

Beth Seaton SKIN DEEP

THE STARS HAVE FALLEN. TUMBLING TO EARTH, they spill down her leg; heaven written in flesh. And beneath these stars lies a garden, tendrils of roses whose sinuous lines descend to her feet, fusing her body to the ground. She shall walk forever in this garden, for the garden and the stars above are with her, swirling and dancing on her skin.

We are warned never to wear our hearts on our sleeves. To do so is to involve oneself in a revealing act of self-exposure leaving oneself open to pity or contempt. We want our bodies to appear untouched by age or emotion and expend much time and money on keeping them free of scars, wrinkles, blemishes, the remainders of pain once felt. The un-marked body is a stronger body, a harder body, a whole body, a body free from earthly or emotional contusions.

The tattooed body cannot be gathered into such a single equation for it is part skin, part image, part literal and part figurative. It mixes the familiar whole with an inventory of alien parts. The tattooed body arranges itself by bricolage. It is made of the flesh, of the dismembered eyes and limbs of beasts, beauties and demons. It is a body assembled from the remainder bin, bringing together the spare parts of memories and momento mori, fusing them with the sacred body, inserting the profaning needle under a stainless skin. Its very action is a mixing, a confusing, and a condemnation of the common sense by which we live. It gets in the way of meaning.

DISCIPLINED BODIES

In New Guinea the Roro people, who tattoo themselves extensively, describe the un-tattooed person as 'raw',

comparing him to uncooked meat...The Roro see the tattooed man as 'cooked meat', transformed by a human process and thus given a social identity. Therein lies the distinction between a social being and a biological entity.

—VICTORIA EBIN, *The Body Decorated*

Those who have studied the body marks of so-called 'primitive' people tell us that the primary purpose of these inscriptions is one of differentiation. These marks assert the difference between what the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss also termed "the raw and the cooked" (like the Roro), the difference between nature and culture, between animal life and the human animal. Tattoos also acted to discriminate and characterize the uniqueness of one culture from another, and within each culture, one individual from another. These marks were individualistic expressions of community, of age, of sex, of status but they were also the differential mark of society's law set upon the body. The societal order, its meanings and its structure, was inscribed upon the epidermis, linking it permanently, physically and visibly to that which must be felt and obeyed. In this way, the body politic was made both internal to the individual yet co-extensive to the social group. It was a collective medium of human thought visualized through human flesh.

Conversely, urbane society mediates its symbolic order externally from the individual and codifies this order independently and anonymously. The law of this society ceases to be figured upon individual bodies; instead, it is written in the media which can be everywhere and everyone's. There is no permanent writing transcribed upon an individual body, there are only copies of copies and standardized texts, each one a version of the same. These are transcribed upon the ephemeral parchments of video tape, radio waves, newsprint, and their codification. Creation is done as if in secret, an incognito inscription.

Franz Kafka's story *In the Penal Colony* is an expressive portrait of a civilized codification of the law which is conversely written upon the body. The device which the officer of the penal colony proudly shows the traveler is a particularly horrific 'drawing machine', within whose mouth full of shiny needles a convict is laid. The purpose of this machine is to inscribe upon the convict's

body the law which he has broken, driving it deeper and deeper into the skin for a tortuous six hours. The convict knows not what is being written upon his body. He knows not what his sentence is. The needles strike into his body in such a complicated way that they are impossible to decipher. "Read it", says the officer. "I can't," says the traveler." It is only at the last moment of life, at the last minute of the sixth hour when the pain has left his body, that the convict can read the law in his own dying flesh.

