BODY ART

ARTS FOR HEALTH

Series Editor: Paul Crawford, Professor of Health Humanities, University of Nottingham, UK

The *Arts for Health* series offers a ground-breaking set of books that guide the general public, carers and healthcare providers on how different arts can help people to stay healthy or improve their health and wellbeing.

Bringing together new information and resources underpinning the health humanities (that link health and social care disciplines with the arts and humanities), the books demonstrate the ways in which the arts offer people worldwide a kind of shadow health service – a non-clinical way to maintain or improve our health and wellbeing. The books are aimed at general readers along with interested arts practitioners seeking to explore the health benefits of their work, health and social care providers and clinicians wishing to learn about the application of the arts for health, educators in arts, health and social care and organisations, carers and individuals engaged in public health or generating healthier environments. These easy-to-read, engaging short books help readers to understand the evidence about the value of arts for health and offer guidelines, case studies and resources to make use of these non-clinical routes to a better life.

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BODY ART

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Virginia Kuulei Berndt dedicates this book to Daniel, Mom, Caroline, and Curtis. Thank you for always encouraging and inspiring me.

Brown would like to dedicate this volume to Xylia – an inspiration, support, source of gentle encouragement and constant companion on life's journey these past eighteen years. Oh, and she's the proud owner of some wicked tattoos too!

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Brian Brown is Professor of Health Communication in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at De Montfort University. His academic interests range across health care, philosophy, educational studies, gender studies and the health humanities. His recent projects include initiatives to use the arts to alleviate suffering and enable resilience in the face of mental health problems in both the UK and India. The core of his work has focused on the interpretation of human experience across a variety of different disciplines and settings including health and social care, education, philosophy and the arts in health, exploring how these may be understood with a view to improving practice and with regard to theoretical development in the social sciences. In particular, this concerns notions of governmentality and habitus from Foucauldian and Bourdieusian sociology, and how everyday experience reveals how systems of knowledge operate in society. He has also dabbled in community arts and been part of a group who took over derelict buildings and turned them into art galleries. Recently he has been using his spare time to plant trees in a rewilding project and hopes to live long enough to witness the forest canopy closing over his head.

Virginia Kuulei Berndt is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Texas A&M International University in the USA. Much of Virginia's research and teaching centres on reproductive health as it relates to disasters, the environment, the body and embodiment, provider-patient interactions, and sociological theory. Virginia has presented this research in the USA, Sweden, and Canada and has published in academic journals including *Contraception, Culture,* *Health & Sexuality*, *Health*, *International Sociology*, and more. In her spare time, she enjoys embroidery, browsing and obtaining tattoos, drinking coffee, and spending time with her loved ones, especially her spouse and two cats.

FOREWORD: CREATIVE PUBLIC HEALTH

The *Arts for Health* series aims to provide key information on how different arts and humanities practices can support, or even transform, health and wellbeing. Each book introduces a particular creative activity or resource and outlines its place and value in society, the evidence for its use in advancing health and wellbeing, and cases of how this works. In addition, each book provides useful links and suggestions to readers for following-up on these quick reads. We can think of this series as a kind of shadow health service – encouraging the use of the arts and humanities alongside all the other resources on offer to keep us fit and well.

Creative practices in the arts and humanities offer a fantastic, non-medical, but medically relevant way to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Intuitively, we know just how important creative activities are in maintaining or recovering our best possible lives. For example, imagine that we woke up tomorrow to find that all music, books or films had to be destroyed, learn that singing, dancing or theatre had been outlawed or that galleries, museums and theatres had to close permanently; or, indeed, that every street had posters warning citizens of severe punishment for taking photographs, drawing or writing. How would we feel? What would happen to our bodies and minds? How would we survive? Unfortunately, we have seen this kind of removal of creative activities from human society before and today many people remain terribly restricted in artistic expression and consumption.

I hope that this series adds a practical resource to the public. I hope people buy these little books as gifts for family and friends, or for hard-pressed healthcare professionals, to encourage them to revisit or to consider a creative path to living well. I hope that creative public health makes for a brighter future.

Professor Paul Crawford

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DEFINING THE FIELD: THE MULTIPLE ARTS OF THE BODY

Body art – especially in the form of tattoos and piercings – has enjoyed an explosion of interest in many nations in the last 30 years. It is hard to estimate just how many people have taken up this trend, but some authors suggest that perhaps between 21% and 29% of Americans have a tattoo (Pittman et al., 2022) with younger adults leading the practice. However, with an activity which is growing in popularity like this, estimates quickly become outdated, so any figures quoted are only the roughest of rough guides. We can say with some confidence, however, that in the nations of Europe, North America and the so-called 'Global North' (which, confusingly also includes Australasia) this kind of body art is embraced by a substantial minority of people.

