

## Occupy your Body: Activating 21st-Century Tattoo Culture

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**Abstract:** *To consider body modification, in this case tattooing, in the 21st century, opens new paths of inquiry about body and identity. In the context of *Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU*, a long-term, multi-disciplinary creative and research collaboration, this paper will consider several questions about its scholarly import. First, the phenomenon of the widespread, mainstream popularity of tattoo is occurring at the precise moment when our lives are becoming more virtual. What is the significance of this profoundly bodily performance of self in a world where bodies are being left behind for avatars? If tattooing offers a positive value to individual subjectivity, can this significant embodiment of self offer an ethical model for that affirms our lived experience, on an increasingly endangered planet? Analyses from art history, sociology, anthropology, and pragmatist philosophy offer tattoo culture as a touchstone for 21st-century body politics.*

**Keywords:** *art, body, bodying, culture, embodiment, humanities, occupy, tattoo, tattoos.*

In the course of a years-long creative and research collaboration called *Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU*, hundreds of tattoos have been photographed and stories have been gathered and interpreted in numerous art forms, both for their artful content, and to explore the promising implications of reconnecting body and mind, ink and story, through the creative process. The focus of this essay is to describe and define the ways in which tattoos and the stories associated with them offer fruitful ground for experiences of embodied subjectivity, in the virtual age. I will argue for the merits of such bodily commitment. Tattoos don't merely "mean" something. Rather, they "do" things.

If a person inscribes part of their memoir—picture, text, or symbol—permanently in their skin, it is formative of their identity. What then is the significance of the recent expansion of this particularly embodied form? A 2016 Harris Poll estimated that "about three in ten Americans (29%) have at least one tattoo, up from roughly two in ten (21%) just four years ago. What's more, few inked Americans stop at one; among those with any tattoos, seven in ten (69%) have two or more."<sup>1</sup> The astonishing rise to mainstream popularity—hardly a sitcom or talk show today fails to make a few tattoo references—indicates a distinctive zeitgeist, or, to borrow Susan Bordo's apt phrase, a "crystallization of culture" that invites a closer look.<sup>2</sup> Rather than simply a trend or fad, the permanence of tattoo lends itself to more sustained study as aspects of the practice weave through other areas of interest in the present age.

Using John Dewey's concept of art as experience rather than discrete object as a baseline, and integrating scholarship that undergirds a pragmatist proposal that such experience-based interactivity promotes a social good, I argue that this potential resides in the connecting tissue of

1 Larry Shannon-Missal, "Tattoo Takeover: Three in Ten Americans Have Tattoos, and Most Don't Stop at Just One." *The Harris Poll* (Feb. 10, 2016.) [http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Tattoo\\_Takeover.html](http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Tattoo_Takeover.html) Accessed March 8, 2017.

2 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 139.

body and mind. When set in motion through ink and story, the reanimated energies of original motivation, creative presentation, and social interaction are where art resides, and does its work in the world. With tattoo as an exemplary (but not the only possible) case study, this essay situates the above specifically within the political ramifications of such a project in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Is actively bodying a self in pictorial, textual and symbolic permanence of specific relevance in the virtual age?

If hypothetically we determine that today's tattoo phenomenon is period specific in its significance, then can we argue that it can be a positive phenomenon? Can embodiment be empowering in the age of avatars? And can the active quality of stories and storytelling activate the aspirations embedded in tattoos, connecting body and mind toward a more authentic rather than contingent subjectivity?<sup>3</sup>

What then is the political dimension of such bodying of self, and of society? The use of the term Occupy is provocative and strategic. "Occupy Your Body" marshals the powerful image of Zuccotti Park and other sites around the U.S. and the world, where the virtual, in the form of social media, produced the corporeal, thousands of peaceful protestors, refusing to give ground. If their name, Occupy Wall Street, conjured images of military occupations, their actions produced something quite different. Once occupied, their means of communication was physical, in the form of the "human megaphone." The assertion of human presence in the political realm, literally the "body politic" changed the conversation, inserting the phrase "We are the 99%" into the lexicon, and forcing wealth and income inequality into the public dialogue, where it remains. As Rebecca Solnit observed on the one-year anniversary: "Wily Occupy brought a Trojan horse loaded with truth to the citadel of Wall Street. Even the bronze bull couldn't face that down."<sup>4</sup>

