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**After the Pain, Beauty Remains: Identity and Aesthetics  
of Body Modification in Montreal**

**Elizabeth Demerson**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**Sociology and Anthropology**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
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## **Abstract**

**After the Pain, Beauty Remains: Identity, and Aesthetics of Body Modification in Montreal**

**By Elizabeth Demerson**

This thesis is an ethnographic and analytic examination of body modification in the downtown Montreal area. The processes of specific non-culturally sanctioned body modifications, such as tattooing, body piercing, scarification, tongue forking, implanting, and amputation, are detailed and explored through description, narratives, and analysis. The processes and end products of these modifications are illustrated through photographs. These modifications are analyzed through a discussion concerning identity, the "modern primitive" discourse, cultural appropriation, consumerism, and popular culture providing an in depth investigation of both mainstream and extreme body modification. These discussions are brought together through cross-cultural and ethnographic examples and description to depict a thorough understanding of the body modification community in Montreal.

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## **I. Introduction**

Body modifications have always existed around the world. Through archeological evidence, it has been found to have existed in the areas now defined as “the West” long before history was recorded. The West is being defined as the area we today call the industrial modern world. Body modification is the intentional alteration and decoration of the body. It can include temporary, semi-permanent, and permanent forms, socially sanctioned and non-sanctioned methods of alteration and decoration. Every individual forms and shapes their body to look a certain way, using a variety of methods, from diet and exercise to clothing, hairstyles and jewelry. Body modification can include any or all of these, from jewelry and make-up to intentional nullification and amputation.

The subject of this thesis is body modification in permanent non-culturally sanctioned forms; forms not considered acceptable by society at large, or existing underground. Forms of body modification such as tattooing, body piercing, scarification, implantation, and even amputation have become more common in recent years, yet remain non-sanctioned. Tattooing and piercing are the most common having become a part of popular culture; scarification, implantation, and amputation remain underground, but periodically surface in the media and in academic writing. These forms of body modification have emerged in academic writing under discourses of aesthetics and art and of a search for meaning.

This thesis also focuses on aesthetics and a search for meaning, and includes an analysis of the discourse on identity, cultural appropriation, and popular culture creating new models for the use of design, aesthetics, and meaning in body modification. The purpose is to discover if and how body art is used in social life concerning daily social and political processes.

Popular culture has recently incorporated body piercing and tattoos into its many visual representations. Piercings and tattoos are commonly shown on models, in television shows and in advertisements. They can also be seen through an increase in media coverage on the topic of body piercing and tattooing in newscasts and newspaper articles and the increase in



documentary programs on the subject. Tattooing and piercing have become a fashionable medium of young middle class adults and even of many professionals. However, the fashionability of tattooing and piercing does not mean any type of tattooing and piercing, only a very specific category is labeled as fashionable and these categories will be defined and discussed in the ethnographic section. While this trend in body modification in mainstream culture may seem superficial, there is much more to it than fashion.

At the beginning of this research, the most frequent reaction people had to my research topic was to first question why I was interested in body modification. People would immediately look me over for obvious markings and remark on how "normal" I look. The only visible modifications I had were ear piercings, which are unremarkable in today's society. Since then I have had my nose pierced and no longer receive these types of questions. In order to help the reader understand my motivations and intentions, I will introduce the topic through a brief description of my background in reference to body modification and an explanation on how I came to do research on body modification.

I have always been interested in art. I have taken many courses in drawing, clay and photography. Since before I can remember I have always been drawn to the visual aspects of life. While growing up I wanted a tattoo. I thought they were pretty and "cool", but when I became old enough, I did not have the nerve to go through with it, not to mention that I was certain my mother would strongly disapprove. My most important concern was choosing the right design. I waited for a long time because I was fully aware that tattoos are permanent and are a very personal reflection of the wearer. I wanted to be certain about the design I chose to ensure that it was not only appropriate for my personality but one I would not regret in the future.

As I neared the completion of my undergraduate degree I decided to mark the event with a tattoo. It seemed fitting to mark it with a type of rite of passage, especially since my degree was in anthropology. I chose the design, after an extensive search, from a book on North West Coast art of a Kwakiutl style sun.

My sister and I went together to receive our tattoos, although she had other motivations for the body marking. I researched several tattoo parlors and chose the one that was the cleanest and where I felt the most comfortable with the tattooist. The experience of being tattooed was unforgettable. I received my tattoo a week before my graduation ceremony and it always reminds me not only of that time in my life, but of the entire tattooing experience with my sister.

I have since come to notice other body art more and to appreciate its aesthetics. Because I recognize that tattooing is not done merely for aesthetic reasons, I usually inquire of people why they got the tattoo or piercing and how they chose the specific design or placement. There is always a story behind the marking and people are usually more than happy to share their design and the experience.

This project began as an interest in the aesthetics of body art. Before any serious research on the topic was started, I met my first informant who launched me in a direction that I had not even thought about going: extreme body modification. I initially wanted to research the popular culture aspect of tattooing and piercing, but this meeting opened my eyes to many strange and wonderful things. He made me realize that all body modifications are essentially the same; from collagen lip implants and tummy tucks to branding and tongue forking. It is a matter of degree and politics surrounding the practices. The reasons behind the actions are essentially the same.

Reasons for body modification vary. For some it is to create a sense of individuality or identity, using the marking as a symbol to separate them from family, friends, or co-workers creating their own sense of identity. Others become modified to become a part of a group in order to conform to others within the group. Some choose body modification to mark an event in their life, as a personal growth experience, or as a healing experience. This is interpreted as a rite of passage as the markings are used to provoke personal, social, or spiritual change through ritual. The tattoo or piercing is a constant reminder of an important life event and acts as a

marker or symbol. Some become modified for aesthetic enhancement, a reason often de-legitimized because it is believed to be shallow and without 'real' meaning (DeMello 2000, Sanders 1989, Myers 1992). Body modifications, for centuries, have been used to beautify and decorate the human body in many cultures worldwide. Beautification can be just as important to the person as group identity or rite of passage. Some piercings and implants are done for sexual enhancement. Genital piercings are done in males and females and can radically enhance sexual sensation. Small pearl implants around the head of the penis helps to enhance sexual pleasure in both partners. There are many reasons why people decide to modify their bodies, frequently they can be combined and changed over time.

Body modification has become important in the lives of many individuals in Montreal, its importance centering on personal searches for identity and meaning. Although it is also used as fashion and as art for many, the body in Western culture has become a centre for personal identity and permanent alterations are becoming directly linked to that unique delineation. This thesis focuses on identity among body modifiers, exploring where the ideas for body art and meaning are found, how they are perceived, and how they are used.

In Chapter two, the history of tattooing and the introduction of extreme body modification to Western culture is explored. This history is presented to foster a better understanding of the present uses of body modification and the differences between European history, Polynesian history and the mythology created in the tattoo community, which will be explored more closely in Chapter Five. Cross-cultural material from older ethnographies follows the Western history to show the types of information body modifiers are using to acquire ideas. Various body modification practices which parallel forms which exist in Montreal are highlighted from six different cultures across the world: The Maori of New Zealand, the Japanese, the Tiv of Nigeria, the Nuer of Sudan, the Aborigines of various parts of Australia, and the Americans of the United States. Methodology and ethics considered throughout the process of this thesis, from fieldwork to the final writing stages, are the subject of Chapter Three. Chapter Four contains the

ethnographic data that shapes this thesis. It is based on fieldwork carried out in the downtown Montreal area from June to September of the year 2000. This data is included in an ethnographic section consisting of eight parts, each centering on a specific type of modification and organized in sequence from mainstream to extreme, mainstream being that which follows the norms or fashions of culture at large and extreme is that which deviates from the norm. I have organized the ethnographic material in this way to separate the specific actions of becoming modified as they are very different, however, through their separation it becomes obvious that each type of modification is essentially the same in theory. While the actions and perceptions surrounding them may be different, the reasons for becoming modified and the theories on the body fit into the same categories. Narratives from my fieldnotes are used through much of the ethnographic section to provide a reflexive description.

Chapter Five is the theoretical section of the thesis and will incorporate the ethnographic material through the use of quotes from informants and narratives in an analytical context. The theoretical section concerns identity in body modification and is divided into three main sections: individuality and group membership, an interest in the primitive, and mainstream body modification. The first will explore the concept of individuality, describing how body modification is not only used to create a unique sense of self, but also to become a group member. The use of ritual, pain, spirituality, the modern primitives, and cultural appropriation provide an insight into how notions of the primitive are used among body modifiers to glean meaning from their desires to modify their body. The section on mainstream body modification explores popular culture and consumerism to provide insight into another important aspect of body modification. As body modification becomes increasingly popular, commodification follows. This section does not reduce body modification to a fashion accessory, but links it with notions of identity. Chapter Six is the concluding chapter of this thesis where the composition of the tattoo community will be shown to reflect in the concept of history held by body modifiers. The process of becoming modified will be described as having an important social aspect which is highly organized. Cross-cultural material

and notions of the primitive will be linked to notions that the body is a source of identity. The final focus of this thesis is popular culture concerning how the marginal style reacts by becoming more extreme and pushing the medium further when their style becomes popular. Consumerism becomes linked to identity, yet the potential for change is not overlooked but expected as the dictates of fad and fashion move to the next trend.

## **II. Historical Perspective**

### **Western Tattooing and Body Modification**

*"Through adornment, the naked skin moves from the biological world to the cultural world."* (Myers 1992: 299)

The history of tattooing and body modification is important to this thesis because it reflects in the present. Tattooing and other body modifications are commonly discussed in historical and cross-cultural perspectives by body modifiers making a link to the past and to other cultures helping to provide a sense of legitimacy to their body ethic. The following is an historical background of tattooing and body modification in the West, followed by six cross-cultural examples of body modification. Their purpose is to link with present day activities, to show the development process of body modification in the West, and to complement the theoretical section of this thesis contained in chapter five. In chapter five, identity is examined concerning individuality, group membership, primitivism, and mainstream body modification.

This history of Western tattooing begins in Europe and moves to North America for the purposes of this research. Examples of historic tattoos come from various places and times: There is evidence of body marking in cave painting of human figures appearing with tattoos or scars from 5000 BCE (Thevoz 1984). In 1991 in the Austrian Alps, mountaineers discovered the frozen corpse of a prehistoric man, which has been dated to approximately 3300 BCE. His body had blue lines tattooed along his spine, feet and ankles, and one knee. Medical reasons were cited as the motive for the marks because evidence of arthritis was found in the tattooed areas (Hewitt 1997). Tattooing was practiced in pre-Christian Europe, but prohibitions nearly eliminated it among Christians (Taylor 1995). Leviticus 19:28 from the Bible is often cited as the reason for its prohibition "Yea shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print and marks upon you: I am the Lord" (King James Version).

The modern history of Polynesian tattooing and indeed the borrowing of the word from languages into English in Western culture began with the voyages of Captain James Cook in the

1760's and his encounters in the South Pacific. The Tahitian word "ta-tu" which means, "to strike" became the common term for the practice. Sailors, soldiers, and convicts were the sole groups marking themselves at this time as no one else had mingled with what were considered "primitive" people and observed their body markings. The mariner's tattoos, which they received in the islands, were on their upper arm, forearm, wrist or hands, and were explained as functional for identification in the case of drowning: initials, names, dates, words and letters. They were also, however, done for adornment. Stories of Polynesian adventures were recited and accounts were written by the sailors, who also brought tattooed natives to England and put them on display in pubs, dime museums, and fairs (Taylor 1995, Sanders 1991, Burg 1995, Sinclair 1908, Thevoz 1984, Newman 1996).

The invention of the first tattoo machine in 1891 by Professor Samuel O'Reilly enabled the artist was able to use several needles simultaneously. A new American style of tattoo was formed using strong black outlines, greater detail, and subtlety in shading. The process of becoming tattooed was made faster and less painful than the previously used hand method, which was borrowed from the Polynesians (De Mello 2000, Govenar 2000). According to Maureen Mercury (2000), at around the same time the tattoo machine was being invented, "flash" was also being developed in the United States. Flash are mass produced standard sheets of images. The images are purchased from suppliers by tattoo parlors and displayed as potential choices for the design to be tattooed on customer's bodies. This tradition of using flash designs was started by Lew Albertis, also known as "Lew the Jew" and is still commonly displayed on the walls in tattoo shops. Flash sped up the tattooing process by providing ready-made designs. (See Plate I, Photos 1-A and 1-B)

By the end of the nineteenth century, tattooing became a fad among the European aristocracy. According to Clinton Sanders (1991), Winston Churchill's mother, Lady Randolph Churchill had tattoos, as did many in the monarchy, although its acceptability as a fashionable practice was short lived. Re-established as a symbol of marginality, tattooing became a custom of criminals, prisoners, manual labourers, prostitutes and inmates in psychiatric hospitals in Britain

**EARLY FLASH SAMPLES**

*Right:*  
Photo 1-A: 1920's Flash.  
Artist: George Bigmore  
Collection of Lyle Tuttle  
Ink and Water on Paper.  
14 1/8 x 8 1/8 in.  
(Hardy 1995:94)



*Left:*  
Photo 1-B:  
1950's Flash.  
Artist: Bert Grimm  
Collection of Lyle Tuttle,  
Ink and Water  
on Paper 15 x 20 in.  
(Hardy 1995:110)



(Sanders 1989 and 1991, De Mello 1995a, Hewitt 1997, Thevoz 1984, Newman 1996). To become tattooed became equivalent to excluding oneself from society. Body marking was widely seen as a sign of moral decay. Heavily tattooed men liked to be taken for savages and to inspire reactions of awe and dread by displaying their markings proudly (Thevoz 1984). They became regular attractions at carnivals and circuses and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the sideshow spread to America with little appreciation for the cultural or social context of the images (Taylor 1995). During the 1920's and 30's, tattooed women dominated the amusement world of carnivals and stories were often concocted as explanations of their tattoo's origins (Sanders 1991, De Mello 1995b, 2000). (See Plate II, Photo 1-C) As this new type of "freak" was created and people were willing to pay to see them, a new type of occupation was created simultaneously. Also in this time period, according to Albert Parry (1933), the reason sailors, soldiers, and "thugs" became tattooed stayed constant from the time of the Polynesian voyages; so their bodies could be identified if they were killed. The aspect of group identification in the West is reported at this time as another reason for their use of tattooing. In the late 1940's and early 1950's the sideshow became outdated and old fashioned, and today have almost disappeared (De Mello 2000).

Social movements were pivotal for the present popularization of tattooing and body piercing, which began in the 1960's and 70's, as new forms of artistic media were recognized. Prior to the 1960's, tattoo art followed established patterns. The designs people had tattooed on their bodies were not original, they were from the same standardized flash displayed on the walls of tattoo shops across the country (Taylor 1995, Sanders 1989, Hewitt 1997). Customized work was rare as were multiple tattoos by the same artists. Artistic innovation in the 1960's helped to change tattooing drastically because those entering the tattoo occupation often had art school training. The potential for design was expanded and interest in the medium was generated (Taylor 1995, Govenar 1995).

Secularization and popularization of body modification are rooted in the British punk movement of the late 1970's. Early punk subculture provoked widespread condemnation and

**CIRCUS ATTRACTION**

*Below:*

Photo I-C: Tattooed Circus Lady, circa 1920

Name Unknown

(Hardy 1995:72)



moral outrage. Twenty years later it was celebrated as a pivotal cultural movement that had influenced music, fashion, design, literature, film, and aesthetic trends overall. Through tattooing with aggressive and confrontational imagery and piercing the face with large safety pins, punk was a subculture that expressed estrangement and feelings of "futurelessness" experienced by working class British youth in the 1970's. As an aesthetic response to the inability of society to meet the needs of individuals, punk constituted a form of resistance that provided a sense of self-identity, self-esteem, and community for alienated youth. All of the elements of the punk style was created by the punks themselves. They tattooed each other by hand and inserted safety pins into their faces and ears. The style seemed random and chaotic, with the brightly colored and formed hair and dark, dirty, and shabby clothing, it was consistent with their values and ethos of the subculture (Wojcik 1995, Hewitt 1997, Nordquist 1991). The punk movement moved to North America in the late 1970's, early 80's. The style was the same, but it expressed different sentiments. The North American punk movement was used to express feelings of individuality and independence among middle class youth (Nordquist 1991).

The gay pride movement of the 1980's and 90's, with help from the punk movement, made body piercing more visible. Its visibility and frequency of use has made it more acceptable to mainstream society because people have become desensitized to the medium. Previously it was practiced in private, but because of these movements, more people began to have their nipples and genitals pierced as well as visible facial and multiple ear piercings. The early 1980's also showed an increased interest in non-representational, black, graphic tattoo designs, which were adapted from non-industrial societies. However, the late 1990's showed some returning interest in the traditional flash designs of the 1940's. The many changes in styles, practices, and increased creativity have contributed to body modification's recent popularity (Taylor 1995).

Since the publication of the book *Modern Primitives* (Vale and Juno 1989) there has been a significant amount of growth in body modification. Many research participants have given this book credit for popularizing and assisting in legitimizing body modification. The word body modification has become the trendy term to encompass all forms of body alterations. It differs

from body mutilation in that it is done in aesthetic patterns for social and spiritual reasons, not because of psychosis. *Modern Primitives* shows graphic photographs and reproduces interviews with people who practice extreme modification. For example, images of full body tattoos, multiple piercings, genital piercings and tattoos, scarifications, stretched and cut body parts as well as restricted ones fill the pages. It is written in an interview format focusing on those who are known for their modifications as they explain what they are doing and why.

The internet has also contributed to the growing popularity of body modification. Increasing numbers of people in the mid to late 1990's began to use the internet. For posterity, people began creating their own websites for others to view displaying their personal body art. The many different sites dealing with body modification often use graphic photographs and include experiences and narratives. They have become increasingly popular. People receive a voyeuristic pleasure from viewing the photographs that people submit of themselves. It has become the private home viewing of the strange and exotic, resembling that of the long lost circus freak show. The sites usually have little information concerning the people who are practicing body modification and why. They are set up more as a means to shock outsiders and exhibit themselves to their peers. Membership is frequently required to view the more extreme images, but free sites are also available, which display the less potentially disturbing images. A list of popular websites is included in Appendix C of this thesis.

The anthropological perspective concerning body modification has changed over the last few decades. Before the 1970's, anthropologists rarely studied Western culture, focusing their attention on non-industrial societies. Frequently these groups studied practiced some form of body altering activity. The body alterations were studied thoroughly when encompassed in a ritual, however, when the modification was performed merely for decoration, anthropologists tended to merely provide brief accounts of the modification. Examples of this can be seen through comparing Evans Pritchard's (1968) account of Nuer scarification or Spencer and Gillan's (1927) exhaustive description of Aborigine rituals, with Margaret Mead's (1969) brief section concerning tattooing in the South Pacific. Both art and the body have rarely been the subject of

early anthropological works, but have been described as a functional part of culture. Claude Levi-Strauss (1963) is the exception as his structural analysis of primitive art contains comparisons between the design structure of several culture's body art. While Franz Boas studied Northwest Coast art, his analysis concentrated on art forms other than tattooing. Levi-Strauss and Boas were two of the few who studied art in an anthropological context in their time.

Mary Douglas and Marcel Mauss were of the two early anthropologists to study the body specifically and develop theory concerning how the body is representative of society. Mary Douglas (1966: 115) states that "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened and precarious. The body is a complex structure. The function of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals ... unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body." This idea that the body is representative of society is the basis of sociological theories concerning the body and is the underlying assumption of this thesis.

Contemporary anthropologists and sociologists like Clinton Sanders (1989), Arnold Rubin (1988), and Margo DeMello (2000) have concentrated solely on tattooing in Western contexts, providing valuable insight into the recent trends. These studies have provided functional analyses, linking tattooing in the West to tattooing in non-industrial societies in the sense that tattooing provides an emotional and social function to the individual who becomes tattooed. They have allowed people to see beyond the stigma and legitimize the reasons behind the decision to become tattooed.

The Western history of body modification outlined in this section is used, re-created, and re-defined by contemporary body modifiers in Montreal. The following is another type of historical view of body modification, only the perspective is altered. In combination with the Western history, body modifiers frequently use cross-cultural perspectives to explain and justify their actions.

## **Highlights of Cross-Cultural Body Modification**

This section highlights body modification in six different cultures across the world. It is included for two reasons: First, cross-cultural reference helps explain and to understand body modification in our own culture through providing examples and explanations of practices from other cultures. Because these types of body modifications are practiced across the world in different cultural contexts, comparisons can be made. Secondly, anthropological data concerning body modification practices are being used by body modifiers in Montreal to discover new ideas and designs as well as to find explanations for and to legitimize their own actions. Each culture in this section has been chosen based on the influence seen and spoken of among the Montreal modifiers. The information provided will be used in comparative analysis with the ethnographic data from Montreal. Data included is historical information compiled from anthropological information mostly collected in the early to mid-twentieth century because research showed that earlier anthropological works were those which were being explored by body modifiers.

Maori and Japanese tattooing, scarification among the Tiv of Nigeria and the Nuer of Sudan, penile subincision among various tribes of the Australian Aborigines and finally plastic surgery in North America will all be discussed in this section. These examples are influences among Montreal body modifiers and parallel the reasons they choose to become modified.

### **The Maori**

Polynesia is well known as having a significant influence on Western tattooing. With the exception of a few atolls, tattooing prevailed throughout Polynesia. The Maori of New Zealand are discussed in this section because they are frequently cited and described among the Montreal tattoo community as important influences in contemporary tattooing. Polynesia is often labeled as the origins of Western tattooing, ignoring the evidence of tattooing's existence in Europe before Captain Cook's voyage to the South Pacific (Flemming 2000).

The Maori are often presented as being one cohesive group, however there is a cultural divide between north and south New Zealand that is also expressed through tattoos. It is the northern group that is known for their elaborate and traditional curvilinear designs. In the south,

the designs are traditionally linear. The tools used are somewhat different as well. The northern group used two different types of tools. One was similar to others found throughout Polynesia: an adze made of bone with an arched comb-like blade, and the other was a single bladed instrument, like a chisel, that was used to make deep furrows in the skin while it deposited pigment beneath the surface of the skin. (See Plate III, Photo 1-F) The southern group used only the comb adze tool for tattooing. The chisel tool was made out of whalebone and one end was shaped like a flat knife, which was used to wipe blood away. A piece of bark cloth was sometimes used also. Both types of blades were attached to a handle at a right angle. The tattoo artists had many different tools; each used for different parts of the design, all elaborately carved. A container was made of pumice or wood to hold the pigment (Hiroa 1950, Mead 1969).

The pigment was made through an extensive process of burning the resinous heartwood of the white pine or Kauri gum in a shaft, that was dug into a small cliff creating a flue. The soot was collected and mixed with fat, sap, or juice from berries, and sometimes used "as is". Most often the pigment was kneaded into balls, wrapped in skins and kept buried for many years. A deeper shade of black resulted after an extended burial. Occasionally the pigment was refined further after being burned in the flue through being fed to a dog. The dog's feces was then kneaded and buried for an extended time, eventually to be used as tattoo pigment. The pigment was usually used over generations (Gell 1993, Hiroa 1950, Mead 1969).

The traditional technique of tattooing is similar throughout Polynesia but the designs were unique to each area. The patterns were first sketched on the body with charcoal and water. The blade was dipped into pigment and placed on the pre-traced design, then lightly tapped with a mallet, inserting the pigment below the surface of the skin. The operation was heavily ritualized. The tattooist and tattooee were considered dirty until the operation was completed. They were not allowed to touch their own food and used feeding funnels to eat. Blood was considered a sacred fluid; therefore, blood letting was believed to be dangerous. Songs were sung to help ease the pain and when finished, spells were uttered. A feast was held at the end of the operation to compensate the tattooee for the blood loss. The outcome was highly prized but

the process was highly degrading because the sacred fluid of blood had been shed (Gell 1993, Hiroa 1950).

Men were tattooed on their faces, trunk and from the knee to the thigh. Occasionally the tip of the tongue was tattooed as well. The Maori's waist to knee designs consisted of large double spirals over the buttocks with oblique linear designs on the thighs. The double spiral eventually evolved into a triple spiral through adding a third whorl (Hiroa 1950). Women were almost always tattooed, but only on their lips and chins. (See Plate III, Photos 1-D and 1-E) They were tattooed before marriage and were considered glamorous and erotically alluring. It was an advertisement for potential sexual availability.

The southern tribes used a simple series of parallel lines in groups of three or four, alternately horizontal and vertical. In the north the curvilinear style was elaborately designed for the sex and body shape of the wearer. The thigh and buttock scrolls were not varied, however facial tattoo designs used a great deal of individuality (Mead 1969). The curvilinear art was developed on the northern part of the island through wood carving and painting designs. Wood carving also influenced the technique of tattooing as a chisel was used to cut deep furrows into the skin (Hiroa 1950). The chisel was used only for the face; the rest of the body used a comb-like blade, which created a smooth surface (Gell 1993).

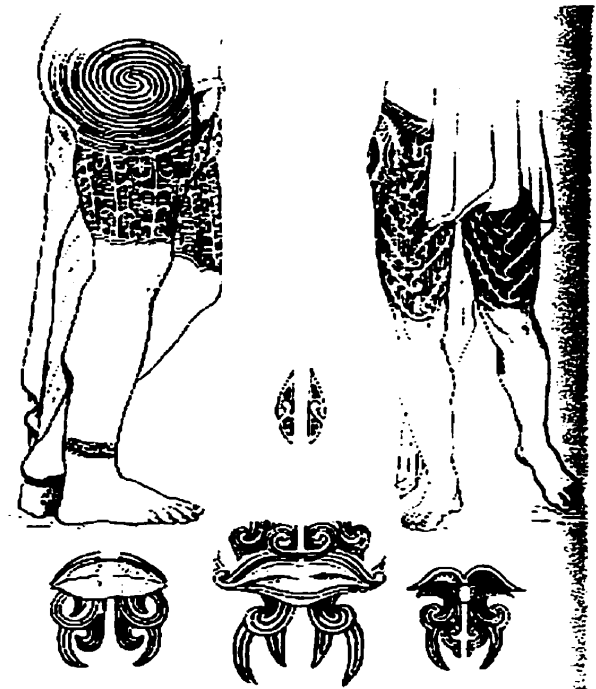
Politics and religion were present in the meaning and function of Maori tattooing, but meaning in their tattoos rested in personal adornment. Facial tattoos were probably to impress and overwhelm. In general, in the Polynesia Islands, those who had facial tattoos lived in a fragmented society and the tattoos were confrontational (Gell 1993). Tattooing was not collectively experienced and there were no initiatory associations, which suggests secular motives for becoming tattooed. According to Alfred Gell (1993), it was probably associated with a desecularization as the Maori tried to symbolically remove themselves from a daily close proximation with the gods. There are contradicting accounts in the literature concerning rank and tattoos. Margaret Mead (1969) stated that tattooing was not associated with rank, but more with war. Elsdon Best (1952) also stated that rank was not the reason for a tattoo, that it was merely



## **MAORI OF NEW ZEALAND TATTOOING**

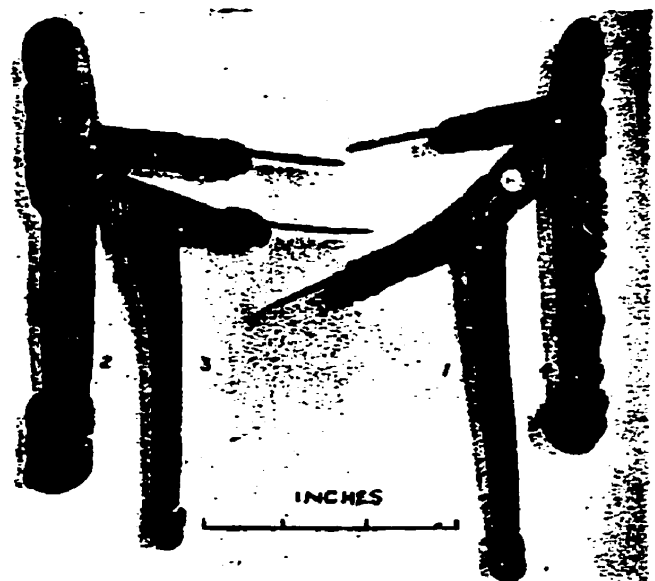


*Above left:*  
Photo I-D: Maori facial tattoo  
(Best 1952).



*Above right:*  
Photo I-E: Maori body tattoo. An  
example of placement (Best 1952).

*Right:*  
Photo I-F: Maori tattooing  
instruments (Best 1952).



decoration, however the most elaborate designs were found on important chiefs. Yet, Karl Groning (1997) labels Maori tattooing specifically as a matter of rank. Whether a sign of rank or not, the tattooist was well paid or else he would be careless with his work, which could explain this distinction. To become tattooed, one must have wealth. Gell (1993) remarked that tattoos were seen as personal valuables, which communicated social prestige. This was not because the designs conveyed messages, but because it testified to the wearer's ability to go through the pain and expense of becoming tattooed and engaging in a significant social exchange. Especially fine tattooing meant a social superiority because all men were tattooed and most women had their lips and chin tattooed. Tattooing was considered socially important which led to skilled experts who were well rewarded for their services. Each had their own style and were recruited from different tribes to work on people (Hiroa 1950).

Heads of important chiefs who had died or were killed in enemy territory were preserved. It was impossible to take the entire body home, so the head was removed, preserved, and then wept over by the widows and orphans. After contact, curio collectors created a trade in tattooed heads and because Maori's wanted European trade goods they sold not only their enemy heads, but relatives' as well. Slaves were also prepared for the trade market and decapitated often before the wounds had healed (Hiroa 1950).

Tattooing remained for quite a while after contact, the only change was the use of steel in the instruments rather than bone. Missionaries discouraged the practice with some success. By 1870 men had stopped tattooing, but women continued to have their lips and chin tattooed despite the lack of qualified artists. The lines were fuzzy and badly executed and eventually the practice stopped (Hiroa 1950). There has been a revival in recent years as people have relearned their lost tradition, but there is little information available concerning its new form.

### **Japanese Tattooing**

The Japanese influence in Western tattoo art is unquestionable, as classic imagery can be seen decorating the walls of tattoo parlors and the bodies of the artists.

Clay figurines have been dated from the Jomon period (10,000 – 300 BCE) which show possible tattoo markings, however they could also be representations of scarifications or face painting (McCallum 1988). The earliest literate record appears in the Yayoi period (300 BCE- 300 CE) in a Chinese text describing the customs and appearance of the Yayoi people. The texts state that all men, regardless of social position tattooed their faces and bodies. They were used to protect the wearer against malevolent spiritual forces, but later became merely ornamental (Hardy 1995, McCallum 1988).

In the Kofun period of 300-600 CE, there are few references to facial tattooing as a severe form of punishment for criminal offenses. A tattooed person's social position was drastically lowered because they were marked as a criminal for life. There are also a few mythical references. The years from 600-1600 CE, prior to the Edo period, contain very sporadic references to tattooing. It was still a form a punishment and also characteristic of outcasts (Hardy 1995, McCallum 1988).

During a long period of peace, the Edo period (1600-1867), tattooing developed into a complex art form along with Kabuki drama and woodblock prints. The Edo period brought a vital popular culture as all social classes took part in various artistic and literary forms. Tattooing in this period formed the basis for the tattoo in modern Japan, but it is not clear exactly how it began. Had there been an undercurrent of tattooing among the lower classes, it would not likely have been recorded. It is documented as expressions of an urban culture. A new bourgeois aristocracy set the standards for an affluent culture that spent money and indulged themselves in pleasure and entertainment, like the Kabuki theaters, restaurants, tea houses, brothels and bathhouses (Hardy 1995, McCallum 1988).

As the medium of tattooing expanded, simple characters were replaced with pictorial designs, which became larger and more elaborate as professional tattooists appeared. Most of the people who acquired tattoos were of a rowdy and macho crowd with active lifestyles: firefighters, craftsmen, palanquin carriers and rickshaw runners. The full body images consisted of dragons, Buddhist gods, and mythological heroes, taken from the delicate images of

woodblock prints. They illustrated stories and sentiments and consisted of heroic, legendary, or symbolic subjects, often the heroes found in popular literature. The prints were unaltered when placed on the back and extended over the shoulders, arms and chest as a coherent whole. The areas covered were the torso and arms, traditionally open at the front and vented under the arms to mimic the coverage of the worker's jacket of the Edo period. This was so that a coat could be left unbuttoned without the tattoo being visible. For this reason the tattoo also did not extend beyond the upper arm. (See Plate IV, Photo 1-G) Designs were chosen from the tattooist's books. Because they were traditional, the clients never requested anything unusual as the individualism prevalent in the West was, and still is, undesirable in Japan. The most significant part of the design was put on the back. The images contained elements of mainstream pictorial art and were thought to protect the wearer from spiritual forces (Hardy 1995, McCallum 1988).

The term for tattooing in Japan is "irezumi" which means literally to insert ink. Tattooists took on professional names that began with the prefix "hori" meaning to engrave or carve. This prefix implies artistry and avoids the negative connotations of the term irezumi, a word that implies a vulgarity: to insert what is interpreted as darkness (the ink), which is symbolically evil, into the skin (Hardy 1995).

The popularity of tattooing shocked the conservative military government who outlawed tattooing in 1790. The government still regarded tattooing as punishment and it was incomprehensible why anyone would purposefully mark themselves in this way. There were also laws that attempted to curb other excesses among the population. There were further bans in 1812 and 1840. While there were occasional crackdowns, the bans were not strictly enforced. The fact that prohibitions had to be continually reissued shows that they were ineffective. In fact, in 1830 there were contests with prizes for best tattoo artistry, even after the second ban was issued in 1812. Tattooing, though, was a peripheral practice and was practiced by marginal characters (Hardy 1995, McCallum 1988).

## **JAPANESE TATTOOING**

*Below:*

Photo I-G: Traditional Japanese Tattooing (McCallum  
1988: 127)



**Plate IV**

The subtle gradation of black to gray, which was derived from Sumi painting, is the most distinctive quality of Japanese tattoo art. The skillful use of shading to create tone and nuances is the most difficult aspect of tattooing. Classic Japanese work used primary subjects surrounded by fields of stylized natural forms of clouds, whirlwinds, waves and rocks. This helped shape the tattoo, to follow the lines of the body, and to give it a sense of life and movement. The framing devices were often more important than the images themselves because of the skill involved in creating them (Hardy 1995).

The late Edo Period could be considered the golden age of Japanese tattooing. In 1868, the end of feudal government saw further repression of the tattoo as Japanese authorities were concerned about their image in the eyes of the West. The Japanese did not want to be perceived as barbarians. There were more rigorous efforts to end the practice, however, tattooists were not forbidden to work on foreigners. Many foreigners were very impressed with the intricate work and received them, however, not in the full body format. According to McCallum (1998), King George V and Czar Nicolas II both received Japanese tattoos when they were heirs to the throne. Many sailors became tattooed as did marginal Japanese citizens (Hardy 1995).

After the American Occupation of Japan in 1945, the law was revoked and craftsmen were no longer harassed by authorities. But, there was no renaissance of tattooing as many traditional artisans had died and few had been trained in the old art. The same was true with other crafts, but they were considered respectable and the government gave them special designations, which included financial support and special high status (Hardy 1995, McCallum 1988). Japanese culture is based on tradition. A person follows orders, the norms of society, and does not question authority. The body in Japanese culture is an undefilable gift from one's parents and ancestors. Because tattooing is done on the body, it is inconceivable that those who wear them could have anything but marginal status, even though the images themselves are beautiful.

Eventually American imagery was incorporated into the Asian style. The 1990's brought an increase in tattoo magazines and conventions and many Japanese opened public tattoo shops (Hardy 1995).

Since the end of the Second World War, traditional Japanese tattooing has flourished throughout the world. A North American adaptation of the Japanese style began in the 1960's as people began to fit images to the shape of their body using the classic Japanese images (Hardy 1995).

The Yakuza or Japanese Mafia remains the primary wearers of the tattoo in the public's eye. When asked who in Japan wears tattoos the answer is always: "the Yakuza", but there is a large group of people who are not of the Yakuza, but are tattooed. To be different or an individual is not a desirable quality in the Japanese psyche and ideas prevail that one's body is an undefeatable gift from the ancestors and one's parents. Throughout the world, Japanese tattooing is held in high esteem and most assume that it is acceptable in Japan. In fact, the majority of Japanese reject tattooing. The artists, however, loved the medium, and kept tattooing despite public opinion and official disapproval. Most people's reaction to a tattoo is revulsion, however if the designs were not on the body the work would likely be appreciated and the tattooists would be considered great artists (Hardy 1995, McCallum 1988).

### **Scarification among the Tiv of Nigeria**

In the 1940's, the Tiv were mostly subsistence farmers and pastoralists, however some were miners and agricultural labourers. They lived in small huts in the northern provinces of Nigeria (Bohannon 1953). Cicatrization or scarification was associated with age, tribal identity and personal attractiveness. Due to the strong association of scarification with personal attractiveness and its use in popular culture, the example of the Tiv provides many parallels with the Montreal data.

The Tiv aesthetic of physical beauty assumed that people should make themselves as attractive as possible. The proof of being attractive rested in being looked at. People put oil and color on their skin, they dressed up, chipped their teeth, and incised their skin. Smoothing and

lightening the skin was given a sacred quality as well as a beauty. People smeared their bodies with camwood oil on festive occasions (Bohannan 1988, Abraham 1968) making them attractive smooth and sacred. The glistening glowing body was made more attractive through further decoration. Scarification was used to add texture and design to the body and would take decades to complete (Bohannan 1953, 1988). The scars also marked them as being Tiv, as most had them. If they traveled they were easily identified.

Innovations in instruments and scarring techniques were used to make new types of scars and designs. Combinations of these tended to mark each generation, creating an association of age with specific types of scars and designs. While the emergence of styles tended to mark and represent each generation, some men who wished to appear older would acquire a style from a previous generation. The styles of scars tended to run in fashions, some becoming popular, while others would be considered out of style. They scars did not mark lineage. Charcoal was rubbed into the wounds to create keloids, or raised scars. Larger scar tissue would form the more a wound was irritated.

Men decorated their chests, backs, arms, shoulders, necks and faces with geometric designs, animals and birds. Women scarred their backs, stomachs and legs. Women with large calves decorated them intricately, as fat calves were admired. Scarifications were common to both sexes and both showed geometrical designs and animals (Bohannan 1953, 1988).

The scars most characteristic of the Tiv were found on the bellies of women, which were cut at puberty. These scars were believed to be sexual and to promote fertility, as well as to enhance a woman's physical beauty. The scars were sensitive to the touch for a few years after being cut, thus creating erogenous zones in women. Due to these newly formed erotic areas, a woman would demand more sexual attention and was therefore likely to have more children as a result. Some scars, though, were put on the belly after a child or two was born with the intention of keeping the belly skin firm (Bohannan 1988).

Children's first scars were often on the mouth and throughout their lifetime more scars were gradually added. They began by using painted designs on their faces. As they became older



## TIV OF NIGERIA SCARIFICATION

*Below:*

Photo I-H: Facial scars among the Tiv of Nigeria (Photo by Paul Bohannan (Bohannan 1988:78))



Plate V

they prepared scar designs using temporary markings with a twig from a shase tree, which lasted 2-3 months. It was a trial run in an effort to find desirable patterns. The goal was to find a pattern that emphasized the best points of one's face. (See Plate V, Photo 1-H) Being scarred was requisite to beauty (Bohannan 1988).

After puberty, additional scars were acquired due to prompting from a spouse or lover. Experimentation was first done with painted designs and then cut into their flesh. Body modification among the Tiv also included ear piercing and tooth chipping. Both sexes had their ears pierced at an early age, between six and twelve (Bohannan 1953). Often carved pieces of horn were worn through the piercing as an ornament (Abraham 1968). Tooth chipping is a practice that had almost completely died out by the time Paul and Laura Bohannan did their fieldwork in Nigeria in the 1940's. It, however, was done to beautify the individual. A person with buck teeth may have knocked them out, filed or chiseled grooves into them. The ways in which teeth were modified also followed stylistic fashions that depended on generational trends (Bohannan 1953).

With the exception of the female stomach scars, none of the modifications were connected with any definite age, rite of passage, or status. It was based on a public opinion that found them attractive and distinctive of the Tiv. Scarification was something to be proud of.

### **Scarification Among the Nuer of Sudan, Africa**

The instance of Nuer scarification is important to discuss specifically because it is a rite of passage. This example provides a comparison with Western usage of rites of passages. There is a belief among some Montreal body modifiers that people need rituals to discover personal identity and spirituality. A discourse of rites of passages is often used to explain and legitimize their actions. Yet the Nuer had an incredible male rite of passage that was outlawed because it was deemed unnecessary and portrayed a negative image of Africa to the West.

In the 1960's the Nuer lived in huts in the open savannah that stretches along both sides of the Nile River in the Sudan. Cattle were the mainstay of their economy. The Nuer were a kin-based pastoral society. All Nuer males were initiated from boyhood to manhood through a ritual

called Garr. This ritual scarification involved the cutting of the forehead to the bone with a small knife. Six long cuts were made from ear to ear and the scars remained for life. (See Plate VI, Photo 1-J) The marks were said to be detectable on the skulls of dead men. The ritual of Garr launched boys into the age set system of manhood, which was of great social importance. Boys between the ages of 14-16 obtained consent from their fathers to become initiated. The boy was blessed and then made his own arrangements to undergo the operation. The operator, who was any man who had learned the procedure, was presented with a fishing spear. Approximately four to twelve boys had Garr performed on them at the same time. (See Plate VI, Photo 1-I) It was believed that if a boy were initiated alone he would become lonely and die. On the day of the cutting, there were festivities, sacrifices, and horseplay. Lewd songs were sung. A feast was held after the cutting, but only the age-mates of the boy's father were invited. After the operation was complete the boys lived in partial seclusion and were subject to several taboos until their wounds had healed (Evans-Pritchard 1968).

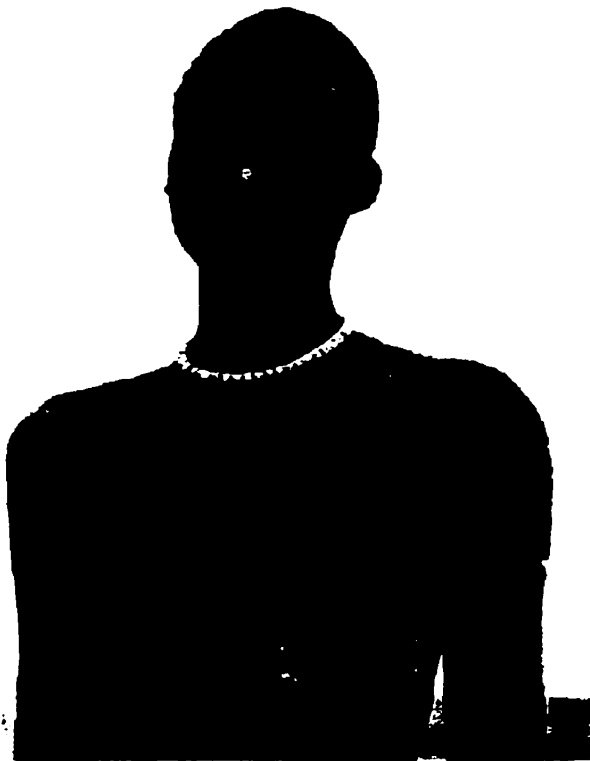
All of the boys initiated during a number of successive years, usually four, belonged to a single age set. An age set is a group of people who are initiated together into a group of individuals based on age. Each age set moves through the age grade system together. There was no specific education or moral training within the ceremony, but the boys remained in that age set for life and advanced to each level, Youth, Warrior or Elder, together (Evans-Pritchard 1968).

The boys experienced a sudden change in status from boyhood to manhood, however each set was stratified by seniority and had well defined relationships between them. Within the age set system, the position of every male was structurally defined in relation to every other male. Through the initiation the boy became integrated into the age set system and the hierarchies that were fundamental to the relations of authority among men. Taking the Garr created permanent blood bonds between the initiate, his agnatic kin, and his fellow agemates and marked the onset of the system (Evans Pritchard 1968). Taking the Garr was a submission to a social hierarchy, but it was daring and showed strength as the initiates were expected to show

## **NUER OF SUDAN SCARIFICATION**

*Right:*

Photo 1-I: Ritual rite of passage. Nuer youth receive their cuts (Evans-Pritchard 1968)



*Left:*

Photo 1-J: Nuer youth with head scars (Evans-Pritchard 1968)

Plate VI

neither fear nor pain during the ceremony. The six scars remained proof of the initiate's self-mastery and his ability to be a man: a master of himself and women (Hutchinson 1996).

