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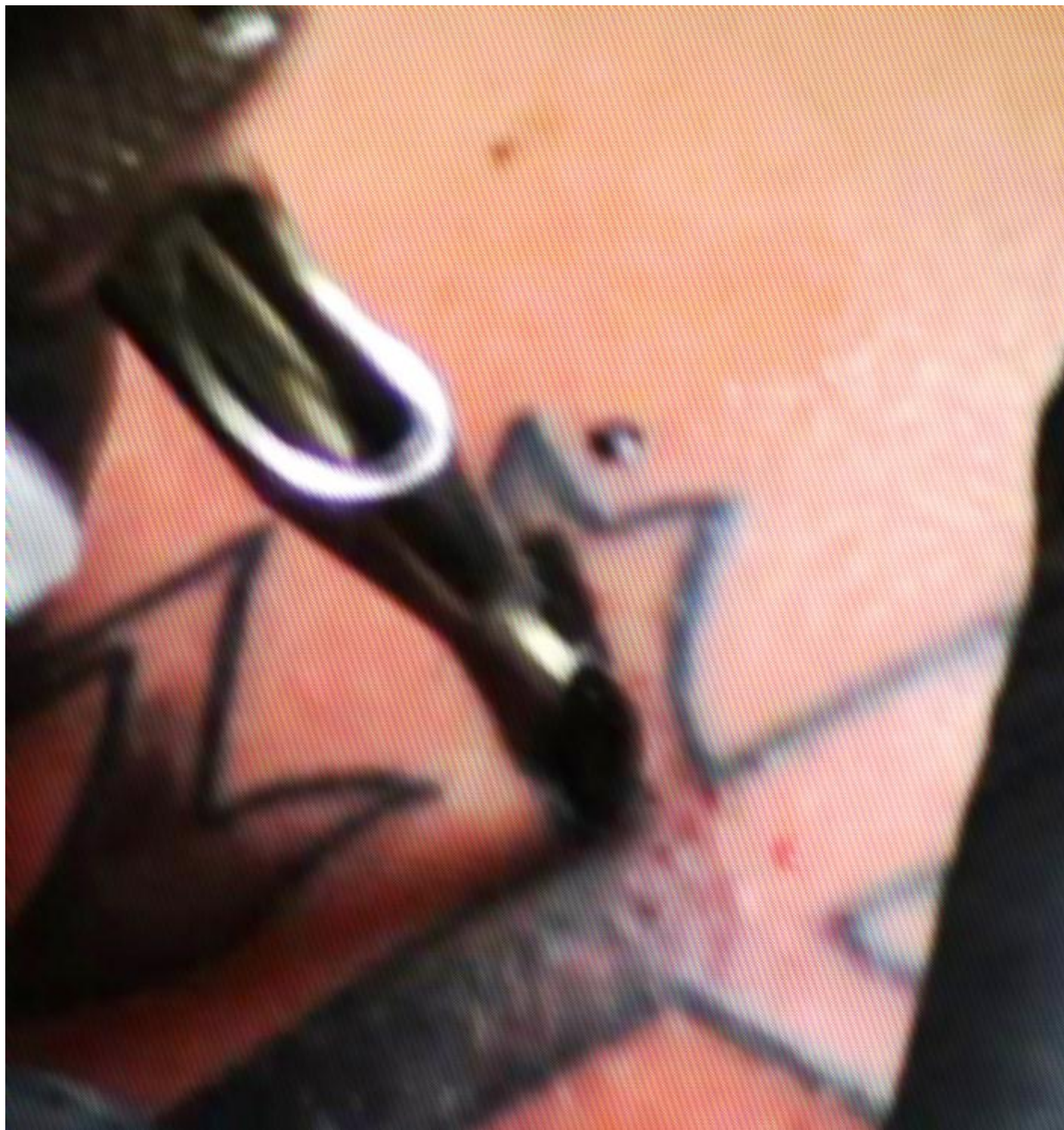
## ABSTRACT

What does it mean to own a tattoo? How does the tension between running a business and creating art affect the experience of producing and receiving a tattoo? This project consists of two parts: a written paper and a short documentary film. Based on original research, I explore what ownership means to tattoo artists and tattooed persons, and how this idea of ownership may or may not change when a tattoo is transmitted to film. Several participants conclude that the person who wears the tattoo ultimately owns the tattoo, while others believe all those involved in the experience have a stake in the ownership of their tattoo. While my conclusions are decidedly incomplete, partly a result of the originality of this work, I nevertheless draw attention to the significance of this tension to the way one looks at his or her tattoo after it is completed. I also explore in depth the complexities of using film as a research tool, as well as of conducting "field work" at home.

[http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections\\_Summer\\_2010/Matthew\\_Hayes\\_This\\_Is\\_My\\_Tattoo.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Summer_2010/Matthew_Hayes_This_Is_My_Tattoo.pdf)

Video component of "This is My Tattoo": <http://vimeo.com/10670029>

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# This is My Tattoo

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Several years ago I was slowly pacing the lobby of a tattoo studio in Toronto, nervously anticipating the experience to come. While it was not my first, the tattoo that I was waiting to have applied on my skin was my largest to date, and it was going straight on my ribs, one of the most painful areas of the body to have tattooed (or so they say). Despite the physical pain involved, and the difficulty I experienced in maintaining a steady breathing pattern throughout the three-hour sitting, I do not remember much; the entire experience is a muddled blur in my mind. Oddly enough, the only clear memory I do have of the day is of an innocuous newspaper clipping pasted to the wall beside the studio door, easily missed if one was not paying attention upon entering the studio, or, like me, looking for a distraction.

The clipping was a recent article detailing the absurdity of the Canadian government's inaction towards tattooing in prison. It turns out that prison inmates were costing the health system, and taxpayers, millions of dollars in treatment for hepatitis. Prison tattoos are often applied with simple tattoo machines, often crudely constructed, from mechanical pencils and small motors, such as those found in electric razors; or simply by dipping a sewing needle or guitar string in homemade ink.<sup>2</sup> What the article commented on is the fact that a professional tattoo machine and equipment costs far less than the money put towards treating the disease after the fact. If the government provided the inmates with adequate tattooing equipment, taxpayers would be saved the millions of dollars needed to treat the subsequent infections. Yet, the federal government has been reluctant to provide the equipment, and I puzzled over this for some time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Julia Harrison of Trent University for her guidance and outstanding accommodation of my study interests and, oftentimes, grandiose research plans. I also thank Stephanie Hayes for her enduring patience.

The video component of this project can be viewed at: <http://vimeo.com/10670029>.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Gilbert, *Tattoo history: a source book; an anthology of historical records of tattooing throughout the world* (New York: Juno Books, 2000), 187; See also Clifford Krauss, "A Prison Makes the Illicit and Dangerous Legal and Safe," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/24/international/americas/24bath.html> (accessed October 25, 2010). For a short video on how to construct such a tattoo "gun", see: <http://www.afrojacks.com/making-a-homemade-tattoo-gun/> (accessed October 25, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Since chancing upon this newspaper clipping, there have been contentious steps taken to resolve the issue in the intervening years. See, for example, Krauss, op cit.

Why would the government not purchase a handful of professional tattoo machines for prison use and, as a result, save so much money in the long run? I believe it (not so) simply comes down to an issue of power and ownership. In short, by providing inmates with sterile equipment, the prisoners would also get back a modicum of power over their bodies. As Foucault writes, the development of the penal system has served to wrest control of the body. Beginning with a description of the spectacle of the tortured criminal, Foucault discusses how public torture in 18<sup>th</sup> century France exhibited the sovereign's control over the prisoner's body. The body was the locus of power and domination, and displayed the sovereign's ability to do with the body what he wanted, at will.<sup>4</sup> Tattoos have similarly been used in the past to simulate this control, to symbolically deny personhood, by tattooing criminals on the forehead for instance, an immediate and indelible mark of their transgressive actions.<sup>5</sup> Kafka's "In The Penal Colony" graphically illustrates this procedure, in which the crime committed is laboriously inscribed in the skin of the condemned man, to be followed by swift death.<sup>6</sup>

Matters have not changed much since the practices of 18<sup>th</sup> century France. The courts may no longer put criminals to death by torture, but the modern penal system is still considered a display of power and control over the prisoner and his or her body. I would also argue that the 'spectacle of the body' still persists. For example, Pickering, Littlewood, and Walter, in their analysis of British front-page tabloid news concerning death, demonstrate the public's fascination with images of the dismembered corpse, reduced to a spectacle.<sup>7</sup> The penal system serves to strip the individual of power over the way he or she uses his or her body, and, in terms of this paper, this includes the will and ability to get tattooed. Kuwahara, in her ethnography of tattooing in Tahiti, highlights another dimension: "...the inmates are manipulating time through tattooing. They capture the prison time by tattooing anew, reconfigure the past by covering up or modifying old tattoos, discard the past by erasing (or wanting to erase) old tattoos, and connect themselves to the ancestral past by refusing contemporary practices of tattooing."<sup>8</sup> Tattooing can change or even erase the past, and likewise the crime one has committed, creating a new future for the inmate, a

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Enid Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 323.

<sup>6</sup> See Franz Kafka, Joyce Crick, and Ritchie Robertson, *The metamorphosis and other stories*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81-83.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Pickering, Jane Littlewood, and Tony Walter, "Beauty and the Beast: Sex and Death in the Tabloid Press," in *Death, gender, and ethnicity*, eds. David Field, Jennifer Lorna Hockey, and Neil Small (London: Routledge, 1997), 124-141.

<sup>8</sup> Makiko Kuwahara, *Tattoo: an anthropology* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 229.

future determined, not by the penal system, but by the inmate. Foucault discusses how, by inflicting pain and hardship on the prisoner, the sovereign displays his power. By willfully inflicting pain and hardship on one's own body, in the form of a tattoo, one can similarly display (or regain) power and ownership over one's body.

