'Silence' and the Venn*

The sonic venn is important not only in relation to sound but also to its counterpart, the recognition of 'silent' or quiet times. Silence is powerful, we need only think of the one-minute silence acknowledging those who have died in war to recognise the impact that 'silence' has. While my presence at body modification events meant that I was a 'silent' observer when the practices were taking place, I recognised that I added to the soundscape even when my presence was 'silent'. 'Silence' leaves a mark, which is less perceptible than other sounds, for example in the shifting of body weight and 'rustling' of clothing which was audible and 'showed up' on my ethnographic recordings, as did

the movement of other bodies in these spaces. However, enjoying deliberate states of quietness was something that emerged as a potentially desirable feature for some research participants. This was particularly so in relation to the tattoo process:

JANE: I would like to... be tattooed in a more quiet... it would have to be a lot quieter the next time I think... [name omitted] has sort of said if you come up... again then I'll put you up and maybe do some work at home...

The appeal of receiving a body modification in a non-studio and therefore quieter environment is clear for those that may have become fatigued with regular tattoo environments. *Gary* shared with me his experience of receiving 'hand' tattooing; these are often understood as 'traditional' forms of tattooing which are now also commercially available in the UK. These tattoos are transferred onto the skin by hand and do not require the use of a tattoo machine. *Gary* begins by explaining how tap tattooing and then hand poked tattoos proceed:

GARY: With a stick and – it's called a hammer but it's not actually a hammer, it's another stick that you tap onto the stick with the needles... tap the tattoo needles into the skin... a very enjoyable experience. It's very nice not to have the sound and the feel of electricity running through... it's nice just to hear... the methodical tap, tap, tap of the tools working together, which is quite... mesmerising almost, it's really nice... Actually my first hand tattoo was a sort of hand-poked tattoo, which is different to hand tapped.... the needles just go on the end of a stick, and it's just pushed in to the skin rather than tapped into the skin, so you just kind of, you can then stretch the skin with one hand and use the stretching hand as a rest, and push the needles... That was done in the mountains of India so it was a perfectly quiet, amazing environment, no machine noise... very nice... bordering on a spiritual experience, really. It was good.

It is the tranquillity associated with these experiences, the absence of the electricity of the tattoo gun and other sounds associated with the studio, which links these two experiences for *Gary*. Both were experienced outside of regular and familiar tattoo environments and as such form a powerful and interconnected venn for *Gary*. Although these tattoos are carried out at different times *Gary* links them due to the sonic and physical memory of the experiences. The absence of electricity and machines is clearly significant for *Gary* and in recognising this he identifies how these experiences differ from the many hours of tattoo work that he already has on his body. The use of tapping instead of the electrical current to transfer ink onto skin allows *Gary* to have a very different experience than he has in a regular tattoo environment. Hand tapping and poking take on a spiritual significance, which is implicated with touch, the environment and the sonic print left by the experiences. *Gary's* account produces a particular kind of venn, one that is without electricity and outside of the machines and the mechanics that he uses everyday in his professional life. Electricity creates a buzz and a hum, which is contrasted with the meditative tapping or 'silence' of hand tools. Venns not only bring different spaces and times together, it can also bring *contrasts* together, the quietness of the by-hand tattoos and the noise of the tattoo machine.

### *The Sound of the Tattoo Convention*

Tattoo convention spaces offer an ethnographic encounter with sound. The tattoo convention as sonic venn inhabits environments and bodies. Tattoo conventions are made up of tattoo enthusiasts and practitioners that come to show off tattoos, get tattoos and watch tattooists at work. It also serves as a social occasion and is used as a meeting point for those that do not see each other regularly, as individuals will often travel long distances to attend. Although I have attended a number of conventions over the years I want to focus here on just one example, the *London Tattoo Convention* (visited October 2006) which is becoming one of the largest conventions in the UK and Europe. It is an event attended by thousands, with hundreds of artists working alongside each other. Tattoo conventions are generally understood as places of observing and being observed. Competitions run for the best tattoos and convention attendees display their tattoo pieces as they walk around the site. Photographers mingle among the crowds capturing attendees and artists at work.

The symphony of sound created by the tattoo convention is one that is energetic with hundreds of machines working together. Machines have different sounds; those that run harder and faster for example are louder than 'softer' running machines. Different types of tattoos have different sounds attached, which are instrumental to the convention space. There are areas where hand tattooing is being performed and this has quite a different ambience to the areas where the regular electric tattoo machines are at work. The convention is characterised by pockets of concentration as artists work on clients, often accompanied by their own individual soundtrack. The sounds of people as they are packed into small then larger rooms, in the bar and café all compete in the busy soundscape. The tones of voices meeting in greetings and negotiations, those of male and female, young and old, drunk and sober, excited and expectant all formed part of the auditory mix. It is at points deafening and it is usual to see people outside of the convention having a break from the hustle and bustle. The layers of noise, of voices, announcements, music and outside street sounds produce a multi-sonic and shifting venn.

Tattoo conventions at first appear to offer an exaggerated example of the microcosm of the tattoo studio, yet they are qualitatively different. Conventions take the notion of being tattooed in relative privacy and transform it into an open event where individuals might want to watch or indeed approach the artist as they work. *Jane* shared her experience of being tattooed at a convention:

JANE: I didn't really know what to expect... I knew what the tattooing was going to be like but I didn't realise quite how... oppressive at times it was going to be... All the while you know people are walking past, there's a lot of noise there, there's music going on, there's just crowds of people... completely different to my other tattooing experiences where I'd had a choice of music that I wanted to play... It was a shame because the noise detracted away from what was going on to me... the background noise and people coming along, and... they would sort of interrupt him, so he would stop... and then have to start again...

The intrusion that *Jane* experiences here is clear. Mingled with this sense of intrusion is the experience of the convention as an overwhelmingly sonic event. It would be

unusual for a tattooist to work in their studio with constant interruption yet it is understood as acceptable behaviour at the convention. The public nature of the tattoo space changes the experience of being tattooed to one of being 'on show'. This together with the amplified experience of music, voices and tattoo machines creates a distinctive sound experience.

## Conclusion

Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise. (Attali, 1985: 3)

The motifs in this chapter - the sonic vennis, keynotes, and soundscapes - have been conceptualised in order to explore the modified body and its procedures in sonic terms. I have used these concepts in order to provide some ways through which to address the unseen aspects of body modification practices. Examining the range of sonic practices that can be identified in relation to body modification processes centres the body as audible and in so doing values the auditory as an area of legitimate concern. I suggest that sound is an essential feature of any socio-spatial ethnography. As such the example of the body modification studio critically expands our knowledge of the social and cultural life of body modification participants and their environments.

The sounds of body modification can be experienced as a tingle, an exclamation, a bodily shrug or an acoustic hook. Body modification processes provide an opportunity to tune into such body noises, whether they are comfortable, desired or not. While I have suggested that the sonic is a welcome addition to how the experience of modification practice is understood, it was also something that body modification participants sometimes 'left out'. Participants will often detail procedures to each other, what it feels like or how it looks, yet they will often leave out sound in the telling of these experiences. For example at *Star*, before his branding procedure, *Colin* tells *Ellie* what to expect when the branding begins, yet she jumps when the machine begins to make a high-pitched noise:

COLIN: I didn't tell you it beeped!

ELLIE: No! I'm fascinated by all of this...

It may be that sounds are lost in the recounting of procedures because they are understood as outside of the more important aspects of modification process, or indeed peripheral to the occasion. Relating to sound may be an unfamiliar way of framing body modification practice, something that only slips through the cracks of description and discussion. Yet the fact that it is overlooked tells us something about the ways in which sound is conceptualised in itself. Whether it is explicitly recognised or not, sound's presence impresses upon us. The sounds that are produced through the practices exacted on the modified body are ones that augment both notions of sound and of bodies. Acknowledging the significance of the sonic has repercussions for modes of analysis, experience and how we think social and cultural systems. Sterne (2003) writes that 'the history of sound implies a history of the body' (2003: 12). Utilising the potential of sound in relation to body modification experience extends the ways in which knowledges about body modification practices are produced.

The description of the sonic venn aids our understanding of body modification experience. It adds layers that assist in either imagining or reliving the experience of being in and using these spaces. Through the articulation of the sonic within any environment a visual one is also elicited: we can imagine bodies moving in the space, scenes that are created. The soundscape then also provides a 'map', which adds to our understanding of body modification practice; the auditory has the capacity to add to and extend the visual 'picture' of body modification practice. Connor (1997) explores the ways in which acoustic knowledge has transformed how social space, particularly urban space, has been theorised: 'the most far-reaching effects of the return of the acoustic, may be in the transformations it has allowed in visual concepts and ways of feeling' (1997: 220).

Accounting for sonic life in relation to body modification practices has additionally challenged the ways in which notions of sound have been constructed. The elevation of sound in relation to the denigration of the visual (see Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960; Ong, 2000; and Ihde, 2007) has essentially 'reversed' the hierarchy that has been responsible for creating the audio-visual binary, as Sterne (2003) has identified. Therefore throughout this chapter I have sought to offer ways of working in sound that do not occur in the wake of oppositional arguments in relation to vision, as was explored in Chapter Two, not because they are 'inaccurate' but because in light of body

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Gaze and the Haptic: Producing Visual Process

'I know some people like to have tattoos that signify their Mum or their Dad or y'know some event in their life. I just like really nice looking tattoos'. (*Jane*)

The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative. (Marks, 2000: 163)

#### Introduction

Body modification practices draw the eye. We engage with the surface(s) of the modified body when we look to the practices that figure upon it. In this chapter I explore the ways in which modified bodies, as visual entities, have and can be understood and realised. The surface of the modified body is often identified as 'excessive'; it is weighted with signification and therefore requires interpretation. This is but one way to approach the visuality of the modified body; however, there are other things to be said about the surfaces of modified bodies. Focusing on the visual experiences of body modification participants suggests that different attachments were made; rather than relating to their surfaces as 'superficial' and/or as signifiers I propose that *haptic* connections were made by research participants, both to their own surfaces and those of others.

The haptic has been discussed in terms of video, film and cinema (Marks, 2000 and 2002, and Bruno, 2007), art and performance (Fisher, 1997 and Paterson, 2007), textiles and craft (Paterson, 2005), geography and space (Rodaway, 1994 and Bruno, 2007), and technologies (Paterson, 2005 and 2007; Manning, 2007; and Puig de la Bellacasa, 2008).

The haptic relationship is often understood to occur in concert with another medium: film, sculpture, digital performance or the surface of a computer screen. My focus in this chapter is on the body in haptic encounters, where I suggest *haptic visuality* is key. When approaching visuality I have not assumed that vision solely operates as a meta-narrative<sup>85</sup> or that 'alternative' approaches, such as haptic visuality, are necessarily oppositional. I develop Laura U. Marks' (2000, 2002) work on haptic visuality in order to explore a practice of seeing (and being) that I identify as *created* by body modification participants. I identify haptic visuality occurring between bodies that do not physically touch, but where 'touching' with the eye signals particular kinds of visual process. In this chapter I make a case for the haptic as both an *everyday* and *body-to-body* relation.

This chapter consists of two parts. I begin by addressing 'the gaze' and the ways in which research participants experienced looks that variously questioned why they were modified and what modifications signified. In the second half of this chapter I explore more explicitly the ways in which the modified surface has been conceptualised as an extended and added-to surface. I then go on to explain haptic visuality more fully. I suggest that through the materiality of style, pattern and colour modified individuals both participate in, and crucially create, a haptic visuality. In turn haptic visual processes produce ways of looking between individuals that are based on participation and reciprocity. As such I suggest that haptic visual practices are grounded in responses that are both empathic and responsible.

## The Gaze

'The thing is people assume things... and say stuff... and half the time I can't be bothered to say "actually that's not really right"'. (*Fiona*)

Once bodies bear evidence of being marked by body modification practices they can also become a site of curiosity and subject of a 'gaze'. Writing on 'the gaze' has

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<sup>85</sup> Vision has often been privileged as the most rational and objective of the senses, as explored in Chapter Two. The exploration of vision and visuality is vast and has been documented in the work of (Tagg, 1988; Crary, 1990; Jay, 1994; and McQuire, 1997) while also being adopted within a widening sociological project that examines the visual life of culture (see Jenks, ed., 1994; Hall and Evans, eds, 2001; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001; Mirzoeff, ed., 2002; Knowles and Sweetman, eds, 2004; and Pink, 2007).

modification experience they appear limited and partial. The material from my research participants has suggested a somewhat different relationship with sound, one that is not necessarily an either/or default position or one that experiences sound in uniquely positive ways. The concept of the sonic venn is predicated upon the recognition that there are crossovers between the auditory, visual and tactile aspects of body modification experience. The sound of the tattoo machine produces a corporeal tingle of recognition and seeing, and hearing the snap of gloves is a prelude to the experience of being pierced. The opportunities that sound and listening affords in relation to body modification experience in particular, and the conception of corporeality more generally, is significant not only because it is of interest in itself but because it critically unsettles patterns of duality.

developed particularly out of the intersections between feminist theory and film studies, notably Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), and further developed by writers such as Mary Ann Doane (1982). The notion of 'the gaze' is one that has often been classified in terms of identifying power disparity. In her analysis of film, Mulvey (1975) argued that women are the objects of the gaze, their lack of power implied in their objectification. Women subjected to the male gaze were caught in a state of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey, 1975: 11). 'The gaze' then has generally been characterised as emanating from the perspective of the white, heterosexual male. This conceptualisation has been developed in the work of visual theorists such as John Berger (2003) who suggested that the relations of being 'surveyor' and 'surveyed' were gendered constituents (2003: 38). However this notion of 'the gaze' has also been problematised. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001) suggest that the male gaze has had to be revisited due to its inadequacy to theorise 'the pleasure for female viewers' (2001: 83). Further the notion of 'the gaze' has also been critiqued in relation to what it omitted, particularly in terms of race (see hooks, 2003: 99). Critiques such as those offered by Norman Bryson (2001) propose that 'the gaze' is a limiting concept. He suggests that there is not one gaze but many, which operate in more than one direction and have multiple effects. By way of example Sean Nixon's (1996) discussion of masculinity and spectatorship explores ways of looking through a 'range of masculine-masculine looks' (1996: 201).

In further discussions of looking, Henrietta Lidchi (1997) examines spectatorship and the museum, addressing how 'living exhibits' were brought to Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1997: 195). Lidchi's (1997) analysis is useful in thinking about how bodies have been made 'spectacular', where the politics of looking at 'them' provided a foil to the 'us' of the viewer(s): 'The display of people was a display of a power asymmetry, which these displays, in a circular fashion, served to legitimise' (1997: 197). As was introduced in Chapter One, modified bodies have often been displayed as objects of curiosity, either in the carnival or circus sideshow. Stephan Oettermann (2000) suggests that: 'The true home of the European tattoo... is, or rather was, the fairground and the market. It was here that bodies were put on display...' (2000: 193). The experience of being looked-at endures for those who are visibly modified:

ANDY: I don't really care that the kids come in here and say, "go on waggle your tongue, show us this"... Me and Henry are a bit like the walking freak show... But you keep coming back in here so there's something about it that's... sparking an interest in your mind, y'know, it's like with kids saying "that's disgusting!" well, "why do you keep looking?"

*Andy* largely accepts his position as an object of interest and accedes to showing his modified body to others. Occurrences such as those which *Andy* describes were common within everyday life at *Star*. Visitors and clients clearly wanted to see the bodies of *Andy* and *Henry*, ask them questions and also physically touch their modifications. Implants were particular objects of curiosity and *Andy* and *Henry* routinely let people run their hands over their implanted skin. Implants appeared to hold fascination partly because they remain fairly unusual modifications, but also because people, especially children, were curious as to how they 'got there'. Meeting 'difference' clearly held an allure. The notion of being near or touching difference is discussed by Jane Round (2005) in relation to Sonia Boyce's exhibition of thirty pieces of 'black hair' entitled *Do you Want to Touch?* Round (2005) states:

In naming an offer Sonia Boyce makes her work available for literal inspection by a viewer whose hand is eager to read a tactile braille of racial difference, who want to get a grip on material evidence, and who wants to know what it *feels* like. (2005: 105)

*Andy* in particular spent time explaining procedures to those that were interested. He discussed with me his attempts to 'normalise' implants by trying to diffuse the 'hysterical' reactions that people often had when presented with more invasive body modifications. However while *Andy* expressed a degree of ease with being questioned, *Henry* expressed fatigue with the notion of being on 'constant display':

HENRY: [They] come up to you and actually ask you... touch it and ask you what it's like [implant]... I prefer that to, sometimes you get, some kids coming in and they're going... "Err! Err! That's disgusting!" and then they walk out, then they bring their mates in, then their mates bring

their mates in. It's just... you feel like you're standing in... the pound goes in, the curtain comes up.

*Henry* likens this circle of looking to being in a circus or freak show, which makes him into a spectacle. Like *Andy* he identifies the word 'disgusting' as the most common term people use to frame their dualistic dislike/fascination with body modifications, the pairing of these two terms both pulls in and distances those that view modified bodies in these ways.

