***Modern Angels*: Exploring transdermal body art and body modification as transformative practice and political resistance** Roy Wallace

> Body and power, both religious and political, the body and the politics of power. The body has long since become one of the sites in which forms of knowledge converge, creating their own systems of awareness and understanding, a luminous field of uncertainty upon which to establish an intensely violent politics, through apparently liberating, a culture with a winking, conspiratorial tone that from time to time threatens death on the bonfire, employs tortures or promises youth and beauty.[1]

[fig-1]

In 2000, I produced a short documentary work called *Modern Angels* which explored the 'body art' scene in Belgium at that period.

Body art is an ancient practice. Some 5300 years ago, in the Late Neolithic period, the 'Iceman' (as commonly known) was tattooed with stripes, lines, and cross shapes on his back, knees, feet, and hands.[2] Since that time, so far as we can tell, body art has been widespread, customary and normative. So how can it be that body art was, until recently, increasingly regarded with disdain in many modern cultures and what relationship does body *art* have with politically motivated art movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteen centuries, through to present day? More importantly, what is at the core of body art as a transformative practice? What significance do these practices play in the acquisition of both individual and collective forms of esoteric knowledge/power?

Defined by Crowley in *Magick in Theory and Practice*, '[m]agick is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will'.[3] Moreover, it 'is the Science of understanding oneself and one's conditions. It is the Art of applying that understanding in action'.[4] My focus here is on Western forms of body art ritually performed as a

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[1] Alfano, *Extreme*, 51.
[2] Gustafson, 'Inscripta in Fronte', 80.
[3] Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice.*
[4] Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice.*

transformative, spiritual – or even magical – practice, and, body art as practised in Belgium at the end of the second millennium.

We need to acknowledge that history is ever evolving and a highly contested site of meaning production. It is also heavily weighted from a Westernised postcolonial perspective which may not include key cultural narratives that more appropriately define the significance and purpose of body art practice over time. I would argue that our understanding of body art resonates with grand narratives of historical understanding which, from a Westernised perspective, draws upon the knowledge accumulated through, mainly barbaric, colonial conquests of the cultures and tribes which may have used body art practices in ways become lost on Western interpretations. Scientific and ethnographic studies may offer a partial insight into the nature and meaning of such practices, but my point is to emphasise the need to bring a deeper well of knowledge, to recognise the potential layers of complex meaning woven into tribal and cultural practices, which, historically have been viewed through the narrow lens of orthodox historical narratives; therefore, any critical investigation of body art practices should acknowledge that such analysis – viewed through the lens of Western historical narratives – can only be a constrained form of information and knowledge. Of course, the term 'tribe' itself is controversial amongst some in anthropology, due to an argued association with colonialism in its usage, but I have elected to retain the term here, primarily because the idea of tribe is key to how participants from my documentary self-identified, as we will discuss later.

Jane Caplan, in her introduction to *Written on the Body, Tattoo in European and American History*, notes:

> Tattooing is one of many forms of irreversible body alteration, including scarification, cicatrisation, piercing and branding, and it is probably the oldest and most widespread of these. Physical evidence for the practice survives from the late fourth millennium BC in Europe and from about 2000 BC in Egypt, and tattooing can be found in virtually all parts of the world at some time.[5]

Caplan also points to a key defining concept which has informed and helped shape

[5] Caplan, *Written on the Body*, xi.

Westernised understanding of body art as a 'stigmatic, rather than honourable practice'.[6] Caplan's research on the subject would seem to point toward the 'honourable practices' of ancient and tribal cultures as possessing a direct connection with the Earth and their environment, reflected in the images and symbols decorating their body art. Many civilisations from Polynesia, Australasia, the Americas, India, China, Japan and elsewhere across the globe, practised body art that reflected the world around them as a celebratory, spiritual, and transformative activity with the potential to connect with entities and energies outside of the individual, tribe or culture.