Thus from the theoretical we move to the practical. Admittedly, asserting a positive value to an embodied existence, a committed physical presence, in an increasingly virtual world places a heavy onus on the kinds of meanings the body can carry, so marked is it by regimes of power. Deploying methods from various disciplines, including art history, feminist theory, narrative studies, philosophy and sociology, this argument proposes the frame of "tattoo culture" and the metaphor/agent of occupation as a melding of mind and body, in order to turn those meanings into a confrontation with power, in the context of the facing down the global challenges of the twenty-first century.

Ask any person to tell you about their tattoo (s) and you will get a story. Such stories are not uncommon, and when repeated in response to the vaguely hostile queries the tattooed often experience, can seem boilerplate; what Louise Woodstock calls dismissively "therapeutic narratives."<sup>5</sup> However, approaching with a genuine sense of curiosity will yield a remarkable range of experiences, interpretations, and opinions. The "tattoo culture" in the title of this article refers to ways my collaborators and I developed the stories we collected into other visual and performing arts (figure 1).<sup>6</sup> The intricate connection between ink and story can be articulated through art, which can move audiences beyond shallow preconceptions, to more deeply appreciate the multiplicity of tattoo cultures.

3 Arthur F. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narrative* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

4 Rebecca Solnit, "Occupy Your Victories," *Guernica* (September 17, 2012): <http://www.guernicamag.com/daily/rebecca-solnit-occupy-your-victories/> Accessed May 24, 2017.

5 Louise Woodstock, "Tattoo Therapy: Storying the Self on Reality TV in Neoliberal Times." *Journal of Popular Culture* online early view, 2011: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00814.x/abstract>.

6 For details of the various phases of this project and initial analysis see Leader, Karen. "Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at a South Florida University." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 14.4 (March, 2015): 426-446. DOI: 10.1177/1474022215575162. More about the project can be found at [storiesontheskin.org](http://storiesontheskin.org), and [Facebook.com/storiesontheskinatfau](https://www.facebook.com/storiesontheskinatfau).



Figure 1: Alex Catalano, “Phoenix-Toranika Washington” from *Skin Full of Stories*, choreography by Clarence Brooks and dancers, 2014. The dancer expresses abstractly student Jesse’s story of a phoenix tattoo, a symbolic rebirth from the crippling self-destruction of addiction. (Reproduced with the artist’s permission)

## Surface and depth

The interpretive anchor for this project has been the body. The skin is not a canvas to be framed and hung on a wall. And the story is not found in a journal or book. Tattoos are living, breathing, embodied autobiographies, ink and story acquired through considerable pain and expense. When someone tells you about their tattoo, they are not describing something that happened to them, but something that is them. Interpretation considers the pain, the permanence, and the ongoing influence of the ink.

From the beginning of human existence, in candlelit caves or nomadic caravans, tattoos have been a living art, and a lived art form. They are part of elaborate ceremonies, they carry profound aesthetic, religious, and socio-political meanings. And they are often performed, meaning that they are hidden or revealed as part of a strategy of self-presentation. In addition, their interpretations change not only with the circumstances of the bodies that wear them but also with/in the societies that read them. Of course tattoos are a form of creative expression, but they are also keepers of memory, celebrations and commemorations, affirmations and decorations. They are, in short, complex cultural interventions.

Asking a tattooed person about their ink can be a fraught interchange, and people have relayed extraordinary examples of rudeness. Instead, starting from a position of curiosity and interest, and wanting to draw out the complexities, a dialogical model emphasizes the importance of telling but also of listening. This forecloses the unsatisfying “defensive mode” and turns the narratives away from narcissistic self-storying. It is here that the emphasis on what tattoos “do” rather than “mean” or “diagnose” becomes most fruitful. “Tattoo culture” insists that the story is for the listener as much as for the teller.