It is usual to start academic texts with definitions, but in this case it's hard to know how wide to cast the definition of body art. In general, people think about tattooing and piercing under this heading, but it could potentially include much more. There is also scarification, where scars are deliberately created for ritual or decorative purposes through branding or cutting of the skin, along with implantation, where implants are inserted under the skin to create textures and contours, to name only a few of the practices which could be thought of as body art. And there's more – could body building or cosmetic surgery be thought of as kinds of body art, too? Long after their heyday in the nineteenth century, it is possible to find people in the contemporary era reducing their waists with corsets. 'Waist-training' and corseting circles are thriving communities, popularised in part by a contemporary renaissance of hourglass shapes being the ideal feminine figure and a revival of interest in retro needlecrafts. Could this be considered a kind of body art? As well as the shape or appearance of the body, there are also its capabilities. We probably wouldn't consider endurance runners to be practising a kind of body art, but if they wanted to be thought of like this, it would be hard to say no, as they train and reshape their bodies, savouring each run as an almost sacred ritual. As well as the relatively enduring kinds of body art like tattooing and piercing, there are a variety of more transient art forms jostling for attention such as body painting and henna decoration. Even with piercings, the holes may readily heal up, and some people deliberately undertake 'play piercings', which are intended to be temporary. There are also a variety of temporary tattoos to stick or transfer on for those who want a short-term decoration. In a similar vein, there is clip on jewellery that resembles the kind used in body piercing.

The areas of the body involved and the kinds of practice are changing too. On first inquiring about a tongue piercing in 1995, one of us (BB) was told that it was a well-nigh impossible and fraught with danger, and that no one managed to keep them in long before being overcome with infection. Receiving one involved a trip to a major city several hours away. Yet, nowadays these are fairly common piercings. It is a good idea to advise potential clients of the possible side effects of any body art, of course, but the sheer wall of impossibility which was thought to exist in the 1990s has now been overcome, and the procedure is much more accessible. In a similar way, in the 1990s, tattooists were reluctant to tattoo conspicuous areas like the hands and the face, yet in the 2020s, these kinds of tattoos are becoming more commonplace, and not just amongst entertainers and social media personalities either. We shall turn to the question of changing fashions and patterns of social acceptability later in considering the path of the decorated individual through the vicissitudes of family life, working life and interactions with the wider society. The point here is that everything is in a state of change, and it is therefore difficult to say anything definite about either body art or the very capabilities of the body itself.

We still have not quite answered the question of what body art involves. Turning to other writers who have addressed the question of body art, we find that they have grappled with the issue of what exactly it is they're talking about in different ways. Body art might include modifications that are non-medical and voluntary (Keagy, 2015), whereas some limit the scope to piercings and tattoos (Martin & Cairns, 2015), or focus entirely on piercings (Swami et al., 2012). Others include a greater variety of body projects that allow individuals to be and display their true selves: life-changing and life-saving measures including medically mediated procedures like gender affirmation (Aguayo-Romero et al., 2015), weight loss or gain and even cosmetic surgery (Karupiah, 2013). These procedures help to 'achieve permanent alterations of the human body' (Stirn et al., 2011, p. 359). Some authors focus on people with more unusual, extensive or conspicuous modifications (Atkinson & Young, 2001; Klesse, 1999). David Lane (2017), in a wide-ranging review of the different ways in which body art and body modification has been defined and studied, offers four features that run through most of the activities that are subsumed under this heading. First, body art modifications are performed for aesthetic reasons, rather than, for example, medical benefits. Second, they alter the organic form of the body for a period of time. Third, they are intended for at least one person – including the wearer – to see. Fourth, they are considered to be part of the cultural sphere of body modification (Lane, 2017, p. 3). This fourth point can be rather elastic – body modifications can be whatever body modifiers consider them to be. So, we get only a little closer to any precision! However, the discussion so far might give some idea of the activities that can be called 'body art' or 'body modification'.