The activity of documenting and recording, a privilege of the literate, complex societies over the 'primitive', is at the core of power relationships which would not only shape Western understanding of 'others', but also of the potential to exploit both indigenous people and resources across the globe – such activity affects our understanding of body art practice as either within a 'stigmatising' or 'honourable' framework.

Demarcations of power also feature in ancient cultural body art practices, with tattooing and branding as forms of irreversible stigmatising activity. C.P. Jones examines this concept in more detail, outlining from the New Catholic Encyclopaedia how,

> [the] term derived from the Greek root Stigma, meaning mark and, a brand impressed by iron. It was used in antiquity to refer to marks branded on cattle, on all slaves in the Orient, and on fugitive slaves in Greece and Rome. Soldiers also, of some Eastern countries, wore stigmata.[7]

The use of tattooing, marking and branding within these contexts take on a very different meaning from those often practiced within tribal contexts, where the art form is conducive to the common bond, here we find the use of the activity as a degrading form of power dominance which sought to claim ownership of the individual – utilised by either slave owners, institutions or the state.

The demarcation of dominant power relationships and stigmata over the individual significantly manifests during the Roman era with tattooing on the face, as a way of advertising the individual's status and often alleged crime, as well as a form of punishment.

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[6] Caplan, *Written on the Body*, xi.
[7] Jones 'Stigma', 139.

The stigmata also served a third function, which was to degrade the individual and break their will to resist authority.

Gustafson provides examples of this happening during the late Roman Empire where prisoners who had rebelled were facially tattooed as traitors and publicly humiliated, by parading them in front of the city, to maintain discipline and order under the dominant official or servant of either Roman state or religious order. He acknowledges that Christians under Constantine also held slaves and discusses the internal wrangling of the religious hierarchy, in their deciding whether tattooing the face was degrading.[8]

In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, and its emergence, MacQuarrie indicates a significant change that occurred with the development of the Holy Roman Empire. The will to subjugate the Pagan populations of mainly European cultures brought with it another form of stigmata: *stigmatibus malignus*.[9] The Holy Roman Empire and its emissaries introduced the additional element of 'evil' as a motivational strategy to degrade the individual and their association with Pagan roots and practices, particularly in Spain, southern France and the insular Celts of Great Britain and Ireland.

This Empire sought to act as the intermediary, undermining directly experienced spiritual knowledge acquired over millennia and imposing interpretations full of corrupt and divisive meaning that suited its purpose as a colonialist expansion strategy based on fear, degradation and brutality. Protestant interpretations of these relationships with the divine contest the concept of intermediary via the ritualistic and directorial cannons from the Church and instead replaced this concept with the direct spiritual relationship with a personal God; although, that is not to say that Protestantism did not have its forms of oppression and societal control.

The rise of Islam led to Christian Crusades, contributing further to the practice of tattoo being seen as 'uncivilised', as MacQuarrie describes:

> When associated with exotic cultures they indicate sometimes the rudeness and sometimes the nobility of the 'savages' who wear them, and when connected to groups within the civilised world they are usually signs of deviance or selfdiscipline. [. . .T]hese references associate the practice with two very different

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[8] Gufstafson, *Written on the Body,* 23.
[9] MacQuarrie, *Written on the Body*, 32.

> sorts of community: the one characterised by illiteracy, paganism and outlaw status, and on the other, conversely with extremes of literacy, Christianity and enculturation.[10]

It is of interest here to point to the dominant centralising initiative taken by the Church in reorientating the meaning associated with previous Pagan cultural practice, and, yet, the inconsistency when such practice occurs within its purview and domain, such as, marks of enlightenment by priests or crusaders who had travelled to Jerusalem in service of God via the teachings of the Church.[11] Crusaders were often tattooed with Christian symbolism which would distinguish them from the Islamic religion and mark their rank within the hierarchical Christian societies from which they emerged. Thus, in this context, the tattoo was regarded as a symbol of those who transcended by their deeds into a more meaningful relationship with the Church.