In the 1980's there were debates among the politicians and local people over the ultimate significance of male initiation, the historical conditions that created it, as well as its contemporary socio-political importance. Questions like "Does manhood have to be proven or are the scars just tribal identity that was developed in a time of intertribal warfare?" were central to the debates. Arguments for and against scarification centered on issues of manhood. Those who were unscarred were said to lack manhood, and formal membership into the age sets. In the 1980's the age of Garr had been reduced to between nine to thirteen which meant that the boys had to wait a few years for puberty to take advantage of the sexual privileges allowed them. Unscarified men, however, were also taking part in courting and marriage and manhood became a matter of degree rather than a definitive status (Hutchinson 1996).

The emergence of the debates came from educated youth who rejected the scarification in order to identify themselves with other black Africans and Sudanese, rather than just the Nuer. Those who remained uninitiated straddled categories of boyhood and manhood. They were labeled "Bull Boys" and carried a liminal status. The emergence of "boy-men" provoked a society wide reassessment of the role of initiation in transferring age sets and privileges. Unscarified boys were often not taken seriously, mocked by scarred men calling them "boy". Girls sometimes refused to marry unscarified men, forcing them to submit to Garr. There were, however, some ritual adjustments to accommodate the unscarified. They were still given sacrificial meat and received their inherited herd (Hutchinson 1996).

An unscarified military commander outlawed the Garr in the Sudan in 1988 as a small unscarified and literate elite became incorporated into regional and national government institutions. Despite the decree to outlaw initiations, it still exists. The decree was made to shield future generations from the negative gaze of outsiders as well as to help undercut the tribal identity in favor of political unity. The scale of initiation has reduced and today it is mostly practiced on boys in rural areas (Hutchinson 1996).

## **Penile Subincision among the Northern, Southern, and Western Australian Aborigines**

The Australian Aborigines have several rituals concerning rites of passage, two of which will be explored here. These are male ritual rites of passage which shift a boy from a childhood state into the realm of men. Penile subincision is to be used in this section as an example of cutting to compare with Western examples of cuttings (tongue forking) as well as an example of rites of passage. The origin of the subincision ceremony is unknown, but is characteristic of tribes in the interior parts of Queensland, North and Southern Wales, Southern, Northern and Western Australia.

The male initiation ceremony occurs in three sections, beginning with painting the initiate's bodies and throwing them in the air several times to be caught by men while women dance and shout around them. The second section is the circumcision ceremony, after which is the subincision ceremony.

The complete circumcision ceremony happens over a series of days, beginning with the initiates' bodies being greased and painted with clay. They are removed from the village to a secluded location and taught the secrets of manhood, which contains many ritual actions and lasts for many days. The finale of the ceremony occurs when the boys are laid over a human table created by several men lying down on the ground on top of each other. The initiates' foreskin is removed with a sharp flake of stone. There is much ceremony and many rituals that follow the operation including body painting, singing, and dancing. These ceremonies take place in the bush and, as it concerns the secrets of manhood, women have very small parts to play (Spencer and Gillan 1927).

There are two reasons for the circumcision. It has mythical reasoning as punishment for having sexual relations with one's sisters and it shortens the penis. More importantly, it is said to symbolize the severing of the initiate's association with women. It also has a connection with birth as the newly circumcised individual is said to have just emerged from his mother. It is symbolically the cutting of the umbilical cord and the removal of the boy from the world of women (Berndt and Berndt 1964).

Approximately five to six weeks after the circumcision when the boys are completely healed, men re-assemble in the bush where the initiates have been living since their circumcision with other initiates and initiated men only. Again, there are many rites performed before the actual operation and the boys are given rules and information on their roles as males in Aboriginal society over a series of days. On the day of the subincision operation, after being ritually prepared through song, dance, and being painted with white clay, the boys are again placed over a living table. The boy is laid on top of the men and the operator sits across the boy grasping and stretching his penis. Very quickly with a stone knife the operator cuts underneath the initiates penis, from the scrotum to the tip, to open up the urethra. The boy is lifted off the men and led to a bowl over which he bleeds. Pubic tassels are tied to him and he is told there are no more operations to fear. The initiates are now admitted to the ranks of men. The blood from the bowl is emptied into a special fire. Glowing coals are removed which each boy urinates over causing steam that helps to relieve the pain from the operation. There are many food taboos and he is not allowed to lie on his stomach until his penis has completely healed or else it will heal crooked. The initiates are also not allowed to speak unless spoken to, which is not very often (Spencer and Gillan 1927, Berndt and Berndt 1964).

When the initiation is complete, some of the men who helped in training the initiates will voluntarily undergo a second operation. This is because the men consider the first subincision to be incomplete; the wound must run from the base of the penis to the tip so that the penis is wide and flat, flaring out where it was cut when erect. The wound often heals closed at the base, restoring the previous shape of the penis. An oval piece will be cut away from the entire length of the penis and thrown away. Some men will do it a third time, but most only have it done twice, the second when they are 30-35 years of age (Spencer and Gillan 1927).

When all have recovered from their operation, the body decorations are removed. When the new man is given a present of food he is then allowed to speak again. The men return to the camp, and women assemble singing and dancing, welcoming them enthusiastically. There are

many festivities. The boy is now considered an initiated tribe member, a man and a member of his totem (Spencer and Gillan 1927).

A man must experience this ceremony before he is eligible to marry and the penalty is death if he refuses (Spencer and Gillan 1927). Each tribe has variations of the same ceremonies, especially in the treatment of the expelled blood and foreskin.

There is great symbolism in the subincised penis. It not only makes the penis larger, but the words for subincision in their language also refer to the womb of the fertility mother. The subincised penis represents both the male and the female organs, which must combine to create life. The blood from the wound symbolizes menstruation and afterbirth blood; a parallel that is widely acknowledged among Aborigines (Berndt and Berndt 1964, Hiatt 1996).

Another example of cutting among the Aborigines occurs only with medicine men. There are three different ways to become a medicine man. Two are by spiritual initiation achieved through a journey to a specific cave located near Alice Springs. A spear is thrown by a spirit that pierces the tongue of the medicine man permanently leaving a hole approximately half an inch in diameter. The hole is large enough to insert the little finger. This is the only visible sign and is always present in a genuine medicine man. If the hole in his tongue heals closed, then he is not a real medicine man and cannot practice. The other way to become a medicine man is not believed to be as legitimate as through spiritual contact. A man is initiated by other medicine men through a lengthy and painful process. (Spencer and Gillan 1927, 1968).

### **Plastic Surgery in The United States of America**

Plastic surgery is important to discuss in this thesis because it is a socially sanctioned form of body modification in the Western world. It is commonly thought to be very different than the non sanctioned forms of body modifications, which are the subject of this thesis. Through a comparison of the literature on each topic, we may find that they are not so different.

Plastic surgery is something that we hear about frequently and are perhaps more familiar with than the previous examples of body modification. Cosmetic surgery has become more common in the last few decades; its increased popularity due to the decreased social stigma



attached to people who have been operated on. It is also within economic reach of middle and working class people. It is the fastest growing specialty in medicine in the United States (Synnott 1993, Hamburger 1988, Goodman 1994).

Medical journals from fifty years ago assumed that people seeking cosmetic surgery for reasons other than a trauma and disfigurement were mentally ill. These views began to change in the 1970's when doctors realized that those seeking it were not mentally deficient. People have become more accepting of those who have had plastic surgery and are more willing and able to undergo the procedures (Hamburger 1988, Goodman 1994).

Before undergoing cosmetic surgery, the patient takes the problem they have identified in their appearance to the surgeon who determines if it can be remedied and if the person is a good candidate for the operation. This is judged on the patient's reasons for wanting the surgery and their expectations of the results. If the person is determined to be emotionally stable and has realistic expectations, the surgeon will agree to the procedure. People with unrealistic expectations are noted as those wishing for a massive life change which cannot be achieved through surgery. People with a negative self-image who seek plastic surgery to change their lives are said to need psychological therapy, not surgery. Expectations cannot go beyond the physical change, but successful operations are documented as having increased the patient's self-confidence, self-esteem and self-image (Hamburger 1988). There are few who become addicted to plastic surgery and are never satisfied with the results. They travel from surgeon to surgeon and receive multiple procedures (Hall 1988).

Common procedures are breast augmentations and reductions, facelifts, chemical peels, tummy tucks, nose reshapings, collagen lip injections and liposuction. They reflect the cultural messages about what a woman and a man should look like. According to the social literature on plastic surgery, the image of the ideal woman and ideal man projected in the media can have a profound influence on those who wish to alter their appearance. People are in fact altering their bodies to more closely resemble this ideal. Younger women tend to focus on reshaping the body while older women and men focus more on the face (Synnott 1993, Goodman 1994).

It is difficult to find social information about plastic surgery that is not either condemning it or endorsing it. Much of the literature consists of critiques which either praise it as a way of taking control of one's body and making a free choice, or condemn it because of hegemonic processes that limit one's ability to choose. Feminists often remark that plastic surgery pathologizes the body, making it flawed, defective and in need of restructuring (Brush 1998).

In sum, plastic surgery in America through new medical developments in helping people who had experienced a trauma that left their appearance disfigured in World War I. It expanded to become used by the rich and famous to keep their appearance youthful and thin body in peak form (Hamburger 1988). This was generally negatively perceived and mocked by regular people and still is today when the famous people deny obvious surgeries or take the medium to the extreme. Michael Jackson is commonly cited as an example. The stigma and price of becoming altered in this way has decreased and availability of the surgeries has increased. However, the goal is to appear as though no surgery has taken place. When cosmetic surgery has become obvious, people still tend to condemn the recipient (Wilson 2000, Jenkins 1998). Women receive breast augmentations and collagen lip injections to appear more feminine and sexual. Both sexes have facelifts and chemical peels to appear younger, and tummy tucks and liposuction to have thinner bodies (Goodman 1994, Hamburger 1988), believing it will make them more attractive, the same reason the Tiv become scarified. The importance of a person's physical attractiveness in the Western world seems to be increasing. Whether it is oppressive or empowering is another thesis.

The six cross-cultural examples given in this section are used in two ways. First, cross-cultural material is used in an attempt to help demystify the "exotic". Various body modification practices have been put into cultural contexts with functions and sanctions giving them a foundation. Through explanations including context and meaning, similar practices in Montreal can be understood through a realization that it too has a context and meaning. The cross-cultural

information is paralleled with the local data and body modification in Montreal is seen in a context of a cultural practice and those who take part are not dismissed and pathologized.

These six examples are compared in order to link the problematized subject (Western body modification) with something that the reader is more familiar with ("primitive" body art and plastic surgery), provoking a new understanding. Through placing cross-cultural forms of tattooing, piercing and scarification as well as Montreal modification, in the same vein as plastic surgery, a new perspective on each is gained. This inclusion creates a unity between the many different practices with an understanding of each context. We can also understand that each body modification is essentially the same, it is the cultural context in which they exist and define them that are different.

Secondly, cross-cultural as well as historical material, have become important influences for those who are modifying their bodies in Montreal. The influences are reflected in their choice of modification and the design, location, reason for acquiring it and its personal meaning. A person may choose to become modified when they learn that many different cultures have practiced body modification with social sanctions. Their desire to mark their body is legitimized through the fact that body modification has been practiced for thousands of years around the globe. Its deviance can be shifted to acceptance through its legitimization cross-culturally and historically. These influences are apparent both practically and theoretically in contemporary body modification and will become evident as this thesis progresses.

Design and meaning among Montreal's body modification community is often derived from cross-cultural material. Through the presentation of the ethnographic material in chapter four and the theoretical section in chapter five, Montreal body modifier's understanding of cross cultural modifications, especially those concerning "the primitive", will become clearer. These concepts of cultural appropriation, and exoticization will be examined in detail as will fashion and popular culture. Cross-cultural material is an important part of body modification in Montreal and will be a constant theme throughout this thesis.

### **III. Methodology and Ethics**

The methods used in gathering information reflect on the quality and quantity of data gathered, making them an important part of this thesis (Fluerh-Lobban 1998). The following contains an outline of the methodology and a report on the ethical considerations that arose throughout the research process. This is done to ensure that information was obtained with the best intentions while causing no harm to the participants.

This project began with considerable reading on the topic of body modification. A literature review was compiled and theories addressed. Montreal was the area of choice for field study as there were a large number of tattoo and piercing studios as well as a significant population of modified individuals. Fieldwork began with the belief that I could simply choose a few tattoo and piercing studios, observe the daily activities, then ask questions in an informal manner. I chose the specific shops for my research through the area they were located in, as well as the shop owner's willingness to participate. I entered each shop and introduced myself, asking permission to do research there. Most said yes, but a few suggested I go elsewhere. After several weeks of asking permission from shops and spending some time observing the daily activities, I chose the three shops where I would spend most of my time. These three shops were chosen due to the positive fieldwork relationship that developed between myself and the tattooists and piercers employed there. (See Table 1 on page 38 - Shops A, B, and C)

Initial observations were accomplished in three shops on Ontario Street, (See Table 1 - Shops E, F, and G) but I chose shops in other areas to perform the majority of my fieldwork. This was done for two reasons; one a language barrier; and the other that these shops catered to the more popular forms of flash tattooing. Interviews were conducted in two of these shops and observations were conducted in all three. I found more variation between tattooists and those becoming tattooed in the three shops located elsewhere in the city.

While locating establishments willing to participate in my research, I realized that not only would observation be necessary, but I would require a more directed information gathering

approach. Tattoo parlors are extremely busy in the summer season, sometimes so busy that it is difficult to wedge inside, and I made a conscious effort not to disturb their daily routine or inhibit business. In the beginning, while simply observing, many expected me to conduct a formal interview. Since this was expected and the participants were willing, I conducted interviews, which allowed the tattooists and piercers to become more familiar with me and my project. I also spent many hours observing and informally interviewing clients. I arranged interviews with tattooists and piercers when it was convenient for them and observed when they were busy. To help illustrate my topic further, I took photographs of the tattooist's and piercer's own personal body art. It was very important to me that I give back copies of the photographs I took of them. This only became a problem with one participant, since I did not anticipate usage of the photos for their professional purposes. Eventually I circulated questionnaires so that I could reach more people. The participating establishments were willing to distribute them to their clients, although some more willing than others. The questionnaires were not very successful as the shops were frequently too busy to distribute them and few clients responded. (See Table 1, page 38 – Shops A, B, C, H and I)

Note taking was done during formal interviews, but not during informal ones. I discovered that writing down what is said while having a regular conversation often makes participants very uncomfortable, but during a more formal interview the notepad and pencil were expected. I made audio recordings of some interviews, but found note taking to be more than adequate. During the course of my fieldwork, by taking a few notes throughout the day, I was able to strengthen my memory and transcribe the day's events and observations in my fieldnotes.

Extreme modifiers became a part of my research due to a chance meeting with a practitioner of extreme modification, Mike<sup>1</sup>. (See Table 3, Page 40) Following this meeting I began to see body modification in a new way, not as compartmentalized actions but as a continuum from naked skin to full body alterations. An important and significant part of my research was spent with the extreme modifiers. They were quite willing to participate in my

research and to allow me to observe, take notes and photograph the projects they undertook. When an individual was about to embark on a project, I would receive a phone call inviting me to participate. I would go to various locations to watch the procedure and usually found a group of people in attendance, enjoying the experience, while offering advice to the person carrying out the body project.

I interviewed four extreme body modifiers who were participating in forms of body modification that are both acceptable and unacceptable by society. I was also able to informally interview their friends who frequently attended the modification events; most were also modified in some way. Some of the extreme body modifiers had a few tattoos, but also large brands or implants or ear lobes stretched beyond 3/4 inch, the diameter considered acceptable in society by most piercers. Aside from these four individuals, I also interviewed seven extensively tattooed and pierced individuals who are considered extreme as well. They were not participating in other forms of modification, but had gone beyond the socially acceptable limits of tattooing and piercing. I interviewed countless others who were considered mainstream body modifiers, who were participating in acceptable levels of piercing and tattooing.

The extreme body modifiers were chosen for study because they were simply too fascinating to ignore. I cannot honestly say that I chose them for study, more accurately they chose me to study them. My principal informant, Mike, was very interested in my research and frequently contacted me to watch a new procedure he was undertaking. He introduced me to several of his friends who were also practicing extreme forms of modification and were pleased to be interviewed and photographed.

While there are classifications of body modifiers, biker or jailhouse tattoos, middle class body art, and extreme body modifiers, they are difficult to adhere to. This is because they are constantly changing, due to the fashion and fad aspect of body modification. For example, a modification that is considered new and extreme, like stretched earlobes, may no longer be considered deviant, extreme, or "cool" two months later when more people can be seen on the

street with stretched earlobes. Body modification becomes easier to understand when it is regarded as a fluid gradation from popular models of modification to full body and extreme cases. Extreme and mainstream can be defined, but there are many gray areas in-between. To draw a line between extreme and mainstream would be an arbitrary line, constantly shifting. Also, it is important to realize that mainstream and extreme body modification are linked.

Meaning in body modification flows in a continuum from fashion accessory to the modern primitives search for spirituality, ritual and purpose in life. While these may seem clear-cut and extreme categories, they are not. Meaning is often created in popular forms, and extreme forms often have no meaning. Some of the extreme forms are done purely for appearance, with little or no ideology. This can be seen through the tremendous numbers of photo submissions to a popular body modification web site. Many of the photographs are obviously submitted to exhibit themselves and for shock value, the person in the photograph glorying in the spotlight. (See Appendix C for list of websites) Those who acquire a tattoo or piercing as a fashion accessory may also have great meaning attached to their modification. Meaning can also be added to an old tattoo or piercing, or taken away. There are people who attribute deep personal meaning to their small flash tattoo, while others who say there is no meaning and have many tattoos. The middle ground between the two extreme sides of body modification are subjective and depend on many different factors such as style, type of imagery, the individual, and their friends. Many with small tattoos or piercings would not link themselves with extreme modifiers, and extreme modifiers intentionally avoid being linked with the mainstream through the very nature of their practice. In essence, though, each group is doing the same thing. The difference between them is the degree of the modification and its acceptability in society. Due to the many variations, exceptions, and flexibility in body modification firm categories have not been used since they cannot be strictly followed.

This project has been laden with ethical considerations. I have had to deal with the usual issues of consent and the protection of the participant's anonymity, but due to the photographic

elements of this thesis there have been additional concerns. All photographs were taken to ensure people's faces would not be recognizable, with the exception of Mike. He clearly stated in the beginning of my research that he thought anonymity was silly and signed the consent form stating that he wanted to have his face shown, although I have since decided to protect his identity where possible.

Anonymity is difficult to secure when photographing people's original body art. The participants are identifiable through their art, despite the fact that their face is not shown. I informed them that my thesis will be published and they could be identified through their body art, but not through their faces. No one seemed concerned with this. Signed consent was obtained from each of the participants stating that permission was given to interview, photograph, and publish the material upon completion of the research.

Additional ethical problems arose with my principal informant that was a little more troubling. Because he was so interested in my research I worried about the potential that he could have been accelerating his frequency of modifications for my benefit and for his new found potential for display. Could I have been contributing to his practicing extreme body modification by giving him the push he needed to go through with the actions? I realized that he had been practicing extreme modification for quite some time before meeting me, but he appeared to be doing more since I began my research. When I first met him, he had over 20 brands and was a known brander in the city. He told me about acquiring pearl implants in his penis as well as many past non-permanent modifications, for example: dying his skin with Henna in large animal spot-like patterns, coloring his hair with permanent dye in a wide array of bright colors, and relayed to me the many plans he had of future modifications. Within the several months that I had studied him, he had forked his own tongue, began a massive tattoo project, and used a dremel to scarify his leg. However, I do not think I significantly influenced his decision to perform these modifications and have resolved this issue because I am certain that he would have done these modifications had I been there or not. I am certain of this because within the first few meetings,



Mike expressed in detail the many different body modifications he planned on undertaking within the near future.

As can be seen, there were many intense ethical questions considered throughout this research. I believe I have addressed them justly without harming the individuals who were kind enough to allow me to speak with, observe, and photograph them concerning their body art.

The final concern for this chapter is the issue of the representation of the participants, which has been a concern from the beginning of this project. I have pondered about how to ensure that I do justice to their art form as well as to their humanity without objectifying them through photography. I have tried to represent them accurately with respect to their identity, anonymity, and artistry. Because the photographs have been presented in a manner to protect their identities while still showing their body art, obviously anonymity has taken precedence. Although some participants wished to be recognizable and I respect their feelings, since my fieldwork was carried out in the same city in which it would be presented and published, I felt it unfair to expose them in that way. When the thesis is viewed as a whole, the humanity of body modification is apparent.

Another concern about representation was the fact that the photographs display bodies, some scantily clad and some naked. While my informants voluntarily disrobed for my camera and were not shy to show their bodies, I worried about how they would be viewed. The last thing I wanted this research project to become was a peep show featuring the modified naked body. I have discovered that books on body modification in the library tend to go missing or have photographic pages torn out because they are viewed in a sexual manner. I wanted to show my informants the utmost respect and therefore have kept the photographs as tasteful as possible. I hope I have succeeded in this.

This research project contains several different data collection methods: directed interviews, participant observation, and questionnaires. These methods were used to ensure a range in the type of data collected. Also, throughout this project, there was a great deal of

concern for the ethics involved in the research and representation of participants. Many issues arose throughout the entire process of the thesis: during fieldwork and still more after it was completed concerning informants directly, but also in the writing process when dealing with representation. I believe I handled these issues appropriately and ethically.

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**Table 1 – List of Tattooing and Piercing Shops Researched**

<b>Shop</b>	<b>Services Performed</b>	<b>Category of Shop</b>	<b>Number of Employees</b>	<b>People Formally Interviewed</b>	<b>Observations Conducted?</b>
<b>Shop A</b>	- Tattooing - Body Piercing	- Custom Designs - Modified Flash	2 Tattooists 3 Piercers	1 Tattooist ( <i>John</i> *) 2 Piercers ( <i>Susan, Daniel</i> ) Clients (informal) Questionnaires	Yes – Daily operations and piercing procedure
<b>Shop B</b>	- Tattooing - Body Piercing	- Custom Designs	1 Apprentice 5 Tattooists 2 Piercers	1 Apprentice ( <i>Ralph</i> ) 2 Tattooists ( <i>Marcel, Zoe</i> ) 1 Piercer ( <i>Lucy</i> ) Clients (informal) Questionnaires	Yes – Daily operations, tattooing procedure
<b>Shop C</b>	-Tattooing - Body Piercing	- Flash - Modified Flash - Some Custom Work	5 Tattooists 1 Piercer	2 Tattooists ( <i>Claude, Rachael</i> ) 1 Piercer ( <i>Don</i> ) Clients (informal) Questionnaires	Yes – Daily operations, and tattooing procedure
<b>Shop D</b>	- Body Piercing	-Specialty	2 Piercers 1 Receptionist ( <i>Lara</i> )	1 Piercer ( <i>Ken</i> )	Yes – Participant Observation
<b>Shop E</b>	- Tattooing	- Flash	unknown	1 Apprentice/ ( <i>Maurice</i> ) Tattooist Clients (informal)	Yes – Daily operations
<b>Shop F</b>	- Tattooing - Body Piercing	- Flash	unknown	1 Tattooist ( <i>Serge</i> )	One observation only
<b>Shop G</b>	- Tattooing	- Flash	unknown	none	One observation only
<b>Shop H</b>	- Tattooing - Body Piercing	- Flash	1 Tattooist 1 Piercer	1 Tattooist ( <i>Luke</i> ) 1 Piercer ( <i>Martin</i> ) Questionnaires	Yes – Daily operations, and piercing procedure
<b>Shop I</b>	- Tattooing - Body Piercing	- Flash	2 Tattooists/ Piercer 1 Receptionist	1 Tattooist/ ( <i>Joe</i> ) Piercer and his Wife ( <i>Audrey</i> ) Questionnaires Clients (informal)	Yes – Daily operations

\*All names in this thesis are pseudonyms

**Table 2 – List of Principle Interviewees**

<b>Shop</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Language Spoken Most Frequently</b>
<b>Shop A</b>	John*	Tattooist	Male	45	English
	Susan	Piercer	Female	26	English
	Daniel	Piercer (shop owner)	Male	27	English
<b>Shop B</b>	Ralph	Tattooist/ Apprentice	Male	24	French
	Marcel	Tattooist (shop owner)	Male	27	French
	Zoe	Tattooist	Female	28	English
	Lucy	Piercer	Female	29	French
<b>Shop C</b>	Claude	Tattooist (shop owner)	Male	28	French
	Don	Piercer	Male	24	English
	Rachael	Tattooist	Female	22	French
<b>Shop D</b>	Ken	Piercer (shop owner)	Male	28	English
	Lara	Receptionist	Female	27	English
<b>Shop E</b>	Maurice	Tattooist/ Apprentice	Male	24	French
<b>Shop F</b>	Serge	Tattooist	Male	22	French
<b>Shop H</b>	Luke	Tattooist	Male	25	English
	Martin	Piercer	Male	23	English
<b>Shop I</b>	Joe	Tattooist/ Piercer (shop owner)	Male	48	English
	Audrey	Receptionist	Female	46	English
	Dave	Tattooist	Male	54	English

\* Each interviewee is of European descent, with the exception of one female piercer, who is of Asian descent

**Table 3 – List of Extreme Modifiers**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Modifications</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Language</b>
<b>Mike*</b>	Male	23	Brands Forked tongue Large tattoos	Student	English
<b>Paul</b>	Male	27	Brands Implants	Computer Technician	English
<b>Ken</b>	Male	28	Piercings Tattoos Scarifications Implants	Body Piercer	English
<b>Josie</b>	Female	24	Tattoos Brands Piercings	Make-up Artist	French
<b>Guy</b>	Male	26	Brand	Machinist	French
<b>Lori</b>	Female	32	Tattoos	Natural Healer	English
<b>Steve</b>	Male	34	Ear Piercing Dremel scar	Mechanic	English

\* Each extreme modifier interviewed is of European descent

#### **IV. Body Modification in Montreal**

Field research was conducted in the downtown Montreal area. Montreal is a large metropolitan city in eastern Canada, in the province of Quebec, with a population of approximately 3.2 million in the metropolitan area, 1 million in the downtown centre (Statistics Canada 2000). The city is located on an island 50 kilometers by 17 kilometers, in the middle of the St. Lawrence River (See Maps 1, 2, and 3 in Appendix A). The province of Quebec, with a population of 7.3 million, is the only French speaking province in Canada, which frequently results in a great deal of tension, however Montreal is multi-lingual. While French and English are the two main languages spoken in Montreal, there are large groups of people whose mother tongue is neither. The tension can be felt between these two main language groups only when dealing with political and governmental matters. In everyday life, French and English speaking people live together with little tension. The businesses where I spent much of my fieldwork were bilingual. Language was never a problem. The Separatist Government (Parti Quebecois) had political power but at the time of the fieldwork, however the nationalist agenda was not central because the support was not present, although the debate continues.

Montreal is very diverse ethnically. Over 100 ethnic groups are represented and many languages are spoken. According to the "Profil Socio-Economique" (Ville de Montreal 1998) for the three electoral districts in the downtown center where fieldwork was conducted<sup>2</sup> are composed of people who speak French, English, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Chinese, Portuguese, German, Vietnamese, and Arabic, as well as many whose mother tongue was labeled "other". Montreal also has many neighborhoods that are noted by ethnicity, but these areas are not homogenous. While French culture dominates and French is the official language, there is a wide range of people and cultural activities that exist throughout the city, creating great diversity. These three districts within downtown Montreal are reported as having a population of 67,188; forty-nine percent of which is female. The area's average age is 25-34 (Ville de Montreal: Districts: 25, 26, and 38 1998).

Montreal is a fashionable, trendy city, which can be seen by observing people: many are dressed in the most recent fashions. The streets of Montreal are laced with shops selling popular new clothing styles, the latest trends in interior house design as well as other popular goods and activities. There are many nightclubs, cafes and fine restaurants, each filled with people and in the summer months the restaurants and cafes frequently spill out onto the sidewalk in what is known as "the terrace". People sit under umbrella tables in the sunshine and into the evening, sipping beverages and enjoying meals.

I was surprised to find that during the summer there is a different festival each week, all of which are attended by many Montrealers and tourists alike: (Festival of Lights, the Fringe Festival, the Film Festival, the Beer Festival, the Jazz and Blues Festival, the Just for Laughs Festival and many more). Street vendors sell their wares throughout Old Montreal, a tourist and historical area, as well as in the downtown centre. It is a high energy city at all times and the streets are never dull.

While Montreal is lively and fashionable, there are also a variety of alternative lifestyles practiced. These alternative lifestyles are not usually as visible as the mainstream because they tend to be hidden and discrete, although evidence of their existence appears in the presence of the gay village, sado-masochism clubs, swinger's clubs, raves, and visible extreme body modifiers. People who take part in these alternative lifestyles tend to remain underground as the discovery of their lifestyle could mean ostracism from society. This, of course, is not true for everyone who takes part, but for the many who live mainstream lives, but occasionally indulge in alternative lifestyles.

Montreal has a large population of people wearing tattoos and piercings and a large number that are receiving them every day. My research has not been able to discover an accurate statistic of those who are becoming modified because many people with tattoos and piercing keep them hidden. For the downtown area there are sixteen tattoo shops advertised in the 2001 phone book in an area with a population of one million<sup>3</sup>. One of the shops I researched

is not in the phone book, and I later discovered two additional ones, also unlisted. Each of the shops I visited were extremely busy, either with walk-in customers or with a full appointment schedule. While an exact number of tattooed, pierced, and otherwise modified individuals cannot be determined; it can be said that one tattoo shop for every fifty-three thousand people is a significant number supporting the industry.<sup>4</sup>

It was discovered early on through field research that body modification went far beyond the present socially acceptable forms of tattooing and body piercing to full-scale and extreme body modification. In this thesis, extreme body modification is defined as alterations done to the body which are not socially sanctioned, for example, deliberate amputations, cuttings, scarifications, implants.<sup>5</sup> Extreme body modification can also be defined as full body tattooing or extensive piercing. The numbers of people practicing the more extreme forms of modification are significantly smaller than mainstream tattooing and piercing. Mainstream body modification is defined as small easily hidden tattoos or body piercings. Imagery is deemed culturally acceptable when it is benign, like a lady-bug, a flag or "tribal" marks as opposed to skulls and daggers, they appear in small numbers, are easily hidden, or semi-permanent.

Montreal tends to have a population that is very accepting of those with multiple tattoos and piercings. Many of the interviewees remarked that while people did stare at their tattoos, piercings, and scarifications, the feelings that were taken from the experience was an appreciation of the art, not a disgust of the medium. Research showed that Montreal is a place where the limits of social acceptability in body modification are further than in most Canadian cities. Body modifiers noted that each neighborhood in Montreal had different reactions to the art, depending on how prevalent it was in that area. This will be explored in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

Research participants were all working and middle class. These classifications were based on educational level, which ranged from non-completion of high school to university degrees, and occupation, which ranged from waitress and laborer to investment advisors. Most were in their



late teens to mid twenties, but body art practitioners spoke of many older people becoming pierced and tattooed, I saw few. Many were high school, Cegep and university students. Body modifiers were mostly of European descent, speaking English or French. Tattoos tend to be worn by lighter skinned individuals because the tattoos do not show well on dark skin but body piercing is practiced by a more diverse group of ethnicities. Mainstream body modification is fairly evenly split between the genders; practitioners though were mostly male. Extreme body modification however tends to be practiced mostly, as practitioners and recipients, by male Caucasians. (See Tables 2 and 3, Pages 39 and 40)

There is great diversity among the body modifiers of Montreal. While they appear to be a homogenous group, they differ in terms of type and extent of body modification. Many had acquired small, easily hidden images and piercings in the skin, while others had full-scale, visible, and extreme modification. While those at the opposite ends of the continuum are doing the same things, modifying their bodies with the intention to decorate and make more attractive, they are however, trying to obtain a very different effect. Also, there is a range in ideas on the body, beauty, and art. There are differences in imagery and style ranging from homemade or jailhouse tattoos, to fine art and the Japanese style. They are not a cohesive group despite the assertion by many tattooists of a tattoo community. There are groups of modified people in Montreal who are not represented in this thesis, for example the biker population, street kids, inmates, and an older generation of tattooed and pierced individuals because they were inaccessible by this researcher.

The tattooists often spoke of being approached by other tattooed individuals because a commonality, friendship, or subcultural tie is assumed based on the fact that both are extensively tattooed. While this is true, people tend to approach and become friends with those who have a similar type of imagery or modification on their bodies. Their work is completed in the same shops or they acquire a similar style. Due to the formation of these smaller groups, the community of modified individuals is not homogenous. While there is variation in style, and

imagery, each type of body modification and the personal reasons for becoming modified fit into the same categories. These categories have been defined by past theorists on tattooing and are based on motivation for becoming tattooed, which has already been outlined in the Introduction.

In the next section, I will give detailed ethnographic descriptions of some of the events and actions I witnessed throughout my fieldwork with body modifiers in Montreal. The descriptions are divided into seven sections beginning with the most common and more mainstream forms of body modification and successively detailing the more extreme forms. As the ethnographic section progresses, the description and images will become more radical. These descriptions contain ethnographic descriptions, photographic images, narratives, quotes from fieldwork and some analysis. Photographs are referred to where appropriate, narratives are separated from the rest of the text in a different italicized font, and quotes from fieldwork informants will be separated in italics. These different modes of presentation are to distinguish between the different types of information gathered through field research and presented in this thesis.

### **Professional Tattooing**

*"Zebras have stripes, horses don't. A horse is a horse, a zebra is a zebra." - Ken, when asked how his modifications have changed him. (Interviewed on July 20, 2000)*

### **The Tattoo Shop**

The majority of field research was spent in five tattoo shops throughout the downtown Montreal area. Some of my research time was spent in initial observations during which I studied the daily activities in the shops and talked to clients. The rest of the time was spent interviewing tattooists and those they were tattooing, going over tattoo flash and looking through the many books they had on tattooing and body modification and talking about the images casually with tattooists, piercers, and their clients.

There is a significant range in tattoo shops; no two are exactly alike, although after walking into and out of many of those located on Ontario Street, one obtains the impression that they are not dissimilar. This is due to the fact that each have a similar layout and often have

identical flash designs on their walls. Most people who have never entered a tattoo shop are nervous about the experience and feel intimidated because they do not know what to expect. Both the tattooists and those clients who were in the shop for their first time verified this sense of fear of the tattoo shop. It is essentially a fear of the unknown. One client stated that the full coverage of the tattooist's arms was what struck her when she entered a shop for the first time.

Most of the shops open at eleven in the morning, but sometimes not until noon. They usually stay open until nine or ten in the evening. There is a waiting area out front, which usually is sterile looking and sparsely furnished, with a couch or a bench. Only one shop sold a lot of other items besides tattoos, piercings and jewelry, like clothing, sunglasses, pipes and rolling papers. Often there is music playing, usually something rather angry sounding and the loud buzz of tattoo machine is fairly constant, a sound that resembles a bumblebee buzzing in your ear. Upon entering the tattoo shop, a person is usually struck, not only with the smell of antiseptic, but with a large amount of visual stimulation. The walls are generally covered with flash, which is the term used for the designs found on the walls of tattoo parlors; designs that have been created specifically for tattoos and will tattoo well. They are usually bought through a catalogue and new images are often published in tattoo magazines. In some of the shops, the walls are so filled with flash, that the client is overwhelmed. They frequently spend a great deal of time browsing through them in search of the image they desire.

Categories of shops consist of those that only tattoo flash, those that tattoo modified flash, and shops that discourage people from acquiring flash on their bodies altogether and encourage their own designs, labeled here as custom shops. The tattooists that only tattoo flash and those that modify it have an abundance of examples of it featured on their walls. They also have books and poster racks filled with more. One of the shops on Ontario Street has so much flash that not only are the walls covered with the designs, but poster racks and the ceiling is covered as well. While this shop has the most extensive collection of flash, most have the same designs available, although there are always a few different ones in each.

Typically the custom shops have plenty of artwork displayed on the walls in the tattooing area, the public waiting areas tend to be more subtly decorated than in flash shops. Custom shops usually have scant amounts of flash, which is often kept in books, not on the walls. One custom shop has some old style flash in frames as decoration. (See Plate VII, Photo 2-B) As clients move from the waiting area into the separated tattoo rooms, they may see images on the walls of female sexuality drawn in tattoo style, usually in pin-up girl poses. Walls are most often decorated with other types of artwork such as: Japanese prints and masks, and posters from past tattoo conventions that were attended by the tattooists working there. Also present are work-in-progress custom designs drawn in pencil on a thin parchment-type paper, and pasted on the walls with masking tape. Tattoo workstations, which are spread about a large room, usually consist of two chairs and a counter top or desk. Each tattooist has his or her own area, in which they work and decorate themselves. Sometimes there are specialized chairs for the client to sit in, like a dentist's chair or masseuse's table, sometimes regular chairs. Some of the studios have private rooms for those being tattooed in private areas.

Some shops that tattoo flash, alter it in some way so that the wearer of the art will never find another person with an identical tattoo. Those that only tattoo unmodified flash are not as likely to have a portfolio of past work to show their clients. Custom shops always have a well-organized portfolio present in the storefront area. The portfolio shows the best of the artist's work, examples of their style and quality, and examples of possibilities for covering up an old unwanted tattoo with another tattoo.

Tattooing is done in a sectioned off area reserved for the tattooee and occasional friends. Few shops do not allow other people in the area to watch the process, stating sanitary reasons. The storefront is reserved for browsing through designs and waiting to be tattooed. There are a few shops in the city where the person undergoing the tattooing is seated in front of a large window overlooking the street, to allow people walking by the pleasure of observing the process.

Some of the shops work on a walk-in basis, while others work by appointment only. The appointment only shops are usually also custom shops, or the tattooist has such a good reputation that people have to book time with him well in advance. Marcel has an eight-month waiting list. The other tattooists in his shop have a two-week waiting list. The walk-in flash centered shops do not have a set rhythm, having busy and slow days. Winter is not a popular time to become tattooed, but in the summer, when people begin to take their coats off and think about wearing skimpier clothing, the shops become much busier. The weekends are usually very busy and the walk-in shops sometimes have to resort to taking appointments. Custom shops tend to have a steady daily flow of customers simply because they work solely by appointment. Their schedules do vary, depending on the size and time required to complete each tattoo. Some days the tattooist will tattoo one very large piece and another day he does several smaller pieces.

Most of the tattoo shops followed the above-mentioned patterns, which fit into the three categories of flash, modified flash, and custom shops (See Table 1, Page 35). There is one tattoo shop that did not have the same atmosphere as the others. I was frequently warned to stay away from this shop by tattooists and tattooed people alike because it has a bad reputation for cleanliness, ugly inexpensive work, and has had several hepatitis scares. Naturally, an appointment for an interview was arranged. The adequacy of their sterilization procedures cannot be commented upon as this was not the focus of study. This particular shop, however, had a most interesting setting:

It is a flash centered shop and is unique, but not in the general layout. It has the same storefront with flash covering the walls and jewelry cases for piercings, a bench to wait, and a room out back where the tattooists and piercers do their work. The difference about this place is more in the feel, and the lack of a welcoming atmosphere. While I was given repeated warnings about this place, I went in with an open mind as I was well aware of the politics between parlors, the loyalty of clients, and the rumor mill that clouds the industry and certain shops. The feel I received from this shop was strange and did not reflect in the types of warnings given to me. All

## TATTOOS



2-A



2-B



2-E



2-D



2-C

*Clockwise from top:*

Photo 2-A: A dedication tattoo done in honour of the birth of a son, Photo 2-B: 1950's style flash displayed as art in a tattoo shop, Photo 2-C: Combination of neo-tribal design and old style, Photo 2-D: 1990's appropriation of old style flash, and Photo 2-E: An old style tattoo.



*Left:*  
Photo 2-F: Combination old style, neo-tribal, and Hebrew lettering.



*Right:*  
Photo 2-G: Blackwork and neo-tribal.

*Right:*  
Photo 2-H: Blackwork arm band.



*Left and right:*  
Photos 2-I and 2-J: Blackwork



of the women I saw working there resembled "Barbie," wearing tight scant clothing and the men had a "Herb Tarlick" type appearance. None were tattooed or pierced. In the other shops, the people working there were regular looking people, meaning boy or girl-next-door types, only heavily tattooed or pierced. These shops also have photographs of their own work in books, however this place had what appeared to be magazine pin-ups of depilated female porn stars showing off their genital piercings. All of the posters were of female genital piercings and the models were in very revealing poses; nude, yet wearing high heeled leather boots and black stockings, their oversized breasts pierced. Images of male genital piercings were not to be found, nor were ears, noses, or eyebrows. I felt a little uncomfortable and alienated, but oddly, the shop was filled with female clients.

Other shops have some sexual imagery, however much less and it usually consists of caricature-like images in a tattoo style drawing. It is not nearly as graphic, and on a very different scale. The difference between this shop and the others is enormous, which shows an incredible variation between the tattoo shops, even those placed in the same category. Tattooists and piercers at each shop are greatly aware of the image the different shops portray as well as the personalities and professional conduct within them. There is usually a strange tension between each shop that goes beyond professional competition. This intriguing social phenomenon will be explored at the end of this chapter.

### **Observations: Entering the Shop**

The experience of observing in tattoo shops is always an interesting experience. Daily operations were witnessed, as well as some interesting incidents like job interviews, angry parents, and fainting spells. The people working at the shops all welcomed me and allowed me to talk to their clients.

What occurs in the tattoo shop is fairly standard. Upon entering a tattoo shop, people silently browse through the designs that are displayed, in search of the image that they will like to have etched into their skin. If they have a specific design in mind they will show it to the



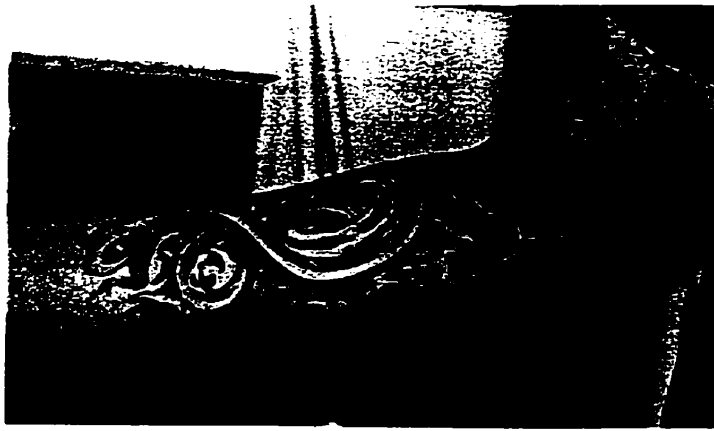
tattooist or explain and discuss it. After talking to the tattooist about the specifics, the size and the location of the tattoo they wait their turn or make an appointment for a later date. If they want flash, the tattooist enlarges or decreases the size of the image to the person's specifications. If they are getting custom work, some preliminary sketches are made and a deposit is given to ensure that the person will return. If it is a small image to be done on that date, the details are worked out then. Larger pieces take significantly more time and the person must return at a later date to approve the design.

Most people are fairly eager to talk about what they are having tattooed and why. People often speak about their thoughts on tattooing as well. While many different types of people can be found in the various tattoo parlors, few were heavily into tattooing and most were about to receive their first or second tattoo.