Modified individuals are understood to have elected change, they have made an active decision to become modified, and as such they are routinely called on to explain their choices in ways that the 'non-modified' rarely are. Because body modification participants are perceived as having chosen 'difference' they are often expected to explain body modification practices to others, they are called on to give an account. Research participants felt that those without modifications assumed they had 'license' to question them. The emphasis on choice seems to actively serve to legitimate questioning within what might be considered a 'grey area'. 'Non-modified' individuals may feel comfortable asking questions because they perceive such choices to signal a willingness to discuss them:

FIONA: [People] saying things like "why did you get it done [the tattoo] if you weren't prepared to explain to people what it was about?"... [As if] you were tantalising people so much with that information! I mean, people do look at stuff like that don't they, wonder why, and if they can't understand why they get annoyed. It's the same with piercings and stuff... they want answers.

ISAAC: I do sometimes get a bit sick of people asking me what things mean but I s'pose it's just curiosity... you know, you've chosen to do something that marks you out a little bit... I mean, for me, I don't really... have a lot to say about it [body modification]... I don't always want to explain myself to people. Just 'cos I have mods doesn't mean I'm, y'know, like an exhibitionist or anything... I think now especially cos there's so

much more on the streets... I just don't need to justify anything anymore and I'm getting older, so...

Like Richard Dyer's (1997) work on the category of 'white', the body that is without modification, like the white body, is set as the silent norm. This standard then becomes the measure of what is expected:

...white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail. (1997: 9)

Research participants often expressed reticence when they were called on to make sense of their body modifications for others. Having an explanation 'in reserve' was an oft-adopted strategy:

COLIN: People who I tell about it [branding] ask to see it [say] "you must be mental"... The general thing is "you must be mad!", "Doesn't it hurt?" et cetera et cetera...

NATASHA: Have you got a creative response to that question?

COLIN: ...Not really, no [laughs]... [I] say the same things... I've got those all ready, sort of a response, a stock response.

FIONA: When I had the... Japanese thing [a previous tattoo, subsequently covered up] everybody constantly said, "what does that mean?", and if I said I didn't want to explain, I wasn't very good at articulating that apart from saying "I don't want to tell you", or I would make something up.

Modified individuals are repeatedly called on to provide accounts of what modified bodies 'represent'. Through this process they are made into spectacle, where their 'display' requires explanation, they become anthropologised. I suggest the strategies that *Colin* and *Fiona* employ, either having a response 'ready-made', 'making something

up' or indeed refusing to engage in discussion at all, suggests the difficulties that research participants experience in these interactions. When participants do not have a specific reason for a modification (or one that they want to share) this can be met with hostility by those who want to 'know'<sup>86</sup>. Additionally research participants suggested that those that attempted to 'read' body modifications might be misled if they tried to interpret what was seen:

ANDY: I think it's quite amusing because he's gay and he's got a 'man's ruin'<sup>87</sup>  
[Laughter]

ISAAC: I remember that whole thing about how it was important which ear you got pierced, cos one side meant you were gay or something stupid like that... I just don't think that exists any more does it?... piercing can't mean something... there are so many people doing it now it doesn't mean... anything really.

All research participants had experienced questioning or unfavourable reactions to their body modifications, or recognised it as an issue for other modified individuals. Certain effects of the gaze were actively undesirable; this related particularly to overly negative or hostile reactions to modifications:

BETH: I can remember walking down the street once... with [name omitted, her child], I didn't hear them but my friend who was with me said... "Do you know what that woman just said? She said, 'People like you shouldn't be allowed to have children'" [laughs]. That sort of thing of people just judging you by the way you look.

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<sup>86</sup> That is not to deny that there are those who enjoy 'showing off', revealing and explaining their modifications, but there are also those who do not welcome this kind of attention. None of my research participants discussed their modifications in terms of display.

<sup>87</sup> This is a classic 'old school' design that has had renewed popularity in the past few years. It usually appears as a tattoo image with the words 'Man's ruin' in a scroll wound round the stem of a champagne glass. Sitting in the glass is a pin-up girl and around the glass are various symbols which often include gambling motifs which are very popular in tattooing imagery, playing cards, dice and an eight ball.

The categorisation of 'bad mother' that is attached to *Beth* emanates from a gaze that seeks to 'fix' her. It is likely that *Beth* is 'typed' as being bad because she is visibly modified. Attaching negative assumptions to modified individuals could also mean participants faced difficulties in getting jobs, renting accommodation or experienced general perceptions of negativity.

Making assumptions about individuals based on what could be seen (or what could not) was something with which modified individuals also engaged, as was suggested in chapter four. Therefore the gaze was not only one that operated from the direction of the 'outside in'. If as Dyer (1997) argues 'whiteness needs to be made strange' (1997: 10) then conversely there can be a querying of the ways in which modified bodies are made atypical. *Andy* for example suggested that he often tried to 'turn things around' and position unmodified people as the subject of interest:

ANDY: I use it [body modification] sometimes as a little lecture. I had a woman in the other day that was looking at the photographs and she was going "oh that's disgusting"... and I was going "well, yeah, each to their own" and we sort of chatted. [I said] "you must realise that I understand that we look weird for you, but do you think you look normal for me? Do you think when you come in with all your nicely brushed hair and your make-up do you think that I find that attractive? Don't you realise that for us it's not?"... and you could see she's thinking "is he insulting me?". She couldn't quite work out if I was being rude to her. I was like, "well I am in one way, but only what you've just done to me".

*Andy* asserts the legitimacy of his own gaze (and that of other modified individuals) in opposition to the visitor to the studio. He also clearly pitches 'their' aesthetic against hers. Both are engaged in acts of looking that make assumptions based on appearance. Such responses suggest that being subject and object shifts from moment to moment. The 'typing' of individuals into groups or categories is evidenced in the way that *Andy* reflects on those who are without modification:

ANDY: I hate the word but 'straight' [unmodified] people think it's alright to criticise something that's different, but if you did it the other way back [to them] they would be horrified.

If modified individuals commonly experience certain reactions based on their modifications, then the modified are also responsible for objectifying those without and shifting the gaze 'back'. The relations of the gaze create particular modes of seeing. As research participants have suggested, they are usually based on adversarial positions that promote distance between individuals. Research participants recognise the ways in which their choices can impact on their lives, particularly when they adopt the 'long view':

JANE: I mean I'm lucky with my job, y'know, I've worked hard to get where I am... hopefully with... time's going on... and people are... gonna be less discriminatory about jobs and appearance and things like that... I really hope that that's going to be the case, but you never know what they're [those that are heavily tattooed] gonna end up doing. They might want to be a city banker... or... a clergyman.

*Jane's* concern with modified individuals being able to be accepted now also reveals an anxiety about how they will pass in the future. Carole Anne Tyler (1994), in her discussion of passing, uses the notion 'future perfect', this '*will have been*' (1994: 216), as a means of envisioning selves in times to come. Modified individuals may face prejudice and discrimination based on how they look; yet these gazes do not operate in a vacuum where only preordained outcomes and effects occur.

Modified bodies also 'pass' in ways that signal their appeal, as *Hannah* reflects: 'I like tattoos on other people they can be quite sexy, or quite interesting'. If individuals were anxious about how they or others would be perceived in the future, they also expressed confidence that the reactions that they would meet with would be favourable. *Isaac* contrasts his good reactions with how he might have been perceived or passed in the past, a past that 'might-have-been':

ISAAC: So I suppose the reactions are mostly positive. I mean you get the odd thing but really I find, I don't know if it's just me [laughter] but I tend to get more good reactions than anything else. I suppose for older people it's more difficult to understand but I suppose tattoos meant something different when they were younger... like you were, criminal or a soldier<sup>88</sup> or whatever, but it just meant you were harder, that was what it was all about then.

### *Looking to Surface*

The discussion provided by research participants in the first half of this chapter suggests that being the object of a gaze is a familiar experience. The experiences of body modification participants suggest that the modified body is often treated as a surface to be read. Looking to the modified surface has been used as *the* way in which to explain body modification practices. The modified surface is often conceptualised in ways that leave it in an incongruous position: the modified body is assumed to be 'all about' the surface, but what is said rarely goes beyond locating the surface as 'stylish' or 'extrovert'. Body modification practices are variously conceptualised as rebelling against 'images of beauty' (Salecl, 2001: 31), as 'purely a style statement' (Alford, 1993), or as adding value to surface through the 'cultural capital' of modification (Turner, 2000: 40). For Stewart (1993), 'the tattoo creates not depth but additional surface' (1993: 127). Fleming (2000) suggests that 'to tattoo is precisely to "decorate" the surface, to produce the skin *as* surface' (2000: 64, emphasis in the original). Body modifications are prompted by 'the primitive desire for an exaggerated exterior' (Hewitt, 1997: 67) while MacCormack (2006) states that 'Tattoos create a new surface of the body as text' (2006: 57). Connor (2004) suggests that, 'the tattoo substitutes a surface for the actual surface of the skin...', creating a 'flaunted surface' (2004: 63). The experiences of modified individuals suggest that they are 'read' on the street and analysed in text in ways that are congruent. Viewing the modified body, precisely as 'all surface' suggests that these bodies differ from 'regular' surfaces. This conceptualisation suggests that it is through the alteration of surface, through changing skin that difference resides.

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<sup>88</sup> The association of the tattooed body with the outsider or the outlaw is explored in Chapter One.

The notion that skin<sup>89</sup> communicates who we are is a familiar theme. Connor (2004) argues that skin is the authenticator of self and as such has the capacity to communicate selves in meaningful ways:

The skin figures. It is what we see and know of others and ourselves. We show ourselves in and on our skins, and our skins figure out the things we are and mean: our health, youth, beauty, enjoyment, fatigue, embarrassment or suffering. The skin is always written. It is legendary. (2004: 50)

That skin is understood to represent 'truth' or express a unique narrative is an enduring theme (see for example Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, 2001: 2, and Jay Prosser, 2001: 52), and one that frequently arises in relation to body modification practice (see Sweetman, 2000: 69). Skin is given by Jay Prosser (2001) and Connor (2004) the power to stand-alone and 'speak'.

I propose that the tradition of surface 'explanation', the reading of modified skin, ascribes both too much and too little to the modified surface. 'Too much' because the modified body is conceptualised as excessively visual, an abundance of surface that through its plenitude requires reading and interpretation, and 'too little' because isolating surface in terms of what is 'presented' and 'represented' cannot account for all that passes within seeing. I suggest that because analyses have got caught up in the 'spectacle' of body modification they have become 'stuck' at this point. The modified surface as both over- and under-analysed fails to take the subject of surface seriously enough and as such passes over its substance. I suggest that the importance of surface has, in one respect, been *over-looked*, resulting in both a disproportionate visuality and an under explored process. My intention in the second half of this chapter is not to deny the importance of surface, but rather to propose there are relationships to it that signal different forms of attachment, that are beyond what has been outlined so far in relation to the gaze. As was explored in Chapter Five in relation to pain, and Chapter Six to sound, body modification experience has the capacity to change the way in which we experience the everyday. As such I suggest that the haptic is a way of day-to-day seeing

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<sup>89</sup> The subject of skin has received varied and detailed analysis from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis (Anzieu, 1989), psychology (Montagu, 1986), in relation to film (Marks, 2000), anthropology (Jablonski, 2006) and social and cultural analysis (Ahmed and Stacey, eds., 2001; Benthien, 2002; and Connor, 2004).

that prompts a different mode of visual interaction with the modified surface. My focus on the haptic addresses the issue of how the surface of the modified body is understood. I turn now to explore in more detail the concept of haptic visuality.

## Haptic Visuality

'Haptic' means 'able to come into contact with' (Bruno, 2007: 6). Giuliana Bruno (2007) details how the development of the haptic was initiated by Alois Riegl (a 19<sup>th</sup> century art historian and curator of textiles at the Museum of Art and Industry in Vienna) in *Problems of Style: Foundation for a History of Ornament* (1893) and *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901). Bruno notes that this focus on the haptic was enabled through the 'historical coincidence' that brought together both the advent of cinema and a discussion on spatiality in art (2007: 247). Marks (2000, 2002) uses the work of Alois Riegl<sup>90</sup> to develop her concept of haptic visuality. Marks' discussion of 'seeing haptically'<sup>91</sup> is made through a discussion of cinema and video images, specifically within the scope of intercultural<sup>92</sup> cinema. She invokes haptic visuality as a foil to 'traditional' vision that she perceives as monocular and objectifying:

That vision should have ceased to be understood as a form of contact and instead become disembodied and adequated with knowledge itself is a function of European post-Enlightenment rationality. But an ancient and intercultural undercurrent of haptic visuality continues to inform an understanding of vision as embodied and material. (2002: xiii)

Marks' (2000, 2002) work is concerned with viewing video and cinema<sup>93</sup> images haptically, invoking 'touch' through vision and emphasising the visual/tactile

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<sup>90</sup> Riegl's work also influenced the work of Benjamin (see Caygill, 1998: 90-91 and 157n; and Bruno, 2007: 247-250) and that of Deleuze and Guattari (2003: 492-500).

<sup>91</sup> Marks (2002) also follows the haptic in relation to the erotic in cinema and film, which I do not detail here. See 'Haptics and Erotics' (2002: 57-110).

<sup>92</sup> Marks (2000) defines intercultural as being the mixture of more than one culture: "'Intercultural" indicates a context that cannot be confined to a single culture. It also suggests movement between one culture and another..." (2000: 6).

<sup>93</sup> For discussion of the influence of the haptic in early film theory see Bruno (2007: 255).

connections that the viewer makes with images. Crucially Marks uses the concept of the haptic in order to reconnect with a *method* of looking, one that facilitates an embodied vision. Her project to reconstitute vision locates the haptic within a larger project that accounts for the sensory quality of seeing:

Haptic images, I suggest, invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well. (2000: 2)

Instead of adopting the distanced, discreet, 'long view', Marks (2000, 2002) encourages engagement, participation and reciprocity through embodied vision. By making this association Marks suggests that vision is a physical and 'tactile' experience; not one that involves an actual touching but one that develops tactility through the method of seeing: 'In haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch' (2000: 162, emphasis in the original). The development of the haptic as textural was at the core of Riegl's perspective:

Work on the haptic was thus, significantly, produced by an art historian whose curatorial considerations put him in touch with matters of texture and tactile practices. (Bruno, 2007: 247)

Marks (2000, 2002) writes that haptic visuality is a method that favours closeness and identification with detail; as such they are looks that 'invite a small, caressing gaze' (2000: 169) one that 'is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze' (2000: 162). Marks is drawn to the promise of 'small-ness' through the haptic, not to reduce vision but to open up the possibilities of seeing. Through such visual engagements Marks constructs the hope of a particular visual relationship between the viewer and the image. She uses the following example in order to describe a haptic visual experience:

Palestinian-born scholar and video maker Alia Arasoughly uses the close-up image of an Oriental carpet as the ground for an excursion into the memory of exile. It recalls how one might lie on a carpet and stare at its patterns,

daydreaming; or, how patients might have gazed at the patterns on the carpets covering Freud's couch. (Marks, 2000: 169)

Haptic visuality can also be identified in the work of Donna Haraway (2007), whose evocation of 'fingery eyes' (2007: 5) is briefly discussed in *When Species Meet* (2007) through her experience of watching *Crittercam*. *Crittercam* is a series of television programmes produced for the *National Geographic* Channel in 2004. Tiny cameras are attached to marine animals, which capture and record their surroundings. These films are then edited into television programmes where the viewer can 'travel' with various marine life, sharks, whales and penguins, and follow their underwater lives<sup>94</sup>. Haraway (2007) borrows the term 'fingery eyes' from Eva Hayward to describe:

...the haptic-optic join of machine with marine critters, especially invertebrates, at the multiple interfaces of water, air, glass and other media... (2007: 304n4)

The ways in which Haraway (2007) makes haptic connections with watching marine life, echoes the ways in which Marks (2000, 2002) discusses the appeal of haptic video and cinema:

I experience in *Crittercam's* "conventional" footage some of the same pleasures of intimacies at surfaces, fast changes in scale, ranges of magnification, and the immersive optics of refraction across varying media. (2007: 258-9)

While Haraway (2007) is held rapt by the detail, texture and movement that she experiences when she looks on marine invertebrates, Marks (2000, 2002) is absorbed by the texture of patterns on a carpet in Arasoughly's video. In the following section I will develop the suggestion that these haptic visual engagements are ones also created by and between modified bodies. Before doing so however, I want now to address the relation of the haptic to movement, which has bearing on my decision not to include images of modified bodies in this thesis.

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<sup>94</sup> For a UK equivalent see *Extraordinary Animals in the Womb*, Channel 4 (2008). Regardless of how we might feel about these 'opportunities' to follow the growth of animals in-utero, these programmes potentially offer the viewer a haptic experience in the textured, fleshy, furry animal life that is rendered in explicit detail.

Throughout this chapter I am accounting for what happens when we look. Therefore the reader may question the absence of images of body modification practices within this chapter. It may seem counter-intuitive to not include some visual aid when discussing the sometimes complex state of visual relations. The problem with including images of body modification practices is that the photograph does not do the work it is important for us to do here: it would not elicit the haptic connection. In order to explain this position I turn to the haptic images used by Marks (2000, 2002), and to a lesser extent, Haraway (2007).

