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“IT CAN BE QUITE DIFFICULT TO HAVE YOUR CREATIVITY ON TAP”: BALANCING CLIENT EXPECTATIONS AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN THE TATTOO INDUSTRY.

Kim Barbour¹

Abstract — *Tattoo artists work in a commission structure. Their artistic practice, possibly more than in any other creative career, requires the complete approval of the client prior to the creation of the final work. An unsatisfactory tattoo cannot be on-sold, discarded or easily replaced. Rarely can a tattooer practice their art without external participation. Therefore, tattoo artists come up with a number of strategies to manage their client base to ensure that the art they are asked to create satisfies both the client and their own artistic skills and preferences. Drawing on phenomenological research conducted for my PhD investigating artistic persona, this paper will explore the strategies tattoo artists use to construct their portfolios, manage the tattoo consultation and design process, and develop their own artistic skills, in order to build a successful and rewarding career in the tattoo industry.*

Index Terms — *Persona, Tattoo, Artists, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Tattooing has been undergoing a significant renaissance for the past three decades, particularly in Western liberal democracies [1]. With the increase in popularity has come the partial breakdown of some of the stereotypes about tattoo enthusiasts and artists. Prior to the 1980s - and indeed ongoing today - much of the research conducted on tattooing focusses on elements of deviance and the profane, whether through linking tattooing to criminality [2] or to psychiatric issues of those who were considered to be self-harming [3]. (The exception to this trend occurs in studies of tattooing in Pacific, Asian, or African traditional cultural practice.) This project takes a different approach. Following Atkinson [1], I consider “the tattooed body is both a marker of social position...and a symbol of ‘civilized’ individuality”. My focus in this paper is on the creators of tattoos, the tattoo artists.

In this paper, the experiences of two tattoo artists are used to explore the relationship between artist and client, and the strategic decisions and processes that tattoo artists use to manage that relationship. After describing the methodology of the wider research project from which this paper has been developed, I outline the relationship between tattoo and fine art. This is followed by an in-depth interpretation of the two tattoo artists/co-researchers

experiences in managing and developing a client base for their artistic practice. The strategies involved are designed to mitigate the different ways that tattoo artists are perceived, and the different expectations that they feel potential and even current clients have of the creative practice involved in tattoo art. Through the careful selection and display of images in online portfolios, the decision to specialise in a particular style, and the insistence on having considerable control over the design of the tattoo, artists balance having the need to please the tattoo recipient with their own interests and preferences for the work that they create.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The research on which this paper is based comes from my doctoral study into artistic persona in physical and digitally networked spaces. Using an adapted form of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) [4], I am studying the experience of creating persona, exploring what it is like for artists to present themselves to the public in mediated ways. Along with tattoo artists, my Ph.D. research sample includes performance poets, craftivists, and street artists.

Applying phenomenology to the study of the human experience with digitally networked spaces is not unknown, but is certainly underutilised outside of psychology [5][6]. Phenomenological research “seeks to reveal and richly portray the nature of human phenomena and the experiences of those who live through them, taking into account the contexts in which these experiences occur and the subjective meanings participants give to particular situations” [7]. Saldana [8] comments similarly that the purpose of phenomenological research is “to come to an intimate awareness and deep understanding” of human experience, and involves revelations between research and participant of “what goes through one’s mind and what one feels as the phenomenon occurs”. This is distinct from the study of behaviour as seen in projects that utilise an ethnographic or anthropological methodology.

The choice of IPA as the phenomenological approach was made as “it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event” [9], while also emphasising the role of the researcher in the co-creation of that account. Although IPA has been developed for use within psychology, the clarity of method and analytical process as described by its principle proponent Smith, which

¹ Kim Barbour, PhD Candidate – School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia, kim.barbour@deakin.edu.au

emphasises deep analysis of individual transcripts followed by comparative interpretation of emergent themes, means that the methodology can be applied across disciplinary boundaries.