*"So, what are you getting?" He seemed to want to talk because he got right into it. He was going to get Chinese letters or symbols in a band around his arm. He chose symbols whose meanings were important to him. He didn't care what the specific symbol looked like because they all looked the same to him. It was each symbol's specific meaning that he was concerned with. I asked him how he chose the Chinese symbols and he said he had a few other designs picked out, but wanted the meaning they carried. He showed me in the flash the other designs he was looking at. One was a dragon, but he said it didn't suit him, and the other was a tribal band around his arm. He didn't want that because they are so common. He was really interested in having something that meant something to him. The symbols were chosen because of things that he could relate to in his personality. This was his first tattoo. – Quote from fieldnotes (June 17, 2000)*

People usually go into the tattoo shops in groups of two or more. Rarely does a person go in alone, unless they are known to the shop. Usually only one person is becoming tattooed, the others are present for support; however, occasionally groups of people get similar tattoos in a group membership dedication. One group of four men were all members in a jazz band. They were each getting different designs on their upper arms, but all with the initials of the band's name beneath it in the same font and style.

While clients spoke about the design they had chosen, they frequently made comments about other people's designs as well, particularly concerning those they did not like. They made these comments while looking through the artist's portfolio as well as books of flash. The

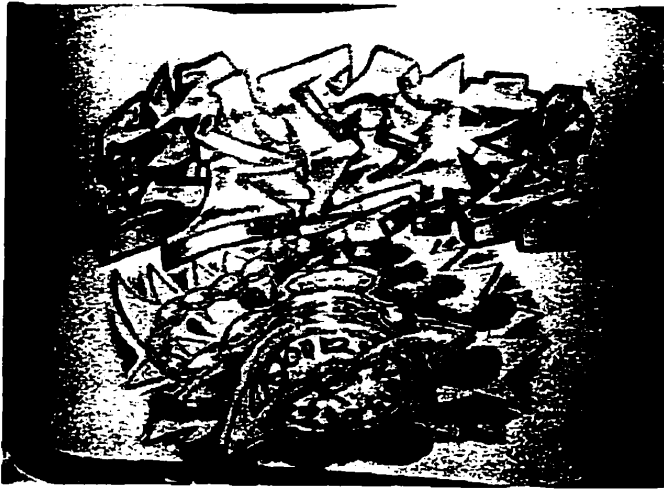


*Above and right:*  
Photos 2-K and 2-L: Japanese  
design.



*Below:*  
Photos 2-M, 2-N, and 2-O:  
(left – right) Japanese sleeves  
using a combination of  
different design styles.

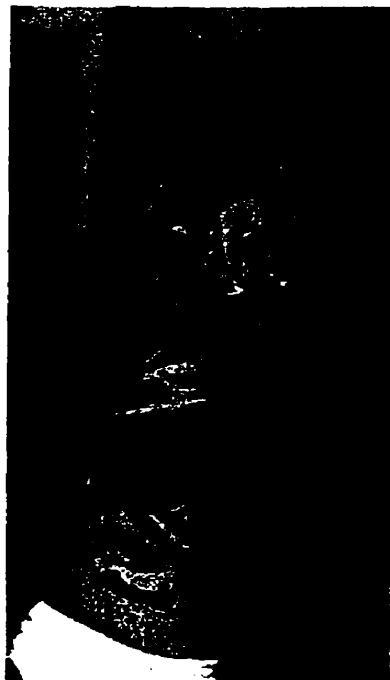




*Left and below:*  
Photos 2-P and 2-Q:  
Graffiti style tattoos.

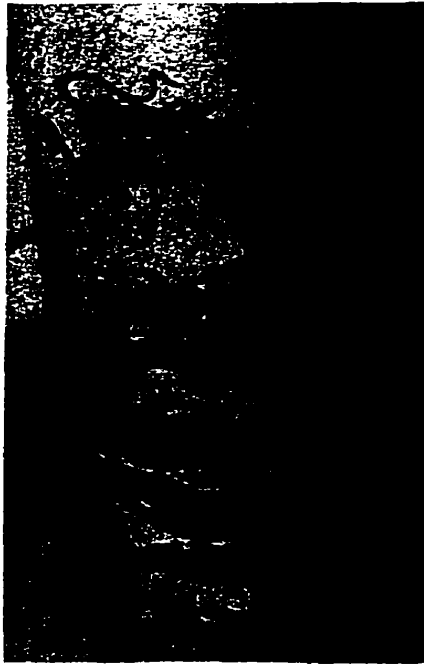


*Below:*  
Photos 2-R, 2-S, and 2-T:  
(Left - Right) Combination  
new and old style, new school,  
and new school.





2-U



2-V



2-W



2-Y



2-X

*This page:*

Photos 2-U, 2-V, 2-W, 2-X and 2-Y: Single and patchwork Flash tattoos.

Plate XI

negative comments were usually concerning large tattoos or angry imagery. They would question why people would want them on their bodies and then stress the small size of the tattoo they were receiving that day.

Repeat customers frequently spend time socializing in the shops, even when not becoming tattooed. They are often friends of the tattooist or piercer, but had met them through becoming tattooed there. They were people who are very interested in the art and enjoy socializing with like-minded individuals. All in all, people are very interested in talking about their tattoos and tattooing in general. The images on their bodies tend not to be private and meanings are usually shared as well.

### **Observations: The Process of Tattooing**

After choosing a design and finalizing the details with the tattooist, the person is led to the tattoo area. Stencils are made from the chosen drawing using transfer paper and applied to the skin. Speedstick helps the stencil stick to the skin. It must be properly aligned to the body and to any pre-existing body art so that it connects with, or covers it up properly. Occasionally additional elements of the design are worked out in marker, directly on the skin as happened in one of the observations of how a "full sleeve" was done. A sleeve is a tattoo that covers the entire arm. Each studio does things a little differently; it depended on the artist and the client. In one custom shop, for instance, Marcel is given free reign over the art. His clients are aware of his talent and allow him to create the art based on his knowledge of them. He is given ideas and they let him create something based on their body shape and personality. Trust is essential to the process.

The tattooist freshly sets up the space for each client. A sterile blue surgical cloth is laid out, fresh ink is placed into little plastic cups, as is Vaseline, which is applied to the skin as a lubricant so the needles glide comfortably across the client's skin. The tattooist wears new sterile latex gloves as he or she inserts the needles into the tattoo machine. The needles are checked with a magnifier to ensure they are level and the machine is tested to ensure it works properly

(See Plate XII, Photos 2-Za, 2-Zb, 2-Zc and Plate XIII, Photo 2-Zd and Figure 1). The tattoo machine's motor is controlled with a foot pedal. The tattoo gun vibrates making a loud buzzing sound, moving with an in and out motion, puncturing the skin inserting the ink between the dermal and epidermal layers of skin. This depth is control by the machine as well as the pressure applied by the tattooist.

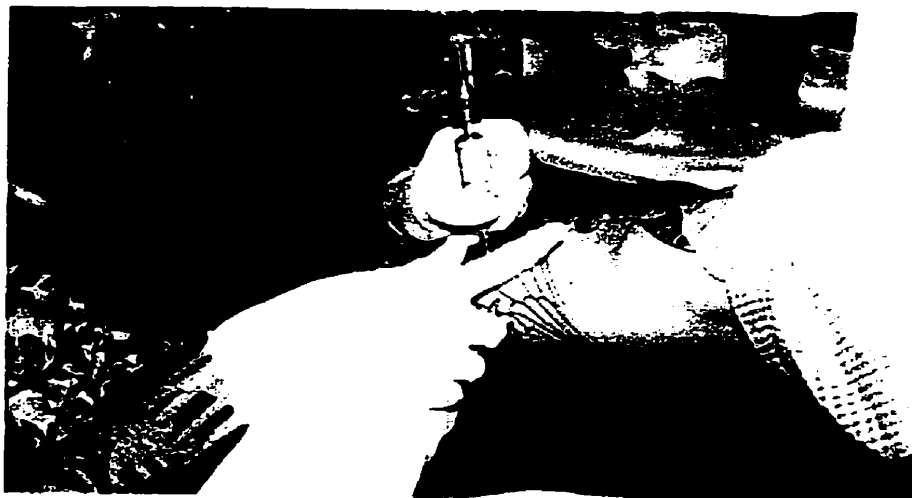
The client is seated in front of the tattooist with the body part to be tattooed exposed. The skin is cleaned, shaved and the stencil applied. The skin to be tattooed is stretched a little between the thumb and forefinger, the needles are dipped into the ink, applied to the skin. After a small portion has been tattooed the excess ink on the skin is wiped away with a tissue. The outline is always done first which means that large pieces usually require a session to be devoted entirely to the outline. In one occasion, a man was having one sleeve done by one artist and the other sleeve by another. One arm only had the outline, the other sleeve being colored in that day (See Plate XII, Photos 2-Za, 2-Zb and 2-Zc). Sleeves take a long time to complete and the wearer of the art may have an incomplete tattoo for several months. This particular man said "some people only want one person's style, but when you look at their body, it is obvious that only one person tattooed it" (Ian, August 11, 2000). He wanted to have different styles of art and because he really likes the style of each tattooist, he received both.

When the outline is complete, color is added to the interior of the design. Shading alludes to shape and texture in the design, which is accomplished by diluting the ink with water. After the tattoo is complete the area is washed, cream is applied and the tattooee looks at it in a mirror. The client is instructed concerning proper aftercare procedures and a sterile bandage is applied to the fresh tattoo. The tattooist's card is usually given; the backside often has aftercare instructions as well so they will not forget.

Most tattooists liked to talk while they were working, although a few said they were quiet and serious and simply wanted to complete the work. Marcel was very talkative while he worked. When asked if it was to ask questions while he tattooed, concerned as I did not want to



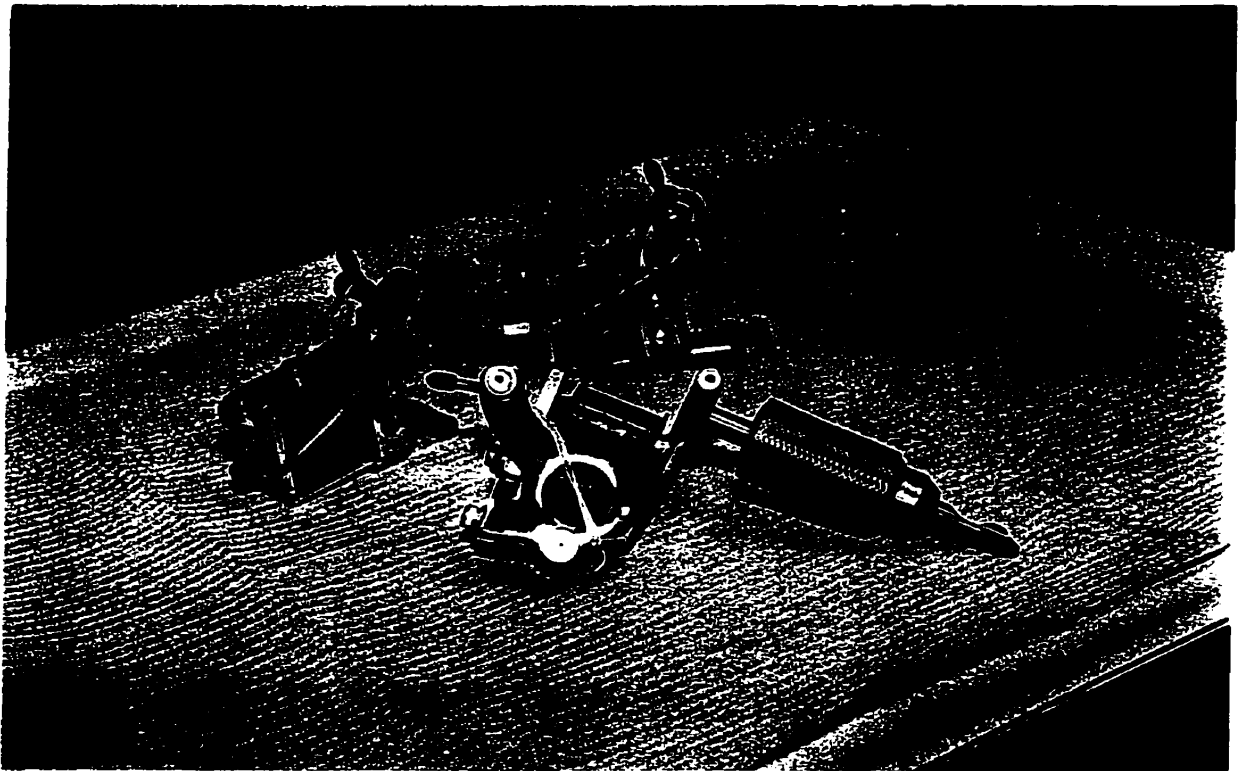
*Left:*  
Photo 2-Za: Sleeve  
tattoo in progress.  
Outline is  
complete, with  
colour still to be  
added. This  
individual is having  
two sleeves applied,  
each by a different  
artist.



*Left:*  
Photo 2-Zb:  
Additional sleeve  
tattoo in progress.  
Application of  
outline using a  
custom made stencil  
as a guide.



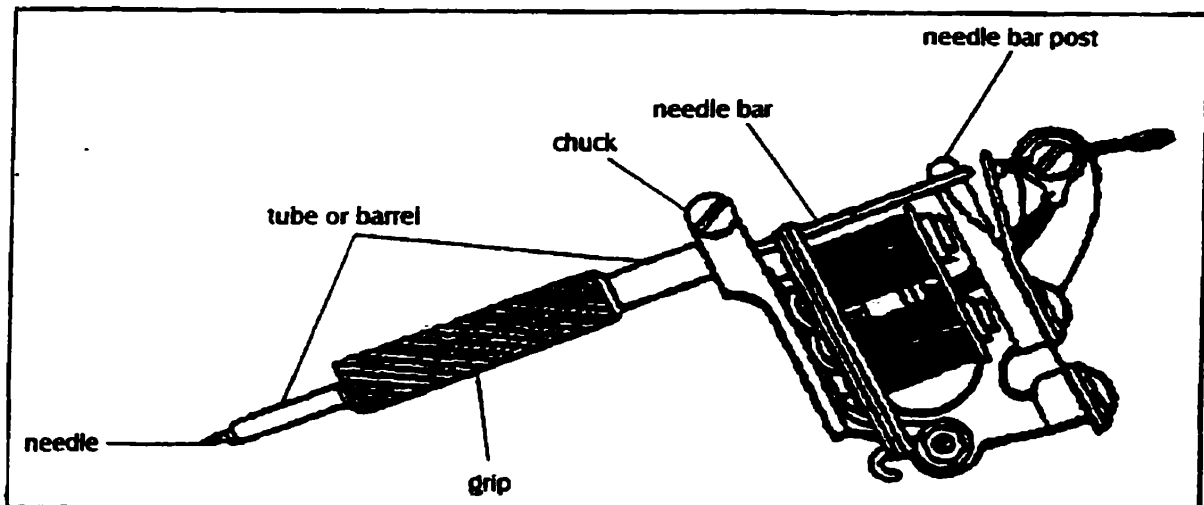
*Left:*  
Photo 2-Zc: Sleeve  
tattoo in progress.  
Colour and shading  
is being applied.



*Above:*

Photo 2-Zd: The Tattoo Machine. The three pictured here are (clockwise from bottom): The Red Stinger, the other two are Puma Quick Change. Each can hold up to 36 needles in the tube.

**Figure 1:** Diagram of a Tattoo Machine



\* Adapted with permission: Spaulding, H *Tattooing A to Z (A Guide to Successful Tattooing)* Spaulding & Rogers Mfg. Inc. 1998; 31.

(Health Canada 1999: 25)



distract him, his client answered for him: "No, He always yaks away while he is tattooing." Clients usually did a lot of talking while they were being tattooed. The tattooists learn a lot of information concerning people's personal lives. Some people like the distraction of conversation, while others enjoy silence and do not encourage talking. The tattooist has to be sensitive to the client's needs and not pry. The clients rarely ask questions about the tattooist's life, talking entirely about themselves. While people are becoming tattooed they tend to be self-focused and nervous about the pain. Talking helps to relieve the nervousness and to distract their attention from the pain.

*"When you are inflicting pain on people they seem to want to open up." – John  
(interviewed on July 12)*

Pain is always a big concern when becoming tattooed. Clients said that they tried not to think about the pain, but usually watched the process. Breathing well is very important to help tolerate the pain, and also prevents fainting. Marcel remarked that in a walk-in shop, people frequently faint because they do not really want the tattoo, they are nervous, apprehensive, and not breathing properly. Because people must wait extended periods at a custom shop, they want the tattoo a lot, are more relaxed and more prepared for the pain.

The tattooing experience in most of the shops is quite a social event. In some there is not much conversation as no one is allowed in the tattooing area except for those being tattooed. These were flash oriented shops. These types of shops have been described by several as producing "McTattoos", in which the tattooist's goal is to do as many tattoos in a day that he can, and not clutter the time with originality or conversation. A television commercial observed in another city clearly describes this concept of McTattoos. It was a short 30-second spot on the local listing channel. Photographs were shown of the people who worked there wearing uniforms: red T-shirts with the name of the shop printed over the left breast in yellow. No tattooed people were shown in the commercial, including the people working there. Their many years of experience, many satisfied customers, and handy downtown location were the marketed qualities

of this shop. Upon visiting this shop, (Shop I) the woman behind the counter remarked that the tattooist probably would not be interviewed because he did not like to talk to people. He did agree to an interview, but his wife answered most of the questions for him.

This example is a stark difference from what was experienced in most other shops. There were always many people socializing, loitering, and enjoying themselves. Occasionally people would sit around the tattooist while he worked on a client; each tattooed to some degree. They frequently shared tattoo experiences, talking about their first tattoo, favorite tattoo, and often of getting a really ugly tattoo when they were much younger and later having a better artist fix it or cover it up.

Payment is made when the tattoo is completed. Price depends on the size and complexity of the tattoo. Only one shop (Shop H) has everything priced very clearly through color-coding, however, most tattooists look at the design and the customer and then judge the price based on the time required to do the design and how much they think the person is willing to pay. Prices are rarely placed on the flash and the client must ask the tattooist. Most prices begin at approximately \$35 for a small simple design, approximately one inch in size. As the design becomes more complex or has more elements in it, the price increases to \$45 or \$50. Tattoos that are approximately three inches in size usually cost around \$100. If a client has bad body hygiene, wants work on the genitals, or an inappropriate design, the price will be inflated and the client usually refuses the quote. Custom shops price by the hour, at approximately \$100 per hour, and estimate the time beforehand.

People are often very excited when their tattoo is completed and some almost forget to pay. One mild mannered tattooist remarked that he has followed clients to their car smiling at them before they realized that they had forgotten to pay him for his work.

## **Professional Ethics**

**Sterilization and cleanliness are presently very important issues within the shops and in the public's view. Tattooists were all very concerned with sterilization issues stating clients should always ensure that the artist has changed their needles before they start their work. Marcel remarked that he would rather be tattooed by an incompetent artist but worked with sterile equipment, rather than by a great artist whose sterilization procedures were questionable.**

**Those who have never been inside a tattoo shop frequently comment on the cleanliness of the waiting area. Often though, people do not ask about the tattooist's sterilization procedures, they simply assume that because the shop looks clean, that the tattooing procedure is clean as well. He most in depth questions asked by clients about cleanliness is usually about changing needles. The possibility of cross contamination is rarely broached. Once people go through the door, they tend to overcome their bad impression of tattoo shops. This is because their impression of tattooing and the tattoo shop is often based on negative stereotypes and once they pass through the threshold, they realize the stereotypes are just that: stereotypes.**

**Most tattooists use autoclave sterilization and new needles, but there are a few differences in thoughts on sterilization and in procedure. Martin remarked that he did not need to use new needles because the autoclave sterilized everything, and showed me a certificate that proved the autoclave left no trace of anything organic behind. John said that there is no need to reuse and resterilize needles because they are not expensive to buy. He always cuts the used needles into pieces and disposes of them in a "sharps" container in front of the client so they can see for themselves that he is not reusing needles.**

**Interestingly, there are no laws or regulations governing the cleanliness of tattoo studios at the time of this research. This is most uncharacteristic in a society that is deeply concerned with cleanliness and the spread of Hepatitis B and C and AIDS. The tattooists were all appalled at the lack of regulation and were working towards a standard of cleanliness. Two had written letters to the Government of Quebec in an attempt to create a province-wide standard. The Government of Quebec has published a small pamphlet including prophylactic advice, but**

tattooists felt that it was insufficient. It provides scant information on sterilization, but states that if sterilization is not possible, to disinfect the equipment. The disinfection procedures consist of placing needles in an oven at 170 degrees Celsius for one hour, soaking them in pure bleach for five minutes, or boiling them in water for twenty minutes. This pamphlet has been reproduced in Appendix B. Health Canada has also produced a 72-page document entitled *Infection Prevention and Control Practices for Personal Services: Tattooing, Ear/Body Piercing, and Electrolysis*. This document meticulously describes proper sterilization procedures for prevention of disease transmission, but acts only as guidelines. This document is summarized in Appendix B. Susan, a body piercer, stated that when opening her tattoo and piercing studio, she contacted the Government of Quebec to request information concerning health issues and inspection. She was given none. She requested an inspection of her premises to ensure that she was following the proper guidelines and was informed that there are no guidelines and no one would inspect her shop. Another piercer and several tattooists echoed this story and the disdain for the lack of regulations in the industry.

Most studios will not tattoo anyone under the age of 18. Again, there are no laws concerning a legal age, however tattooists did not want angry parents entering their shop to yell at them for tattooing their children and therefore refused anyone under 18. If a client does not appear to be 18, proof of age is requested. Some shops request that every individual they tattoo or pierce sign a consent form, which specifies that they are 18 or older. Most said that they would tattoo an individual under this age if they had permission from their parents. A phone call is usually placed to confirm permission if the parent is not present. Some young people have tried to pass themselves off as over 18, and occasionally they succeeded, but when there is doubt in the client's age, the shops always ask for proof.

The tattoo and piercing shops have their own sense of professional ethics. These ethics revolve around sterilization, consent, age limit and what they will and will not tattoo or pierce, which will be discussed later. These ethics are not standard and vary from shop to shop. They all

tend to follow these same categories, but the sterilization procedures differ, the degree of consent varies, as does the age limit.

### **Designs, Styles, and Intensity**

The possibility for tattoo designs is almost infinite. There are a few limitations, however simply because the medium is skin. For example, lines cannot be made too close together because skin stretches and lines spread after a few years. Lines that are tattooed too close together will turn into a fuzzy blob.

There are trends in tattoo designs that change over time. Yosemite Sam was once a mainstay in a tattooist repertoire, yet today not many people are putting it on their bodies. (See Plate VII, Photo 2-C). The designs that people choose consist of a wide variety of images: from hearts and flowers to old style flash and cartoon characters. There are common or popular designs that tend to shift each year. The summer of 1999, the most popular design was a tribal style sun and the year before, Tasmanian devils and ladybugs were frequently tattooed. Old style flash, which is sometimes called "rockabilly" is becoming popular again and could be said to be making a comeback. (See Plate I, Photo 1-A, 1-B, and Plate VII, Photo 2-B, 2-C, 2-D and 2-E). There is a trend in what is called "tribal art", which has been popular for several years. The label "tribal art" combines all designs that use thick black patterns, usually abstract designs in spirals and wisps that curve with the body's shape. (See Plate VII, Photos 2-E, and Plate VIII, Photo 2-F and 2-G). Tribal designs emerged in the 1980's and are still very popular. There is not as much angry imagery being tattooed on people's bodies as is perpetuated in the stereotypes of tattooing.

The main fads at the time of this research were Chinese, Arabic and Sanskrit lettering, and Chinese dragons. The Asian characters are popular because the wearer knows what the character means but no one else does. Horror stories have been reported of people acquiring a Chinese letter on their body. The flash declares its meaning in a caption: honesty, courage, or strength. However, upon meeting an individual who can read Chinese, they discover that their

tattoo means something quite different. All of the tattooists said that they tattooed a lot of dragons because the year 2000 was the year of the dragon.

Some people obtain designs they think will look "cool", meaning people will admire them and will make a certain favorable judgment about the tattooee based on the tattoo they have. Many acquire a specific tattoo because they have seen others wearing a particular style, armbands, for example. Others decide they want a tattoo but do not have a specific image in mind. They will choose a design off the wall among the flash and have it tattooed on their skin. Some people think a great deal about the tattoo they want and where exactly it should go. They do research and think about it for a long time so they can be certain they have chosen a design that they can live with forever. In short, tattoo choice ranges from impulse purchase to fully thought out effort and choice.

Cost is sometimes a major factor in choosing a design. Some people try to bargain the price down with little success. Many believe that a tribal design is easier to tattoo and takes less time and thus should cost less; whereas a color tattoo is harder, takes longer and therefore costs more. This is untrue as the process of tattooing in any color is the same. Price is based on size and complexity. Several artists noted that people should not be stingy because "you get what you pay for. Your tattoo is for life and you should be willing to pay more for a better job." (John, June 23, 2000)

*There is a wide variety of designs just like there is a wide variety of people. People are interested in Asian culture and imagery, but it's technically North American, they are just taking on elements of Asian culture. Asian is very popular right now, fashion, cooking, and aesthetics. It is affected by fashion and fashion affects tattooing. Fashion changes, tattoos last, fashion doesn't. - Sam (interviewed July 18, 2000)*

A major trend in tattooing today is linked to the Japanese influence. Some call it Japanese tattooing, while others are very clear that it is a Japanese influence on contemporary North American tattooing, which is often called new school tattooing. New school tattooing is typically done with thick outlines and bright colors, the artists who produce this style have usually been trained specifically in drawing. In reference to the previous section on Japanese tattooing,

similar Japanese images are often used (like the orange carp, dragons, lotus' and Japanese geishas), and are connected to each other with flowing swirls representing water or wind. More traditional pieces show larger images depicting Japanese epics using the flowing swirls to complete a body suit. Some use Western imagery as the major designs, but use the theme of flowing swirls to connect the images creating a sleeve, covering their entire arm. The sleeve is the most common area, but some get this style covering their entire back. A few people are having extensive Japanese style artwork put on their bodies in the traditional Japanese body suit method. Most simply have Japanese style sleeves, but this is usually where it begins and over extended periods of time connect their sleeves with back pieces, front pieces, and cover their legs as well. (See Plate IV, Photos 1-G and Plate IX, Photo 2-K, through 2-O).

Most custom shops are very concerned with originality. They will not copy someone else's work or tattoo the same design on two people unless it is a group project. Those who choose flash are believed to be aware that one thousand other people can obtain the same design. This is why many shops encourage altering flash designs. Some people enter a tattoo shop with a photo from a tattoo magazine wanting it directly copied. For this reason, one informant said that he would never want his body art photographed. This concern for originality in body art is linked with notions of uniqueness in character. Tattoos have become symbols of a person's identity and for the tattoo to be unoriginal, or for it to be copied, devalues the tattoo. In turn, the person may no longer want their identity linked with that tattoo, and eventually alter or cover the design with another.

All of the tattooists who worked in custom shops, or who do some custom and some flash tattoos thought that it was unfortunate that most people choose flash. For lack of information, many people believe the tattoo designs (and sizes) displayed on the walls are all that is available; they are not aware of or do not understand the process therefore do not realize the potential for variation.

*People pick designs from what they have seen before because it is safe. We try to get people to go into their imagination and find the things that are important to them. If*

*someone thinks that their astrological sign is important to them than they should have it tattooed. Sometimes it comes from their values and sometimes it is just armor, for example: some very nice people get very angry imagery on their body. It's about having control over it. They pick out the imagery and see how it fits their body. It is permanent and you carry it with you until the last day so it is important to take an image that you see as important and make it yours. – Sam (Interviewed on July 18)*

Some people receive dedication pieces in honor of loved ones who are deceased as well as those who are still living. Two men were interviewed who were having tattoos done in honor of their children and one who wanted one in honor of his wife. Most tattooists discourage placing a name on people's bodies, but in the case of children and a "well-established" wife or husband, exceptions were made.

*There are different reasons people choose the designs they do. Many get it done because of the beauty in the drawing because they know it is an art form. Other reasons are marking births and deaths. Fans sometimes get the same thing as rock stars but it is not usually because they like the music it's because it's a famous guy and they know that the design is safe because everyone already likes it. It also depends on who the tattooer is. People know I like to do Asian stuff so they come to me to get Asian styles. If they know someone who does something really well, they will go to that person. – Marcel (interviewed on August 11, 2000)*

Claude said that many come in after seeing the movie "From Dusk till Dawn" and want a large tribal piece. People take images to the tattooist from comics, the internet, or sometimes things that they have a passion for. Claude commented that it is easy to tattoo those who know exactly what they want and have wanted it for a long time. Those who are unsure take more effort on the part of the tattooist, in helping them make a decision.

Generally, there are designated spots that people have in mind when they are choosing a location. Some people choose spots because they like it on someone else. For, others it depends on different things such as aesthetic reasons, to be discreet in public, or because they have a certain type of job and must keep it hidden. Men usually receive big designs on their arm and smaller ones on their shoulder. Women obtain bigger designs on their lower back and smaller designs on their shoulder or ankle. Women were said by tattooists to choose smaller designs and put them in more hidden spots than men do. A person's first tattoo was usually in a place that could be shown or hidden at will.



One extensively tattooed man stated that he regretted placing his first tattoo on his shoulder. He was completely tattooed in a Japanese style suit. This tattoo complicated the details for his back piece because covering up an old tattoo is very specific. The image must be larger and darker. He did not know then that he would eventually cover his entire body when he decided on his first tattoo.

*Men tend to choose powerful areas like the shoulder, back and chest. They want to enhance the body part. Women often choose the lower back. There aren't as many women with arm tattoos. This is generalized because people choose many different body parts, but mostly it is the lower back for women. Ankles are a female spot. More men get it at the top of their back. Those with tattoos on their legs are generally more into the lifestyle of tattooing. – Sam (Interviewed July 18, 2000)*

Only one tattooist, Luke, spoke about rebellion as a possible meaning for acquiring and placing a tattoo. Because tattooing has become popular in the last few years, people who want to separate themselves from society in this way have to go much further than in the past. If a person wants to stand out for having a tattoo, he or she has to obtain large visible pieces because small, easily hidden tattoos are no longer considered deviant. However, when a person puts big visible tattoos on their body that show in public they are said to become a party of a community. Marcel described it as a family. People with visible tattoos are thought to understand each other. There is a connection felt between them, and other tattooed people will approach them and initiate conversation in bars and on the street. They may not know each other, but they feel a connection.

This community was mentioned by several tattooists, however because research was only able to be conducted among a certain type of tattooed people, it is unclear if this community encompasses all types of visibly tattooed people. The ways in which it was discussed and through observations in the tattoo shops, the tattoo community does not incorporate all visibly tattooed people. This can be concluded from statements that disparage certain styles and flash tattoos. Margo DeMello (2000) states that this tattoo community encompasses middle class people. Excluded from "the family" are bikers and those with jailhouse tattoos. Through observations and

discussions with tattooists and tattooed people, this middle class concept of the tattoo community can be assumed.

Tattooists usually refuse to tattoo numbers on the forehead or genital tattoos. Most tattooists refuse to tattoo faces and hands because of the stigma it brings and the bad reputation that they would receive for doing such work. They would not tattoo anything that personally offended them, or was hateful. They sometimes receive strange requests that involve peculiar designs, like a peanut or a flashlight, or peculiar placement, like the ear or forehead. One strange design that Rachael executed was a straight black line down the middle of each of the client's arms. It took her two-and-a-half hours to complete.

### **Aesthetics and Meaning**

*"Those who the tattoo doesn't mean anything to them, they shouldn't be getting tattooed." – John (interviewed on June 23)*

Tattooists who did custom work regarded themselves as artists. Many of them have been trained at universities in art and have developed their own style. At the time of research, the most significant trend for custom artists was a Western adaptation of the Japanese style of tattooing; but artists have developed other styles, such as graffiti art, new school, and neo-tribal design. (See Plate VII, Photos 2-C, 2-D, 2-E; Plate IX, Photos 2-K through 2-O; and Plate X, Photos 2-P through 2-T)

Marcel, one of the tattooists who specializes in large-scale custom work, also enjoys doing small tattoos and even flash if the client really desires it. One woman waited seven months to have a two-inch flash design tattooed by him. She could have had this design done at any shop in the city, but chose to wait because she simply felt more comfortable with him than any other tattooist. In her mind, it was an experience that she would always remember and wanted it to be pleasurable. According to Marcel, the tattooist makes all the difference to the outcome of the tattoo and how the person feels about it afterwards. If he did a beautiful job, but was not very nice, the person would hate the tattoo. If he did a mediocre job, but was a great guy, the

person would love it and have good memories of the experience. While the aesthetics of tattoos is not this simple, a good rapport with the tattooist is generally desirable.

Some of the tattooists and clients interviewed believed that body art is aesthetic with little foundation of deep personal meaning. Several tattooists remarked that about half of the tattoos people acquire are simply for fashion or are an impulse purchase with no meaning behind them. Many tattoos, though, are obtained with a great deal of thought, reasoning and personal meaning. There are always a few people who ask for racist symbols or other offensive designs, but all tattooists refused to tattoo them. As previously mentioned, some people obtain dedication pieces to mark births, death, and marriages, but for the most part, people received images that they chose within the flash. The images that are chosen from the flash are sometimes described as "it just jumped out at me" or simply "I liked it". Tattooists thought that the meaning placed onto a flash tattoo could be unconscious and the design just appealed to the person. Some people, though, have long elaborate meanings and stories attached to their designs.

Marcel believes that the amount of meaning placed on a tattoo is usually reflected in the shop in which it was acquired. People are judged to go to certain shops based on how seriously they take the medium. In custom shops, most of the people took it very seriously, while those who were not considered serious about tattooing went to a flash centered tattoo shop, with very little meaning behind the tattoo. This is said to be where the impulse purchasing of tattoos takes place. Through observation, though, people were seen in all types of shops with and without meaning behind their body art.

Meaning in body modification is directly linked to the reasons for becoming modified already outlined in the introduction; to beautify, to mark events, to individuate, to identify with a group, as a healing, or as a sexual enhancement. For example, if the reason for becoming modified was to individuate, then the meaning held in that tattoo to the wearer will be centered around individuality. But again, there is a great deal of overlap as multiple reasons and meaning

tend to be combined. Meaning, though, changes over time. What may have been acquired to individuate may change meaning when others are found to have the same mark.

Aesthetics and meaning is very personal and subjective, yet it is something that is judged by the viewer of the tattoo as well as the wearer. Because tattoos send messages to the viewer, meaning is created beyond the personal sentiment attached to the design by the wearer. Also the distinctions between flash and custom tattoos and the different styles of tattoo art overall, create value in the tattoo for the viewer and the wearer. Tattoos are judged by others which can influence the meaning and value placed by the wearer.

### **Male and Female Differences**

Tattooists showed resistance in commenting on male and female differences in tattooing aside from design choice. When they did discuss it, their answers were contradictory. One said that placement and size of a tattoo was not male or female, but that it depended on whether or not the person wanted the tattoo hidden. Another tattooist at the same shop said that most gender differences were in placement and size of the tattoo. This contradiction is resolved through realization that tattooists themselves tend to be heavily tattooed. Gender differences can be seen in popular forms of tattooing which involves one or two small tattoos. When a person has become heavily tattooed, their design choices tend to be more varied. Heavily tattooed men sometimes have flowers and heavily tattooed women sometimes have dragons and daggers. This is especially true with people who have tattoos influenced by traditional Japanese imagery. My own research shows that design, placement, and size were directly affected by gender, but the differences were not present among those who were more heavily tattooed.

Women were said to want to look delicate, and men wanted to look tough, but there were always some exceptions. John does not like big tattoos on women's arms because he thinks it is harder to hide them. His belief comes from the fact that women tend to wear more sleeveless clothing than men do. John always explained the consequences to a female customer before he tattoos her arms because she will have the tattoos forever and the stigma along with

them. John also thinks that people stare at a woman with tattoos on her arms thinking: "Wow, she's a hard one." This is because a woman with a lot of tattoos is thought to be tough and manly.

Luke, a tattooist in a flash oriented shop, remarked that men obtained big pieces, and women did not. To a woman, a big piece was usually around two inches in size. Marcel noted that the response would differ depending on the type of shop this question was asked. At shops that centered on flash design, women tended to receive smaller, daintier images, however, at custom shops and shops that cater to larger pieces, people of all genders were obtaining larger pieces. While there were always exceptions, women tended to want gentler images, with thinner lines, flowers, and more space between each image. Zoe, a female tattooist, directly confirmed my hypothesis by stating that those who are not heavily into tattooing there is a big difference between genders and the type and amount of tattoos they receive. But, for those who are heavily into tattooing there are no gender distinctions. Zoe had tattooed many flowers on men and large angry images on women.

One woman, who was tattooed 10 years ago, explained that the tattooist took her into a private room, even though she was not being tattooed in a private spot. Yet the men who were being tattooed on their buttocks were not given this courtesy and were tattooed in the middle of the room in front of everyone. There was no evidence of this found in this research. Some of the tattoo areas had curtains and private rooms, but both men and women were tattooed in the open. Those obtaining a tattoo in a private area were behind a curtain, regardless of gender. The piercing sections of tattoo parlors were usually blocked off and private, but that probably had to do with the larger amount of people having private body parts pierced than tattooed.

### **Size Matters**

According to tattooists, first timers can be spotted upon entering a tattoo shop because they always ask about the pain. If it is not their first time inside the shop, they undoubtedly show the tattooist all of their tattoos. People are often at the shop, though, to have an old tattoo

altered or touched up. Many of the tattooists enjoy being shown other tattooist's work because it allows them to see the quality of work that exists throughout the city. Sam said that sometimes people are shy to show their tattoos because they are of poor quality, but keep them as is, without touching them up or altering them, because they like them or have an important meaning to them.

Most people receive small tattoos as their first one, some even saying that many wished they had received the same tattoo larger, regretting its small size. Once they have one tattoo, the possibility of wanting more is great. Many of the clients noted that becoming tattooed is addictive and it is difficult to stop at one. People who have large-scale tattoos all started with one small tattoo.

Links in style, design, or meaning between each tattoo is rare. This is often because people receive multiple small-scale tattoos interspersed about their body without planning ahead. Claude regretted the lack of links in design between each of his tattoos. He started tattooing at a very young age and got what looked good at the time without a plan concerning his next tattoo. Some people do have themes to their body art, viewing it as a whole. There are others who have devoted certain body parts to specific themes. One man stating that his arms have a religious theme and his back is done in Japanese style. People usually develop themes in their tattoos or other body art when they become serious about tattooing. People with themes tend to receive a lot of large-scale work with special concern for their body and tattoo imagery as a whole. People with multiple smaller tattoos rarely have connections between them. (See Plate VII, Photo 2-G and Plate XI, Photos 2-W and 2-X) When the person continues to receive more tattoos, they frequently fill up the holes between the images with other unconnected images. Occasionally though, a person will alter old images and connect them to new ones creating a cohesive style. (See Plate XI, Photo 2-U)

Due to the influence of the Japanese style, people have begun to want bigger pieces. The Japanese style is said to be influencing people to see their body as a whole. The patchwork

style of North America is not as common as it once was as people are having each image connected to one large image. Some people still obtain the patchwork style, but the Japanese influence is strong and popular at present.

*There is a big difference between those who get one or two small ones and those who get large pieces. It's about coverage, not numbers. Some people come in with small ones bragging about how much it hurt and then my girlfriend shows her big thigh tattoo and it shuts them up. But some like it small. Small intricate ones don't last as long, big ones look better and the way the skin moves the lines blur over time so the big ones last longer and the small ones turn into a green blur. This is why Japanese tattooing lasts a lifetime and North American tattoos get ugly and blur. – Luke (interviewed on August 29, 2000)*

In Montreal, it has become trendy to have small tattoos. This can be observed in the summer months as people begin to wear fewer clothes and many show off their tattoos. Tattooists in custom shops all remarked that tattooing was becoming fashionable and frequently objected to this trend because of its permanence. They objected to something so permanent being considered little more than a fashion statement because fashions change. This trend in small-scale tattooing has also pushed those who previously had small-scale tattoos into large-scale tattooing because they do not want to be a part of mainstream culture. A woman who was being tattooed with large-scale work confirmed this when she stated that she chose a large area and covered her armband because small armbands had become trendy.

### **Who Becomes Tattooed?**

More people are becoming tattooed than ten years ago but exactly what the proportion of tattooed versus non tattooed people is not clear because many tattoos are kept hidden. Most people's first tattoo is small and hidden, but later ones are usually much bigger and more visible. The tattooists friends were almost all tattooed, but they could not tell within the general population. Their social circle consists entirely of tattooed people. One can easily assume that everyone is tattooed when that is what he or she is exposed to. Aside from this, they tattoo more people everyday. Trying to figure out exactly what the proportion of tattooed people is in Montreal is virtually impossible. Through observation, most people who become tattooed are

between the ages of 18-30, few were over 30. Clients in tattoo shops were fairly evenly split between males and females. Tattooists, however were mostly male.

There is a great deal of variation in the types of people becoming tattooed and their ages as well as the different styles of images they choose. Few tattooists noticed similarities in types of people and the designs they choose. Ralph, an apprentice, thought that he has seen a definite link between the type of music people listen to and the tattoo styles they like. While most tattoos represent a person in some way, some are based on something seen on someone else and admired, for example Pamela Anderson's barbed wire arm band.

### **Tattooing Vs Piercing**

More information about an individual can be gleaned from a tattoo than a piercing because of the potential variety of artistry in tattooing, according to tattooists and piercers alike. The two were thought to be different worlds, but connected somehow because some people have both. Heavily pierced people frequently become tattooed, but heavily tattooed people do not usually become pierced. Susan Bensen states that "tattooing and piercing worlds are not coterminous but certainly overlap – piercing in the contemporary context has developed its own form of discourse, communication, and visibility" (2000:241). This was confirmed through interviews with tattooed and pierced individuals.

To become pierced on the face is considered very different from becoming tattooed on the face, because a piercing can be taken out and will heal but a tattoo is a mark for life. The person with a facial tattoo will always be perceived as a bad person who has either been to prison, or is a biker. Facial tattoos are seen as a sign of deviance, a purposeful mark that tells the viewer that the wearer is dangerous. None of the tattooists would do facial tattoos, fortunately people rarely ask for them. Occasionally clients asked for beauty marks, like a mole. I told one very large piercer who had multiple facial piercings, a shaved head and neck tattoos that I would like to meet someone with a facial tattoo and he immediately replied "Oh No! They're scary!" His response was based on beliefs that facial tattoos are a mark of deviance. He noted: "If you have



a facial tattoo, people will think you are a squeegee kid." Squeegee kids are homeless teenagers who offer to clean the windshields of drivers in the street for money. They are commonly criminalized. This piercer's response is very interesting because most modified individuals are very concerned with public perceptions of the modified. This man was heavily modified and has probably been discriminated against based on his body modification, yet believes that facial tattoos signify a deviant person.

### **Perceptions of Self**

*"It is only a slogan, the only difference is the tattoo." – John (interviewed on July 12, 2000)*

The tattooists were fairly united in their thoughts concerning whether or not becoming tattooed changed the way people perceived themselves: the person does not change, although they may temporarily become a little more outspoken. This is because the tattoo may give the person an initial feeling of power, but personal change is a false perception that only lasts about two weeks after acquiring a tattoo. When a person becomes tattooed, they tend to notice tattoos on people in public more than before they were tattooed. This is because they now have a tattoo and are looking for them.

*It is taking a responsibility, choosing images. It's a demanding process, it costs time and money and lots of thought. It is like a rite of passage. Because of the pain, you earn your tattoo. It grounds you and it is real. It doesn't lie if you didn't get it done right because it will show. It changes you in a sense because you are more aware, but tattooed and untattooed people are the same. – Sam (interviewed on July 18)*

Zoe commented that a tattoo changes a person's body image and can make them feel better about their body. She stated that tattooees were "claiming their body as their own", because society was not dictating to them how they should look. Rachael declared that her tattoos made her feel more like herself. Luke also reported that his tattoos made him feel better about himself and he was proud to have them. They made him want to bare his arms and he deliberately had his tattoos put in places that he could see and show at will.

### **Why Become Tattooed?**

"Why?" is always one of the first questions the untattooed ask the tattooed. Aside from: how much does it cost? These reasons for becoming tattooed tend to fall into the already defined categories by past academics. As previously outlined in the introduction, these categories are: individuality or identity, group membership, marking a life event as a personal growth experience, or as a healing, aesthetic, or for sexual reasons (DeMello 2000, Sanders 1989, Myers 1992). These reasons are often combined and changed over time. The reasons tattooists gave as explanations as to why people become tattooed fit into these categories. They stressed, though, that every individual is different and has their own reasons and ideas concerning tattooing. This is likely due to the individualistic nature of Canadian society. All of the reasons for becoming tattooing obtained through field research fit into these defined categories.

