Counterculture to Common Culture: Tattooing in America from 1960 to 2009

On a sweltering summer day in the Houston suburbs in 2007, the author, an eighteen-year-old resident of Spring, Texas, pulled into the parking lot in front of a shop at a small strip mall on the corner of Rhodes Road and FM 2920. The sign on the front of the building read “Ink Injection TATTOO” in twelve-inch tall orange letters. As Jennifer and a friend entered the shop, a bell sounded over the pounding bass of some obscure rap music. The pulsations continued, threatening to shake hearts free of ribs, during the intermittent seconds before a man wearing an orange polo shirt stepped out of a nearby door and asked, “Can I help you?” From her pocket, Jennifer produced a folded piece of printer paper covered with four designs and handed it to the man. The man, who never gave his name, stepped outside to consult with someone before reentering to inform the friends that the work would cost $220, cash, since the shop would not have a credit card machine until the expansionary construction was completed. Jennifer quickly agreed and, once he verified her age, the man in the orange polo produced a stencil of each of the four tattoos she had requested.

 Several minutes later, another, small, skinny man, tattooed from the crown of his shaved head to the tops of his feet put out his cigarette, walked in the door, and asked Jennifer to take a seat on a stool in the next room. Jennifer obliged and watched as this man, who identified himself as “Frank,” washed his hands and donned latex gloves before selecting a brand new needle, ink well, and razor. Frank then shaved the portion of the woman’s arm to be tattooed and doused the area with rubbing alcohol to sterilize it before removing the needle from its sterile packaging and cleaning it too. He applied the stencil and verified the positioning was correct, then attached the needle to the tattoo machine and switched it on. Jennifer squeezed the hand of her friend as the buzzing sound began and the needle inched closer. A stinging sensation began to radiate from the area near her elbow and Jennifer knew she was officially marked. Before paying, an hour-and-a-half later, Jennifer stood in
front of a mirror examining the results. Satisfied with the outcome and instructed in proper aftercare, Jennifer paid the fee and exited the shop.

This twenty-first century tattoo experience is drastically different from tattoo experiences during much of the twentieth century in many ways. To begin with, the tattoo recipient in this anecdote was not a sailor, a soldier, a biker, or a rocker. In fact, the recipient, also the author of this article, was a middle-class, college-bound, young woman. Furthermore, the tattoo shop was not some illegal, downtown, back-alley operation, but rather a licensed, suburban business. The tattoo process was neither haphazardly completed nor unsanitary, but carefully undertaken and sterile. Payment for services was rendered in cash, but only due to the same transitional phase many businesses undergo during expansion. The transaction was far from shady; instead, it was a recorded portion of the shop’s taxable commercial income.

Tattooing is not what it once was. The practice of tattooing in American culture has undergone much change since it first gained popularity among American maritime professionals of the mid-nineteenth century. Following this advent, military men, as early as the Civil War, began enlisting tattoo artists to help them express their devotion to their country, solidarity among the ranks, and the depth of their bravery and heroism. Tattooed individuals also appeared in successful circus acts and carnival sideshows from coast to coast. In spite of this popularity among military and circus professionals, tattoos failed to garner a substantial following within the mainstream. By World War II the military had begun discouraging tattooing among the ranks and, following the decline of tattooing among servicemen, the public began to associate tattooing primarily with rebellious youths, blue-collar workers, motorcyclists, and street gangs.¹

In the 1960s, some cities restricted tattooing equipment to use by medical professionals while other cities, including New York, banned the practice outright. Social pressures forced some tattooers,

even those in cities where tattooing had not been banned, to relocate to cities more hospitable toward their profession. Evidence indicates that during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the general public simply was not prepared to accept into its ranks those who had been marked by ink.²

However, in the 1970s the tattoo began to enjoy a more mainstream existence and at least some semblance of general acceptance. This led to the 1980s and 1990s, during which tattoo artists began modifying the bodies of customers in every imaginable social group, including celebrities, business professionals, practicing doctors and nurses, and average middle class citizens, in addition to those who bore tattoos but were viewed as the deviant demographic. By 2005, tattoos had become commonplace enough that advertisers, such as Levi’s, Chanel, Converse, and Post-It, began to employ tattoos to sell jeans, designer sunglasses, shoes, and even mundane office supplies.³ People even began selling their own skin as tattoo ad space for a variety of companies.⁴

At the same time that tattoos became more socially acceptable, a number of innovations came into play. Mainstream tattooed groups began seeking alternative methods of tattooing, including black light, white, and temporary inks, and ways to remove or replace tattoo work they no longer wanted through laser removal. These innovations allowed mainstream tattoo customers the flexibility to choose when to expose tattoo work, leaving the rebellious demographic to question what, if anything, it meant to bear ink. This demographic began to resent the new, more mainstream tattoo customer, and turned away from tattoos and toward more extreme forms of body modification, such as scarification and branding. By 2009, traditional tattooing, which this article defines as the process during which one or more needles is used to inject indelible ink of varying colors into the skin in order to permanently mark the skin with some design, was dying.

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² Govenar, 232.
Tattooing also had begun to lose meaning as a countercultural practice, a phenomenon that Walter Benjamin referred to as an artwork’s loss of “aura.” The aura of an artwork is the significance of the piece, or, more generally, of a medium of art, that is imparted to that piece or medium through the tradition that is associated with it. In the case of the tattoo, it was the permanent statement of rebellion against societal norms inherent in the tattoo process that provided meaning. By 2009, when tattoos were neither necessarily permanent nor inherently rebellious, but both easily erasable and markedly commonplace, tattooing had been disconnected from its socially defiant origins and, thus, had lost its aura. Rebels and fringe groups could no longer claim their tattoos as symbols of their outsider status when soccer moms and CPAs could use their tattoos as indicators of their hipness.