In my research, I am borrowing my artist-participants' experiences of constructing personas, both in physical spaces and in digitally networked and mediated spaces to develop a deeper understanding of how persona construction occurs, and how it is experienced. My discussion with the two tattoo artists who are participating in this research is presented here, focusing on themes of client management strategies that emerged through the interpretation of the interview transcripts. The peculiarities of the tattoo industry, explored further below, have given rise to strategic practices that are distinct from those used in the other creative practices investigated through this project. The phenomenological approach used here is directly responsible for the discovery of these differences.

TATTOO AS ART

In this paper, and in my wider research, I contend that tattoo is an art form. Indeed, in 'Are Tattoos Art?' [10], Michaud comments "there is little or no reason to assume that a work, because it is a tattoo, shouldn't be considered art".

If we accept that what we understand as 'art', and particularly 'fine art', is in fact linked only by its ideological function, rather than by something inherent in the creative practice (see [11] for a comprehensive discussion of this idea), then we can clearly include tattoo within any defining structure of art. The tattooing community or industry has developed such that those features that once excluded the art form from the formal art world on the basis of class, taste and value - clearly ideological constructs - are now a defining features of what makes tattoos art, at least in those countries where tattooing has become acceptable for the affluent middle classes. Tattooing and tattoo collection has become an expression of individualism and taste in the same way that the creation and collection of the so-called 'fine art' paintings were an expression of individualism and taste in the 18th Century. Atkinson writes "The tattooed body both marks long-term 'civilized' cultural preferences to alter the flesh as part of 'doing' social identity, and signifies more recent social influence on body modification preferences arising from corporeal commodification, risk processes and technological innovation" [1].

The differences that exist between the way the art form is practised, such as practical considerations of the physical spaces in which tattoos are created, the canvas on which they are placed, and the ways in which they are displayed, are part of what makes tattooing such an interesting art form. The dependence of the artist on the end purchaser for the creation of the work - the canvas and the client being one and the same - means that the relationship between client and artist is intimately connected: the artist is inking their work directly onto the skin of the client.

Early commercial tattooing was based on 'flash' books and posters. These collections of drawings and photos, including designs for roses, skulls, daggers, butterflies, pin-up girls, naval iconography, tribal designs, Chinese characters and love hearts, were displayed in the tattoo studios. Customers browsed through, selecting the image they wanted, and then directed the tattooist to apply the design in a particular space on their skin. In contrast, today most tattoo artists draw each tattoo in a co-creative process with the client, what is called 'custom' tattooing [1][12][13]. The emergence of custom tattooing as the standard within most studios has made it easier for tattoo to be considered art. Although these ostensibly unique designs may be variations on a theme, the same can be said of many other types of artistic practice, and should not stop us from accepting each piece as a valid work of art.

If we accept that (at least some) tattoos are art, then it is a logical extrapolation that (at least some) tattooers are artists, for art can only be made by artists: the modern understanding of art, developed since the 18th century, requires that art is an intentional practice [11][14]². However, the structure of tattooing is such that the artist is subsumed to a large extent within the industry. Structured around an informal apprenticeship-mastery system, discussed further in the next section, tattoo artists usually operate out of a fixed location or studio and with fixed hourly rates. The production of the actual art work occurs only with the co-presence of the client, who it could be argued cannot see, feel or experience the final product until well after it has been affixed to their skin, after the swelling has gone down and the scabs have healed. However, the client is intimately involved in the creation of the work, and sees, feels and experiences the creative process in a way not often replicated in other forms of creative practice. In addition, the work will continue to change, stretch, age, fade and distort with the client. It requires a tremendous leap of faith on both sides to enter into this agreement. For the artist to continue to enjoy their work, to continue to value the process and extend themselves creatively, they must find a way to ensure their creative preferences and those of their clients are synchronised. Rubin describes this relationship for tattoo artists who work in custom tattooing:

Eschewing conventionalised designs, artists well versed in the history and ethnography of tattoo, technically skilled and conceptually innovative, increasingly mediate processes of deep introspection for their clients. Conversely, the uniquely personalized visual results of these highly individualized explorations have been characterized as comprising the hallmarks of a 'new tribalism', a bond of aesthetic elitism which cuts across considerations of class, sex, and age. [12]

² This does not mean that all those who create tattoos are artists, nor that every tattoo is an art work - we do not consider house painters as artists, despite their use of the same essential tools as the painter of portraits, landscapes, or abstracts [15]

Negotiating the tattoo design and creation processes drives the client management strategies that are discussed below.