#### Ownership and Authenticity

I focus here on two levels of inquiry. First is the question of ownership: ownership of the body, and ownership of the art. Second is the desire for authenticity, as an implicit and explicit characteristic of one's tattoo (and the authenticity of the tattoo as process in and of itself). With the advent of the "second tattoo renaissance"<sup>9</sup> the media is playing a significant role in the popularization of tattoos, and television shows like *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*<sup>10</sup> are changing the way one can view and research the "tattoo world".<sup>11</sup> My interpretation of how one 'owns' a tattoo is based both upon my own experience and the model Kuwahara uses in her analysis of tattoo motifs in Tahiti. Kuwahara establishes four categories of ownership: The Collective, The Tattooist, the Tattooed Person and The Photographer.<sup>12</sup> A tattoo motif may physically travel through these four categories, but this model provides a way of thinking about the many ways someone may claim (more) ownership over a motif. "The Collective" may not shed much light upon the particularly individualistic ethos that drives the commodification of tattoos in the West;<sup>13</sup> here I have opted to adopt the latter three categories for my own research, modifying "The Photographer" to include the filmmaker.

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Atkinson, "Tattooing and Civilizing Processes: Body Modification as Self-control," *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 41, no. 2 (2004): 125; See also Victoria Pitts-Taylor, *In the flesh: the cultural politics of body modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 3.

<sup>10</sup> Premiering in 2005 on TLC, *Miami Ink* was a series that followed the artists in a tattoo studio in South Beach, Florida. It quickly gained widespread popularity, was broadcast in "over 160 countries", and spawned several spin-offs, including *L.A. Ink*. The significance of the series is in the way tattoos and people with tattoos are portrayed. The show featured a variety of people getting tattoos, rather than the stereotypical bikers and convicts, and attempted to show a different side to the tradition. However, as several of my participants believed, the people featured in the shows nevertheless were simply getting tattoos to be cool, to be seen on T.V., and did not care about the art at all. See, for example, Diego Lucille, "That's a Wrap: Miami Ink Call it Quits," *rankmytattoos*, <http://mag.rankmytattoos.com/that's-a-wrap-miami-ink-calls-it-quits.html>.

<sup>11</sup> D. Angus Vail, "Tattoos are Like Potato Chips... You Can't Just Have One: The Process of Becoming and Being a Collector," *Deviant Behaviour* 20, no. 3 (1999): 262.

<sup>12</sup> Kuwahara, 152-59.

<sup>13</sup> Kuwahara largely equates "The Collective" with "culture". She writes that, "Each cultural/social collective is considered to own particular tattoo styles, designs, motifs and techniques" (*ibid.*, 152). The tattoo, as a marker of ethnic and familial identity, is of particular importance in the South Pacific Islands.

Armed with this model of ownership, I similarly set out to study the way a contemporary Canadian tattoo design can be called one's own, simply to find that such an idea cannot be extricated from broader ideas of the ownership of the body. A common answer, given during interviews to my convoluted questions concerning the ownership of a tattoo, was simply: "The person owns the tattoo because it's on their body". The statement was usually accompanied by a noncommittal shrug of the shoulders or tilt of the head, indicating the obvious nature of the definition.

Does a tattoo artist still "own" a design once he or she has tattooed it on someone's skin? Does a tattooed person (re)gain ownership over the tattoo design once it is placed on the skin? What happens to this concept of ownership once the tattoo is captured on film and, especially, broadcasted to a wide, anonymous audience? This triangulated discussion becomes more complicated when one factors into the equation that I acted as both ethnographer and filmmaker.

My goals for making a documentary film as a companion piece to my written paper included simulating the effects of the transmission of a tattoo from a body to film, as well as spreading the results of my research to a wider public. I agree with MacClancy when he says that, "[m]any anthropologists, despite their best intentions, have hidden their insights and cloaked their findings in the thickest of prose. Their texts...are usually difficult to read and harder to finish. This is as unnecessary as it is unwanted. If an idea is worth expressing, the chances are it can be most powerfully expressed in a simple manner."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, I want my film and written text to appeal to others outside the halls of the academy.

Throughout this paper are paragraphs of bracketed text, which represent my reflections on my research at key intervals. These asides are written so as to flow, as best as possible, with the results I present, while providing additional insight into my method and thought process. As Heider writes, one of the purposes of simultaneously producing an ethnographic film and a complementary written text is to provide a more accessible introduction to the issues in my research, which are treated in a more detailed manner in my written component.<sup>15</sup> As for this written piece, I have several goals in mind. Perhaps inadvertently at first, I used my study opportunity as a way of exploring what it means to conduct research in an intimately familiar environment.

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<sup>14</sup> Jeremy MacClancy, "Introduction: Taking People Seriously," in *Exotic no more: anthropology on the front lines*, ed. Jeremy MacClancy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic film: revised edition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 7.

This discussion falls into the issue of doing anthropology at home;<sup>16</sup> as a “native” anthropologist.<sup>17</sup> Being a “tattoo enthusiast” myself, steadily working on my own “body project,” I have spent countless hours (and dollars) in tattoo studios, participating in the process, and slowly but surely covering my body in tattoos.<sup>18</sup> Thus, I explore what it means, and if it is possible, to separate myself from my past role as a person entering a studio to get tattooed, to a person entering a studio to do research on those getting tattooed. I also hope to contribute to the ongoing debate in the field of visual anthropology concerning ethnographic film as a research tool, with my own documentary and the observations I have collected from my experience. I believe ethnographic film is a highly underrated tool, and I quest to help visual anthropologists change this image.

This discussion will ultimately contribute to a definition of ownership of tattoos, which is what I have been striving for all along, perhaps at first without my full realization. The drive of this research, and my participants’ views, was the pursuit of authenticity. As I discuss further below, the difference between custom tattoos, those original drawings sketched by tattoo artists, and “flash” tattoos, stock photos copied onto the skin, is crucial to one’s conception of ownership. The *authenticity* of a tattoo, its originality, combined with the equally authentic experience of getting tattooed, is what often defines one’s ownership, and is what provides the framework for my conclusions. In short, what does it mean to own a tattoo? How can I (if at all) say with surety that, indeed, this is “my tattoo”?

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<sup>16</sup> See Anthony Jackson, “Reflections on ethnography at home and the ASA,” in *Anthropology at home*, ed. Anthony Jackson (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1987), 1-15; Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Discipline and Practice: ‘The Field’ as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology,” in *Anthropological locations: boundaries and grounds of a field science*, eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-46; Virginia Caputo, Virginia 2000. “At ‘Home’ and ‘Away’: Reconfiguring the Field for Late Twentieth-Century Anthropology,” *Constructing the field: ethnographic fieldwork in the contemporary world*, ed. Vered Amit (New York: Routledge, 2000), 19-31; and Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock, “Introduction: Awkward Spaces, Productive Places,” in *Anthropologists in the field: cases in participant observation*, eds. Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), xi-xxviii.

<sup>17</sup> See Kirin Narayan, “How Native is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?” *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1992): 671-686/

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of these terms see Michael Atkinson, *Tattooed: the sociogenesis of a body art* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2003), vii; and Chris Shilling, *The body and social theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1993) 5.

Filming Alex<sup>19</sup>

Like myself, Alex was in the fourth year of her undergraduate degree at the time of my study. I met her well before I began my research, as a result of a university activity in which we both took part, and this preexisting relationship made it easier for me to initiate my contact with her. I was able to film her throughout her initial tattoo experience, from her first meeting with Mike, a tattoo artist with twelve years of professional experience, up to, and slightly beyond, what would have been the day she actually got tattooed. Mike and Alex were my two key participants, who fulfilled the role of tattoo artist and tattooed person, respectively (while I fulfilled the role of filmmaker). Using Kuwahara's typology made it easier to classify my participants and analyze the relationships between them during the tattoo process.<sup>20</sup>

I chose to film my first formal interview with Alex in a fourth-floor seminar room in the library at Trent University. The room has a nice view overlooking the river that bisects the university campus, with students meandering across the bridge and trees waving in the distance. I thought this room might provide a pleasing background for the interview, around which my film is constructed. Unfortunately, due to the strictures of sufficient lighting (and my filmic inexperience and relatively inexpensive video equipment), such aesthetic details are almost entirely omitted from my footage. The light entered the room at an inappropriate angle, and thus I had to awkwardly adjust my camera, and the seat in which Alex sat, to better accommodate the conditions. There was also an incessant humming throughout the interview, coming from a vent in the ceiling, which later provided me with significant impediments while editing the film. Setting up this stage created the conditions for a less than ideal interview

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<sup>19</sup> One of the difficulties I have encountered independently studying Visual Anthropology as an undergraduate at a university that does not have an infrastructure supporting such studies is the scarcity of ethnographic films available for viewing. See Anna Grimshaw, *The ethnographer's eye: ways of seeing in modern anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ix.

As such I have elected to post my film online (with the permission of my participants) in the hopes of greater accessibility and compatibility. Such a move may be indicative of the recent and quite rapid changes in, and increased use of, visual research methods, and the dissemination of results through new media, mentioned recently by, for example: László Kürti, "Picture Perfect: Community And Commemoration in Postcards," in *Working images: visual research and representation in ethnography*, ed. Sarah Pink (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 48; Sarah Pink, "Conversing Anthropologically: Hypermedia as Anthropological Text," in *Working images: visual research and representation in ethnography*, ed. Sarah Pink (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 166-184; and Roderick Coover, "Working With Images, Images of Work: Using Digital Interface, Photography and Hypertext in Ethnography," in *working images: visual research and representation in ethnography*, ed. Sarah Pink (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 185-203.

<sup>20</sup> These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as individuals, much like myself, may cross over their boundaries, occupying two, or even more, categories at any given time.



situation, one where the presence of the camera was constant. For example, filming a static interview requires the interviewee to sit rather still, within the physical parameters of the camera's gaze, and, by the end of our interview, Alex began to find this taxing.

"Are we going to need the whole three hours?" She anxiously asked me halfway through the interview, while I took a quick break from firing questions at her to connect my camcorder to a wall socket.