How did a practice that made little headway toward social tolerance in American culture for over a hundred years go from counterculture to common culture to gimmick all in a span of less than forty years? Since 1980, scholarly tattoo literature has addressed this change in tattoo culture through a number of approaches. Sanders and Vail in *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (1989) and Rubin in *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body* (1988), chose to defend the tattoo and its integration into mainstream culture by merits of institutionally defined parameters of art and comparisons to ancient and Eastern body modification practices. However, later authors, such as Hewitt in *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink* (1997), tended to focus on the psychology of tattooed demographics and, particularly, the social psychology that led to the recognition of tattooing as a tolerable form of social expression or artistic endeavor. The focus of recently published works related to the tattoo lies primarily in the portrayal of the tattoo in the media and, in many cases, these works have become less scholarly and more likely to take advantage of America’s preoccupation with popular culture. Ritz’s *Tattoo Nation: Portraits of Celebrity Body Art* (2005) and Kat Von D’s *High Voltage Tattoo* (2009) are the latest examples of pop culture tattoo books.

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5 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1935), 221-3
Despite the array of works published about the tattoo, there is still a gap to be filled. Amongst the authors of scholarly tattoo literature, only Margo DeMello manages to take seriously the members of the fringe/rebel tattoo demographic and the role they played in the introduction of tattooing into mainstream society. In her conclusion, DeMello asks whether tattooing was another trend that would fade out, and addresses the concerns about the future of tattooing voiced by older tattooers. However, most of DeMello’s research was conducted during the mid-1990s, and since the publication of *Bodies of Inscription* in 2000, there has been no further critical analysis of tattooing. Therefore, there exists no comprehensive picture of the current state of both fringe/rebel tattoo culture and tattoo culture since its synthesis with popular culture.\(^6\) The story of the rebel tattoo demographic and its interaction with the new tattoo demographic has been neglected.

This work aims to fill that gap in the literature by addressing the interaction between old and new demographics, rather than the usurpation of the old by the new, through an analysis of the relationship between one specific subsection of the rebel demographic – rock musicians – and recent trends in tattooing demographics and practices. This paper argues that rock musicians of the 1970s and 1980s, as the first pairing of a rebellious tattoo culture with mainstream popular culture, were responsible for catapulting tattooing into the mainstream, yet rather than effecting long-term positive changes in tattooing, it was precisely this pairing of counterculture and popular culture that also ultimately led to the demise of the traditional tattoo.

**Tattoos and Rock Music**

Prior to World War II, the public associated tattooing with sailors, circus freaks, and servicemen who came home tattooed with images representative of their particular company or their loyalty to the U.S.A. After the war, tattoo culture, in the minds of many, was embodied by blue-collar

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workers, motorcyclists, street gangs, and rebellious youths. This is reflected in the literature about tattooing published between the post-war years and 1980. Because tattooing was regarded as a deviant fringe practice for so long, academics did not consider it a serious topic of study until the 1980s, thus few works were published on the subject. Most of what was written prior to the 1980s was a mix of cultural studies on tribal practices of tattooing, outside Europe and the United States, and psychological studies conducted amongst tattooed inmates and gang members. These studies presented tattooing as either a barbaric practice of archaic “jungle tribes” or an indicator of “personal maladjustment and conflict” in tattoo bearers. Therefore, following WWII both academics and the public associated tattoos with socially rebellious groups.

From the beginning, rock musicians established themselves as social rebels and distanced rock culture from societal norms. As rock ‘n’ roll became popular, artists like Elvis, who made his radio debut in 1954, and the Beatles, whose American debut came ten years later, were controversial for gyrating hips, associations with drug use, and suspect political affiliations. However, it was not until Janis Joplin, a popular musician in the late 1960s, publicly displayed a tattooed wristlet (see Figure 1; she also had a small tattoo of a rose on her breast, which she commonly kept covered) that the public had its first reasons to associate musicians, specifically rock artists, with tattooing.

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8 Govenar, 231-2.

During the 1970s, the number of tattooed rock musicians began to rise, albeit slowly. After the recording of “Mama Kin” in 1972, Steven Tyler of Aerosmith received his first tattoo (see Figure 2). The tattoo, on the outside of Tyler’s upper left arm, reads “Mama Kin” over a heart surrounded by flames.\(^{10}\) The members of another popular rock band, Black Sabbath, also displayed tattoos. Ozzy Osbourne, the front man for Black Sabbath, acquired his first tattoo, a knife on his left arm, at fourteen, but added a number of pieces to his collection during his time with the band.\(^{11}\) In a promotional photograph of Black Sabbath used in the early 1970s (see Figure 3), Ozzy’s knife tattoo is clearly visible, along with another, slightly smaller and indecipherable tattoo located on the same arm.\(^{12}\) The significance of this fact is seen by comparing the public visibility of Tyler’s and Osbourne’s tattoos with that of Joplin’s.

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While many photos displaying Janis Joplin’s tattoos were taken at concerts or for interviews, the fact that Tyler’s and Osbourne’s tattoos were clearly visible in promotional prints, that is, mass-produced photographs included in press kits given to the media and subsequently printed in magazines and advertisements, demonstrates the willingness of an increasing number of rock bands to be associated with and to represent tattoo culture. That number would continue to grow during the 1980s.

Rock musicians of the 1980s embraced the body art trend begun by their 1970s predecessors. Members of Metallica and Mötley Crüe, two of the biggest names in rock music during the 1980s, commonly bared tattoos on stage and in promotional photos. Publicity photos taken around the 1983 release of Metallica’s album *Kill ‘Em All* showed then bassist Cliff Burton with a distorted skull tattooed on his upper right arm (see Figure 4).  

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Mötley Crüe’s first album, *Too Fast For Love*, debuted November 10, 1981 and featured a picture of a leather-clad Vince Neil, the band’s lead vocalist, with his hand in his pocket. Though Neil wore a leather glove, a tattoo that stretched from his wrist up his forearm was clearly visible (see Figure 5).\(^\text{14}\)

The conspicuousness of Cliff Burton’s tattoo in promotional stills served as a connection between Metallica and tattoo culture, but Mötley Crüe’s use of tattoo imagery points to an even deeper relationship with tattooing. The band was not only comfortable enough with the tattooed image to have Mötley Crüe widely and publicly associated with tattoo culture, but also secure enough with that image to use it to market their product to consumers and potential fans. By placing tattoos on their album cover, Mötley Crüe expressed confidence that the image would garner sales, which partially depended on the reaction to the cover image by customers browsing record store shelves.