CASE STUDY

The two tattoo artists, Benjamin Laukis and Amanda Cain³, who are involved in this research project are currently based in Melbourne, Australia, and were approached as a result of their participation in the April 2012 Rites of Passage Tattoo Convention and Arts Festival [16].

Benjamin was trained in the Sunshine Coast before moving to Melbourne mid-2012, and is a specialist in realist tattooing - portraits and pictorial work that have depth and perspective. An avid convention attendee, Benjamin has won (and continues to win) a large number of awards and trophies for his work at these events, most recently best small and best medium colour tattoo at the 2012 Melbourne Tattoo and Body Art Expo, and best portrait at the 2012 UK Tattoo Jam. Benjamin and I spoke about his experiences as a tattoo artist in an interview conducted in a Melbourne inner city cafe in July 2012, shortly after his relocation to the city and prior to him beginning work in his new studio.

Amanda is a specialist in what is called the neo-traditional tattoo style. Her work tends to be illustrative and colourful, drawing on traditional tattoo iconography. Amanda met me in her studio between appointments, and talked openly about the frustrations and successes she's encountered thus far in her career. She also explored her desire to engage with other art forms, and her frustrations balancing her work life with her other artistic pursuits. It is from Amanda that the title of this paper came, saying 'It can be quite difficult to have your creativity on tap, and be expected to produce and get it right, and you'll be happy with it, the client's happy with it'.

Learning to tattoo is generally achieved through an apprenticeship, in a studio with an experienced tattoo artist. Without a standardised qualification system, the length, style and process that each apprentice goes through differs within each studio, and with each tattoo artist who is training the apprentice [17]. However, a basic structure can be seen. Apprenticeships generally last around 4 years, and for at least the first year the apprentice is what Amanda describes simply as the 'shop bitch'. The newcomers draw, clean, make up and break down equipment, observe, and clean some more.

For Benjamin, the tattoo apprenticeship was his second - prior to entering tattoo, he completed a formal sheet metal apprenticeship - and his tattooing apprenticeship lasted 'just over four years' before he moved on. He'd been invited to join the studio as an apprentice after the owner, who was also his tattooist, saw Benjamin's drawings - it was not a career he sought out, but suited him nevertheless. As a graffiti artist, he was already working within visual art, and

tattoo allowed him to make this a paying career. He began tattooing people around nine months into the apprenticeship, starting on his boss then moving to volunteers. Our discussion coincided with Benjamin's move from the Gold Coast to Melbourne, a shift he saw as making it possible to work with a wider variety of people and techniques, as he feels that the industry is more developed in Melbourne.

Amanda, having already begun and abandoned several creative careers, started a tattooing apprenticeship in what she describes as a 'very ... *suburban* shop' - suburban here is descriptive of lower socio-economic clientele, and artists who work primarily in flash, rather than custom - after responding to a job advertisement that her mother found in the newspaper. However, despite being encouraged to tattoo on customers within six months of starting the apprenticeship, Amanda left her position before the first year was out, as 'I knew what I was learning wasn't right'. Her first tattoo, on a shop regular, was one where 'there wasn't much damage I could have done', recolouring a tribal style tattoo. When her second client, a motorcycle club member, passed out three times while getting an arm band tattoo, she realised she had no idea if that was a regular response to being tattooed. She comments 'whilst I was really excited about being a tattooer, I knew I wasn't learning the right information so my conscience got a hold of me, and I got the hell out of there'. After around four years of waiting for the right apprenticeship opportunity to come up, Amanda was employed by a studio in St Kilda, Melbourne. Having received from the second apprenticeship the training she didn't feel she got in her first, she was confident enough to travel, further developing her skills and techniques working 'in a bunch of shops overseas', before settling in Sydney.