*There are many reasons. Choosing and having control and carrying images, it's powerful. Not much is certain in our consumer society, nothing lasts and tattoos make it solid, it grounds you and makes it real. Everything else can be taken away. Individuality it is always with you. You may not always like it [the design], but you did at one time. It's a powerful statement. – Sam (interviewed on July 18, 2000)*

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## THE TATTOO PARTY



*Left:*  
Photo 3-A:  
Experimentation  
begins with various  
homemade pigments  
and tattooing  
implements.

*Below:*  
Photo 3-B: The technique is perfected  
inside the areas that will subsequently be  
tattooed.



*Above:*  
Photo 3-C: Once the technique is  
perfected, people begin to arrive  
and the tattoo party begins.



*Left:*  
Photo 3-D: People observe the  
procedure and await their turn to  
take part in the night's events.

Plate XIV



*Left:* Photo 3-E:  
Initially, each individual is shown how to tattoo by the host. Each person proceeds to work for approximately two hours.



*Left:*  
The tattooee invites me to take part in the tattooing process.  
(Photo by Steve)

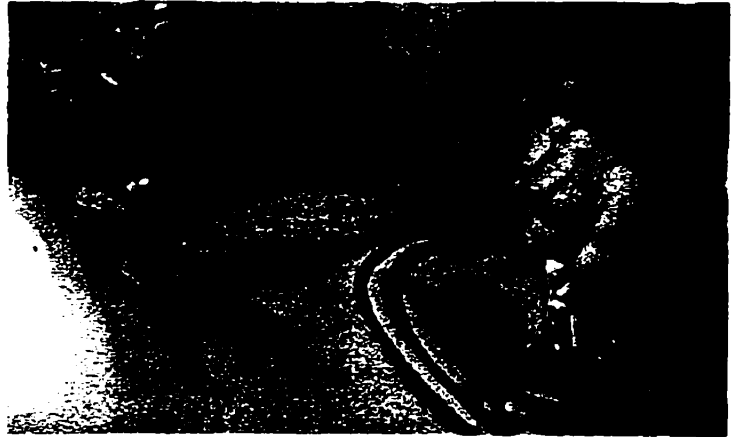


*Above:* Photo 3-G:  
The tattooist strikes the individual receiving the tattoo with the homemade instrument, which is first dipped in Chinese Calligraphy ink.

*Above:* Photo 3-H:  
The tattooee works on himself in the areas he is able to reach.

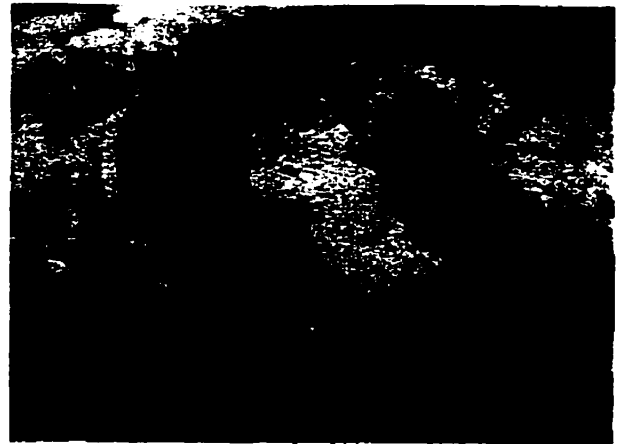
*Right:*

Photo 3-I: In order to speed up the tattooing process, two tattooists work on the individual simultaneously.



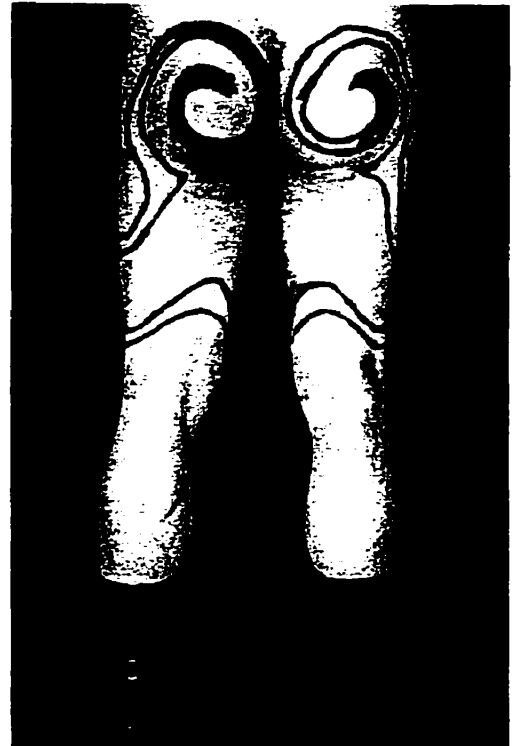
*Right:*

Photo 3-J: The individual is struck harshly with the instruments, causing lymph and blood to ooze from the wound. The process is messy and a film of ink is prevalent throughout the host's apartment.

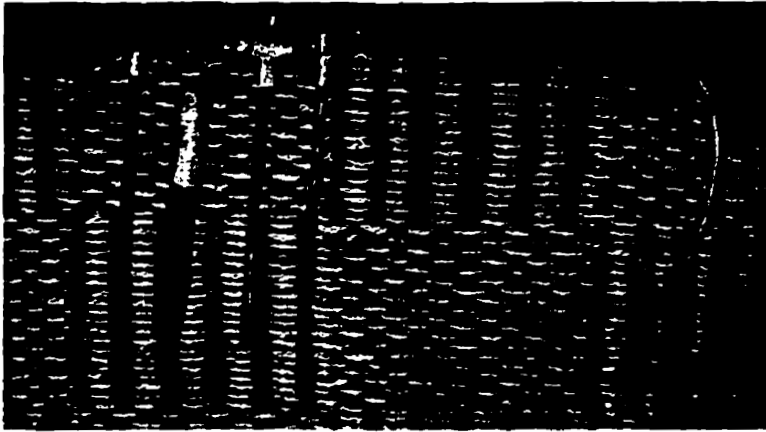


*Left and Right:*

Photos 3-K and 3-L: Work in progress upon completion of my fieldwork. An additional two months were required to complete the tattoo.



## The Evolution of the Tattooing Instrument



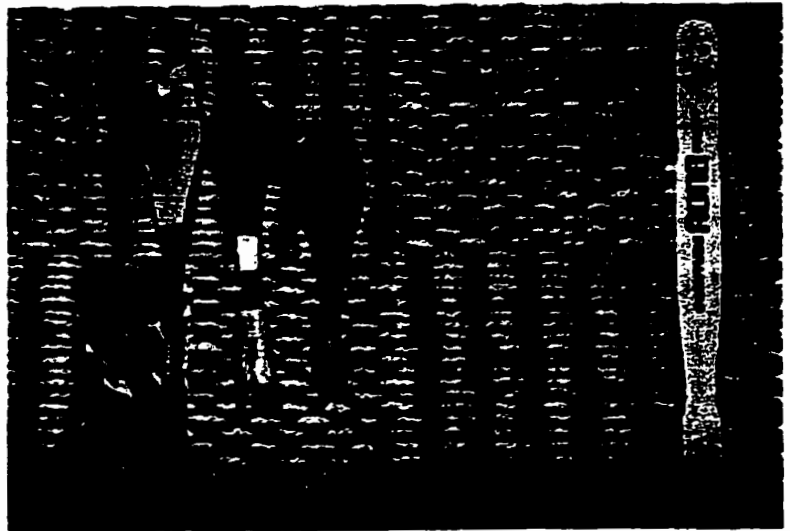
*Left:*

Photo 3-M: (Right-Left)

A sharpened bear rib, piercing needles attached to a chopstick, piercing needles attached to a chopstick at a right angle, piercing needles attached to a dowel, acupuncture needles attached to a chopstick.

*Right:*

Photo 3-N: (Left - Right) A sawed-off wooden spoon with 60 acupuncture needles attached to it in a circular pattern, a sawed-off wooden spoon with 100 acupuncture needles attached to it, a sawed-off wooden spoon with 75 acupuncture needles attached in three bundles of 25 each, a paint stir-stick with 25 acupuncture needles attached in two rows.



*Left:*

Photo 3-O: All of the materials used in the procedure. A glass of water, a film container, a marker, a seam ripper, a sponge, toilet paper, rags, ink, and a straight-edged raser are shown in addition to the above mentioned instruments.

Plate XVII

## **Body Piercing: A Personal Experience**

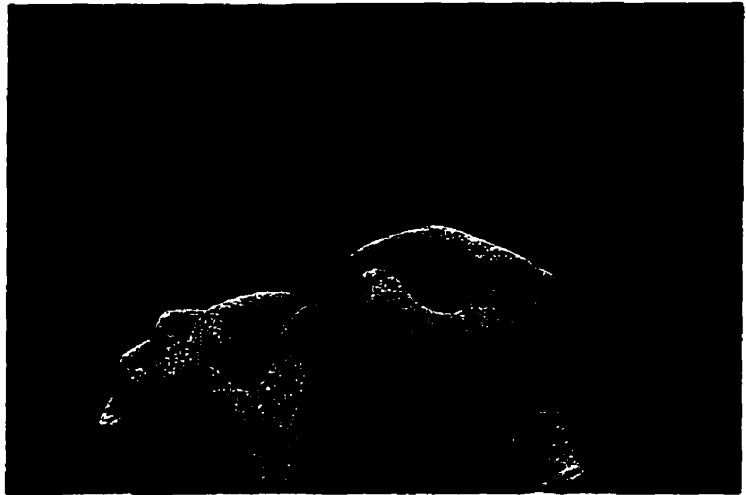
*My introduction to body piercing took place through speaking with tattooists and meeting the piercers who worked on the piercing area of each studio I visited. I had considered a piercing for myself but had doubts. "What will my Mother think? I'm too old for that! How much will it cost?" When piercing came up in conversation with other informants, one specific studio was always recommended as being "the best". As I was calling that studio for an appointment for an interview, I also made one to have my nose pierced at the same time. I impulsively resolved the doubts in my mind. I decided to use my own piercing to help me understand body piercing better through a personal experience: a participant observation. I asked two informants, Lori and Steve, to accompany me and photograph the process of my piercing. (See Plate XVIII, Photos 4-A, 4-B, and 4-C) Lori and Steve were present for several of my observations and interviews with extreme body modifiers. They also took part in conversations concerning their own body modifications and ideas concerning the body and were delighted to join me in my nose piercing adventure.*

*The studio was very neat and sterile looking. The walls were painted in pastel colors. The receptionist's desk was situated at the top of two flights of stairs in an office with a cut-out window in the wall. The hallway led past two piercing rooms to a waiting room with lavender walls, a long sectional couch, a coffee table with an interesting selection of reading material, a wonderful smelling jasmine tree, and a tall glass jewelry case. There were a few of the tall glass display cases placed throughout displaying the different types of jewelry available. There were laminated photographs and articles about body piercing on the walls. The atmosphere was much that of a doctor's office. I could see why so many people had recommended it to me as it was very welcoming.*

*Lori and I explored the studio and then Ken, the piercer, greeted and led us into the piercing room. There was a large black dentist-type chair in the middle of the room,*

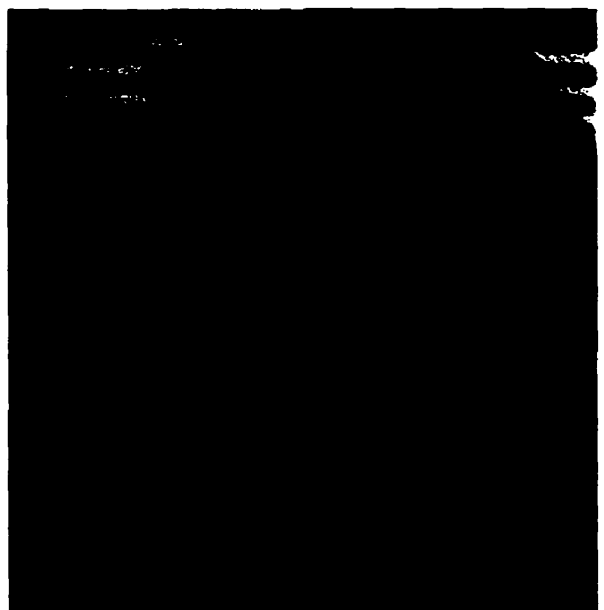
## **BODY PIERCING**

*Right:*  
Photo 4-A: Piercing needle is  
inserted into the nose.



*Left:*  
Photo 4-B: Jewellery  
insertion.

*Right:*  
Photo 4-C: Demonstration of the new  
nose piercing.



(Photos on this page by Steve)



*a small chair in the corner and another beside the large black one. There were two mirrors on different walls and a counter with many drawers underneath. It looked like the type of dresser that you would find in a doctor's office filled with tongue depressors, swabs, and medicines. Ken opened drawers and took out some tools from sterile packaging and carefully placed them on a blue drop sheet. The tools he placed on the drop cloth were some strange looking pliers, some swabs and some gauze. Ken set up the area so all of his tools were within easy reach of the chair I was seated in. He cleaned my nose inside and out with an antiseptic solution and then marked the place where I would be pierced with a small red dot. I checked in the mirror to confirm the placement of the mark, which was good, and then Ken had me choose the jewelry I would wear. This was not an easy task as the choice was great, but I opted for a white gold diamond stud. I sat down in the big black chair in the middle of the piercing room and Steve, got the camera ready.*

*Everyone chatted while Ken prepared the diamond stud, which was frighteningly long. It had to be coiled in order to fit the inside of my nose. Ken sized my nostril and then bent the long stem with the pliers so it would properly fit my nose. He said that the stud had to go through my nose while coiled. I could not imagine the logistics of this, but trusted he knew what he was doing.*

*He was finally ready. In a bit of a panic I grabbed for Lori's hand and grasped the arm of the large black chair with the other. I needed a feeling of security, of being grounded as I sat waiting for Ken to pierce my nose. After telling me to take a deep breath in, Ken inserted the needle into my nose as I exhaled. I felt a sharp pain and let out a little "Ow". A tear rolled down my face. Ken assured me that the pain would go away soon. The pain stopped as soon as the stud was inserted in place of the needle. I did not even see how the coiled stud was inserted through the fresh wound in my left nostril. Ken wiped a little blood away and Steve took a picture of me with the tear*

*running down my face. The sharp pain had made my eye water, but it was over in seconds.*

*When it was all over, I could feel the long coiled stud on the inside of my nose. It was a strange new sensation that I would have to become accustomed. Ken used his gloved finger to adjust the coil and explained how it was situated on the inside my nose. He then gave me instructions on how I must care for the wound.*

*Having several people present made the experience very enjoyable as there was a great deal of socialization. After becoming pierced, I had a strange awareness of my nose, which lasted for approximately three days. I cleaned my new piercing as I was instructed, was not plagued with any form of infection and am still enjoying my piercing to date. My family accepted my facial piercing fairly quickly after realizing that it was a small stud in the side of my nose and not a giant ring through my septum.*

### **Discussions with Piercers**

Body Piercing has become more and more popular in the past ten to fifteen years. In North America, it used to be risqué to have an ear piercing, but in the last 40-50 years this has become almost the norm. With the punk movement in the 70's and 80's, and the gay movement of the 80's and 90's, other forms of body piercing have been forced into the spotlight and adopted by popular culture. While body piercing tends to be popular among younger groups of people aged 16-25, most of the piercing studios claimed to have an extensive clientele of people aged 30 and over receiving piercings that are not visible to the public. Some even have clients in their 60's and 70's who are usually repeat customers. There is a wonderful range in types of people becoming pierced: young, old, professional, mother-daughter combinations on a body piercing bonding expedition, and couples.

Younger people are having visible body parts pierced. The most popular are navels, tongues, noses, eyebrows, and ears. More and more people are getting what is called "ear projects". These are either stretched earlobes or numerous cartilage piercings. Lobe stretching is

not expected to become popular, but has increased in frequency in the last few years. Most are doing smaller stretches, usually around 3/8 of an inch in diameter. The jewelry worn is usually small plugs which look like a large round chunk of wood or plastic, some have a hole in the middle like a gramut and some are solid. (See Plate XIX, Photo 4-D and 4-E)

There is an even gender split according to the particular type of piercing being done. Navel piercings are generally female, but eyebrows, tongues, noses, labrets and ears are gender neutral. Martin stated that women want smaller jewelry and men are not as picky. Each specific piercing is different. Hollow needles are used to pierce the skin but something is needed to stabilize the skin on the other side, sometimes cork is used. The jewelry directly follows the needle through the skin. Piercing guns are not used as they are dangerous when used for anything other than earlobes because they can crush tissue and inhibit healing.

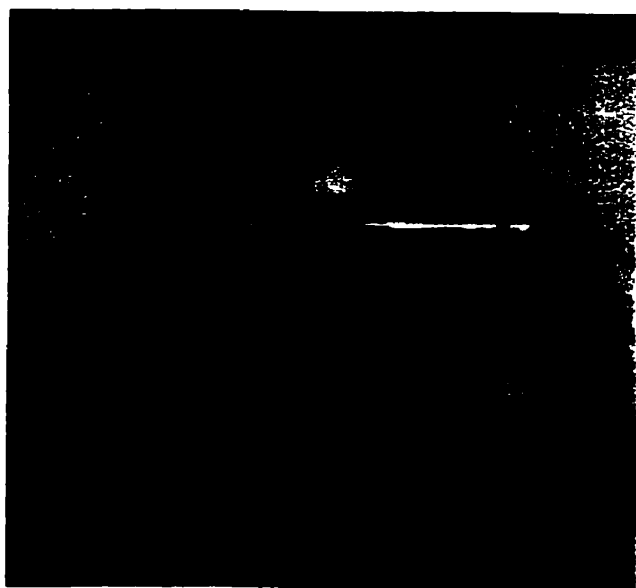
The type of jewelry used is very specific to the piercing. The shape of the jewelry also depends on the type of piercing and there are certain recommended thicknesses (or gauge) for different piercings and they differ widely. Genital piercing uses a fairly thick gauge of jewelry, noses use a thinner gauge and ears even thinner. The higher the number of the gauge the thinner the diameter. Thicker gauges are used for body parts that experience more activity. This is because if pulled, thin gauged jewelry can act as a cheese wire, cutting through the skin, whereas a thicker gauge will hold. There are, of course, jewelry design elements where the metal is changed as is the decorative part of the jewelry, the ball, and the color. Most of the jewelry is surgical stainless steel, but is also available in of gold, platinum, and titanium. Silver is never used.

The many display cases in the piercing studios show a range in jewelry that is almost infinite. It depends on the type of piercing involved and on the studio itself, though. Some studios have an incredible selection, but also offer the option of custom-made jewelry. The smaller combination piercing and tattooing studios offer less choice. There are also fairly large differences in price between the two types of studios.



*Left:*  
Photo 4-D: Ear project  
consisting of stretched ear lobe  
and two cartilage piercings.

*Below:*  
Photo 4-E: Stretched ear lobe  
displaying weighted jewelery, as  
well as a nose piercing and a  
screw being worn as a labret.



*Left:*  
Photo 4-F: Septum pierce.

The cost of a piercing varies depending on both the studio and the jewelry. A piercing can be purchased for approximately \$50 - \$60 in combination tattoo and piercing studios depending on the location of the piercing and the type of jewelry purchased. In a specialized piercing studio, the average price of a piercing is approximately \$100. The price is divided into the price of the piercing itself at \$55, and the cost of the jewelry is added to this base price.

Most people ask for the standard piercings: belly buttons, eyebrows, tongues, noses, lips, and ears. (See Plate XIX, Photos 4-D, 4-E and 4-F) People will, however, ask for a piercing on any skin surface of the body. Piercings that will not heal well are considered strange by piercers and are considered not worth having. Surface piercings, which are piercings on a flat area of skin, have very low success rates and are usually rejected by the body. Rejection occurs when the piercing is pushed out of the body through the healing of the skin. This usually takes approximately six months and the person will be left with a small scar. A surface piercing is pushed out of the body because the jewelry does not have enough flesh to hold it in place. The body simply recognizes a foreign object inside the skin and pushes it out through the healing process. When the piercing is through a solid piece of flesh, like an earlobe, nipple, or a tongue, the body accepts the jewelry easier and has a harder time pushing it out.

*I've had people ask for it between their toes, in the middle of their forehead. It is not that we won't do them, we will strongly discourage it. We also do that to absolve ourselves of the risk that comes with it. I really believe in informing people and giving them all the details of what they are getting themselves in to. With a tongue piercing, they have the highest success rate, there is nothing to tell people. Just do what we say and you will be fine. There's not really much of a risk. Don't bite the jewelry, you'll break a tooth, other than that there is nothing to worry about. Why would I want to sell you something that probably won't work and probably will leave you with a nice scar? That's not my job so I try and discourage it. – Ken (interviewed on July 20, 2000)*

Most piercers occasionally receive strange requests. People have asked for piercings in the web between their thumb and forefinger, the back of the neck, the calf of their leg, elbows, knees and just about every inch of flesh possible. When faced with a customer asking for a high-risk piercing, piercers will try to convince them to do something less dangerous.

People tend to go to specialized piercing studios for genital work. Genital piercings are usually done for sensory enhancement, appearance, and sometimes for bondage and weight bearing.

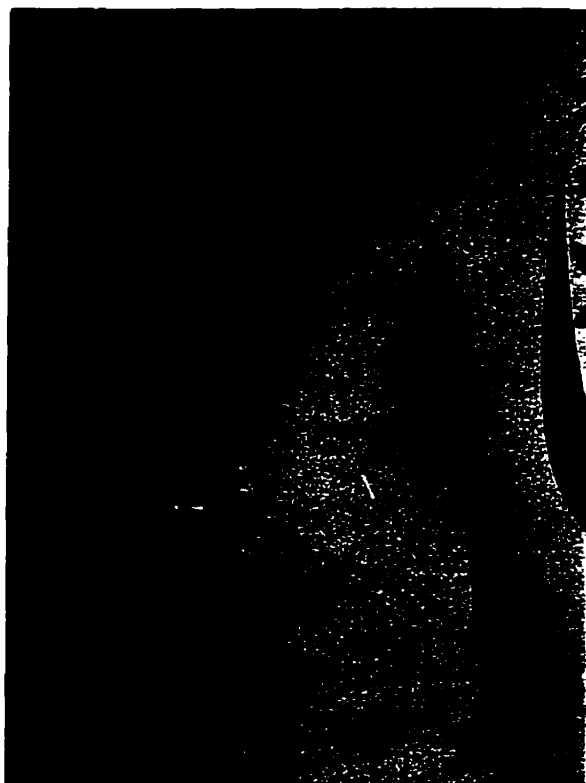
*I don't think that most piercing studios do very many genital piercings. A lot of them are weird about doing it. By weird I mean perhaps if it's a male piercer they would prefer to do really easy female genital work so they can have women get undressed in front of them and then they refuse to do male piercing or charge ridiculous prices for it because they are not comfortable touching male genitals. I hear stories like this constantly, so they don't do it or are weird about doing it or do less. I think that people who do genital piercings think about it more than people who are getting ear or nose piercings for example. They think about where they are going why they are going. – Ken (interviewed on July 20, 2000)*

The piercers who worked in combination piercing and tattoo studios confirmed that genital work is usually done by in studios that specialize in piercing. They simply stated that they do very few genital piercings, whereas the specialty piercing studio stated that they did many genital piercings. The politics of having someone undress is the only difference between genital and any other type of piercing. This can, however, be a big factor. Genital piercings tend to heal faster and have a lower risk of infections because of the larger amount of blood vessels in the area. The piercer, however, must know the anatomy specific to the area as well as the method of treatment. For example, rubbing alcohol should never be placed on someone's genitals because it is painful, but rubbing alcohol can be used on someone's nipple because it will not sting or burn. (See Plate XX, Photos 4-G, 4-H, and 4-I)

### **Learning to Pierce**

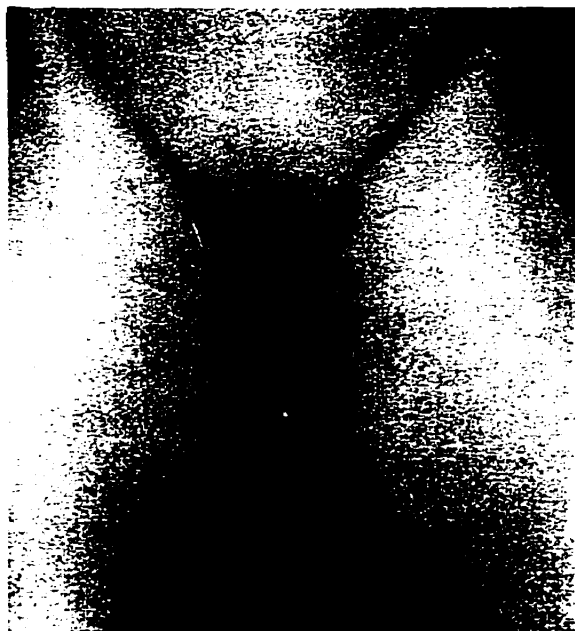
Learning to become a piercer is an individual process. Most people learn to pierce through an apprenticeship. Apprenticeships usually take a year or two to complete and involves observing many piercings being done, learning the anatomy and healing techniques of each specific area as well as healing infections. When the teacher thinks the apprentice is ready, he or she is allowed to practice on clients. This is the reason Ken stated that he would never have an apprentice. He has a reputation to uphold and does not want anyone practicing on his clients. He wants people to go to his studio for expert professional service.

*Right:*  
Photo 4-G: Male nipple piercing.



*Left:*  
Photo 4-H: Female nipple piercing.

*Right:*  
Photo 4-I: Prince Albert penis piercing.



Apparently there is a piercing school in San Francisco, but it is the only one in North America. In Canada, there are no credentials that a person must have to become a piercer. There is no professional association and no regulations, specifications, or techniques that a person must know before becoming a professional body piercer. Most of the piercers interviewed for this research had learned to pierce through an apprenticeship. None had planned on becoming a body piercer and happened upon their apprenticeship by chance. Some piercers read "how-to" books in conjunction with apprenticing, others simply learned through trial and error. Many had been self-piercing since childhood. All of the piercers claimed that long, one-on-one apprenticeships were the best way to learn.

### **Reasons for Becoming Pierced**

Similar to the questions asked of tattooed people, everyone asks: Why do people want to become pierced? Upon asking piercers this question, the answers body piercers and clients gave ranged from "I don't know", or "I guess because it is popular right now", to well organized categories of reasons. This long quote is especially telling:

*I can break it down to three reasons. The reasons sometimes overlap. They overlap as much or as little depending on the person. Aesthetic reasons, which explains itself, sensual or sexual as one group, spiritual or psychological, depending on how you interpret it. Psychological could be something as simple as needing a boost, a rush, needing to feel like you've accomplished something, you've been in a rut lately so you need to make a change and do it through a ritual. Or it could be something as profoundly psychological or spiritual as, well, I had one woman come in and say that she tried to kill herself exactly a year before, so this was her one year anniversary so she was doing it to celebrate being alive and to remind her how important her life was. It was just a navel piercing, but I was really happy to do it. I've had a lot of women come in and say that they are reclaiming their body after sexual abuse or rape or something like that and they are often genital piercings which is interesting. They are reclaiming that part of their bodies. After having children a lot of people feel like their genitals or breasts don't belong to them anymore so they do it to reclaim control or power over it, so I consider those spiritual or psychological reasons. Sexual ones you know, any piercing can be sexual in a sense that it attracts attention to that part of the body and will cause other people to touch that area of the body more frequently. Or you may simply feel an increase in weight in that part of the body. Until you get used to the new type of jewelry you'll feel some weight or pull in that area, and people find that desirable. And then you have very direct, like when you pierce an erogenous zone and are opening up new nerves that have never been accessed before, that's very clearly sensual or sexual. And then you have fetish piercing and a lot of people don't even realize but men in North America and European cultures have totally overtly fetishized pierced ears in women. It's an erotic fetish... It has been so common in our culture than men have developed a fetish surrounding pierced ears. – Ken (interviewed on July 20, 2000)*



Other piercers spoke of expressing individuality, changing appearance, like putting on make-up, and shock value as reasons for becoming pierced. Genital and nipple piercings are done for eroticism. Following the example of the Nuer and the Australian Aborigines, some body piercings are used as a ritual rite of passage. Some young adults have their ears, nose, eyebrow or tongue pierced in an attempt to ritualize and symbolize their feelings of adulthood, an accomplishment, and individuality. The jewelry provides a symbol of their ability to make their own decisions and to be their own person. Often the piercing will be performed in a group setting, with their friends acting as support and validation for the ritual. The whole process was assumed to be individualistic and different for everybody.

What makes people choose between tattooing and piercing is linked to individual preference as well as commitment. The jewelry can be changed or removed, leaving a small scar, but a tattoo is permanent and will be in place forever only removeable through surgery or a cover up tattoo. Earlobe stretching, though, is permanent after a certain point is reached.

Most piercers and tattooists did not comment on the social differences between tattooing and piercing until they were asked about facial piercing and facial tattooing. Facial piercing is sometimes disparaged, but people are becoming more familiar with the concept and realizing that the piercings are temporary. Facial tattooing is considered taboo, because a person cannot easily get a job if they have a tattoo on their face, hands or neck. Permanent facial markings go against society's view on what a person should look like. Marks like these that cannot be hidden make a very strong statement, which goes against the image most employers want to portray.

Tattooed people tend to connect with other tattooed people, but those with piercings do not connect with each other. People will approach tattooed people and talk about tattoos but will rarely talk to others about their piercings. Martin noticed that an older person may occasionally ask about the piercing, but younger people do not unless it is a very peculiar piercing. As Ralph, the apprentice tattooist stated, a tattoo tells a lot about the wearer, but a piercing is just jewelry and tends to be more fad oriented. Ken, who was also an extreme body modifier, said that he

thought all body modification, permanent or semi permanent, culturally sanctioned or otherwise, was the same thing. However, simply because a person likes piercing does not mean that they like tattooing as well.

Most of the clients during this research were receiving their first body piercing. They usually had their ears pierced with a piercing gun, but no other piercings. Many people only get one or two body piercings. Only a small number of people have several piercings, which is often a result of the social limitations of having multiple piercings, like not being able to get a job. Sometimes, though, people will get a piercing that is socially acceptable, like a nose or an ear project. After discovering that they like the idea and the feeling that they have done something different or almost deviant, they will get something else pierced that is hidden from the public. Professionals who choose to become pierced tend to get nipple piercings and genital piercings rather than facial piercings because they can be secret and hidden. There are also repeat customers who have evolved in piercing with age. They will start by having their navel pierced at age 16, they will go back at age 17 and have a nipple done, and then back at age 20 for some genital work. But at the age of 16, genital piercings are something they could never have imagined.

As with Nuer scarification, body piercing can be used to physically mark a life change; the piercing acts as the symbol of the change. The piercing helps to change the person because it acts as a constant reminder of the reason they became pierced. After becoming pierced, people tend to feel more immediately powerful or tougher because they have done something considered somewhat different and deviant. They often feel as though they have accomplished something. When asked if becoming pierced changes people, some piercers said yes and some said no. Most thought that changing something aesthetic about oneself is only a cosmetic change. Ken remarked that becoming pierced will change the way people respond to you. His belief is that people respond differently to others based on the way they dress. A person might be treated one way when dressed in one style, but treated another way upon changing their

attire. How people dress and adorn themselves changes not only how people react to them, but also their self-perception. Ken thought that dress and adornment also changes where a person is willing to socialize. When pierced people are in areas where pierced and tattooed people are rarely seen, they will be treated differently and often in negative ways. Modified people may not be willing to spend time in those areas because they are aware that their appearance will be disparaged there.

*It is going to change how you have to live your life. From my own perspective it makes me a lot tougher, it makes me want to prove myself more. It makes me want to not have a criminal record, not have drug problems. I am really extra intent on not doing the things that the establishment, mainstream culture expects of modified people. - Ken (interviewed on July 20, 2000)*

Most of the piercers said that body piercing was “just jewelry” meaning that it was just fashion and really only effects the person for the period immediately following acquiring the new piercing. After being pierced, people often are a little more outgoing as there is a novelty in the new decoration. This is because they have become a little different than the people around them. When they become used to wearing the piercing they no longer feel the excitement that they often feel in the days immediately following the piercing event. This could be why many describe piercing as addictive.

*Some people get addicted to piercing. No one has ever come back and told me that I changed their life. It hasn't changed their life. People could feel more sure of themselves, but those who get a lot of piercings, it does change their life. - Lucy (interviewed on August 14, 2000)*

Several people spoke of the addictive quality of body piercing. There are many reasons for this addiction. For example: the love of the medium, the need for the ritual, the pain and healing that has been linked with body modification; the need for a change in appearance; the feeling of being different and doing something deviant, and staying at the same level of modification as friends. This addictiveness exists within all forms of body modification and cosmetic surgery and could also be linked to the euphoric feelings that the release of endorphins creates during the process. When a person experiences bodily pain the central nervous system releases endorphins which diminishes the suffering associated with painful stimuli making the

experience less painful and more pleasurable. Endorphin release has been labeled as a "human inborn ability to modulate their pain experience" (Elton et al 1983: 23).

### **Perceptions of the Pierced**

There are many different thoughts on what un-pierced individuals think about people who are piercing their bodies. Each piercer and pierced person believed there were stereotypes and discrimination towards people who are heavily pierced. They are thought of as lower class and grouped together in a nasty homogenous whole by the non-piercing public. Daniel especially has been very affected by the stereotypes as he became very offended at the question on how he thinks people perceive pierced individuals. He became offended and remarked that the question was similar to being racist and was prejudicial. When the question was clarified, he relaxed and relayed a couple of events: Sometimes in his neighborhood he cleans up the area to make the storefront look nicer. His shop is in a somewhat posh part of town. One time he saw an older lady staring at him and he asked her if she was OK. She told him that she was surprised to see a tattooed person cleaning up the area, she assumed they would be dirtying it. Also, when he is in a restaurant he will hear people talking about his piercings and how awful they think it looks. He thought that people who make these types of comments are close-minded individuals.

*"It depends on where you are. In some places people will cross the street if they see you coming, in others you are taken as a person. Some people believe that anything different from the norm is vulgar." Chris (interviewed on July 27, 2000)*

People's perceptions of those with piercings and tattoos are improving, but it depends on the area of the city the person is in. As Lucy put it: "Montreal is a fairly open minded, and tolerant city". However, as we were talking several people walked by stared at her fully tattooed arms. My impressions of the incidents were negative, but Lucy did not take offense from these stares: "the staring is more of an interest than an arrogance, but it depends on where you are in the city." Some piercers and tattooists said that if you are in west Montreal people react badly,

but east Montreal people are more accepting. The difference between these two areas rests in the number of visibly modified individuals residing there.

Two of the tattoo/piercing studios had recently opened areas that were inconsistent with the types of areas they usually appear in, which are usually trendy. (See Table 1, Page 35, Shops A and H.) Both moved from poorer areas of the city into richer areas. In one case people were very accepting and in another that they were not. The employees would hear people walk by and make negative comments about their shop. The other studio which had been accepted into the community reported that the neighborhood sent them flowers on their opening day.

*I find it absolutely astounding that people are culturally bound enough, culturally limited enough to not blink an eye at plastic surgery which is radical and sometimes dangerous and a huge undertaking of surgery, to look a certain way, where a tattoo or a piercing is destructive and contradicts the Judeo Christian body ethic. It's just ridiculous. – Ken (interviewed on July 20)*

Several of the piercers were aware of the difference between culturally sanctioned and negatively sanctioned body modifications. They would often comment on the social differences between plastic surgery and body modifications compared to the technical similarities. Body modifiers believe that face lifts and tummy tucks, for instance, are no different than tongue piercing and forking except for the fact that one works towards a socially acceptable body aesthetic and the other does not. In reference to the previous section on plastic surgery, most people are uncomfortable with altering their bodies, especially in a permanent way in which the alteration is visible, obvious, or against the norm. Plastic surgery frequently pretends that the body has not been altered. While many breast implants and facelifts may be obvious and drastic, they still follow a cultural idea of how the body should look. They may be exaggerated ideas on the ideal body, but these alterations are done with the intent of looking youthful and more voluptuous. Those who visibly modify their body in a culturally unsanctioned way intend on looking very different from the norm, with a very different body aesthetic than most and are perceived as deviant.

## **Will it Hurt? And Sterilization: People's biggest concerns**

The funniest thing about body piercing is the fact that every person that walks through the door of a piercing studio for the first time asks the same question: "Does it hurt?" Every piercer thought it was rather strange. One remarked:

*Well, I'm sticking a needle through your skin? It's gonna hurt a little bit. They should ask how much will it hurt, or am I going to faint, should I be taking painkillers for this or should I have had six beers before I came in? They don't ask it that way, they ask "Is it going to hurt?" Well yeah, of course it's going to hurt. – Ken (interviewed on July 20, 2000)*

*Does it hurt? I tell them Yeah, it hurts. But it depends on what it is. If it's a belly button, no, I just tell them to relax, breathe deeply and let it happen. Enjoy the experience. They are paying for the piercing, they should enjoy it. Pain isn't the big problem, it's their nerves. It's all in their head. There are some piercings that flat out hurt. If you hold your breath you will probably pass out, you have to keep breathing. – Daniel (interviewed on July 27, 2000)*

In a time when the media is emphasizing safety in body modification as well as the transmission of HIV and AIDS in the general population, there are remarkably few people asking about the studio's regulations for cleanliness and the use and disposal of their needles. In this sense, body piercing follows the same trend as tattooing. Most of the piercers want people to ask these types of questions because it is important to their clients and their business. The cleanliness of the studio is something that piercers have had to prove to those who judge them based on the old style dingy tattoo parlor of the past. This can be seen through the way some of these places are decorated. Many of the shops are kept spotless and decorated in a stark uncluttered manner. People who have never been inside a tattoo/piercing studio are usually amazed when they first visit one and often remark on how clean they look. Because the facade is spotless, they assume that the procedure in the piercing room or tattoo room were equally as spotless. Each of the places use autoclaves and new needles and made a point to tell me so. But the customer almost never asks about cleanliness standards.

*The questions I like are questions about sterilization and stuff like that. If they don't know the studio, I want them to know why they are here and I think they should be asking questions about who we are and why they should be in our studio and not down the street. You know, sort of questions I like to get. But they ask "Does it hurt", "Why do you charge \$20 more than the place down the street?" And, "Do you use new needles?" Those are the questions I hate. – Ken (interviewed on July 20, 2000)*

While historically piercing began with underground subcultures including Sado Masochism, it is no longer exclusively among them. Only Ken spoke of certain fetish piercings that had become more common, but most clients were nervous about the experience of becoming pierced. The pain is necessary to achieve the desired end product, and it is usually feared. After the physical piercing, the client must take care of their body a little more. Special attention must be paid to the piercing and it must be cleaned twice a day. The painful wound is turned into a special area to be cared for, pain turns to pleasure.

*They are very nervous about it. To pierce you need a big needle and a lot of people have a phobia of it and don't even realize it. Even when they have many piercings they still get nervous. I still get nervous about 10 seconds before I get pierced. It's a strong impression that lasts only a few seconds and then it is nothing. It's like a roller coaster, scared at first, but after it was great. – Lucy (interviewed on August 14, 2000)*

The piercer usually has to calm people down and make them relax because they are nervous. Piercers do not regard their trade as hurting people, they regard it as adorning them. The pain only lasts a short time and the end product is desired. Each piercer though, said there is a degree of compassion and gentleness necessary to do the job properly.

### **Danger in Body Piercing**

The biggest potential for harm through body piercing, according to body piercers, is through inexperience on the part of the piercer. There are important details to be aware of in order not to damage blood vessels and cartilage. It is also essential to know the proper aftercare. The most common risk through body piercing is infection because an open wound has been created. Through experience, the piercers have discovered that if a professional performs the piercing with clean needles and jewelry, the most risk lies with the client. Piercers give their clients extensive after care sheets and highlight the most important procedures they must do to care for their new piercing. Frequently, though, clients contact them weeks later complaining of infection. In these desperate phone calls, it is made obvious that the client failed to read the aftercare sheet.

Piercers are very concerned with ethics and safety procedures and do not hesitate to refuse customers when they have reasons to doubt their age. In an example, Joe, a tattooist/piercer described refusing some young girls because they were underage and did not have their parent's permission to become pierced. A few weeks later they returned to his shop with safety pins inserted through their navels, which had rusted and become terribly infected and painful. He scolded them and sent them to the emergency room to have them removed.

Piercers give or sell a bottle of special cleansing fluid to clean the new piercing. This is a special sterile antiseptic solution with low alcohol content. Alcohol is never recommended for treating a piercing because it kills cells. Alcohol may be an inexpensive way to disinfect superficial injuries once, but it does not promote healing and should not be used regularly. Polysporin is also never to be used on new piercings (or tattoos) because it clogs the piercing and blocks airflow.

*You can die. It will hurt. You have to sort of qualify, who is doing the piercing? Whether it is a degree of risk or potential harm when you come to a reputable studio versus if you are, you know, being in someone's basement with a sewing needle and a candle. What is the risk? What if you are trying to do a really difficult piercing and you've never done it before, well there are all these things that qualify what sort of risk you are taking. With properly done piercing in a professional context there should be zero risk of disease transmission. So you can rule that out. There should be minimal risk of immediate danger such as nerve damage or severe bleeding. It's almost unheard of, you'd have to have really abnormal anatomy or be doing a really unusual tricky risky piercing. The things we see most often, it's just the piercing not doing well. There's a little bit of a build up of scar tissue, the body not responding well to the piercing. We try a lot of different methods to treat the problem of getting it to heal and sometimes it will just never quite heal. Theoretically you have a risk of abscess, infections, you can get rare infections through piercings or you can transmit disease through a piercing. If you are exposed to other people's fluids you can get an illness from that person because a piercing is a hole in the skin when it's not healed and through it you have a disease transmission risk... It's all pretty low risk... So yeah, it's a hole in your skin, so all of the things that come with a minor injury like that, all of the things that could go wrong with a minor injury and minor, superficial implants, all of those are there. – Ken (interviewed on July 20, 2000)*

Some piercers noted that people contact them after having been pierced at other shops, and ask if mistakes can be corrected. When the piercing has been performed at another studio, they do not know the quality of the jewelry or what type of solution has been used to treat the wound. If there is a problem with a piercing done at their own studio, then the piercer is familiar



with the jewelry and exactly how the client has have been instructed to care for it. According to Ken, many of the problems with piercings are caused because the jewelry is of low quality and the aftercare instructions are not followed properly. Infection can come from the piercing event, or after through improper care.

At one time it was considered unthinkable to have a nose pierced or multiple ear piercings, but it is becoming more common among young adults in Montreal. The number of piercing studios opening up has increased as has the number of body parts that are being pierced. More people are obtaining common facial piercings in their noses, eyebrows, ears and also piercings that are kept hidden, such as nipple and genital piercings. While body piercing can be interpreted as just decoration, there are usually other reasons for becoming pierced.

### **Scarification**

*"I hope it doesn't smell like bacon."* - Guy, said as he was about to be branded

Scarification is defined by body modification practitioners as the intentional creation of a scar. It can be done with a scalpel or any other sharp object, electric cauterizer or with chemicals. Hot metal can be used to brand, which is also a type of scarification. The scar is often enhanced with an irritant such as ash or sea salt. Through irritating the wound by rubbing it with these ingredients, as well as by peeling the scabs and blisters off, the scar will develop what is called keloids. Keloids are scars with a raised lumpy texture and tend to be pinkish in color. The potential for design can be anything, but are usually limited to simple patterns and symbols.

Two types of scarification were witnessed during field research: branding and what was dubbed "Dremel scarification" by Mike, my informant. Both will be discussed in detail and represented photographically in this section.

