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### OPINION ARTICLE

## Skin as Material and Medium for Artistic Creation

### La piel: soporte y materia en la creación artística

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When we were children, we would draw wristwatches, colorful rings, or our friends' telephone numbers on the backs of our hands and crib sheets with notes of mathematical formulae or endless lists of kings and queens on our palms. Having a bath or sweating would erase those works of art or mini-encyclopedias. During those early years, our skin was the canvas on which our rudimentary artistic efforts were often expressed: our skin certainly played a role that stretched well beyond its mere biological function.

We use our bodies for note-taking, drawing, or temporarily tattooing the name of a person we like. We may even mark our skin with permanent scars, unerasable signs for the body and the mind. They are, after all, tattoos; some are ephemeral, like the paintings used by ancient tribes in their rituals, and others resemble the tattooed anchors that adorned the shoulders of explorers and seamen.

Tattoos have now become just another fashion craze. Formerly, they identified social outcasts or convicts; today they are worn by teenagers and young people from good families who tattoo their skin to mark their own identity with urban tribes, as a sign of self-affirmation and individualization within the social group to which they belong.<sup>1</sup>

Our skin reflects our personal histories. Through it, we can see what we have experienced and what has marked

us; we can decipher the traces of time. We read the skin, observing the details that betray whether people have been sun-damaged, whether they have some form of dermatosis, or whether they bear the scars of accidents or operations. Our history remains in our memories and also on our skin.

Body Art<sup>2</sup> is the name given to practices in which artists specifically use their bodies as a medium and as material for artistic creation. Some artists do so fictitiously and others work directly on the real body, which is then used, cut, painted, and sewn up as part of modern rituals that have close ties to those of primitive tribes. These practices do not leave the onlooker indifferent and generally cause astonishment and alarm because they do not stop at mere scarifications. Although there is evidence to suggest otherwise, it was not until the 1970s that this practice became a trend.

In these modern times, decorating the surface and final frontier of the body, the skin itself, has led to a huge variety of responses that range from conceiving of skin as a mere medium for visual work to taking on the notion that it envelops something or serves as a frontier.

A wide range of artists have used the skin as a means of expression. For the leading character in the film, *The Pillow Book* (1995),<sup>3</sup> directed by Peter Greenaway, the skin of her lovers, and indeed her own, provides a vehicle for a private diary. On their naked bodies, she writes books that she expects to be published. The body becomes a site of intervention, a location where different kinds of sensations can also be measured.

The work of painter Arnulf Rainier is based on manipulating photographs or previously printed images.<sup>4</sup> This method of

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drawing on areas of bodies, whether the artist's own or another's, and acting on them is also found in a series of works by Annette Messager in which she creates something like relics that pay tribute to the body. She makes this explicit with the title, *My Trophies*. This series is loaded with tribal references shown through tattoos and other marks that tell stories written a posteriori and piecemeal directly on her body. In this artist's work, the body is the bearer of messages, like a book or a memoir. Another interesting case is that of photographer and painter, Helena Almeida, who manipulates her own image in black and white through paintings or texts on skin.<sup>5</sup>

Alberto García-Alix focuses his gaze on the tattooed individuals of urban tribes, people close to the artist, and on his own body. He has turned his attention to semi-marginal individuals whose existence is portrayed as a challenge and a promise of personal freedom in the oppressive world we live in. A tattoo becomes an intrinsic part of their characters. Achieved through pain and loss of blood, it will remain as a permanent reminder-part and parcel of their identity.<sup>4</sup>

Brazilian Miguel Rio Branco, on the other hand, focuses on time, feelings, the inner workings of life, and on sensations, all areas that cannot be easily named. In this case, the subjects of his photographs are marked in many different ways. Rio Branco construes the passing of time through scars, marks, ritual paintings, or tattoos that speak for themselves.<sup>6</sup> The skin of each individual tells a tale; it is a demonstration that life exists with its pains and pleasures, the good and the bad along the road.

Skin is the stage where various characters step out: the markings are signs that may be accidental, voluntary, or ritualistic. They all reflect the identity of the character who breathes life into them by displaying them. This is where Richard Avedon's photograph (1969) of Andy Warhol slots in as it depicts the artist's torso covered in scars after surgery. The photograph draws the camera away from the customary portrait of the face towards what distinguishes the person, a biographical event, or the physical traces of that event. Whether they are unwanted signs that remind us of interventions by action artists or scarifications representing tribal art, body markings are important manifestations in some dark-skinned ethnic groups because the color of the ink beneath the skin is practically invisible, hence the use of scars or raised marks—authentic bas-reliefs.