The trend of rock musicians embracing tattoo culture as part of rock culture continued in the 1990s. During the 1990s, not only did the number of band members with tattoos increase, the number of visible tattoos on each band member began to increase as well. In a promo print from 1993 (see Figure 6), one member of the band White Zombie bared a tattoo on his upper right arm while another had his left arm tattooed from his shoulder to his elbow in a “half sleeve.”15 All six members of Guns N’ Roses, who were active in rock during the last half of the 1980s, but did not experience widespread

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popularity until the early 1990s, were tattooed. This included the band’s two most famous members, Slash and Axl Rose, the latter of whom had nearly his entire outer right arm covered in tattoos in addition to a significant portion of his upper left arm (see Figure 7).16

Another trend that developed during the 1990s was the increased number of tattoos on musicians from the seventies and eighties who were still active in the rock scene. By the end of the nineties, Ozzy Osbourne, who had only two tattoos visible in the promotional still mentioned earlier, had expanded his tattoo collection to include a nearly-full sleeve on his right arm and significant coverage of his left (see Figure 8).17 Nikki Sixx, who had been tattooed only sparsely for most of the eighties, was covered in tattoos by the late nineties. He sported two full sleeves, a full back piece, and

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“Sixx” and “1958” across his fingers, along with numerous other tattoos (see Figure 9). It seems that the very artists who pioneered tattooing in the music industry had fully embraced the idea and raised the bar on tattoo exposure, to which artists of the early twenty-first century rose in force.

It is far from difficult to find images of rock musicians covered in ink during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Members in popular hard rock bands such as Disturbed and Killswitch Engage, alternative bands like Seether and Breaking Benjamin, and punk rock bands including Sum 41 and AFI all displayed visible tattoos on a regular basis. In fact, during this period, so many rock musicians had latched onto the connection between rock music and tattooing that many established rock musicians began to lament the sheer number of aspiring musicians acquiring tattoos simply to play the rock and roll part. Nikki Sixx said of this trend, “so many bands sit back and say, ‘Okay, let’s get a tattoo…and we’ll make a quick buck because that’s ‘rock & roll.’ But it’s not a cliché to us, because it’s real.”

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While older rock musicians had accepted tattooing as part of the rebellious nature of rock culture and used that deviant symbolism to market their music to the world, as in the case of the album cover to Mötley Crüe’s *Too Fast For Love*, younger musicians were beginning to utilize the connection between rock music and tattooing to market an authentic rock and roll image. Newer musicians had redefined tattooing in rock culture so that it no longer symbolized the rejection of social norms, but instead denoted a specific commercial market in the entertainment industry. In his essay entitled “Santa Claus on the Cross,” Richard Shweder addressed the shifting meanings of symbols in the context of what he refers to as “postmodern humanism.” Shweder describes several options one has for understanding something “other” than oneself. One option is to view the other as actually being quite similar to oneself. For Americans attempting to cope with images of tattooed rock musicians, this meant one possible route to understanding this “other” culture was to think of oneself as being part of both rock culture and tattoo culture by acquiring tattoos of one’s own. According to Shweder, a second option to understanding a cultural “other” is “to treat the other as an unsophisticated version of the self.” Americans also could opt to view the phenomenon of tattoos among musicians as a cliché method by which those musicians identified themselves as members of rock culture. This was the concern voiced by Nikki Sixx – that too many musicians becoming tattooed in an attempt to fit in with rock culture would render the culture cliché. This led some rock musicians to resent the encroachment of outsiders on what they viewed as an integral part of their culture.

It was not only older rock musicians who began to critique individuals trying to play the part of rock stars, either. Aaron Fink of Breaking Benjamin, whose first album *Saturate* was released in 2002, stated, “Kids that get full sleeves before they learn an instrument or can write a decent song in order to

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21 Shweder, 76.
22 Shweder, 76.
look like ‘rock stars’ annoy the shit out of me, you have to learn to crawl before you walk.”

Fink, while newer to the rock scene than Sixx, observed that musicians trying to break into rock music before they were actually capable of playing and performing sometimes abused the connection between tattoos and rock culture to project a rock image. For Fink, who is the least tattooed member of his band, getting tattoos “isn’t about showing them off or trying to look edgy, they are more of a rite of passage…” Neither Fink nor Sixx acquired tattoos in an attempt to legitimate himself as a rock musician, and each clearly resented the use of tattoos as a way to do so even when one lacked the necessary skills to make such a claim. In spite of this resentment, tattoos continued to be linked inextricably to rock musicians in the minds of non-musicians. The fact that rock musicians, though members of a traditionally rebellious culture, were also part of mainstream culture by way of popular music paved the way for a larger trend in society – the growing public conclusion that being tattooed no longer exclusively identified one as a blue-collar worker, biker, or gang member.

**Expanding the Boundaries of Tattoo Culture**

Americans in the 1970s commonly held the belief that tattooing was a lost phenomenon, a curiosity of the past kept just barely alive by bikers and street gangs. One exhibit on display at the Museum of Folk Art in New York City from October to November 1971 exemplified this perception of tattoo culture by restricting the “art” on display to nineteenth century tattoos of sailors and Navy men, the “heyday” of tattooing. Two police officers passing the exhibit before it opened read the large block “TATTOO!” in the window and returned with a warrant, prepared to arrest the “heathen[s]” breaking the 1961 New York City ban on tattooing. It did not occur to the officers that anyone associated with tattooing could be anything but an unruly criminal. This situation was reflective of the negative image of tattooing in the American public.

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23 Aaron Fink, interviewed by Author.
24 Ibid.
In spite of the public’s attitude toward tattooing, by the end of the 1970s an increasing number of citizens began seeking the services of tattooers across the country and many professional tattooers identified the influence of rock musicians as the catalyst for the change. *New York Times* journalist Joseph R. Gregory interviewed several tattoo artists in the New York area, including Tony Cambria, who had been in the tattooing business for twenty-three years, and Linda White, who owned a tattoo establishment in North Jersey. Gregory reported that some specifically blamed Janis Joplin and her televised tattooing in 1971 for increased publicity of tattooing and the cheapening of the art. Others artists interviewed by Gregory noted the growing prevalence of music-related tattoos requested by customers, including album covers. One observation common among tattoo artists who blamed Janis Joplin and those who blamed the influence of rock music in general for tattooing’s rise in popularity, however, was that popularity had produced an “overabundance” of tattooing in the media, including television shows and magazine and newspaper articles. During the 1980s, this became exceptionally clear.