I booked the seminar room for a full three hours, yet our interview only lasted an hour and a half, "like a proper class" as Alex put it at the end. All I was able to offer in response to her question was that "it really depends on how much we talk. So if you get sick of it just start giving me one-word answers and I'll get the picture". Rather conveniently, Alex agreed to take part in my study because she was looking to get tattooed by Mike. However, before she came to this decision, Alex had initially settled on getting tattooed by a different local artist, a fact I found out after I had already obtained permission from Mike to research and film in his studio. As a result of some uninspiring reviews of this other local tattoo artist however, Alex quite quickly decided that getting tattooed by Mike was more in tune with her interests. Her decision coincidentally aligned perfectly with the goals I had set for my ethnographic film. I wanted to build a narrative of Mike and a client that presented their views on my research, and which ultimately culminated in the actual act of tattooing. Mike was also instrumental in the ease with which I obtained my footage. He had been filmed by local news channels in the past and was quite comfortable in front of the camera, and was perhaps eager for his tattoo studio to gain exposure in the process (whatever exposure the limited release of my film could offer): "This is an art studio, and I want people to see that. This is a place where we create art".

Gaining access to Mike's studio went smoothly, and combined with Alex's equally eager participation, my research was quickly underway. Alex and Mike clearly articulated the gains they thought they could expect from my research, and particularly my film: Mike would gain exposure for his studio, in whatever capacity, and Alex would receive footage of her tattooing experience, for her own records. In many respects my own goals for the film were subordinate to those of Alex and Mike, as I kept them in mind throughout, using them to construct my film. I was consciously aware of what Mike and Alex would like to see in the finished product, based upon what I understood to be their goals for participation, and this pseudo-collaborative process has certainly influenced the final product. As Mascarenhas-Keyes writes, participants understandably want to

be portrayed in the best possible light, and may feel betrayed if this does not occur.<sup>21</sup> Keeping Alex and Mike's interests in mind was particularly difficult when editing the ending of my film. The relationship between Alex and Mike changed quite drastically near the end of my study, and, largely as a result of the footage I obtained from my final interviews with them, it was difficult to keep a "neutral" stance in the film, to keep the film from favoring one viewpoint over another.



I formally interviewed a total of four tattoo artists and five tattooed persons, each interview lasting approximately a half hour. The other three artists all work in Mike's studio, and I found the five tattooed persons through word of mouth. However, Alex and Mike were my key participants. My film focuses exclusively on them in what was an attempt to build a narrative of their mutual relationship and tattoo process. (Due to time constraints and disillusionment with the tattooing process on Alex's part, this ideal did not come to pass. Indeed, as will be discussed further below, during the span of my research, Mike never did tattoo Alex.) As my documentary film features Alex and Mike using their real names, I have decided to do the same in this paper. I purposely constructed my film and written paper as companion pieces, to potentially be viewed and read together, and seeing as Mike and Alex's real identities are exposed in the film,

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<sup>21</sup> See Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes, "The native anthropologist: constraints and strategies in Research," in *Anthropology at home*, ed. Anthony Jackson (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd., 1997), 180-193.

we saw no reason to hide them within my written words. Neither Alex nor Mike raised any objections to the idea when asked, seeing the suggestion as logical. Certainly I take the fact that Mike scoffed at the idea of signing my university approved consent form, and never did return a signed copy of it to me, to indicate what he considers the frivolousness of hiding his identity in my research.

#### Filming Mike

Filming my interview with Mike was terrifying. Hume and Mulcock refer to such encounters as “messy, complicated, and often emotionally fraught interactions between two or more human beings, one of whom is the researcher.”<sup>22</sup> Mike and I set the date and time for an interview for two weeks later, to take place on a Thursday at ten in the morning, one of the days and times during which I had no class to attend, and one morning when Mike did not have a client booked. I arrived early, took a seat at the front of the studio, and set up my camcorder and tripod, waiting for Mike to come out from the back, to usher me into the folds of the studio. I waited, only to witness Mike stroll through the front door, and seeing me, wonder aloud why I was sitting there.

“We’re filming today, right?” I asked him, my heart skipping a beat.

Mike answered casually. “Oh man, that’s today is it?” He set down his morning coffee and took off his jacket. “Right then, I guess we can do it today. I totally forgot that was this morning, man. Well, let’s do it then.”

Mike and I stared at each other for several seconds, unsure of how to proceed. I tentatively broke the silence. “So, where do you want to film then?”

“I don’t know man, wherever. We can do it here if you want, wherever, it doesn’t matter. You’re the director, you tell me where to go and I’ll do it.” Another awkward pause ensued. I hoped he would invite me into his booth where the lighting was clear and the sounds from the other artists were muffled: more ideal conditions for filming than anywhere else in the studio. Yet Mike did not mention his booth. He simply indicated the waiting area. I was afraid his booth, his working area, was off limits, an unnecessary compromise to the cleanliness of his station.

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<sup>22</sup> Hume and Mulcock, xviii.

Nevertheless, valiantly forging ahead, I worked up the courage and boldly asked, “Could we film in your booth?” I dreaded the refusal and subsequent embarrassment, but to my relief Mike simply said “sure”, and that was that, no further qualification needed.

There were many moments like these during my “fieldwork”, awkward pauses and gestures and comments infused with uncertainty, many of them centering on my use of a camcorder in the studio. Mike stated, matter-of-factly, “You’re the director”, but I certainly did not feel like it. Directors are in charge, and confident in their abilities and presence (or so one is led to assume). Using my camera in the rigorously maintained and regulated tattoo studio made me feel like an intruder, imposing my presence and will inappropriately. Yet there were just as many moments where I felt certain that my presence was acceptable, simply a curiosity rather than a distraction, or at worst, a hindrance. It was moments like these that made me painfully aware of the distinction outlined by Pink between the usefulness of film for simply representing ethnographic research and using film as a research method in itself.<sup>23</sup> My use of film in Mike’s tattoo studio determined the manner in which I conducted my research, and ultimately the results I gathered. My interviews with Alex and Mike did not consist simply of a discussion of my research topic, and did not occur just anywhere convenient, but were conducted on a set, scouted and constructed according to the needs of my camcorder.

Contrast the situation described above, fearfully proposing the move to Mike’s booth for his interview, to the fact that I conducted my interviews with the other tattoo artists in the small waiting area, at times surrounded by other clients. I did not film these interviews and so did not worry about lighting and sound quality, but was simply content to have a space to sit and talk. But for Alex and Mike, the answers I received to my questions were predicated on the knowledge that anything said could, and probably would be, used in my film. The camera’s constant presence is not something one can ignore while answering questions, especially of such an academic nature, and the responses I received, in all potentiality, were catered in specific ways in acknowledgement of the camera’s presence. The knowledge I built of my research subject was constructed by my use of film as a methodology, rather than simply as a record or representation later used to illustrate my results.

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Pink, “Introduction: Situating Visual Research,” in *Working images: visual research and representation in ethnography*, ed. Sarah Pink (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 5. See also Paul Henley, “Putting film to work: observational cinema as practical ethnography”. In *Working images: visual research and representation in ethnography*, ed. Sarah Pink (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 109-130.

However, perhaps as a result of the quality of equipment and training to which I had access, I never felt in control, or that I had any power over my participants, during my research. My use of film as a research method subverted my authority, by subordinately positioning me in relation to the comfort levels of my participants. Whenever I thought of a shot that might look interesting in my film, I weighed its aesthetic value to the way I thought Alex and Mike may perceive the shot; whether or not they would be happy with its inclusion, if they would be satisfied with the way they looked, and the way they would be perceived by others watching the film. The filming process was all about appeasing what I thought were Alex's and Mike's hopes, and maintaining an awareness of my situatedness in my research.

In many ways, the crises of representation plaguing anthropological writing and film are much the same, indicated by past works on visual anthropology, such as Crawford and Turton's *Film as ethnography*, and Banks and Morphy's *Rethinking visual anthropology*.<sup>24</sup> These works deal with the need for reflexivity in ethnographic films, often realized, among other methods, by the acute presence of the filmmaker throughout the film itself. The filmmaker's presence helps provide the context in which the film was made, and illustrates the relationship between the filmmaker and those being filmed. Loizos recommends including "contextualizing reflections" on the research process in the film.<sup>25</sup> Such tricks may include maintaining in the final cut the "nuts-and-bolts of filming": clapperboards and mike-taps. Reflexivity in this manner was hard to attain in my short film. I was behind the camera the whole time, and thus could not film myself, and simply did not have the equipment recommended for this purpose. Nevertheless, my main focus was to provide an introduction to my research, based on the views of Alex and Mike, and as such, I strived to inform my filming process through this intellectual framework.<sup>26</sup>

"It's your art, but it's their body"

Uncertainty runs rampant throughout my research, likewise in the views of my participants. If nothing else, I caused those I interviewed to think more deeply about the ownership of their own tattoos, and perhaps this can be

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton, *Film as ethnography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, 1992); Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, *Rethinking visual anthropology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Peter Loizos, "First Exits From Observational Realism: Narrative Experiments in Recent Ethnographic Films," in *Rethinking visual anthropology*, eds. Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 94.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

considered a success. I spent hours puzzling over the answers I received, attempting to build a more coherent picture of my research results. My topic is not one often thought about during the course of everyday life. Many of my participants could only offer partial answers, leading to what are most certainly “partial truths”;<sup>27</sup> an amalgam of various conclusions I laboriously came to that may, or may not, amount to some sort of a whole.

There are inevitably several aspects of the process of getting tattooed on which all of my participants more or less concur. As mentioned, quite quickly into my research I realized there is a distinct conceptual divide between ownership of the body and ownership of the art. While this division was often hard to articulate, there is a general feeling that the two can be separated. Ownership of the art implies the custom drawing imaged by the tattoo artist is entirely unique. There is no sense in which the drawing the artist creates, the piece of paper with the tattoo design on it, belongs to the client after the fact; it is simply paper, an external object that rightfully remains in the tattoo artist’s possession. The artist’s ownership of this drawing, of the art created, extends to the tattoo itself, on the client’s skin, in a much more liminal way. Depending on the participant, I asked the question: “are the tattoos on your body yours?”, or “are the tattoos you’ve done for others yours in any way?” A typical answer went something like: “the tattoo is the client’s/mine, as it’s on their/my skin...but the art is the artist’s, as he or she drew it and put the work into it.” Some responses referred to a subject’s sense of partial ownership. Mike answered, “I guess it could go both ways really, but personally I feel it’s a shared ownership to some degree. But that person wears that, they have it their whole life”.