The fetishisation of body art within the Haute Couture of Western societies can be also be traced, within the modern era, to the Imperialist aspirations of the Western colonialist activities from the 1700s to the Victorian period in Britain. As mentioned above, while slaves, and later, criminals, were tattooed as an act of ownership or degradation, many privileged members of Western societies took body art as a noble and enlightened acknowledgement of their encounter with exotic and often mysterious practices of other cultures and sub-cultures. Edward Said observes, Victorian gentlemen and women often had large tattoos or body art decorating their hidden bodies, with body piercing a common practice among the elite. This affectation transcends class boundaries as sailors, for example, would often document their encounters with some form of crude tattoo; this helped bond groups together through the shared experience of having encountered the exotic 'other' during their travels.[12]

Clair Anderson has provided a detailed analysis in her work, 'Godna: Inscribing Indian Convicts in the Nineteenth Century', where she examines the methods and practices of criminal degradation often used as a method of control and punishment replicating previous centuries of similar activities by systematic stigmata on the individual.[13] She outlines how

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[10] MacQuarrie, *Written on the Body*, 32.
[11] Fleming, *Written on the Body,* 79.
[12] As discussed by Burney analysing Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978). See Burney, *Orientalism: The Making of the Other,* 23–39.
[13] Anderson, *Written on the Body*, 105.

branding, in particular, was used to punish Brahmin with symbols of their misdemeanour branded on their foreheads to publicly humiliate and outcast individuals from the controlling central political, social, cultural or religious ideologies.

Arguably, the greatest fracture between the individual, their cultural practices and the sense of spiritual connectedness to the environment, occurred during the Industrial Revolution when mechanised methods of exploitation and dominance – particularly over the individual – led to the contrived concept of national identity as a deferred replacement for pre-existing inter-relationships between humans and their living environment.

Later, history and all other forms of written, visual, and emerging technological mediums such as photography, radio, film etc. facilitated the continual re-writing of dominant and domineering cultural narratives. During the industrialised era, nation-states exploited such cultural narratives, with ever demanding 'progress' as the central motivation, using technology, religion and education to facilitate the manipulation of millions of individuals to their premature death through contrived worldwide nation-state wars.

Body art, like many other activities during the Industrial Revolution, moved from a manual to a mechanised method of the irreversible inscription on the body. Depending on the motivation, this was either a welcome progression by many practitioners of the art of body art or an additional weapon of systematic control and degradation of the individual. The National Socialist Movement in Germany took this activity to the extreme, with the degradation of the Jewish population in Europe through stigmata: by tattooing, branding and other forms of dehumanising practice. Unfortunately, they were not the only nation-state to engage in such stigmatisation, as many of the allied forces employed such practices with prisoners in internment camps in Britain, and elsewhere throughout Europe.

The Nazi regime, however, was the epitome of the previous historic degrading of the individual, and the dehumanisation and 'othering' of specific group identities, while at the same time manifesting control over compliant individuals through the exploitation of symbol and the concept of Nation State as a 'superpower' over all other adversaries.

The Nazi Party celebrated the concept of the beautiful human body and drew aesthetic inspiration from ancient Greece and Rome with the Discobolus featured prominently in the opening of Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia. Throughout history, hegemonic power structures have promoted an idealisation of preferred form concerning both art and the human body. Again, taken to extremes by the Nazi Party and their denouncement of so-called 'degenerate art' forms.

One of the key movements identified by the Nazi's as degenerate art was that of the Surrealists, and their predecessors the Dadaists, who, emerging from the trauma of the First World War, often displayed individualist and anarchist qualities in the aspirations and manifestations of their works. The Surrealist movement was a revolutionary one that presented layers of hidden meaning critiquing the excessive rational thought and bourgeois values that catalysed global conflict, and instead sought to access forms of hidden knowledge as a liberating potential.