Following on from this, it would seem that the opportunities for engagement with body decoration as a spectator appear to be rather extensive. It is widely depicted in a variety of forms of media. There are a great many social media accounts whose owners show off their body art collections, and it forms an important part of the legacy media too, providing a subject for documentary and magazine programme makers, or merely providing a colourful backdrop via characters' piercings and tattoos. Sometimes they are a specific focus of the story – films with titles like 'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo' give some hint as to the contents! On other occasions, the decoration is more incidental to the plot yet lends a more exotic and visually arresting feel to the *mise-en-scene*. Once upon a time, perhaps less than 30 years ago, seeing body art in the media needed a trip to the shops to get one of a handful of tattoo magazines, which in the United Kingdom at least, were not widely stocked. Yet, now it appears to be everywhere and is consumed ceaselessly, through scrolling and 'binging' television shows like *Best Ink, Ink Master, Tattoo Redo, Miami Ink, LA Ink* and more.

Before we go any further, to head off another source of confusion that we might encounter when reading around the subject, it is worth bearing in mind that the term, 'body art', has not always been used to denote such things as tattoos, piercings and allied manipulations of the body. From around 1960 to the late 1980s, the term referred to works of art which incorporated the 'artist's body … rather than the more conventional wood, stone or paint on canvas' (Atkins, 1991, p. 73). This might include, for example, the work of Yves Klein who had his naked female assistants smear blue paint on canvases with their bodies. This kind of activity was considered very *avante garde* in the late 1950s. Applying the term body art to tattoos and piercings was consolidated by the UK-based magazine, *Body Art*, which ran from 1988 to 1997. One of us (BB) actually received a phone call from one of the editors in 1997 – BB's initial pleasure at being contacted was tinged with sadness because the purpose of the call was to tell him that they would not be printing the magazine any longer and ask him if he wanted his subscription money back. Nevertheless, there was much more coverage to come in the future, from magazines to material in mainstream popular media, to the proliferation of ideas, images and stories on the internet, as the practices gained in popularity and became even more popular as a way of decorating and garnering interest on stage, screen and social media.

In the United States, the contemporary era of body art and body modification was ushered in by such pioneers as Richard Simonton (better known by his pen name, Doug Malloy), Jim Ward, proprietor of the Gauntlet piercing shop and Roland Loomis (who performed under his stage name, Fakir Musafar). We will return to these early luminaries later as they were important in shaping the styles, subcultures and stories around body art in North America.

That's a little recent history behind the current movement. There are many examples which take the history of body modification much further back, of course. One of these is the so-called 'ice man', Otzi, a Bronze Age man whose remains were discovered in the Italian Alps in 1991. Having been embedded in the snow for thousands of years, the body was remarkably well preserved and has been the source of many clues about life 5,300 years ago when the unfortunate traveller is believed to have succumbed to the cold weather or perhaps to an arrow wound in his shoulder. Amongst the features of interest was the fact that he was sporting a great many tattoos when he died. Many of these took the form of dotted lines, which appeared to have been made by piercing the skin and then applying charcoal. To complement his tattoos, Otzi also appeared to have stretched ear piercings, perhaps around 7–11mm across (Samadelli et al., 2015). As archaeologists and historians have turned their attention to the antecedents of contemporary body art, many other examples have come to light. Earrings requiring pierced ears have been found as grave goods in the ancient city of Ur, from around 4,500 years ago (Hesse, 2007). Historical references to nose piercing have been found in the Vedas before becoming more popular in India in the sixteenth century (De Mello, 2007), and in the Old Testament Bible where Abraham's servant gives Rebecca a nose ring.

Like many kinds of history, of course, there is a plethora of stories, some of which are hard to validate. Many of these can be traced to the long out-of-print pamphlet by Doug Malloy, *Body & Genital Piercing in Brief*. Here, we can find a variety of anecdotes that persist into the present day, such as the story that Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert had the eponymous piercing in his urethra to secure his manhood so it would not be visible through his trousers. Other stories that seem to be Doug Malloy-isms include the idea that Roman soldiers had nipple piercings so as to secure their cloaks, or that navel piercings were common in ancient Egypt. There is little concrete evidence to support many of these ideas.

Moreover, it would not usually be considered a good idea nowadays to use intimate piercings as loadbearing attachment points (save for brief, short-term intimate play, but that, as they say, is a story for another day). What is interesting here is not so much the literal truth of the histories which have been elaborated, but rather the fact that people thought they needed them in the first place. There was something very attractive about the idea that body art was part of a venerable historical tradition, so the histories were added, almost as an artificial patina. As Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have described, this isn't unique to body art. The identities of nation states, artistic traditions and folktales which are re-told for tourists are all examples of this creativity where history and tradition are concerned. The idea of Wales as a country with a tradition of music and literature stretching back millennia or Scotland as being about tartan, kilts and Robbie Burns's poetry are examples of this elaboration and embellishment of supposed traditions by folklorists and nationalists in the nineteenth century. The idea of an illustrious history is an attractive one in many fields of human endeavour, even if it eventually turns out to be a modern invention.