There is a strong feeling that, ultimately, the one who wears the tattoo owns the tattoo. The one who performs the tattoo, who applies it on the skin via specialized technical means, owns the artwork the client then walks away with. The tattoo artists in Mike’s studio often distinguished between professional tattoo artists and those who simply tattoo for quick money. The latter do not appreciate the history and tradition of the art form, the meaning behind it. Another artist reflexively mentioned, “It’s your art, but it’s their body”. Whereas the drawing is simply a physical object, a sketch of what is to come, the tattoo itself is a more ambiguous manifestation of the time, effort and creativity of the artist and his or her skill. This conflicts with the notion, commonly felt (although not by all my participants) that one undoubtedly owns one’s body. Since simply

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<sup>27</sup> James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George F. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 7.

asking in my interviews, “do you own your body?” was not the best way to elicit highly articulate answers, I often had to dig deeper into the issue through various other tangents, the result being a much murkier discussion.

[So it went with Mike, who can strike one as quite an intimidating figure upon first meeting him. Throughout my interactions with Mike, I encountered this difficulty in eliciting information from him. He is not necessarily a private person; in fact, he loves talking, and could do so for hours if something did not distract him. Nevertheless, I had difficulty in extracting information from him, and often felt self-conscious when asking him questions, or even just sitting in the studio lounge, hanging out. In fact, upon first meeting Mike and asking his permission to film and conduct my research in his studio, I was embarrassed to find an assumption I harbored, that tattoo artists dislike the use of cameras in their studios, was a laughing matter in his opinion.

He asked me who, in what studios, had told me such a thing. To my chagrin, I could not easily recall specifics, nervous as I was at this initial encounter, mumbling vaguely that it was an impression I must have picked up somewhere. (After the fact, I remembered several studios in which I had seen signs stating the use of cameras was forbidden, and vividly recalled a vacation I enjoyed in Scotland, in which my partner, attempting to use her camera in an American themed tattoo studio we visited, had been reprimanded by one of the artists sitting behind the counter.) Needless to say, it was not exactly how I had ideally envisioned my first meeting with Mike. Subsequent interactions were just as fraught with uncertainty and embarrassment, yet I did manage to collect enough information over the course of my study to come to some conclusions.]

In terms of ownership of the body, a client owns his or her tattoo, the finished product, because it is on his or her body, and it is there for the rest of his or her life. Essential to this idea, discussed again below, is the notion that the body is not a commodity, not something that can be fractured and sold, like “chicken at KFC”, as one artist described. Once the tattoo is in the skin, it cannot be sold off the body; it cannot be taken away from the tattooed person. The tattoo is more than a simple commodity that anyone may buy; it is something *real*, a symbol of an authentic choice or event in one’s life, followed by an equally authentic tattoo

experience. The tattoo is also the property of the tattooed person partly as the result of the intention of the tattoo artist. The artist has the intention to do the tattoo for the client, to give the client the particular work of art decided upon (ideally, in many cases) as a result of collaboration; the desires to give and receive the tattoo are an essential aspect of one's perception of the ownership of one's tattoo.

In short, however, no matter what angle I attempted to take in my interviews, it seems the bottom line is, ambiguities aside, the tattooed person owns the tattoo, simply by virtue of its indelible presence in his or her skin. However, these ambiguities continued to frustrate my study, and I still do not have a sufficient explanation. There is the notion that the artist owns the art, and that the tattoo is (a manifestation, or representation of) the art created by the artist. As such, can an artist lay claim to the tattoo itself? And if so, how much (or is it possible to quantify ownership in such terms)? As Mike mentioned, there is the possibility of shared ownership, an idea echoed by some of my participants, yet an idea that is nevertheless partly a mystery, as evidenced by the many instances in which my participants and I could do nothing but shrug our shoulders at each other, at a loss for further words on the matter.

A potential way around this issue is the importance of the experience of being tattooed, that is, the process involved, which can inevitably reduce to the relationship one has with his or her tattoo artist. All of my participants acknowledged the significance this relationship plays in the experience of getting tattooed, and the way in which they later perceive their tattoo. As a result, it was mentioned more than once in my interviews that ownership of the tattoo may be a misleading direction. Perhaps it is more productive to focus on ownership of the very experience of becoming tattooed. One tattoo artist ruminated at length on this idea, on the impact of those around you while being tattooed:

“Even if Mike is tattooing somebody in his booth,” she said, pointing over her shoulder to the back of the studio, “the other artists and people in the shop are part of the experience, just by being here.” She indicated my own position, waving a hand at me. “You’ve come in a few times now over the past while, in and out, and you’ve definitely been part of the experience for some of the people in here, especially filming them. The next time you get tattooed for instance, somebody might walk in on you, and you’ll remember that as part of your experience.”



[I have been getting tattooed for years, and will continue to do so for many years to come, and thus assumed I could make use of my previous knowledge in my current research. I thought I would be prepared for research in a tattoo studio, an intimately familiar environment. In many ways this intimacy made my research more difficult. I felt I was very aware of the ways in which one could transgress the unwritten rules of the tattoo studio, such as refraining from photography (which was evidently misguided), and respecting the tattoo artists as artists, creating art, not simply workers providing a service. Yet this awareness, significantly generated by the tattoo artist's comment above, and augmented by my use of film, highlighted my intrusions. It made me acutely aware of my movements within the studio, of where it was appropriate to tread, and what to touch. I did not find it particularly easy to study a subject within my own culture, however my past experience did provide some immediate insight, even if I do not consider myself a "native" in this context.<sup>28</sup>

Part of the difficulty in distinguishing between my research and my personal life lay in my proximity to Mike's tattoo studio, literally a one-minute walk around the corner from my apartment. There were multiple occasions throughout the four months of my research (and beyond) where, on my way home, I passed Mike in the street, on his way to a café two doors down from my second floor apartment. Those participants I interviewed outside the tattoo studio were all students attending my university, friends of friends even, considering the institution's small population, and thus the potential to encounter them on campus almost every day of the week was significant. Indeed, one of my participants even admitted that she was getting tattooed on one of the days I was filming Mike in his booth. At the time I had yet to meet this participant, so was unaware of the coincidence, yet the potential of future interactions made the impact of my own presence in the tattoo studio all the more acute.]

By acknowledging my own presence in the studio, and the impact I may have had on the experience of those clients getting tattooed and the resulting perception they may have of their tattoos, I was able to more easily understand this aspect of the process. I recalled numerous instances when someone called in on the artist

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<sup>28</sup> Helena Wulff, "Access to a Closed World: Methods for a Multilocale Study on Ballet as a Career," in *Constructing the field: ethnographic fieldwork in the contemporary world*, ed. Vered Amit (New York: Routledge, 2000), 154; See also Narayan, "How Native is a "Native" Anthropologist?"

tattooing me, causing him to halt the buzzing of the needles for a few minutes. Once the meeting ended, he would start up again, the brief respite a means for me to temporarily catch my breath and regain my composure. By recalling my own tattoo experiences I was better able to come to a sort of “personal revelation”, the “principal means we have of truly appreciating the standpoint of others.”<sup>29</sup> As Hastrup and Hervik indicate, the most relevant information I collected came from my own experiences of being there, getting tattooed, rather than through my more superficial “field work”.<sup>30</sup> It is a shame that I interviewed the artist that led me to this insight only after filming Mike tattooing his client in the beginning of my film, as I did not think to ask the client such questions while he was getting tattooed. It is clear that the breadth of the experience, the process involved in becoming tattooed, from the first inklings of the concept for the tattoo, to its completion and aftercare, is instrumental in determining the way in which one perceives one’s tattoo.

One participant went so far as to claim that the experience itself is even *more* important than the finished tattoo; for her, the element that mattered most in the construction of (the meaning of) her tattoo was the relationship with her long-time artist. The significance of the experience is an aspect of studying tattoos that Vail has also picked up on, in his discussion of the commodification of time in the tattoo world.<sup>31</sup> Echoing Bourdieu, Vail defines various aspects of the consumption of time, a categorization predicated on the perception of time as a commodity, as cultural capital one can collect in order to legitimate one’s power and authority in the (tattoo) world.<sup>32</sup> Of immediate import here are the three categories of “educational”, “(contiguous) consumption” and “painful” time, each relating to a particular aspect or phase of the tattooing experience.<sup>33</sup> Educational time is the time spent learning about one’s particular “art world” of interest, although such education is considered legitimate only if obtained at the hands of an expert, rather than the type of education acquired by the sweat of one’s own brow (labeled autodidactic time).<sup>34</sup> Consumption time refers rather broadly to the time spent consuming the art, optionally considered “contiguous” if one’s

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<sup>29</sup> Hume and Mulcock, xx.

<sup>30</sup> Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervik, “Introduction,” in *Social experience and anthropological knowledge*, eds. Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervik (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

<sup>31</sup> See D. Angus Vail, “The Commodification of Time in Two Art Worlds,” *Symbolic Interaction* 22, no. 4 (1999): 325-344.

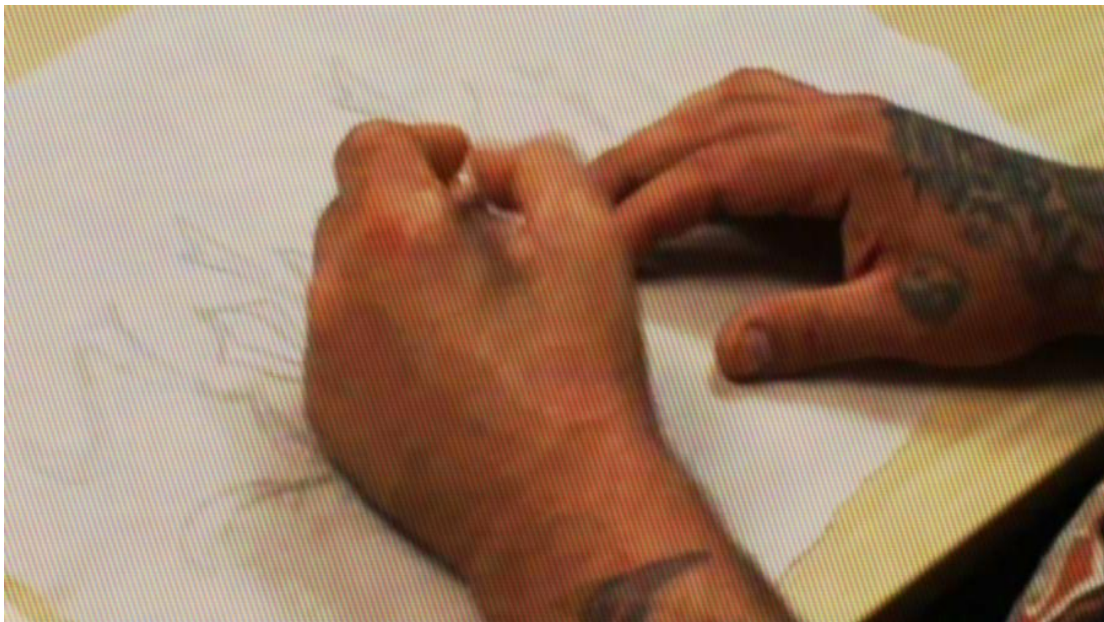
<sup>32</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 281. Vail, “The Commodification of Time”, 332.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 332-338.