One aspect of this increased media coverage was the mounting acceptance of tattooing among celebrities who were not part of the rock scene. Celebrities of all sorts, including musicians beyond the rock genre, actors and actresses, and professional athletes, became tattooed during the 1980s. Cher, a

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pop singer and actress, acquired only one tattoo during the 1970s, but five more during the 1980s, most of which were visible on a regular basis and all of which were visible once the performer donned her revealing stage costumes. Johnny Depp, whose acting career began in the mid-1980s, acquired at least two of his tattoos over the course of that decade. Mike Tyson, one of the most recognizable professional boxers and athletes, began his professional career in 1985. During the late 1980s, Tyson displayed two tattoos on his right arm – one on his bicep and one on his forearm (see Figure 10).

Just as legendary tattoo artist Lyle Tuttle, who tattooed Janis Joplin, Cher, and Peter Fonda and was influential in the standardization and sterilization of tattoo equipment, noted of the late 1960s and early 1970s, during the 1980s, “the role models of the day were getting tattooed.” While the generally positive connotations of “role model” may not apply to every example used in this paper, by definition, public figures such as Depp and Tyson are people whose behavior is imitated by others – role models – regardless of the positive or negative influence of their images. The number and variety of those popular role models only increased during the 1990s and into the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the last decade of the twentieth century, ever greater numbers of professional entertainers and athletes, including Janet Jackson, Drew Barrymore, and Dennis Rodman, displayed ever greater quantities of ink. Singer Janet Jackson amassed several tattoos, including one on her lower back and one of Mickey and Minnie Mouse engaged in lewd behavior on her right pelvic bone. Actress Drew Barrymore’s tattoos were photographed extensively during the 1990s and a multitude of images feature the cross on Barrymore’s ankle, the butterflies on her stomach, the flower on her hip, and the angels on

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29 DeMello, 76.
30 Gay, 49.
her lower back.\textsuperscript{31} The number of photographs taken of Barrymore’s tattoos indicates a public fascination with tattooed celebrities, and speaks to a growing overall interest in tattooing.

Dennis Rodman, whose career in the National Basketball Association (NBA) began in the late 1980s but flourished in the 1990s, might just be one of the most famous tattooed professional athletes. During his time with the Chicago Bulls, with whom Rodman won three of his five NBA championships, Rodman’s tattoos included extensive work on both of his arms, his chest, and his back, most of which was regularly aired during game coverage to millions of fans each week and on the cover of Sports Illustrated magazine (see Figure 11).\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Ritz, 55.
\textsuperscript{32} Sports Illustrated, October 23, 1995, cover.
By the twenty-first century, not only did the number of tattooed celebrities skyrocket, several older celebrities came out about their tattoos for the first time. Whoopi Goldberg showed the tattoo of the *Peanuts* comic character Woodstock on her chest and Tony Danza admitted to having the comic character Mr. Natural tattooed on his bicep, though he had the tattoo removed during the 1990s. It seems that by the first decade of the twenty-first century, tattoos had infiltrated a number of popular culture outlets – including music, movies, and sports. In fact, so many popular icons had embraced tattooing and were willing to share their appreciation for and affiliation with the practice that fans began to take notice and to follow suit.

It was also at this time that academics began to take notice of tattooing as a serious topic of study. Written at a time when tattoos had just begun to infiltrate mainstream culture, much of the tattoo literature from the late 1980s and early 1990s examined the validity of tattooing’s stake in American popular culture. In these examinations, however, often little thought was given to the actual history of tattooing. Typifying most of the literature from this period, Sanders and Vail instead raised questions about the rebellious demographic’s capacity to make informed decisions about the aesthetics of their own bodies and implied that the rebel tattoo demographic was somehow inferior to the new, more thoroughly educated crowd beginning to fill tattoo shops. When scholars did cover the history of tattooing, they frequently compared tattooing to other historical forms of body modification and their relationships to the cultures in which they existed in order to explore the relationship of the tattoo to Western societies. While asserting social value for tribal tattooing and other body modification practices, scholars assessed that American tattooing had little, if any, worth as a cultural practice.

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33 Gay, 49.
In spite of the skepticism of academics, as the number of tattooed celebrities rose, so did the number of average citizens electing to go under the needle. According to a Harris Poll conducted in 2003, the first survey to provide official statistics on tattooing, sixteen percent of all American adults were tattooed. While the average percentage of tattooed individuals in age groups forty and older was only ten percent, thirty-six percent of those between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine, and twenty-eight percent of those between the ages of thirty and thirty-nine were tattooed.\textsuperscript{35} The significant drop in the number of tattooed individuals after age forty indicates that unlike young adults of the 1990s and early twenty-first century (those in the twenty-five to thirty-nine groups in the poll), young adults of the 1960s-1980s (those in the groups over the age of forty in the poll) did not seek the services of tattooers. Therefore, tattooing among Americans, and especially among pre-middle age adults, had increased significantly during the 1990s. Of those Americans with tattoos, thirty-four percent said that having a tattoo made them feel sexier, twenty-six percent more attractive, and twenty-nine percent more rebellious.\textsuperscript{36} While it is impossible to say statistically how important rebellion was to tattooees of the mid-twentieth century, since the poll does not separate feelings about tattooing by age group, it seems that for those who had been tattooed since the 1990s, who comprised a majority of those questioned about how tattoos made them feel, physical beauty was now at least as important a factor in tattooing as was rebellion.

In a culture that obsesses over the physical beauty of celebrities, it is not surprising that a number of tattooed Americans looked directly to celebrities for inspiration – tattoo artists, including Kat Von D, star of TLC’s \textit{L.A. Ink}, began to complain about customers requesting celebrity “copycat” tattoos, or exact replicas of tattoos worn and displayed by celebrities. Additionally, artists received requests for tattoos of celebrity likenesses, including portraits of David Bowie and Marilyn Monroe.


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
The celebrity effect on tattooing was so great that artists began warning customers looking to emulate their idols against undergoing the tattoo process. Jonathan T. Shaw, who had been tattooing in the Greenwich Village area of New York since 1977, noted in a 1997 New York Times interview a trend of regret among young people getting tattoos in an attempt to follow body art fads seen in celebrity magazines and on television channels such as MTV. In spite of warnings, the number of tattooed Americans continued to rise, reflected in the climbing number of tattooers in America – from several hundred in the 1960s to nearly ten thousand in the mid-1990s, despite official bans on tattooing in cities like New York, where the thirty-five year ban remained in effect until the city council passed a bill that officially legalized and regulated tattooing in February of 1997.