Mary Kosut posits an embodied storytelling (after Arthur Frank), made significant

specifically through social interactions. The tattooed body is, Kosut argues: “a conceptual latchkey— a tool that may enable researchers to begin to unlock the complicated relationship between the body, self-identity and society.”<sup>7</sup> This approach takes tattoo as an opportunity for discovery and understanding of humanity in general, rather than as something in itself to be investigated in order to be diagnosed.

Arthur Frank has focused in his most recent book on stories as “companions” or agents that offer possible outcomes. In an interview he explains: “Stories teach us what sort of consequences follow from what sort of action; that’s their narrative logic. We then perceive moments in our own lives as fitting that narrative logic, and we act as if in the story.”<sup>8</sup> In *Letting Stories Breathe*, Frank offers from the beginning, in the title, that there is a bodily component: “Stories are material-semiotic in their double embodiment.” (Frank, 44) Referencing Donna Haraway, Frank continues: “there is no existing as a human outside a companionship with stories that are semiotic in their being and material in the effects they bring about. The capacity of stories is to allow us humans to be” (Frank, 44, the Haraway cite is “How Like a Leaf”). Tattoos are often (though not always) a literal embodiment of a story, a partnership between mind and body.

Paul Sweetman argues depth over surface: “In this sense, the modified body produces itself. A pair of jeans, or a new pair of training shoes, can be consumed and displayed as ‘pure sign,’ in ignorance of the conditions under which the material product was fabricated. Tattoos and piercings, in contrast, *demand* one’s presence as producer, consumer and living frame for the corporeal artefact thus acquired.”<sup>9</sup> Sweetman’s argument is against fashion, trend or commodity, but also emphasizes the active body politics in “an attempt to lend corporeal solidity to expressions of individuality.” Sweetman is not arguing that tattoo shapes a fixed identity, but that it is a more committed expression of self.

Kosut, Frank and Sweetman provide interpretive threads that tie the permanence, the pain, and the reanimation of the tattoo’s agency, into a pragmatist proposition about the possible consequences of such a model. Identity, life choices, and social interaction, fundamental aspects of humanity, are woven together.

## Embodiment in a Virtual Age

While Plato could dismiss the body as too ephemeral to be real and valuable, today the body seems more stable, durable, and real than the rest of the world we experience. It certainly seems much more familiar and easier to grasp, survey, and control. The media’s unmanageable overload of unintegrated information is a strongly decentering force, turning consciousness into a flux of swirling, disconnected ephemeral elements.<sup>10</sup>

Returning to the question of the period specificity of the current global expansion of tattooing, questions arise about the distinct physical commitment of the practice of getting tattooed, in an increasingly virtual world. A few years ago, a study of tattoos and public opinion was conducted not through interviews, a survey, or a questionnaire, but using avatars, a simulation model.<sup>11</sup> One

7 Mary Kosut, “Tattoo Narratives: The Intersection of the Body, Self-identity and Society,” *Visual Sociology*. 15.1 (2000): 79.

8 Quoted in Caren Schnur Neile, “Our Stories, Our Companions: A Conversation with Arthur W. Frank,” *Storytelling, Self, Society* 9.2 (Fall 2013): 264.

9 Paul Sweetman, “Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self? Body Modification, Fashion and Identity” *Body and Society* 5.2-3 (1999): 64.

10 Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives For the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 148.

11 S. Wohlrab, B. Fink, P.M. Kappeler, and G. Brewer. “Differences in personality attributions toward tattooed and non-tattooed virtual human characters.” *Journal of Individual Differences* 30 (2009): 1-5.

wonders if the data was more or less reliable than had there been actual flesh and blood, skin and bones, involved. Did the virtual presence, by its disembodiment, remove the very material essence that was at the heart of those opinions to start with? From the loftiest cerebrations of the philosophers from Plato to present, to the jeering taunts of 7<sup>th</sup>-grade mean girls at their early-developing classmates, to the multi-billion dollar diet/exercise/liposuction industries, bodies are under constant scrutiny. And we increasingly love our virtualities: our profile pics and selfies, second lives and emojis.