<sup>34</sup> Maruska Svasek, *Anthropology, art and cultural production*, Anthropology, Culture, and Society (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 91.

consumption involves being tattooed in a more or less continuous timeframe. Painful time refers to the amount of time one has either spent feeling the physical pain of being tattooed, or experiencing the emotional or mental pain that can be involved in the process.

One participant noted that, while the tattoo artist put in the hard labor of drawing up and laying the tattoo on her skin, she did equally try “emotional work” during the process, legitimizing her own claim to her experience, and the cultural capital gained by getting tattooed in such a way. Vail does admit though that a concept such as painful time is quite ambiguous, as pain thresholds vary considerably between persons, and in terms of the type of pain one is discussing.<sup>35</sup> However, the model he proposes is nevertheless useful for organizing the meaning my participants, tattoo artists and tattooed persons alike, associate with the process. The meaning one associates with a tattoo is inevitably driven by the desire for authenticity. Vail touches on the need for a more or less unique, original tattoo, and the factors he describes is, in a way, a means of determining the authenticity of the experience, and thus of the tattoo and how one perceives it afterwards.



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<sup>35</sup> Vail, “The Commodification of Time”, 338.

The significance of the experience additionally goes a long way to explaining the role of “The Photographer” in my research.<sup>36</sup> While at the outset of my study I believed photographs and film that contained tattoos and tattooed persons would form a major component of ownership, my results indicate quite the opposite. Indeed, many of my participants were quite straightforward about the insignificance of capturing a tattoo on film. For the tattoo artists in my study a photo of a tattoo is considered more or less inconsequential, its main purpose to provide a record of the effort put into the tattoo, to put into a portfolio as a means to further advertise and promote his or her work. While it is nice to have a record of the experience, the photo itself is an object that has no relation or affect on the ownership of a tattoo. The photographer or filmmaker may own the *object* that portrays the tattoo, the film or photograph, but they do not actually own the *tattoo*; that is, they do not own the meaning associated with the tattoo, and the photo cannot, for instance, readily represent the process that went into producing the tattoo. This echoes Hastrup’s experience with the use of photography in her Icelandic research. Photos taken of a ram exhibition failed to capture the various sensorial aspects of the experience, and provided nothing other than a motionless image, devoid of “texture” and “essence.”<sup>37</sup> Like the custom drawing of a tattoo, owned solely by the tattoo artist, the photo is the property of the photographer, by virtue of the time spent producing it. It cannot, however, convey any further meaning.

Where the role of the photographer or filmmaker is more significant is the affect they can have on the experience of getting tattooed. One participant was adamant that his tattoos are a result of the whole process involved, of the innumerable factors impinging upon his life and where he finds himself at any given moment, and as such, the act of photographing or filming the tattooing process creates a stake in the experience, corroborating the thoughts of the tattoo artist quoted above. While the photographer may not share ownership of the tattoo, there is the potential to share ownership of the experience, and alter the way a client may look at his or her tattoo after the fact. While all my other interviewees recognized the importance of the process and those involved, they still considered the one who wears the tattoo to ultimately have ownership. In contrast, this one participant fully articulated the interconnected nature of his tattooing experience and was adamant that he could not portion more ownership

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<sup>36</sup> Kuwahara, 159.

<sup>37</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, “Anthropological Visions: Some Notes on Visual and Textual Authority,” in *Film as ethnography*, eds. Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 11.

to any one individual, instead maintaining that all in his tattoo world had an equal stake in his tattoo.

[My interview with the above participant made me think more deeply about Alex's decision to participate in my research. After hearing Alex's decision to get tattooed by Mike, rather than the local artist she had originally chosen, I could not help but feel guilty at the thought that I unduly influenced her, before my research had even properly begun. Had telling her that I was filming and conducting research at Mike's studio persuaded her to change tattoo artists? What kind of consequences would such a decision engender after the fact, on both her satisfaction with the experience and my own research results? Then again, according to the above participant's views, any influence I may have had on Alex's decision was simply part of the experience as a whole; one cannot minutely separate each bit of the process and lay blame on a single aspect. The whole process becomes more authentic partly by virtue of its multifaceted nature. All stages of the experience are inextricably interconnected. Regardless, despite Alex's assurances that I had no part in influencing her decision, and that she fully considered it to be the right choice, I have not shaken my doubts. Even worse is the silent glee I felt, thinking how much more concise my film would be as a result. By filming Mike tattooing Alex, I thought my film would come together more smoothly and effortlessly, at least when Alex was still considering the idea. After my initial terror at the prospect of unfairly influencing Alex, I simply took her word for it and pressed on, trusting in the honesty of our relationship, and perhaps, myself influenced by the participant above, relying on the potential effect of the interconnected tattoo process on a tattoo's authenticity.]

What this process often comes down to is the level of collaboration between the artist and client. The collaboration can be integral to the way one "looks at" his or her tattoo. One artist answered my questions concerning the relationship involved by stating "it's [tattooing] providing a service for someone that can't provide it for themselves. It's a partnership". Alex discussed this issue at length with me:

When trying to find a place to get the tattoo done, it's really important to me to have, like a...like, a connection between the

person who's doing the tattoo for me, because I don't see it just as me bringing a design to a tattoo artist, and having them replicate it exactly on my body, because to me that's not art, that's not...there's no collaboration there. And I *want* to be able to collaborate with the artist. So I want to have, like, it sounds crazy, but have an imagined design in my head and not have it like an official blueprint, and then go and try and describe it to the artist. But I want them to be able to pick up on it and not just repeat what I say. I want to hear their ideas and I'm willing to make those changes in my mind. But in the end it comes down to whether the sketch fits this feeling, or this sense of what I want from the beginning, and I'll be able to recognize it. It's hard to explain, it's kind of just like a connection.

For Alex, the experience is not satisfying unless the artist is equally involved in producing the final product as she is; it is integral to the experience, and thus to the way she later looks at her own tattoo. A high level of collaboration between client and artist contributes to a more authentic experience, as opposed to someone who gets a tattoo on a whim, without thinking more deeply about it, without planning it ahead of time. Often this latter type of tattooing experience is associated with flash tattoos: someone has the thought that getting a tattoo would be "cool", and, without further consideration, walks into a tattoo studio and picks something off the wall.

[At the start of my contact with my participants I thought my own research would be a collaborative project, a mark of the authenticity of my results. I realize now this was not entirely the case. Shooting my documentary highlighted the fact that I alone produced the final product, despite what I perceived as a certain level of collaboration. For example, although I made my film and written paper available to my participants to critique and make suggestions for change before submission, it was nevertheless I who made the final decision on what to include and omit. My ultimate authorship is indicated by the first image you see in the film: my own name, a commonplace in ethnographic film, as Henley discusses.<sup>38</sup> However, I feel I attempted a degree of reflexivity in my research and writing process as well as, within the confines of my particular situation, to value the experience of being there during the process.<sup>39</sup> I attempted

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<sup>38</sup> Henley, 114.

<sup>39</sup> See James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); see also Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervick, *Social experience and anthropological knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

to come to some type of “resonance” and “empathic understanding” with my participants and what they told me.<sup>40</sup> For me, this particular strand of research will never be finished. This product, I hope, in both written and visual format, is likewise true to the desires and goals of my participants.]

Collaboration between filmmaker and tattooed person or artist aside, there is certainly something to be said for the connection one can feel to a tattoo artist, especially for the artist that tattoos you for the first time. Open for further exploration is the impact of getting one’s first tattoo on the relationship formed with the artist. I often hear since first getting tattooed myself that there is a degree of loyalty felt towards one’s first tattoo artist, to the extent where some clients will only ever get tattooed by their first artist. While four artists to date have tattooed me, this is largely the consequence of geographic location and referrals for specific types of work. Yet I similarly feel a certain loyalty towards those that have tattooed me in the past. I believe part of this connection lies in the nature of tattooing as an intimate act.

The artist often sees a client at his or her worst: the area being tattooed is bloody, the client’s body is tired and sweaty, the pain of the process is written upon his or her face and in the tensing of muscles. There is a reason that minors are not legally allowed in tattoo studios, as the services provided are of a penetrative nature. Freeland discusses the efficacy of using blood in art, and how it “has a host of expressive and symbolic associations”.<sup>41</sup> At the age of seventeen, while getting tattooed for the first time, I, like many others I am sure, was not aware of the phenomenological aspect of the process: the vibrant blood that leaks from the skin, the smell of medical supplies, the buzzing of the tattoo machine, the pain and burning one feels, often described as a prolonged cat scratch. The experience can be a very intimate one, between client and artist.<sup>42</sup> The phenomenology of the experience motivated the opening scene in my film, a close up shot of blood welling from the freshly tattooed skin of Mike’s client. Bell recounts how blood contains “the essence, or vital spirit, of the creature in

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<sup>40</sup> Hume and Mulcock, xxi.

<sup>41</sup> Cynthia Freeland, *But is it art?: an introduction to art theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Gengenbach’s work on both the experiential and physiological dimensions of tattooing in Mozambique provides an excellent comparative perspective. See Heidi Gengenbach, “Boundaries of Beauty: Tattooed Secrets of Women’s History in Magude District, Southern Mozambique,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 4 (2003): 119.

which it flow[s]”; it is an essential fluid, and the act of spilling it is significant.<sup>43</sup> The pain of becoming tattooed is also an inherent part of the experience, and, as one artist defines it, absolutely necessary: “No tattoo is painless. You have to earn your tattoo through how it feels”. All of the artists I have encountered were liberally covered with tattoos, and this certainly contributes to the connection and loyalty a client may feel. The artist intimately knows the smells, sights, sounds and pain that come with the territory of getting a tattoo.