A certain allusion to scarification can be found in Hannah Wilke's *SOS Scarification Object Series*, which features photographs of the artist with different-colored chewing gum stuck to various parts of her body. There is something perplexing in these images, which suggest papules, pustules, nodules, and even warts, molluscum, and tumors-skin diseases but on young desirable bodies. Photography also forms the backbone of Danielle Buetti's work. The fictitious scarifications we see in her manipulated images—fire-branded inscriptions, with signs saying *Bulgari* or *Lancôme*—allude to the body as merchandise. Like cattle bearing the brand of the stockbreeder, the models' bodies are marked by strange papules or inscriptions that stand out from the skin in bas-relief. Buetti's accusation is that the body is merchandise, and she emphasizes evidence that

these women's bodies belong neither to them nor to the onlooker. Instead, they are owned by the corporations that manufacture and handle them: the models are branded with permanent scars that become part of their flesh and skin.

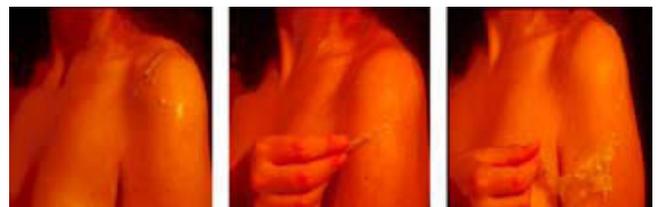
Actions aimed directly at the body (creating wounds, lesions, pain) are more radical. This time the mutilation is real; the body is attacked, bound. In the 1960s, the skin was subjected to extreme pictorial events. Viennese actionists deposited food, blood, guts, excrement, and various kinds of paint on their naked bodies. Günter Brus and Hermann Nitsch were part of this group, and their work clearly gives prominence to the human skin in performances dominated by practices that grew out of a variety of pictorial traditions.

A clear exponent of body art is North American artist Dennis Oppenheim. In his work, *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* (1970), the author spent 5 hours in the sun with a book on his belly. He photographed himself before and afterwards with the white outline left by the book on his bronzed body, evidence of the performance.<sup>7</sup>

The passing of time, the accumulation of experience, and the importance of the body for taking the measure of both are the themes these practices allude to, in a cultural climate favorable to such inventiveness. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw many examples of self-punishment, involving the infliction of real wounds on the body of the artist. For each of these artists, their work had a clear aim, whether to denounce, to underscore a particular feature, or merely to prove they could do it. In either case, many chose skin as a medium through which to express their concerns.

These practices still continue today and students at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Granada, Spain, work more or less directly with the idea of the skin as a medium and a material for their creations. Their interest leads them to enroll in dermatology courses, particularly in our *Skin and Skincare* course, to obtain free-elective credits while learning more about this organ and its pathology as a basis for their art.

During her art studies at our university, María Jiménez constructed, or rather elaborated, a second skin on her body that acts as a barrier against others (Figure 1) in the face of external aggression that may cause either physical or psychological wounds, a mask she will only remove in private in front of people she trusts. This is skin as frontier, binding us to others or separating us from them; it is a metaphor for the clothing and housing that shelter a fragile, vulnerable body.



**Figure 1** The work of María Jiménez, a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Granada, Spain.



**Figure 2** A work by Mario Pellejer, a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Granada, Spain.



**Figure 3** A work by Mario Pellejer, a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Granada, Spain.

The relationship between clothing and skin is apparent in several pieces Mario Pellejer did while a student at the University of Granada (Figures 2-4). Sewing a glove to his hand or making a shirt that is a perfect fit suggest this relationship. It recognizes the desire to fuse these



**Figure 4** Work by Mario Pellejer, a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Granada, Spain.

garments with the skin, so that they become part of the body and fulfill a function: protection.

In these art works that use skin as an artistic medium and in which new tendencies and concerns transform the artist's conception into curious images inviting the onlooker to reflect, the artists present us with a different perspective of skin and skin disorders.

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