### **Branding**

Branding is a method of scarification executed with an extremely hot iron applied to the skin. The skin is cauterized, producing a severe burn that eventually becomes a scar. There are

two main techniques of branding, which are known as "stamp" and "freehand". Mike, a brander, usually performs freehand branding, which involves drawing directly on the skin with a pointed piece of hot metal, usually a screwdriver or a nail. Mike will occasionally brand a client with a stamp, which is a metal shape heated to 1700 degrees Fahrenheit, and applied to the skin. A good scar, according to Mike, is one that has raised into a large keloid and retained its pinkish hue.

Branding can be traced to the fourth and fifth century (BCE) when the Greek doctor Hippocrates observed cauterization for medicinal purposes among the Scythians, an ancient nomadic tribe of southern and eastern Europe (Jones 2000). The most common function of branding is penal. It has been used to mark criminals and slaves in ancient Egypt as well as in more modern times. Convicts in France were branded until the year 1832, as were Siberian exiles until the year 1864 (Jones 2000). Cows have commonly been marked for identification through branding in Native and Western culture. It has also been used in fraternity hazing ceremonies where crude marks are made with forks and knives that are heated on a stove. There is a great deal of literature concerning African scarification. Examples can be referred to from the previous two sections concerning the Tiv and the Nuer. Each of these two types of scarification are done through cutting and rubbing ash into the wounds, but none have been done through branding (Berns 1988, Bohannan 1953, 1988, Evans-Pritchard 1968). Through field research, thick tribal-like designs were discovered to be the main choice in designs for the brandings in Montreal, in a sense, resembling African scarifications because of the line and dot type patterns and themes used.

### **The Branding Process: A Narrative**

*I met Mike, my main informant, at the university where I was a teaching assistant. On learning of my research topic, he introduced himself to me as the only brander in Montreal. After many discussions on body modification, and a few other fieldwork experiences with him, he invited me to observe a branding.*

*Five or six years ago, Guy had seen someone in Victoria, B.C. with a brand and thought "Wow, that looks nice!" He believed that tattoos have become too common stating: "even businessmen have them." The popularity of tattoos was a deterrent. Guy wanted something a little more unique and began searching for a brander. It took him five years to discover Mike through a friend who had what Mike called "his masterpiece" branded on her stomach. Guy was impressed by Mike's work and sought him out. Mike's clients are all through referral. They find him either through those whom he has branded or through a friend who owns a piercing studio. This piercer is also able to brand, but only brands friends and refers all others to Mike.*

*Mike learned about branding from a friend in Vancouver. His first brand was on himself when he was 18. He did it with a fork that was heated on the stove, which was not quite hot enough making it very painful. Mike is pleased that his first brand has faded because he thought it was terribly ugly. Through trial and error, he learned a technique that he felt was adequate and began branding others. Mike enjoys branding because it provides him with a creative outlet that helps people to feel that they have improved their body. While he loves to create designs in scar tissue on people's bodies, he hopes that branding does not become fashionable or trendy in mainstream culture, because he values its uniqueness.*

*I met Guy for the first time, at Mike's apartment when they met for a consultation. I arrived early and Mike was cleaning his living room in an attempt to evoke an air of professionalism. The three of us sat around a coffee table and the meeting began with Guy showing Mike the design he wanted branded on his upper left arm, a sun. Mike immediately informed him that he could not brand a closed ring. This is because branding cuts off blood flow to the epidermis, cauterizing straight through to the dermis. To allow the blood to flow through to the centre of the sun, Mike would have to brand four arches and leave spaces between them. The spaces could be very tiny so that when the skin forms a scar, which will spread, it will appear to be a full circle.*

*Mike inspected Guy's upper arm to settle on the exact placement and was pleased to find that Guy wanted the sun branded on the top fleshy part of his arm. This was not only because it is a fairly painless spot but because the sun shape would also fit with the shape of the muscle on Guy's arm. Mike frequently expressed concern with people applying images to their bodies that do not flow with its shape and believes that a brand (or tattoo) should fit the form of the body. Body art that does not fit the body and is just applied to the skin without any thought to body shape is what Mike calls a "bumper sticker".*

*During the consultation, Mike showed Guy his branding kit. (See Plate XXI, Photo 5-A) The contents of the kit were contained in an old clarinet case. The inside forms in which a clarinet was once held had been removed, and new forms were created to fit the branding tools. It was lined with a purple velvety material. There was a propylene tank, a blowtorch, nails, a sharpened screwdriver and an exacto knife inside. The nail and screwdriver were used for shaping and for thick lines; the exacto knife was for thin lines and touch ups. Skin tends to contract when burned and the knife is used to fill in the missed areas.*

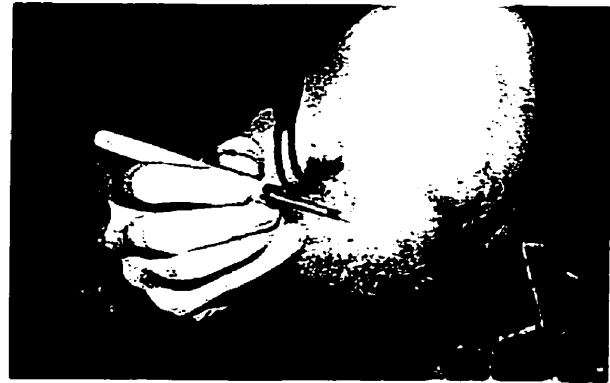
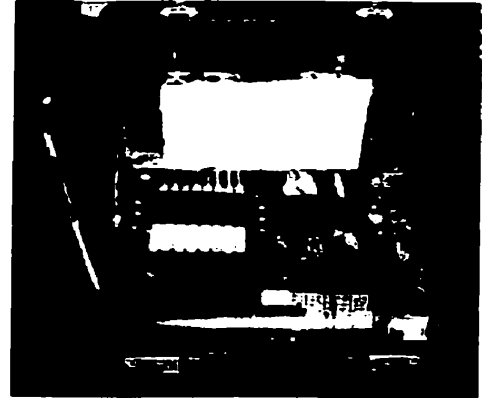
*Over time, new tools were continually added to the kit. At one point Mike had bought a chisel set from the dollar store. He filed down the ends to make them finer so that he could use them as hand drawing tools. He bragged that they were quite possibly the first ever custom-made hand drawing branding tools. A few months later his chisel tools had changed shape again. The same wooden handles were present, but new iron ends had been inserted: a screw in one and an allen key in the other. The other tools had been discarded.*

*Mike assured Guy that the brand would not be too painful, but he seemed skeptical and so was I. Mike described the branding process to Guy, so he would understand it and be more relaxed. The iron is heated to 1700 degrees Fahrenheit, which is judged by the metal's change in color from black to white. Apparently, the pain*

## **BRANDING**

*Right:*

Photo 5-A: Branding kit: Can of propylene, wooden handle branding tools, exacto knife and a blow torch.



*Above left and right:*

Photos 5-B and 5-C: Heating of the branding iron with the blow torch and propylene.



*Left and right:*  
Photos 5-D and 5-E: Applying the brand.



*is instant, and then disappears; the iron is so hot that it numbs the nerves. After a short while, the body's natural endorphins make the pain diminish and the person feels distant and somewhat euphoric. Mike remarked that the hotter the iron is, the less pain is felt. It seemed to me that it should be the other way around, but I was informed that it does not work that way.*

*Mike described how the skin reacts to the brand: Through burning, the skin produces a protective leathery layer over the entire area, which is actually a layer of melted skin. Guy was instructed in caring for the burn. The first three days the burn should just be washed with soap and water. When the leathery scabs fall off and the burn becomes sticky and uncomfortable, it should be soaked in warm salt water. The scabs should not be disturbed if a delicate scar is desired, but to make a big tribal scar, salt should be rubbed into the wound after peeling off the scabs. This is very painful to do, but produces large keloid scars. Cornstarch should be used to keep the wound dry. A bandage should only be worn if the environment is dusty or dirty. The burn will remain scabby for about two to three weeks, at which time healing and scarring will begin.*

*Concerning cleanliness, Mike told Guy that it really does not matter if the steel or skin is clean because no bacteria can live on metal heated to 1700 degrees. The hot iron kills everything when it touches the skin. Once the skin is burned, leathery scabs form a seal, keeping the body clean. There is no blood transmission and the temperature kills all germs. Mike does not wear gloves for two reasons: he believes that there is nothing to transmit and that it is dangerous to wear latex gloves near a blowtorch.*

*I have seen segments on television concerning branding which have shown the branding process. In each, the brander was shown wearing latex gloves. I attempted to find more information on the risk potential of branding and consulted my family doctor. She confirmed that in the actual burning process, if the iron is indeed heated to 1700 degrees Fahrenheit, there was little chance of disease transmission. The greatest*

*potential for infection and disease transmission is during the healing process, when the wounds are open and most vulnerable. (Doctor interviewed December 14, 2000)*

*Mike has mentioned several times on different occasions that branding is the only form of body modification approved by the Canadian Blood Association because there is no blood transmission. Piercing and tattooing have a one-year waiting period for donating blood because of the potential for transmission of Hepatitis C. In an attempt to confirm his claim I called Hema Quebec, and was told that it this was simply not true. The waiting period is one year not only for piercing and tattooing, but for branding as well. This is because they do not want to take any chances on receiving infected blood. (Telephone interview on November 20, 2000) The actual branding process may not draw blood, but the healing process is not nearly as neat and tidy. According to Paul, an extreme body modifier with full body brands, healing is most uncomfortable as body fluid oozes from the wounds after the hard scab falls off. The fluid dries and sticks to clothes and bed sheets.*

*Mike informed Guy that he should return for touch ups a week after the burn. When the skin begins to heal, it relaxes and notches of unburned skin may become visible. Mike will have to re-burn with an exacto knife to ensure there are no imperfections in the design. He can also use the knife to make a deeper burn a week later and create texture in the burned design. Mike has been branding for six years and has learned many arty touches through practicing. Through re-burning, the scar will raise a little higher. Sun exposure also creates thicker scar tissue. The first summer, Guy was told, he should try and get as much sun exposure as possible on his fresh scar because it will help it to keloid more. Scar tissue will often heal and flatten out, unless it is irritated when a wound or exposed to the sun.*

*The following week was scheduled for the brand. When I arrived, Mike had just started to work on the irons. There were a variety of tools lying on the table, large tools I had never seen before. Mike was a metal worker before attending university and has*

*acquired many large specialized tools. He showed me a can of propylene. A blowtorch would be attached to the top, lit, and the iron heated in the flame. He uses propylene because it burns very hot. He bent a piece of metal and cut it, making a little handle on the top so that he not only had something to hold, but also so he could see what he was doing. He told me that was the secret of the trade. The metal he was using was in sheet form and called low carbon steel. In the past he used wires to make the forms, but found that they do not retain heat as well. The only problem with the low carbon steel is that he cannot cool it down by putting it in water because it becomes brittle.*

*Guy seemed rather nervous when he arrived. This was understandable; he was about to be branded with metal heated to 1700 degrees! The two men worked out the design and the size, noting that scars spread about 1/16 - 1/8 of an inch on each side when they heal. Due to the small size, Mike decided to do most of the brand in free hand because he found it easier than making a small stamp. Mike pounded an arc out of metal. He heated it up and tested it on a piece of cardboard so that when he applied it four times, it made a perfect circle. Guy was curious about the pain and the smell. He thought it would probably smell like bacon and that he would never be able to eat it again after the brand.*

*Mike instructed Guy to move his arm around in natural ways so he could see how the muscle moved. Then he drew a circle on the area to be branded with a large black marker, asking Guy to look in the mirror to make sure it was the right place. Then Mike began doing several geometric measurements. It was quite a procedure. First he found the center using a plumb line, then marked it in halves with a protractor. He made what looked like a target on Guy's arm, asking him again to check it in the mirror to confirm placement. Mike then took out a compass and began measuring the half mark of each section and then connected them with lines, like pie pieces. He then washed most of it off leaving enough visible so he could follow the lines. Then he began to draw the sun design on Guy's skin with a thinner pen following the accurately spaced guidelines. After*



*each component of the design was drawn on his arm, Mike instructed Guy to check it in the mirror for approval. Mike would apply the brand directly over the marking drawn on Guy's skin.*

*When the design was completed to Guy's satisfaction, Mike poured him a glass of water and lit the blowtorch. Guy was instructed to breathe deeply and that he could tell Mike to stop at any time. Guy sat in a chair while Mike knelt on the floor beside him. Mike began to poke Guy's arm in the area he was about to burn with one hand while he heated up the arc shaped iron in the flame with the other. He poked the area so that Guy would not jump when the hot iron touched him. He heated the iron in the flame of the blowtorch until it glowed white. (See Plate XXI, Photos 5-B and 5-C) Mike applied the strike. I froze and held my breath. Guy's skin sizzled and crackled loudly as the brand was placed. A small puff of smoke was released. (See Plate XXI, Photos 5-D and 5-E) Guy made an irritated face, but did not jump or even twitch. The strike only took about two to three seconds. When the first strike was over, he looked at me in amazement and declared that it did not hurt.*

*When branding, the iron is so hot that it is placed next to the skin, barely touching it. The person feels a blast of heat, and then nothing. The real pain comes later, when it is healing. The skin is burned to a depth of 1.5 mm below its surface, down to the dermis. Mike insisted that there is great skill in ensuring the burn goes to the right level and not through to the layer of fat beneath. The four strikes of the arc were all done exactly the same. Next were the four large sun spokes. Mike drew them by hand with a white hot pointed screwdriver. The four iron strikes were simple strike and release. The hand drawn lines took longer to complete. While they were being done the tool cooled down and changed color from white, to red, to black. The tool was reheated before each strike or touch up as it cooled down very quickly.*

*While I watched, I was certain that it was painful, but Guy was adamant that it did not hurt. He did not appear to be in any pain, although had an uncomfortable*



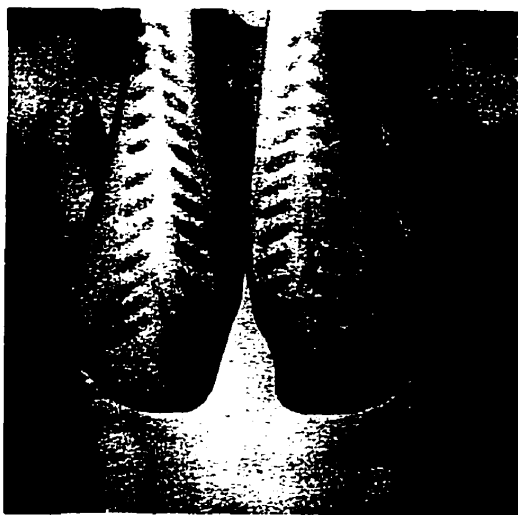
*Above:*  
Photo 5-F: Fresh and healed brands.



*Right:*  
Photo 5-G: A two-year old brand that has just been re-burned to promote an increase in the development of scar tissue.

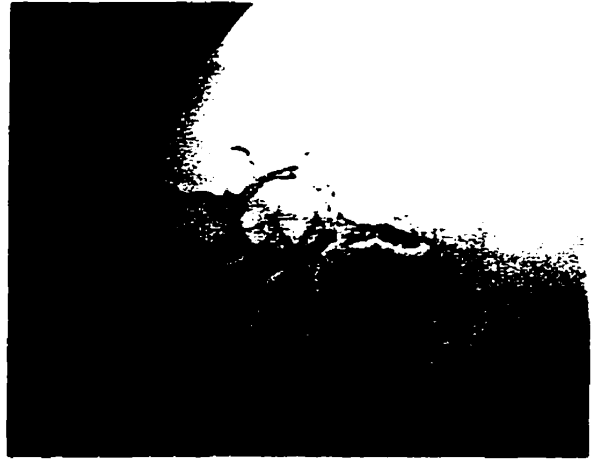


*Left:*  
Photo 5-H: Two-week old brand. Leathery scabs have fallen off and bloody scabs have formed



*Left:*  
Photo 5-I: Two-month old brand. The scars have begun to form.

*Right:*  
Photo 5-J: Freshly branded sun.



*Left:*  
Photo 5-K:  
One-week old sun.

*Right:*  
Photo 5-L: Collected and dried  
scabs from brands.



*Left:*  
Photo 5-M: Branding iron is cooled in water.  
Remains of branded skin settle to the bottom  
of the water.

*expression on his face. After each strike, Guy pulled and stretched the skin around so he could see the marks Mike had burned into him. The way in which he twisted the skin on his arm around, it could not have hurt. There was some conversation while Mike was heating the iron, but as soon as he was about to strike, Guy stopped talking and looked out the window. I got the impression that branding is an intense experience, but not a painful one. Apparently, the burn does not hurt for the first three to five days. When the leathery scab falls off and the wound must be treated with salt water, it is quite painful.*

*Each sun spoke was traced twice to ensure it was uniformly burned and no skin was missed. At one point during the branding, Guy asked if the volume of the music could be turned up because the sound of his sizzling flesh was disconcerting. Near the end of the process, Mike had to hold Guy's hand steady, as it had begun to twitch. When the drawing was finished, Mike got a thick blunt tool, heated it up, and went over the outlines, touching up the design. Then he heated up the exacto knife and did some smaller touch ups. He made thin lines at the end of the sun spokes, extending them a little. When he was completely finished, he washed the burn with some soap and Guy admired it in the mirror. (See Plate XXIII, Photo 5-J)*

*Surprisingly the smell was never mentioned after the initial anticipatory comments. I noticed an odor of burning hair. Because the burn was relatively small, the smell was noticeable, but not strong.*

*Guy wanted a delicate scar, so was instructed not to remove the blister or scab. Removal of the scab will result in a wider scar. Had he wanted a large "tribal" scar, he should treat it more harshly, scrub it and peel the scabs off, but because the design is delicate, he must treat it delicately. After the blisters heal, the burn will develop regular scabs and heal within a few weeks. Guy paid \$40 for the brand and left shortly after it was completed. He was asked to return a week later, so that Mike could check how it was healing and perform any touch ups at that time.*

*When Guy returned one week later the burned area had spread considerably, but both Mike and Guy seemed happy with the results. (See Plate XXIII, Photo 5-K) The burn had what Mike called "a non-porous layer of burned skin", the leathery layer he had spoken of earlier. It had not yet formed a scab, therefore was still not prone to infection. A lot of movement and stretching makes scars bigger and more visible. Because Guy's burn was on his upper arm and he does a lot of heavy lifting for his job, the burn had stretched a bit more on the front side of his bicep. The scar tissue will be thicker there. Guy allowed me to touch the burned sun design in his arm so I could feel its texture. The detail that impressed me the most was the fact that his wound still felt hot one week later. I never saw Guy again and was unable to find out how the brand healed and survived the summer.*

Each brand I witnessed followed the above pattern. One difference was when Mike was branding someone he knew, they smoked some marijuana before doing the brand. Mike and Guy did not smoke marijuana beforehand because Mike was unacquainted with Guy. The other brands I witnessed were performed on repeat clients, so there was no need to have a consultation beforehand. One was a touch up job on an old brand that Mike had done years before. Josie wanted her brand touched up due to uneven scarring. (See Plate XXII, Photo 5-G) This process followed the same pattern: the spots to be branded were measured and then marked with marker; and multiple mirror checks for approval, alterations and redrawing. Josie did not seem as nervous as Guy did, as she had been branded before. Again, the brand looked painful, but provoked no reaction from her. Josie simply sat and received her decoration.

One of the brands I witnessed was on a much larger scale than the others and was remarkable in the intensity of the smell of burning flesh. This brand was performed on Paul, who was almost entirely covered with branded scars. Mike heated a giant nail to do this brand. (See Plate XXI, Photos 5-B, 5-D; and Plate XXII, Photo 5-F) Due to its size, the nail took a long time to heat up and retained its heat longer. A wet cloth was used as a handle for the nail so that he did

not burn himself. Mike learned that lesson the hard way. Paul requested frequent breaks as the brand was large and the sensation he experienced was very intense. When the procedure was finished, the branded man was full of energy. He got dressed up and went out for a night on the town. Adrenaline and endorphins at work!

### **Dremel Scarification**

*"Why are you taking a picture of that guy's leg?" – woman on street, said while Mike posed for a photograph outside on a balcony.*

*"Because there's a fish on it." – Liz*

*"Oh, OK." – woman*

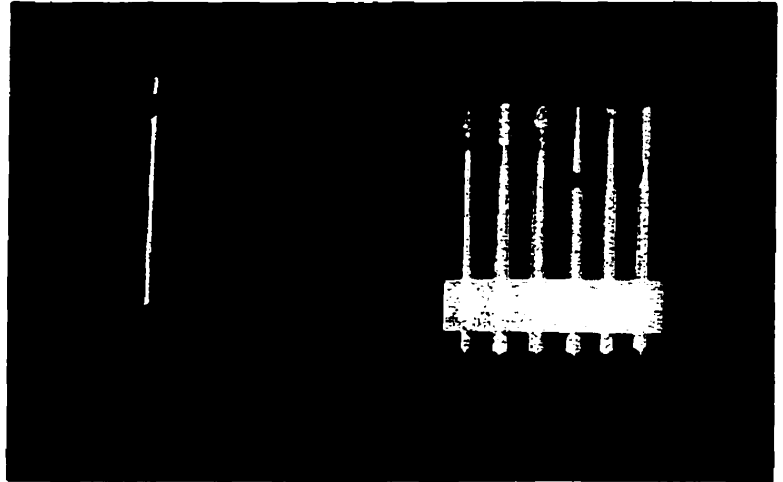
*Mike spoke of a new type of scarification when he returned from a convention in Toronto. The convention was for extreme body modifiers and it was by invitation only. No anthropologists or reporters were permitted. Mike had spoken to an elderly Japanese man at the convention named Izi who introduced him to this new technique. Apparently, everyone else at the convention whom Izi told about the Dremel procedure had expressed disgust, except for Mike, who had asked for more information. Izi did not speak English, so Mike got as much information as he could through sign language and a photograph. About a month later, he purchased a "Wizard Rotary Tool".*

*Dremel is the brand name of the prototype of this tool. I was given the example of Kleenex for its name usage. The Dremel is a rotary power tool used for engraving or polishing. It is held like a pencil and different attachments can be inserted into the tip, much like a drill, for different engraving, carving or polishing techniques. (See Plate XXIV, Photo 6-C)*

*When I arrived at Mike's apartment to, as he put it, "witness history," Lori and Steve were already there and Mike had a Japanese looking carp drawn on his leg in black marker. He showed it to everyone and requested their comments. Lori pointed out that it was shaped a lot more like a penis than a fish, so he washed it off and redrew it. (See Plate XXIV, Photo 6-B) The fish was copied from a photo in a pin-up calendar that Izi had given him at the convention. It was a calendar filled with nude women covered in*

## **DREMEL SCARIFICATION**

*Right:*  
Photo 6-A: Diamond  
encrusted dremel heads.



*Below:*  
Photo 6-B: A Japanese  
style carp drawn in  
marker.



*Above:*  
Photo 6-C: The scarification is under way.



*Right:*  
Photo 6-D: Self-modification.

*Japanese tattooing which Mike found incredibly sexy. He looked at a photo of a woman with a carp tattooed on her body and copied it onto his leg in marker. This time everyone approved.*

*Mike had bought some special diamond encrusted tips for the Dremel, which included different tips ranging from round to pencil-like. They had cost him approximately \$30 for the set of six. (See Plate XXIV, Photo 6-A)*

*I asked a few questions: What type of scar will it produce? How will it differ from the branded scar? They were all answered with "I don't know." This procedure was an experiment of trial and error. Steve remarked that experimentation was an intrinsic part of Mike. Looking back, the same can be said of the tongue forking (See below) and the tattoo. They were both based on trial and error. Through each procedure, Mike searched around his apartment, hardware stores, and The Dollar Store until he found the tool, homemade or otherwise, that would give him the results that he wanted.*

*Before Mike started the scarification, he put some Yunnan Pao in powder and liquor form in a plastic container and mixed them together to make a paste. Yunnan Pao is a Chinese herbal medicine that Mike found in China Town. It can be used like styptic, which is a drug commonly found in powder or stick form that stops bleeding instantly, ordinarily used for stopping the bleeding from shaving nicks or when clipping dog toe nails. He also took out a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, and some paper towel. He poured the hydrogen peroxide in a shot glass, which ended up being tipped over many times throughout the evening. Mike had also bought some "Emla" which is a topical anesthetic. It cost him almost \$50. He tested the Dremel first on a piece of cardboard to see how it worked and felt in his hand, then tried it on his leg. He found that it was not painful, and decided to return the Emla unopened. Steve also did a few small tests on his fingernail to see what it felt like.*

*Mike began the scarification using the ball shaped diamond tipped heads on the Dremel tool. He did not clean it, stating that it came right out of the package and was*



*therefore clean. He was surprised at the amount of control he had and exclaimed that it was "an unbelievably controlled experience" as he used the tool on his own skin. (See Plate XXIV, Photos 6-C and 6-D) This tool ground away his skin layer by layer and he could actually see each layer disappear; the outer layer was apparently painless. There was little blood, mostly a glistening of red seeping through the layers of remaining skin. Mike remarked that this scarification was much different than branding. The rule in branding is that an enclosed circle cannot be made because the skin is cauterized and blood flow completely cut off to the central area. In this type of scarification there is no cauterization, therefore this rule does not apply. He began the scarification on a long line of the fish with the ball tool. He then switched to the cylinder tool thinking it would grind deeper into his skin because it has a hard edge. He removed ball shaped tip from the Dremel and placed it in the shot glass of peroxide for a cleaning. The tip hissed and fizzed as the thick foamy white bubbles accumulated due to the chemical reaction peroxide has when it comes into contact with organic material.*

*Steve and Mike decided that the wound was probably not deep enough, and debated if the cut should be deeper and if so, which tool to use. Mike decided to cut deeper using the same tool, until he bled more so he could be certain there was a deep groove. He still bled very little, a constant oozing of fluid from the wound remained. He finished the long line and then applied the Yunnan Pao paste to the wound. He used this to stop the oozing of fluid and to help in healing. Steve and Mike talked about using ash to put on the wound to irritate it in order to provoke a bigger scar, but he ended up using only the Yunnan Pao. As Mike applied the paste, it apparently stung causing him to yell and flap his arms, a process Steve named "the owie dance", involving flapping arms and kicking the wounded leg. The entire process of the scarification, similar to that of the tattoo party (illustrated in a previous section and described in Chapter Five), was marked by the presence of many people, lots of discussion, and plenty of joking around. It was a social event. While no liquor was involved, marijuana was smoked*

*periodically by Mike and Steve, and there were frequent jaunts to the Depanneur (convenience store or seven-eleven) for snacks.*

*Using the Dremel is much like drawing with a pencil; there is incredible control and precision. Mike was impressed at the precise detail that was possible through using this tool. Through branding there is less of a possibility for specific details due to the medium and the healing process. Knowledge on how to use a Dremel is important, but it was much different using it on skin than on wood. The risk of spreading diseases was discussed fairly casually, with Mike concluding that if he does this procedure on someone else he will have to purchase a mask and wear latex gloves, not to mention sterilize the equipment. Many different topics were discussed as he worked. Everyone sat around while Mike worked on his body, talked, joked, and watched. Steve contemplated different techniques with Mike, Lori made jokes and commented on the experience. I sat and watched, clutching my camera and asking questions that no one could answer because none of this had been done before by this group of people.*

*After completing a few lines, Mike was still unhappy with the depth. He had tried several of the store bought diamond-tipped bits and different pressures, but it was not working exactly as he wanted. He suggested using a drill bit and the feasibility was discussed. Steve thought it was a bad idea, but because experimentation was a part of the process, Mike broke a drill bit in half and filed it down, smoothing it to a 90-degree angle. (See Plate XXIV, Photo 6-A) While this sounds incredibly horrifying and gory, the drill bit actually worked much the same as the other tips. It cut a groove into his skin, as opposed to grinding it away, but it still worked gradually, layer by layer. The Dremel was used in a back and forth motion to trace over the image drawn onto the skin. It took many passes before the wound was deep enough to ooze blood. At that point, Mike moved to another section of the design. The drill bit worked a little better and faster than the other tips.*

*After an hour and 20 minutes, Mike was almost halfway through the design. He was feeling giddy and high. Mike boasted that this was probably the first Dremel scarification performed in North America and each of us present were witnessing history. Steve theoretically compared this process to a cutting done with a surgical blade: a surgical blade creates a nice clear scar, but not as wide as the Dremel would produce. With the Dremel, the wound stays open because the skin does not pull back together like it does when cut with a blade. This means that the scar will be wider and more visible.*

*Steve remarked that Mike seemed to be in much less pain during this procedure than when he brands himself. Although I have never seen Mike brand himself, I have seen several brandings and there did not seem to be much pain in either procedure. While being branded, people seemed to enter an euphoric state. During the Dremel scarification, Mike also seemed "high", but more giddy than anything.*

*After three hours of grinding at his leg the design was finished. Mike applied the Yunnan Pao and yelled, shook and spasmed. He paced about the room because of the pain. After approximately three hours of work, the outline was complete. He decided that he would put the scales and fin marks on the fish another time.*

*Mike contemplated that a thorough knowledge of the use of the tool would be essential for this procedure. If not, the tool could crash, meaning it could jam into the body and a person could drill a hole into their muscle. He had crashed it into his skin a few times and caused considerable pain, but fortunately it only went underneath a few layers of skin. He was familiar with the power tool as he had used it before, but he had never used it before on flesh. Mike felt that most people are afraid of their power tools, he is not, explaining why he can use them to experiment to find new body modification techniques and others cannot. A big part of experimental body modification is confidence in yourself and your actions, or at least having an air of confidence. When an*

*experiment is successful, it is attributed to your skill and ingenuity. When it fails, it was someone else's bad idea, or a mistake in information and you were somehow wronged.*

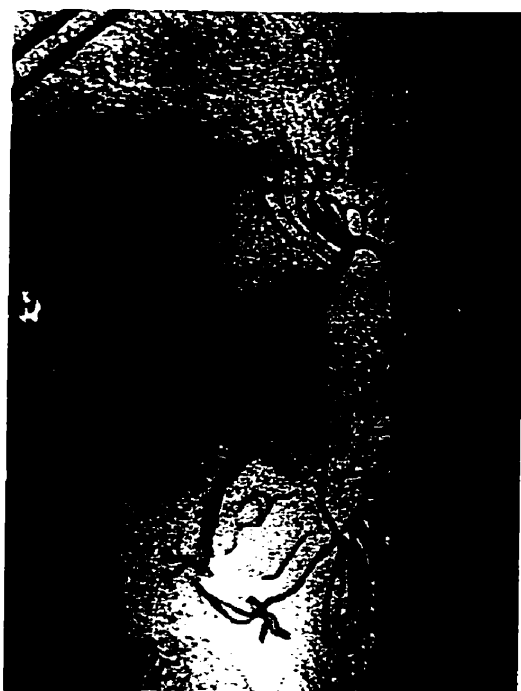
*A brand is more painful and overwhelming than this Dremel procedure. Mike reported that it felt like he was grinding the skin away, which is exactly what he was doing. I believe he also has a fairly high threshold of pain. I have been told repeatedly that brands do not hurt much, but then told that this hurt less than a brand. Because I have not experienced either, I cannot know what this means. They both looked very painful and the reactions from the participants were minimal, except when salt or the Yunnan Pao powder was applied.*

*Mike said that it hurt more as it was healing than a brand. He had shown it to several of his friends in the body modification world and believed that he astounded them: they were shocked because of the intricacy in the design, something that is not possible with branding.*

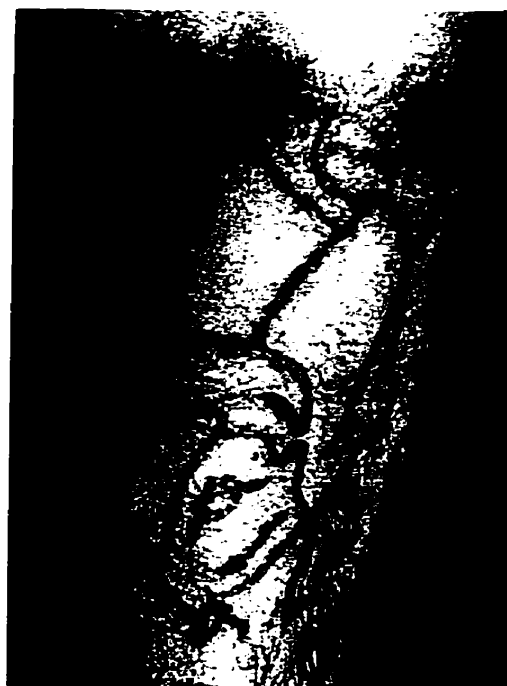
*I met Mike about a week later for coffee and we discussed the scar. We then decided to walk over to Canadian Tire so he could return the set of diamond tipped heads. People walking by on the street were obviously staring at his leg. I asked him how it made him feel when people stared at him and he said that the feeling he received was more of appreciation than curiosity and added: "anyone who has body art and is upset about being looked at has problems." Mike finished the scar, filling it in with fin marks and scales. (See Plate XXV, Photo 6-G) He seemed very pleased with the finished product.*

*Mike's friend Steve, who was always a part of the body modification process in some way yet had no modifications of his own, decided to have Mike give him a Dremel scar. Unfortunately he received it after I had completed my fieldwork and was unable to observe. I was informed, though, that he "took it like a man."*

Why did Mike choose a carp as the design for his scar? Mike creates a scar on his body whenever he experiences emotional pain. More specifically, he gives himself a scar when he is



*Above:*  
6-E: Scarification in progress.



*Above:*  
Photo 6-F: Scarification is complete. Details still to be added.



*Left:*  
Photo 6-G: One week after completion. The wound has formed a scab.

*Right:*  
Photo 6-H: Two months after completion. The scar begins to form.



hurt through the ending of a relationship. Sara was Mike's girlfriend who ended their relationship about a week before he performed this scarification. He stated that he wanted the scar for Sara to be very beautiful because she is beautiful. Mike feels that he needs to have an external scar as a memento, not simply a scar on the inside. This is his way of dealing with emotional pain, making it more real so that it is not just an internal struggle and pain. It becomes tangible, making it able to be dealt with, and then gone. When the Dremel scarification was completed he showed it to Sara who gave her approval. (See Plate XXV, Photos 6-G and 6-H) He also said that he has to make his scars look nice so that people will take him seriously in "the business."

Concerning cleanliness and sterilization, Mike believes that you do not have to be sterile, just clean. It is impossible to sterilize the entire tool. The drill bits can be cleaned and disinfected, but the machine cannot. Mike declared that he would have to wait two weeks after each scarification because Hepatitis lives outside the body for only two weeks, which was confirmed by Hema Quebec. However, Mike also noted that Hepatitis is only transmitted through visible amounts of blood, therefore he can simply clean the tools so no blood is apparent. The Health Canada guidelines to be discussed in Appendix B proves this information false, as it explicitly states that: "[b]lood does not have to be visible on a device to transmit infection" (Health Canada 1999: 4). There is commonly misinformation circulated concerning infection transmission and sterilization making it imperative to consult with multiple sources.

Ken, the piercer referred to in the Body Piercing section of this thesis, also practices scarification. However, he practices it only on friends because he does not want his piercing studio associated with scarification. This is due a certain reputation he wishes to keep of running an upscale body piercing studio. Ken is frequently consulted by the media for information on body piercing and does not want his scarification procedures advertised as it could tarnish his image.

Ken stated that the Dremel scarification is not viable in a professional context. It is too high risk because of the "aerosolization" of body fluids. Aerosolization, a concept that Ken

introduced me to that he learned about at a conference on S & M. It refers to the fine mist of blood that occurs when you slap or whip someone who is bleeding. The fine spray of blood could be inhaled causing a contamination risk. The Dremel, being a high-speed rotary tool, breaks the layer of skin and sends a mist of blood into the air. While the mist is very fine and barely detectable, it could cover everything in the room and be breathed in by those present. Due to the messy nature of the procedure, he would never adopt it as a method of scarification.

Scarification is one of the less common and more extreme methods of body modification, although it is gaining popularity in recent years. Some, like Guy, choose to become scarified as an alternative to tattooing because they believe that tattoos have become too common and popular. It is difficult, though, to find someone who practices scarification in Montreal, and they are usually discovered through friends in the body modification community.

### **Tongue Forking**

*"It is hard to look cool when you are mutilating your body, especially with your tongue hanging out of your mouth." - Mike, said while viewing the photos of his tongue operation*

*I was a little nervous as I got off the Metro to go to Mike's apartment. I think I had pretty good reason to be nervous. Not only was I going over to a strange man's apartment, but I was about to watch him split his tongue in half. He had come to see me at the university earlier that the day and he showed me his partially spliced tongue. He had cut about a centimetre into the tip of his tongue and was going to finish the forking that evening, which meant cutting straight back as far as the tendon beneath. I meekly asked if I could watch and he answered "yes" almost as though he expected my request. That must be why he came to see me, because he was aware of my research and probably thought I would not want to miss this operation. When I asked if I could photograph the procedure, he was just as quick to accept. I thought little about the event throughout the day, not wanting to lose my nerve, as this was my first introduction to fieldwork.*

*I rang the doorbell and waited. Mike answered the door and invited me in. I climbed the dark stairs to his apartment and found his friend, Steve, sitting on the couch, who greeted me enthusiastically. He joked around with Mike while I was given a quick tour of his small two-room apartment. I was also introduced to Herman, his pet iguana. A large blue plastic swimming pool sat in the middle of his living room floor, filled with water and a few large rocks, a pump, a small bust sculpture of Elvis Presley, and a few balloons floating on the surface. His pet crocodile had recently passed away so the pool was more or less empty. Mike had been to the taxidermist earlier that day and had just received the preserved remains, which were passed around for inspection. His apartment was situated above a fetish club. It was a Friday evening and the floor was vibrating from the volume of the music below. The kitchen was rather messy. The sink was filled with dirty dishes, which were in turn filled with water. I was shown a pot on the stove containing boiling water and hospital utensils.*

*Mike described to me the utensils that were being sterilized on the stove. The utensils were found through thievery, the Salvation Army, and from over the counter supplies at drug stores. There was a tongue clamp, forceps, a metal poker, and half of a razor blade. The razor blade was one of those long old fashioned ones that had been split in half. Mike said that they had to boil for approximately an hour. When I decided to take a photograph, he cleaned the stovetop and put out a round pizza pan with a paper towel smoothed over top. He laid out a syringe filled with Novocain<sup>®</sup>, several needles, and later placed the sterilized utensils on it as well. (See Plate XXVI, Photos 7-A and 7-B) It reminded me of a hospital drop cloth prepared by a nurse before surgery. He filled a bowl with cotton balls and took a little brown bottle of Yunnan Pao out of his nap-sack.*

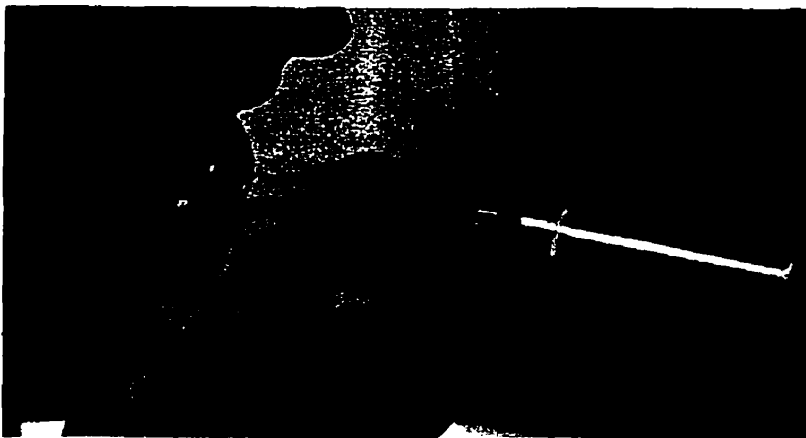
*While we waited for the utensils to sterilize, we talked about Mike's ideas on body modification and life in general. He showed me several of his scars; several on his arm and his chest, as well as his legs and back. Most of them are abstract marks. He said*



## **TONGUE FORKING**



*Above left and right:*  
Photos 7-A and 7-B: The operation site. Items are laid out and utensils sterilized.



*Left:*  
Photo 7-C: Inserting  
novocaine in tongue to  
anesthetize it.



*Left:*  
Photo 7-D: Pocket  
of blood released  
upon insertion of  
novocaine.

*Right:*  
Photo 7-E: The  
forking of the  
tongue begins.



*that he has mainly used abstract marks because he wanted to avoid getting "bumper stickers".*

*Steve left to pick up his wife Lori. Mike and I talked, while the pot on the stove boiled. He rolled some marijuana into a joint and smoked it. He apologized for being a chronic "pothead". When the utensils were sterile and had cooled down, he carefully clamped his tongue in the center, checking in the mirror several times to ensure that the placement was accurate, and letting the clamp dangle from his tongue as he prepared the tools. Mike picked up the syringe and put a needle on it as though he had done it a few times before. (See Plate XXVI, Photo 7-C) He pierced his tongue in the center of the clamp with the needle and pushed a little of the drug in, and then took the needle out. His tongue began to bleed a fair amount from the tiny hole the needle made. He became a little worried about the amount of blood as it dripped down the handles of the tongue clamp. (See Plate XXVI, Photo 7-D) He sopped it up with the cotton balls he had placed in the bowl on the stove. The bleeding subsided and he decided that it happened because the clamp had made a pocket of blood. Picking up the syringe again, he inserted the remaining Novocain into his tongue.*

*We sat down in the living room while Mike poked at his tongue, checking for feeling. He spoke to me the entire time with his tongue clamped and hanging out of his mouth. It was almost an entirely visual experience, as I could hardly understand a word he was saying. When he decided his tongue was frozen enough he picked up the razor. My immediate reaction was to turn away, thinking that I would be unable to watch, but quickly looked back through my camera lens and watched him place the sharp razor into his tongue very slowly.<sup>7</sup> It almost seemed as though it had not cut because there was no blood. The previous release from the needle must have emptied the blood out of the area and the clamp prevented further blood flow. (See Plate XXVI, Photo 7-E) Mike slowly cut at his tongue, but was making a face. He took the razor out. Something was wrong. "What's the matter I say?" He was feeling a deep pain in his jaw. There was a*

*part of the nerve that was not yet frozen. We sat and waited a while to see if it would freeze. He dabbed and blotted periodically at his tongue with cotton balls to wipe off the drool and a little blood. He also poked at his tongue with one of his sterilized instruments to see if it was frozen.*

*When Mike decided that he was indeed frozen enough to continue, he picked up the razor again. I became tense, closed my eyes, and gasped. He turned to look at me to see if I was all right. "No, I'm fine" I say. What have I got to be afraid of? It's not my tongue under the knife! I regained my senses, but still clutched my camera and tensed up all of my muscles. He inserted the razor into his tongue and slowly cut it in half. He moved the razor in an up and down motion. (See Plate XXVII, Photos 7-F and 7-G)*

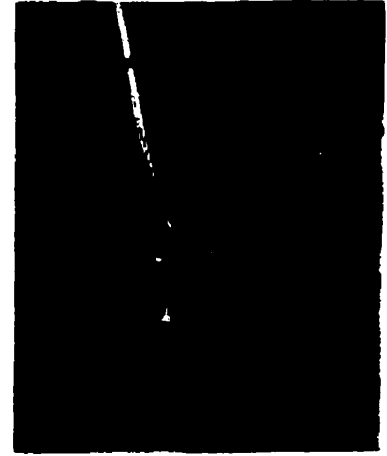
*There was a knock at the door. Great Timing. I ran down the stairs to answer it because Mike still had the razor blade in his tongue. It was Steve returning with Lori. I greeted and met Lori and then ran back upstairs. I had to witness this operation! Mike waited and posed for a photograph with the razor protruding from his tongue, while Lori and Steve came in and sat down. There was almost no blood. After taking the razor out of his tongue, Mike managed to communicate to us that when the clamp came off the blood would begin to flow. Lori and Steve are good friends of Mike's and have witnessed many of his self-modifications, and therefore, were not shocked at being greeted by him with a razor blade sticking out of his tongue.*

*Mike had become somewhat jittery before the surgery. While he was cutting, his hands were shaking. I was a little nervous because I thought he might slip and do some serious damage to himself. Neither of us said anything about his shaking, although when it was all finished he held his hand out to check his steadiness. He was well aware of how shaky he had been, but it was never mentioned.*

*Mike began to administer the Yunnan Pao to his freshly inflicted wounds. This would help clot the blood and prevent an excess flow of blood when the clamp was removed. He removed the clamp and a small amount of blood spilled into a strategically*



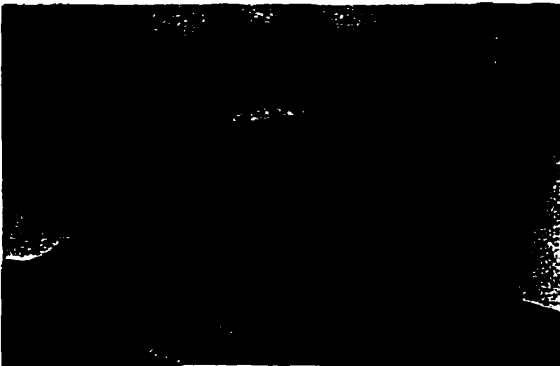
*Left:*  
Photo 7-F: Cutting  
from the top.