**Nothing else happens; the man is simply beginning to decipher the text, pursing his lips as though listening, it's not easy, as you saw, to decipher the text when looking at it; our man, remember, is doing it with his wounds.**

Like Kafka's drawing machine, the mechanisms of society work with an illegible grace, its needles extending and permeating invisibly across the social body. What better example than this of the practices of disciplinary society, which, with the economy of power, work their way naturally and illegibly into the skins of its subjects. The law is felt and obeyed, but never seen, until disobeyed. And it is only at this point that the graceful synchronicity of society's disciplinary mechanisms make themselves and the offending bodies visible, marking them into police blotters, data banks and video clips. Michel Thevoz writes:

**So tattooing does not disappear with the advent of writing, is simply placed in reserve. If the law postpones the moment of marking and chooses to wait, it does so in order to emphasize its de-individualization and its universalization. If it spares the body, it does not do so out of respect for its integrity, but on the contrary to signify that in its view bodies have become non-essential and interchangeable**

Tattooing, then, has never quite been relinquished, but with the evolution of civilized society

its meaning has gradually been reversed. What was once the sign of inclusion within society is now a sign of exclusion, or regression to the margins of society. Why tattoo the body? Why mark oneself when one's body is already invisibly marked, as Thevoz has said, "vampirized by its normative image". Is it to express a differentiation from the norm? Is it to position oneself as 'deviant' via a signifying practice which is recognized by this society as a stigmatic marking of those who inhabit its margins (bikers, bad girls, convict and criminals) or to leave its civilized shores to sailors and soldiers? What does it mean to be both possessor and possessed by the tattoo, to write upon oneself, upon the sacred stainless body of Western civilization, the epismatic marks of difference? And does this difference matter anymore?

## PROFANED BODIES

The tattoo profanes the values and meanings of a society which strives to keep the human body within the norm, to keep all human bodies looking like one another. It is part of the glorification of the 'natural' body that it should be de-individualized and made universal. In contrast to the public, individual bodies of the 'primitive', our modern society has privatized the body, disinvested it, and removed it from the social field. God made man in His own image, said the Book of Genesis. And if all men, (and with much more difficulty, women), are to be an image of God, then this image must correspond to a universal type. The body must be neutralized, so that it does not draw any attention to its individuality, or to that flesh which leads not to transcendence, but brings one down to earth.

In a similar vein, Judaic culture places great emphasis upon the wholeness and completeness of the body, forbidding bodily perversion, which, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas explains, "means a mixing or confusing". "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you" (Leviticus, xix:28), for this would be the mixing or confusing of one form with another. "Be holy for I am holy" (Leviticus, xxiii:23), and holiness, as Douglas interprets it (ibid), is exemplified by completeness. It is an order that involves correct definition, discrimination, unity and symmetry. The tattoo subverts this bodily order. It confounds the sacredness and wholeness of the body by visibly defiling its boundaries, mixing ink with skin and the image with the ground. The task of the tattoo is not only to classify a membership or a

memory, but to declassify, to collapse the difference between the flesh of the body and the form of a bird or a fish or a skull. It fuses things together which are meant to be apart, obliterating their difference, and thus obliterating the meanings and values which posit and demand such difference.

**The intrinsic character of the tattoo lies not so much in its subject matter, but its medium, the skin. There is an eerie incongruity between the set imagery of the tattoo and the flexible canvas of the body. Here lies its potency, for the tattoo exceeds and transcends that rectangular frame which normally announces the separateness of an image from the world at large. The skin of the body moves, swells, shrinks and quivers, de-stabilizing any sense of frame or boundary, and curtailing that visual distance usually demanded by a normal perspective. The canvas of the living body fuses the subject with the object, grounding the image with the spatial and temporal moment of its site. To look at a tattoo you need to get up close, to be in the presence of flesh.**