At that time, blue-collar workers, bikers, rockers, and other members of fringe/rebel tattoo demographics still comprised a significant percentage of those served by the thousands of tattooers in America; however, during the 1990s, artists, including Mark S. Agee, the National Tattoo Association's reigning International Best Tattooer of the Year for 1996, noted a diversification in the population on which they worked. Agee, who owned four tattoo establishments in Indiana, noted that “doctors, lawyers, and a lot of professional people” were entering his shops with increasing frequency. In fact, as noted earlier, according to the 2003 Harris Poll, by that time, many more Americans of all backgrounds were seeking the services of tattoo artists.

This trend was noted often in scholarly works about tattooing published during the 1990s. These works relied heavily on analyzing the changing characteristics of tattooees, including the higher socioeconomic status, more extensive education, and greater level of aesthetic sensibility of the more recent tattoo consumer base, in an effort to argue that tattooing has become a legitimate art form. Literature from the late 1990s into the year 2000 generally addressed the changing demographics of

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37 Von D, 69-100.
tattooing by examining the psychology of both tattooed persons and society to explain why tattoos became increasingly more common during the last thirty years of the twentieth century. The focus of the literature was on the connection between the importance of body art and body modification in self-definition and cultural or artistic identity in historical cultures and current attempts by tattooees to use tattoos as a mode of self-expression or an artistic outlet. All of these works, however, failed to effectively include the American tattoo demographic of sailors, bikers, and social deviants in their evaluations of the current state of tattoo culture, and instead placed greater emphasis on tattoos as the newer, more middle-class demographic had come to view them.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, books placing tattoos in the realm of popular culture also began to appear. Several books, such as Tattoo Nation: Portraits of Celebrity Body Art, published by Rolling Stone Magazine in 2002, are nothing more than coffee table showpieces filled with pictures of tattooed pop culture icons from actress Drew Barrymore to magician David Blaine, along with a multitude of musicians. Kat Von D’s High Voltage Tattoo (2009) is just the latest example of this trend. Publishers of these books marketed specifically to the visual interests of fans in order to sell products. Tattoos were becoming both popular and trendy, and corporate America began to take notice.

Commodification and Commercialization of Tattooing

Tattooing as an industry had grown immensely during the last decade of the twentieth-century, but, at that time, only tattooers were reaping the benefits. When business minds realized the marketing potential of tattooing, they were quick to make the most of it. American Rag (AR), a California company that sells vintage-design-inspired clothing was created in partnership with the Federated Department Stores (FDS), which owns Bloomingdales and Macy’s. The company’s creative director, Maryellen Needham, followed the Lollapalooza tour, a multi-day punk and rock music festival, with one specific goal in mind – scouting for models to be featured in an ad campaign. After taping crowd
shots of moshing concertgoers, Ms. Needham and her photographer invited tattooed concertgoers to try on clothes from the AR clothing line, in which the individuals would then be photographed and potentially featured in a number of the company’s advertisements. American Rag used tattooed individuals who viewed themselves as rebels and actively participated in countercultural activities, such as the punk rock scene, to move merchandise.

While FDS employed a stereotyped image of tattooees, other companies utilized tattooing as a marketing tool without directly engaging the rebel subsection of the tattooed populace. In 2006, Levi’s produced an ad for its Red Tab jeans that featured an otherwise clean-cut man seated in a padded chair while a tattoo artist works on him. The ad implies that the man’s jeans are so much a part of him that he would have them permanently inked onto his body (see Figure 12).

![Figure 12](image)

By fusing the man’s tattoo, a permanent part of his body, with his jeans, Levi’s allows the jeans to stand in for part of the man’s physical existence. Part of the man’s identity is now determined by his

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consumption of goods. Brian Massumi has described this process in his theories on the postmodern commodification of culture. According to Massumi, in late capitalism, the “serial commission of the act of groundless consumption” determines one’s identity. The encounter between commodity and consumer becomes an integral part of the consumer’s existence. The act of purchasing even the smallest product becomes a defining moment.43

Furthermore, while the Levi’s ad leaves the permanence of the tattoo intact, Levi’s took tattooing out of its rebellious context by using a model who could pass for a young business professional to sell one of the most common clothing items in America. According to Benjamin, this amounts to an adjustment of the reality of tattooing to fit the masses.44 Once the context of the art of American tattooing changes so that it is no longer unique but made to serve the purposes of the masses, in this case the selling of clothing and the perpetuation of a capitalist market, it cannot retain its original rebellious nature or its artistic value.

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44 Benjamin, 223.
Tattooing became even further removed from its fringe origins as more upscale brands hopped on the tattoo bandwagon. One ad featured in the Winter 2006/Spring 2007 Chanel Eyewear ad campaign showed an otherwise unmarked and unblemished model wearing Chanel glasses and a tattoo of the double-C Chanel logo on her bare left shoulder (see Figure 13). In one 2007 Juicy Couture ad, a tattooed man wearing an undone dress stands in a room of elegantly dressed women apparently primping for some formal event (see Figure 14). The juxtaposition of the tattooed man and the uninked women, or of hard and soft, represented a synthesis of tattoo culture and high culture. The Chanel and Juicy Couture advertisements were not directed to the rebel roots of tattoo culture. Instead, both were meant to appeal to customers of high socioeconomic status and high class tastes in fashion.

Figure 13

Figure 14

Simultaneously, tattoos were also being used to sell some of the most mainstream and mundane products one could identify – office supplies. Pilot, in a 2007 ad campaign, utilized tattooing’s mainstream appeal to sell its fine-point pens. One ad featured a beetle that had been

tattooed with a Pilot pen (see Figure 15) and another featured a ladybug that had been similarly inked. In another ad, Post-It implied the effectiveness of Post-It Extra Sticky – one Post-It covered with a tribal tattoo design, a solid black, random pattern of lines and curves combined to create an abstract form, was placed on the bicep of a muscular man, where it remained affixed despite the fact that he was in the middle of a workout, judging by his lack of attire and the jump rope that can be seen in the far left of the frame (see Figure 16).