#### The Popularization of Tattooing

I have heard some in my own tattoo world imply that the discussion of one's familiarity with the intimate and sensorial aspects of tattooing, as well as the importance of the experience as a whole with one's long time artist, is an indication of the exclusive nature of the tattoo world. They say that any mention of the authenticity of a proper, custom tattoo or tattoo experience, as opposed to the experience of walking into a shop and getting a flash tattoo, smacks of

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Bell, “Vampires and Death in New England, 1784 to 1892,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 31, no. 2 (2006): 128.



elitism. To an extent, such a conclusion may be true. DeMello traces the history of contemporary tattooing in America, and, for example, focuses much attention on the elitism enforced through the divide between high and low brow tattoo magazines.<sup>44</sup> These publications, and the media more generally, create hierarchy within a community that claims to be anti-hierarchical, and often stifle and effectively silence certain communities traditionally associated with tattoos, such as “bikers and their ilk.”<sup>45</sup> Much recent popularization of tattoos has focused on the middle class appropriation of the art, with a propensity for individual “tattoo narratives” that highlight the uniqueness of middle classer tattoos (often associated with the importance of the experience).<sup>46</sup>

Such a move has likewise highlighted the cultural taste now dominating certain areas of the tattoo world.<sup>47</sup> A prime example of such shifts in the popular portrayal of tattoos and tattooed persons is the rise to fame of television programmes like *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, what many of my participants consider to be “sitcoms”, simply soap operas that capitalize on the second tattoo renaissance. But what is interesting about these shows is the fact that they are making tattoos public (more so than they have been in the past). Tattooing in North America has traditionally been stigmatized as a “secretive dark art” as Mike says, where you have to “bust your balls to get in the front door [to eventually become a tattoo artist]”. As such the general public may be ignorant of the process and meaning potentially involved in the experience of becoming tattooed. One the reasons I made my short film was to contribute to this popularization, in a manner not so explicitly commercial as that driving the popularity of the television shows mentioned above. Gell writes of the technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology, a construct readily applicable to the, still very much unknown, art of tattooing.<sup>48</sup>

**T**here is still an enchantment about the technology of tattooing and the art it creates. The way in which a tattoo is made is not common knowledge; it is still in many ways a trade secret, enchanting to the masses, but inaccessible. The

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<sup>44</sup> Margo DeMello, *Bodies of inscription: a cultural history of the modern tattoo community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> See Margo DeMello, ““Not Just For Bikers Anymore”: Popular Representations of American Tattooing,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 29, no. 3 (1995): 41; and Fenske, 58.

<sup>46</sup> DeMello, *Bodies of inscription*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> After Bourdieu, in *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*.

<sup>48</sup> Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology, art and aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 40-63.

enchantment of tattooing technology spreads to the extent where the technology of tattooing can indeed *create* enchantment, judging, in one sense at least, by the awe with which many regard what are considered highly sophisticated tattoos. And again, these sophisticated tattoos are often associated with authenticity, a mark of their originality and creativity, as opposed to flash tattoos, or those that involved little thought and effort. As Mike suggested, the practice of tattooing is mystified. While the media may be playing a role in dispersing the shadows concealing the tattoo world, it is largely exposing only those select few of the middle class (or perhaps upper middle class and beyond, judging by the extortionate fees one actually pays for a tattoo at L.A. Ink) that have “unique” tattoo narratives. The media is voicing the opinions of one group of tattoo enthusiasts, while silencing another, what Raento calls “symbolic annihilation”<sup>49</sup>:

Mainstream media rhetoric about tattooing blurs the lines between sailors, bikers, and gang members, who all wear different kinds of tattoos and who wear them for different reasons. By blurring the lines, the media create an image in which the stereotypical tattoo wearer can be easily defined as low-class trash and, by implication, easily disregarded.<sup>50</sup>

Bikers and their ilk are not interviewed for these pieces [such as L.A. Ink], and are effectively silenced through this maneuver.<sup>51</sup>

While certain voices are heard slightly more, the history and technical aspects of tattooing, for example, are continually ignored. The symbolic annihilation of parts of the tattoo experience is an element I attempted to address in my own film (albeit, superficially), by including footage of the various instruments used for tattooing, such as the foot pedal Mike uses, and the small inkpots in which the needles are frequently dipped.

Mauss’ essay, “Techniques of the Body,” discusses the ways in which one uses, and learns to use, one’s body.<sup>52</sup> For example, the way in which one holds oneself when walking, or the particular way a person eats, are techniques or actions employed by a person to operate his or her body. These techniques are

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<sup>49</sup> Pauliina Raento, “Tourism, Nation, and the Postage Stamp: Examples from Finland,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 36, no. 1 (2009): 133.

<sup>50</sup> DeMello, *Bodies of inscription*, 99.

<sup>51</sup> DeMello, “Not Just For Bikers Anymore”, 41.

<sup>52</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2 (1973):70-88.

culturally learned and variable according to one's habitus. Mauss' essay relates to the variation one can find within the practice of tattoo artists, manifested in, for example, the manner in which Mike, or any artist, specifically tattoos a client. I have always been fascinated with the setup a tattoo artist goes through in preparation to tattoo a body, and the variation (and inevitable similitude) between artists. The ways different artists move their hands, and the ways they hold their tattoo machines, the ways they ritualize the preparation of ink and Vaseline, the countless pieces of paper towel used to wipe blood and excess ink from the skin. My interest in techniques of the body motivated their inclusion in my film, as is apparently the case with other ethnographic films, as Ruby indicates.<sup>53</sup>

[My interest also extends to my own body techniques. The way in which I used my camcorder as a part of my research process is a result of the way in which I was exposed to ethnographic film, and learned about the filming process. At the time of my research I was an undergraduate student on a severe budget and thus accordingly used a simple domestic camcorder, a Sony Handycam, (relatively) easily purchased for about 500 dollars. To edit the film I used Final Cut Pro, professional video editing software designed by Apple. I trained myself on both items from scratch, a practice common among ethnographic filmmakers.<sup>54</sup> The "needs" of my camcorder, mentioned above, refers to the level of sophistication of the equipment I used. I did not have access to an external microphone, and so was continuously aware of my spatiality: essentially, the closer I was to my subjects, the better, at least in terms of the audio I recorded. The audio I obtained was never necessarily of the highest quality, evinced by the background humming slightly noticeable during any footage of my interview with Alex, and the stress I placed on moving Mike's interview to his quiet and contained booth.

These factors inevitably affected the way in which I filmed, the way I used my camera and positioned my body in Mike's booth, for instance. That being said, there were inevitably advantages to using such simple equipment. By using a domestic camcorder, rather than a larger, professional camera, I was less intrusive. I imagine my presence would

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<sup>53</sup> Jay Ruby, *Picturing culture: explorations of film and anthropology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 47.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

have been felt much more acutely if I had taken up half of Mike's booth while filming him tattooing a client, as opposed to standing in the corner, almost surreptitiously, with my camcorder the size of my hand, quietly filming the event. As Hughes-Freeland points out, expensive technology and training is not necessarily needed in all cases; indeed, it may even be unduly excessive.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, certain culturally normative body techniques are more appropriate than others in such situations, and I had to quickly navigate these options, constrained as they were by the confines of the tattoo studio.]

However, scenes portraying body techniques are rarely observed so explicitly in representations of tattoo artists on television. As Mike ruminated, "...I think like, the T.V., the ones on T.V., there's a lot of Hollywood and glamour and all that kind of stuff, and you're not seeing a lot of the reality of *tattooing*, you're not learning much about *tattooing*, you're not learning much about the history of tattooing". One of my participants thought that shows like L.A. Ink and Miami Ink give the wrong impression of tattoos and what tattooed people are like (or should be like). She feels that these shows create the obligation to construct an elaborate story, a unique tattoo narrative, in order to justify one's tattoo, which she feels detracts from the experience of those who get tattoos for "legitimate", or authentic, reasons. It seems much easier to define the legitimacy of a tattoo by listing what it is not. This participant felt that getting a tattoo on a whim, or getting one to be "cool", to jump on the bandwagon and participate in the trend, is not legitimate. In this context, she felt getting tattooed on L.A. Ink or Miami Ink constituted jumping on the bandwagon, simply adhering to the latest fashion. She implied that those who get tattooed on the shows do not care about the deeper meaning of their tattoo; they simply care about looking cool. In contrast, in her view, a legitimate tattoo would be one that has a story, but not a story elaborated just for the sake of others, one that has meaning to one's life, that perhaps reflects a significant chapter, or aspect, of one's life. Thus the authenticity of a tattoo is a mark of the whole process that went into it, the defining moment in one's life, not always evinced by an elaborate narrative.

What is interesting about this observation is the contradiction between what many of my participants originally considered to be the inconsequentiality of photographs and film (of their tattoos), and the potential effects of mass media in

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<sup>55</sup> Felicia Hughes-Freeland, "Working Images: Epilogue," in *Working images: visual research and representation in ethnography*, ed. Sarah Pink (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 206.

disseminating images of their tattoos to a wide audience. As mentioned above, photographs are considered, at best, a record of the experience, relatively devoid of significance. Photographs cannot communicate or take part in the meaning behind the tattoo. However, when I asked my participants the following question, they all instinctively responded with repugnance at the possibility of such a shameful action: “How would you feel if a stranger saw your tattoo in a photo or in a film (such as mine), and decided to have it tattooed exactly on his or her own body?” All the tattoo artists I interviewed unanimously agreed that if a client came to them and asked to have someone else’s custom tattoo placed on their body, the design would have to be at least somewhat altered, to respect the original design and the person on which it was originally tattooed. Having someone else’s tattoo placed on one’s own body amounts to stealing, an “unfair” appropriation of the effort and creativity (on the part of both tattoo artist and client) that went into originally designing the tattoo. For the tattooed persons I interviewed, the most extreme repercussion of this act is the diminution of the tattoo and its significance, once the custom design is replicated on another body. Several individuals answered that the “value” associated with one’s tattoo is diminished once repeated, as a result of the destruction of its originality, and of the indexical desire to be unique. What is even more interesting was the equation of this idea of the diminution of value or meaning with ownership itself. Several of my interviewees admitted that if they found out a stranger had copied their tattoo, their very conception of ownership would diminish. The act of copying another’s tattoo, in this sense, strips ownership from the original.