In order to illustrate how haptic images and connections are made, Marks (2000, 2002) reproduces stills and frame enlargements from various films and videos. She clearly wants to communicate the textured and detailed quality of the haptic engagement she makes with film and video (see for example stills from *Sniff*, 2000: 173). However these reproductions do not work as powerfully as her words. Their reproduction in size, to fit with her text, and their black and white format, mean that it is hard to make a haptic connection with the images. What are presented are 'flat' images that do not have the texture or movement that we can imagine when watching the video or film on the screen. Watching one of the films that Marks (2000, 2002) discusses would work in ways that her stills fail to do. There are also difficulties viewing Haraway's (2007) haptic photograph, called *Jim's Dog*. The 'dog' is the product of a wooded landscape in Santa Cruz and is made up of a collection of old wood, moss, leaves and tree saplings that have grown together and which from a particular angle resemble a dog looking out over a woody vista. She states:

We touch Jim's dog with fingery eyes made possible by a fine digital camera, computers, servers, and email programmes through which the high-density jpg was sent to me. Infolded into the metal, plastic, and electronic flesh of the digital apparatus is the primate visual system that Jim and I have inherited, with its vivid colour sense and sharp focal power. (2007: 5)

While Haraway (2007) makes a convincing case for the hapticity that resides in Jim's dog (unlike Marks' reproductions the dog is reproduced in colour and has a full page), looking at the dog on the page *still* does not reveal what looking at the dog 'on screen' or 'in person' might produce. Although Haraway (2007) suggests that the technology

that we bring to the photograph produces a haptic engagement, this is not apparent in the reproduction on the page. I am not suggesting that there cannot be haptic engagements with 'static' images either with photographs<sup>95</sup> or with paintings<sup>96</sup>. Rather the 'still' images, used by Marks (2000, 2002) and Haraway (2007) suggest there are challenges in showing the *haptic*<sup>97</sup> within these contexts<sup>98</sup>. I suggest Marks' (2000, 2002) and Haraway's (2007) photographs do not express the haptic because the photographic reproductions do not illustrate movement or detail, nor do they generate participation or reciprocity from the viewer. In counterpart I suggest that the haptic as it is created between modified bodies cannot be 'illustrated' through a photograph attached to my text<sup>99</sup>.

Momentarily shifting the focus from haptic visuality to the haptic more generally I want to briefly position the ways that the turn to the haptic has been effected. The haptic has proliferated particularly in the area of technology, where Mark Paterson (2005) suggests that 'haptics' are increasingly becoming a feature of our everyday lives:

...technologies of touch have been quietly proliferating, finding uses in such diverse areas as surgical and military training, long-distance keyhole surgery, mine clearance, internet sex, undersea and interplanetary exploration, and video games. (2005: 431, references omitted)

The notion that haptic technology makes equipment more 'user-friendly' has been one of the reasons attributed to creating better haptic technology. There has been a particular interest in interfaces (see Manning, 2007: 118 and 171: 9n; and Paterson, 2007: 129-131), and as Puig de la Bellacasa (2008) suggests in the haptic devices of surgeons, who use haptic instruments to operate 'remotely', or in touch screens like that on the *i-Phone*. This suggests that, as Paterson (2005) proposes, more appliances

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<sup>95</sup> See for example Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* (1962-present) in Bruno (2007: plate XI).

<sup>96</sup> See for example the paintings of Howard Hodgkin.

<sup>97</sup> Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's lecture at Goldsmiths College on Friday, 3 October 2008, *The Remaking of Sensorial Experience and the Politics of Speculative Constructivism*, touched on the challenge of finding and making haptic images.

<sup>98</sup> This is not to deny that photographs can be powerful and evocative in social research, see for example Knowles and Sweetman, eds (2004) and Back (2007).

<sup>99</sup> Perhaps a film, or some other creative project, involving modified individuals could do this work. Such projects were outside the limits of this thesis, however this may be something to be pursued in the future.

have become imbued with haptic technology. As such the area of haptics and technology is a rapidly developing industry for the commercial sector.

Haptic technologies are often invoked when there are moves to 'enhance' our experience of technology, and therefore 'of life'. Haptic technologies have primarily focused on the relations between technology/machines and people and how this interaction can be more 'felt'. This is apparent in the development of haptics in the fields of art/crafts and design. The *Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles*<sup>100</sup> at *Goldsmiths College* are developing projects that explore how technology and textiles can come together. These haptic technologies are being used in part to develop 'intelligent textile systems' that produce interactive fabrics. Developing haptic technology through art-based practice has also been a focus of the *Tacitus*<sup>101</sup> project based in Edinburgh. They identified that those working in the fields of art and design were not using the potential of technology effectively; therefore they have worked on developing haptic computer interfaces to make technology more accessible to artists and those working in crafts. Paterson (2005) suggests:

As the fidelity of haptic devices increases, the content of digital sensation alters such that the direct feeling of weighty material, so necessary for intricate craftwork with the hands, can be reproduced. (2005: 433)

The field of haptics is therefore developing into an important area of academic<sup>102</sup> research.

## **Haptic Visuality and Modified Bodies**

The haptic is useful precisely because it explicitly engages with surfaces, as its application from art and aesthetics (Fisher, 1997 and Paterson, 2007) to space and

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<sup>100</sup> Ongoing research projects include explorations of human/machine touch led by Dr. Mandayam Srinivasan, the Director of the *Touch Lab*, MIT, USA, and 'E-Static Shadows', an ongoing project exploring the possibilities of interactive technologies and textiles supervised by Professor Janis Jefferies, Director of CHRRCT (see CHRRCT, 2008).

<sup>101</sup> Headed by Ann Marie Shillito at Edinburgh College of Art, the *Tacitus* research project has explored the development of computer interfaces for those in design and craft fields (see *Tacitus*, 2008).

<sup>102</sup> See for example MIT Touch Lab (2008).

geographies (Rodaway 1994 and Bruno 2007) suggests. While Marks (2000, 2002) has been inspired by Riegl to develop the haptic in relation to viewing inter-cultural cinema, I in turn use Marks' work (2000, 2002) and develop it in relation to the modified body. Rather than taking the interface or screen as my point of contact however I suggest that the haptic can be identified in the images, patterns and colours that are lived and seen on modified skin. I acknowledge that the move from non-living to living images is not a small one to make and requires a propositional shift. Nor do I want to ignore the conceptual issues that occur when one shifts concepts from one medium to another. However I suggest that once made the move has a coherency that can be traced through Marks' work itself. Marks (2000, 2002) links cinema and video images with skin and bodies and repeatedly uses video and cinema images as a stand in for the body, representing the embodied nature of visual processes:

I want to emphasise the tactile and contagious quality of cinema as something we brush up against like another body. (2000: xii)

And it enables an embodied perception, the viewer responding to the video as to another body and to the screen as another skin. (2002: 4)

The very circulation of a film among different viewers is like a series of skin contacts that leave mutual traces. (2000: xii)

Where Marks (2000, 2002) invokes the screen, I invoke the body. Marks draws on the surface of film and video as a way of relating the hapticity of embodied vision. The haptic enables connections with surface, style, image and pattern on the modified body in ways that are analogous with the connections that Marks makes with screen images. I propose that this experimental move is worth making because like cinema and video, the modified body relies on images and patterns based on non-text heavy forms<sup>103</sup>. Honouring the image, pattern or colour is central to the tattoo, scar, brand or implant.

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<sup>103</sup> This is not to deny that writing may be tattooed, burned or scarred onto the body (for examples of text based tattoos see Saltz, 2006). However body modification practice predominantly has its roots in creating images; indeed when writing is put onto the body it can also be understood in terms of making an image.

Utilising the haptic in relation to modified bodies allows us to engage with bodies *closely* rather than at a distance<sup>104</sup>. Marking closeness is one of the key ways in which Marks (2000, 2002) develops the notion of haptic visuality. This method is used to devise ways of seeing without enforcing or extracting 'knowability' from the image. As such I suggest the modified body need not have signification attached to it to legitimate the visual experience. Rather than engaging with modified surfaces in terms of eliciting information, as the gaze often invites us to do, hapticity allows us to explore the idea that the image, colour or pattern is *enough*. Nothing is needed beyond it to complete the encounter:

Film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole. This view of perception implies an attitude toward the object, in this case a film, not as something that must be analysed and deciphered in order to deliver forth its meaning but as something that means in itself. (Marks, 2000: 145)

Extending the ways in which we think about the modified surface is also one that counters the alienation that can occur when individuals are read through the gaze. As we saw in the first half of this chapter body modification participants often experience the effects of the gaze in negative ways.

Valuing the experience of looking without seeking to analyse through extracting information, Marks focuses on creating a visuality that is 'ethical': 'a look that acknowledges both the physicality and the unknowability of the other is an ethical look' (Marks, 2002: xviii). Instead of making the viewer 'vulnerable'<sup>105</sup> to the image as Marks (2000) suggests I propose that haptic relations between modified individuals are better understood through the term *openness*. Meeting modified surfaces with openness, or without knowing in advance what might be encountered, is key to the creation of hapticity between individuals. In this openness I identify a look that is valued also due to its *reciprocity*. Reciprocity in the haptic 'allows us to come into contact with people

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<sup>104</sup> Paterson (2007) also discusses proximity and the haptic see (2007: 160-163).

<sup>105</sup> Marks (2000) uses 'vulnerability' as a way of opposing the adoption of 'objectivity' when watching intercultural cinema: 'Haptic visuality implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterises optical viewing' (2000: 185).

and the surface of things' (Bruno, 2007: 252). It is valuing the connections made between individuals that form the basis for haptic visuality. Bruno (2007) suggests that it is the relationship of 'touching' and being 'touched' that is key:

Thus, while the basis of touch is a reaching out – for an object, a place, or a person (including oneself) – it also implies the reverse: that is, being touched in return. (2007: 254)

When the eye is what 'touches', reciprocal exchange builds a foundation for haptic visuality as it is lived. Being in the company of modified individuals led me to observe the ways in which they related to and treated each other; in short, how they visually 'touched' one another. Connections were often discernable through the presence of interest and empathy, which they took in each other and their body modification practices. It is a common feature amongst body modification participants to complement others on their work or make them feel comfortable with their choices, even when these might be very different to their own. These characteristics suggested that they were based on a strong sense of *responsibility* in visual practices. I suggest that because modified individuals have often experienced negative reactions based on how others view their body modifications, they counter this by creating careful visual practices with one another. This 'politics' of looking, or at the very least recognising what is at stake through visual process, is demonstrated through the benign approach adopted by modified individuals. I suggest that this approach can also be adopted when it comes to 'analysing' modified bodies. Constructing responsible ways of seeing also finds a counterpart in Haraway's (2007) discussion of 'fingery eyes'. Through her discussion of meetings between humans and animals, Haraway (2007) dwells on the production of responsibility that is prompted through haptic visual exchange:

Propelled by the tasty but risky obligation of curiosity among companion species, once we know, we cannot not know. If we know well, searching with fingery eyes, we care. That is how responsibility grows. (2007: 287)

The adoption of responsibility in viewing can be understood as a companion to Back's (2007) call to listen. Back (2007) suggests that sociological listening:

...involves artfulness precisely because it isn't self-evident but a form of openness to others that needs to be crafted, a listening for the background and the half muted. (2007: 8)

Rather than employing a gaze that rushes towards a conclusion, the haptic helps us to respond to what else might be occurring through visual practices, precisely that which may be less immediate or evident but is none the less significant.

Establishing an epistemological and methodological framework of haptic visuality requires empirical examples in order to flesh out the ways in which the haptic happens, both on and between modified bodies. Acknowledging the haptic allows us to follow what happens when modified individuals create visual experiences that focus on style, colour and pattern. In the following section I address the ways in which modified individuals experiment with haptic visual practices and how these embodied experiences *create* haptic visuality.

## Haptic Experiments

### *Adopting Style*

In order to establish how the haptic figures in relation to modified bodies it is necessary to locate how individuals arrive at and develop their style. Designs, colours, patterns, inks and materials such as stainless steel, Teflon, silicone and scarred skin are all central to the aesthetics of body modification practice. Research participants evidenced care in the planning of their modifications through working on design, choice of colours or finding the best placement anatomically for their chosen practices. Participants also took into account what they already had, or planned to have, suggesting a careful consideration of what it is to live with a body that is modified, as was illustrated by practitioners in Chapter Four. Considerations also extend to and include how the practice will take up space on the body, for example working towards a bodysuit<sup>106</sup> or

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<sup>106</sup> A bodysuit is the term given to a tattoo design, particularly in the Japanese style, that follows a single theme or design that covers the entire body and is usually the work of a single artist. The suit traditionally finishes at the neckline, the wrists and the ankles allowing it to be covered by clothes.

only marking places that are routinely hidden under clothes. Jane reflected on the way her tattoo projects have progressed:

JANE: I've got... my arms to fill up... I sort of seem to be starting at my extremities. I've got my foot done and my wrist and the top of my arm, and eventually I might meet up in the middle.

Research participants often had clear ideas about the type of 'look' that they wanted to achieve and invested time in research and development<sup>107</sup>. Only when this phase was complete were participants willing to proceed<sup>108</sup>:

GARY: I'd spent ten years thinking about getting my first tattoo... I was twenty-seven when I got my first one so not very young. Sort of waited till I was old enough to know what I was wanting.

Although individuals may get tattoos and other body modifications as isolated pieces, it was evident among my research participants that they developed ideas for practices in relation to the whole 'picture' they wanted to create. Benson (2000) writes:

...tattoos, like piercings, are to be 'chosen' after much deliberation. And this is reflected in the designs, which should form a coherent and aesthetic whole on terms decided by the subject. (2000: 244)

While designing what will go on and in the body, participants consider what kind of *style* they will adopt. Deliberation over identifying the right theme, colour, pattern and organisation is a vital decision and forms the axis on which body modification practices proceed. I suggest that for body modification participant's style choices are ones that are committed to and are 'permanent':

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<sup>107</sup> Additionally see Sweetman (2000: 59) for discussion of how individuals research body modification practice.

<sup>108</sup> Some studies on body modification practice have focused on the impulsive nature of getting a body modification, with little or no planning (see for example Mercury, 2000: 71 and Fisher, 2002: 100). This was not something that was evidenced amongst my research group.

JANE: I mean the stuff that I've got, I wouldn't be able to have covered up.... so I'm pretty much stuck with it, so... I've got to try and make it right the first time.

The designs open to individuals are vast. The diversity in tattoo styles alone amongst research participants illustrated an extensive variety of styles and images<sup>109</sup>. Adopting a particular style then includes an entire reflexive practice that is embedded within aesthetic considerations.

Modified bodies are generally understood to be so when the body modification appears on skin. However I suggest that if we fully acknowledge the relationship that participants have with style we can identify the modification process as starting earlier, and constructively, this is where the haptic relationship begins. When the participant chooses an image, design, pattern or colour they are establishing a visual participation with style that happens *before* the modification process occurs. The haptic is rooted in this initial and significant visual bond. Although the foundation of the haptic relationship occurs before the image is put onto the body, it is through the mark of the modification practice that the visual relationship with style develops. I propose that body modification participants do not remotely associate themselves with particular designs, patterns or colours but 'become with' the styles they have chosen: they experience a *joining-with* style:

By interacting up close with an image, close enough that figure and ground commingle, the viewer gives up her own sense of separateness from the image.  
(Marks, 2002: 13)

The style and the body are interwoven and hapticity is realised through the merging of the sense of self with style. Research participants discussed the ways in which they adopted (and monitored) the designs that they joined-with:

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<sup>109</sup> These included for example 'old school' motifs: anchors, cherries, stars (in particular nautical stars), hearts, bluebirds, skulls, spider webs, gambling motifs, dice, cards, eight ball; patterns: chevrons, triangles, lines, waves, circles, dot-work, geometric, Polynesian, Borneo and Maori styles; symbols: yin and yang, sun, Japanese symbols, a Buddha, lotus flower, Hindi writing; personal: names, scrolls; animals and birds: Japanese and Chinese dragons, butterflies, swallow, and Koi carp.

JANE: I'm interested in my Polynesian styles... and sort of geometric patterns and things like that... I would be very wary about having... a butterfly, or... I really wanted a pin-up girl... I just thought they looked really... voluptuous and gorgeous, and you see some... really amazing work... that's fantastic, but it wouldn't go with anything else I've got... it depends on whether you can get a good artist who will incorporate what you've got into everything else you have... it's important for me, aesthetically... to have stuff that goes together.

*Jane* has chosen to follow the detailed patterns associated with Polynesian styles of tattooing (for examples see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 143-144 and Chapter One for discussion of Polynesian tattoo). Although she is attracted to other designs, through the motifs of the butterfly or the pin-up she acknowledges that these don't match with her chosen visual and 'body' style. *Jane's* identification with Polynesian patterns means that introducing other designs would result in discontinuity, an interruption to how she haptically lives with her style. This commitment to style establishes how ingrained *within* her style she is. *Jane's* sense of self is continuously and haptically derived from the image that she wears, not from a pre-existing (separate) image of her self. Being is experienced through her haptic relationship with style: enjoying and living the images is what is important rather than what the style may represent or mean to others. This relationship can also be followed in *Gary's* identification with style:

GARY: I think from the beginning I kind of always knew I would want to stick to the loosely [sic] term of tribal sort of tattoos.... All my tattoos are not strictly technically sort of tribal but they kind of follow a theme...