*Right:*  
Photo 7-G: Cutting  
from the bottom, to  
follow the natural line  
of the tongue.



*Left:*  
Photo 7-H: Moments after the  
procedure is completed, cotton is  
inserted between the tongue halves.



*Left:*  
Photo 7-I: The resulting wound.

*Right:*  
Photo 7-J: The tongue clamp and  
syringe after the procedure is  
completed.



*placed bucket from his freshly spliced tongue. The Chinese medicine worked well. His tongue bled very little.*

*Mike began to pack up the fresh wound with cotton balls, inserting them between his two tongue halves. (See Plate XXVII, Photo 7-H) I could hardly understand him when he spoke and he had to write his comments down on paper. He had already done this procedure twice and would have to do it again as he had not cut as deeply as he would have liked. While Mike waited for the blood to completely clot, the four of us sat around in his living room, Steve and Lori joked and teased Mike about his tongue. Mike's girlfriend Sara called while we were sitting around talking. She was repulsed by his tongue cutting and refused to go to his place that evening. He thought she would eventually overcome her squeamishness. I believe she did overcome her disgust for his forked tongue.*

*After about an hour and forty-five minutes, Mike removed the cotton balls and showed us the cut. It had stopped bleeding. (See Plate XXVII, Photo 7-I) It was a little crooked. He thought he might have to find a way to keep his tongue from growing together. Mike said that the base of the cut at the back of his tongue would heal closed, but hopefully not the entire tongue. He intended to cut his tongue so that the wound went to the top of the tendon, which means one or two more operations. This is the same problem face by the Australian Aborigines as explained in Chapter Two. After being subincised, the penis heals slightly closed at the base and is frequently re-cut several years later.*

*Mike talked about eventually cutting the tendon itself, but knew that could be very dangerous so will do some research before deciding to proceed. Cutting the tendon would allow him to stick his tongue out much further than normal. He knew a man who had his tendon severed, but it had not been long enough to know for sure what the consequences were.*

*I was invited back to watch the re-cutting almost two weeks later. His last incision almost completely healed closed. This procedure was almost identical except this time Mike cut back further than he anticipated and did not think he would have to cut it again. A few months later though, his tongue had begun to grow together and he again underwent the tongue splitting procedure. After that time he began to stretch the two tongue sections by putting something in between and applying pressure with his tongue. This was somewhat painful, but kept him from having to re-cut every few months. (See Plate XXVIII, Photos 7-k, 7-L, and 7-M)*

*"It really makes me feel more like me. I like it. I'm still at the stage where I like going up and forking it in the mirror. Because I have a forked tongue and that's good." (Interviewed on March 16, 2000)*

After living with a forked tongue for two weeks, Mike talked a bit about the differences he experienced in having two tongues. He had planned for having two points on his tongue, having eating difficulties, and talking difficulties. The psychological differences though, were something he had not anticipated. His example was the idea of making one thing into two, something that he was very pleased about. He could move it in new ways, almost independently. He wished he could go back to compare, but is happy with his forked tongue.

*"I had an injured one of something and then there was two." – Mike (Interviewed on March 16, 2000)*

Mike could not remember exactly where the idea came from but knew he had the idea for a long time, he had seen it somewhere and thought it was striking and original. He had a garter snake when he was seven and has always liked reptiles, possessing them as pets repeatedly throughout his life. He also simply thought it would be "cool" to have a forked tongue. He suspected that hearing the expression "White man speaks with forked tongue" the first time probably had an influence. This was when he was around 12 but did not think it was possible for



*Above:*  
Photo 7-K: One-month  
after the tongue  
forking procedure.



*Right:*  
Photo 7-L: Healed  
forked tongue after  
three different tongue  
forking



*Left:*  
Photo 7-M: New mobility is  
achieved after living with forked  
tongue for several months.

a person to actually have a forked tongue. Mike's first realization that it was possible was when he saw a performance artist with a forked tongue in Montreal a few years ago. When he realized it could be done without speech impediment, he made the decision. He wanted to have someone do it for him, but when no one would, he gathered information from medical books and devised a method to do it himself.

As the wound began to heal and the scabs fell off revealing a new skin surface, he began to discover new sensations on the inside of his tongue, like feel the depth of the cut. Trying to move each tongue section independently required intense mental concentration. He found it interesting to experience the procedure of his mind rewiring itself. Mike practiced in front of a mirror. The experience of trying to move his tongue in new ways was described as the feeling as when a dental anesthetic starts to wear off. It is the sensation of "can I feel that? I don't know if I can feel that?" He described a grasping for sensation and for awareness as well. Mike said that it has been a very interesting internal exploration of himself.

I was curious about the bodily sensations that Mike felt while he was cutting his tongue. The first time I witnessed him cut, he experienced some jaw and nerve pain that happened because the area was not completely frozen. In the subsequent cuttings a distinct non-sensation marked the experience. He could see the razor in his tongue, but felt nothing. Mike revealed that the sound of the razor cutting his tongue was rather disconcerting. It was similar to the sound of carving a roast, but from the inside. He experienced many distinct sensations, however, after he cut. As for his emotional state while he was operating on himself, he first regarded it as an experiment. However, when he realized that he was cutting askew, he believed that he became detached and started to cut from the bottom of his tongue up. (See Plate XXVI, Plates 7-F and 7-G) It became more of a job that he had to finish and do right.

Mike believed that the fact that he forked his own tongue would give him a certain amount of credibility within the body modification community. He expected to receive an invitation to Mod Con, a convention for extreme body modifiers in Toronto (Summer 2000).



Before splicing his tongue Mike realized he had no credibility. He had no piercings, no tattoos, no implants, and a lot of brandings that were barely visible, but now felt that because he did the operation himself he would be included and not be perceived as a voyeur. It also ensured that certain people would now take him seriously as a body modifier and as a practitioner. In fact he did not get an invitation to the convention, which will be discussed below in another section of this chapter of the thesis.

The reactions he received from his body modifier friends have been favorable. Mike observed that body modifiers tend to notice his forked tongue immediately, but those who are not modifiers, do not notice. The reactions that he received from non-modifiers have been fairly similar. At first they are disturbed at the sight of the tongue, but quickly become curious and want more information. The reactions to this research project, concerning the tongue forking operation, by individuals who did not practice body modification were similar to Mike's unmodified friend's reactions. Upon first hearing of "tongue forking" people reacted with horror and disgust. Most, after the initial revulsion, became curious, asked multiple questions and wished to view the photographs of the operation. Some, however, could not even bear to discuss it, due to utter abhorrence at the thought of forking a tongue. These reactions were a physical revulsion based on the feeling of pain and the physical appearance of the forked tongue, and not on a belief that the body should not be altered.

Tongue forking is not as uncommon as previously thought. Two of Mike's friends are now interested in having Mike perform the operation on them. Through internet exploration, body modification websites can be discovered that feature tongue forking. One popular Canadian site has 18 pages of photographs on tongue splicing as well as a long list of people's experiences, highlighting the story of their tongue cutting. Mike submitted some of the photographs of his operation to this website and they have been posted. He has since attempted to detach himself from this group of people because he believed they were not serious about body modification. He felt they were doing these things because they have seen others do it and they will impress

people or be "cool". Mike and his group of friends are careful about researching the safest procedure but the photographs on the website are bloody and gory and the experiences give first person accounts and tend to be horror stories. Mike prides himself on his technical know-how and the fact that his modifications are well planned and the procedure researched and well organized.

Mike forked his tongue simply because he wanted to, and thought that the whole operation would have meant more to him had it hurt more. He noted that it hurt a bit, but had he not used the anesthetic he believed it would have meant something very different to him. This idea that personal meaning and painful body modifications are linked will be explored in detail in Chapter Five. This section concerning tongue forking can be paralleled with the case presented in chapter two about the Australian Aborigines. While one is a rite of passage and the other simply for show, the concept of cutting fleshy body parts to make them into two, or to make them bigger, corresponds.

### **Amputation**

*"Aesthetics in body modification can only be understood and appreciated through its procedural elements. How would a regular person be able to see beauty in an amputation? All they will see is that you are missing something. In order to appreciate its aesthetic quality, you have to understand how it is done and know that it has been done well."* – Mike (said in conversation on October 11, 2000)

*While at Mike's apartment to observe a branding, Paul stopped by shortly after it had been completed. The two men were having a regular conversation when Paul abruptly said "Oh Mike, you should see this." He took a small pill bottle out of his bag and tossed it over to Mike. Mike looked at it with a chuckle, then remarked, "Oh, you mummified it. Liz, do you want to see what this is?" Knowing full well that it was something peculiar, I asked, "Do I?" Mike tossed the container to me claiming it would be educational. I discovered Paul's mummified amputated finger inside.*

*Paul amputated his left little finger three years ago and placed it in the freezer where it remained the entire time. His plan was to boil the flesh off and to make a*

*pendant for a necklace with the bone, or possibly to implant it under the skin in his chest. He did not wrap the finger in plastic and had left it in the freezer too long and it developed freezer burn. When the finger was placed in boiling water, it hardened and shriveled up, turning brown and blue. He then packed the finger in salt to allow it to completely dry. Paul and Mike discussed the finger's potential for rotting and eventually decided that the salt should have preserved it for life.*

*Paul's decision to amputate his finger was to function as a healing ritual. As a child, his father had molested him. This caused intense mental anguish over the years. The amputation was his method of coming to terms with the incest following the many years of pain and distress. Paul had learned about body modifications in different cultures from National Geographic and specifically read about amputation in Africa.<sup>4</sup> After deciding that the little finger was the least necessary, he was able to put himself in a trance. Using a butcher knife, he placed his finger on a brick and chopped his finger off.*

*Following the amputation, Paul took himself to a hospital for medical help and lied to the doctors concerning how he lost his finger. They stitched the end of his finger closed and it now has a nice smooth surface of skin. He was very pleased with the smoothness of the stump and let me feel its texture. (See Plate XXXI, Photos 8-G and 8-H)*

*Paul still keeps the remains of his finger in the pill bottle. He also keeps a clear plastic box labeled "Leftovers". In it he keeps all of the scabs he peeled from the many brands he has received, souvenirs of the healing process. (See Plate XXIII, Photo 5-L)*

The pain, and the fact that he performed the amputation himself, were key issues to Paul. The pain was a necessary element in the ritual. Pain is a common feature in ritual rites of passage as explained in the cross-cultural section of this thesis through the examples of the Nuer and the Australian Aborigines. The concept of pain being used to create a memorable event, ensuring a valuable lesson will not be forgotten will be elaborated on in Chapter Five. Paul used pain to create an unforgettable ritual to ease his mental anguish. The stubbed finger acts as a

## Finger Amputation



*Right:*  
Photo 8-G:  
Mummified portion of the  
amputated finger, demonstrated  
in the hand of which it was  
amputated.

*Below:*  
Photo 8-H: Top view of amputation.



constant reminder of his strength to endure. By doing the amputation himself, Paul understood that he was taking control of his own life and body.

After attending a convention in Toronto for extreme body modifiers, Paul met some other deliberate amputees. There was an older man, Arthur, who, during the 1970's, removed part of his arm, as well as others who had amputated fingers. Paul took several photographs of he and Arthur, both displaying their stumps proudly. He was very impressed that Arthur had amputated his own arm at a time well in advance of the recent popularity of body modification. Due to these facts, Paul held a deep respect for him.

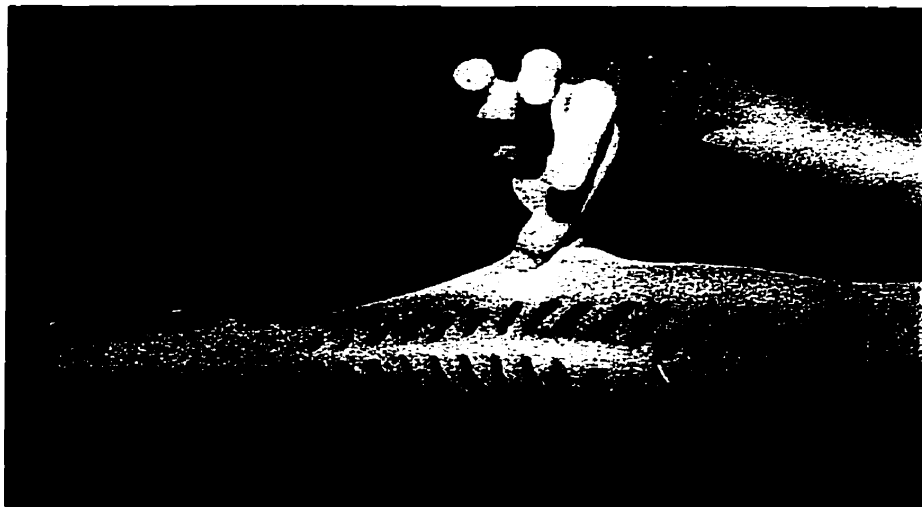
### **Implanting**

Implanting is the insertion of an object beneath the skin to produce an altered effect on the surface texture or shape. It can range from breast implants made of saline filled balloons, to small pearls, bars, or any shaped design made of teflon, titanium, implant grade stainless steel, or nylon placed beneath any surface of skin. The materials are received from supply stores, which also supply high quality jewelry to piercing studios. The implants come with papers certifying that they are of implant grade.

Small pearl implants have traditionally been a part of the Yakuza, the Japanese Mafia. Often lower members in the Mafia will take the blame for a superior's crime and spend time in jail. The inmate will have one pearl implanted under the skin of the penis for each year spent in prison. He would sharpen a chopstick and make a small incision in the skin of the shaft of his penis and insert the pearl. Each pearl looked like a large wart when healed. The pearls are approximately ¼ inch in diameter (Vale and Juno 1989). The pearl was a status symbol, but also provided extra sexual pleasure. Several informants have relayed this as a history about pearl implants. Implanting was also practiced among the Maya of Central America. They implanted pieces of bone or stone into the penis to enhance sexual pleasure. Pieces of bone and stone were also implanted beneath scarifications to make the scar larger and more obvious (McNab 1999).

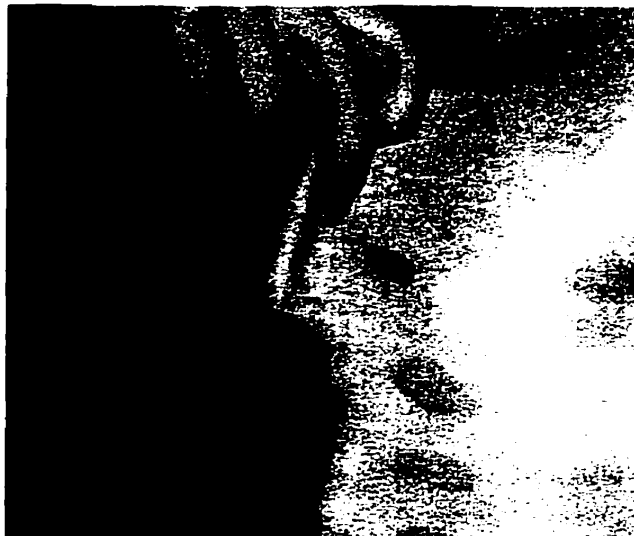
My principle informant, Mike relayed the story of acquiring and then losing his implants:

## **IMPLANTATION**



*Left:*  
Photo 8-A: Bar  
implant in the  
forearm as well as  
on top of hand.

*Right:*  
Photo 8-B: Chest implants.



*Left:*  
Photo 8-C: Chest implants  
consisting of implant-grade  
teflon bars and balls.

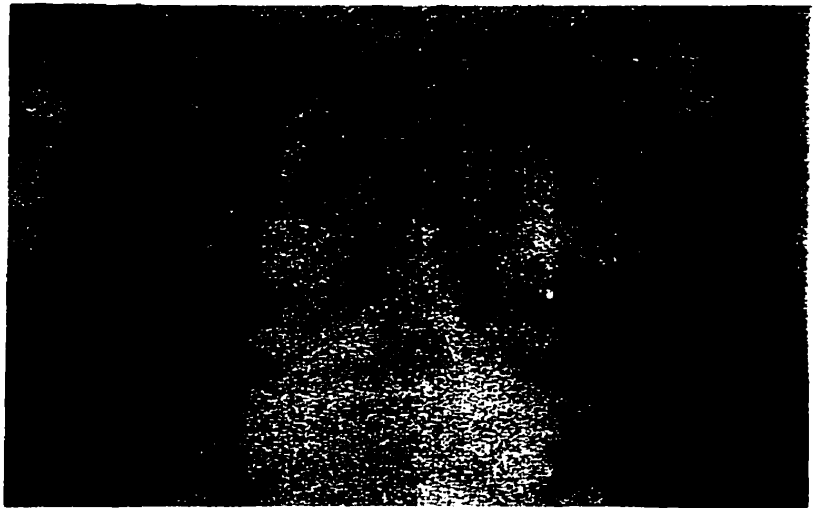
*Mike decided to have small pearl implants inserted around the head of his penis. He asked a friend who practices surgical procedures underground to do the operation. Surgical grade stainless steel was used instead of implant grade because it was all that could be found at the time. Anesthetic was used and two rows of pearls were inserted around the head of his penis.*

*When the stitches were removed two of the balls fell out. One of the wounds created to insert the balls healed over, but the other did not. Both became infected, but the wound that healed swelled up to the size of a ping-pong ball, the other side remained open and weeping. The wound that inflated rattled with the pearls inside, which he thought was hilarious, labeling his penis "a rattle snake".*

*His friend inserted a syringe to drain the swollen ball of puss and a sickly brown fluid came out. They removed the pearls as the infection was a definite sign of rejection and that his body would never accept them. After visiting a doctor for another reason, Mike decided to show him his weeping and swelled up penis and was prescribed an antibiotic. He plans to try the procedure again, but will do it gradually, one row at a time, instead of all in one attempt. He will also use the proper materials.*

Paul and Ken also have the pearl implants in their penises; theirs have healed successfully. (See Plate XXX, Photo 8-E) They both also have other implants. Paul had some implant grade nylon bars implanted in his hand and forearm. (See Plate XXIX, Photo 8-A) They follow in line with the bones in his arm and hand. The implant in his forearm was acquired because when a child, he periodically slashed his arm due to the molestation. When he stopped slashing he used the implant to signify that he would never self mutilate again. He would modify in aesthetic and non-destructive ways. He also has four smaller bars implanted over the tendons in his hand. He originally had them implanted in his right bicep to mirror the brands in his other arm. A series of eight bars were inserted, but they migrated up his arm because of muscle movement. He had them removed and inserted into his hand where they remain.

*Right:*  
Photo 8-D: Full-frontal  
view of chest implants.



*Left:*  
Photo 8-E:  
Penis implants consisting of three  
implant-grade steel pearls.

*Right:*  
Photo 8-F:  
Nine teflon  
balls  
implanted  
over the  
clavical.





At the convention in Toronto, Paul had two large bars implanted over his pectorals and three small balls directly underneath them. (See Plate XXIX, Photos 8-B, 8-C, and Plate XXX, Photo 8-D) They are half cylinders and half balls, so that they rest nicely on his chest but bulge out. The surgery was performed by a body modification practitioner who has specialized in implants. He anesthetized the area. Paul wanted six balls inserted, but was impossible because he had too little body fat. The probe creates a tunnel for the implant to travel below the surface of the skin and needs a layer of fat to lubricate.

Even though the area was anesthetized, Paul reported that it still felt very strange. He mimicked it by putting his hand inside his shirt and moving it around. The drive back to Montreal was horrible because the implanted area was swollen and happened to be where the seat belt rubs across the chest. He padded the area with t-shirts, but it was still painful. Ken had his implants done at the convention as well by the same man. His were put in over his clavicles and he had the same seat belt problem as Paul.

Paul received the bar and pearl implants in his chest at the convention simply because he wanted them. His original plan was to implant his amputated finger bone into his chest over his heart but because his finger was preserved intact, it was impossible. His intention was to relate it to his childhood trauma of sexual abuse signifying "never again". His next implanting project will consist of a series of balls down the middle of his chest resembling a spine. The penis implants were done for purely sexual reasons.

As with scarification, implanting tends to be performed underground. Finding someone who practices it and is proficient in implanting is usually done through referral in the body modification community. Implanting, though, has become fairly common among extreme body modifiers, but are not yet a part of mainstream, or popular culture. There is a potential for implants to become popular because, as with body piercing, they can be removed eventually without excessive trauma or expense. The price of acquiring them though, may be a deterrent.

When a practitioner can be found who will competently place the implants, the price usually starts at approximately \$200.

The ethnographic chapter of the thesis has placed a great deal of emphasis on process. The processes of becoming tattooed, pierced, scarified, and amputated were highlighted. The process of becoming modified is very important to extreme modifiers, especially self-modifiers. Often, the processes are assumed, the final product being the anticipated prize and subject for discussion. The emphasis on process in this thesis has been to provide a full picture of body modification because it is an intrinsic aspect. In order to receive the completed and healed modification, the person must go through certain actions, often lengthy and painstaking. While many people simply tolerate the process and state that if it was not painful or time consuming, everyone would be modified. Others use the process to their own personal and emotional advantage, as a ritual, the final product acting as a symbol of the process and experience. While the process has been shown to be as social as it is utilitarian, the following section will provide more details concerning the social aspects of body modification. The social realities concerning public perceptions, modifiers perceptions of each other, and the political action between them will be discussed.

### **Social Realities in Body Modification: Perceptions and Politics**

While tattooing and piercing have become a part of mainstream culture, there are still questions surrounding its acceptability and its perception in society. Often, people wearing the most common type of modifications are forced to remove jewelry and cover tattoos at their place of employment. While most body modifiers feel there is a prejudice against those with body markings, few had stories to share. My main proof that there is a lack of understanding of those who become modified rests in the frequent reactions of unmarked individuals to this research. Opinions are usually offered on tattooing and body piercing, most of which are negative. A common question asked by unmarked individuals is: "Why would anyone want to do *that* to their

body?" This question holds an underlying assumption that all people should feel the same about their body; because they do not want to permanently mark their body, no one else should either.

This research experience provided contact with a wide array of people, heavily modified, moderately modified, and completely unmodified. When this research began, many friends, peers, and acquaintances expressed great concern for safety issues during fieldwork, after first questioning what the appeal was in this topic. One woman commented that I should "try to look and act tough" after bumping into her while going to a tattoo shop to introduce myself. It became apparent that those who expressed fear and gave warnings had never been inside a tattoo or piercing studio. They were reacting to the stereotypes that are perpetuated in our society of the type of person who becomes tattooed and works in a tattoo shop. Stereotypes are generalizations based on a group of people with the same interests, ethnicity, religion, political views, or any commonality. The generalizations are used to describe a person or a group of people. Stereotypes are slow to change and perceive the group as homogenous, diversity among the stereotyped group is not recognized (Cunningham and Lab 1991, Bourhis et al 1997). While the stereotypes of tattooed and pierced people are changing, many people still think that those who alter their bodies are morally bad people, linking them to the historically documented fact that tattooing used to be only practiced by criminals, sailors, and prostitutes (DeMello 1995a, 2000, Govenar 2000, Sanders 1988.) The stereotypes are perpetuated through media depiction's of tattooed individuals, through historical ideas, and through those who wear tattoos who correspond to the stereotype.

The people who were familiar with tattooing and piercing reacted to this research in a different way. They would inquire about the names of shops research was being conducted in and which artists were being interviewed. After naming a shop, they would frequently offer advice on which place to try because the artist they know is "the best" and the other shop mentioned is "the worst". Upon further discussion, it was discovered that they had never been inside or met the tattooist in "the worst" shop and were quoting "reliable sources." Tattooists and

tattooed people were constantly giving warnings concerning certain shops in the city that should be avoided. Due to the nature of anthropological fieldwork, these shops were called and interviews were scheduled. Through these interviews and observations, these shops proved to be just like the others. An interesting dynamic between tattoo and piercing studios was discovered through this exercise. Due to the lack of advertising, word of mouth, sterilization politics, and blatant slander helps to funnel clients to certain shops. Some shops are clouded by a bad reputation because rumors are spread by another shop. However, even shops that receive a bad reputation in this way, stay in business. As Marcel, explained it, "every shop has their fans and their enemies no matter how good or bad they are." (Marcel, interviewed on August 11, 2000) Much of the body modification industry is centered on this type of politics.

### **Tattooing and Body Piercing Studios**

The public perceptions surrounding body modification tend to differ according to the type of modification and the degree to which it varies from the mainstream. The social aspects differ according to the type of modification as well. With tattooing and body piercing, they involve bickering, in-fighting and spreading rumors, similar aspects that are involved with running a business and trying to make money. The social aspects concerning extreme modification will be discussed in the next section.

All tattooists and piercers agreed that there are many differences between tattoo and piercing shops. Some show nothing but respect for their competition, but speak of quality in the art, which is linked to each particular shop in a grade-sale. For example, tattoo shops that copy flash from the walls onto people's skin are negatively perceived by those working in custom shops and called "scratchers". Those who create their own designs or modify flash for a personal touch are respected as artists by those employed in both custom and flash shops<sup>9</sup>. Rachael, a tattooist at a flash centered shop, declared that she would not work in that shop for a long time because she wanted to be in one that only provided custom tattoos. Rachael believes that there is little respect in wearing a tattoo that is unoriginal, nor to be the tattooist who put it there. This

is because a thousand other people can choose the same flash design. She, as well as other custom tattooists, felt strongly that tattoos should be unique.

Body piercers are judged on whether they are a tattooist who pierces or a specialized piercer as well as whether or not they work in a combination tattoo shop or an exclusive piercing studio. The piercer's reputation in a combination shop usually rests on the reputation of the shop as a whole. The tattoo area is usually dominant, more people enter the shop to be tattooed and more tattooists are employed. If the tattoo area has a good reputation, then the piercing area does as well. Only one of the combination shops has a piercing section that is larger than the tattoo section. (See Page 35 - Table 1, Shop A)

*There are people who care and people who don't care. Those who just copy flash off the wall I can't respect because they are just scratchers. They are just in it for the money. Then there are the ones who don't draw but they like the job and they do it well. I respect those people. They are good people. Then there are those who went to art college and draw well and love it. Even if a tattooist doesn't draw they should still take photos of their work because a person shouldn't get tattooed if they haven't seen the tattooist's work before. Some see the shops as companies; I don't because if someone opens up shop down the street I will still have customers. Even if a tattooist sucks, he will still have customers because someone will love his work and think he is the king. People should understand that it is art. – Marcel (interviewed on August 11, 2000)*

The distinction between tattooists remains between those who create their own designs and those who copy flash, as well as those who are good and bad artists, but it is not exactly that simple. An emphasis is also placed on the attitude of the tattooist. One tattooist, John, spoke of another who had begun to show a bad attitude in the past few years. He was being ill tempered with customers and patronizing with other tattooists. He was thought to be becoming too self-important. He also refused to make small talk with clients. If a client was talkative while becoming tattooed he would stop and ask them if they wanted to be tattooed or to go and see a psychiatrist. This attitude is negatively perceived because tattooing is being recognized not only as a social event, but as an important one for the client. Because tattoos are recognized as having meaning, the process is labeled as important as well.

*There are the flash walk-in oriented places and there are a few custom oriented places with a higher caliber of artists. They are not only technically and artistically better, but their attitude towards it is better. In a better shop the artists are willing to talk to the clients and*

*figure out what they want and look at designs rather than just get them in and get them out.  
- Zoe (interviewed on August 15, 2000)*

Most tattooists and piercers spoke of the caliber of artists and quality of work, only one person addressed the issue of cutthroat competition head on:

*There is a lot of competition in the city and it is often slanderous. When we had a special last year the other place told people that we reused needles. Every once in a while I will have to give a tour with a mother and a daughter so they can check the place out. People tend to believe what they hear. I always tell them that they should go and check it out for themselves, but they never want to. They say it was from a reliable source. People really rely on word of mouth and rumors. But they stay with one shop. It's a cutthroat business. -  
Martin (interviewed on August 28, 2000)*

The tattooists and piercers rarely spoke of the relations between shops, but always inquired of the other shops in which research was being carried out. Their reactions usually consisted of eye rolling and the occasional derogatory comment about that place or a person who worked there. They were fairly cautious in their comments about these shops as they were aware that they were being consulted for this research as well. Customers were less circumspect with their comments concerning other shops, perhaps because they had less to lose by gossiping. Clients relied on word of mouth and rumors to make their choice in which shop to have their work done. They would frequently relay these comments concerning certain shops, and had rarely been inside those they were putting down. Word of mouth and the opinion of friends is highly valued.

Where people receive their tattoo or piercing depends on areas they are familiar within the city and if their friends are tattooed or pierced. Usually people will go to the same place as their friends, as loyalty to certain shops is exceptional, although this loyalty is stronger towards tattooists than towards piercers. This is probably due to the higher degree of artistry involved in tattooing. Before becoming tattooed, people usually ask their tattooed friends where they had theirs done. The shop where their tattoo was received, assuming they are happy the work, will be praised and recommended, and all other shops will be disparaged. It is an interesting phenomenon that was witnessed repeatedly. The fact that there are many tattoo and piercing studios throughout the city of Montreal, with competent and talented artists, is rarely recognized.

An interesting example of the slanderous type of competition that occurs among tattoo and piercing studios involves a negative article that was written about one of them. A tattooist refused someone with HIV, believing it was his human right to refuse to expose himself to a deadly disease. While the client had a right to go to the media, the article written was one-sided. The tattooist and the shop that refused him were both named, but the shop that did tattoo the person with HIV was not named (Burnett 2000). This is an excellent example of the type of competition and politics that occurs within the body modification industry. Others are constantly trying to mark their competition as incompetent.

### **Extreme Body Modification**

The politics surrounding extreme forms of modification are centered on acceptability in society and there is little professional jealousy and bickering. Extreme forms of body modification are practiced underground meaning they are not practiced professionally for the general public. Those who become modified in extreme ways tend to be of a closed social circle. Due to the referral method of searching for a practitioner, they often know each other.

People usually decide to receive an extreme modification because they feel tattooing or piercing has become too mainstream and they do not want to be like everyone else. There are some people who are doing extreme modification because they think it is "cool" and others who associate themselves with the modern primitives, a group originating from San Francisco who have been exploring cross-cultural material for body altering ideas and appropriating them. The search for meaning in a meaningless Western world through the exploration of their tribal roots is the subject of discussion for modern primitives. Those who become a part of this group, though, are generally not taken seriously or accepted by society.

The major issue surrounding extreme modification is that people find it strange and assume that those becoming cut, scarred, and implanted have mental problems, labeling it as body mutilation. Each of the forms of body modifications have some aspects in common, from small tattoos to implants. They are done for any of the six reasons already outlined, but always

and importantly, with the intent to be decorative, even the more extreme forms. People rarely practice body modification in a self-destructive way; modifications are executed in a social environment with help and advice from friends.

Medical literature has studied body modification within the context of mental illness, believing it could be the only explanation for Westerners to practice such things (Myers 1992, Favazza 1996). Mental illness, however, is not at issue in this thesis because it is not the defining influence of these practices. It must be noted that there is a difference between mutilation and modification. Mutilation is performed because of psychosis. Extreme body modification is done in aesthetic patterns and in a social environment. It is well planned and well organized; the technique thought out in detail beforehand and refined through experimentation. It is not performed in a depressed, irrational or psychotic state. This can be seen in the previous ethnographic sections of this thesis. People practice extreme body modification for several different psychological reasons that are similar to those who acquire mainstream modifications: to beautify, to mark events, to individuate, to identify with a group, as a healing ceremony, or a sexual enhancement. Individuals tend to link with other extreme modifiers, rarely altering their bodies in private and keeping the modifications to themselves. Body modification is performed in a social environment with social consequences of which they are aware. The convention in Toronto mentioned in the ethnographic section is just one example of this.

In attempts to be understood and accepted by society, extreme body modifiers compare plastic surgery to tongue forking, ear stretching, and implants. They complain of society condoning plastic surgery, but not accepting their form of body modification. Extreme body modifiers think that plastic surgery produces clones, people that look alike, having the same beauty ideals and standards. They believe that society thinks those who do not look like the norm are mentally unbalanced. Some body modifiers, however, play the role of the demented person through performance shows in which they act scary, swallowing swords, lying on beds of nails, and performing ball dances<sup>10</sup>. Marcel, an extreme body modifier, informed me that due to the



popular perceptions of body modifiers, it makes him want to *not* do the things that are expected of him like have a criminal record and have a drug problem.

According to Armando Favazza (1996), cutting or burning for psychotic reasons and cutting for decorative reasons have been defined as similar in the medical literature, in fact there is little distinction made between the two. For some, it is easier to place them together labeling them as deviant than to try to understand why anyone would want to create so much pain simply to decorate their bodies, purposefully excluding themselves from society. During research, many non modifiers have asked about the mental state of those informants who practice extreme modification. Some may indeed be performing these decorative modifications to help overcome mental anguish and even because of narcissistic or exhibitionistic tendencies. There is, however, a difference, socially and mentally, between an isolated person in a depressed state slashing their arm with a razor blade and a person with an audience present, carving a stylized fish into the side of their leg after a relationship ended. One is highly organized and socially gratifying and the other is not. The stylized fish was a personal marking for healing with the acceptance and guidance of friends and the personal sanctioning through the use of cross-cultural material.

Deutschmann (1994: 35) defines deviance as being "best identified as a process in which a stigmatizing label is placed on people by others who claim they are just enforcing social rules." What if people are deliberately using symbols defined as deviant in order to distinguish and separate themselves from mainstream society? This type of self-marking and self-identifying could be defined as a method of political resistance. Through the permanence of body modification, modifiers are commenting on the status quo, specifically on society's definition of an appropriate and acceptable body. Modifiers are taking control of their bodies. They are creating their own image of what is acceptable and normal, finding freedom from the Western concept of body, which is perceived as an impossible ideal. While this is often interpreted as deviance, through using Julian Tanner's (1992) model of Canadian youth culture, it is not. He defines Canadian youth culture as remarkably non-deviant. He states that deviance among

Canadian youth exists with aspirations of a conventional life. Research supports this statement.<sup>11</sup> Ken owns a reputable and upscale body piercing studio, Paul holds a full-time job as a computer technician, Mike is an honor's student in university, and Josie is employed as a make-up artist. Each of these people who have marked themselves as deviant are acting as functional members of society. Deviant youth culture is typified through rejection and failure in school, unemployment and dead-end jobs (Tanner 1992). While these individuals are partaking in an activity, labeled as deviant by some, they do not fit Tanner's model of deviance.

Extreme body modifiers are searching for status and prestige within society as well as within the body modification community. This has been shown through their participation in television interviews and through public body modification performances. Society values difference and originality. To be "cool" is to be different, and gives one status, makes them known and memorable. At present, extreme modifiers are labeled as deviant, but because of their participation in society, they could also be labeled as "cutting edge" originals and creative artists. Deutschmann (1994) and Tanner (1992) both label this type of deviance as a "Bohemian Tradition," which are individuals living on the edge of the artistic community. They tend to be both working-class and middle-class people who choose their particular lifestyle, and who embrace extreme political views, in this case, extreme views on the body. Originality in the type of modification and the design are important social issues concerning prestige between body modifiers. For example, Paul, noted in the branding, implanting, and amputation sections, remarked that he was unable to receive a certain implanted design that he really wanted because he knew someone with the identical design and did not want to be perceived as copying him. Having original ideas is very important as is becoming accepted by other extreme modifiers. Mike almost did not receive an invitation to the convention because he was not considered extreme enough, despite the fact that he forked his own tongue, has over 20 brands and is also a brander. Being considered extreme is to have made modification a way of life by acquiring visible permanent alterations which have social implications. Those who can hide their modifications are

perceived as voyeurs. For some in the body modification scene, it is as important to be rejected by mainstream society as it is to be accepted by other modifiers, yet, many of these modifiers are functioning normally within society, holding jobs and attending school. They simply stand out as different and become a deviant curiosity where they work and attend school.

There is not a great deal of competition among the extreme forms of body modification, in a business sense. The competition usually rests between individual body modifiers and practitioners because there is yet to be shops established selling scarification, implanting, and amputation services. As previously mentioned, the modifications are practiced by individuals on a reference basis, underground. However, there have been rumors spread by businesses that another shop is practicing certain extreme modifications. There has also been evidence of a minor rivalry between Mike, the brander in Montreal and one in Toronto. Mike had nothing nice to say about any other brander he had met, seen on television, or read about. Only he knew the proper way to produce an effective scar through branding.

Paul spoke about a problem he faced due to his brands and his implants. His supervisor at work informed him that they were phasing out his position. A new one at higher pay was opening up, which he was considered to be well qualified for, but because he had a bad image, he will likely not be recommended to assume the position.

*"She is obese, and that's OK, I have burns and it's not." – Paul (interviewed on October 28, 2000)*

Paul complained that when people speak to him they do not look in his face. He can see them looking at the scars on his arms. Tattooed individuals likely have the same problem, much staring was witnessed by strangers when walking down the street with heavily tattooed people, their eyes concentrating on the inked body part.

The lack of understanding towards altered bodies can be somewhat paradoxical. In a sense, body modifiers want to be accepted for who they are, what they do, and how they look, yet they relish their marginal status, their ability to stand out in a crowd, and to make heads turn

and wonder about them. As body modification becomes mainstream, body modifiers must push further to maintain their marginal place in society.

This section concerning the social realities of body modification has helped to show that there is more to the body modifications than just the visual aspect, there is an industry surrounding it which has become a way of life for many. This industry is much like others in that there are daily realities that must be faced, like competition with others and the public's perception of the business and of body modifiers in general. Body modification becomes multi-faceted as an identity, a fashion, and a business.

The analytical section that comprises the next chapter combines each specific modification, which have been separated in this chapter, into theories that encompass each. The focus is on the use of body modification in a search for identity. Different theories concerning identity are explored, such as the necessity of individuality and group membership and how body modification produces a sense of both. The prevalent discourse concerning body modification is that of the modern primitives. While there are not many in Montreal who are aware of the modern primitivist ideology under this name, there is an overwhelming interest in "The Primitive". The notion of the primitive and the use of the body in ritual, which people in Montreal are aware of and using, is basically identical to the modern primitive ideology, but is not labeled as modern primitive. The following chapter explores the use of pain, ritual and spirituality. It describes the modern primitive ideology in more detail and shows how it applies to the Montreal data using concepts such as cultural appropriation and collection. Finally, mainstream body modification is explored in the last theoretical section with regards to consumption and popular culture.

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## **V. Identity and Body Modification**

Identity is a sense of self-hood and a distinctiveness that people constantly negotiate and re-negotiate throughout their lives. It is linked with kinship, age, ethnicity, gender, religion, personality and group association. Identity is never fixed. It changes over time, but also in the moment, depending on emotion, or the people with whom the individual is associating. There are some aspects of a person's identity that cannot be altered, such as age or ethnicity, but they can be masked. Even gender has become malleable and one's sex can be changed. As Calhoun (1995: 223) has noted "identities are often personal and political projects in which we participate, empowered to greater or lesser extents by resources of experience and ability, culture and social organization."

The body is recognized as a natural symbol of society in the social sciences (Synnott 1993). The body has become an increasing focus of self-identity because it appears to provide a foundation to construct a reliable sense of self (Shilling 1993). The body's reliable sense of self comes from its materiality and the definitiveness of ownership. The body, and any alterations to it, cannot be taken away from its owner except in death. Body modifiers hold this basic underlying belief that their body is their own to do with as they please and use permanent alterations to etch identity on the body, or to help create one through the use of ritual. Those who become modified often claim pride in their body, increased self-esteem, and a greater sense of self-hood.

How people negotiate their identity through body modification is the subject of this chapter, the theoretical section of this thesis. According to Chris Shilling (1993), the maintenance and alterations of our bodies has an impact on feelings of self-worth and self-identity. This was confirmed through research as statements were made such as "I feel more like myself" or "I feel better about who I am and want to show my tattoos." Through adornment, a person can create a sense of self and a social identity, using symbols that are interpreted by others. With the use of

the ethnographic material and the cross-cultural data presented above, this chapter will elaborate on how body modification is used to help people search for and to discover their identities.

### **Individuality and Group Membership**

*"The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination." (Foucault 1977: 170)*

Recently in the West, advances in technology and new body ideologies have made it increasingly possible for people to alter their bodies. In the last two decades, the body has been viewed as a project, an unfinished entity that should be worked on and accomplished as a part of an individual's self-identity. A person's size, shape, appearance and even contents can be reconstructed and altered to fit their vision of self. The boundaries of the body have been revised and the outer layer of the body has become permeable (Giddens 1991). Chris Shilling (1993) states that the body as a project means that the individual is conscious of and concerned with the management, maintenance, and appearance of their body. This recognizes that the body gives off messages of one's self-identity (Lock 1993). Bodies become malleable entities, which can be shaped and honed by their owners. People in the West have not only become increasingly aware and concerned with their bodies but also have the knowledge and technical ability to substantially alter them (Shilling 1993).

"Investing in the body provides people with a means of self-expression and a way of potentially feeling good and increasing control they have over their bodies" (Shilling 1993:7).

While research has showed that the body is being altered in new and intriguing ways, Christian Klesse (1999) has argued that the body and identity has not turned into an option for all subjects in all situations and all contexts as Giddens and Shilling have suggested. Racism forces identities on people that cannot be changed or controlled. However, the body as a project does not mean that everyone has the willingness or ability to transform their bodies in radical ways, but it does assume that people are aware of the possibilities. There are many factors besides ethnicity that force identities on people as well as prohibit them from altering and

controlling their bodies. Class, age, gender, religion, knowledge, economic constraints, individual preference, and culture all become relevant. People are able to use these limitations in new ways due to the realizations of the body's plasticity.

Field research discovered that body modification is being practiced mostly among white middle class people. While most of the population are indeed aware of the possibilities concerning some forms of body alterations such as plastic surgery, tattooing, and body piercing, other forms are less commonly known, such as scarification or tongue forking. Once people who are interested in becoming modified in these ways are found, the main limitations to individual's use of body modification include economic constraints and skin color. Tattoo ink does not show through very dark skin. While black tattoo ink may work for some darker skin tones, colors tend to not show through. Therefore, a person with very dark skin does not have the option of becoming tattooed. Scarification, however is more successful on darker toned people; dark skin keloids easier and bigger than lighter toned skin. A person with any skin tone can receive implants, but the cost, at \$200, is very high, limiting those on a fixed income.

The ethnographic section of this thesis has shown that in Montreal, this idea that the body can be altered to fit one's notion of identity and self is present among body modifiers. The ideas were witnessed among many of the tattooed people interviewed, Mike's tongue forking operation, and through Paul's finger amputation. People have always been concerned with decorating and inscribing their identities on their bodies (Shilling 1993, Groning 1997). Body marks in non-industrial societies, however, are permanent, collective and obligatory. They are a part of a shared culture of collective identity and the significance of a tattoo can be read unambiguously. In contemporary Western society, the tattoo is not confined, but extends across the social scale. Tattoos are increasingly used for aesthetic enhancement and do not indicate or define gender, social status or life stage; they become optional (Turner 1999). In non-industrial societies, marks are inscribed for group identity and the body is marked with traditional signs in

ritualized settings. By contrast, the body in modernity is more frequently treated as an individual expression of identity (Shilling 1993).

