

Decoration, Mutilation and Reclamation

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Since the beginning of our existence, humans have felt a need for cultural and self-expression - it is an integral part of our history. One such form of expression is body decoration: painting, ornamentation and modification. The motives behind such activities are complex and diverse; they range from tribal rites to reclamation of the body. Others may adorn themselves for ritual or sexual purposes.

In modern Western culture, there has recently been an uprising of "neo-primitivism," especially of body piercing, and there is much controversy surrounding this new trend and its implications. This growing mode of expression often involves shocking and highly visual practices and is most apparent in alienated groups in society, such as the Punk movement, where it is used to "free" them from social constraints. It has been explained by many sociologists and cultural anthropologists that this inclination towards the physical is a way of changing the only thing individuals feel they have power over: their own bodies. In a world where there is an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and loss of control, where technology has taken over our lives, it is a way of reclaiming not only the physical but the sexual as well. There are many aspects to this, but in my mind there are three main ways of looking at the sexuality of body decoration: 1) as fashion, 2) as repression, mutilation and control, and 3) as a way of marking life's journey and reclaiming one's own body. Examples of all three exist throughout history.

Decoration, Fashion and Status

Decoration and modification of sexual areas of the body goes back a long way, especially in terms of piercing. Trukese women of Polynesia pierced their labia to attract suitors. Piercing of the foreskin is believed to have evolved from a practice in ancient Greece during the Olympic Games (around 776 BC). Athletes competed in the nude and to keep



PRINCE ALBERT

their genitals from moving around, they tied a ribbon from the ring to the base of their penis. Romans pierced the prepuce of athletes and slaves with rings called fibulas - this prevented erections which might cause distractions. The Prince Albert was originally called a "dressing ring" and was used to secure the penis against the leg in Victorian times when tight pants were in style; to this day it is still used by some scuba divers to control the flow of urine into a designated receptacle. Piercing of the nipples isn't new either - Roman centurions wore nipple rings as a sign of virility and to hold up their capes. Queen Isabelle made popular a style of dress which had an open collar to the navel, this led to the adornment of the nipples, since they were

clearly exposed.

There are some practices, past and present, which aren't so pleasant and do not serve any decorative purposes - only cultural ones. The difference between decoration and mutilation is that decoration does not have negative functional consequences. The act of mutilation which people are most aware of is the clitoridectomy. In Kenya, Sudan and Somalia it is still a fairly common practise to perform this genital occlusion on young women as a reinforcer of cultural values. Clitoridectomies are a way of oppressing and controlling women: it negates their sexuality. This process of infibulation involves the removal of the clitoris and inner labia, then the vulva is sewn shut, leaving only a small hole for urine and menstrual blood to pass through. The woman is cut open by her husband after marriage, but has no sensation during intercourse and is often sewn shut again after childbirth. Refusal to comply with these standards often results in ridicule or even exclusion from the society, although the operation has been outlawed for some time.

Other less extreme practices are also performed on men. In some cultures, it is still the custom for all boys to be circumcised at age fourteen, without anesthetic. If he should flinch or cry out, his family will be dishonoured. The Victorian era, famous for its sexual repression, offered special

apparatuses for men which prevented masturbation - a chastity belt of sorts. Even now the "Oetang" ring is jewelry worn by some African tribesmen when they go off on a long hunt - it is a large metal ring through the foreskin which prevents them from having intercourse while away from their wives.

This is a hard topic to give examples for,



THE HAFADA

although it is just as important and prevalent. Identification of sexuality through ritual does not exist, or has been lost, in our culture. That is to say: we have no passage rites to celebrate our sexuality or coming of age. Among many African tribes, both boys and girls are scarred on the face at puberty to mark their new found sexuality. Often women of these same tribes are remarked after bearing a child. The ampallang, an uncommon

piercing in North America, originates from tribe living around the Indian Ocean. The piercing is performed by an old woman during puberty rites and involves pushing a metal bar horizontally through the centre of the head of the penis, above the urethra. This enhances pleasure for both the male and female during intercourse and many women from that region will refuse sex with a man who does not have one. Many Arab youths, when they reach manhood, are given a silver stud or ring at their celebration. The jewelry is inserted through the left side of scrotum, between the testicles, at the base of the penis. This piercing, called a "hafada," is believed to prevent the testes from ever returning to the groin, it is a sign that a boy has become a man.