The phenomenon of the widespread, mainstream popularity of tattoo is occurring at the precise moment when our lived experience is increasingly detached from the physical realm. What is the significance of this distinctly bodily performance of self in a world where bodies are being left behind for avatars? What does a tattoo do in the world?

The stories can be surprising in their complexity, encompassing initial motivations but also accrued values through lived experiences. The telling reanimates these embedded meanings. Tattooing is a way of marking important memories and life events. The passage from child to adult, graduation from college, birth of children, these and many other transitions are commemorated with a practice far more permanent than a photo. Memorial tattoos commemorate a lost loved-one, survival tattoos, for instance on the site of a mastectomy scar reclaim the body from disease; shield tattoos are external reminders of the need to protect one's body and one's subjectivity from external violence (figure 2).



Figure 2: Z. Koppisch, Eddie, Inshallah, 2011. This tattoo represents a pact made between friends, one stateside, one deployed, then re-deployed to Iraq. Eddie explains Inshallah (If Allah Wills it) as inspirational, a tattoo they would both get, in the script the soldier learned while serving, should he return home safely. (Reproduced with the artist's permission)

Anthropologist Susan Benson describes the transit between inside and outside:

Again, what is external is transformed into something internal to the subject; and memory, a critical property of contemporary self-identity, is externalized and fixed upon the skin... And such practices may do more than merely 'remind' or 'reinforce'; they may, as [tattoo artist Vyvyn] Lazonga puts it, also elicit 'who the person is or is becoming'. In this sense they evoke not the registration of external events but internal depth...<sup>12</sup> (Benson, 246)

That depth marks the connection between past and present, memory and the constant process of becoming. It is significant that while the image is fixed if never altered (as tattoos sometimes are), its meaning is mutable.

Inscription is often invoked to emphasize how power colonizes the body, through self-surveillance, the policing of social norms, or worse.<sup>13</sup> The "counter-inscription" of extreme body modification projects can constitute active resistance to social oppression, but showing and telling tattoo stories offers a more subtle recalibration of the body's active role in subject formation. It is not simply a visual cue sparking a memory, but sensory experience embodying emotion.

Sociologists Atte Oksanen and Jussi Turtiainen contextualize contemporary tattoo practice in relation to subjectivity, deftly approaching the topic from multiple perspectives. Rather than just narrating life stories, the authors propose numerous active functions:

The sociology of the body has recently started to approach tattooing as a form of self-expression and body politics, hence opening the way to a positive diagnosis of tattooing... It is shown here that tattoos are used by subjects in order to control their lives when faced with the chaos of late modern society. A tattoo engraved into the skin represents a link to personal life history, as well as an opportunity for subjective security.<sup>14</sup>

Just what is that chaos, which destabilizes our sense of self, creating a capitalistic paradise of putting on and taking off consumable subjectivities like so many Halloween costumes? It is, at least in part, the chaos of the very information age virtuality that is separating identity from physicality, creating a burgeoning research focus on the problematics of virtual identity, such that you can earn an advanced degree studying it. It is that "flux of swirling, disconnected ephemeral elements" described by Richard Shusterman in the excerpt that began this section. There is obvious appeal to presenting oneself in a social space as an avatar. You absent yourself from the embedded preconceptions of corporal presence: weight, disability, class, gender, race, age, any number of external signifiers; each of them invitations to discrimination and prejudice. This disembodiment, however, has serious ramifications.

The permanence of the tattoo resists the disembodiment of virtuality. Sweetman's postmodern metaphor of "anchoring the self" leads to the more active metaphor of occupation, which is rooted in the body politic. Sweetman argues convincingly that the combination of permanence, pain, and the narrow gap between producer and consumer (tattoo artist, tattoo customer) helps to move the practice beyond fashion.