While this sense of individualism may seem to be the case in Western society, and it is what people are saying they are experiencing, on the whole, this may not be exactly what is happening. The concepts of control, choice, and individuality concerning bodies will be explored due to the hegemony inherent in these ideas. People feel that they have control over their bodies; the choice is limitless and they can mark their body however they please. But, as Susan Bordo (1997) has argued, when dealing with issues of free choice, there are hegemonic processes that need to be considered which limit the possibility of autonomous decisions. The hegemonic processes make people believe they are making free choices, but there are limitations in the choices available, for example: language, religion, morality, ethnicity, cultural perceptions, and regulations. There is also an ideology behind the choices that shapes how they are used. Different ideas concerning the ideal body shift in time and greatly influence how people maintain their body. The body is not only a text of culture, but also a direct point of social control. Bodies experience forces and energies and become accustomed to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and improvement, through normalizing disciplines of diet, make up, and dress (Bordo 1989). According to Michel Foucault (1977), the power of the norm is used to discipline and control. The norm is used like surveillance, which is a great instrument of power, with the ability to define the eccentric body based on the norm. In short, various methods of social control which produce different body effects are denied and free choice is assumed.

Individualism is a strong influence to become marked. Many participants in this research directly expressed that difference is of value and was their reasons for becoming modified. However, as more people become marked, collectivity and communal rites are created, which are perceived as absent in Western culture (Klesse 1999). Each person who becomes tattooed or pierced also becomes attached to a group: a community of body modifiers and in extreme cases, the modern primitives. While these groups are not homogenous, each member is not entirely



unique either, many commonalities run between them. Mike, for example, thought that when he forked his tongue that he was being unique. However, when he submitted the photographs to a website for publication he discovered a fairly large category of forked tongued individuals.

In the West we have an ideal of individuality, but we tend to think that each individual is much more unique than they actually are (Hewitt 1997, Bordo 1997). In a sense, people are both individual and group members. In a society that is deeply concerned with individuality, the fact that our choices are limited and bound by culture is often difficult to accept. This contradiction of uniqueness and group membership can be seen through body modification conventions where individuals search for like-minded individuals who are doing the same things... only differently. They may all be receiving implants, but each implant is in a different place or is a different shape. Each implanted person is photographed at the convention individually, but grouped together as implanted people. Cohesiveness and individuality both are assumed.

Culture not only communicates our identities to others, it also creates and manages those identities. Dress and adornment is one medium that shapes and communicates personal and social identity, it is also linked to social values. Particular groups within society tend to adopt approaches to the body which correspond to their social location (Shilling 1993, Lock 1993, T. Turner 1993). Appropriateness in dress and adornment is important for self-expression and group affiliation. People need to look "right" to conform to the groups in which they belong or seek membership (Cunningham and Lab 1991). Body perception is a significant part in the formation of identity. When group membership is vital to identity, it is marked in some way, usually on the body.

### **Individuality and Gender**

The modified female body is different from the modified male body due to cultural perception. "A woman's appearance is always judged as important and in some way representative of who she is" (Brush 1998:38). While men with large amounts of body art may be marginalized because of a perception of aggressiveness and deviance; females have the

added stigmatization of going against their proper gender roles. A modified female body is dangerous, hardened and often unfeminine. Heavily tattooed women described themselves as taking charge of their bodies. The word empowerment is often used in terms of identity formation, spirituality and overcoming adversity (DeMello 1995b). Robert Murphy (1987) argued that because women are expected to maintain their bodies to perfection, to become heavily tattooed is a rejection of these ideals. Heavily tattooed women are perceived as openly mocking conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. A tattooed woman may feel empowered when she becomes a spectacle because she chose to become marked. However, female tattooing could contribute to further objectification because those with extensive tattoos cannot help but be the object of a voyeuristic gaze. While it rejects our notions of beauty, perfection, and femininity, the female body is still on display (DeMello 1995b). The male tattooed body is also subject to the voyeuristic gaze but it is much less sexualized than the female body.

Men commonly see the tattoo as a public symbol to communicate social identity. Sanders (1991) and DeMello (1995b) state that women are said to be more concerned with the perceived unconventionality and possible stigmatization caused by the tattoo. Therefore, many still put their tattoos in "female" spots like the ankle, breast, or lower back, and choose delicate "feminine" designs so their femininity or heterosexuality is not at risk of being challenged. Rather than being a public declaration of the self, it is a private decoration for personal enjoyment and private appreciation because the tattoo is hidden from public view. Women tend to place their tattoos in more private areas, which would in turn make their tattoo directed at or meaningful to intimate friends. In the professional world, females and males alike may be concerned with other professionals finding out about their body art, therefore place it in private areas. In one of James Myers' interviews (1992), a female informant stressed the importance of her piercings remaining a secret, because she would lose her job if they were discovered.

## **Tattooing as Counter-Hegemony**

Tattooing was at one time considered counter-hegemonic as it challenged dominant notions about the body and how it should be used. While there still is a counter-hegemonic discourse in body adornment for some, the current popular discourse has promoted it, making body modification increasingly safe and sane (De Mello 1995a, Larkin 1993). Historical American tattooing and piercing can be seen as counter-hegemony because the people who performed it were on the margin of society making a statement about mainstream society. Biker tattoos are the prime example of this because traditionally their imagery was anti-social, commenting against society. The bikers themselves were outlaws. The tradition has been primarily with working class men, and while it has become a middle class and often feminine tradition, working class men and bikers are still being tattooed and still using imagery that comments on society. This idea of going against the mainstream is still prevalent in some forms of adornment. These political and personal statements can be made through the amount of tattoos and the choice of design. This is true today even though tattooing has become a mainstream practice. The more extreme forms like heavy tattooing, heavy piercing, branding and scarring become political statements and the less extreme and common forms such as one small tattoo on the shoulder become fashion (Myers 1992, De Mello 1995a, 1995b).

While body modification appears in many varying degrees, it has an element of narcissism, which at the same time attempts to reject the idea that the gaze of another defines the self. The defining gaze and objectification of bodies are here to stay. Our daily lives are saturated with self-absorption and self-construction due to a perceived lack of meaning and life cycle rituals. People are concerned with the role that image plays in their success, and are being compelled to consider their bodies as a means to reconstruct their ideal identity. Sometimes consciously and sometimes not, the body in modern Western society is a means for personal, social, and spiritual identity.

## **An Interest in "The Primitive"**

Fieldwork conducted in Montreal proved that there was a special interest in what is called the primitive not only among the extreme body modifiers, but among many tattooists and piercers as well. This interest was observed through the many images displayed in the tattoo and piercing shops, the images people put on their bodies, the reasons they gave, and in conversations with body modifiers. The primitive was the term used to describe all non-literate, non-industrial groups of people, all of whom were believed to practice some form of body modification. The primitive was described in terms of admiration, but also with a sense of superiority. Admiration was mostly centered on artistic quality and the functionality of the medium they use to decorate their bodies. The sense of superiority was expressed in terms of technology and modern daily life. The primitive was spoken of extensively by those whom ritual was important. The two following sections will explore this notion of the primitive in terms of ritual, spirituality, and cultural appropriation.

### **Ritual Rites of Passage, Pain, and Spirituality**

*"We cannot know who we are without some practical ritual and moral structure that orders our freedom and binds our choices"*— Robert Bellah (Hewitt 1997: 36).

Throughout history humans have performed rituals to create order and predictability in a world that is very unpredictable. The rite of passage is a ritualized celebration of life changes. It ensures the passage from one condition or social state to the next by publicly celebrating the transition and marking its significance. Ritual is most frequently associated with magic and religion, but it can refer to any culturally patterned activity that is taken seriously by those involved. A rite of passage separates the individual from the group and publicly declares the individual's entry into the new group and status. There are many adornment rituals related to rites of passage, and they tend to have developed into social celebrations (Schlick and Rowold 1991). The Nuer scarification described in Chapter 2 is a case in point.

Rites of passage have three stages: separation, liminality, and reintegration. To be liminal is to be in a state of nothingness, awaiting identity. Marking the body signifies the end of

the liminal stage when the initiate accepts the social identity in which the markings confirm (Hewitt 1997, V. Turner 1967).

An important theme that has recurred many times during research is the search for meaning in life. Body modifiers believe that "primitive people" have more meaning in their lives than those in Western culture. Through ritual, meaning is acquired in the primitive's life and a body marking is usually a permanent result of the ritual. In reference to the ritual of Garr among the Nuer, societal roles are clearly defined through that event. Identity has been linked with spirituality and ritual rites of passage, which is symbolized through the acquisition of permanent body marking. Many body modifiers believe that Western culture lacks shared meaningful rituals and cohesive values, and there is no clear passage from childhood to adulthood. They believe that we cannot know where we belong unless we have these rituals that define our role and identity in society. They rarely recognize a driver's license, or high school graduation ceremony as a rite of passage. Due to these beliefs, the body has taken on a greater significance. Montrealers are using body marking in a search for meaning and as a symbol of their identity. The ritual, though, is centered on the body marking itself. While some may chose to become tattooed or pierced as a fashion statement, many see it as an identifying mark that not only helps to show others who they are but also helps them to realize their own sense of self. Because they feel that there is no support structure, these self-created initiations, and the end result - body art, often becomes the goal of the ritual (Shilling 1993, Hewitt 1997, Vale and Juno 1989, Mercury 2000). For many young people, body art is a newly discovered rite of passage.

Not only is the ritual act of body marking important for its ability to permanently transform the initiate, it is especially significant because it is embedded in cultural beliefs. Community affirmation is very important. Rituals accompanying body marks physically socialize the initiate who then receives a new status. The symbols also stimulate emotion and a special attachment to others who have undergone the same ritual. Affiliation is one of the most important functions of the rites of passage. The unknown individual is introduced to the known

social group (V. Turner 1967). For the purposes of affiliation with a desired social group, people are often willing to surrender their body. When viewed in this way, modification of the body is seen as more than a visual badge of admission, but a link to one's social group and psyche (Myers 1992, Shilling 1993, Lock 1993, T. Turner 1993, Newman 1993). Field research showed this social aspect in body modification as each event was marked by social activity. Many people were always present simply to experience the event and support the modifiers.

These rite of passages are not institutionalized. This differs greatly from the examples given in the cross-cultural section of this thesis of the Nuer and the Australian Aborigines, whose rites of passages are performed on every male in the society. As stated in Chapter 2, those who reject the ritual suffer great social consequences. They are generally ostracized from society at large and not seen as adult members of the group. The rituals performed by body modifiers in Montreal are more or less individual. Meaning is taken from that small group's or individual's ideology. The meaning of the ritual and the markings do not have wider social meaning, at least not the same meaning, yet these rituals are indeed social.

Markings witnessed in the field were spoken in terms of ritual, and usually spoken of after the act of becoming marked, rarely before. The tattooing and piercing events that I witnessed were not specifically ritualistic, but the participants gave their own ritual meaning to the event claiming they were marking life events, emotions, or group affiliation. The piercer or tattooist usually had no idea that the person was undergoing a ritual: he or she was simply doing their job. The ritual is basically the same for each person, but the meaning that each client takes from the experience is different. The sense of ritual experienced by the participants is internal, experienced in their minds and the marking acts as a symbol of that ritual. The participant usually had an audience present during their marking in the tattoo and piercing studios. This was also true for extreme modifications performed at home; they were never executed in private. The audience is critical to the ritual for their part in acknowledging and validating the event.

Legitimacy in the marking is usually important, because of the deviance that is often attached to tattooing and piercing.

The participants of this research presented body modification as a rite of passage. The importance of pain in the process is evident as pain has long been associated with these rites. The Nuer males undergoing the ritual of Garr, while undergoing tremendous trauma, they do not show that they are experiencing pain. During field observations in Montreal, many who became modified denied that pain was felt. This occurred during many tattooing sessions, piercings and the brandings. There were a few incidents where pain was expressed. Mike expressed minor pain during the tongue cutting and the Dremel scarification and a few people remarked that their tattoo or piercing hurt. While pain is often denied, it is also often used during the ritual to mark its significance. Pain is commonly referred to as necessary to accomplish the desired end. By using pain to change the body, an attempt is being made to recreate and heal the self. The story of the person's identity is written on their body. This can be seen as people with multiple tattoos use their body art as markers for life events. Body modification can be an attempt to connect and heal the mind along with the body (Hewitt 1997, Mercury 2000).

Pain can be used to take control of one's life and to control one's emotions. For example, Paul's finger amputation used pain to control the mental anguish associated with his traumatic childhood. According to Paul, the ritual he performed helped him to feel better about himself. During ritual rites of passage, pain is used to make the event memorable to ensure that the valuable lessons learned throughout the ritual will be remembered. The pain associated with body marking acts as a constant reminder of the ritual and of the lessons learned. "I wanted to feel the pain and I wanted to have the scars on me as testimony to that pain" (Mercury 2000: 100). Mike remarked that had his tongue forking hurt more, it probably would have meant more to him. He used an anesthetic to dull the pain, with the result that his forked tongue had little meaning beyond its aesthetic quality. By contrast, Paul's stubbed finger remains a constant reminder of his self-control, physical and mental strength to overcome a traumatic experience

and take control of his life. There was no one present during the amputation, but he ritualized the event by himself inducing a trance and attaching great personal meaning to the operation. One tattooist, Dave, commented that the present desire for painless tattooing and piercing will likely produce a backlash. The lack of pain felt reduces the amount of meaning attributed to the modification, decreasing its value. Dave believed that as more people find ways to become tattooed and pierced painlessly, in the next decade, there will likely be an increase in removal and reconstructive surgery. He believed that if researched, the results would show that those who received their modification without pain will be the ones removing them because they will regret their modification more than those who experienced pain. Pain is therefore an essential feature in meaningful modification.

When experiencing pain, a person may experience a feeling of harmony between mind, body, and spirit because it establishes and re-establishes personal boundaries. Self-inflicted pain can give a sense of self and provoke a feeling of connection with something beyond the bodily boundaries (Hewitt 1997, Vale and Juno 1989). As Hewitt (1997:31) phrases it: "To be able to withstand pain is to transcend ones physical limits and become closer to a spiritual realm of being." It is worth noting that pain and suffering have been a part of many major religions throughout the world, for example Christianity and Hinduism, because of the belief that suffering cleanses the soul.

Peter Trachtenberg (1997) describes the body as remarkable in its use of pain. He used pain in his life to feel something, anything, because pleasure was beyond his reach. Pain can be used to activate feeling in a body that is numb, helping to remove oneself from a life stage or situation that is perceived as stagnant. This is corroborated by Mercury (2000:98): "Whenever you inflict pain on yourself it forces you to heal yourself, and pulls you deeper inside yourself than you could normally be. Pain is very therapeutic and very necessary to feel anything at all. It is very humbling." Pain may also be used to relieve emotional distress and the mark that is left behind is used as a trophy to represent the accomplishment of conquering something that



seemed unconquerable. Often people are not shy to show the symbol, the tattoo or piercing, but keep the personal accomplishment to themselves.

As my data shows, the painful modification may be used as an act that resolves a crisis. This often is shown through self-cutting, but as the person ages, he or she moves to other modifications such as body piercing and tattoos. Body modification is an attempt to establish oneself within a cultural setting, using symbolism to accompany the rite. Body modification has become a healing process. Favazza (1996) states that modification can be used to promote recovery from illness, to relieve depression, as an alternate to suicide and generally as an attempt to reduce feelings of distress. Paul is again a prime example of this. As a child he was a self-cutter. He slashed his arms with anything he could find and burned his skin with cigarettes. When he became older he began to use the pain in a more ritualized way. He had implants inserted into his forearm when he stopped cutting it, amputated his finger in a most painful way to prove he could overcome obstacles and prove his inner strength, and has branded marks into his body in aesthetic patterns. The pain aspect is always important as it makes the event and the marking memorable.

Even though body modification can be used to create identity and emotional healing, due to the negative symbolic value placed on them by society, the wearing of a tattoo can be a liability as well as a pleasure. The tattoo is a label, which marks a person as unconventional and possibly dangerous and unpredictable, Western culture however, contains ambivalent messages about unconventionality. Unconventionality is both valued as individualistic as well as condemned as deviant. This can be seen through the popularity of tattooing in recent years. Small tattoos are tolerated in hidden places, but large visible images are different. Visible body modification identifies the wearer as unique and unconcerned with approval or disapproval. Body modification can also lead to discrimination or fear of those who practice it because of stereotypes and lack of knowledge concerning the medium.

Some extreme body modifiers believe that the process of body modification as a rite of passage is in our inner nature, a bodily need for healing. People are learning to see the spirituality reflected in life around them (Mercury 2000). Fakir Musafar, a prominent figure in the modern primitive movement in California, explains that if a person has enough training, experience, and practice, they can transcend, transmute, or change a sensation to mean anything. He believes it is impossible for humans to progress spiritually without experiencing a rite of passage. It must be physical, bloody, painful, and it must leave a mark (Vale and Juno 1989).

*"You are giving your flesh to the gods"* - Fakir Musafar (Myers 1992: 281).

The most popular tattoo discourse centers around notions of personal growth, healing, and spirituality. This is because most of the people who are participating in body modifications claim deep spiritual fulfillment and empowerment as a result of the experience. New Age philosophies and discourse are often used by body modifiers to describe their body art and the meaning it has for them. This follows with the new age and self-help trend in Western society as people learn about yoga and other types of meditation, feng shui, numerology, palmistry, tarot, paganism, and other forms of spirituality and superstition (DeMello 2000). New age philosophies are used, but often symbols of the philosophies are used as well, such as Asian characters, Native symbols, and astrological signs to reflect beliefs in Asian or Native spirituality, and astrological philosophies. The philosophies used tend to center on person growth, healing, and spirituality and are narcissistic in nature. The narcissism comes from these philosophies which focus on the self, producing body art that centers on self and a discourse of identity.

The decline of religious frameworks, which constructed and sustained existential certainties, gives people a tendency to place more importance on the body as an essential ingredient of their identity. Those who have lost faith in religious authorities and grand political narratives are no longer provided with a clear world-view or self-identity by these structures of meaning. Individualism and narcissism take precedence over other influences on identity like

family and religion. The body provides a foundation on which to construct a reliable sense of self in the modern world. The body is concrete, it cannot be taken away and it can be moulded into an acceptable form, creating an identity and a sense of spirituality. Body rituals are used to make a spiritual connection without the mediation or guidance of clergy, creating new structure and imagery to discover personal spirits that have more relevance for them (Hewitt 1997, Shilling 1993, Mercury 2000). By discovering a personal sense of spirituality that is guiding and defined by the self, body modification becomes a journey for some. The journey becomes an accomplishment, which can be read like a text on the body.

Body marking has been used in the oldest known religions as a systematic expression of a belief in powers that affect the course of natural and human events. It has remained in many cultures, such as the Ga'anda of Nigeria (Berns 1988), the Newar of Nepal (Teilhet 1988), and the Gujarat of India (Rubin 1988b), as a fundamental medium for expressing spiritual beliefs integral to religious practice. The magical world-view of many body modifiers validates alternative states of consciousness, which are dismissed by many modern formal religions, as well as by some in the medical profession, as pathology. "The medical literature on the topic presents a picture of deeply disturbed individuals engaging in self-mutilation for various psychopathological reasons ... This view is supported by the general non-participating public." (Myers 1992: 296) The people who take part in these modifications readily admit that their practices are outside the norm of society, but none think it is a deficiency in mental health. Those who participated in this research were sane individuals who had motivations and rationale for body modification. There was an awareness of ceremony and ritual and links to cultures deemed primitive.

While most psychiatrists look at body modification under the veil of body mutilation, Favazza (1996), uses cultural psychiatry because the understanding of behavior demands an examination of the cultural beliefs, attitudes, and practices of the individuals. He cites examples from historic Christian practices as well as historic and present cross-cultural practices that use body mutilation to attribute meaning to the spiritual realm through pain. With the addition of

anthropology to psychiatry, his research has found that body mutilation (or modification) has been used throughout the world for centuries with social sanctions to legitimize the different practices. Most in the psychiatric profession, however, simply label all Western modification as mental illness despite the religious or spiritual reasons given. No distinction is made between depressed self-cutters attempting suicide and those creating patterns in their skin with spiritual or social intentions. Favazza's theory states that there are many different reasons why people self-mutilate or seek to modify their body and mental illness cannot be used to explain it all away.

This realization of the difference between depressive body mutilation and modification for psychic healing has been echoed in Paul's story, learned through field research. His psychiatrist is an exception. She advised him that if he must go to the hospital after completing a modification and is placed in the mental ward to contact her, and she will have him released. His psychiatrist has realized that he is not modifying his body because he is insane, but because it helps him to heal. Through speaking in depth with Paul, she has realized that his methods of healing are not understood by the institution and she is willing to ensure that Paul can heal his mind in his own way.

There are many modifiers who echo this need for a rite of passage to create an identity and a sense of spirituality. Young people who are searching for meaning find themselves creating rituals, which mark the body to find the meaning they need. This could be seen in the many tattoo and piercing studios, as well as with the extreme body modifiers.

### **Modern Primitivism**

Christian Klesse defines modern primitives as "a subcultural movement in the intersection of the tattoo, piercing, and sado-masochism scenes (Klesse 1999: 15)." Tattoo magazines in the late 1980's helped to create and promote the idea of "The New Tribalism" devoting space to tattooing practices in tribal cultures with photographs of white middle class people imitating their styles naming it "neo tribalism". This philosophy represents a desire to "return" to a primitive

past, which is romanticized as egalitarian, honest, and full of ritual and meaning (De Mello 1995, Vale and Juno 1989, Klesse 1999).

A "Primitivist" is

a person who prefers a way of life which, when judged by one or more of the standards prevailing in his own society, would be considered less "advanced" or less "civilized". The primitivist finds the model for his preferred way of life is a culture that existed or is reputed to have existed at some time in the past; in the culture of the less sophisticated classes within his society, or of primitive peoples that exist elsewhere in the world ... Primitivists have differed widely on the nature of the evils and weaknesses of civilized life, the causes of these evils, the positive values of the primitive life, and the degree to which a regression to the primitive is possible. (Vale and Juno 1989: 4)

The ideology of primitivism has a framework of cultural evolution and is strong in people who are modifying their bodies. Modern primitivists speak of a need to *return* to a "tribal past", to something considered better than modern life, yet label it a regression. Many modifiers are disillusioned with the West and what they perceive as a lack of community, ritual and spirituality. They also feel that advancements of Western civilization have left a hole in the important part of our lives, ritual, spirituality, and meaning. Adornment practices are appropriated from multiple cultures, which have been labeled as primitive and tribal in an attempt to find a meaning that will fill the hole. These so-called primitive cultures are used as an exemplar of a world that is untouched by Western materialism and are still "enchanted", Utopia (Klesse 1999). "Primitive" is used in a romanticized and homogenized sense. By contrast, modern society is deemed to be massive and uncontrollable, by altering something they have the power to control, their bodies, modern primitives are attempting to provoke change in society at large. Primitivism is a reaction to or a rebellion against modern life (Taylor 1995, Rubin 1988, Vale and Juno 1989).

The popularization of body modification, primarily tattooing, has reached the middle class. Middle class appropriation of tattooing has denounced the lower class forms through ignoring, ridiculing, and excluding it from the tattoo discourse. Middle class tattooing is defined as popular flash and fine art tattoos, lower class tattooing is seen as biker, jailhouse and sailor type tattoos. Popularized forms of modification have been separated from a tradition that is seen as negative, but have retained the same symbols (DeMello 1995, 2000). Because middle class

tattooing denounces lower class tattooing in this way, the history of tattooing in North America has been denied and a new history has been created. This history is based on a mythical primitive past, not the history of prostitutes, sailors, criminals and bikers. The romantic notion of primitive has a long history within the repertoire of colonial fantasy. As DeMello (1995a:55) has argued: "This fictionalized past gives legitimacy to a cultural tradition which is seen as low class, and furthermore, naturalizes it". Because it is believed that people have practiced these forms of modification in most "primitive" societies around the world, because they are considered to be our evolutionary past, body modifiers believe they have proof that it is natural.<sup>12</sup>

This is not a shocking prospect because of the eurocentric and colonial ideology that gives foundation to our daily life. Colonialism is described in older texts as "the meeting of civilized races with the savage and uncultured tribes native to the soil" (Fuller 1900:1). In the nineteenth century it was thought necessary and heroic to conquer new lands and people, show the primitive how to live a "civilized" life and stop their "barbaric" practices. Today, this type of colonialism is itself considered savage and uncivilized. Colonialism, though, has not ended; it has simply changed form to a discourse of development and globalization. Body modifiers are attempting to recreate some of those extinguished "barbaric" practices with a belief that their elimination has caused an emotional cancer in humanity, yet they are not questioning the overall evolutionary structure. For the modern primitives, to create meaning in life is to "return" to our pre-colonial concepts of body and ritual. While some have tried to eliminate the evolutionary scale, the concept of world development is still a standard often elevated to the status of natural law and an evolutionary necessity. This self-grandizing framework is regarded as natural and accepted without question, therefore it legitimizes itself (Turner 1999). Modern primitives use this ideology when they speak of body modification. While other cultures are believed to be lower on the evolutionary scale, they are steeped in meaning and tradition. Since they believe that Western society and its body ethic are hollow and shallow, "primitive" belief systems and body ethics are more desirable.

I know we are kin to those secret souls of so many cultures before. I know that this urge to pierce, to feel, to tattoo, to express with our very bodies in such primitive ways, is deep in the generic memories, constant and strong as the tides. The chord it strikes resonates strongly for some of us, affecting our psyches, our spirits, our libidos (Myers 1992:295).

While modifiers view the "primitive people" and their practices as lower on an evolutionary scale, they tend to view Western culture as lacking a vital sense of self and spirit. We are believed to be technologically advanced, but emotionally inferior. This belief denotes that our more technologically developed way of life has gone too far and we need to return to a time when life was filled with meaning. Extensive use of technology and specialization is thought unnecessary, however, the internet is widely used as it has made cross-cultural information more available to body modifiers. Primitive notions of the body, ideology, and spirituality are used, but end there. The internet and other modern technology are said to be unnecessary, but convenient. Many modern primitives have their own webpages and explore the internet regularly. (See list of websites – Appendix C)

Fakir Musafar, considered to be the father of the modern primitives, claims to have had several out-of-body experiences and to have met his god through body modification (Vale and Juno 1989). He re-created rituals from various cultures, for example the Sun Dance of the Plains Indians and the Kavadi of the Hindu Tamils, and claims to have had religious experiences similar to those of thousands of years ago, even though he performed these rituals in a Western context. He has acted as a shaman and has held these rituals for others (Musafar 1996), which are believed to be the same in that culture today as they were then. Cultural experience is believed to be recreatable by people who are not a part of the lived culture. An authentic experience is not only thought possible but access is simply through the participation in the ritual. The symbols and meaning, however, can only be interpreted from the person's own repertoire of symbols and meanings which comes from their own culture. The meaning taken from the ritual by the Western participants has no basis in that culture because they have no lived experience from that culture. This question of authenticity in ritual is never broached within the modern

primitives because it is the experience of the ritual and the personal spiritual journey they seek. Using rituals from other cultures gives the ideology legitimacy because it is perceived as natural. If they claimed to be creating ritual and meaning their legitimacy would be lost; therefore it must be discovered, not created.

In Montreal, the modern primitivist ideology is still important among some groups of people, primarily those who are participating in the most extreme forms of modification. People interested in modern primitives were those forking their tongues, receiving large tribal tattoos, branding, and having implants inserted beneath the surface of their skin. Body modification has become a way of life and primitivism is taken very seriously. Many of the Montreal tattooists and piercers, however, were unaware of the modern primitives, only one of my informants from this category thought it a valid philosophy. Those aware of its existence were unsure what to think, at times giving it credibility and at other times denouncing it with the view: "for primitive societies it's a way of life, but it's not for North Americans." (Claude, interviewed on July 7, 2000) Marcel believes that tattooing moved into respectability due to the modern primitives but most thought the heavy search for meaning was contrived.

Those who gave credibility to modern primitives have created their own modern primitives-type group, tentatively named PUBA: Prehistoric Urban Body Art. The ideology was similar to the modern primitives reflecting their reading of *Modern Primitives* (Vale and Juno 1989) and *Decorated Skin* (Groning 1997). The name of this group was still under discussion upon completion of fieldwork; the word "primitive" had negative connotations, and the word "prehistoric" was also under question.

An article in *US News and World Report* (Leo 1995) describes "primitivism" as "the new toy to be purchased at the local mall"; claiming modern primitives are dissatisfied with the Western world. Because there is a feeling of being powerless to change the world, individuals are altering their bodies in hopes that it will provoke change. This is being done in a similar vein as the Punks in Britain in the 1970's as noted in Chapter 2. Modern primitives are decorating



themselves to reflect their world-view. They believe the world should be more "natural" and "primitive", filled with honesty and meaning.

### **Cultural Appropriation**

Cultural Appropriation is the use of ideas, goods, practices, and imagery from another culture, usually for uses other than their original intent. Meaning is changed from its original one and altered to fit new uses. Sometimes appropriation has been so radically altered from the original form that it is hard to recognize it in the new form. The origins are frequently realized but the new manifestations are usually believed to be authentic and unchanged.

"Tribal" tattooing uses tattoo designs borrowed from the many tribes in the Polynesian Islands. It began in the 1970's and is still popular today. The contradiction of white Canadians with no link to Polynesia applying Island designs to their bodies is frequently not recognized, rather it is seen as an appreciation and a token of admiration for a culture that no longer exists. But what of the socio-cultural meaning of wearing a tattoo in Samoa or Borneo? Other than the fact that the images are from Samoa or Borneo, little of the original Samoan or Borneo meaning is recalled. Often information from *National Geographic* or an old ethnography are used to create meaning in a tattoo. The tattooist's goal is to tell a good story and entertain the client. A recent acknowledgment by a tattooist in Hawaii, Mike Malone, exemplifies this creation of tradition and history. He designed a style of tattoo consisting of a tribal looking band that wraps around the arm. He told concocted stories about the meaning in the symbols while he was applying armband tattoos, usually to tourists. Now, native Hawaiians wear this type of tattoo labeled as a traditional form of Hawaiian tattooing, even appearing in *National Geographic* as a representation of tradition. It was, however, created by a white American in the 1970's (DeMello 2000).

Over the years the designs have changed: to typical Samoan or Pacific designs, Western people have added their own original thick blackwork designs and have labeled them as "tribal". Blackwork designs from other areas around the world, like Native American art and the Northwest Coast Native art of Canada are also used and labeled tribal. The designs have been

bleached of their cultural background and meaning, and are now simply repackaged as "tribal." Through using designs labeled tribal, a link is made with "primitive" cultures, which are perceived as being pure, noble and spiritual. People desire meaning and through appropriating a symbol or a similar symbol from that ideal, the tattoo becomes more meaningful. It is connected with a spiritual world and an ideology, which is considered to be more natural and better than Western ideologies. Body modification is believed to be instinctive in these indigenous cultures and has become a very powerful notion for those who follow the modern primitivist movement.

Due to the popularity of tribal designs, short quasi-academic articles occasionally appear in tattoo magazines that give a brief look at cultural appropriation. They attempt to give a short introduction of the history of tattooing in Polynesia, but also tackle the issue of meaning in cross-cultural art and provide examples of offending indigenous people by wearing an inappropriate tattoo. The following excerpt from the magazine *Skin and Ink* (Nunes 2000:20) is an example of this:

Some designs are viewed by the culture as too sacred to be given to people who have no idea of the cultural meaning and responsibility that the tattoo carries. Most non-indigenous people have only a surface understanding of the culture when they decide on a design...People mainly get traditional tattoos for the beauty of the design or to honor the culture of origin. Unfortunately, without a thorough understanding of the culture where the design originates, these good intentions often generate an opposite effect.

Most tattooists and tattooees do not see a difficulty in a white person with no ties to or any real concept of Borneo life wearing a traditional Borneo design. However, there is a small effort within the body modification milieu to learn as much as possible about a design before applying it to the body.

### **A Model: The Body as a Curio Cabinet**

Museums are institutions devoted to collection, preservation, exhibition, study and interpretation of these objects and are an important part of the creation of Western history. Collections are made which contain curiosities to be giggled at, art to be admired, or evidence to be understood scientifically. A curio cabinet is a display case filled with strange or obscure objects

for display, usually in a private home and is the commonly accepted prototype of the modern museum (Clifford 1998, Pearce 1992, Stocking 1985).

Museums create an illusion of adequate representation of a world by first taking objects out of specific context displayed as though they stand for abstract wholes, removed from their original context of culture, time and space and recontextualized in another (Pearce 1992, Clifford 1998, Stocking 1985). Similarly, gathered artifacts are placed in a curio cabinet in a private living room or a museum display, their rarity and strangeness is prized and jumbled together, each object standing for a whole region or population. Value and meaning is created. The artifacts' commercial and scientific worth are linked with the interest and beauty in objects from the past and value is guaranteed by the vanishing cultural status (Clifford 1998).

This above example of how cross-cultural goods have been used historically is reflective of what is occurring within the body modification community. In the 1970's, tribalism was just beginning to emerge and few western people were familiar with Polynesian art (DeMello 2000). Images were, and still are, collected from foreign and exotic lands, tattooed on the body with little sense of cultural context, and used as a representative of a group of people.

Before tribalism was introduced, Western tattooed bodies consisted of designs placed sporadically on the body. (See Plate VII, Photo 2-E, Plate XI, Photos 2-U, 2-V, 2-W, and 2-X) In the earlier style, images were fairly consistent in style and design and were colorful, religious, patriotic, and sexual, usually of crosses, portraits of the crucifixion, flags, anchors, pin-up girls, swords and skulls as well as angry looking animals claiming "Death before Dishonor", often "Mother". Many images, but one similarity: they were all Western creations and their meaning was shared by those who wore and viewed them. Before tribal art was introduced, all tattoo designs were generally unconnected colorful and pictorial images.

Following the introduction of abstract tribal art, with its use of thick solid black shapes and its adherence with body shape, a new trend began which involved meanings that could be construed beyond the picture on the skin. A crucifixion scene refers to a specific event, but

abstract patterned blackwork can mean anything the wearer wants it to mean. The image may come from Samoa with specific meaning and function in Samoan society, but in a Western context on a white body the meaning becomes more fluid. This is due to the multiple meanings created through mixed cross-cultural messages. Through its use of cultural material, the body becomes a curiosity cabinet, a museum of sorts, filled with representations of various peoples unknown to the wearer.

This concept of the body as a curio cabinet has become apparent through fieldwork, although it does not apply to all body modifiers. Some people have a consistent style of art on their body, many using local creations, while others show combinations of cultural influences. Mixtures of Western, tribal and Japanese styles of art are frequent, some may also have one style on one body part, and another style on another. For example, Plate VII, Photographs 2-C, 2-D, and Plate VIII, Photograph 2-F are on the same body: Photograph 2-D shows a recreation of the old 1950's style (Western influence), while 2-C and 2-F show combinations of neo-tribal, using the thick black markings, the old style, and Hebrew lettering. Plate IX, Photographs 2-K, 2-L, 2-M, 2-N, and 2-O reveal the influence of Japanese style artwork, some are true to the traditional images while others use the style and images, but in a non-traditional way. Yet none pictured here are found on Japanese bodies. The body becomes a display case of Japanese-like artwork used to represent a style and a culture. A mixture of Japanese images along with images from other cultures, usually Western imagery, is frequently used as can be seen in Plate IX, Photograph 2-O. In this picture, Japanese imagery is used in a North American adaptation along with graffiti art to create a sleeve. The result is a mixture of cultural symbols together in a new way, creating new symbols and messages that tend to play on the old meaning.

Another good example of the body as a curio cabinet is best represented by the following narrative:

## **The Tattoo Party (See Plates XIV, XV, XVI, and XVII)**

Through an experience of fieldwork in Montreal in the summer of 2000, Mike decided to get a full body tattoo, but waited until his body was in peak condition so the tattoo could be styled to fit his musculature. He would then be tattooed in a traditional Polynesian style. He later revealed that he was going to do the tattoo himself, in traditional Polynesian style and technique, with the help of friends to complete the areas on his body that he could not reach.

*Mike began by drawing the design in marker on his skin and then burning a piece of wood, collecting the soot then experimenting with combinations of water and oil to make pigment using a sharpened bear rib as a tattooing tool. Although he wanted to do it traditionally, his skin would not absorb the pigment and the sharpened bear rib was too painful. He continued to experiment on an area that would subsequently be covered up. Once he mastered the technique, he reasoned that anthropologists recording the procedure had been wrong. I had assumed until this time that Mike had done extensive reading on the topic before commencing the procedure, but after reading Alfred Gell's book (1993) and after watching the procedure, I quickly realized he had no idea of the complexity of the project. His ideas concerning the procedure had come from the common knowledge and oral history of tribal tattooing that is recanted frequently, describing the use of sharpened bones and soot as pigment.*

*After trying piercing needles and sewing needles to tattoo himself, he settled on Chinese calligraphy ink as the pigment, acupuncture needles of varying numbers attached to a sawed off wooden spoon with electrical tape and Five Minute Epoxy glue. These tools worked best. Mike believed there was no need for the specialization of a tattooist. He and his friends could do it themselves if they experimented long enough, despite the fact that traditional Polynesian tattooing is performed by a specialist.*

*When questioned later on the authenticity of his instruments and their use in Polynesian tattooing, his response was that he was still tattooing traditionally because he had used tools that he could find in his environment, as Polynesians do. Anything he*

*could find and make into a tattooing tool was considered traditional usage, so long as it was done through tapping the ink into the skin. His main concern was that he avoid mechanization and specialization. Later, when a new tool was made that somewhat resembled the Japanese "Irizumi" tattooing tool, it was interpreted as tattooing in the Japanese style due to the shape of the tool and the way the ink was pushed into the skin at a slant. This tool was made with a paint stir stick acquired at a hardware store, Chinese acupuncture needles, electrical tape and more Five-Minute Epoxy. I was informed that The Dollar Store, any hardware store and China Town were important "foraging sites" for body modification tools.*

*Once the technique was chosen, the tattooing process evolved into a tattooing party with several people sitting around to watch, each eventually taking a turn at tattooing. None had ever tattooed before, so they were given a quick lesson. While the tattooee sat up and explained, watching to make sure the technique was learned adequately, the new tattooer was shown on the top of his leg, inside the to-be-tattooed area, how to push the ink into the skin through pressure, speed, and amount of ink needed.*

*The tattoo party continued over a series of days and evenings, which involved the tattooee lying naked in the middle of the floor with someone bent over him tapping at his skin with the home-made instruments and Chinese calligraphy ink, each for about two hours. I had taken some books about body modification for everyone to look at. In one, a picture of a traditional Samoan tattooing session was remarkably similar to what was going on in front of me, a fact noticed by several in attendance. The caption underneath the photograph read:*

*According to Polynesian mythology, humans learned tattooing from the gods. Such decoration was therefore applied in a ritual and ceremonial context by particularly revered masters. The costly patterns were a visible sign of prosperity and conferred prestige. They increased a person's chances of finding a partner and his prospects of success in battle. To heap further disgrace on dead enemies, they were ritually eaten and in the Marquesas Islands this was only permitted to those who were tattooed. The Hawaiians had their tongues tattooed as a sign of mourning, whilst on Rorotonga mourning patterns were*

*tattooed on the neck and chest. Men on the Marquesas Islands who had to pursue a blood feud were marked on their cheeks, their wives on their chests and shoulders. (Groning 1997 :94)*

On hearing the tattooee discussing Polynesian tattooing, it was confirmed to me that he had done very little research or reading concerning the process. Within the Montreal community, the historic voyage of Captain Cook has become the mythical point of origin of Western tattooing. This is an oral history that is recited in the tattoo community, although few have ventured into reading the recorded history for themselves. My informant indicated that he did not remember exactly what he read on the subject, but that it was a few years ago when his memory was much better than it is today. A strange, but predictable answer.

Due to the similarity in shape of the tool used and an incredible visual similarity in the way the person being tattooed was laid out with the tattooist bent over him, he claimed the process was "like" the Polynesian experience, especially because of the tapping method used. In reference to Maori tattooing described in Chapter 2, Polynesian tattooing experts tap the instrument, which has been dipped in ink, with a mallet although in the process I witnessed there was no mallet or expert. The instrument was used in a tapping motion by the tattooer through hitting the skin. The design was in large animal stripes, nothing resembling traditional designs, although placement was similar as it ran from his knees to his waist. The similarities and differences in cultural meaning were never discussed. Mike strongly believed that there was a very real traditional element present and became rather irritated when questioned about the authenticity of what he was doing. He stated only that the differences were minor details and it was technically the Polynesian style.

The tattoo parties revealed a very important part of body modification that centered on cross-cultural information. The ritual was discussed in a very general manner by those taking part, for instance "Primitive people do this", "Tribal people do this", or "The Polynesians do it this way". While Polynesian tattooing was almost wiped out by colonization, missionaries and Western assimilation, there has been a revival in recent years. Tattoo machines are often used

because it is faster, easier, and less painful but, there are still people who continue to practice the traditional methods of tattooing. Western tattoo enthusiasts often travel to the islands to receive a traditional tattoo, but it must be stated that tattooing in the Polynesian Islands is by no means homogenous.

A few months after this self-tattooing project began, the same individual performed a scarification on himself. A Japanese carp design was cut into his flesh, the same body with a large "Polynesian tattoo". (See Plate XXV, Photo 6-G) With this addition, the body moves from attempting to represent and display Polynesian culture, to representing both Polynesian and Japanese cultures and designs. The Japanese carp was not done with the intent to be traditional but because it was pretty. The body became a curio-cabinet nonetheless, displaying symbols from different cultures in a foreign context where meaning is subject to numerous interpretations.

The model of the curio cabinet and ethnographic narrative illustrates how extreme modifiers search cross-culturally to find a connection with people who share their body ethic, and then create their own meaning surrounding it, using notions of "the primitive". Cultural appropriation has been happening around the world since people first began to discover others unlike themselves. Body modifiers use this cross-cultural material with a colonial and museum oriented mentality to intentionally go against popular beliefs and to shock people. It is also used to discover a body ethic and aesthetic that they find pleasing and to realize and understand their own identities.

In general, there seems to be little interest in the traditional meaning of the art form or the social context in the culture it has been taken from. The actual symbol is used in a very permanent form and what is focused on for meaning are the sensational aspects of ritual, battle, and cannibalism. Meaning is attributed to the symbols based on folklore, notions of the primitive and popular cultural ideas on body modification and marginality. The original meaning of the modification or design is irrelevant because modifiers have created their own system of meaning.



To try to understand the meaning inherent in the design's culture of origin and how it is used would not make sense because that is not the point of getting the design. While there may be a conscious effort to incorporate a certain cross-cultural element into their body art, many realize that they can never fully understand what it means to have a Polynesian tattoo in its original context. There is a significant number, however, who strongly believe that after going through the actions of a ritual they know what it means and how it feels for those who practice it regularly as a part of their culture.

### **Mainstream Body Modification**

Body art has become popular in Western society, and with popularity brings commodification. Many new tattoo shops and piercing studios have opened in the last few years. Mainstream jewelry stores like *Arden's* and *Claire's* sell body jewelry and fake tattoos. Images of tattooing and body piercing are used to sell other products as well. There are multiple television programs that peripherally deal with tattoos and piercings and more information shows and articles are appearing covering the pros and cons of acquiring body art. Body modification has many different social aspects because it does not exist only in one segment of society. It is practiced by a wide range of individuals, not just people who live on the margins. Even Alexa McDonough, leader of the Canadian New Democratic Party, has make-up tattooed on her eyelids (Hunter 2000). Tattooing and piercing have become a part of the middle class and it is no longer a statement against society simply to have one.

This section of the thesis will explore theories on consumption and popular culture to show how some forms of body modification have become more than marginal and anti-fashion, but common place, popular and marketable.

### **Consumerism**

According to Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979), consumption is an integral part of the social system, a process whose function is to make sense of events. Goods present sets of meaning, as they are a part of an information system, which help to link the community. Goods,

or the items to be consumed, are body modifications in this case. The modifications communicate messages about the wearer, however the symbols must first be understood. Communication exists only in a structured system of meaning. Body modification has multiple meanings in society depending on the person doing the interpretation. They are used as messages, which are interpreted based on past experiences, knowledge about the medium, as well as ideas about those who have them. Knowledge such as the history of tattooing, Polynesian mythology or artistic ideology can be used to create a certain impression about the wearer of the tattoo. The use of consumption theory in theorizing body modification helps us to understand the messages they convey and how the modifications are used (Douglas and Isherwood 1979).