Nadia Choucha in her work *Surrealism and the Occult* contextualises the informing logic which underpinned the Surrealist ambition, discussing Kupka she observes:

> In the 1880s, Kupka had practised as a medium, became a vegetarian and studied Greek, German and Oriental Philosophy. He became interested in Theosophy and moved to Paris in the mid-1890s. An aquatint *The Way of Silence* (c.1900) by Kupka depicts himself standing in an avenue of sphinxes under a starlit sky, typical Symbolist in both style and subject. It represents Humanity confronted with the riddle of the universe and its destiny.[14]

Surrealist ambitions were inextricably linked with the spiritual and the quest for understanding; just as with Choucha's interpretation of Kupka's work, a primary motivation is pursuing knowledge of the destiny of humankind. The Surrealists explored and revealed the potential of the hidden, and the unconscious, as a fusion of the mystical with the material. Surrealists experimented with various forms and manifestos including automatism, revolution and the erotic aesthetic, the androgyne and the magical tradition, alchemy, shamanism and psychoanalysis. Body art featured as a recurring motif in many forms of modern art, but within the Surrealist movement, it tapped an otherwise under-researched domain between symbolism and extra-symbolic relationships of the individual and spirituality[15]:

> Leiris attacks the rationalism of the last few centuries for having suppressed the influence of sexuality on thought, and 'Against this intellectualism, which deprived man of half himself, occult science rises up with its formidable armour of symbols, like a mighty, involuntary protesting force. It matters little whether,

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[14] Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 27.
[15] Gibson et al, Going the distance, 1237–1261.

> taken, it corresponds to an objective reality. Its symbols are invaluable from a poetic standpoint and consequently from that of the significance of humanity.[16] What Leiris points us toward is the suppressed influence of the animalistic on thought, where intellectual rationality ignores what nonrational aspects of culture have long understood: the need to have direct access and contact with our spiritual connectedness, at one with our material world.

I observe a direct link here, with the work of Belgian Surrealist artists such as Magritte, Delvaux, Mensens, Nougue, Marien, Scutenaire, Souris and Ensor making a significant impact on the art scene in Belgium, and permeating the body art scene through to the 21st century.

As previously mentioned, in my documentary work, *Modern Angels* (2000) I set out to capture the body art scene in Belgium. I spent eighteen months travelling back and forth to Belgium for the project and most of the preceding period was taken up with negotiating access to the people and practitioners from that scene. My first key observation, on reflection, is that the body art community reflected the wider social construction of the divided nationstate it had to negotiate. While most participants in the project saw themselves as Belgian, their national identity was further defined by cultural and language grouping, as either Flemish or Walloon. Recapitulating the linguistic division which exists in Belgium to the present day. While purportedly willing to transcend national and international borders, a primary nationalist definition of identity resonated in my encounters with most participants and interviewees.

The second key influence throughout the work was the relationship with the dominant orthodox religion, which is Catholicism. Catholicism influences shape the country, administration and body art scene, whether it is through local by-laws regarding trading etc. or the drinking of the beers in Belgium that are brewed and distributed by monks from the Catholic Church – and have been for centuries.

Within the body art movement, there is a strong anti-authoritarian ambition with a dedicated focus on occult practices. I use the term occult because, as with the Surrealist movement, it demonstrates an ongoing artistic dialogue with hidden meaning and the potential for esoteric knowledge, pathways, beliefs both revealed through and occulted in body art.

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[16] Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult*. 87-88.