In fairness to Malloy and his history making, back in the 1970s, there was little to go on. In the present, with libraries of information available via the internet, it is hard to imagine the relatively restricted media environment of the 1970s and 1980s. With a mere handful of TV channels, a similar number of newspapers and histories of body art being far beyond the reach of small provincial public libraries, there was little hope of validating such stories. Conversely, it was just as hard to refute them, so once seeded into the cultural fabric, there were no natural predators for these tales as they passed from person to person by word of mouth and photocopied fanzines. Unimpeded by the present-day armies of so-called 'fact checkers' and 'disinformation correspondents' these stories flourished. Malloy's talent lay as a storyteller rather than as an empirically meticulous historian.

Another long-standing stalwart of the body modification scene in the United States, Elayne Angel (formerly Elayne Binnie) has produced a book called the *Piercing Bible* (Angel, 2009; Angel & Saunders, 2021) which contains not only practical information about technique, feasibility and safety, but also a variety of historical information which is rather better regarded than Doug Malloy's initial efforts at providing a history for the field. However, the overall theme remains significant – the need for a sense of history. Whether it can be backed up by the documentary or archaeological record is somewhat debatable, but people love these kinds of histories, both creating them and retelling the tales as if they were privy to some sort of hidden knowledge.

Despite this growth in popularity, the meanings of these practices grouped under the broad heading of body art have yet to be fully established. This book is part of a series in the health humanities, so part of our task is to consider body art as a creative and artistic endeavour and explore its relationship to health and well-being. This highlights another thorny area because body art has not always been well regarded by professionals and decision makers, so making an argument for its benefits can be an uphill struggle. The response to the phenomenon on the part of many health professionals and researchers has often been negative, and body art has historically been identified as a risk factor for problems ranging from mental ill health to offending behaviour. The enduring and painful quality of many body modification practices, allied to social prejudices against them, have made a variety of professional groups including psychiatrists and other doctors, psychologists and lawyers to take visible body modifications amongst their clients as a sign of mental ill health, deviance, antisocial behaviour or that they are criminally inclined (Stirn & Hinz, 2008).

Looking at the academic literature, it is also possible to detect other strands of negativity. Often, where health professionals consider body art, the overarching theme is one of risk, injury and illness. The tales of infected piercings and allergic reactions to tattoo pigments which have proliferated in the healthcare literature make it seem as if it is hard to survive the process without a period of hospitalisation. Yet, everyday experience tells a somewhat less lurid story. For example, there are a whole variety of outdoor activities, from playing Rugby, to horse-riding, gardening and mountain climbing, which confer an element of risk and the likelihood of minor (or sometimes major) injury. Yet, these risks are considered acceptable and legitimate both by the people doing the activities and the health professionals who are occasionally called upon to treat them. The vast majority of the time these activities, whilst sometimes physically demanding and even briefly painful, are widely practised and enjoyed. The same can be said of body art. Whilst much is made of the possibility of adverse outcomes by health professionals and researchers, the everyday experience, at least as far as health is concerned, is much more mundane. The intervention may hurt briefly and remain tender for a whilst but the aftermath is usually easy to accommodate and work around. Whilst tales of disaster and hospitalisation are often re-told amongst young adults, often with some enjoyment, these events are mercifully rare.

In this chapter, we have attempted to define, and explore how others have defined body art. We have noted that this is not easy, as it may encompass such a variety of practices. We have begun to hint at how academic researchers and healthcare practitioners have looked at this field in the past, in ways which have not always been encouraging. In many countries, tattooing and piercing are becoming increasingly widely practised, yet a good deal of academic literature is still apt to treat these practices as if they were a risk factor for some sort of personal pathology or that the person concerned is likely to be an offender or otherwise marginalised. This situation is changing – healthcare practitioners themselves are increasingly likely to sport tattoos, usually in places that can easily be covered up at work – so part of our rationale for writing this book is to offer a timely re-evaluation of the field and an acknowledgement of the role of body modification practices as a means of enhancing wellbeing, managing mood and facilitating social connectedness within friendship groups, subcultures and, nowadays, within electronically mediated communities.

Later in this book, we will continue the argument for the potential benefits of body art and for its inclusion within the field of the health humanities, but let us conclude this chapter with one further observation. Despite the negative mood around people with body art which has been cultivated by health professionals and other social commentators, it appears from research that people with body modifications may express some virtues and prosocial behaviour at greater rates than those whose bodies remain unchanged. They are more likely to perform voluntary work, vote,