Many people throughout my fieldwork have said there is a tattoo community, but it is not the same for all types of modifications. A tattooed person will be approached on the street or in a bar and conversation will be initiated concerning tattoos, usually by a tattooed individual. There is a link felt between tattooed people because of the messages they convey. The visibility of the art initiates communication. This link is not usually felt among piercers. The internet has helped to link body modifiers together as well as to expose non-modifiers to the medium. Because more people have been exposed to body modification, they therefore have a better understanding of the messages it conveys.

Due to envious and competitive feelings, a person can begin to modify their body after seeing others they deem "cool" or admirable who they wish to emulate. Envy and competition can launch the individual into either an increasing amount of or a certain type of body modification. Some seek out specific well-known artists or even travel to Polynesia to acquire a traditional tattoo in order to be the envy of their friends. Consumption patterns are also used to exclude people from membership. Style and artistic merit can be used to include and exclude which can be seen through the different types of tattoo studios. For example, those who create their own art are able to exclude those from the tattoo community who cater to flash through

ridicule and gossip. The loyalty surrounding the shops helps to perpetuate the distinctions (Douglas and Isherwood 1979).

Value is placed on a modification based not only on its aesthetic quality, but through its uniqueness and through the name of the artist who created the design. Envy can be based on an attractive design that cannot be copied. Among mainstream modifiers, copying a design is not a problem and it is done frequently, but among those who define themselves through their modifications and derive great meaning from their work, originality in the design is key.

Anyone can connect to the websites devoted to body modification, and many submit photos of their own modifications, however for a person to be taken seriously by the body modification community, he or she must prove him or herself. Proving oneself means showing a commitment to modification through permanence and through being extreme. As more people begin to participate in body modification, being original is becoming more difficult, and multiple entries of the same modification are present on the websites. Peculiarity, though, is prized, and it is prestigious to be the first one to do a strange and new modification. If a person's modifications are not considered extreme, original, visible and permanent, the person may be perceived as copying another and a voyeur. Visibility, or being unable to hide a modification as well as it being unique are important aspects of acquiring status. Popular forms of modifications are often not taken seriously. For example a pierced nose, eyebrow, or small easily hidden tattoos do not show commitment to an alternative lifestyle. They show an adherence to safe acceptable forms of modification, but those modifications, in combination with several other visible ones, show commitment. Also with extreme modification, it is important to keep your extreme and unique status. This can be seen in the tongue cutting section, when Mike decided to stop associating himself with a website after discovering it contained 16 pages of photographic tongue cutting documentation. The website was not deemed problematic when he thought he would be the only one displaying his tongue in that manner.

**"Keeping up with the Jones's" is often given negative connotations. Despite this, consumption activities do continue to be synchronized with friends (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). The visibility and number of modifications a person has shows commitment to modifying, however, as more people become involved in extreme modification, less value is placed on certain things that were once considered extreme. Once it becomes common to be tattooed, the appeal is lost and they must get more tattoos or come up with something else to keep their marginal and "cool" status. Guy, mentioned in the section on branding, decided to get a brand because "everyone has a tattoo". However, people tend to modify at the same level as their group of friends. Once the modifications are practiced widely outside the circle of friends, it is time to discover something new.**

**The reasons people become modified are clear, but how are they used after they are completed and are healed? Most people say that their modifications are for themselves on an individual basis, however the social aspect is certainly there. Few are shy to show their art or to have it photographed. The modifications are done with incredible social intent, that of others seeing the art. The art must be seen because it communicates messages about the wearer to modified and non-modified individuals. It labels, identifies, includes, and excludes based on the type and style of art, the size, and the number of images that are present.**

**Body modification has become a popular commodity. It has become an object of popular culture as can be seen through the masses of people wearing them during the summer months. Its use as a commodity is also apparent as it has been used to sell products such as Trident gum, Guess jeans, Nice and Easy hair dye, and even religion (Trinity Church), each company trying to connect through the messages it conveys with a growing group of people. There have been more people going to the tattoo parlor to become tattooed or pierced and more shops opening up, each one filled with young adults waiting their turn at the needle.**

## **Popular Culture**

An interesting aspect of tattooing and body piercing is the fact that it has become popular in mainstream society because it was once considered a deviant practice. As previously mentioned, tattooed people were at one time all believed to be criminals and savages. "Popular culture" refers to aspects that belong to the entire culture or to large masses. Objects are the media through which cultural ideas flow and help to order the world into comprehensive categories such as class, status, gender and age, and express principles such as values, beliefs, and ideas (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Everyday cultural objects arise out of local conditions, but as societies have become larger and concentrated, mass culture and behavior have resulted, producing large groups of people who produce and consume large amounts of goods. Mass media produces a homogenizing influence creating a large popular culture; fashion becomes mass fashion, which creates, stabilizes, and reinvents norms. Meaning is gleaned from the ways in which people decorate their bodies based on the norms of society, either through clothing or through other forms of decoration, but it is constantly shifting and changing (Cunningham and Lab 1991, Miller and McHoul 1998).

From the onset of this research, an increase has been noticed in advertising that makes use of tattooing and piercing, television programs peripherally referring to the art as well as special information programs and local news reports concerning health and social issues. It is safe to assume that ideas appearing on television are mainstream, as the goal is to make money, which is optimized in appealing to larger numbers. News reports try to give objective information about health risks and television shows give evidence to its multiple meanings. Tattoos are often shown on criminals, helping to identify them, but also shown on men and women, in different contexts, to be sexy. There has also been a few specialty programs about tattooing and piercing which show heavily tattooed people, usually appearing on The Learning Channel (Bernanke 1999, Perry 2000). However, they seem to be voyeuristic as the shows depict the most extreme forms of modification and little concerning the forms commonly seen among mainstream culture. Either

these people are portrayed as exotics, or the point of the program is to highlight body art as problematic. One program entitled *My Son the Tattoo Artist* (Sky 1999) concluded that those who become heavily tattooed did not have a strong male presence while growing up. Programs like these generalize a large group of people and show the medium to be a symptom of perceived societal problems.

Stereotypes are used to help search for meaning and to understand the symbols that are on display. These simplified conventions are based on groups of people, which become standardized. The stereotypes are used to describe the group and to communicate information about them. The stereotypical image immediately tells who a person is and which group he or she belongs to, but these images become generalized, and do not recognize diversity (Cunningham and Lab 1991). Tattooed people are commonly plagued by the stereotypical image of sailors and criminals, but the stereotypes are often used on television to communicate aspects of the story, which will be highlighted in the following examples:

*During my research, I noticed several television shows that used tattoos in direct ways, all using stereotypical imagery to communicate messages. One popular cartoon, The Simpsons, (Collier 1996) used tattoos in one episode to identify people. Monty Burns and Abe Simpson were both in the same platoon during World War II. After flushing the enemy out of a house they stole the valuable paintings from inside. Their agreement was that the last surviving member of the platoon was entitled to keep the stolen art. They all had the same tattoo on their arm to identify themselves, the emblem of their platoon. The cartoon showed Abe baring his upper arm to show the tattoo, but because he was very old, it was depicted as wrinkled and the skin was stretched so that the viewer could make out the symbol of the tattoo.*

*The Simpsons* is a satirical cartoon, which focuses on social issues in the United States. Their use of the tattoo dialogues its history in the military as group membership, but is also used to mock the aging body with tattoos.

*Another show I watched called Mysterious Island (2000) showed many commercials beforehand depicting a Polynesian man with multiple tattoos. The Polynesian's name was Peter, who was covered in patchy tribal tattoos. The characters made a fairly big deal about the tattoos calling them primitive. The show's premise was about some Europeans who had become stranded on an island controlled by a mad scientist. Peter was sent by the scientist to make friends and then sabotage the island's captives. The woman on the island was interested in his tattoos and wanted one. She asked him all about them and touched them in a rather sexual manner. Peter gave her a tattoo on her leg in a traditional Polynesian Island method. She made a face of pain, but told the men that it did not hurt. Then the teenager wanted one, but he was forced to do certain difficult tasks to prove he was a man before he was entitled to wear a tattoo.*

This show's use of the tattoo reflects popular notions that the Western tattoo originated from Polynesia. The tattooed body is stereotypically portrayed as exotic, erotic, and primitive while linking with notions of ritual rites of passage. The two television shows dialogue with the two views of tattooing's history, one of the exotic and the other of a military hero. The use of these stereotypical images conveys messages about the wearer, the story line, and tattooed people in general. They can be used to judge those in the tattoo community. The two different stereotypes are also used by different groups of people in Montreal. The military history, as well as that of sailors, criminals, and bikers is used by the groups of tattooed people who are in the military, are sailors, criminals, or bikers, but also the general un-modified public. Those who follow the modern primitive ideology as well as those who participate in extreme and middle class popular forms of tattooing and piercing use the stereotype of the noble savage. Distinctions may be made between the stereotypes based on the style of the art.

Objects of popular culture carry considerable cultural meaning, which is in a constant state of change. Through advertising, efforts are made to link goods to the world. People held in high esteem, like celebrities, act as opinion leaders to shape and define the cultural meaning. Their admirers tend to emulate their behavior. Popular culture provides a belief in the legitimacy

of fashion or ideology because of mass acceptance (Cunningham and Lab 1991, Miller and McHoul 1998). This holds true in that movies and television stars as well as popular models are commonly shown wearing tattoos or piercings. Tattoo artists said they often have people ask for the same tattoo as a famous person, a common one being Pamela Anderson's barbed wire armband.

One intriguing advertisement on television showed young people being pierced, then many people showing off their piercings: tongues, eyebrow, lips and various combinations. One of the pierced people said, "why do I do it? Because it's cool." Another said, "because it hurts." Then a close up picture of a hand with a nail through it was shown, then a foot, and then a picture of Jesus Christ on the cross. The commercial declared: "he was pierced and he did it because he loves you". Then the Trinity Church logo was shown, an interesting usage of popular culture and a prominent religious figure to attempt to increase church attendance among youth.

There is also a fashion system that is generated by the subcultures on the fringes of society called anti-fashion. Anti-fashion is any style of dress and adornment that goes against what is currently in fashion. People sometimes deviate from the norm willingly because they feel excluded in other cultural arenas, making a political statement. The dress functions as a sign of the rejection of the norm and as an adherence to the ideas and thoughts of the fringe group. Primarily the new subcultures are discriminated against, but the ideas eventually enter the cultural mainstream and are adopted for mass fashion (Cunningham and Lab 1991, Wojcik 1995). As people become used to seeing things that are considered strange, they become desensitized, and it no longer seems bizarre. For example, ten years ago a nose stud was considered very peculiar, but today it is almost unnoticeable.

The example of the "Punks" is a perfect instance of anti-fashion becoming a part of popular culture and fashionable. The early punk movement in Britain was composed of working class youth who were frustrated by their inability to advance beyond their class. They dressed confrontationally, using items that were thought to be inappropriate to decorate their bodies.



Safety pins were used to pierce skin, black leather and torn black clothes were worn, and hair was often shaved leaving a Mohawk, dyed unnaturally bright colors, standing high in the air. Other aspects of traditional culture were used as well, like music and dancing, all reflected the chaotic mood their generation was experiencing. The style was embraced to reflect their alienation, feelings of separation and invisibility in British society. The style was first shown to the public through punk band personas on stage and then became popular among American middle class youth, who had the opposite problem of too much attention placed on them. American punks used the style to express their rebelliousness and to reflect their independence. Clothing designers began to appropriate punk styles in their latest creations. The self-made style was quickly appropriated by the fashion industry through selling studded leather and zippered attire in high fashion shops. Runway models wore stylized garbage bags and punk style make-up. Punk turned from politics to fashion as the style of the working class British youth was appropriated by middle class American youth and entrepreneurs were able to turn the fad into profit (Nordquist 1991, Cunningham and Lab 1991, Wojcik 1995).

My final example of the uses of body art in popular culture provides a very intriguing example that confirms body piercing has been institutionalized within our culture. It was a Hallmark card wishing the receiver "Congratulations on your newly pierced part!" It was a simple design on the front of the card, pastel geometric designs with the words: nose, ear, lip, belly button, eyebrow, and other listed and boxes to check off the appropriate body part. When something appears on a Hallmark card, it has become popular enough to be marketable well beyond the tattoo and piercing studio. Unfortunately I am unable to include this card as an illustration as permission to reproduce it was refused.

The large numbers of young people that can be found in the tattoo and piercing studios and those who can be seen walking down the street on a warm summer's day wearing body art prove that some forms of body modification have made its way from marginal to mainstream

society. Its multiple appearances on television and in Hallmark cards clearly show that its popularity in Montreal is not an anomaly.

### **An example: When the fringe style becomes popular**

The concepts of fashion, popular culture and anti fashion in body modification become clear in an example that came from an interview with a young woman in a tattoo parlor.

*Diane was seated at a specialized stool so that she could lean forward and expose her back. On this day she was having a large piece completed in a six-hour session. The outline had been tattooed at an earlier date and she was there to have the design filled in with color. Diane's first tattoo was an armband, a series of black skulls that wrapped around her upper arm. In the summer she worked on the street painting people's bodies with henna tattoos. She found that in the last few years, many people have been asking her to do armbands stating "I want one just like yours." This made Diane reevaluate the tattoo and contemplate having it covered up, but the real push came when an older woman complemented her on her skull armband. She decided that when an elderly person thought it looked nice, it had become too mainstream and it was time to do something else.*

*Diane had a large Japanese design put over the armband, which extended across her back. She wears a lot of halter-tops in the summer and wanted her tattoo to be visible. The piece was very pretty, full of bright colors and dramatic designs consisting of dragons and samurais connected with whorls of blue water. Pretty, but by no means popular or common. Diane had her armband covered with a much larger piece because it had become mainstream and she did not feel that she was a part of popular culture, nor did she want to be a part of it. In order to separate herself she had the common approved symbol covered up with a larger one considered deviant because of size, visibility, and gender.*

The large image on Diane's arms, at this point in time, is still considered risqué. Due to the increase of males and females having large designs inscribed into their skin, they will have to

find new anti fashion symbols in the near future if they want to maintain their outsider and deviant status. At present it is popular to receive a small tattoo in an easily hidden area, however as the fringe society moves towards visible modification, it can be surmised that popular culture will as well. Cutting, scarification, implanting, and amputation are much more fringe than visible tattoos and extensive piercings. Using the theory presented in this section as a framework, as heavily modified people become exposed in the media, some forms of extreme modification could potentially become fashionable and popular. However, many of those who participated in more acceptable forms of body modification stated that they were not interested in the more extreme forms. They usually thought it was too peculiar and too painful for them. A few though, thought that some of it, like scarification, was more likely to find its way on their list of things to have done some day than others, like implanting or amputation. The process is slow and it cannot be known what will happen in the future. The chances of some of the extreme forms of body modification, like horned head implants, becoming mainstream are slim. Elements of the most extreme forms, however, are often "tamed down" when they are brought into the mainstream. In ten years we may not see horned head implants and filed teeth being a popular fashion accessory, but, for example, we may see small-scale chest and arm implants becoming much more common.

The problem with body modification being defined as fashionable is that it is permanent. Fashion, by nature, is constantly changing. Permanent body modification becoming fashionable threatens this notion. Those with the fashionable trends of today permanently etched into their body become very unfashionable later in life. However, because meaning is flexible and constantly changing, those who acquire a tattoo or piercing today for aesthetics will have developed other meanings for their body art as they change (Sweetman 2000). They may also change their body art by adding to or taking away from the image, as removal technology advances. The probability of permanent visible modifications becoming popular is unlikely simply

because they are permanent. What is likely to become a part of mainstream society in the future are semi-permanent or easily hidden versions of extreme modification.

The current popularity of body modification is more than just a fashionable trend as noted in the previous sections concerning identity and meaning. Due to its popularity at this time, body modification has become a commodity to be marketed, however, this does not mean that it is simply a superficial practice. It has many dynamics and fashion is just one aspect as these dynamics are constantly shifting.

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## **VI. Discussion**

This thesis began with an historical look at tattooing and body modification in the West, and then cross-cultural references were used to highlight examples of similar practices. These two sections show the significant influences on present day body modification. It is inherent to the understanding of present day cultural practice to have a clear understanding of the history and of other important influences (Wolf 1999). History has created the present; therefore its influences must be taken seriously. Many in the body modification community deny much of the history of body modification, thinking it irrelevant. Sailor and biker tattoos are ignored or ridiculed, but cross-cultural tattoos are revered and images of them are pasted on the walls of tattoo shops. Both aspects are an intrinsic part of the history. Many credit the Polynesians with introducing tattooing to the West, however it had been practiced in Europe for centuries before Captain Cook's voyage and was practiced long after in ways never mentioned by middle class and modern primitive tattoo wearers. This one historic incident is exemplified and frozen in time. The voyage has a mythic and romantic appeal, which is used to give body modification credibility when the other aspect of its history destabilizes this credibility and attaches a stigma to those with visible modifications. The historic wearers of the art are thought to be unsavory and the artistry of the tattoos is not considered appealing to the majority of today's tattooees. Those who still acquire biker type or jailhouse tattoos are not considered a part of the tattoo community because they view tattooing differently and have contradictory artistic styles. Those who are included in the tattoo community follow the middle class model of tattooing, wearing original, custom-made, or fine art tattoos. Images of these have been included among the photographs of this thesis.

This use of cross-cultural material and the denial of certain aspects of its history reflect in the data from Montreal. None of the people interviewed spoke of sailors, bikers or the tattooed lady displayed in the carnivals of the past. They spoke of Japan and Polynesia, African scarification and ritual rites of passage. They spoke of individuality, beauty in design, identity and

a sense of spirituality that came from their body art, rarely of rebellion or group membership. While many modifiers spoke of body modification simply as being art inscribed into their skin, most had reasons beyond the beauty for modifying their bodies. The cross-cultural examples given in the second chapter of this thesis were examples of the information that body modifiers are reading. This academic information gives a sense of legitimacy to their body art and lifestyle. This is because people considered nobler than Westerners have practiced body modification for centuries. It has been deemed acceptable in the anthropological literature. This acceptability in the literature validates and legitimizes the practices among Montrealers as well, despite the lack of greater social acceptance.

The ethnographic section, along with the photographs included in this thesis, illustrate the reality and the humanity of this segment of Montreal modifiers more clearly. The process is shown in both the photographs as well as in the ethnographic section. Reality is often denied when dealing with aesthetics and the body, because the process is rarely shown. The completed image is displayed proudly, but the blood and sweat that had to happen to create the final product are ignored. The sculpted body, the new nose, the perkier breasts, the tattoo, and the forked tongue were all created by a process, which is not usually pretty. The sculpted body is rarely shown during an intense workout, nor is the painful healing process of plastic surgery, with the exception of performance artist Orlan. Through displaying the processes involved in body modification, the methods people use are explored, but also how important the process is to the final product. While the final product is the most important part of body modification, how the person became modified is essential to its social perception. People always ask where a tattoo was received or who the artist was. It is the same with body piercing. Meaning in body modification tends to be associated with the experience of and reasons for receiving it. One man stated that he would not cover up an old and fading tattoo because of the experience he had in acquiring it: His father, also a tattooist, gave him the tattoo when he was thirteen years old. (See Plate VII, Photo 2-E)

With extreme modification the importance is placed on self-modification or modification in a group setting at home with no professional help. Things are rarely completed in private, and when they are, it is usually a very personal healing, for example the amputation. The process of the specific modification is discussed at length beforehand with friends who offer advice and help to achieve the best possible final product and the best or appropriate management of pain. The modification process is not simply about body modification; it becomes an event, practiced in a social environment. The outcome of the process marks the modification event as well as the underlying reasons for becoming modified. The marking becomes a constant reminder of the event, making the process intrinsic to how the final product is viewed.

Identity is a common discourse within body modification because modifiers state that they use it to help create and realize their personal and social identities. Body modifiers use cross-cultural material, taking ideas from sources outside of their own practice and giving them new meaning to help create identities. Ideas of ritual, pain, and spirituality all come together within the modern primitive ideology, which uses cross-cultural ideas and practices, often claiming authenticity in ritual and spirituality. Authenticity is frequently claimed by those who practice body modification using cross-cultural images and ideology. Rarely is extensive research done about the culture they are emulating and appreciating. The images are taken and a superficial understanding of the culture is used as a basis for the meaning behind the specific modification. Despite the lack of comprehensive knowledge about the culture in which the image was appropriated from, a sense of identity and a sense of belonging to a group is created, while at the same time making the person feel like a unique individual. While the modern primitive ideology is not often labeled as such within the Montreal sample, what it represents is still a large part of the social processes, construction of identity, and aesthetics of body modification. Cross-cultural information and ideology is used as a foundation to the accumulation of body modification.

**Identity is not fixed. People are constantly negotiating their identities with themselves and others. Identities change over time and from situation to situation. Despite identities being permanently etched onto the skin by body modifiers through sculpting and imagery, their identities remain fluid. Meaning is not fixed and interpretation of the imagery is also constantly changing. While a tattoo may have a certain meaning at the time it is received, which is directly related to the reason for and experience of acquiring the body modification, as the person changes, the meaning will change with them. Personal experience and societal views concerning body modification and body modifiers will change the way the modification is viewed by the wearer. The people who took part in this study were between the ages of 18-30; few were older than this. As identities change over time, through one's natural life cycle, it will be interesting to see how these body modifiers negotiate their identities when they reach middle age. How important will body modification be to them? Will their body art continue to be a part of their identity, or will we see an increase in tattoo removal, implant and piercing removal, and skin grafts to cover scarifications?**

**Bodily aesthetics is much more than mere visual appearance. Seldom is a tattoo or piercing simply for show. There is usually a story behind it and a significant meaning to the wearer. The complexity of acquiring body art, negotiating identity, and the politics surrounding it culminates in the artistry of the design. This thesis has described many different types of body alterations, which are interpreted as body art by the wearers. The body modifications are used to improve and decorate the body while expressing personal identity. It has a social aspect that goes beyond the image inscribed in the skin. The social aspects have been shown, through ethnographic fieldwork, to exist in the process of acquiring the modification either through a self-created ritual, or through elaborate techniques concocted through collaboration with friends and cross-cultural material, as well as through the display of the completed product. The self-created ritual and techniques both use cross-cultural material appropriating symbols, tools, and techniques. The social aspect of display involves the communication of personal and social**



identity because the modification makes a statement about the wearer. Viewers judge body modification depending on societal views and personal experience with the medium. Presently, the distinction between positively and negatively viewed body modifications rest on size, permanence, and visibility. More specifically, a small easily hidden tattoo or piercing is acceptable. While a tattoo is permanent, if it is easily hidden then it will not present problems with interacting socially among non-modifiers and with employment opportunities. When modifications become large and more difficult to hide, there is less tolerance. A person with visible tattoos or piercings may experience discrimination because of their obvious markings. They will have a more difficult time finding employment than a person without visible modifications. This distinction between the acceptability of certain forms of body modification and unacceptability of others remains, and will likely remain because of the constant state of change that is the nature of popular culture. If a permanent modification is visible, it mocks popular culture and those who adhere to it. It becomes hard to change and hard to conform to the next new trend.

Consumerism and popular culture are an inseparable part of body modification due to the nature of Western society as a consumer society. The theory of popular culture states that what begins as marginal eventually becomes mainstream as the ideas spread through mass communication. This is exactly what is occurring within body modification. While the recent history began as a hegemonic dialogue by a group of characters labeled as marginal by society, then became a search for meaning by individuals who felt disconnected by a perceived lack of meaning in their lives, it is becoming increasingly popular among mass society. Models are shown wearing tattoos and piercings and mainstream jewelry stores have begun to carry body jewelry. Temporary tattoos are available at *The Dollar Store*. Advertising and television uses body art to sell products, and card companies cash in on its developing popularity by producing cards which state "congratulations on your new body art". While many still follow the Judaic body ethic that the body is sacred, belongs to God and should not be permanently marked, most young adults

do not as the move in popular culture is to sculpt the body to fit an ideal image. People are beginning to believe that their body is their own. They are creating a body that they can be proud of, a body that they can feel comfortable in, a body that they chose.

These concepts of consumerism and popular culture also tie into the previous ideas on identity. While popular culture and consumption tend to have superficial meaning, it can also be a large part of a person's identity. Body modifiers rarely discuss the importance of being accepted by society as they are usually trying to separate themselves and stand out, but they are still trying to associate themselves with a marginal group. Those who pride themselves on being up-to-date in the fashion industry are following popular culture using it to form an identity, an identity based on being "hip", fashionable, or admirable because of how they look. In recent years, being fashionable has not only meant wearing the latest clothing trend, but also a tattoo or having a body piercing.

Due to the need for meaning that many believe Western society has lost, there is a strong move of young people to try to find the meaning they need through body modification. The marking means something to them and in our individualistic society that is all they need. They can go to the tattoo parlor or piercing studio and buy meaning that they can wear on their person permanently; the image cannot be taken away from them. The meaning however, will change over time. Presently tattoos and piercings are "cool", but it cannot be predicted how they will be viewed in the future.

The present popularity of body modification also produces an interesting dynamic. The many images in this thesis may shock and disturb people and they may wonder how extreme body modification could possibly become popular. It is painful, and some may think grotesque, yet the many images present in this thesis and those available over the internet of people modifying their bodies speak for themselves. It is easy to dismiss them as exhibitionists, narcissists, or psychotics, but the method in which most from this group present themselves strongly suggests otherwise. The most prominent body modifiers tend to be very articulate and

knowledgeable about their medium. They are well versed in cross-cultural examples of similar practices. Their actions are organized and tend to be linked to their sense of self. While popular culture incorporates some of these bodily practices into its repertoire some of this aspect of organization and knowledge about the medium will likely be lost. Meaning and identity becomes centered on aesthetics.

As tattooing and body piercing becomes more popular, those who wish to remain marginal members of society because of their body modifications must push the medium further to remain marginal. Once a modification becomes popular, the ability to shock outsiders is lost. To retain that "shock value" the body modifiers must become more heavily modified and try new types of modification. How far the alterations can go is uncertain. Some believe it has already been pushed to its maximum, but time will tell. As images of extreme modification and even consensual torture become more common on the internet and more people become involved in extreme forms of body altering, the influence on young people to alter their bodies is great. However, fashion fades and body modification could potentially become the bellbottoms of the 1970's, only to become popular again when the fad resurfaces thirty years later. However, body modification is being linked to identity and is being given meaning beyond its appearance, something that bellbottoms did not. The modifications cannot be discarded as easily when they become unfashionable. People may begin to undergo surgeries to remove them, hide them, or they may alter their perspective, changing the meaning they hold surrounding them to fit their perspective at that time. It is difficult to anticipate how body modification will change, how it will be viewed, and what it will mean to people in the future. The only certainty is that it will change.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> These three districts are within the downtown Montreal area: Peter-McGill #26, Jeanne Mance #25, and Saint-Jacques #38.

<sup>3</sup> Twenty-seven tattoo and piercing studios are advertised in the 2001 phone book for the entire island of Montreal.

<sup>4</sup> Number calculated by dividing one million people by nineteen tattoo and piercing studios.

<sup>5</sup> Breast implants have different societal concerns because they tend to be acceptable in society, although not when young girls receive them. Their acceptability comes from the motivations and the end product, which are more or less normalizing. The implants dealt with in this thesis are those which do not follow the mainstream body aesthetic.

<sup>6</sup> Novocain is a local anesthetic. Mike purchased the drug in pre-filled syringes, but would not tell me where, or who sold them to him.

<sup>7</sup> I have often been asked how I was able to watch the tongue forking procedure. I believe the camera allowed me to observe this operation by providing me with a barrier between the surgery and myself, offering a safe and comfortable distance. It also provided me with another focus, to compose photographs, besides simply the physical act of the cutting happening before my eyes.

<sup>8</sup> I have been unsuccessful in finding this reference.

<sup>9</sup> Those working in flash shops, though, were not as interested in originality, but complimented custom designs and appreciated their artistry.

<sup>10</sup> A ball dance is a performance in which the dancer has small weighted balls sewn into his or her skin. The balls hang from the body and while the dancer dances, the balls bounce and move with the dancer.

<sup>11</sup> While the research participants are past the age of being defined as youth, the concept of Canadian youth culture applies to the body modification subculture. Legally, they are adults however they are taking part in a subculture that research shows to correspond with the theories on youth culture.

<sup>12</sup> This is a misconstrued understanding of "primitive" society that is widely spread but has been challenged by anthropologists. So-called primitive societies are the product of their own social transformations and in no way represent our own pre-historic past.

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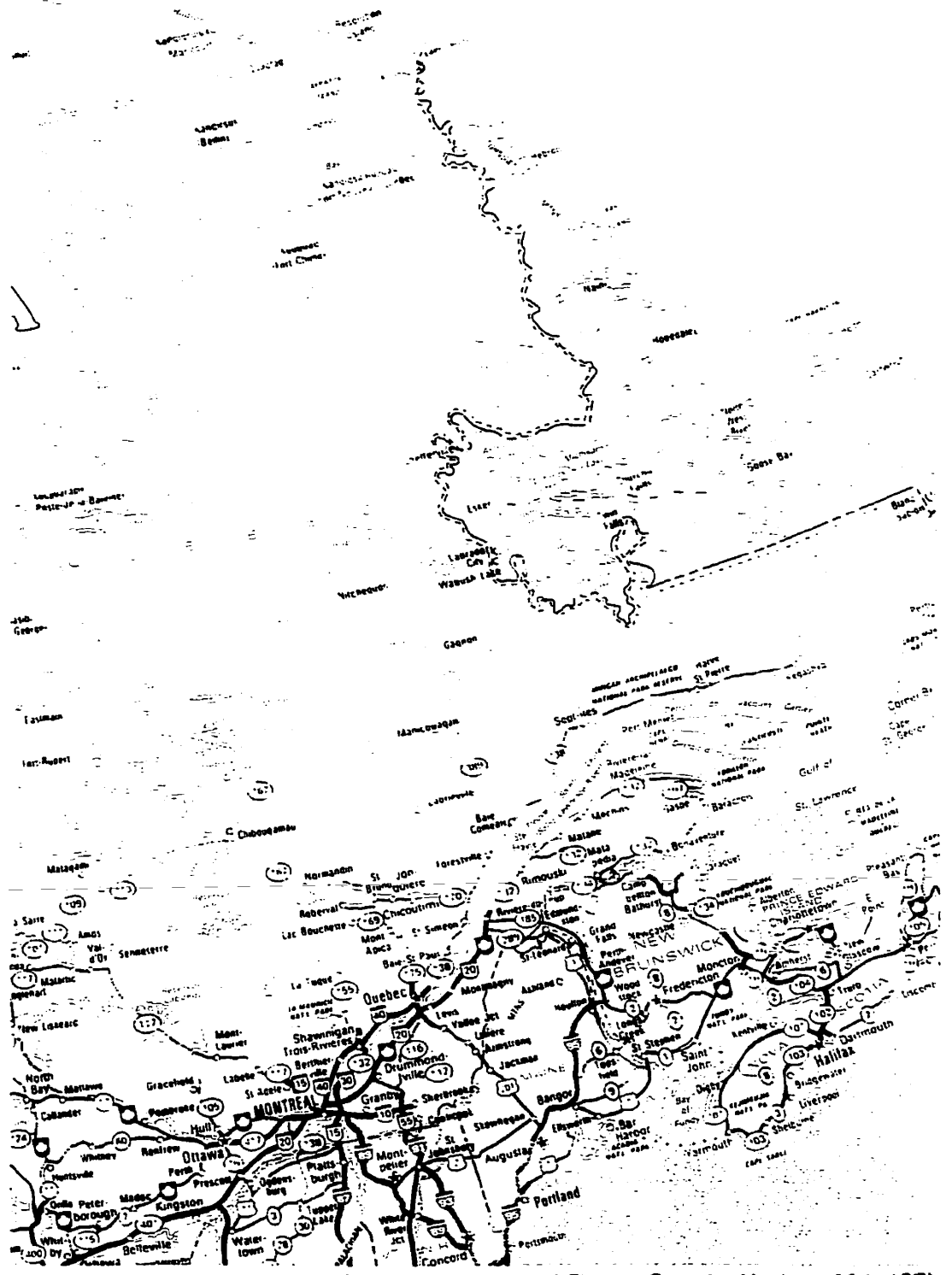
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# Appendix A – Maps

## Map 1 – The Province of Quebec



(Road Atlas: United States, Canada, Mexico. 1994: 127)





## **Appendix B – Government Regulations/Guidelines**

During fieldwork, my main resource on the subject of government regulations was through the practitioners. Several tattooists mentioned the book that the government published, but I was unable to obtain it because of government beurocracy and language politics until fieldwork was complete. I found a small pamphlet in a doctor's office produced by the government of Quebec, which consists of scant guidelines for clients and practitioners. They are highly inadequate. (See Plate XXXV and Plate XXXVI). Through research, I discovered that there are no government regulations, only guidelines, which most of the practitioners considered to not go far enough. There are no sanctions the government can carry out if someone does not follow them properly.


I was eventually able to obtain the Health Canada publication concerning infection and disease control surrounding piercing and tattooing. A brief summary of the official guidelines proposed by Health Canada follows:

This publication entitled "Infection Control Guidelines: Infection Prevention and Control Practices from Personal Services: Tattooing, Ear/Body Piercing, and Electrolysis" is published in both official languages, 72 pages in English and 82 pages in French and is intended for practitioners. It gives very specific actions designed to prevent the spread of infection. The guidelines may be said to not go far enough because they are merely guidelines, with no legal sanctioning behind them. The methods of sterilization and prevention of cross-contamination are described in extensive detail and are certainly adequate. The guidelines are very specific and state that one should follow them precisely.

The purpose of the report is to reduce and prevent the spread of bloodborne pathogens such as the Hepatitis B virus, Hepatitis C virus, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Other infections such as warts, toxic shock syndrome, cutaneous tuberculosis, inoculation leprosy, and deep tissue infection have also been reportedly spread by tattooing and piercing. In effect, through breaking the skin barrier, any






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99-351-1A

● pure bleach for 5 minutes or by boiling them in water for 20 minutes. The needles won't be as safe as sterile ones but it's better than nothing.



**Disinfecting the tattoo machine or the punch and the needle's tubes**  
 The tattoo machine or the punch must be completely cleaned with bleach (tip and tube).



**New ink only**

- Never use ink that has been used for someone else.
- Never put leftover ink back in the bottle.
- Only use capsules that will be thrown out after they are used.

When the tattooing or piercing is finished, put a compress (sterile bandage) on the area for a few hours to keep it from getting infected.



**Tattoos and Body Piercing**  
 ...Protecting yourself from AIDS, hepatitis B and hepatitis  
**Québec** ...

infection could potentially be transmitted. There is reportedly little evidence that tattooing and piercing were genuinely the causes of the reported cases of infection. This is because there are multiple factors that could have caused the infection, not simply the acquisition of the tattoo or body piercing. The risk of acquiring diseases through body modification varies and can be prevented by using sterile equipment and proper after care procedures. The report focuses on infection risks, but mentions the non-infectious risks in passing. The risk of becoming infected occurs when the skin or mucous membrane is pierced as pathogens have an entrance to the body.

The most effective type of sterilization of all reusable equipment is outlined. Practitioners are instructed to clean each item first to remove any visible soiling. Step by step instructions are provided on how to remove visible matter. After the first cleaning stage, a disinfection process must occur. There are specific categories of items labeled non-critical, which are items that come into contact with intact skin, semi critical items, which are items that come into contact with mucous membranes, non-intact skin, or items that touch a sterile item. Finally there is a critical category, which are items that enter deep into the skin. Each of these categories has specific disinfection procedures designed to kill bacteria, microorganisms, and viruses. Autoclave sterilization follows disinfection. Specific sterilization procedures are outlined such as preparation of each item, loading, and unloading the autoclave. The temperatures and timing required are also listed. Sterilization equipment (steam and dry heat autoclaves) must be tested monthly for effectiveness. Past methods that are now considered inadequate are also mentioned as such.

Disposal of contaminated objects is described in depth, as is the proper layout for a studio. Zones of degree of contamination to prevent cross-contamination are required in the studio. Step by step cleaning procedures are provided concerning equipment, client skin cleaning before and after the procedure, blood and body fluid spills, practitioner hygiene and protection of objects that cannot be properly cleaned and sterilized. Keeping client records is recommended.

Name, address, phone number, date of birth, date of procedure, practitioner's name and the site of the procedure should be recorded because they could be needed if an infection occurs.

The publication breaks down each body modification method into procedural elements and guidelines for safe and sanitary practice is systematically given. For tattooing the needles are labeled as the most critical item for infection risk because they actually enter the skin. Everything that touches the needles must be carefully cleaned and monitored for potential cross-contamination. Detailed guidelines are given concerning the set up of the workstation. It is recommended that sterile needles be removed from their packages and disposed of properly in front of the client.

Body piercing is considered the most invasive of the procedures because the needle enters the body at one point and exits through another. Local infections of the piercing site are common because the jewelry inserted slows the healing process, keeping the tissue open and therefore more susceptible to pathogens. Both processes of needle piercing and gun piercing are described and proper sterilization procedures outlined, which are similar to that described for tattooing. The same format used for tattooing is used for piercing as step by step instructions are given.

This governmental publication is thorough. If these procedures are followed accurately and precisely, spread of disease through body modification would be limited. The problem would rest with the clients and their aftercare hygiene. The reality, however, is that it is often easier not to follow the guidelines as they are time consuming and complex procedures. Practitioners often feel that the many particulars are unnecessary and since they are not sanctioned by law, they do not have to follow them.

The spread of disease is not rampant due to body modification. Still, the Canadian Government would be wise to ensure some sort of safety standards. It is ironic that restaurants have certain laws governing them and the Health Board inspects and ensures compliance, yet tattoo and piercing studios are completely unregulated. This is despite the fact that they break

the skin barrier. Several shop owners complained that when they opened their store, no one in the government would inspect their premises or give them any recommendations. They were also unaware of this publication and no one in the government informed them of its existence. There is no professional association of tattooists and piercers either. New tattooists and piercers learn through apprenticeship without any set standard of practice or sanitation. The apprentice is guided by an established tattooist who agrees to teach them the trade. This Health Canada report can be ignored if the practitioner does not wish to take it seriously. Most practitioners practice some form of sterilization procedures but these are not regulated or inspected by anyone. However, there are a large number of tattooists who pride themselves of their reputation as artists, and to keep that good reputation they must not only be creative and competent as an artist, but also follow safe and sanitary practice.

The context surrounding this document was obtained through interviewing one of the tattooists who was involved in its production. Dave discovered that a document was being created concerning the sanitary practices surrounding tattooing with no tattooist's input and approached the government. He has given many lectures around the world, written books about hygiene and body modification, and has been a tattooist for 28 years, all that qualify him to speak on the procedures necessary for sanitary practice. Before this 1999 document was published, the rules created in 1955 were still in effect. These rules did not reflect the health concerns and issues of today. The main reason these guidelines were created was because of Hepatitis C scares. According to Dave, the guidelines are not policed, but they allow the government to act if necessary. Dave has done lectures and teaching seminars in the United States and commented that the American government is stricter than in Canada. The American government will inspect the premises and will close down a shop for not complying with regulations. The problem in Canada is that the government has not enforced these guidelines. The document was sent only to tattoo shops that were advertised in the yellow pages of the

phone book. While available to the public, it is not generally known to exist, as I discovered, even by many of the employees of Health Canada.

When asked if this document is too detailed, Dave commented that some of the procedures were simplified and could be more detailed. Some tattooists may believe that this document goes too far and is too detailed, but Dave does not think it is. When the concern is public health, tattooists and piercers should be putting 110 per cent effort into sanitation. It is important for public safety, but also to protect the industry and to prevent lawsuits.

This document is federally produced, meaning that locally guidelines and regulations can be made that go even further. The city of Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver each have local regulations concerning body modification. Montreal has none.

## **Appendix C – List of Websites**

[www.bmezine.com/links.html](http://www.bmezine.com/links.html) - Links to web pages for body modification  
[www.piercinglinks.com](http://www.piercinglinks.com) – Links to web pages for body piercing  
[www.bmezine.com](http://www.bmezine.com) – Very large Canadian-based body modification web site. This is the main “bme” website  
[www.bmeworld.com](http://www.bmeworld.com) – Links to body modifier home pages, or personal webpages, part of the bme groups  
[www.bme.freeq.com](http://www.bme.freeq.com) – Canadian based, part of the bme group  
[www.bme.freeq.com/pierce/bme-pirc.html](http://www.bme.freeq.com/pierce/bme-pirc.html)  
[www.blacksunstudio.gc.ca](http://www.blacksunstudio.gc.ca) – A Montreal piercing studio  
[www.body-art.net](http://www.body-art.net) – European web site  
[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hbp/lcdc/dpg\\_e.html#infection](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hbp/lcdc/dpg_e.html#infection) – Health Canada’s guidelines for professional piercing  
[www.piercing.org](http://www.piercing.org) – The (American) Association of Professional Piercers  
[www.zelacom.com/~nyctattoo/](http://www.zelacom.com/~nyctattoo/) - New York City tattooing  
[www.spc.bodymodification.com](http://www.spc.bodymodification.com) – Canadian based, part of bme group  
[www.byblair.com](http://www.byblair.com) – Toronto body modifier  
[www.tat-a-rama.com](http://www.tat-a-rama.com) – Tattoo, Piercing, Branding, and Scarring studio in Toronto  
[www.bodyplay.com](http://www.bodyplay.com) – Fakir Musafar’s web page (American)  
[www.churchofbodymod.org](http://www.churchofbodymod.org) – The Church of Body Modification’s website. A spiritual organization.  
[www.tattoos.com](http://www.tattoos.com) – North American website with many links  
[www.tattoo.net](http://www.tattoo.net) – Information and advertising site  
[www.triangletattoo.com](http://www.triangletattoo.com) – Triangle Tattoo and Museum (California)  
[www.sonic.net/pheonix.arabeth/tathev.html](http://www.sonic.net/pheonix.arabeth/tathev.html) – Web based art gallery and shop site (California)  
[www.tatt2studios.com](http://www.tatt2studios.com) – listing of tattoo studios  
[www.ambient.on.ca/bodmod/implants.html](http://www.ambient.on.ca/bodmod/implants.html) – Steve Hayworth’s website, Three dimensional art (Implants)  
[www.obscure.org/~nosx/mypierce.html](http://www.obscure.org/~nosx/mypierce.html) – A personal webpage  
[www.geocities.com/Area51/Dreamworld/3971/enig3.html](http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Dreamworld/3971/enig3.html) – The Engima’s Wedding web page  
[www.tardis.ed.ac.uk/~skx/body/index.html](http://www.tardis.ed.ac.uk/~skx/body/index.html) – A personal webpage – United Kingdom  
[www.infinitebody.com](http://www.infinitebody.com) – A Philadelphia piercing studio web page (also information on tattooing, scarification, branding)  
[www.bodyworksbodypiercingjewelry.com](http://www.bodyworksbodypiercingjewelry.com) – a body jewelry supplier  
[www.abodypiercing.com](http://www.abodypiercing.com) – a body jewelry supplier  
[www.shelina.com](http://www.shelina.com) – a body jewelry supplier  
[www.tribalectic.com/ShopsByCountry.asp](http://www.tribalectic.com/ShopsByCountry.asp) – a directory of piercing studios, worldwide  
[www.interlog.com/~passage](http://www.interlog.com/~passage) – A Toronto based studio, piercing, tattooing, branding, and scarification  
[www.vanishingtattoo.com](http://www.vanishingtattoo.com) – a tattoo journal  
[www.1001services/ofup.htm](http://www.1001services/ofup.htm) – A Montreal North Studio, tattooing and piercing  
[www.modifiedmind.com](http://www.modifiedmind.com) – information site, current events, web reviews, discussions  
[www.xjihad.com](http://www.xjihad.com) – modification/torture website (very graphic)  
[http://spc.bodymodification.com](http://http://spc.bodymodification.com) – extreme body modification site, information and photographs  
[www.internalzine.com](http://www.internalzine.com) – art website with a section featuring body modification artists and their work.