Being self-ascribed to the sub-cultural category of 'Modern Primitive'[17] underpinned much of the interviewee's participation, and this was the defining concept within the scene, which I theorise was due to a desire for a collective sense of belonging to an identity 'other' than the one experienced under normative Belgian circumstances. Thus, the body becomes a site of resistance and a material manifestation of the reaction against power. As both poststructuralist and feminist thinkers in the 20th century, such as Foucault and Butler, have noted, the body is a politicised site of contestation.[18]

Mary Douglas argues, that body art (and I would suggest documentary also) offers a space where we think about and constitute the body politic.[19] The desire to transcend and become 'other' was at the core of individual motivations captured throughout the documentary work, with a key focus being the resistance of dominant modern socio-political frameworks and cultural influences, particularly the Catholic Church. Belgium is, overall, a reasonably affluent society; however, this comes at the price of conceding individual liberty and freedoms to the national bureaucratic administration. The documentary participants, sought to reject consumer culture, although arguably they wished to add cultural capital to their bodies. Turner goes on to comment that:

> Changes in the nature and purpose of tattoos indicate changes in the nature and purpose of social life. By contrast, the contemporary interest in tattoos is no longer confined, as in earlier periods of Western Industrialization, to the working-class, youth culture or criminal communities, but extends through the social scale as tattoos are increasingly used to produce aesthetic enhancement of the body. Tattooing is now more closely related to commercial exploitation of sexual themes in popular culture that to life-cycle transitions. In short, tattoos have become a regular aspect of consumer culture, where they add cultural capital to the body's surface.[20]

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[17] 'Modern Primitive' is a sub-culture in postcolonial nations, where body modification rituals and practices are related to initiatory rites of so-called 'primitive' cultures. The term gained widespread usage due to the popularity of the book by Juno and Vale, *Modern Primitives*.

[18] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', 519-531.

[19] Mary Douglas in Bryan Turner, 'The Possibility of Primitiveness', 37.

[20] Turner, 'The possibility of primitiveness', 40.

While elements of Turner's critique appropriately applies to the body art practice I witnessed in Belgium, one factor that particularly differentiates this approach as a site of resistance, occult process and a politically motivated artform, was the use of ritualistic 'performance'. It is in the approach taken with these performative aspects, and the inter-relationships encountered, that we encounter what is specifically Belgian in this work. One scene, where I recorded Louis Bronx getting scarred live in front of an audience, exemplifies this assertion. She had taken over a year to prepare for the event mentally then turned the activity into a performance with an invited audience, including ourselves, and unfolded a narrative around the activity. She performed a traditional Walloon song in the French language about a bus conductor who likes to 'clip' holes in the tickets as an allegory for the body art practices she was symbolically enacting through corporeally. Just as the juxtaposition in surrealist art and poetry aims to stretch the capacity of the imagination, arousing our dormant creative and analytic powers, making our minds yield their solution to the conundrum before us. Bronx used her juxtaposition of intense ritualistic scarification, and the uncomfortably light-hearted allegory in her singing, unifying all present within this unsettling performance and stretching the capacity of all their imaginations.[21]

[fig-2]

One of the participants, in an interview for *Modern Angels*, put forward a particular conceptual offshoot of 'Modern Primitivism' that they called the 'All Tribe'. Their belief defines 'All Tribe' as a metaphorical construct, an imaginary universal connectedness to 'one source' which is described through language as humankind. Here I want to make connections to anarcho-primitivism, defined as a political and ethical movement that combines the political framework of anarchism with the cultural critique provided by primitivism.[22] The concept that we are all connected to a Universal primary source which gives and takes life in the form of energy creation and dissipation has resonance with many religious belief systems throughout history. With the acculturation of body art as a desirable and fashionable aesthetic, rather than a negatively stigmatised symbolism, body art has now, as Turner describes, re-emerged as the positive symbolic potential for cultural capital. In a post-modern era where signs, symbols and meaning are transitory and interchangeable depending on your

[21] Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 59.
[22] Loy, 'Anarcho-primativism'.

perspective, grounding yourself in the idea that you are part of an 'All Tribe', seems unproblematic and potentially desirable.