Sexual reclamation through body modifications is a fairly new phenomenon. For various reasons, people are reasserting their own role in their sexuality. By piercing "sexual" body parts, a growing number of people are promoting a personal recognition of sexuality. Among feminist circles, it symbolises women's regaining control of their bodies in a patriarchal society. In gay culture, many men and women are using their bodies to show their pride in their lifestyle.

Employed in the sex trade

JENN BROWN

THE BRUNSWICKAN

Prostitution is a job.

It's a job with no unemployment benefits, no government regulations to protect the employees, and no health plan, but a job none the less. Movies like "Pretty Women" depict prostitution as fun or perhaps glamorous, but this is far from the case. I had the opportunity to talk with a former prostitute and discuss his experiences while he was working. The experiences discussed are strictly his and not necessarily those of all prostitutes. He will be called Dan for the purposes of this article. He has requested to have his name left out because he is no longer in the business. Dan is a thirty year old student living in a major Canadian city and he has been out of the business for about a year now.

The questions that I asked Dan were the ones that I thought most people would want to ask if they were given the opportunity to talk to a former prostitute.

The first, and I thought most important question was, "Why?" Dan told me "Well, you know sometimes you've got to do what you've got to do to survive. If there is no money coming in you've got to go else where to make it."

After a person decides that they are going to become a prostitute the next logical question is "How?" When I asked Dan how he got into the business he said, "I talked to a few friends who were in the business and they hooked me up with a few of their clients to start out with. Then I just kind of made my own... No pimps involved," he added.

When Dan and I discussed his feelings about the job he told me that he didn't enjoy it. "To be honest with you, I didn't like it and I looked

at it as work. There was nothing pleasurable about it."

Safety for a prostitute is always a big problem and we talked about that for a while. I asked Dan if he was ever afraid and he said, "Well sure, you know you meet these strange people on the street and you really don't know what is going to happen to you." Dan's safety device of choice was a straight razor. "You never know what kind of weirdos you are going to meet." Fortunately for Dan he never had to use the razor. He was one of the lucky ones.

Customers are a very important part of any

they would call you but you would never hear from them."

For Dan safe sex was very important. "It was always safe sex. What I would do with the person depended on the person and how much they wanted to pay, but the sex was always safe."

A question I also felt was necessary to ask was, "How did you let it be known that you were working?" About that Dan told me, "It depended on the area where you stood. There were plenty of areas where male prostitutes just hang and the people who wanted to knew exactly how to find them."

Dan was in the business on and off for three years, and in that time he hid it from most of the people he knew. His parents and most of his best friends didn't know what he was doing. He worked in both a small town and in a larger city. When I asked him if there were any major differences between the two he said, "Well, there is more money in a bigger town," and about the safety issue, "In the smaller city I knew my way around. No matter what end of town I was in I could get home if there was trouble. But, in a big city you never know where you are going to end up or how far you actually have to go to get back."

The last question that I asked Dan before ending our talk was why he stopped. "Why did I stop? I was tired of it, and at the end of it the money wasn't all that good. Sometimes you would stand on the corner for two or three hours and maybe have one car stop for you. Plus, I consider myself better than that now. I'm not saying that I'm better than everyone else, but you know, I'm going to school now and I want to make something of my life and standing on a corner just doesn't cut it."



JUDSON DELONG PHOTO

business but when it comes to something this personal, the customer becomes even more important. When I asked Dan about his customers, he told me a few basic facts. "They were all men. All different ages. Right down from eighteen up to the oldest one being around fifty." I asked Dan if his customers were regulars or if it was different each time. "I did have a couple of regulars but most of them were one time only type of things. They would say that