## SKIN DEEP

The skin is the body's largest organ. It is also perhaps the most crucial for the body's survival. The two square yards of thin epidermis which stretches across the human form is all that protects it and separates it from the world. It holds in and contours the ooze of flesh, fluid and membrane, giving the body distinctness in shape, shielding it from germs and dirt, insulating it from heat and cold. It is waterproof, pliable, and very much alive. Cut it, and it grows back together again. Burn it, and it can be grafted, one piece cultured onto another. Skin is an organ of the body which can be grown. But skin not only separates and protects, it acts as a conduit between the human body and its environment. Our skin takes stock of ourselves and the world. It registers not only physical, but emotional sensation. The skin tracks our senses. Repulsed, our skin crawls. Lightly touched by a lover, it shudders in delight. What is more pleasurable than a mother's caress, or the feeling of a warm sun upon a naked body, stretched languorously across the sand? Certain people may be described as being thick-skinned or alternatively as thin-skinned. These

metaphors of epidermal emotion are also measurements of the depth of feeling, a hierarchy which extends from the densities of pain, compassion, and love, to impervious indifference. We may speak derisively of someone's feelings being only skin-deep, but what other depth is there? It is the surface of the body which harbors intensities, irritations, memories. It is the surface which contains and consigns the depth of feeling.

**If the law of thought is that it should seek out profundity, whether it extends upwards or downwards, then it seems excessively illogical to me that men should not discover depths of a kind on the 'surface', that vital borderline that endorses our separateness and our form, dividing our exterior from our interior. Why should they not be attracted to the profundity of the surface itself?**

YUKIO MISHIMA, Sun and Steel, 1970

Hanging on a wall in my apartment is an old, hand-painted photograph of the Dionne quintuplets. Taken in 1935, it has faded with age, and the five, dark-eyed infants now seem to float as ghosts upon a baby-blue blanket. While this photograph might inhabit a child's nursery, the history of those it depicts is more nightmarish than anything a young child could ever dream of. Born in 1934 to a franco-Ontario couple who suffered the doubled discriminations of poverty and language, the Dionne quints were immediately placed within a media circus. As freaks of nature ('nature' here embodied in the form of a Catholic, francophone woman), the five baby girls were displayed as tourist attractions: put on view for the world to see.

A yellowed notice glued to the back of this photograph enthusiastically relates what is now known to be a story of institutionally-sanctioned cruelty and avarice. After romantically situating this "miracle"... "heard around the world", the notice states that "recently, with royal consent, the Ontario legislature passed a bill making them (the Dionne quints) 'wards of the King':

**Apart from possessing a beautiful picture of these famous babies, we feel sure that you will be interest in knowing**

**that through the purchase of this picture you will be contributing directly to the care and education of these young ladies. For while they are 'wards of the King', their care and education is to come out of a Special Trust Fund. This Fund is made up from a percentage of profits from all articles sold under the babies' name... The Ontario Government, through its Minister of Public Welfare, the Hon. David A. Croll, extends to you a cordial invitation to visit Callander and see in person these five adorable children Marie, Annette, Cecile, Emilie, and Yvonne.**

Finally, as proof of authenticity, there lie the faded signatures of the parents, Elzire and Olivia Dionne.

While this picture is one of happiness and success bestowed by an altruistic State, the consequences of the quint's public display can be rendered much more differently. The Dionne quintuplets literally grew up in a kind of zoo. Isolated and held behind glass, they were protected not only from the eager touches of tourists, but from their parents. Their mother, Olivia, was forced to stand in line with the rest of the paying customers in order to see her children. Denied the caring touch of their mother, the quint's never grew up normally. All led quite tragic lives.

In her wonderful book, A Natural History of the Senses, Diane Ackerman finds that "In the absence of touching and being touched, people of all ages can sicken and grow touch-starved". Noting the importance of touch in child development, she reports medical findings which reveal that premature babies grow faster, and become stronger both mentally and physically when massaged on a frequent basis. When touch is missing, both human beings and animals atrophy. Their brains and bodies become stunted. Babies of all kinds simply stop growing when there is no one to grow for, or to care for them. "Touch", Ackerman writes, "reassures an infant that it's safe; it seems to give the body a go-ahead to develop normally". Touch is intrinsic not only to our well-being, but our very survival. As one researcher is quoted in Ackerman's book, "We forget that touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it".