Two key issues which emerge from such a concept are 1) the idea that everyone is equal within the 'All Tribe', and 2) to achieve such an anarchist state is problematic in the material but possible in the spiritual domain – which suggests the concept as an idealised form of anarcho-primitivism located between the symbolic and extra-symbolic state of being. Such an imagined relationship helps address contemporary political reality by substituting imaginary deferred individual freedom, without the need for detail or practical application. The 'All Tribe' concept allows for individual acceptance of current material conditions but with the real potential for imagined belonging, which is attractive to many of the body art scene as a purposeful depository for their activities, practice and most importantly, the *meaning* they invest in their body art as a receiver or producer of the symbolic representations committed to the body politic.

My research ambition was to explore how such symbolic practices can transform individual concepts of power and control outside of dominant structures, systems and beliefs to facilitate 'freedom', to view the personal as political, as a resistive strategy against historical forces of dominance and power relationships. As I have outlined in this chapter, the history of body art is intertwined with the development of dominant power relationships, over the individual, in every area of cultural activity. Marking the individual as a 'slave' is not body art, yet body art gets a certain resistive kudos, as an aesthetic challenge to this historically engrained power activity by reclaiming the ability to mark oneself in any way one chooses as a liberating practice. As Louise Bronx comments in my documentary:

> I undertook scarification to reclaim my body and resist all the shit, the corporations, the pain in this society. I use my scarification activity to reclaim ownership of my body against dominant corporate forces which have invaded my real and perceived view of the ideal society and my role within it.[23]

She also emphasises, as a woman, she is reclaiming the body as part of the resistive strategy against the dominant patriarchal power relationships from family, school, society, culture, nation-state, global corporations exploiting the earth and the poor. The 'All Tribe' offers a

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[23] Wallace, *Modern Angels* (2000)

solution to the real problems facing the individual against Westernised post-industrial power structures as an abstract deferment, like religious concepts of enlightenment and reward in another realm, outside of the current, often painful experience which I would attribute to the relentless pursuit of meaning in our Western cultures:

> Meaning equals pain as we become attached to things that seemingly matter to us to live harmoniously together we try to agree on standards, purposes and meanings. So, anything that threatens some of these collective meanings, the sacred cows of our semantic universes, is a great threat. Anarchism – the actual absence of meaning and purpose – is the greatest threat of all.[24]

I did not focus on but acknowledge the invested meaning through rites of passage associated with many other body art practices across various tribes, subcultures and cultures around the globe, some mythical, some real. The transition from one psychical and mental state to another is the underlying essence of these practices; to move through pain endurance into another state of being where the individual is in control of their destiny. The ability to resist, the ability to transcend and control are central ambitions and imaginary outcomes of the transformative practice of body art.

The additional cultural capital may or may not be a motivating force, and with many of the people I interviewed this was not at the forefront of their motivation. Instead, was the honestly held belief that they were, or could become, part of a Universal Belonging which transcended all the problems and issues currently facing humankind. A return to the 'simplistic primitive' ideal in opposition to the complex post-modern lifestyle which seemingly undermines our connectedness to the Earth and our spiritual awareness.

These transformative practices offer the potential to reclaim the personal as a site for meaning, whether aesthetic or political, utilising technological advances, (tribal) symbolism, aesthetics and embodied performativity. We are constantly in transition from one state to another, from birth to death, and I conclude that body art is, in part, a manifestation of the imaginary in the material world, linked to a desire to reach a spiritual connection between both – as suggested by the participants and the title of the work.

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[24] Parkin, Fuck It, 7.

Most contemporary body art is a commercialised activity that many purists find abhorrent; however, the wider acceptance and tolerance of body art reflects the progressive and less conservative cultural attitudes which have emerged from a participatory multicultural society in Belgium and other Western cultures.

Modern Angels, was simply an exploration and documentation of these relationships, at a point in time, from one perspective. The viewer should take, or not, whatever meaning they choose from the documentary construction in the knowledge that I as producer, upon reflection, no longer invest any real meaning or purpose, consciously or subconsciously, in the work. It just is, another artefact in the age of the 'death of meaning'. Decide for yourself: http://trans-states.org/watch-modern-angels/

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