Figure 15

When tattoos can be used to sell something as banal as office supplies, the association of ink with rebel culture and the meaning of tattoos both come into question. Post-It identified and utilized what it viewed as a popular trend and, quite probably without meaning to, demonstrated exactly what tattooing’s fringe demographic had begun to feel – that tattooing no longer identified members of that demographic as rebellious or unique. Aaron Fink of the band Breaking Benjamin stated, “tattoos used to be more of a biker thing or for people on the fringes of society, now every bar or nightclub is filled with ‘bro’s’ covered with some kind of tribal thing on their bicep, it’s more of a fashion accessory

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today,” and Todd H. a tattoo artist interviewed by Margo DeMello, complained about the lack of adventure and rebellion in his “yuppie clientele.”

While the changing attitude toward tattooing of the rebel demographic was an important development in the recent history of American tattooing, most scholarly treatments of tattooing from the beginning of the twenty-first century overlooked this development and instead emphasized the increasing heterogeneity of tattoo culture, which by then encompassed a wide array of groups, from punk rockers to soccer moms and CPAs. While taking note of the newfound diversity of tattoo culture, however, the fate of the rebel tattoo demographic was either briefly mentioned or ignored completely, as if that group no longer had a part in tattoo history. This is a mistake, as the story of this demographic and its relationship to tattooing, past and present, is very much related to trends in tattooing among new tattoo devotees, as this paper attempts to show by examining the influence of rock musicians on tattooing.

Walter Benjamin offers a way to better understand that influence in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin argues that reproduction, especially mass reproduction, eliminates the aura of art. He describes the tendency of the masses to desire “closer” proximity to things they find appealing, for example purchasing a CD in order to more personally experience the music of one’s favorite band, as “their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.” This concept can be explained by examining the relationship between tattooed rebel demographics, mainstream society, and tattooing. A public that viewed tattoos as markers of individuality unique to several specific subsections of society desired to obtain that same distinctiveness. In doing so, however, the public was, in essence, broadening the contexts in which tattooing was practiced, which in turn would create greater acceptance of tattoos and would also strip the tattoo of the very stigmatizing effect that allowed it to set apart those rebellious groups who had

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49 Aaron Fink, interviewed by Author; DeMello, 185.
50 Benjamin, 221-3.
originally borne its marks. Thus, in their attempts to claim for themselves the escape from normalcy that tattoos offered, the public eliminated its own escape route by normalizing tattooing through widespread practice and introduction into mass reproduction of tattooing through photographs and video footage of tattoos, and especially through advertisement. Members of traditionally rebellious tattooed demographics, including rock musicians, responded to this normalizing effect, as have members of mainstream demographics. As tattoos have increasingly become “fashion accessories” rather than refusals to conform, tattooees have been forced to manufacture aura or meaning on an individual level. Margo DeMello refers to this process as the production of “tattoo narratives,” stories which many tattooees tell in order to justify to others their choice to become tattooed, usually through explaining the personal symbolic, and often spiritual significance of the tattoo(s).

While a loss of the aura of tattooing was realized in both rebel and mainstream tattoo demographics, that loss manifested itself in different ways for each demographic. Socially rebellious tattoo demographics began the search for new, oftentimes more extreme, methods by which to capture an aura in the same vein as tattooing, including evermore extensive body tattooing, branding, and scarification, or sometimes outright denunciation of tattooing as unexceptional or mainstream. Mainstream tattoo demographics dealt with the loss in one of two general ways, firstly, by attempting to re-inject meaning into the practice of tattooing by adding a personal or spiritual element through tattoo narratives and, secondly, by mitigating the permanence of the choice to undergo the tattoo process through the use of temporary inks and inks visible only under certain conditions or through the outright removal of tattoos.

“It’s not a rebellion when you’re selling out to an out-of-fashion salesman.”

In the mid-1990s, when the number of both celebrities and Americans in general sporting tattoos first began to skyrocket, the number of members in fringe or rebellious groups traditionally

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51 DeMello, 11-12.
associated with tattooing voicing their displeasure with the tattoo’s integration into mainstream culture was small, but those who did express their discontent were not inconsequential. Lyle Tuttle commented, “Tattoos aren’t meant for everybody, and they’re too goddamn good for some people.”

Rock musicians also conveyed their displeasure at the conspicuous presence of tattooing in popular culture. Tool’s 1996 album *Ænima* contained two derogatory references to tattooing. In the curiously named “Hooker with a Penis,” the vocalist sings, “I met a boy wearing Vans, 501s [Vans shoes and Levi’s 501 jeans are popular among rock fans and concertgoers], and a dope Beastie-T [a t-shirt featuring a band called the Beastie Boys], nipple rings, and new tattoos, that claimed that he was OGT [Original Gangsta Tool – a fan of the band since its pre-fame years], from ’92, the first EP [Extended Play – discs with fewer songs than a full album and more songs than a single. Tool’s first production was an EP entitled *Opiate*, released in 1992].” The singer describes a fan who believes he is superior to fans the band garnered after Tool had obtained stardom. The fan also believes his appearance, including his tattoos, somehow sets him apart from others, marking him as a social rebel and making him cool. He assumes that this fact links him with the band – he believes he gets what the band is about. The singer, however, derides the fan for his assumptions. He sings:

All you know about me is what I’ve sold you.
Dumb fuck.
I sold out long before you ever even heard my name.
I sold my soul to make a record.
Dip shit.
And then you bought one!
All you read and wear
Or see and hear on TV
Is a product begging for your fatass dirty dollar.
So shut up and buy my new record
...  
Send more money.  

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55 “Hooker with a Penis.”
The singer concludes that the fan does not, in fact, get what the band is about; he is not part of some higher movement. In reality, the fan merely bought into the rocker image, the rocker culture that was sold to him by television and radio. His tattoos, his rebellious statement, mean nothing. They only indicate that the fan is another consumer of popular culture.