## TOUCH

Touch brings substance and depth to the surface: it reminds us of the breadth and densities of life, of its possibilities. We are generally happier people when we are touched, even on a casual basis. Briefly touched by a stranger on the arm, we are prone to respond to this person more, and become more readily open to conversation. We want to be touched and will gladly pay for the sensation, visiting what Ackerman aptly terms “professional touchers”: doctors, hairdressers, masseuses, chiropractors, and cosmetologists. We go, she notes, “to be patted, stroked, listened to, inspected, handle- ; to feel the pressure of the hand upon the body.

Tattooists are also professional touchers. It is no accident of language that many of them are called ‘doctors’ by their clients. Like the medical version, they dispense touch, pain, advice, and assurance. And yet they also bestow an artistry quite unlike their medical colleagues.

## THE GOOD DOCTOR

There is a sign on the wall of his shop which reads: WARNING—TATTOOS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO BE ADDICTIVE. It’s a joke which, like most successful ones, carries more than an element of common-sense. Yet its humor rests not on the tattoo’s association with needles, but with touch. Tattoos are addictive. There is pleasure taken in the anticipation of the joy to the eye which these needles will impart. And yet there is also pleasure taken in the sensation of the needles themselves, the constant tapping, pressure, and pain upon the skin, intermittently broken by the soothing swipe of antiseptic tissue. It is a feeling which can be mesmerizing. The experience transports me back to an earlier time when, as a bored adolescent, I drew with a cheap ball-point pen on my tennis shoes and the knees of my jeans. This practice was done not so much for the final effect of representation, but for the process, the reassuring feeling of a constant pressure and movement upon my skin. Tattoos are addictive not only in terms of what is tangibly inscribed. They are addictive in the way they are impressed upon you.

There is a bond of trust which necessarily develops between a tattoo artist and client. Like any

good doctor, the tattoo artist knows and appreciates the distinctness of bodies. He or she has seen countless types and pieces of skin and is able to give advice on what design is best suited to the body’s shape and form. And yet visiting a tattooist is much more pleasant than a visit to the doctor, because after the job is done there is time to smoke and talk, to exchange anecdotes and images. Time is taken to trade stories, histories and memories, to swap pictures on skin. “Now this one...”, he begins, but he doesn’t pull a snapshot out of his wallet; he shows his arm.

## MEMORIES

Tattoos are the inscription of memories. I know a gentleman who spent much of his life in institutions. Separated at a very early age from his family, his ‘home life’ gradually progressed from reformatory to maximum security prison. His family was that family inside, a close-knit but also often punishing family which upholds strict rules of conduct and procedure. He has no photo-album as remembrance of this family life, of this life history, but he has his body. His snapshots are impressed upon his skin.

Just as someone can be embarrassed about an old photo (“Did I really look like that?”), tattoos also offer an irrefutable and often regretful truth. Their verity cannot be denied. Yet the ‘truth-factor’ of tattoos is much stronger than photographs. Photographs, as we know, often lie. Nothing in a photograph is permanently ‘fixed’. Its historical evidence is always subject to the contingencies and distortions of a specific moment. Tattoos, however, embody a history which is not just exposed upon the glossy surface of paper, but is dug under the surface of flesh. Tattoos are memories which are more deeply recalled, marks which cannot be sloughed off as so much dead skin. Those that we regret can be covered up, hidden beneath the design of another, but they still exist. In the wings of a bird tattooed on his arm, he points out the remainder of bars on a window and a view of the ocean. An image he saw for a good while. An image he still carries. Tattoos become him.

## AUTOGRAPHS

On the surface, nothing seems easier, nor more satisfying, than answering the questions, “Who are you?” Many of us welcome the chance to talk about ourselves, for such conversation is a

means of locating and defining ourselves in the world. And yet, the anticipation of this pleasure can quickly collapse into a difficult and frustrating task. An immediate response may be to attempt to place oneself within a series of categories, for instance: white, female, middle class, teacher/writer, Irish-American, 34 years old. But such answers are inevitably unsatisfying. These labels of race, nationality, age, sex, class and socio-economic status don't sufficiently describe just who one really is. They are too static, too short-handed, too held-in-time, and appear more appropriate to the rosters of police blotter or passport application. There are enormous gaps between these objective caricatures and the complexity of a self-portrait. Even when these vacancies are filled in with a more detailed history - 4th generation San Franciscan, red-diaper baby, bad girl made good - there is nothing here which can fully and finally be amassed into a plausible self. Inevitably, one is tempted to just give up and mutter Popeye's slogan, "I yam what I yam".