In contrast, the tattoo artists I interviewed all expressed confidence in the hard fact that no tattoo is ever the same, if only because everyone’s body, and the skin in which the tattoo is imprinted, is inevitably different, in however many minute ways. The skill of the artist, and the particular circumstances dictating the ease with which the tattoo is applied ensures that no tattoos are ever exactly the same, even if the design is a copy: all tattoos are variously contextualized.<sup>56</sup> Thus, at least for the tattoo artists I interviewed, there is no need to fret over the thought of a stranger stripping ownership from one’s tattoo. Nevertheless, the vehement opposition I encountered to this idea prompted me to ask my participants’ opinions on flash designs, often chosen by a client right off the walls of the studio.

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<sup>56</sup> See Richard Bauman, *A world of others’ words: cross-cultural perspectives on intertextuality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 4.

There exists a conceptual divide between those tattoo artists that create custom artwork (and thus apparently have a propensity to appreciate the history and tradition of tattooing, and contribute to an authentic experience), and those that simply apply “stickers”, such as those artists that tattoo simple, accessible designs. Applying ownership to flash tattoos, that hundreds, perhaps thousands of people may have, was a much more difficult task. Several participants mused that the person who first drew the design, or first had the tattoo placed on his or her body, is the rightful owner. Others maintained that, because every individual tattoo is different, and the meaning one associates to one’s tattoo is always variable, the one who wears the tattoo is the rightful owner. It seems the uncomfortable feeling associated with the diminution of ownership and meaning is a strong one. As one participant mentioned, “. . .it’s almost a brand name then. It’s like owning a pair of Nike shoes. You don’t own Nike, because everyone’s got a pair”. When tattoos are made public, irrevocably liberated from the private lives of those who wear them, they become susceptible to duplication, and, subsequently, stripped of value. Their authenticity is torn away.

[In a similar vein, the choice of field site is fraught with notions of authenticity. Gupta and Ferguson relate how the distinction between home and the field, defined by spatial separation, can construct a hierarchy of purity of field sites;<sup>57</sup> the farther away the field site is from one’s home, the more pure it is. writes of “constructing the field”, a necessity in “a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts.”<sup>58</sup> So what does it say about the authenticity of my research, when the “field” was all around me, interacting with me on a daily basis? There was virtually no spatial separation between my home and field site. Every time I took my dog out, or went to the cinema, I walked by Mike’s studio, wondering if the artists inside could see me passing. As a result of this proximity, I felt I was under an ever-present gaze.<sup>59</sup> Anytime I left my apartment, I knew I could run into any of my participants, that they may see me from across the street, without my notice. I was hyper aware of my movements and presence in both the tattoo studio and the streets surrounding my apartment. My inability to distinguish my field site was driven “home” several months

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<sup>57</sup> Gupta and Ferguson, 12-13.

<sup>58</sup> Vered Amit, “Introduction: Constructing the Field,” in *Constructing the field: ethnographic fieldwork in the contemporary world*, ed. Vered Amit (New York: Routledge, 2000), 6; see also Julia Harrison, “Shifting Positions,” *Tourist Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008): 44.

<sup>59</sup> See John Urry, “The Tourist Gaze “Revisited”,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 36, no.2 (1992): 172-186; see also Foucault, *Discipline and punish*.

after commencing my research, when my partner got a tattoo from Mike (after my recommendation), proof that the “field” is not a spatially bounded unit, awaiting discovery, which one can enter and exit at will.<sup>60</sup>

My “fieldwork” was characterized by intermittent and often quite brief trips to the studio, rather than any type of lasting, immediate immersion, echoing Caputo’s efforts.<sup>61</sup> I did not do any participant observation, as I have not completed an apprenticeship and am not a qualified tattoo artist. My study was limited to formal interviews with all my participants, and the occasional afternoon spent filming Mike tattoo a client, a total of approximately 25 hours of contact. My research is not characteristic of what is traditionally denoted as real fieldwork, although as Clifford notes, contemporary anthropology is increasingly characterized by repeated, short trips to the field.<sup>62</sup> The more time I spent with my participants, in my “quotidian world,” the more ambivalent I became concerning my authority and situatedness in my research.<sup>63</sup> In a sense, my private life, and research, became public, much like a private tattoo can be made public. And much like a tattoo, which becomes more authentic the more arduous the experience, a field site, by traditional standards at least, becomes more authentic the more arduous the journey to and from, the more harrowing the experience itself. The authenticity of my “field site” then is questionable, at least by these traditional standards.]

So while photography and film are deemed relatively insignificant, a result of their lack of affect on an arduous tattoo experience, it is evident that these forms of media do retain vast amounts of power over tattoos, and the manner in which they are perceived and accessed. Polhemus coined the term “Supermarket of Style” to describe the situation in which we now find ourselves, able to access the trends and fashion, and accompanying histories and ideologies, of decades’ worth of previous style and subculture.<sup>64</sup> We now have the power to “shop” for the trends that attract our eye, almost as if we find ourselves in a supermarket, picking styles off the shelves like so many cans of soup. In recognition of the vast

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<sup>60</sup> See Jackson, “Reflections on Ethnography at Home”, 13; See also Amit, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Caputo, 26.

<sup>62</sup> James Clifford, “Spatial Practices: Fieldwork, Travel, and the Disciplining of Anthropology,” in *Anthropological locations: boundaries and grounds of a field science*, eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 217.

<sup>63</sup> Harrison, 44.

<sup>64</sup> Ted Polhemus, *Streetstyle: from sidewalk to catwalk* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 131.

repository of styles that we now have access to, and the widespread “sampling & mixing” of these styles, Polhemus writes:

If earlier I likened the Supermarket of Style to a shop where various streetstyles are on offer as if they were cans of different kinds of soup, here we are talking about opening all the cans up and throwing a spoonful from each into one pot. Or perhaps just a selection carefully calculated to shock the palate.<sup>65</sup>

Polhemus hinted at the extent to which this supermarket would permeate contemporary (North American) middle-class culture. Mass media facilitate, indeed monstrously expand, the Supermarket of Style. With the Internet and television sets galvanizing the world, the supermarket is now everywhere, at any time, within the reach of one’s fingertips. We do not necessarily have to find ourselves in the supermarket, wasting precious energy lifting the cans of soup off the shelves; the media, which has infiltrated our lives, spoon-feeds it to us. Tattoos are now everywhere, integrated into the Supermarket of Style, just another can on the shelf (despite various assertions that tattoos are as “anti-fashion” as can be.<sup>66</sup> If one wishes to visually consume tattoos, it is now simply a matter of opening one’s laptop, or turning on the television, acts that take mere seconds. Yet these acts have the potential to instill in some the distress engendered by the notion that one’s custom tattoo may be duplicated, that the meaning and experience one associates with a tattoo may be forever stripped or diminished. Before asking this question of my participants I imagined they would be flattered by the thought that another enjoyed their tattoo so much they wished to have it on their own body. After all, “[i]mitation may be the sincerest form of flattery.”<sup>67</sup> Evidently this assumption was wrong, and my error pointed to perhaps one of the few aspects of my research in which my participants had complete confidence in their answers.

Tattoos in an Instant

**I**f a tattoo experience that symbolizes deep meaning, thought and creativity is a mark of authenticity, then the product promoted by the following three websites represents the complete opposite:

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 102. See also Paul Sweetman, “Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self? Body Modification, Fashion and Identity,” *Body & Society* 5, no. 2-3 (1999): 62; Mary Kosut, “An Ironic Fad: The Commodification and Consumption of Tattoos,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no.6 (2006): 1041; and Jill A. Fisher, “Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture,” *Body & Society* 8, no. 4 (2002): 102.

<sup>67</sup> Polhemus, 12.



Tattoo Sleevs [sic] and Fake Tattoo Slip on Sleeves are the hottest [sic] new fashion accessory! Anyone that wants the Sleeve Tattoo look without the commitment (and pain) of getting a permanent tattoo will love these! This design features Hearts with roses and thorns with the words true love across the sleeve design. This fashion statement is a conversation piece and artwork [sic] of each piece is created by Illustrators, Painters and Tattoo artists from around the world. Our tattoos are hand printed one at a time and are of the highest quality available.<sup>68</sup>

It used to take a lot of courage (and pain tolerance) to have both your arms covered in crazy tattoo designs - until now! Fake Tattoo sleeves are like the coolest gift/prank/look around for anyone who doesn't have the time - or commitment - to get that permanently cool look. They come in 12 different styles, so make sure you click through all the pictures before picking out the style that's right for you.<sup>69</sup>

Want to look like you're punk rawk without jeopardizing your chances at that cushy white-collar job? Visit [Sleevesclothing.com](http://sleevesclothing.com) for the ultimate in instant cool: a line of shirts designed to look as though you've been ferociously tattooed.<sup>70</sup>

What is obvious from these quotes is that tattoos, to a large extent, have been commodified. I found these three quotes simply by typing “tattoo sleeves” into Google (I did not even have to type “fake tattoo sleeves”), and clicking on three of the links listed for businesses that print and sell these fake sleeves. The products range in price anywhere from \$9.99 to \$29.99 for full-length arm sleeves, differentiated by design and complexity (much like real tattoos). There is also the option to buy a “full body shirt” for \$98.00 on one of the sites. When I asked my participants what they thought of this product, all replied variously that “they’re a joke”, “it’s for fun”, “it’s a costume”. Mike replied, “they look good on a mannequin”, as he gestured to the female model in the corner of the studio lounge, which I included in my film. None of my participants thought they were anything but silly, a garment worn by those who did not wish to (or were too scared to) commit to the real thing, as reflected in the sales pitches quoted above.