'Tribal' designs are ones that cover *Gary's* body (for examples see Vale and Juno, eds, 1989: 96-100 and Chapter One for further discussion of tribal tattoo style). He made a decision at the start of his tattoo career to inhabit this particular style or 'theme' and it is one that he has followed and remained loyal to. Tribal style is integrated with *Gary's* experience of who he is. Rather than identifying modification experience in terms of biographical narrative or difference these choices are necessitated by design, pattern

and style in *itself*. As Marks (2000) suggested in relation to engaging with film and video images, *Gary's* engagement with tribal style, the look of it, is *enough*.

I suggest that research participants inhabit colour in the same way they do style. Colour choices helped to create style and as such were an integral aspect of tattoo experience:

JANE: ...traditional Polynesian tattoos have always been black-work so that's all I have... I would like to have some colour... sometimes I really crave for something really, really colourful across my back or across my chest... but I don't know how it would fit in with the rest of it... 'cos everything else is just black.

GARY: My first tattoo was the only tattoo that has any colour, I haven't had any colour since and even some of that has been covered up so... I prefer... black for me.

FIONA: We stopped to have a break, and he [Gary] was going "the colours are the same as the other bit of your tattoo, is that deliberate?" And I was like "yeah..." and I was saying, "I wouldn't mind having some other colour stuff but in some ways I quite like keeping the two colours, although there's some really nice kind of inks and stuff around". You see some really nice colour work... I said to him "do you think you'll stick y'know, with... grey and black stuff?" and he said "yes".

The decision to adopt certain colour(s) means that research participants value cohesiveness, as they do with style. Like style, colour is drawn to like. Black ink is drawn to black, colour to colour, like tribal-to-tribal and so on. Colour does not supersede style but it clearly has its place. In discussing watching a tattooist at a convention *Beth* reflects:

BETH: [He's] doing amazing sort of painting work... Really bright colours... like oil painting... a lot of wildlife work, full-colour but no outlines...

It might be tempting to view colour as something that primarily illustrates or complements style. Illustration is often understood as a secondary characteristic, for example if pictures illustrate a book, they do so to accompany text, which is perceived as the main event. To judge colours in tattoos in this way is to dilute the role and importance of colour to the style chosen. I suggest that for body modification participants colour takes on a more fundamental role than this. Colour is *as* important as style:

Colour is no longer separable from form, as a less real, or less interesting “secondary quality”... It is experienced as being as fundamental as form. (Massumi, 2002: 173)

The adoption of style with particular colour(s) suggests not only that they are interrelated but they *collaborate*. Colour also helps to give style texture. One of the ways we can perceive the texture in colour is in the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s childhood experiences documented in his work *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (2006) evidence his first experiments of joining-with colour; these include being with colour through soap bubbles (2006: 110 and 2004: 50), in the pattern of crockery (2006: 134) or through playing in a summerhouse:

In our garden there was an abandoned, ramshackle summerhouse. I loved it for its stained glass windows. Whenever I wandered about inside it, passing from one coloured pane to the next I was transformed; I took on the colours of the landscape that - now flaming and now dusty, now smouldering and now sumptuous - lay before me in the window. (2006: 110)

Benjamin’s experience of the colour refracted through the stained glass window gives the surface of his body a tactile quality; we can imagine the reds, blues and greens of the coloured glass shimmering along the surface of Benjamin’s skin. Focusing on the textural qualities of colour helps to ‘flesh out’ participants’ haptic relationships with style. As *Jane*, *Gary* and *Fiona* suggest, their style is confirmed through their colour choices. It would not be cohesive with *Jane’s* style to have red Polynesian patterns or for *Gary* to have green tribal work. The collaboration of style and colour create a tactile

visuality. Style and colour as lived suggests the depth that can be ascribed to surface: they become *styles for life*.

The haptic quality of joining-with style is not only identifiable in practices that produce designs or images - tattooing, branding and scarification - but also in practices such as piercing and implants. Implants and piercings, especially multiple piercings, create a textured pattern on the body's surface:

HANNAH: I wouldn't really want to take them out [piercings], but at the same time the funny thing is if somebody asked me to describe myself without kind of looking in the mirror, [I] probably wouldn't mention them... I don't really think about them being there anymore... I kinda totally forget... I just don't notice they're there because I've got so used to them... But at the same time if somebody said you have to take them out now I wouldn't be that happy about that, it's sort of become part of my face.

*Hannah's* piercings have become part of her face; joined-with them, she typically does not perceive them as 'outside' of herself. The metal pattern that she sees and assimilates every day is what her face has become; metal has been brought close-to in ways that are fully incorporated within her sense of self. *Hannah's* sense of her face again is not an association, but that which is experienced visually as becoming-with. Modification and body effect a co-emergence:

HENRY: It's like a tattoo or a piercing, you look at it everyday, and then you think 'okay, yeah' and get used to it being there, and it just becomes a part of you.

The haptic experience that participants create can also be followed in the issue of loss that *Hannah* touches on with her discussion of her piercings. The impact of living-with style is brought into relief when a body modification is lost or 'retired'. During one of my visits to *Star*<sup>110</sup> *Beth* told me that she had her implant removed due to problems with infection and skin growth. She had worn the implant for over three years, a substantial

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<sup>110</sup> Discussion noted in my field diary.

amount of time for what can be a difficult modification to heal and live with successfully. During our discussion she reflected that she felt emotional about 'giving it up' because it had been with her for so long that it really felt a part of her. *Beth* was also disappointed that she hadn't had much scarring from where the implant had been taken out. Therefore she was considering having the slight scar she has tattooed over so that she retained a clearer mark of where the implant had been. *Henry* also shared his experience of rejection with an implant:

HENRY: It never went down [the swelling] so we took it out. You can see nothing, a little bit of scarring...

NATASHA: You've got a scar in the shape of the implant?

HENRY: I don't know how long that will be there for...

NATASHA: You think it'll wear off?

HENRY: Yeah, probably, I would like it to stay, but y'know, scarring on here [where he had previous implant], I wanted them to keep and stay purple for a very long time, but it's... just disappeared...

As *Henry* states, the fact that "you can see nothing" and that his scarring has "disappeared" is significant to him. While we could understand these experiences as ones that are physically tactile, through the touching of the scar, I want to emphasise the texture of the *visual* quality of the scar. The gradual erosion of the scarring means that *Henry* is left with the barest of traces of the implant that he had, which suggests that his haptic connection to his implants will also fade. *Beth* wants to retain the visual connection with her implant by making a more discernable mark to act as a reminder of her haptic connection. Like *Hannah*, *Beth* and *Henry* had lived with the visual incorporation of their implants on a day-to-day basis. Losing a body modification helps us to understand the extent of the haptic relationship. The haptic experience that participants lived is traceable then both before the practice appears on the body and after it has 'left' it. When the bond, the living with style and body modification practice, is broken participants hope to maintain the trace of the practice as both *Beth* and *Henry* illustrate. Their disappointment with possibly losing this connection altogether suggests the extent of feeling that is ruptured when their style is no longer *held close*.

The haptic helps us to recognise the substance of visual experience; its extent differentiating it from the slenderness of the gaze. Body modification participants animate the haptic 'concept' because they *create* it through their joining-with style and colour. Joining-with creates the haptic because such experiences invent and generate the ways in which visual processes are produced and experienced. To summarise the stages of haptic visibility identified so far: I suggest that the initial choice of style, pattern, image and colour initiates the joining-with body and style. The transference of the practice onto skin fastens together body and style, not as a 'second skin' but as co-emergent with the body. The metal with *Hannab's* face, *Beth's* implant or *Jane's* and *Gary's* black-work are all experiences where body and style have met to create significant visual relationships. These relationships have been haptically created because there is a serious engagement with the full depth of the surface.

The haptic is not the fleeting look that glances off of the surface, but instead is a more prolonged, involved, and indeed 'ethical' engagement with surface. In this final section I explore what happens when modified bodies meet. These moments of coming together with style, pattern and colour suggest again that body modification participants generate the conditions that *creatively* produce the haptic.

### *Encountering Style*

Modified bodies seek each other out. Designs, colours and patterns on individuals connect with those of others; 'tribal' meets wildlife motifs, piercings meet with scarred skin, and blue ink meets with red. Alliances between styles are formed when surfaces attract others toward them, creating a flow from one body to the next. These moments of meeting, coming together and moving apart suggest that haptic visibility is formed, in part, through movement. In her exploration of the brand *Nike*, Celia Lury (1999) focuses on how the insignia of the 'swoosh' or the words *Nike* feature on peoples bodies through the clothing they wear. She watches two boys playing on a beach each wearing *Nike* shorts, with a NI on one leg and KE on the other:

The shorts flicker a message as the boys dart in and out of the waves: a visual message, but with an aural accompaniment, a bit like a football chant, or a least a crowd chant: NI-KE! NI-KE!... Here the brand's register is not face-to-face

communication but the topography of the body: sounds and profiles, silhouettes and shapes, and, most of all, *passing by* - the body in movement. (1999: 501, emphasis in the original)

As the text *Nike* transforms these bodies through movement, so body modifications form rhythms of their own, interweaving the individual and their marks with those of others. The notions of 'passing by' and 'with' suggest pattern, design and colour are forms that enable bodies not only to extend to other bodies and in that extension, to vary and change in unanticipated ways. Being-with style and colour challenges the notion of body boundary; when bodies come into contact, like the boys playing on the beach, we cannot know in advance the ways in which they will come together.

The body modification studio is a hub of movement that allows for 'aesthetic communality' to take place. Practitioners' bodies form the core visual figures that provide the co-ordinates for the space, while participant's move around them:

HANNAH: [the] people doing the piercing were quite tattooed and pierced themselves, I think there was a lot of pictures up of stuff along those lines...

The space of the studio is an important element of the aesthetic experience of body modification participants. Body modification studios often follow specific decorative styles and are designed in ways that reflect popular body modification genres like 'tribal' or 'old school' traditions. Walls are painted with flowing black-work styles or motifs and may follow specific colour themes, for example blues to reflect maritime motifs, the sea, ships and anchors or reds to reflect old school themes of hearts, roses and so on. If the studio is a 'custom' studio there will often be examples of practitioners' work on the walls, and if mainly a 'flash' studio there will be sheets of ready-made designs pinned to the walls or displayed in poster racks. My group of research participants were heavily inclined towards collecting custom work<sup>111</sup> as was explored in Chapter Four.

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<sup>111</sup> I do not suggest that custom is 'better' than flash, nor that it is only through custom work that haptic relationships can develop, simply that my research group principally engaged in custom work.

*Dragon* studio has large tattoo designs on the walls and an interior that has been consciously designed to reflect the artistic ethic and custom nature of the studio<sup>112</sup>:

FIONA: The visuals mean a lot to me and I quite like all the paraphernalia around it. All the tattoo guns and looking at the guns and the needles and the little tiny... pots with the really nice vivid colours in them... I think Gary's is quite unique in some respects, 'cos it's a bit like an art gallery, with all the nice framed designs on the walls.

The functional space of the studio also generates its own aesthetic. The body modification studio is a space where modified individuals get involved with others, whether that is with participants or practitioners. This exchange may operate in terms of swapping information or a desire to meet 'like-minded' people. However it also functions as an opportunity to participate in a *shared* visual register. This shared visuality is brought into focus when modified individuals come together:

Optical visuality requires distance and a centre, the viewer acting like a pinhole camera. In a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface. (Marks, 2002: xvi)

Visual reciprocity between individuals produces the ambience of the studio. The looks that operate between modified participants are finely tuned and appreciate the design, colours and details of the work of others. The experience of watching others being modified by modified individuals is often identified as a pleasure. For those with body modifications I propose that watching becomes not a vicarious experience but one that is appreciated in its haptic role: *empathically*. This empathy occurs when modified individuals meet, and is congruent with the notion of empathic sociality that I detailed in Chapter Four. Not only limited to the relationship between practitioner's and clients, empathic-ness can also be identified in the visual experiences shared between body modification participants:

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<sup>112</sup> *Dragon* studio also had books of flash designs if that was what customers wanted, although it is primarily known for being a custom studio

'physical', but rather they inform and emerge *together*. As was suggested in Chapter Two, the corporeal is a mode of thinking and thinking is corporeal. The haptic look is embodied precisely because it recognises what it takes to be modified. This look acknowledges the *process* of the modification practice and understands the importance of it as a *living-with* rather than just a one-dimensional 'end result':

HENRY: To get a certain effect you have to work really, really hard towards it to get it. I mean Andy did this beautiful scarification on a girl and she had a [symbol] done on her [body]. She worked really hard and she got it perfect, almost perfectly raised... [The] raising it's amazing really; really nice... she got the effect that she wanted, but again, real hard work to do it.

NATASHA: Do you have to agitate it a lot to get it?

HENRY: Yeah... I think she spent forever doing it, I don't know what she did with it<sup>113</sup>, but it looks amazing, it does look really good.

The integration of the visual experience as one composed of eye and body also has the potential to 'consume' the individual. After *Colin's* branding the pleasure that was taken in looking at the fresh design was clear:

BETH: The [symbols] round the inside are a really nice shape.

COLIN: Yeah, cos the first sort of three there, and three there, it's kind of going in [a pattern]... I'm happy now!

ELLIE: You are aren't you!

The way in which the symbols curve around *Colin's* body are clearly enjoyed and appreciated by him and those who view his designs. This kind of encounter is haptic because it draws the individual and others *close-to* the modification to appreciate the design and texture of the practice on the body. This experience is one that repeatedly occurs between modified individuals. *Fiona's* tattoo of a bird is admired as someone approaches and asks to look at the shading of the bird's feathers 'close up'. The

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<sup>113</sup> It is common in scarification projects for individuals to agitate the wound with a toothbrush or similar in order to get scars to keloid and raise, if this is the desired effect.

conversation that follows is one that involves discussions of styles, as the individual who complements her work discusses the kinds of images he is presently researching. What occurs in the conversations about *Colin's* design and *Fiona's* bird is a haptic *exchange*, which is mediated through the image itself:

The ideal relationship between viewer and image in haptic visuality is one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose herself in the image...

(Marks, 2000: 184)

This ability to 'lose' oneself in the image, can be acknowledged in those moments where the individual is absorbed by the image, either as *Jane* suggests in relation to watching her friend get tattooed, or in the various encounters where modified individuals enjoy the practices of others. The look that the modified engage in is, as I have suggested, one that is open and created through participation and reciprocation. Rather than the hastiness of the gaze, the haptic look appreciates that not only do practices take time, but living with style, colour, pattern and image is temporally constituted, a look for life.

## Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have argued that style, pattern and colour are fundamental to the visual experiences of modified individuals; as such the modified surface is instrumental to the encounters and relationships that modified individuals have with themselves, others and their environments. I have discussed accounts of surface while trying to avoid the pitfalls of assuming the position that modified surfaces can be 'known'. Instead we can appreciate the depth of surface without using a signification model. Research participants have suggested that they are often on the receiving end of looks that attempt to 'read' their skin; as such being met by these kinds of visual practises are familiar for modified individuals. Treating modified bodies as sources of information elicits only one type of visual exchange. This is not to say that sometimes readings made may be 'correct' but I suggest that setting out to 'know' others is

problematic, only serving to shorten the opportunities that *can* occur within visual exchange.

I have argued that modified individuals inhabit style. The decision to follow or to be led by a particular image, pattern, colour or theme, whether it is abstract or figurative, full-colour or black-work, or in choosing piercings or implants, involves entering into a haptic material relationship. Participants have illustrated for example that one may relate to the red ink and design of the tattoo of a rose in ways that are not dependent on knowing the story (if there is one) that is 'behind' it. These visual practices recognise the substance of the material image. Relating to the modified body in ways that do not position it as 'un-usual', as the gaze suggests, frees us to follow visuality in ways that diverge from expected or 'conventional' approaches to the modified surface. In effect I have tried to communicate the *depth* of surface by illustrating the ways in which style, colour, pattern and image are lived by body modification participants. Additionally I have suggested that the haptic creates visual practices that are empathic and ethical, creating a responsible visuality. The haptic undermines the notion that modified bodies can be determined in advance through fostering openness, participation and reciprocity.