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12 Susan Benson, "Inscriptions of the Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America." *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Ed. Jane Caplan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 246.

13 See Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). Also DeMello, *Body Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2014).

14 Atte Oksanen and Jussi Turtiainen, "A Life Told in Ink: Tattoo Narratives and the Problem of the Self in Late Modern Society," *Auto/Biography* 13 (2005): 112.

Despite the commodification of tattoos, to the point where tattooed celebrities or models are now used to sell products, the “product” of the tattoo is difficult to quantify. The practice is widespread and popular, and particular artists are sought after by collectors, who have to book months in advance. Yet there is no, in Marxist terms, alienation, between producer and consumer. There is no resale market, no futures, the original owner/collector retains full possession. The continuing guild-like apprentice system of the tattoo shop resists co-optation by capitalism, or mass production. Getting a tattoo is, as repeated by scores of our interlocutors, a singular, memorable experience resulting in a permanent change to the self (figure 3). Rarely does anyone say that about a pair of jeans.



Figure 3: Z. Koppisch, *Arely*, Forever Strong 2014. In our questionnaire, Arely wrote: “...for me, the tattoos are even more than aesthetic visual ways of representing my life: they are in fact, part of me, of who I am. Each one of them has become an integral part of me and my identity. That, as much as I originally created them, they create me as well.” (Reproduced with the artist’s permission)

What is tattoo doing now, in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century western world, that is needed for the body? Has it replaced a previous somatic experience? The postmodern answer is the floating signifier, all skin no depth. But Oksanen and Turtiainen refer to the concept of “visualized subjectivity,” the active choice of externalizing a visible self with tattoos. Their study is based, significantly, on narratives, in particular those found in the back of *Tattoo* magazine. These serve as validation or defense, (often their original meaning) but also navigate a circuit between mind and body, word and image, and self and other. Approaching the narrative as specifically mutable, adaptable, and active, the authors draw on various analyses to clarify that: “the narrative feature of tattoos should not be reduced to the symbolic level alone, for the tattooed body is more adaptive than static by nature. In other words, although the picture on the skin has a relative permanence, the affects connected to it change with the flow of life” (Oksanen and Turtiainen, 122).

Shannon Sullivan's preference of the term "bodying" over embodied, for its active construction serves to describe the ways in which tattoos and their stories activate the subject in her encounters with the world.<sup>15</sup> Tattoo narratives are no more the full story of a life than is the memoir, or autobiography. They are selective, strategic, and communicative in ways that the tattoo alone can never be. Oksanen and Turtiainen firmly reply to critics asserting versions of a pathological model with experiential and ameliorative counter-arguments, affirming the mind/body connection: "The subject tells his or her life story in relation to them, situates pain and charts life experiences...The tattoo narratives are construed as powerful existential experiences, where life events are integrated into a narrative form via the body."<sup>16</sup> (Oksanen and Turtiainen, 127) To borrow Wolfgang Kraus' phrase from narrative studies, "the telling is the 'doing' of identity."<sup>17</sup> This aspect is also addressed by Kosut who arrives at a nuanced reading of the narratives not as definitive but rather: "[T]hey describe modern subjects whose selves and bodies are *in praxis*. Within these stories there is a continuous reflexive dialogue between the body, self-identity and society. Through interpreting tattoo narratives we can begin to decipher the intricacies of this communication." (Kosut, 99, emphasis added) Kosut interprets as a sociologist, observing through her field work the active quality of this "doing" or praxis of a storied tattoo identity.