The band expresses resentment toward popular culture and the effect it has on the nation. These sentiments were strong enough that the band devoted a second song to railing against the idea that famous individuals dictate culture. The track “Ænema” critiques the pettiness and superficiality of culture in Los Angeles, as well as the vast numbers of American citizens who idolize and subscribe to the LA image. The first verse and the first two lines of the bridge read as follows:

Fret for your figure and
Fret for your latte and
Fret for your lawsuit and
Fret for your hairpiece and
Fret for your Prozac and
Fret for your pilot and
Fret for your contract and
Fret for your car.
It's a bull-shit three ring circus sideshow of freaks
Here in this hopeless fucking hole we call LA.56

Having established the small-mindedness of LA culture by using examples of luxury and frivolity residents of LA seem to worry over and obsess about, the singer moves forward to address other trivial concerns:

Fuck L Ron Hubbard [the founder of Scientology]
And fuck all his clones.
Fuck all these gun-toting, hip gangster wannabes.
Fuck retro anything.
Fuck your tattoos…57

By juxtaposing attacks on what he believes to be the superficial spirituality of Scientology and the number of subscribers to the religion that seek to follow its teachings exactly, everyday citizens posing as slick, socially rebellious “gangsters,” and on tattoos, the singer implies that while many celebrities,
and their followers, ascribe either deep spiritual meaning or symbolic rebellion against societal norms to tattoos, tattooing has become nothing more than another way for fans to emulate their pop culture idols.

Throughout the nineties and the first decade of the twenty-first century, members of the fringe/rebel tattoo demographic displayed their distaste for the influx of mainstream demographics into their culture in increasing numbers. Among the complainants were numerous tattoo artists and bikers. One letter sent by a reader to the magazine Tattoo, which featured coverage of tattoo conventions, stories from fans, collectors, tattooers, or tattoo shops, and photographs of tattoos submitted by readers, expressed the reader’s aversion to “biker-type” tattoos and her displeasure with the amount of space occupied by that type of tattoo in the magazine (which is published by bikers), and requested that fingernail art also be included in the magazine. The woman implied that tattoo culture also included non-bikers and that tattooing should move away from its exclusive association with the earlier image of tattooees as bikers and deviants. In response, a number of readers voiced their anger in subsequent letters. The patronizing tone of those letters clearly indicated the frustration of the fringe group of tattooees with the newer tattoo converts. One reader wrote, “…if you don’t like ‘biker-type’ tattoos, then get yourself a fucking fingernail growers handbook to read.” In a letter to Tattoo Revue, another tattoo magazine, a reader complained about the “yuppification” of tattooing – the increased numbers of middle- and upper-middle class citizens becoming tattooed.

Scholarly treatment of the concerns of the fringe/rebel demographic included, almost exclusively, Margo DeMello’s Bodies of Inscription. DeMello conducted extensive interviews of tattoo artists and their customers during her research, and did at least address the concerns and opinions of longtime tattoo artists and tattooees. However, DeMello failed to utilize this information effectively in her evaluation of the current state of tattoo culture, and instead overlooked the rebel tattoo

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58 DeMello, 114-9.
59 DeMello, 114-9.
demographic, while placing a greater emphasis on tattoos as the newer, more mainstream demographic had come to see them. For example, the entire first page of DeMello’s conclusion to her book is a quote from tattooer Todd H., who says:

What really gets me…is that with the influx of capital, the ‘best and brightest’ of the bourgeois art mentality are being attracted to the field…these fucking kids who presume themselves artists spout service industry maxims straight out of the K-Mart management manual as if they were some kind of substitute for a personal philosophy. And it just makes it harder for those of us who don’t want to do the kind of bowing and scraping the yuppie clientele expect. They not only want you to shave their pimply asses, pretend that Calvin and Hobbes personify that ‘wild one’ attitude, listen to their pathetic, prudish body-image hang-ups, but at the end you’re supposed to hand them some kind of certificate that certifies them as cool enough to sit in at after hours be-bop jam sessions.⁶⁰

Instead of addressing concerns such as this as indicators of the fringe/rebel demographic’s displeasure with the current state of tattooing, DeMello overlooked this quote and others to focus on the “backlash” of newer, middle-class tattooers who already longed for the blue-collar roots of traditional tattooing, roots which they themselves helped to destroy. In spite of their oversight in tattoo literature, many in the fringe/rebel demographic were unhappy with the appropriation of tattooing into popular culture, and they must not be ignored.

While Todd H. displayed his discontent verbally, others did so by turning to more extreme forms of body modification. From the 1980s to the twenty-first century, the number of customers undergoing processes of scarification (also known as cicatrization) or branding rose significantly. Scarification is the scratching or etching, as a permanent body modification, of designs, pictures, or words into the skin, while branding involves using surgical steel heated to 1100°F (593°C) to produce third degree burns on the skin which then heal into scars forming some design. The number of tattoo shops offering these services increased during this period; however, customers undergoing these processes are less likely to also bear ink, though some do collect both scars and tattoos.⁶¹ There is, therefore, a correlation between the increased popularity of tattoos in mainstream culture and the

⁶⁰ DeMello, 185.
⁶¹ Gay, 63-9.
number of people choosing to endure scarification or branding instead of tattooing, indicating that, for some, tattooing was no longer unique enough, nor extreme enough, to set one apart from what one believed to be a banal existence. Conversely, some tattoo fanatics, rather than turn away from tattooing altogether, have, instead, undergone more extensive tattooing and, in some cases, paired the process with other forms of body modification to produce extraordinary results.

One man, known as the “‘Lizardman” wears one-inch diameter gauges in his ear lobes and a half-inch diameter gauge in his septum, and had five Teflon horns subdermally implanted above each of his eyes to form horned ridges. Four of his teeth have been filed into sharp fangs, and his tongue has been bifurcated. He is covered in green, scale tattoos, and has the word “FREAK” in all capital letter tattooed across his chest (see Figure 17). A former doctoral student of philosophy, Erik Sprague began his transformation into the Lizardman in 1993. Initially, the project began as a way to examine humanness linguistically. The project focused on how people identify others as “humans” primarily according to observations of physical characteristics. Sprague decided that in order to test this, he would need to modify his body in a way that would significantly differentiate him from other “human beings.” Sprague concluded that traditional tattoos alone were not enough to do this and so he decided to go beyond contemporary tattooing trends and become the “Lizardman.”