I believe that shifting the notion of haptic visuality from the screen of video and film to the skin of modified bodies has been rewarding in addressing visual practices of body modification participants. My decision not to include images has I hope been strengthened through my emphasis on haptic visuality as a relation created by participants rather than something which might be represented in a photograph. Instead I hope that focusing on the experiences of modified individuals has enabled their own 'pictures' of haptic relations and relationships to emerge. Communicating sensory experience, without rendering it inert by fixing it, has been one of my aims throughout this thesis. If we follow a trajectory that does not seek to tie down, or presume in advance the ways in which seeing occurs, then the haptic is an example of the creativity of visual process. The haptic helps articulate sense and sensation more explicitly within accounts of materiality. It has potential beyond that which I have outlined here. The haptic complements chapters on sensate reflexivity, pain/sensation and sound because focusing on body processes allows us to acknowledge the manifold ways in which modified bodies are constituted. Marks (2000, 2002) suggests that the haptic is formed in part through recognising that seeing is an experience that involves the sensory body as a whole. The eye and the body are implicated in ways of seeing. As

JANE: I enjoyed it for the experience... it's just nice to see... somebody else's ideas develop... it's just nice to sit there and be a participant in the whole tattooing thing and all the decisions about the art - work and the tattoo studio... is completely taken out of my hands... I'd never really thought about it til just then, it's just nice to completely abstract yourself away from everything apart from the actual tattooing process itself... you're just seeing a design develop on somebody. It doesn't matter who it is... or who the tattooist is or what colours they're using, it's just nice to see.

*Jane's* experience of watching the tattoo as it progresses also challenges the notion that vision is necessarily 'dominating' and directive, as was discussed in Chapter Two. Nor is the attachment of signification to what is seen pertinent. Watching the design take shape is a pleasure that is uncomplicated by concerns that would normally accompany *Jane's* experience of being tattooed. The attention employed in watching a design develop suggests that this mode of looking-with is haptic. *Jane* fully participates as the tattoo unfolds on her friend's skin, so that the experience of watching a design and colour emerge are paramount rather than subsidiary to the experience:

While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. (Marks, 2000: 163)

Visual reciprocity and participation then is, in part, what engenders the development of hapticity between modified individuals.

This visual and material engagement not only occurs in the moment of modification as participants routinely appreciate 'the look' of others. Modified individuals participate in a mode of looking that does not simply read the surface result as the entire experience; rather they recognise the stages that the individual went through to get to that point. The haptic is traceable through all stages of the body modification practice and experience. Participants recognise that which is both 'practical' (sitting through hours of tattooing or healing a piercing project) and 'conceptual' (planning an implant or designing a tattoo image). These states however are not discreet, either 'mental' *or*

such the haptic helps me move toward completing my project on sensate body modification experience; by embodying vision we appreciate the integrated nature of eye and body as one that incorporates all of the senses.

## Coda

My approach to haptic visuality can be contrasted to that of Paterson who in *The Senses of Touch* (2007) reproduces what I understand to be a binary between touch and vision. Paterson (2007) is drawn to touch in the haptic rather than the haptic quality of 'touch' through seeing with the eye and body:

If, ostensibly, vision affirms and reproduces boundaries, exaggerating the atomistic and the individual, then it is arguably *touch* and *tactility* that can explore relations *between* subjects, between bodies. (2007: 158, emphasis in the original)

Paterson (2007) emphasises the range of touch rather than the visual opportunities the haptic provides. Paterson (2007: 155) explores an interesting example of touch through focusing on the therapeutic practice of Reiki. That Paterson (2007) does not privilege the hapticity in seeing 'alone' is revealed in the discussion that follows. Quoting a Reiki practitioner, Paterson (2007) touches on what I perceive to be at the heart of haptic visuality as it produced between individuals. Paterson (2007) quotes his interviewee first, and I have italicised his discussion that follows:

Well touch is... very interesting, even though we're not touching each other sitting here now, we are sort of touching each other, you can touch someone with your eyes, or you can touch someone... but might not actually feel a physical touching.

*Yet equally this form of non-physical touching is recognisable in the immediacy of mundane encounters, an angry glance or a lusty look.* (2007: 168)

It is precisely in these 'mundane' visual processes that I suggest we acknowledge the haptic. However the way that Paterson (2007) types these looks, as 'angry' and 'lusty' is reminiscent of the way that gaze(s) were experienced by research participants in the first half of this chapter. Paterson (2007) identifies the 'touch' of haptic visuality, yet his understanding of it effectively works against my own conception and development of haptic visuality. I suggest that the looks created by modified individuals are both more benign and less quick to jump to conclusion suggested here through Paterson's use of the terms 'angry' or 'lusty'.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Conclusion

‘Someone said to me once “it’s about the journey [with tattooing] not about the end result”... it’s how you get there, not what you get at the end of it... I do feel like that’. (*Jane*)

This thesis has argued that we can engage with body modification experience as a *living-with* rather than as an ‘end point’. *Jane* suggests that body modification practice is not necessarily a ‘destination’ that one arrives at. Throughout this thesis I have emphasised that body modification practices are ongoing and continuous processes. Instead of focusing on the ‘end result’ and interpreting or explaining what body modification represents, I have valued its practice as a collection of embodied and sensorial experiences. My research has suggested that attaching a once-and-for-all explanation that ‘fixes’ body modification practice also limits it. Coming into contact with body modification practice in embodied and sensorial terms tells us something of what it is to be modified and how modified bodies live on a day-to-day basis.

While I have been indebted to previous work on body modification, I have also gestured to the limits of engaging with modified bodies *only* in terms of what they represent or how they are read. Rather than adopting a position that speaks about body modification in terms of reading signs, this thesis has suggested that electing pain/sensation, the sonic and the depth of the surface: the haptic are fundamental to the experiences of body modification practice. Prioritising sense and sensation has had implications both for what it is to be a modified person and what it is to do research.

My research has identified that there are uncharted areas of debate in body modification analyses. I have made clear the limitations inherent in omitting the sensory and embodied experience of body modification practice, demonstrating that focusing on the sensate does not deny the place of themes such as individualism, difference and biographical narrative, but rather acknowledges that there are additional epistemologies to be made. Highlighting the experience of body modification has launched a set of concerns that are differentiated from the themes around which body modification practice is often and predominantly theorised in contemporary academic and informal literature on body modification. Through focusing on the embodied and sensory experiences of body modification practice this thesis has shifted the parameters within which body modification practice is approached and understood. I have added to sense and sensation literature by taking seriously the call to theorise the senses (2006: 6n1, Bull et al). I have not suggested that modified bodies are 'more' sensory than other bodies, yet I have established that the sensate experience of body modification is key to understanding body modification as a practice. In so doing I suggest that this thesis has made the modified body both sensorial and substantial.

### *Starting Points: Sensory and Embodied Experience*

Although they have been key to mapping body modification practice, the themes of individualism, difference, biographical narrative and class and consumerism have become 'grand narratives' in body modification literature. These grand narratives have subsequently become the principal ways in which body modification practice is understood. I have suggested that focusing on these themes alone does not allow other fields of analysis to emerge. Focusing on living-with is a different way of approaching body modification from asking 'why?' or 'what for?' These questions, in the context of body modification, are inclined to *make sense* in very particular ways. It tends to make sense *of* body modifications, by imposing sense *onto* body modifications. Consider for example Kim Hewitt's (1997) expectations of her tattooed interviewees:

Although some of the answers I received were well thought out and showed remarkable insight and self-awareness, many were unsatisfactory. Some replied that they "just wanted a tattoo" or "just liked the design". (1997: 1)

Hewitt (1997) requires her participants to make sense of their tattoos through insight and self-awareness. Perhaps more importantly, this expectation suggests that insight and self-awareness are the sole tools of 'sense-making'. The answers that she considers to be 'unsatisfactory' are, however, precisely those that point towards the *sense and sensation* that is living-with a tattoo. Opening up the interesting question of what it means to 'just' want a tattoo or 'just' like a design requires a methodological approach that does not confine meaning to that which can be made sense of, but which *also* addresses how sense and sensation is made. When we recognise the hapticity of style and colour, or the 'depth of surface', we can begin to appreciate what 'just' wanting a tattoo or liking a design can mean.

Utilising a different methodology that values the embodied and the sensorial allows me to draw attention to the active, ongoing and continuous dimensions implied by living-with body modifications. Throughout this thesis I have made a clear case for focusing on the experience of body modification in order to bring the bodily experience of body modification practice back into analysis. Through privileging the sensory and embodied experience of body modification practice I have not only instituted a change of direction for body modification analyses but have also produced a different set of epistemological concerns.

In particular my research shifts attention away from a sole focus on representation towards the lived experience of body modification practice. Rather than asking *Jane* what her Polynesian tattoo signifies for example, I was drawn instead towards what it is to live-with the intricate black patterns that she wears, crucially producing a different *engagement* with body modification practice. I have demonstrated that *Jane's* relationship to her tattoo style affects a co-emergence between her tattoo and her sense of self that is lived on a day-to-day basis. *Jane's* protection of the integrity of her designs, in style and colour, also gesture towards what it is to maintain and live with her tattoos. Knowing what the tattoo represents, even if that is appropriate to *Jane's* experience, does not elicit the material that a focus on living-with body modification does. Living-with generates a rich and thick analysis of the modified body.

Rather than indexing body modification practices as visual signifiers, research participants suggested that there were many ways in which to 'be' a modified individual. Following the life course of body modifications as they have been presented

throughout this thesis alerts us to the dimensions and layers of body modification experience. I have accounted for the embodied and sensorial elements of receiving a practice in the moment (for example *Colin's* branding, *Fiona's* tattooing or my own scalpel procedure), and also attended to the lived-with aspects of practices (for example choosing a tattoo style, such as *Gary's* tribal work, or colour, such as *Fiona's* black and red palette). These aspects occur even before the moment of ink meeting skin. Through engaging with what it is to live with an implant over time, we register the feeling of loss that *Beth* and *Henry* experience when they have to retire their implants. *Andy* and *Henry's* sensate reflexivity accounts for what it is to mark a body and how that marking is then lived with over time. Research participants have even conveyed that imagining themselves without their modifications, as *Hannah* suggested with the notion of losing her facial piercings, was a disturbing prospect. All of these examples point to what it is to engage with body modification experience in sensorial, embodied and temporal terms.

I have suggested that those working in the fields of sense and sensation need not only interrogate the ways in which we come to 'know' the senses, but also create additional ways of connecting with sensory experience. My recognition of the role of intimacy and the need for an embodied and sensitive approach to research practices shaped my methodology in profound ways. Producing research with body modification participants led me to think about the ways in which we represent the intimate, the sensorial and the corporeal. Through creating a methodology that enabled ways of 'feeling', 'hearing' and 'looking' I have got close to how body modification practices are lived-with.

### *Living-With: Engaging with Feeling, Hearing and Seeing*

My ethnography at *Star* and my observations at *Dragon* demonstrated that living with body modification practice was clearly illustrated in the bodies and working practices of body modification practitioners. Reflexive and ethical practitioners such as *Andy*, *Henry*, *Beth* and *Gary* appreciate the temporality and 'life course' of body modification practice. They take seriously the fact that that they mark individuals 'for life'. The immanent ethics that practitioners developed emerged from the value invested in the corporeal experience of body modification practice. The reflexive practitioner understands body

modification practice not as single or isolated 'one-offs' but events that stay with an individual over a lifetime. I have identified that practitioners develop reflexivity in their own working practices and also seek to foster reflexivity and responsibility in their clients. Highlighting the work (and non-work) of the reflexive practitioner positioned sense and sensation at the heart of body modification practice.

Focusing on the custom and craft quality of body modification practice has enabled me to value the embodied skill of the body modification practitioner. By making sure that clients have, as much as possible, an embodied understanding of body modification practice, practitioners acknowledge their responsibilities toward the body to be modified. Body modification practitioners are generally not concerned with why individuals want a body modification or what a design represents. Instead their focus is on the processes of body modification itself. By examining the roles adopted by the reflexive practitioner we begin to see how the experience of being modified elicits different *priorities* from that which has been established in body modification analyses.

Documenting the sense and sensation of body modification practice allowed me to detail the ways in which body modification participants experienced pain and sensation. Participants' experience of pain and sensation suggests that their experiences could not be theorised within the existing parameters of pain theory. Specifically, I have argued that it was the *elected* and *chosen* capacity of pain and sensation that differentiated it from more familiar notions of pain, as something unexpected, negative and to be avoided. I indicated that alongside the electiveness of pain and sensation, participants had the opportunity to practice receiving pain and sensation with 'welcome intent'. Being open to pain and sensation transformed even challenging experiences into 'fond' memories and allowed participants to repeat practices. Further, I illustrated that participants who chose to experience pain and sensation were not examples of 'exceptional' or 'phenomenal' bodies. Instead they were 'ordinary' bodies that through choosing pain and sensation fostered openness to the experience, whether the encounter was good, bad or indifferent. This conception of the experience of body modification practice in terms of sensation and/or pain allows the sociological significance of pain as an embodied experience to be augmented and developed.

Body modification experience as a 'soundscape' introduced the notion that body modification practice was significant not just as a sonic event, of the 'moment', but had an auditory life beyond the immediacy of the practice. My development of 'sound as

sphere' into 'sonic venns' gave conceptual form to the multi-temporal, spatial and corporeal features of auditory body modification experience. I explored how sound extended from the body of the participant - the noises that the body made and heard - to the soundscape of the studio with the keynotes therein: the tattoo gun or the snapping of gloves for example. That keynotes had the capacity to acts as 'hooks' so that modified bodies, often involuntarily, responded to them was made clear in *Jane's* account. Passing the tattoo studio and hearing the tattoo machine at work acted as a 'tap on the shoulder' to remind *Jane* of the experience of being tattooed while also drawing her towards getting more tattoo work. Music played a role in either aiding or detracting from the experience of being modified and allowed participants to remember or re-live their body modification experiences. Sound emerged as a significant part of body modification throughout the life-course of this research. While illustrating that the sonic was key to modification experience I also identified that the auditory was often something that participants 'left out'. That sound can be 'bypassed' both by participants and in analysis of body modification practice suggests a parallel with how the sensory experiences of body modification processes in general have also been overlooked. This thesis has sought to rectify this absence. The soundscape of body modification practice provides a sonic 'map' that adds to and aids our understanding of body modification practice.

Having identified that body modification practice is predominantly understood as visual, indeed excessively so, I suggested that this way of approaching and viewing body modification practice was limited in scope. Asserting that body modification is an 'all surface' event and by extension 'superficial' was clearly challenged by the experiences of participants living-with body modification practice. Through a discussion of 'the gaze' I explored the ways in which modified individuals are familiar with being treated as surfaces to be 'read'. The perception of body modification practice as producing a surfeit of surface, which in turn could be deciphered through 'the gaze', is however just one way to approach the visuality of body modification practice. Instead I introduced style, pattern and colour as key visual experiences for body modification participants. Through these engagements I have used the concept 'depth of surface' which neither devalues 'the surface' nor relies solely on a depth model of the individual.

Developing and extending the concept of haptic visuality, I have documented the ways in which body modification participants create hapticity. Through engaging with

the materiality of style, colour and pattern, participants appreciate their own body modifications and those of others in significant ways. Participants formed relationships of depth by creating haptic visual practices that 'touch' their own surfaces and those of others. The haptic look is one that appreciates that living-with style, colour and pattern is a visual and corporeal activity. Haptic visibility becomes a mode of touching with the eyes, one that engages the entire body in the act of seeing. I have suggested that appreciating style, colour and pattern haptically are key ways in which to 'see' the modified body.

My findings underscore the need to have a sociology that incorporates the 'living' and lived into sociological accounts. Having detailed the contributions I have made to the fields of body modification analysis and sense and sensation literature I will finish with a reflection on research practice. I consider the ways in which research projects are constructed and how we might use different media to represent body modification practice.

### *Asking Different Questions, Using Different Media*

I wish I could put it, I could dance it better, I could paint it better, than just trying to explain what the experience is like... (Matthew, in Pitts, 2003: 103)

Being able to 'dance' or 'paint' the experience of being modified suggests that to express body modification practice, and in turn for researchers to represent those accounts, we might need more points of contact than words alone. Peppered in body modification literature are clues from participants that gesture to the embodied experience of body modification practice. Perhaps equally as important as asking different questions is the use of other media, besides the written word, to explore the sense and sensation of body modification practice.

Throughout this thesis I have suggested that by asking different questions, and through privileging the experience of body modification practice, we get accounts of what it is to live-with a modified body. I have illustrated the value in addressing experiences of body modification practice that are less determinant but just as critical as 'explanation': the felt, the auditory and the haptic. I have suggested that because modified individuals are so used to being asked what their body modifications signify,

this approach has become an oft-adopted method when researching body modification practice.

Reflecting on research practice throughout this thesis has been an enjoyable task that has enabled me to think through the ways in which we produce, write and take responsibility for what we say about our research participants. I suggest that researchers have a responsibility to those they research, which is not the same as only writing things that might be *acceptable* to those we write about. It is important that researchers are not only compelled to make 'nice' accounts, and that independence is exercised either through offering different worldviews from our participants, or by disagreeing with the ways in which they might interpret our work. Through emphasising responsibility I by extension believe that although researchers should be reflexive, engaged and ethical they should not avoid admitting that they also have a role in 'directing' the research. If researchers initiate research they also effectively need to become skilled in the 'responsible management' of their research practices and for the claims they make of and about research participants.