The problem is that there is always a distance between how we can be described and what we are. Language never seems to stretch far enough or run fast enough to catch up with our lives. Identity never stops at one final point, but keeps going. It's difficult, and sometimes, dangerous to halt dead in your tracks and say definitively, "This is who or what I am". Our lives continue to unfold.

Throughout our lives we collect stories, anecdotes, histories, objects and even people which act to confirm and define who we are. Identity is not something that is self-evident, stably built for all time and for all to see. It is something which out of necessity must undergo continuous renovation, something which must constantly be shored up and re-built in the face of historical accident and personal intent. It involves an inventive process of making-do and make-believe.

And yet, people need the continuity of shared beliefs, goals and practices in order to make sense, not only of the world, but of themselves. We all need a sense of belonging in life. There is something about a tattoo that invests itself in this kind of permanence. Tattoos don't speak entirely of who we are, but they do articulate a message that is part of us. They act to intensify an imaginary sense of self. Just as our lives are constructed from a collection and recollection of personal possessions – objects, artworks, stories, memories and love-letters bound up in ribbon

– so too does the tattoo find its place within such a permanent collection. Tattoos stay with the body until its death. People come and go, memories are forgotten, and objects are lost, but tattoos are with you for life. Nothing else is quite so permanent, so beautiful or so pleasing. Which is not to say that tattoos evoke some sort of unchanging or immutable identity. They may be depended upon to last, but these designs of self are not everlasting. Just as a remembered sadness becomes less sharp, its edges smoothed out over time, so too do the lines and colors of a tattoo fade and spread. The body ages, sags, swells and slackens. Things change. Tattoos become you.

## THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

Whenever non-tattooed people discuss the tattoo of another, they ask about the pain with which it was acquired. These marks must really count for something, they seem to feel, because they hurt. Even before the design is completed, even before these needles signify anything, or signify nothing, they give pain to the living body upon which they are engraved. Even after the moment of inscription itself, these marks still hearken back to the pain with which they were amassed. The judging eye, the public eye must wince, sensing the pain that has worked its way across the skin and the unnatural pleasure which this pain divulges to its beholder. Is the tattoo a sort of litmus test which sets one person apart from those who would not readily submit to the pain which the needle imparts and the permanent stigmatization which that pain implies? Is it merely a partisan badge of self-mutilation which celebrates sentiments of belonging to a different world? Well, maybe, but mostly not.

First of all, tattoos don't really hurt that much. Or rather, yes, they can hurt, but it's a different sort of pain than expected, precisely because it's pain that is expected. When we unwittingly smash our knee against a doorway, that hurts, because we were unprepared for it and the pain comes full bore. But pain can be dealt with if it is not caused maliciously or comes as a surprise. "Relax", the good doctor/tattooist tells us as he prepares to insert the needle under the skin. And so we turn our mind to other things, to the adornment which this pain is becoming. "Forget about it", our friends tell us when we relate a story of heartbreak. Forgetting the pain is a way of leaving it behind.

There are many different degrees and types of pain, and this variety of sensation also pertains to tattoos. With delicate fine-line tattoos, there are times when one wonders whether the needle is imprinting at all, the touch is so light. In contrast, large areas of deep color hurt, the needle agonizingly pressing and digging under the skin. The intensity of pain also depends upon where one is being tattooed. Areas near the joints of the body are excruciating. But the experience of pain is something which is uniquely subjective. Different people are susceptible to pain in diverse ways. Women, for instance, have higher pain thresholds than men. This is probably due to the fact that, 1) women deal with pain on a life-long basis in the form of pregnancy, monthly menstrual cramps, back aches, etc. and, 2) they have more endorphins, naturally occurring opiates that kick in when pregnancy or other pains take place. Needless to say, this places more than a bit of irony upon the macho stereotypes attached to the tattoo.