The troubling dimension of these fake sleeves lies in their power to greatly commodify tattoos and the tattoo experience, to the point where one can simply

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<sup>68</sup> BeWild.com, “Sleeve Tattoo – Slip On Fake Tattoo Sleeves,” <http://www.bewild.com/auslontasl.html> (accessed October 26, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> Stupid.com, “Fake Tattoo Sleeves,” <http://www.stupid.com/fun/TSLV.html> (accessed October 26, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> Sleeves: Art of Clothing, “The Buzz <http://www.sleevesclothing.com/thebuzz.htm> (accessed: December 8, 2009).

play with the identity and ideology that can come with being heavily tattooed. If one can simply pull their tattoos on and off at a whim, what does that say for the practice itself, and all those individuals who have spent their valuable (education, consumption, painful) time consuming the art? As all my participants noted, the experience of becoming tattooed is often just as important as the final product. Wearing a fake tattoo sleeve eliminates the process involved, and, as my participants' views indicate, devalues the meaning associated with real tattoos. The commodification of tattoos in this way strips the originality and authenticity of real tattoos, and mocks those who have rightfully acquired their tattoos through a lengthy and painful process. Banks, in discussing the collection of antique photographs (bought, for example, through auctions), notes that:

[b]uyers accustomed to purchasing unique and provenanced paintings, or prints or books of finite and known print runs, initially looked with suspicion upon investing in photographic prints where the status of the negative 'original' was unclear. How could they be sure that this was a unique print, or that no more would be discovered or – worse – made?<sup>71</sup>

The buyers in this example were wary of buying a copy, a replication of an original; they were concerned about the authenticity of the collector's piece. My participants found nothing authentic about fake tattoo sleeves, yet it is this very inauthenticity that is apparently alluring to others. The third website quoted above further states: "Real tattoos are permanent, and that isn't for everybody. These [tattoo print] shirts are for fun." Fake tattoo sleeves, quite frankly, worry me about the future of the tattoo as a commodity. These products have the power to make a game of tattoos, and the experience of getting tattooed. All of my participants agreed that, in a sense, a tattoo is a commodity. However, unanimously, it was also agreed that getting a tattoo is much more involved than a simple transaction of goods for money. It is more than simply "providing a service for someone that can't provide it for themselves". And again, what is different about this situation is the experience involved, and the connection one may feel with a tattoo artist. A sentiment expressed a number of times in my interviews, in opposition to the idea that a tattoo is nothing more than a commodity, is that the creative control a client may yield over the production of his or her tattoo indicates a much more profound exchange. While the tattoo artist renders the service needed in order to obtain the tattoo, the client has the final say over what goes on his or her body, what the design ultimately looks like, and, as Alex finds deeply important, where on the body she places the tattoo,

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<sup>71</sup> Marcus Banks, *Visual methods in social research* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 60.

“something that only [she] decide[s]”. One tattoo artist commented that “[the artist] helps put it on them, but [the client] still has creative ownership over it”.

Yet the situation encountered in my own research may defy such sentiments. As I document in my short film, during the course of my study Alex never received her tattoo from Mike. Many months after first meeting with Mike and handing over her ideas and reference pictures, Alex harbored second thoughts about the process and final product, largely as a result of the perceived tension between the business and art aspects of the tattoo experience. Mike’s busy schedule, as well as the complexity of Alex’s design, drove the details of her tattoo from his “cloudy noggin”, and when she came in for her appointment, her drawing was not completed to her satisfaction. By the time I had to wrap up my study, her tattoo had yet to be successfully drawn, and the miscommunication, or lack of communication entirely, between Alex and Mike had brought the process to a standstill. The situation, which frustrated both parties, throws into stark relief the view that a tattoo is undeniably more than a simple commodity. While it still may be so for most, there is ultimately an element of inescapable commodification inherent in the transaction, as seen in my research. At least during the course of the seven months of my study, Alex and Mike could not reconcile the tension between running a business, and producing art unencumbered by such material constraints. In this instance at least, the commodification of tattoos was (perhaps temporarily) insurmountable.

Alex admitted that, despite her intentions to collaborate on the generation of her tattoo, Mike would ultimately decide *when* she receives her artwork. Paradoxically, the waiting time involved, Alex’s consumption time, may contribute to the tattoo’s authenticity.<sup>72</sup> As Mike says in my film, whereas tattoo artists are often expected to provide a service on the spot, mainstream artists are not normally required to produce a product on demand; a piece of artwork may take time. Thus, due to its originality, Alex’s tattoo may be an exception, considering the time it took (and may continue to take after the end of my study). If Alex and Mike one day complete the process, the elapsed time may eventually contribute to the tattoo’s authenticity. Such views run contrary to the notion of authenticity defined by the very process of rapid repetition, outlined by Steiner, which provides an example of contrast.<sup>73</sup> Tourist art, as he writes, gains

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<sup>72</sup> See Angus D. Vail, “The Commodification of Time”.

<sup>73</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, “Authenticity, Repetition, and the Aesthetics of Seriality: The Work of Tourist Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Unpacking culture: art and commodity in colonial and postcolonial worlds*, eds. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 87-103.

a feeling of authenticity by the very fact that, through constant repetition and mass production, the art conforms to the history of the culture presented by past literature and design. The tourist art thus becomes authorized as a true account of the culture from which it originated.<sup>74</sup> In other words, Steiner recognizes the contextualization of these particular works of art as indicative of their authenticity, as occupying a place in the continuum of the history and tradition of those who created the piece.<sup>75</sup> My participants value the originality of their tattoos.

The difference here is that the tattoo is on a living, breathing body, and thus not considered a commodity that can be reproduced and sold. The body is (perceived to be) individual, as belonging to one person, and tattoos (can be) a means of further individuating oneself from the masses. Fake tattoo sleeves ignore the creative experience that partly defines how one looks at one's tattoo, and too easily make a mockery of the permanence of the art. I reformulated this conclusion after every one of my interviews, in particular the last I conducted. My last interview was with an individual who likewise emphasized the indelibility of tattoos as a marker of their authenticity: "The absolute finality of getting a tattoo is intense. But if you take that away..." He trailed off, hopelessly shaking his head at the thought.

#### Towards a Definition

I now have more questions than when I first started my study. I began by simply wondering if someone could own a tattoo design, and if such a concept of ownership changed as the design passed from one to another. Perhaps predictably, my original questions quite quickly changed. They led to more inquiries, some of which I will attempt to address here.

What impact did, or will, my film have? I do not imagine Ruby, judging from his scathing critiques of past "ethnographic" films, would much approve of my film. It is too obviously influenced by, and caters to, what he calls an art aesthetic, one more concerned with bending reality to give off a moral impression, a film more suitable for a general audience, and thus largely ineffective in a pedagogical setting. It does not have the crucial elements of reflexivity that Ruby so admires in a select few "anthropologically intended" films previously made.<sup>76</sup> In many

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 89. See also Bauman, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Ruby, 6.

senses my film is an example of contrast, one not necessarily intended for educational use in the strict sense of a university classroom. It is harder to pin down exactly what my film is better suited for. However, I do not see anything too precarious in reasoning with negative identity traits. As Bradbury notes, “[i]ncoherence seems to be postmodernism’s distinctive feature”, demolishing and deconstructing “our modern and objective view of the world,”<sup>77</sup> while simultaneously proposing nothing to fill the ensuing void. Likewise Clifford writes, “. . .in times of uncertain identity (such as the present), definition may be achieved most effectively by naming clear *outsides* rather than by attempting to reduce always diverse and hybrid *insides* to a stable unity.”<sup>78</sup>

I constructed my film in order to appeal to a wider audience, to take into account Mike and Alex’s views and goals. Perhaps my saving grace is the narrative I used to organize my film. The contents, that is, Alex and Mike’s voiceovers and interviews, solely contain the material I expanded upon in this written piece, and I edited these audio clips to simulate the process by which I came to my partial conclusions. It is a manner of introducing the topic to an audience, step by step, at least as I experienced it, without also experiencing the countless extra hours of poring over my notes and transcriptions, attempting to build a more coherent picture of a subject I initially thought I knew well.<sup>79</sup> Was I a “native” anthropologist doing ethnography at “home”? I was intimately familiar with the environment in which I did my research before I started my study, and I believe I now know it only slightly better. Yet this familiarity did not particularly assist me in many ways during my research, other than through knowing the general routines of a tattoo studio and the business conducted therein. I was very much crippled with doubt throughout my research, and throughout the process of writing up my results. This realization prompts me to disregard the notion altogether, that one is apparently more attuned to conducting research in a particular setting as a result of past familiarity. I certainly did not benefit from these otherwise hidden insights.

Can you own a tattoo? The conceptual divide I encountered between the ownership of art and body still stands. The tension between running a business and producing art, as a service, further complicates the dynamic of ownership. It is more feasible to say one can own part of, or hold a stake in, the experience of becoming tattooed. The process is paramount to how one looks at one’s tattoo

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<sup>77</sup> Mary Bradbury, *Representations of death: a social psychological perspective* (London: Routledge, 1999), 196.

<sup>78</sup> Clifford, “Spatial Practices”, 196.

<sup>79</sup> See for example Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 6.

after the fact, acknowledging the influence of others throughout the experience. Yet the one who wears the tattoo is ultimately the owner. For, after all, one surely owns one's body? But, as I alluded to in the introduction by noting Foucault's discussion of power over the body, this assumption is equally contestable. The factors affecting the ownership of a tattoo, and its authenticity, likewise affect the ownership of my film. Is it really my film? My name appears at the beginning, and I have the "rights" to its distribution. Yet the film is the result of a process, and some level of collaboration with others. It would not exist without Alex and Mike's participation, and thus surely they have a stake, a sense of "moral ownership"?<sup>80</sup>

I first became interested in the topic of ownership after finishing my first half-sleeve, a full color pirate ship tattoo on my upper left arm. In fact, the tattoo was done at the shop that had posted the newspaper clipping with which I began this paper. Once we finished the sleeve, I asked the tattoo artist if he minded if I reproduced the original drawing, which he had given to me to keep (in hindsight, quite a rare gesture), on a CD cover for an amateur recording of one of my ubiquitous teenage bands. He simply responded: "Hey man, you can do whatever you want with it. It's your tattoo, right?" At the time I confidently nodded and said "that's right", assuming this to be the case. More than a few years on now I look back on this episode with doubt. Is it, indeed, my tattoo?

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<sup>80</sup> Banks, 132.