I suggest that instead of fostering 'less' researcher-like behaviour or making participants 'co-researchers' it is more beneficial to acknowledge the imbalances inherent in the researcher/researched exchange without trying to smooth these tensions over. As feminist critique of research methods has ably suggested, promoting 'more' sharing and mutuality can lead to greater power imbalances in methodologies. To be clear, I am not suggesting that researchers embrace hierarchy in the research relationship, reinforce notions of 'them' and 'us' or feel as if they have 'the' authority in the accounts that are made. Rather I am advocating a keen sense of accountability through recognising that for better or worse we direct and are responsible for the research projects we initiate. I suggest that by engaging with the extent of responsibility in research we fully value the contributions made by research participants, thereby producing responsibly 'thick' accounts.

There are longstanding concerns in sociological debates about methods. As this thesis has illustrated however, they are concerns that are newly challenged in the light of recent, often innovative, research methods and concepts. I illustrate this point by exploring some of the issues of control and responsibility that are raised by a focus on visual practices. Acknowledging our responsibilities as researchers can perhaps be best explored through an example: visual research methods.

One of the key recent methodological developments has been the opportunity to offer participants ways of creating 'alternative' forms of research. In making visual representations of body modification practice it might be suggested that it would be 'better' if participants made their own accounts free from the influence of the researcher. When asking individuals to make their own films and photographs however we do not erase the ghost of the researcher. Researchers make demands on research participants and just because we are not 'on hand' does not mean that our presence is any less felt. I am not suggesting that such forms of research production do not have a place in sociology; they clearly do as Back (2007: 12) suggests. However there are some critical issues present. Back (2007: 19) acknowledges that participants once given the tools to create their own accounts then hand this material over to researchers to analyse. I suggest that we cannot sidestep the issue of 'control' here. If modified individuals make their own accounts these issues do not 'disappear': responsibility remains in the hands of the researcher. I suggest that the issue is not about 'giving' control to modified individuals. Modified individuals can and do make their own representations of themselves in books (*Modern Primitives*, 1989), on film (*Modify*, 2005), in magazines (*Total Tattoo*) and on the internet (*bmezine*). Asking individuals to participate in our projects means that we will also, inevitably, objectify research participants, as O'Connell Davidson (2008: 57-58) suggests [see Chapter Three]. Issues of representation have also been taken up by those working with visual methods (see Moreno Figueroa, 2008).

Following on from Moreno Figueroa (2008), an example of accountability is the case I have made for not including the 'still image' in this thesis. I have made it clear that I am not 'against' visual research practices per se but that visually orientated methodologies are not necessarily 'better' than using texts and indeed can bring their own limits. I have suggested that filming and photographing practices as they happen has the potential to be both sensationalist and intrusive. I have suggested that visual research practices elicit particular responsibilities on behalf of the researcher that call for a sensitive and nuanced approach to creating images of body modification practice. These issues were highlighted through the discussion of *Henry's* participation in a filmed MA project at *Star*. Being filmed impacted on *Henry's* body modification experience in significant ways; his inability to 'go with' what he was feeling due to the intrusion of the camera was keenly felt. His creation of a 'performance' to distract from the 'click and

whirr' of the camera was manifested through pulling faces, joking and making 'light' of what he was experiencing. Even though *Henry* was happy to participate in the project it is clear that being filmed directed and affected his experience in profound ways.

Through my discussion of haptic visuality I have been able to look at the questions of visual methods from a haptic perspective. Developing the haptic has produced a method of seeing that suggests that there are not only alternate ways of seeing among body modification participants but that perhaps the method of haptic visuality can also be utilised as a way to look at methods. Utilising the work of Marks (2000 and 2002) Haraway (2007) and Moreno Figueroa (2008) I have discussed the use (or non-use) of visual practices. Through my discussion of haptic visuality I have problematised the notion that photographs within this thesis would convincingly illustrate the haptic. I have proposed that the ways in which Marks (2000, 2002) and Haraway (2007) use images to illustrate the haptic have not been entirely successful, and that exhibiting the haptic presents challenges for the researcher (also identified by Puig de la Bellacasa, 2008). However I have also suggested that there are problems with not showing images, as discussed through the work of Moreno Figueroa (2008), where the decision was made not to show the photographs that participants shared with her. I have illustrated the complexities of using visual practices, yet I am not suggesting that we should not use 'alternative' research practices to explore and represent body modification practice. It is then worth considering how communicating sense and sensation in a film, photographic project or audio recording might take shape.

There are exciting possibilities for future research: how to make sense with (as well as of) sense and sensation. Making an auditory account of body modification practice could lend a sense of vitality and 'presence' to body modification experience. The layering of sound at *Dragon* for example, through the music played, the drill of the tattoo machine and the mix of voices, would help us to get a feel for the experience of body modification as it happens. Listening to the sounds described would perhaps have helped bring the concept of the soundscape 'to life', producing a venn between the listener and the recording. Such opportunities extend the scope of research through listening as well as reading. In similar ways, producing a set of photographs or a film might enhance accounts of body modification practice. A film where the denouement was not the spectacularisation of broken skin or blood could challenge the ways in which body modification practice is represented. It is even possible that photography

or film might not focus on the procedure itself if it were more concerned with capturing what it is to live-with body modification practice. These auditory and visual examples are just some possibilities, there will be many more.

Throughout my fieldwork participants generously and engagingly directed me towards the manifold ways in which body modification practice is lived. Privileging embodied and sensorial experiences of body modification processes has produced rich and thick accounts of what it is to be modified. As a consequence of my research I have also identified the need for more creativity from researchers in how they approach, explore and represent body modification practice. This thesis marks the beginning of a more embodied and sensorial approach to body modification experience. It is one that makes demands not only for more innovation in how body modification is conceptualised, but suggests that this can be realised through tuning into the modified body: feeling, listening and seeing how body modification experience is lived.

## APPENDIX 1

### Excerpts from Field Diary

#### London Tattoo Convention

10<sup>th</sup> October 2006

*Very busy and hot, hundreds of people squeezed into a too small space, bottlenecks and gridlocks. People get stuck around popular tattooists, huddle in around their booths to watch them at work. Very noisy, sound of tattoo machines running, talking, music. Each tattooist in their own booth with their own soundtrack alongside the music played in the convention space, interspersed with announcements of competitions, performances, information about food and the bar. Noise of traffic in Brick Lane, conversation – greetings, questions, laughter. Buzz of machines, buzz of people, excitable atmosphere.*

*Smells: disinfectant, but unlike studios there's also the smells of alcohol, cigarette smoke wafts in, takeaway food – layers of smell, from so many people in a space, hard to pick out individual smells from the merging currents of smell. So many people tattooed in one space, anticipation of those waiting for a tattoo or thinking about it, the tattooists aware of the audience and the need to produce good work – must be subtle levels of smell from all this, the bodies involved. At the least, product of these things happening – warm skin, warm armpits, warm hands inside latex gloves – smell of warm latex. Heat and raised appearance of freshly tattooed skin.*

*Hundreds of tattooists at work, lots of international artists, visitors and tattooists travelling to venue from far afield. Big opportunity to get tattooed by someone it might be difficult meet another time. Crowds, difficult to see well-known tattooists at work: Filip Leu, Tin Tin, Shige, etc. Watched man getting half-sleeve Koi carp tattooed on upper arm by Horikoi at back of the main hall. Area here has been made into working space for Horikoi and his assistants, it is glass walled and so is easy to see, stand and watch for a long time. They work on the floor instead of sitting in cramped booths, no people pushing past, an air of calm but also steady, focussed work. Much nicer space, more roomy, different*

*feel, clients take off their shoes before entering area, lie on floor mats to be tattooed. Not so loud at the back and they're not playing music in this section, though rest of tattoo convention hubbub can still be heard. Somehow watching stillness and concentration here hushes the noise. Horikoi works very fast, seems to take about forty minutes to tattoo large Koi onto client, worked with economy of time and movement. More cosy and intimate here, though tattooists don't speak directly to the clients, have an interpreter who sits on floor next to client and tattooist. Watch hand-tapped tattooing here too, while on next mat tattooist uses tattoo machine.*

*Have to tear self away, been standing watching Horikoi's area for so long, though it's easiest watching of the day – very aware of 'watching', me watching, everybody watching everybody else, the close, focussed watching of tattooists putting ink into skin. So much to see and take in – tattooists show work being done and work already done, people show off their tattoos. It is a place to see and be seen – it's about buzz, noise, and display.*

*In main parts of convention space, as well as tattooists at work, also stalls selling tattoo and body modification themed clothes, jewellery, paraphernalia. Sale of inks and tattoo guns is strictly trade - professional tattooists. Wildcat, long-established body mod jewellers, have a stall, so do Total Tattoo magazine, stalls for groups like the 'Suicide Girls', scantily clad women with tattoos and piercings, men getting their photographs taken with them. Museum of tattoo memorabilia tucked away in an alcove. Tattoo fan dancing. Pockets of concentration, people pushing and squeezing past. They are opening doors to get more air in. Above main working hall is 'Japanese Gallery' and also by-hand tattooing, much quieter again as isn't combined sound of hundreds of tattoo machines buzzing, and it's a lot less busy with people. Like section at back of main hall downstairs, is more comfortable with cushions and mats about. Japanese Gallery has vintage prints of Samurai warriors and actors with traditional Japanese tattooing. There are two bars and food areas, here people chatting, shouting and laughing, drunk and sober. Very crowded. People doing circuits of venue, walk around with cling film taped to newly tattooed skin, over reddening flesh. There is a real heat that comes off newly-tattooed skin, intensified by effect of cling film.*

*Men walking round with tops off, some women wear bikini tops, shorts or short skirts to show off tattoos and other modifications. Lots of people showing flesh, and a lot of visible work on hands, faces and necks, tattoo work on faces, extensive work on attendees. Desire to share, compare, affirm, a delight in the exchange. People getting photographed inside and outside convention. When I arrive there is a big group of people photographing a woman with an almost full body suit. Later see woman with full backpiece being admired, large colour-work demon face, it's quite a jarring image, a laughing, evil-looking fantasy-style piece, quite at odds with the light-hearted celebration of the tattoo that is going on*

*around the woman, who smiles and poses for photographs. People whip out cameras, often no asking, seems it's assumed people are here to be photographed so won't mind – etiquette of photographing tattooist at work doesn't seem to be especially observed.*

*Go and get some air, relieved to get outside and away from it all for a bit. Intensity to witnessing just one modification – here there are many modifications occurring all at once, you come across them, another booth, another tattoo in progress. See only one person who looks like they are in obvious pain the whole day, maybe it is not a place to reveal if you are in pain, too public. This man is in his late twenties, looks like he is towards the end of a long session on side/ribs area, at a glance much of this area is reddened, and shiny from wiping with disinfectant, the black ink looking particularly black as so fresh. Feels intrusive so don't look for long. Most people are chatting, laughing, get the impression this is a meeting point for people who haven't seen each other for a while, maybe since last convention?*

*Watch a competition where tattooists create artwork, under timing of stopwatch. They swap work, finish someone else's piece. They're standing up, artwork set up on drawing boards along stage. Goes on for long time, quite drawn out process, difficult to see, people start to wander off. Go outside for another break as it begins to get more crowded.*

*As well as tattooing saw a lot of piercing, also implant work on people, but don't see any of these procedures taking place, so you don't have the more jarring smells of some of the other modifications, like the smell of branding. Historically they've tried to separate these, tattooing seen as more 'respectable'. But many people here have had other mods as well as tattooing.*

*Huge group of bikers, rockabilly look seen a lot, as well as 'emo' style. A lot of black clothes, not all attendees in black but distinct colours add to visual impression, black, red, white, purple, electric blue. Wherever you go people are getting photographed: in stairwells, corridors, outside the convention, causing bit of a stir on Brick Lane, passers-by looking at people. Realise I am part of what's being looked at, from the outside I form part of this mass, though feel separate. Have to squeeze past the groups of people with prominently displayed tattoos to walk down pavement. More people admiring each other's styles - vast array of colours and styles: tribal, Celtic new and old school images, H.R. Giger alien/technological/fantasy stuff, dark stuff, horror images, Japanese (trad. and anime), Americana, naïve style/kids drawings, wildlife and nature, floral, Polynesian, Borneo. Most common: old school, tribal, trad. Japanese – the 'older' imagery. Rockabillies seem most likely to have old school anchors, cherries etc, the clothes go with the tattoos. The tribal work here is mostly big pieces, no tiny designs. Several tribal bodysuits. Trad. Japanese stuff is most frequently sleeves, either full or half-sleeve. If people have neck tattoos they're mostly old school, if on face/head they're often 'tribal' like and part of wider design over body. Hands are usually old school, slogans on knuckles getting more common – used*

*to be associated with prison tattooing, or hard posture, now worn knowingly/ironically, little to do with crime.*

## **Description of *Star***

*10<sup>th</sup> November 2007*

*In front part of shop are display cabinets of body modification jewellery, magazines on table next to seats, flyers on counter next to till. Friendly atmosphere. Large painting on back wall. Small kitchen in annexe with toilet. Studio is in the back, small with low ceilings. Another painting in studio, National Geographic prints and photographs of studio staff doing procedures, children's drawings, council health notices. Autoclave, sink and cupboards. Black leather recliner in centre of room covered with crinkly white paper (tissue roll). Small window is open to outside small yard, few leaves poking in through window. Boxes of black latex gloves, yellow plastic drawers hold sterile needles in wrappers, paraphernalia. Walls are white, lino floor, very clean, smells of disinfectant, freshly brewed tea. Main shop is active space, often people milling around, studio at back more contained but still often several people.*

## **Notes Taken After Colin's Branding (also recorded)**

*15<sup>th</sup> November 2007*

*The branding is an ongoing project, he's had one session, this is his second and he'll finish with a third session in about six months or so. Gives enough time for healing and deciding how the design will proceed.*

*Colin and Ellie go into the back part of the studio followed by Andy and Beth. I go in last and try to position myself to the side so I'm unobtrusive. I ask Andy the best place for the recorder, we try out a couple of locations and decide that on the windowsill is the least obtrusive, won't get in the way of anyone or clutter up surfaces there. Andy and Beth have made the transfers for the design and they now have to put the transfers on evenly, then Colin checks how they look in the mirror, checking particularly the spacing between the designs. Colin wants Ellie to take photographs. Stored on the camera are photographs that Colin's friend took at the last session, Ellie shows me and tells Colin how calm he*

looks. Andy wears a white face-mask and black latex gloves, Beth assisting him wears black latex gloves.

Colin does last check of the design and lies down on the couch. Andy switches on machine that is on small metal table next to couch, the table is covered in cling film. Music on the stereo is Faithless and Everything But The Girl I think, on repeat, relaxing kind of music.

Everyone gets in place. Andy asks if Colin is ready. Beth opens door a bit to create a through draft. Cauleriser is turned on, it starts beeping, Ellie jumps and Colin comments about not telling Ellie it beeped. There are jokes made about the smell to come, that it's like barbecue or roast pork or chicken, jokes about the smell making people hungry.

Cauleriser crackles as it hits the skin, bright blue iridescent light, beeping, slight puffs of smoke where the skin is being vaporised. Andy and Colin talking about keloiding and making scars raised. Beth goes out to the front of the shop when a client comes in. She is mainly helping Andy when he needs another pair of hands to stretch the skin. She makes drinks. Periods where there isn't much talking. Ellie asks Andy questions about the process. Colin and Ellie talk about experience of tattooing and branding and compare them. Andy has a couple of short breaks, slurps tea. Whenever he touches something that isn't sterile, changes gloves. Snaps them on and off. Beth has to keep putting on new gloves and throwing them away as she moves back and forth between the back and front part of the studio.

Colin finding it more difficult as procedure goes on. Andy has to move about a lot. Andy looking tired, strain on the eyes because of the glare of the iridescent light. At end Andy helps Colin off the couch, Ellie and Colin leave first followed by Andy and Beth, both take off gloves, rip off the paper roll from the couch and put in the bin. I'm last to leave and get my recorder off the windowsill, we go into the front part of the studio to relax, have a cup of tea and chat.

APPENDIX 2

**Excerpt from Interview Transcript: *Jane*, December 2006.**

*[I run through the practical details of the interview: that I will be using a voice recorder, which can be switched off at any point if requested, that if at any point Jane wants a break we can have one, how long the interview will take, and so on].*

**Natasha:** so yes, I might just think of some of the things that you mentioned the other day I was going to ask you about, just you know, like getting tattooed at conventions, and perhaps talk about stuff, and if things pop into my head I'll ask you, but if you just wanna chat then, that's brilliant.

**Jane:** sure.

**Natasha:** yeah, being tattooed in London and Derby sounded interesting?

**Jane:** It was a bit of a, a sort of a support thing, cos I found out that he'd had the stroke and y'know I just wanted to see how he was, and I hadn't had any work from him for a couple of years and I thought well I'm going up, we're going to the convention, and, um, just, y'know, just go for it. I didn't really know what to expect, um – I knew what the tattooing was going to be like but I didn't realise quite how, um, oppressive at times it was going to be, um. The tattoo was fine, y'know, we sort of discussed where I wanted to be tattooed and what I was going to have, and he likes to work freehand so... I got there, I said I want this, I want that, and he basically spent some time just drawing it on...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** ...and all the while, you know, people are walking past, there's a lot of noise there, there's music going on, there's just crowds of people, um, and completely different to my other tattooing experiences where I'd had a choice of music that I

wanted to play and I'd sort of chosen quite, um, mellow at times, but sometimes you need music that's sort of quite fast and quite upbeat just to like lift you up, you know when you're feeling really down or feeling really drained and you want to have a break and you can't because he's working on a particular piece – yeah, yeah, that was, that was weird, um. Basically you just sort of sit there and let him, well I sat there and let him get on with it, and people would come up that he knew from, his clients, um, I had some friends there that would pass every sort of fifteen, twenty minutes or so just to keep an eye on the progress, and then you just get complete strangers coming up, um, watching, asking about technique saying 'oh that looks really good,' um, you get people coming up taking photographs which I particularly wasn't happy with because at no point did I get asked if I wanted my photo...