## REBELS AND REPROBATES

**Did you know that the word 'stigma' specifically applies to breaking the skin – the word generally applies to anyone strange or unusual. It's from the Greek. The term refers to bodily designs designed to expose something unusual, or the moral status of the signifier. In ancient times, the signs were cut or burned into the body and advertised that the wearer was a slave, a criminal or a traitor...a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided especially in public places.**

CAPTAIN DON LESLIE,  
(Sword-swallower, fire-eater and heavily tattooed man).

But what about this notion of the tattoo as a partisan badge or permanent stigmatization? What sort of collective identity is signified by the tattoo? If the tattoo acts in part as a sort of sign that flashes MEMBERS ONLY, what kind of clubs do these members belong to?

To many god-fearing, hard-working, 'normal and civilized people', the sight or even mere mention of a tattoo can act as a veritable 'switch' hitting all sorts of panic buttons in the brain which signal someone to be avoided. Within North American and Western European societies, the tattoo has a deeply entrenched association with the subcultures of bikers, prisoners, soldiers, sailors, and more recently, skinheads. These are masculine cultures which are known for their institutionalized spaces (the 'clubhouse', the prison, the navy), a hierarchy, the inmate code and ritualized performances. They are cultures which for the most part are extremely rigid in their compositions. They are conservative cultures. They draw circles around themselves against and outside world boundaries which act to identify and include 'us' by defining and excluding the other.

Tattooing in this respect embodies a gendered, class, and racially specific use of the body. It is a practice which is traditionally seen as belonging to the white, male, working class. Within this social group, the tattoo is used as a means of marking out and giving expression to different values, affinities, and beliefs.

Walk into any tattoo street shop and one is confronted with a plethora of standardized images available for inscription. Everywhere, on the walls (even the ceiling), there are countless biker types: Harley logos, skulls, "born to die", death rides a bike, and Doberman pinchers with drooling fangs. There are va-va-va-voom chicks, dark-eyed ladies, and Viking women in bondage. There are the "property of..." tattoos, stamps of possession to be applied strategically near the genitals or buttocks of girlfriends. There are even a few available for those baby neo-fascists occupying the store-front across the street: swastikas, civil war flags, and tiny Doc Marten boots which look more cutely designed than threatening. Misogyny, racism, machismo, a large spectrum of the politics of representation, gets played out here.

The meanings of these tattoos depends upon not just who wears them, and how they are worn, but how they are seen. These are tattoos which announce a membership, and as such, they must be seen to be heard and believed. They are tattoos which rely upon the gaze of another, a gaze which actively contributes to that which is already there. Supposedly, the intent of such tattoos

is to identify the wearer as a man to be wary of, and these identifications run deep into the fabric of popular culture and popular myth. And yet, the tattoo never quite operates on such a literal basis. Mixing ink with skin refutes that old axiom that "what you see is what you get". The tattoo invites interpretation, but the tattoo also resists interpretation as soon as it welcomes it, and it is this double movement which characterizes its expression. It impresses upon the viewer that there are many ways of interpreting, many modes of distortion other than the ones used by our normative and meaningful society. It can disturb the spectator with the prospect that our 'common-sense' meanings are only but a few among many.

Does the Hawaiian girl on your grocer's belly irrevocably identify him as a sailor, or a sexist? Of course not. You need to ask him what it means. And he'll probably tell you about when he got it and where he got it and who gave it to him and why he got it. He'll relate a past which is still inscribed in the present, a past which is a part of him, but precisely because it is a part of him, is a past which continues to change. It's difficult to anticipate the significance of a tattoo, for its meaning exceeds and stretches beyond the surface of skin. One must follow not only the traces left by a needle, but the topography of a life.