## Occupy Your Body

Any body politics, therefore, must speak *about* the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction, at the same time as disrupting and subverting existing regimes of representation.<sup>18</sup>

What are the ramifications of a theory and praxis that proposes empowerment through embodied subjectivity? Contemporary media portrayals of tattoo split into the vaguely positive (hip, edgy, artsy) and decidedly negative (tattoos as a barrier to employment, as ill-conceived, as signs of deviance.) Such mixed messages are legion, and can't keep up with what is in or out. The first model is to be welcomed, since some tattooing is superb art indeed. But more important is to recognize the second for the strategy it reinforces, of reading in to all tattoos a psychopathology.<sup>19</sup> As Victoria Pitts observes, pathologization, most often inflicted on already marginalized communities: women, people of color, sexual minorities, "is never politically neutral."<sup>20</sup>

The body is, and indeed always has been marked, inscribed, continually colonized by power. The best countervailing force, demonstrated throughout history, is taking ownership of the body, and hence, the body politic, physically embodying it. Storm the Bastille, March on Washington, sit in, stare down the tank in Tiananmen Square, populate Tahrir Square, Occupy Wall Street. Perhaps the most significant act of the political body in Western history was to separate the head of King Louis XVI from the body of France, symbolically severing state rule from "divine right" in all its abuses. "Bodily power or movement" writes Shusterman, "is perhaps the elemental root

15 Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.) This concept is explored in more detail in Karen Leader, "On the book of my body: 'Women, Power, and Tattoo Culture,'" *Feminist Formations* 28.3 (Winter 2016): 174-195.

16 There is no doubt that there is a negative side to this where tattoo traditions inscribe antisocial behaviors, gang markings, prison iconography etc. Nevertheless, taking ownership of the inscription through narrative is at least an act of honesty.

17 Wolfgang Kraus, "The Narrative Negotiation of Identity and Belonging" *Narrative Inquiry* 16.1 (2006): 107.

18 Amelia Jones, ed. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 424.

19 Nikki Sullivan, *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics, and Pleasure* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2001).

20 Victoria L. Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 18.



of our concept of freedom.”<sup>21</sup>

Can what I’m arguing as a culturally and historically significant bodying of self, tattoo, enhanced as I’ve described, through “tattoo culture,” offer an ethical model that affirms our lived experience, on an increasingly endangered and politically polarized planet? The metaphor of “Occupy” entered the lexicon powerfully as a result of committed, bodily, political activism. Body politics in raced, classed and gendered terms is in full-on war mode at the moment, with civilian middle-Eastern bodies being blown up by “un-manned,” that is disembodied American drones. #BlackLivesMatter arose from the continual savaging of black bodies (and minds, and hearts) by police, the prison industrial complex, and domestic terrorism.<sup>22</sup> Laborers are treated as dehumanized working units, as evidenced for example by the atrocities of the Chinese factories making i-phones. The “war on women” (note the martial label) has forced terms like trans-vaginal probe and “legitimate rape” into public discourse. Full body scans at airports implicate all bodies as potential lethal weapons, no longer afforded privacy or the presumption of innocence.

And yet postmodernism has disembodied the subject, separating agency from corporeality beyond the wildest Cartesian dream. Post-human cyborgs compete in cyberspace with Bodies without Organs. Floating signifiers and bricolaged appropriations ironically circulate in the society of the spectacle. But wait, the agency of my embodied subjectivity just got here. How can the author be dead? My sarcastic tone reproduces the distanced ironic stance so pervasive in the information age. Mascia-Lees and Sharpe pose the question dramatically: “But where do we turn when the body, the very place where social anxiety is traditionally concretized, has been abstracted into theory? Where can we find the living, breathing, secreting, sensing, reacting, weeping body on which today’s concerns can be read?”<sup>23</sup> While the body has taken center stage in numerous disciplines and interdisciplinary studies, theory dominates over praxis, mind over material. As Kathy Davis articulates the situation:

Postmodernism, with its critical demolition of dichotomies like mind/body, nature/culture and emotionality/rationality has certainly helped to make the body a popular topic. However, postmodern perspectives on the body have not been unproblematic. Postmodern theorizing about the body has all too often been a cerebral, esoteric and, ultimately, disembodied activity.<sup>24</sup>

Richard Shusterman’s “freedom” quote above positions this paper within a philosophical context that insists on an ethics of lived experience. Philosophy, Shusterman argues:

should be transformational instead of foundational. Rather than a meta-science for grounding and justifying our current cognitive and cultural activities, it should be a form of cultural criticism which aims to redescribe our experienced world and reconstruct our practices and institutions so as to improve the quality of our lives. Improved experience, not originary truth, is the ultimate philosophical goal and criterion.<sup>25</sup>

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21 Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 78 n. 5.