**Natasha:** nobody asked you?

**Jane:** no.

**Natasha:** god.

**Jane:** that is standard in the convention, it's like you are, you are on show, if you go and you have your tattoos on show, nine times out of ten somebody will just take your photo, occasionally you get somebody asking you, but more often than not they will just take your photo, and you don't know where those photos are going to end up.

**Natasha:** yeah

**Jane:** um, but I guess, y'know, if I was bothered, that bothered, about them selling their photos to websites, magazines, whatever, then I would cover up. You know, I was there basically to advertise his artwork, and I was happy to do that, so you've got to take everything that sort of gets thrown at you really. Um, you know, it was, um, it was a shame because the noise detracted away from what was going on to me...

**Natasha:** like the kind of background noise?

**Jane:** yeah, the background noise and people coming along, and you know, they would sort of interrupt him, so he would stop...

**Natasha:** oh god, right.

**Jane:** ...and then have to start again, and you're watching something develop on your skin, and, um, you want to get that over with because you're paying for his time, and now he is, um, it's harder for him to work because of the stroke, and he said to me that he has to concentrate a lot more.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** and the last thing that I wanted was for someone to come along and just distract him totally and then it would be more difficult for him to actually get back into the flow of it, um, it's certainly a less personal experience...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** ...because of everything else that's going on, um, but I think it was probably, and I don't know whether it had had anything to do with the day that I went, when I went to Derby on the Saturday and it was really, really busy, I went to the London convention on the Friday and it wasn't so busy, and um, and [REDACTED] was stuck in a corner, but because people knew he was there people they would come out of their way to find him, um, and it was, it just seemed less intensive in London than in it did in Derby, it just felt a little bit more relaxed, although the tattooing itself was more painful because it was in a particularly painful area of the body, um, but it just seemed a little bit more bearable. Yeah, I don't really know how else to describe it.

**Natasha:** yeah. Has a long time elapsed between the Derby and the London one?

**Jane:** no, the Derby convention was June or July of this year.

**Natasha:** right, okay.

**Jane:** and, um, the London convention was October, so it wasn't a great deal of time. It's probably, apart from having like the one piece where I was tattooed every couple of months or so, um, it's probably the quickest amount of time that I've had between two distinct sets of tattooing, so, but the experiences couldn't have been more different really, and maybe I was used, or maybe I knew a little bit more what to expect at the second convention, but it did seem to be a lot easier, on the body, the mind and, y'know, the whole shebang.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** the whole thing was a lot easier to deal with.

**Natasha:** would you have a tattoo at a convention again?

**Jane:** um, ummm, probably not – certainly not at Derby, and it would depend on the time of day that I got an appointment if I was having a tattoo in London, but I don't think I would do it again. I would like to, um, be tattooed in a more quiet, um, it would have to be a lot quieter the next time I think, and, um, [REDACTED] has sort of said if you come up to [REDACTED] again then I'll put you up and maybe do some work at home, so I would like to experience that, y'know, 'cos I just think again that would be totally different from anything else that I've gone through.

**Natasha:** yeah. I was interested just to hear you saying about the music, have you always made a cd? Just 'cos I've talked to other people... it's really interesting, 'cos quite a few folk have said I love being tattooed but I hate the noise...

**Jane:** yeah, because you're basically at someone else's whim really, it's up to them what they listen to, and the tattooists that I have met have all had completely eclectic taste in music from, from punk and rock and, um, ska, um, I mean all of which can work but some of it doesn't, um, the last time my other half got tattooed they played Tricky's album 'Blowback' and I got a copy of that and that was great, something I could relate to and just a nice album to listen to. But a lot of the time you'll get, this is just a generalisation, but imagine Napalm Death, you know, you really do not want that noise - I sound like an old, an old granny now [laughs], but it is. It's difficult when you go somewhere because you may have three or four people being tattooed at the same time, trying to satisfy everybody, you know, it's just not going to happen. I know that, um, the tattooists take turns in what music they listen to, um, but yeah, I have made my own CD to take along and half the time the other tattooists you can tell, you know, it's not what they want to listen to, but, y'know, I'm the one being tattooed, although they're the ones that are having to work. But I'm the one being tattooed and it would be nice to listen to something that I want to listen to, and it's nice when you get a studio that will allow you to do that...

**Natasha:** yeah, definitely. Do you think it changes how, I'm just trying to think, 'cos I watched someone getting tattooed recently, and I think it was Muse came on, and it like really affected the entire kind of room, in that it was really loud and quite fast, and it seemed that the tattooist was going faster...

**Jane:** [laughing]

**Natasha:** and it seemed like she was in more pain and, um, I was wondering if, if it's not too much of an obtuse question, if the music changes how it feels to get a tattoo?

**Jane:** yes, yes, it can, because what I said it earlier, it depends on how you're feeling, and if a track comes on that's sort of quite uplifting, or you know, the tempo increases, they do, I have noticed that the tattooists, it can affect how they work and how fast they work and how they gentle they are, um, and it also affects you as well, um, you know, it's, it is very strange the way that you can be affected by music. The right music can get you over a particularly painful bit of tattooing and, um, the wrong music can really sort of make it worse, it really does affect you like that... um, the last time I went

to [REDACTED] I was tattooed outside of the convention, um, an album was playing and I went and bought it, 'cos I hadn't got it, and it's just nice that I can listen to that album now and just remember, it's, at the time I couldn't really hear the music, it was something that I couldn't, it was just something that was on in the background, it was quite, it's called 'Arabesque Zuge', and it's quite, it's a lot of Iranian, Iraqi music. It's really, really, really nice album, but it's nice to sort of play it and I can then think back to the time I was being tattooed. But at the time it wasn't, it wasn't important what I was listening to but it's, it's, I have that sort of connotation with it now.

**Natasha:** yeah. That's really interesting. I was wondering how different that feels, 'cos I know you've had work, like ongoing work on the same design, and how different that feels to having just an individual design done in a day, in terms of sensation and how it feels.

**Jane:** umm... I don't really know how to answer that to be honest.

**Natasha:** that's alright [both laugh]. Or perhaps that's too big a question.

**Jane:** no, I don't know, um, it was the last piece I had done was just an individual bit and I probably...it would be difficult for me to go back to the guy 'cos he's in [REDACTED], so it would take something quite extraordinary for me to go and add to the piece that I got done, um. It was a case of the person being there and being in the right place at the right time and having it done and, um, the ongoing pieces that I've have, it's, it's more to do with the person and the relationship with the person that I have, um...

Sensation-wise, there probably isn't that much difference, um, there obviously is a difference because it's different areas of the body being tattooed and physical sensation is very different, my foot, my foot was agonising painful.

**Natasha:** right. Which foot did you have tattooed?

**Jane:** it's all over the...

**Natasha:** sorry, making you disrobe!

**Jane:** no, it starts there. Take my shoe off...

**Natasha:** wow!

**Jane:** and goes down, round there, and onto there...

**Natasha:** ooh god. That's really nice.

**Jane:** so... I mean, this bit here was very painful, this bit here was very painful and, um...

**Natasha:** just like the side of your foot...

**Jane:** there, you know, it's, on the front of the foot is absolutely fine, but around the extreme edges if you see what I mean, that was um, yeah that was fairly agonising...

**Natasha:** it's so nice, it's such a lovely design. I'm getting a severe pang of jealousy [laughter].

**Jane:** but yeah, I mean, it was, I'd seen his work and I was just like 'I have to have something done by him', um, and him being in London for the convention, I thought 'I have to do this,' and I was lucky to get an appointment on Friday as I said, I mean if I'd have been tattooed, I went on the Friday and the Saturday, and if I'd have been tattooed on the Saturday I don't think I would have been able to stand him finish

**Natasha:** really?

**Jane:** yeah, I mean he was wanting to do more on the Friday, and I said no, no, this has been going on for like four hours, I really just need...

**Natasha:** four hours?

**Jane:** from the whole starting drawing to the finishing of the tattooing, I think I it was about an hour and half tattooing and two and a half hours drawing, and I thought, no I can't do this anymore, so I just had to, I had to go, and hobble home... [laughter]

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** I probably think that... if you've got an ongoing piece you know the person that's doing it, and they know you and they know what your limits are, and they can probably try and make it easy for you, so, um...yeah, the, um, but, maybe it's the areas, I don't know, but it was quite painful. I've had quite painful parts of my body tattooed as well by [REDACTED] but it just seems to be easier to deal with because I know him and I trust him, you know, I'd never met [REDACTED] before, although I'd seen his work and I knew what he was capable of, I didn't know what he was like as a person or a tattooist, you know, he might have been heavy-handed, he might have been light-handed, I didn't know what to expect. So it's probably easier to go back to someone that you know.

**Natasha:** yeah. So it's interesting that the pain is kind of managed to a degree to your relationship with the tattooist, which is really significant...

**Jane:** yeah, well you're sort of putting yourself in their hands and you know you're putting an enormous amount of trust in them, but you've also coming back to them, they know you as well as you know them, um, yeah it's um, yeah, this is why I like going back. [REDACTED] to [REDACTED] is not an easy journey, um, but I wouldn't want to go

anywhere else because I know the piece that he's, before, the piece he's done for me is one of the best pieces that he says he's ever done...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** ...and, um, when someone says that about you, you know, and like we came up with the design although he did the drawing and he's done the tattooing, so I came up with the concept, and I know that we worked on that together, and it's just nice for him to say that, and it, it builds the relationship, and it makes the whole tattoo process a lot easier.

**Natasha:** yeah. I was wondering if, and perhaps it's, you know, not everybody wants to talk about tattoos in terms of pain but I wondered if, you were saying your foot was really painful, and you weren't sure, you know, you didn't want it to carry on, I wonder if you can kind of explain that kind of feeling if it's possible...?

**Jane:** My foot um, well was agonisingly painful um it's ... it's a physical pain, cos obviously you've got needles that are being scraped across, um, fairly – although, your feet, the soles of your feet you know, the skin's fairly tough, um, by the toes and around the sides of the foot, it's not a normal thing to do, it's not like an everyday occurrence, that you get some needles and then you just sort of scrape - continually drag them across your skin over and over and over, or dig them in a little bit, um, it's, it's an intense physical pain and... I'm one of those people who um, uh, um, you know, whenever I go and have a blood test they always say "oh, look away" – "no, I want to see what's going on!", y'know, I'm quite nosey and I want to know what's going on, and... So to watch the needle going into the skin is important to me and I don't quite know why, but it's important for me to see what's happening, and... You've got that feedback then, you know, you've got the, the, you can see that it's, what is happening, you can feel the pain, it's going round and round, and it's probably amplified, maybe if I would look away then it might not hurt so much, but I doubt it, you know, so... it's important for me to, I think it's important for me to see what's going on so I can deal with it in my own way, I can deal with it in my head...

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** um, I'm still unconvinced about my levels of endorphin release because everyone says, "oh yeah after a while you know it gets easier", blah blah blah, and sometimes, yeah, sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't, sometimes it can get worse and worse and worse... so... it's... sometimes it's fine and sometimes it's not. Recently

I've felt a lot crabbier and I don't know whether that's 'cos I'm getting older, or, or, or not... I can't understand it because I'm not doing anything differently, we're having the breaks, you know, I'm eating and drinking, I'm eating before I go, I'm eating during the session, and, and, so if I get home, I just wanna, I end up shivering in bed, it does feel like I've got the flu. I think maybe there is a limit, maybe there isn't, I don't know, maybe I've just hit my limit, um...

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** um... so... yeah, I think I deal with the pain in my head rather than... my body's doing something, I don't know... yeah it did get so bad, it's so uncomfortable and so painful that you just think "I have to stop" and, you know, I've... there have times with my other tattoos where I've just said, 'look, I need to take a break, my body feels physically exhausted,' and um, sort of feel sweaty and whatever, and obviously you start to feel hungry 'cos your body's trying to combat it and you know, you just need to have a bit of sugar or a bit of carbohydrate or something.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** um, so, just um, having a break, and having some water and having some food, just to try and bring your blood sugar levels back up...

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** ...feeling a bit faint and um, there have been a couple of times after tattooing that I've got home and have felt like I've got the flu.

**Natasha:** right, okay.

**Jane:** so, I don't know.

**Natasha:** well one thing um, that's come up with a few people that have been quite heavily tattooed as well who have said to me that the more you get tattooed the more difficult it gets.

**Jane:** really? I didn't know that. Oh!

**Natasha:** well, just in the sense of, that's just been their experience, but very often if you've got a lot of coverage, and people can see you've got a lot of coverage, generally folk would think that you're good at dealing with the pain and it must get easier, the more you get, and they've said like the exact opposite...

**Jane:** oh, okay.

**Natasha:** ...so it's interesting hearing you say that, about feeling kind of shivery and stuff before, that you've had...

**Jane:** but I'm hardly covered, you know, I don't know.

**Natasha:** but you've got quite a lot of hours' work.

**Jane:** I've got a lot of hours' work but it's quite intricate stuff so it does tend to take some time, yeah, but I tried to count it up earlier, I think it's like thirty five or so, 'cos the main one was seventeen [hours], um, the, the foot one was an hour and a half, I've got ones on the backs of my legs which were about an hour each, um, that [gesturing to body] was about seven, that was about four, you know, so, that's that really...

**Natasha:** yeah. Is there any other kind of, I know you talked a bit about pain and managing, but is there any other kind of sensation that you associate with tattooing?

**Jane:** um... well it's probably... um, it, it is all related to pain, but there are times when I feel really quite relaxed about what's going on, um... afterwards, well it is just pain, it's like stinging if you're washing it afterwards, then you've got, um, you've got to make sure that it's clean, and, um, sometimes it can sting, um, um... I think it's all pain really [laughter]. Um... no... it's, yeah, I mean it's, it's... no, that's quite a hard one. It's - the over-riding feeling is that, and that's probably, for me, everything else seems to be blocked out, as I say, I mean, it is uncomfortable, but sometimes it can be quite relaxing work depending on where you're being tattooed, um. Yeah, I mean there are like emotional responses that I have because I remember when I was tattooed at such a point and I had a friend with me and I think about that, but that's not actually directly related to the tattooing, so um, I don't know whether that counts or not...

**Natasha:** yeah, it all counts [laughter].

**Jane:** yeah, and then I get the, um, the feeling of regret over like certain friendships that aren't there anymore, that have been around when I've been tattooing, and now, the friendship is no more...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** so, that's, you know, that's another side to it... but if it was so bad you wouldn't keep, keep going to have it done and I certainly don't intend stopping.

**Natasha:** yeah. I think that's one of the, I don't know if it's anything that can ever really be explained, that although these things are painful it doesn't mean...

**Jane:** it's like childbirth isn't it.

**Natasha:** yeah. Well, I don't know!

**Jane:** well I don't know either, so um... um, yeah, well everyone I've spoken to says, well, I've forgotten what it's like, and, can't wait to have the next one, but...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** that's how I feel about tattoos really – it's like childbirth [laughter]. Think you certainly get something better out of it anyway [laughs].

**Natasha:** I was wondering how piercing – I mean, obviously piercing and tattooing are different – I was wondering if you had any thoughts on piercing and how that's felt and stuff.

**Jane:** ummm... it's a very different feeling. Obviously you've just got the one instance of pain and then it sort of ebbs away, whereas... oh no, maybe tattooing isn't like that, tattooing is painful whilst you're having the tattoo done but once the tattooing stops then it's not really painful anymore, but obviously you get a little bit of residual pain but, with piercing you get, you get the pain where you get pierced and then you've sort of got that ebbing away over time, um... and I've thought quite a lot about, since sort of meeting up with you, about piercing and whatever and reasons behind it, and... it was, I dunno, it was what I wanted to do and what I needed at the time but I don't think I'm interested in getting anything else pierced now, so...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** yeah, it was, it was, um, something that I needed to do at the time but not anymore...

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** and I'm probably more interested in, um, building on my relationship with the tattooist and also seeing how our ideas can develop into, into art, basically...

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** which sounds a bit pretentious, and probably is...

**Natasha:** no... Yeah, I think that's the thing with, I mean obviously you can have more and different varied piercings, you can wear different things in it, but it is a very different thing and obviously they're kind of put together a lot but...

**Jane:** indeed.

**Natasha:** I mean, I think sometimes when, uh, 'cos obviously you've stretched your ears a bit...

**Jane:** yeah. I got to a certain point and I realised that I couldn't get any further without having my lobes cut, so I had... I cheated.