Although Amanda and Benjamin had different pathways into their careers as tattoo artists, their overarching experiences show similar strategies for client management which allow them to satisfy both their own creative preferences and their client expectations. These strategies have been developed to help balance the inherent contradiction between their role as a creative artist, and as a creative worker commissioned to create a specific visual outcome.

CLIENT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Within tattoo art, there is an inherent contradiction between the artist as a skilled professional who creates unique pieces of art, and the artist as a trades-person, there simply to fulfil a commissioned artwork. This contradiction generates a lot of the frustration with clients. On the one hand, artists are expected to be 'creative on demand', to come up with unique designs and to have a signature style. This style is, after all, what attracts clients to that particular artist in the first place. On the other hand, artists are also expected to have a level of skill in all styles, to complete work on demand, and to meet client expectations despite pressures of time and working under difficult conditions. London tattoo artist Alex Binney

³ Participants' real names are used with their permission and in line with the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee approval granted to the research project.

explains that in his view "Real tattooing cannot be about the tattooer - it's about them in part but it has to be about the client. Otherwise it is self-indulgent crap and a lot of tattooing is like that... Tattooing is about something broader than the individual tattooist" [18].

One way of trying to mitigate this experience of contradiction is to create a comprehensive portfolio of imagery indicating the types of work that an artist does. Amanda comments that 'people are really visual. If they don't see it, they can't imagine it, and if they haven't seen you do it, then they generally don't ask you to do it'. Therefore, she says 'I deliberately put out what I want to get back', because she has noticed that 'people seem to be attracted to whatever you put out. So whatever I put out online I seem to get more and more requests for. So I get a lady wearing an animal hat, and the week later all of the sudden three other people want it'. By creating a digital portfolio that focuses on images of the styles of work that she currently enjoys doing, she helps to direct potential customers towards a style and specialisation from which she will get creative satisfaction. Benjamin does the same thing, saying 'I try and focus on photographing pieces that help my portfolio, as far as going the way of trying to specialise in particular styles'. Both carefully select images for their online portfolios - either on their shop websites, or on their own social media platforms - to reflect their preferred style. Benjamin comments that he still photographs 'some of the illustrative side' but that 'I try and focus on photographing pieces that will help my portfolio, as far as going the way of trying to specialise in particular styles'.

Through careful selection of images to put in their portfolios, both Amanda and Benjamin are able to create not only an understanding of their specialisation with clients, but also direct people to request particular types or visual themes for their tattoos. This process of selection and display of images in online portfolios is an example of Goffman's impression management, where the 'front stage' [19] is carefully set to encourage a specific interpretations by the audience.

This stylistic specialisation works to balance the need for creative control with the expectations of outcomes that come from the client. One of the elements of the tattoo artist's experience is being treated as a trades-person rather than an artist by clients. Amanda calls this being 'the vessel', where the tattooer is someone who 'just puts the artwork on'. Although some clients seem more aware of the tattooers role as an artist, Amanda describes the more common situation, where the client seems to be saying 'I'm paying you to do it, do it... You haven't eaten, you haven't gone to the toilet, I don't care, get it done'. This understanding of tattoo-as-trade is supported by the structure of the tattoo industry as a whole. In addition to the system of apprenticing under a master, the whole structure of the industry is essentially commission based. Amanda summarizes this: 'You give me a quote, I'm giving you money, and you'll get the job done. You told me it would be

two hours, it will be two hours. You know? ... There seems to be no room for variables.' Although commission structures work in similar ways in other types of creative practice, working tattoo artists cannot operate without them, unless the artist only tattoos him/herself. In all other tattooing situations, the primary audience for the work, the purchaser, the tattooed, is intimately involved in the process. A tattoo artist cannot practice purely for their own satisfaction. It is this experience of the absolute necessity of balancing personal creative satisfaction with the expectations - both creative and practical - of the client that separates tattoo artists from other creative practitioners.