22 Black Lives Matter, the movement was founded by the activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>.

23 Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 146.

24 Kathy Davis, ed. *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 14.

25 Richard Shusterman, “Dewey on Experience: Foundation or Reconstruction,” *The Philosophical Forum* XXVI.2 (Winter, 1994): 127-148; revised and reprinted in his *Practicing Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 127-128.

Somaesthetics, Shusterman's body-centered, interdisciplinary philosophical practice is a progressive and transformational approach, which if pursued in each of the three branches enumerated (analytic, pragmatic and experiential) will produce outcomes that are concrete, earthbound, and somatic. The ethical dimensions of body studies must treat the body as an active agent rather than a passive vessel through which the mind enacts its will. *Thinking Through the Body*, the title of a recent book of Shusterman's essays (2012), insists on just that, not what our bodies should do, but what we can do through our bodies. Somaesthetics, rooted in the pragmatist philosophy of Peirce, James and Dewey, invites, even insists on, tracing concrete consequences of adopting particular positions. The third, experiential category of somaesthetics is where the theory of Occupation intersects with Shusterman's philosophy: "This dimension, not of saying but of doing, is the most neglected by academic body philosophers, whose commitment to the logos of discourse typically ends in textualizing the body. About practical somaesthetics, the less said the better, *if* this means the more done."<sup>26</sup>

What others have integrated into somaesthetics as it has expanded internationally enriches its potential. In particular, feminist theory and praxis, already grounded by necessity in the body and its potentialities, has much to offer a philosophy which seeks a way out of dualistic thinking. Judy Whipps explains,

Both pragmatism and feminism are more likely to bring social context to the forefront of philosophy, allowing for realities that are in flux and that are always being shaped and reconstructed by their context. Pragmatists emphasize that we must include particular and individual experiences in a pluralistic discussion of multiple realities, and that all parties involved in the issue be involved in any creation of a solution.<sup>27</sup>

Of particular promise in the context of this article is the narrative-somaesthetics proposed by Marjorie Jolles. Centered around Cressida Heyes' interrogations of bodily "normalization" in the Foucauldian sense as disciplinary and self-policing, Jolles argues "that a deliberate, collective practice of telling and contesting narratives of embodiment can disrupt the dualistic logic of norm/anti-norm that keeps normalization intact."<sup>28</sup> As a feminist, Jolles embraces the active aspects of somaesthetics: "Going beyond analytic somaesthetics—which emphasizes the intellectual work of tracing the intersection of bodies, culture, and discourse—pragmatic somaesthetics entails seeking out those somatic practices that might produce meaningful anti-normalizing effects on our bodies and lives" (Jolles, 306).

Tattoos operate precisely in that realm, at "normalization's edge" in Heyes's terms. In the shallowest terms merely fashion or self-infliction, tattoos are self-adornment, creative expression, and, for some, art collections built over a lifetime. But as we've seen, they are also identity scaffolding, buttressing, or in a phrase quoted above, providing "subjective security" in the flux of possibilities. The narratives are an agent that activates (referring back to the title of this paper) not only the original energies in the tattoo's history, but also the present self, bodying it in transaction with others.

Transaction, a Deweyan term elaborated upon by Shannon Sullivan, another pragmatist-

<sup>26</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives For the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 143.

<sup>27</sup> Judy Whipps, "Pragmatist Feminism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2004, rev. 2016) <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/femapproach-pragmatism/> Accessed March 8, 2017. See also Janet Sarbanes, "Body Conscious: On Somaesthetics," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (August 16, 2013). <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/on-somaesthetics> Accessed March 8, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Marjorie Jolles, "Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics," *Hypatia* 27.2 (Spring 2012): 302-303. Also Cressida Heyes, "Somaesthetics for the Normalized Body" in *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

feminist, places our concerns firmly in the social context Whipps identifies above: “the notion of transaction focuses on the way in which humans and nature effect each other so that their relationship might be improved.”<sup>29</sup> Thus “tattoo culture” presented through this lens offers the third term for image and story, the interpretive thread that operates in transaction, connecting people in an artful *experience*. Beyond “self-improvement” or narcissistic self-storying, “tattoo culture” enacts the work of art as affective, altering perception and eliciting response. Works of art do this on multiple levels, those works most likely to endure pack a bodily aesthetic jolt.