**Natasha:** no, I've cheated on mine as well! [laughter] No, one, one I could never do.

**Jane:** oh right, yeah, I've um, I've, yeah I've, I've done, I think I'm done with the piercing thing and I've lost about twelve or so over the years, through various, various things happening in my life and, you know, so...

**Natasha:** how did you find the scalpelling? Have you had it done on both ears or just one?

**Jane:** yeah, both of them. um, really bloody [laughs].

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** You don't realise how, um, how many blood vessels are in your ears, until you have it done, um... it... it was quite weird because, I said earlier about wanting to see, being quite visual and wanting to see things happening, and obviously you can't because they're completely in the wrong place, um, and it felt like I'd had these huge, my perception was that, that he'd just made these really, really long incisions in the earlobe and, um, they weren't at all. It just felt, maybe he was just being really, really a complete bastard and was doing it really slowly, um, but yeah it just, it just seemed to go on forever and it wasn't, you know, it was... yeah, I just bled everywhere, I had blood all down the side of my neck and all over my clothes, it just looked really hideous, really hideous. Um, but they healed up fairly well and they're fine, and um, I know that they'll never go back to where they, where they were, and I don't quite know how I feel about that now, um, but it's a bit late really, so... but you can always have them stitched up I guess, go and see a plastic surgeon.

**Natasha:** there's quite a lot of ear re-construction happening now.

**Jane:** yeah, yeah.

**Natasha:** but, what size did you go to?

**Jane:** um, I was at... 12... I think I went to 18.

**Natasha:** okay.

**Jane:** and they've been 18 since then, I've not gone any further, um, I'm happy with the way that they are, um.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** yeah... yeah, so in the grand scheme of things it wasn't a huge cut, but it just felt like it was because you've got no perception about what's happening to you...

**Natasha:** yeah, I think also there's, the stretching aspect feels so unfamiliar...

**Jane:** yeah.

Natasha: 'cos I just, when I did it, it just felt to me like someone was wrestling with my ear, whilst my ear was on fire.

**Jane:** yeah [laughter]

**Natasha:** So I was a bit like [gestures], but...

**Jane:** yeah. The whole cutting thing was another completely alien sort of feeling that I'd never really experienced. I hadn't experienced at the time, I have since then 'cos I've um, been involved in a bit of play cutting and stuff so, yeah, that's, it's something that you don't really want to go through again to be honest.

**Natasha:** no. It's interesting, it was interesting but yeah, I think I'm probably with you on that one [laughs].

**Jane:** yeah, I'm glad I don't have to do it again. And um, but, if you had your time over I would've pierced, had them pierced in a different place and made sure they were higher and...

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** ...giving yourself the best chance to actually get as much out of the whole stretching thing as possible.

**Natasha:** yeah. That's the thing, as long as it's not too low or...

**Jane:** yeah, yes.

**Natasha:** so I guess the piercing thing and stuff doesn't feel like what happened with your ears at all, does that feel like...

**Jane:** um...

**Natasha:** if that's something you're happy to talk about, if you're not that's fine.

**Jane:** um, well it's, I've only done it once and, yeah it did feel very similar, which is probably why I don't want to go through it again, um. Yeah it's, um, it's ... and it was done in a way that you could actually feel the skin parting, and I really did not like that feeling, at all. And it was done in a, in a particular scene and you know I was with someone that I trusted and blah blah blah, you know, but that's, but that was irrelevant, you know the whole, it made me feel really, um... uncomfortable.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** I mean the trust was there with the person, um, that, that wasn't, I didn't question that at all, you know, that was, that went beyond anything else, but the whole,

your skin's doing something that it's not supposed to be doing, y'know? And, and you can think about the whole healing thing and, and um, that sort of side of it spiritual side of it maybe, I don't know, but, yeah, I didn't, I didn't like it, it wasn't, um...it just felt a little bit too extreme for me. Yeah, don't want to do that again! [laughter]. Um, yeah...

**Natasha:** well, you don't know until you've tried it [laughter].

**Jane:** yeah, exactly. And which is different from the play piercing I've been involved in which has been absolutely fine.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** and um, continue to do, and even though I don't like the whole permanent side of piercing, the play piercing thing is, you know it's, it's quite exciting and fun and I can see what's going on as well. Maybe, maybe it's a visual thing of seeing a needle going into or through your flesh, I don't, I don't know, I don't really claim to really understand it.

**Natasha:** yeah, 'cos that sounds really quite important, actually watching what's happening.

**Jane:** yeah, yeah it is, it is for me. It's like you're, um, you're taking, I feel like I'm really taking part in it.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** I'm not just, I dunno, it's, I don't know if from a feminist point of view maybe it's not right what I'm doing or I'm letting myself or - but anyway, it feels like I am, um, I dunno... I'm empowering myself by watching what's going on.

**Natasha:** yeah. But you're also in control of what's happening as well...

**Jane:** yeah.

**Natasha:** ...aren't you, so somebody else might be doing something but you're kind of calling the shots.

**Jane:** yes, yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah, there's never been a, a point where I didn't feel like I couldn't say "no, I really don't want to do this"...

**Natasha:** and does play piercing feel really different from, say, getting your nose pierced or a labret?

**Jane:** yes, because um, I'm a bit of a wimp, in terms of, um, of that, and uh the needle size is important I've found. I've experimented with different sizes, different thicknesses of needles.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** and thinner ones are much more easier to deal with pain-wise. It still hurts and, but it's nothing compared to a piercing needle.

**Natasha:** yep.

**Jane:** even if you've got like, you know, ten, twelve or so through your skin, each, it's not like a cumulative effect in terms of pain, it's the same amount of pain...

**Natasha:** oh okay.

**Jane:** ...from my experience, um, and piercing needles are a lot thicker.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** Um, yeah you're talking about half a millimetre versus 1.6, 2 mil needles

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** and that's a hell of a lot of, of difference. Plus you're going through a very thin amount of skin rather than through, you know, cartilage or a cheek.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** or through an earlobe or whatever, so, even though you're probably piercing more sensitive places, it's... it is a lot easier to deal with.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** I feel like I probably get more of an endorphin rush through play piercing than I do through tattooing or piercing and I don't know why that is.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** maybe it's, uh, the environment or...

**Natasha:** yeah, 'cos it's kind of like being at home as well, that really changes something.

**Jane:** yeah.

**Natasha:** as opposed to being in a studio, 'cos there's always a certain amount of, sort of, you couldn't just flop around in a studio, or maybe you could, if you really know people, but, there's always a sort of public...

**Jane:** yeah.

**Natasha:** ...slightly on display feeling, so I guess being at home...

**Jane:** yeah. Although you, I'd never go to, I've always tried to meet piercers and get to know them a little bit before I actually got pierced by them.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** uh, but there's still that element of not actually knowing them very well.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** and, um, you know the, they've got to prove themselves, and the only way they can prove themselves is for them to pierce you. With, you know, when you're with your partner or with someone that you trust in a play piercing scenario then you've, I put my trust in them completely, and I don't think I would ever be able to do that with a piercer.

**Natasha:** yeah

**Jane:** I don't know.

**Natasha:** I think it's interesting because I think actually the time you spend with a piercer is much less if you're used to being tattooed as well isn't it, cos -

**Jane:** yeah.

**Natasha:** by nature it's quick, over and done with, and that's it, y'know, unless you're doing something a bit, you know, more unusual or whatever, but generally...

**Jane:** yeah. It's a shame because I wouldn't, even if I wanted to get pierced... I wouldn't know where to go now anyway, cos.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** the um, the studio that I used to go to, it was on [REDACTED] and I can't remember what it was called now 'cos it changed.

**Natasha:** was it [REDACTED]?

**Jane:** [REDACTED], yeah, yeah. And um the guy that I went to see, [REDACTED], he went over to live in [REDACTED] I think.

**Natasha:** oh right, okay.

**Jane:** so, uh, yeah, I'm sure there are some really competent piercers in [REDACTED], I just don't feel like I know them well enough to put my trust in them and, and that's got a little bit to do with not wanting to get pierced again as well.

**Natasha:** yeah, mm. So I guess, it seems like tattooing's got much more kind of longevity, you know as in you can see doing it into the future [indecipherable] and there's times you want to do it and stuff.

**Jane:** yeah, yeah. Yeah I've got, um, my arms to fill up, um, and beyond that I don't really know, um, I sort of seem to be starting at my extremities. I've got my foot done and my wrist and the top of my arm, and eventually I might meet up in the middle, I don't really know, but, I can't really see past, I mean I don't even know when my next appointment is...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** so yeah, just depends on being able to get up to [REDACTED], but it makes it more significant because I don't know when the next session is, and...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** someone, someone said to me once "it's about the journey [with tattooing] not about the end result", you know, it's how you get there, not what you get at the end of it.

**Natasha:** right

**Jane:** and I sort of, I do feel like that.

**Natasha:** yep.

**Jane:** Going up to [REDACTED] does seem to be a bit of a pain but it's worth it, and I, you know, I get to meet up with a friend that I don't see very often and it just makes it a little bit more special really.

**Natasha:** right, yeah. And I guess you can see that, I mean, can you, I know you got tattooed by that other guy, but I mean I guess it's kind of like a relationship for life, almost, it sounds like, so...

**Jane:** yeah, yeah.

**Natasha:** that's really quite...

**Jane:** yeah. When I look at my other ones and um, um, the person who did my first one is working at um [REDACTED] in [REDACTED], he was in [REDACTED] where I got tattooed and he moved down to [REDACTED].

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** um... the guy who did these ones I saw at the Derby Convention for the first time in about five years so it was nice and... it was nice to see him although I don't really sort of speak to him very often, it's, it was nice to see him again, and, I know that he did them and I won't ever forget that. Whereas my tat-, my piercings, I can't, if you ask me to say who did what, and I've been pierced by about four or five different people over the years, I couldn't tell you who did what.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** yeah.

**Natasha:** it's kind of telling.

**Jane:** so it does have a more, more sort of significance in my life, and maybe that's me, I don't, I mean I can't speak for other people, so...

**Natasha:** yeah. Mm. I was just thinking when you were talking about getting work from other people as well – sorry, I’ve got things backed in my head that I was trying to remember to say! [laughter] – um, about... I mean obviously people have different ways of tattooing but, there’s kind of, do you really notice the different ways that people get ink in, ie. like heavier or lighter -

**Jane:** yeah.

**Natasha:** I know we touched on that before.

**Jane:** yeah. Um, um... yeah it depends on the um, on the competency of the person as well. These, these ones were done by someone who was just starting out.

**Natasha:** okay.

**Jane:** um, they had to be retouched about three times because, um, he was really quite light-handed

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** and maybe the ink didn’t go far enough into the skin as it should have done, so I had them done over a couple of times, which wasn’t completely, um, completely pleasant really, so, um...

**Natasha:** right, okay. Did you have to have them retouched while he was doing it kinda thing or did they heal and then...

**Jane:** um, I had, they healed up, um, but because of the location it was only a couple of weeks in-between, so he probably tattooed them over a little bit sooner than it should have been so, um, and um, someone else that I had tattoos by, we did a sort of bartering thing. I got something, I sorted something out for him, and he tattooed me because he was apprenticing and wanted to get some stuff for his portfolio, and he was definitely heavy-handed, really quite badly so, um...

**Natasha:** how did that feel?

**Jane:** um, yeah it was, it was really, really uncomfortable. I mean I said that parts of my foot are the worst place... may - I mean I have heard other people say this, maybe he was being heavy-handed, um, but maybe it was location, and a combination of, of what he was doing, but the backs of my calves - oh my god, I have never experienced pain like it.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** um, unfortunately I’ve had quite a lot of blurring, from the work and maybe, and I think that’s got to do with his, um, the pressure used.

**Natasha:** okay.

**Jane:** so um, yeah... um, yeah, backs of my calves were the, were the most painful, more painful than my foot and my ribs, which, that was quite bad, but the backs of my calves was just - and you'd expect that, you know, it's a nice fleshy part of the body, would be fine -

**Natasha:** yeah, yeah.

**Jane:** - no, it, it's all lies! [laughter] it's lies, it's just horrible, it was really horrible, I was like, chewing on my fists.

**Natasha:** oh god, oh god [laughter]. Yeah.

**Jane:** so if you're going to get a tattoo by an apprentice, don't get them done on your, on the backs of your calves. Yeah, yeah, you need someone who really knows what they're doing and has experience because he didn't know what to expect either, you know, and I think you've got to have someone who knows how different parts of the body react.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** I know everyone's different but I do believe that there are certain parts of the body that, that react the same.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** and I think that an experienced tattooist will, will know when to be maybe a little bit gentler.

**Natasha:** yep, yeah.

**Jane:** I'm sure there are things they can do with the machine to make it not hurt as much.

**Natasha:** yeah [laughs]. Well it's funny 'cos hearing people talk about different styles, like lighter style and heavier, I didn't really, I hadn't actually thought about that before.

**Jane:** right, okay.

**Natasha:** about how significant that is and...

**Jane:** right. I mean the needle groupings I know has something to do with it, and they always say that shading can be worse or less, more or less painful than the outlining, because of the way that the needles are grouped together.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** but I don't really know, but...

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** but it's like, um, I think the shading's because they have more needles, and a lot of the time they're just sort of shading and dragging it across the skin rather than trying to draw or sort of pencil on the skin.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** yeah, I think, um, shading can be a little bit more uncomfortable.

**Natasha:** yeah. Have you got any colour work at all?

**Jane:** um, I'm interested in my Polynesian styles, um, and sort of geometric patterns and things like that... I would be very wary about having like, um, I don't know a butterfly, or, um, I really wanted, there was a point where I really wanted a pin-up girl, I don't know what it was about pin-up girls but I just thought they looked really, um, voluptuous and gorgeous, and you see some amazing work, really amazing work.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** like, that's, that's fantastic, but it wouldn't go with anything else I've got, and I don't know, I see people with a sort of a mish mash of different styles and, some of it works and some it doesn't, it depends on whether you can get a good artist who will incorporate what you've got into everything else you have, um, but it's important for me, aesthetically to, to have stuff that goes together.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** and, um, and Polynesian, traditional Polynesian tattoos have always been black work so that's all I have. I would like... I would like to have some colour... I would – oh I, sometimes I really crave for something really, really colourful across my back or across my chest, or, but I don't know how it would fit in with the rest of it.

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** 'cos everything else is just black...

**Natasha:** yeah. I mean, is that important to have that kind of integrity of the design then?

**Jane:** yes

**Natasha:** Would you be worried about introducing colour because you've only got the black work?

**Jane:** yep, yeah. Yes. And the style as well, because it's all sort of geometric-y style patterns and Polynesian ...

**Natasha:** right. Yeah, 'cos very often I think, sometimes it seems that people kind of get one or two early tattoos and they're designed on a theme and then they've got to try

and work it in or they've got to have it covered up 'cos it doesn't kind of go, or whatever, but.

**Jane:** yeah, I mean the stuff that I've got, I wouldn't be able to have covered up.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** so I'm pretty much stuck with it, so, uh, I've got to try and make it right the first time.

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** y'know. And it's weird seeing, oh, last summer I was in one of the studios, there was a guy in there who was, couldn't have been more than twenty five, and he's got full sleeves already, and you think, why sort of limit yourself now, why not just sort of, I dunno, just get a couple of bits, and, 'cos, I dunno, maybe it's me... I mean I'm lucky with my job, y'know, I've worked hard to get where I am, and then you just think, well are they gonna, and hopefully with y'know time's going on and whatever and people are less, um, gonna be less discriminatory about jobs and appearance and things like that, and I really hope that that's going to be the case, but you never know what they're [those that are heavily tattooed] gonna end up doing. They might want to be a city banker...

**Natasha:** yeah, yeah.

**Jane:** or, y'know, a clergyman, or something, and it's not, I just feel that they're just sort of limiting themselves, and maybe that's, I don't know whether I'm just being a bit old fashioned or...

**Natasha:** I think it's interesting though because ten years ago you wouldn't have seen younger...

**Jane:** no.

**Natasha:** ...y'know people in their early twenties with full sleeves...

**Jane:** no.

**Natasha:** ...and you didn't see people with full sleeves very much at all, so yeah I mean it is, it's interesting...

**Jane:** it's um, it was weird 'cos I saw a guy on Friday, he was driving a van, and he was like in his late fifties sixties, and he had like the traditional spiderweb on his elbow...

**Natasha:** right.

**Jane:** and he had all these really sort of, they looked like they had been done at home, you know he'd done them himself, but obviously your skin changes, and I sort of think,

well, is that what I'm gonna look like in, y'know, twenty, thirty years time when my skin's got a little bit saggy and... so, yeah, it's, um, it's a, a little bit, um, you don't know what to expect...

**Natasha:** yeah.

**Jane:** it's very strange, the way things are, are changing, you know, even in the short period of time that I've been getting tattooed and pierced, y'know...

**Natasha:** sure.

**Jane:** ...the attitudes are a lot more liberal and, um, designs are a lot more um expressive as well.

**Natasha:** mm.

**Jane:** I mean you certainly wouldn't see the colour-work that you get now, ten sort of twenty years ago.

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