The importance of this distinction can be seen when comparing Amanda and Ben's experiences as tattoo artists as a part of this collaborative process, with the myth of the artist as a hero which developed in the 18th Century out of Romanticism and the Enlightenment in Europe [20][21]. The artist as described in the myth is transgressive, bohemian, sensitive, and inspired [22], working in fits and starts. Often unrecognised in their own time, the mythical artist genius struggles on in solitude despite setbacks and poverty. Because of the systems of apprenticeship, trade conventions, and awards, when matched with an hourly rate and a fixed physical location (the tattoo studio), tattoo artists seem far removed from this myth of the artist as hero. However, despite the apparent differences in working conditions from traditional fine art forms, the types of work created are what distinguish the tattooer as an artist.

Both Benjamin and Amanda have a particular style in which they prefer to work. Although most tattoo apprentices are taught to be proficient in a range of styles (just as art schools will teach their students a diversity of practice), most tattoo artists will end up working and being known for a particular type or style of work. For Benjamin, this is 'realist, portrait stuff'. The challenge of this style is something that Benjamin thrives on, saying that 'portrait is sort of like the hardest thing to do... I just like rendering 3D shapes rather than just flat'. He mentions that he does do some 'illustrative' and 'comic book inspired stuff' as well as his specialist style. Similarly, although Amanda's work tends more towards neo-traditional pictorial tattoo style, she does have a second specialisation in script tattooing. What ties these two artists together, despite their very different aesthetic styles, is their determination to specialise. However, this is by no means universally successful, with Ben and Amanda saying they're contacted 'all the time' to do work outside of the styles they promote through their digital portfolios. Although these two artists are trained and experienced in a range of styles, and are skilled enough to do a good job in most types of work, they use stylistic preferences to maintain their own interest and satisfaction in the artwork they create.

The idea of tattoo artists driving trends is certainly not new within the industry. In the past, this would be done through 'flash' folders, collections of drawings from which a client would choose their tattoo. Amanda has seen the

change from largely flash based tattooing to custom tattoos in the time she has worked in the industry, and thinks that it's a matter of client education and a change in expectations around the tattoo artist's role that means that most people now want an original design. 'I think when I first started tattooing people were really set on one thing. They'd been into a shop, they'd looked at all the flash. That was the one they wanted. You could not talk them out of it, right down to the colours being exactly the same as the ones on the wall. ... They had no imagination, and because that was the way that a lot of shops were run, people didn't really grasp the concept of having something completely original'.

Both Benjamin and Amanda concentrate on producing large scale, custom tattoos. The consultation process with the client is another balancing act, where the artist tries to satisfy both the clients expectations for the work they want to see, and their own stylistic preferences. Benjamin described the process of convincing a recent client to go from a single character to a full sleeve as 'pretty easy'. Similarly, Amanda takes suggestions from client then redraws them, 'embellished a bit so it's a one off design'. She describes the experience of being a custom tattoo artist as being like 'mind-readers and psychologists', requiring her to 'try and extract as much information from them as I can before I go away and say "yes, I'm happy to take your deposit and then draw something for you"'.

CONCLUSION

Although having a tattoo is becoming increasingly acceptable (and common) in many places around the world, the stigma associated with permanently marking the body persists as a legacy of what Atkinson describes as "Judeo-Christian understandings of the body as a sacred 'home', and legitimate Western-scientific theories about tattoo enthusiasm prevalent since the turn of the 19th century" [1]. Therefore, the acceptance of tattoo as an art form, and tattooists as artists, is an ongoing process. The client management strategies used by Amanda and Benjamin work to create a balance between the expectation of tattoo artists to provide a commercial service, and their own desires to create strong, distinctive art work that extends their skills and gives them creative satisfaction. This balancing act is more pronounced than in other types of creative practice as each purchaser is intimately involved with the creation and display of the work. After all, few people are willing to allow an artist complete creative control over their canvas of skin.

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