It is necessary to reiterate that theorizing “occupying your body” is not merely controlling its representation or using it to perform a self, but rather to privilege a body-mind subjectivity. Carrying that idea to its logical conclusion has enormous political ramifications.

The disembodiment of daily existence in social media, telecommuting, distance learning and online shopping, google glass and seductive Siri, offloads social existence to Second Life, where oxygen is superfluous and water an animator’s abstraction. While islands of garbage the size of continents float on rising oceans, the trending top story is a U.S. President who tweets conspiracy theories. Cyber-trash leaves no mark, lost down the rabbit hole of endlessly consumable bytes of trivia.

So Occupy Your Body relates to the planet, and the body politic that must act in a physical sense to counteract the disembodiment, environmental destruction and a toxic trajectory driven by short-term domination models, and/or end of days ideology. Occupy recovers the word from its martial meaning of invade and occupy, while retaining the resistance to removal inherent in the word. We are staying— in this body, in this park, on this planet.

At precisely this moment of virtual ascendancy and planetary crisis, an art form as old as human culture itself explodes. Am I suggesting that tattooing is, or has the potential to be a persuasive political practice? No, not the practice itself, which is personal, and sometimes quite narcissistic. But the permanence undermines the faddishness, the narrative embeds the meaning as “material-semiotic,” and “tattoo culture” externalizes and universalizes this corporeal presence by creating a space for communication, interpretation and interaction.

John Dewey helps further the proposal by foregrounding experience and communication in the social realm: “Such facts as these give convincing evidence that the medium of expression in art is neither objective nor subjective. It is the matter of a new experience in which subjective and objective have so coöperated that neither has any longer an existence by itself.”<sup>30</sup> The quote is extracted from a longer discussion of different aesthetic theories, but gets at a key aspect in pragmatist aesthetics, which is its embeddedness in social interaction, which Dewey articulates further on: “ART is a quality that permeates an experience; it is not, save by a figure of speech, the experience itself.... Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization.”<sup>31</sup> Somaesthetics locates the essential role of the body in this philosophical proposal: “One answer, inspired by the pragmatist philosophy that shapes somaesthetics, is that if we truly care about the ends, we must care about the means necessary to realize those ends.”<sup>32</sup> Tracing the practical consequences of philosophical disputes is central to pragmatism, thus recognizing the necessity of a healthy, empowered, communicative body for the realization of a functioning society is the ultimate goal; one in which *experience* plays a

29 S. Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 3.

30 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934), 299.

31 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 339.

32 Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 37.

major role.

As in all other forms of creative production, not all tattoos are art, but the combination of the visual, the narrative, and the embodiment of that experience offers fertile ground for the rich somatic bodying of self that produces the most fully active person/citizen. Tattoos, to reiterate, are a touchstone in this project, not a symptom. “Tattoo culture” starts with the popularity, attends to the permanence that separates it from passing fashion, and unfolds its complexity outwardly through public exhibitions and performances. This paper offers a 21<sup>st</sup>-century intertwining of mind and body, story and ink, which can be brought into the conversation about what you can know about the tattooed person sitting before you. It is not just in the showing, but in the telling as well. What is proposed pushes away from the crippling duality of a wretched body at the service of the god-like mind, toward an embodied subjectivity that is present, expressive and empowered. “Tattoo Culture” is a vehicle, while “Occupy” is a potent, contemporarily resonant metaphor for active social change through corporeality, insisting on the value of this physical presence in human interaction, in communication, and in formulating a new body politic.

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