## EVERY BODY'S DOING IT

In the past, the tattoo had to be something: a skull with wings, an anchor, a sexy woman and the meanings of these pictorial representations were usually quite specific. They would identify the bearer as belonging to a particular fraternity; they would function as a sort of talisman or act as a rite of passage. Their meanings were limited and they were generally limited to certain types of people. The identities of these tattoos were empowering like the skin they were inscribed upon, they acted to separate and protect. They were capable of expressing dissatisfaction with the limits imposed upon bodies. But in a most paradoxical way, they also acted to visibly mark out a limited and stigmatic identity of the bearer, framing him to those limits themselves.

Nowadays however, things have changed. A lead article for the March 1992 issue of SPY magazine informs us that currently, "EVERYBODY'S A REBEL". Inside are a number of "free authentic SPY lick n' stick celebrity tattoos". What was once a brand of banishment has now

become a means of being 'in with the crowd'. Tattoos have become trendy, the de rigueur practice of wannabe risk-takers and faux rebels. Hollywood celebrities have tattoos, rock stars have tattoos, and former Secretary of State, George Schultz, proudly brags of the Princeton tiger on his butt.

What does this mean? Do tattoos show off a risky encounter with difference, without entailing the risks these differences once made? Do they allow the bearer to associate with the ruined and the ruinous, but without actually coming to ruin themselves? Are they desperate attempts at authenticity in a culture where there is nothing much left but more of the same?

Admittedly, given this society's cult of the body, the tattoo just seems to be another form of corporeal style. And, it too, appears to fit all too easily within a fashionable fascination with the dangerous or the taboo. In their desire and fear of 'others' (such as African-Americans, Asians, American Natives), whites have always incorporated and domesticated that which is exotic, while simultaneously holding it at bay. Yet, within an entire symphony of celebrities who unabashedly sing of tucking, clipping, sucking, and bleaching their flesh, the practice of tattooing works over the body in a very different way. Tattoos work for the person rather than the societal norm.

Part of what's fucked-up with this culture is the absolute denial of everything having to do with the aging process and death. That's what I think really kicks people in the head about tattooing. They see it and they remember they're going to die, and they don't want to deal with that.

DON ED HARDY  
(tattoo artist par excellence)

The impact of the tattoo is never wholly dependent upon its image, upon what it depicts. Rather, its effect lies with how it depicts, with how it is permanently inscribed and yet never lies still. The tattoo is based upon movement, the curvature of the body, the rise and fall of flesh, and

the visceral and tangible changes of age. The tattoo signifies a body in process. Unlike cosmetic surgery, which draws the skin tightly against a normative standard of beauty, the tattoo follows its own codes of conduct. It is not a smile held rigidly in place, but a fluid expression of emotion. And in this movement, there is always the possibility of change.

While tattoos are there to be visibly seen on the skin, they are, at depth, more personal than public statements. These epidermal designs are tailored by and for the self, rather than another. They are read in private as an archive of the self which clarifies its intentions and dreams. And importantly, they can act as an attempt to re-connect or re-claim one's own body for oneself, an action which, for very obvious reasons, is especially important for women.

Things start to move forward with the tattoo. Breaking through skin can be a way of breaking through an impasse. For many people, the act of getting a tattoo does serve as a rite of passage. It may suffice as a means to acknowledge and settle something with oneself. And from that moment, the body can continue to walk on. The tattoo signifies a provisional place of closure. It underlines the paradoxical necessity of having to stay put, if only for a moment, in order to move on to a different place. Many things are lost in life, but in the changing life of a tattoo something is always found.

Kafka, Franz. *In the Penal Colony*, 1981: p. 224

Thevoz, Michel. 1984: p.62

ibid., p. 82

Douglas, Mary. 1966: p. 53

Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses*.

ibid, p.75

ibid., p.78

ibid., p.121