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Extreme body modification and denunciation of tattooing were not, however, the only means of distancing oneself from traditional tattooing. Mainstream tattoo demographics primarily dissociated themselves from the tattoo not by abandoning tattooing altogether or by employing other forms of modification, but rather by adopting new methods of tattooing that rendered the process impermanent or allowed tattooees the opportunity to hide their tattoos under most conditions.

The ability to hide tattoos has become more important in recent years – as the number and diversity of tattooees increased, so did the focus on what has been labeled “tattoo regret.” Prior to 1989, the only significant mentions of tattoo regret in the New York Times are in relation to former prison inmates attempting to reenter society upon their release from jail. In the few articles about tattooing printed before the 1990s, there is hardly, if any, focus on the phenomenon of tattooees later rueing the decision to become tattooed. During the 1990s, however, when tattoos had become commonplace in mainstream culture, tattooers were issuing warnings to would-be tattooees, telling them to make certain that that they could live with any tattoo, let alone with a particular design. Tattoo Chuck, who worked at New York tattoo shop Big Joe’s, stated that he felt it was part of his job to steer people away from “silly” ideas and toward designs they would be more likely to remain satisfied with.
later in life.\textsuperscript{63} A Harris Poll found that by 2003 nearly a fifth of all tattooed Americans regretted it.\textsuperscript{64} During the 1990s, it became feasible for Americans to cope with their tattoo regret through advancements in laser technology that allowed for tattoo removal.

In 1991, the Q-switched neodymium laser was introduced, and made tattoo removal more effective and versatile. By 2007, Americans were receiving up to 100,000 laser tattoo treatments per year at tattoo removal chain stores such as Dr. Tatoff, Tat2BeGone, and Tattoo MD, in addition to licensed general dermatological practices. In most cases, nurses, rather than doctors, use lasers to break down the pigment in tattoo ink over a series of treatments. The advent of this process has enabled tattoo recipients to both rid themselves of tattoos in order to accommodate specific situations, such as the bride who had two tattoos removed because they would detract from her appearance in her strapless wedding gown. Kelly Brannigan, a model who had her fiancé’s name tattooed on her inner wrist, had the name removed with laser treatments following the couple's breakup. What was the “important” lesson the model learned from the experience? “I’m not going to get a tattoo of another guy’s name until I get married.”\textsuperscript{65} It did not occur to the model to forgo additional tattoos altogether, because, if need be, she could always have the next mistake, and maybe the one after that, removed, too. Additionally, in the future, laser removal of tattoos will become even easier – new ink encapsulated in beads has been specifically developed to break up after a single treatment with a special laser.\textsuperscript{66} For those not willing to undergo the painful processes of both tattooing and tattoo removal, there is still hope.

Currently, there are several ink options available to those who are doubtful of the permanence of their wish to be tattooed, but are unwilling or unable to receive laser treatment. In the 1990s, a tattoo

\textsuperscript{64} The Harris Poll \#58, October 8, 2003.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
ink was developed that is visible only under black light. The ink was not in widespread use until the late 1990s, but now is often available at many tattoo studios for slightly more than the cost of traditional tattoo ink, and, in fact, a significant and growing number of customers enthusiastically opt for black light tattoos. Individuals tattooed with this type of ink can enjoy the experience of being tattooed, without the pressure of having to display their work constantly. Tattooees have the ability to choose in what context they will display their ink and when they will hide it. There is no need to seriously consider the implications of tattooing when one is not subjected to all the social pressures that might arise from making such a decision. Thus, tattooees with black light tattoos are freed from the possible permanent stigmatization of tattooing should acceptance of the practice in mainstream culture wane.

However, in “An Ironic Fad: The Commodification and Consumption of Tattoos,” Mary Kosut claims that tattoos resist “consumer throw-away” culture. Kosut cites George Stimmel’s theory that the attraction of “any fashionable phenomena lies in its inherently transitory character,” but rejects the idea that tattooing, though it has become both fashionable and commercialized, is subject to this rule because of the permanence of the choice to become tattooed. However, with the option to permanently hide and forget one’s tattoos, should one simply avoid black lights, tattooing is no longer set apart from other consumptive practices – including shopping for the latest fashion trends or purchasing the newest cutting-edge technology. Even more contradictory is the mass availability of temporary tattoo inks. There are several temporary tattooing options available to those seeking the tattoo experience without the pain or the commitment. These options range from the temporary tattoos given out at children’s birthday parties which can be applied and easily removed with oil-based creams, and similar forms of vegetable dye temporary tattoos for adults designed to last up to three

weeks, to more sophisticated forms such as henna tattoos, taken from Indian culture, and airbrushed
tattoos, both of which can last up to three weeks. When there is no longer a commitment inherent in
electing to bear a tattoo, the very core of tattooing – the choice to become permanently altered – is extracted from the practice. What remains is an artificial imitation masquerading in its shell; there is no more aura.

Conclusion

Tattooing has undergone many changes since its introduction into American culture in the nineteenth century and especially since the 1960s. It has filled the roles of countercultural practice, mainstream trend, and marketing gimmick. By the twenty-first century, groups that once embodied the spirit of tattoo in their nature and embraced it as part of their culture no longer felt the deep connection they once had with tattooing, and groups that adopted the tattoo in the process of its cultural normalization have altered the tattoo so that it more closely coincides with the fickleness and trends of popular culture. Rock musicians of the 1970s and 1980s, as representatives of the first synthesis of tattoo culture with popular culture, were responsible for both the infiltration of tattooing into mainstream culture, which expanded the boundaries of tattooing and allowed it to enter into new spheres, such as that of art. However, those same musicians were also ultimately responsible for the demise of traditional tattooing practices. The absorption of tattooing by mainstream culture had removed the tattoo from its deviant context and therefore stripped tattooing of its aura in a cultural process theorized by Walter Benjamin. The tattoo, then, was left vulnerable to redefinition by all demographics and social institutions, a situation of which corporate America took advantage in order to reinvent the tattoo as a marketing tool and, subsequently, as a commodity. Commodification so distanced the tattoo from its socially mutinous roots that the only hope for the traditional tattoo to reclaim its aura, its meaning, and its cultural significance may lie in an entirely new start. In his tirade against the trendiness of Los Angeles, including the practice of tattooing, and the total
abandon with which pop culture idolizers subscribe to it, Maynard of Tool may have described this course of action best – “The only way to fix it is to flush it all away.”  

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