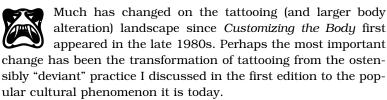# Preface to the Revised and Expanded Edition

In those days, a tattoo was still a souvenir—a keepsake to mark a journey, the love of your life, a heartbreak, a port of call. The body was like a photo album; the tattoos themselves didn't have to be good photographs. . . . And the old tattoos were always sentimental: you didn't mark yourself for life if you weren't sentimental (Irving, 2005: 74–75).

Much has changed on the tattooing (and larger body alteration) landscape since *Customizing the Body* first appeared in the late 1980s. Perhaps the most important change has been the transformation of tattooing from the ostensibly "deviant" practice I discussed in the first edition to the popular cultural phenomenon it is today.

There are (at least) three criteria sociologists use to define an activity, perspective, or appearance as fitting into the category of "deviant." First, the phenomenon could be seen as constituting or causing some sort of social harm. Since much of what might be considered to be socially harmful rests on the values of the person or persons doing the defining, what is regarded as "bad" behavior, "disgusting" or "shocking" appearance, or "inappropriate" thoughts is largely a matter of taste (though sociologists tend to overlay their personal tastes with a legitimating patina of theory). A second way of understanding deviance is to see it simply as something that is relatively rare. This "statistical" orientation, of course, has some presumed relationship to the values/harm model since what is bad by definition is presumed to be appealing to only a relatively small number of twisted, misguided, or unfortunate people.

A third, and to my mind the most useful, way of thinking about social deviance is to see it as behavior, thoughts, or appearances that are widely regarded as "bad." Consequently, when those who engage in the bad behavior, think the bad thoughts, or publically

display their bad appearance come to the attention of some audience or another, they are subjected to punishment or some other kind of negative social reaction. This third orientation has the advantage of making a distinction between breaking rules and being "deviant" in that deviance is defined as that which is the focus of social reaction. A person might break rules and not be found out—he or she is a rule-breaker but not a deviant—or one could not break rules and still be "falsely accused" of being a violator—he or she is a deviant but not a rule-breaker. It is especially useful for understanding the shifting social definition of tattooing and other forms of permanent body modification in that this "labeling" perspective (deviance as a socially applied label) incorporates the central idea that defined deviance changes over time, from culture to culture, and depends on just who is doing the defining (see Becker, 1963; Goode, 2005: 86-93; Rubington and Weinberg, 2002).

Tattooing and, to a somewhat lesser degree, other modes of body alteration have been "de-deviantized" since the early 1990s in light of the last two definitions of deviance. Tattooing has become more widely practiced (that is, more popular) and has, therefore, come to be seen as less odd, unusual, rebellious, or otherwise deviant. In general, those things your friends do are significantly less likely to be negatively regarded than are those things strangers do.

Although I see it as wise to take the findings of survey research with considerable skepticism, polls conducted in the early– to mid–1990s suggested that somewhere between 3 and 10 percent of the general population were tattooed (Anderson, 1992; Armstrong and McConnell, 1994; Armstrong and Pace-Murphy, 1997). Recently, a study conducted by Anne Laumann, a dermatologist at Northwestern University, revealed that 24 percent of American adults between the ages of 18 and 50 are tattooed and one in seven had a body piercing somewhere other than the earlobe (nearly one-third of young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 said they were pierced) (Laumann and Derick, 2006).

The movement of tattooing into the realm of popular culture displays certain features of the contemporary culture industry and reveals how fad-like phenomena emerge. Culture producers, beset by the problem of "commercial uncertainty" (that is, what popular cultural products will or will not be successful [see Sanders, 1990]), are constantly on the lookout for new materials

with potential commercial appeal. Typically, the producers keep an eye on the interests, activities, and appearance of those outside the boundaries of social power. The tastes and entertainment and material interests of minorities, teenagers, disaffected urban residents, and other "outsiders" are filched by the culture industry, cleaned up and homogenized, avidly promoted as the latest thing, and sold to the larger consumer market. In short, the major source of innovation in popular culture is in the materials and activities of the relatively poor and powerless; innovation flows up the stream of power.

This process has impelled the movement of tattooing into popular culture. Beginning with the "tattoo renaissance" of the 1960s (discussed in Chapter 1), musicians, movie actors, and other entertainment figures admired and followed by young people started acquiring and displaying tattoos. Similarly, sports figures—typically from minority and/or impoverished backgrounds—were tattooed. Despite the fact that most of the tattoos displayed by entertainers and (especially) athletes look as if they were done by eight-year-olds with magic markers, the fact that admired public figures were tattooed gave tattooing a certain popular cultural cachet.

While exposure by key figures in the mediated popular culture is an important factor in the rise and dissemination of cultural interests and products, cultural innovation and the consumption of particular materials also derive from people's immediate social networks and contacts. As we see in Chapter 2, an important factor in people's decisions to get tattooed is that their friends or family members sport tattoos. Understandably then, as more people are tattooed, more people have contact with those who are tattooed, and more people see it as reasonable or desirable to acquire a tattoo. Cultural popularity is a form of contagion.

As tattooing has inserted itself into mainstream popular culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it has been thematically assimilated into a variety of media materials. At this writing, television viewers have access to such tattoo-themed shows as "Miami Ink" on TLC, "Inked" on A&E, and "Tattoo Stories" on FUSE. Popular memoirs such as Emily Jenkins's *Tongue First* (1998) and serious novels like John Irving's *Until I Find You* (2005) and Sarah Hall's *Electric Michelangelo* (2005), a finalist for 2004's Man Booker Prize, feature tattooing and tattooists. Mass market booksellers like Borders and Barnes & Noble have a vari-

ety of tattoo-oriented titles such as *International Tattoo Art*, *Skin & Ink*, and *Tattoo Magazine* on their magazine racks. Clearly, tattooing has moved out of the dark underground of the 1950s into the spotlight of mainstream commercial culture.

Given the "mainstreaming" of tattooing, the declining power of the tattoo to generate what I call (after Quentin Bell) "conspicuous outrage" becomes an interesting issue. When the traffic cop who stops you for speeding or the youth minister in your church sports a tattoo, the mark clearly has lost a considerable amount of stigma potential. The issue then becomes "How can those who fit into or aspire to the common social category of 'rebel' visibly demonstrate their divergent identities?" The question "What is next on the horizon of rebellious body alteration?" is commonly tossed at me by the journalists who still call me when they have been assigned filler stories for the leisure section of their papers. When I choose to catch the question, I usually make note of the rising popularity of full-body tattooing and multiple piercings and less frequently encountered, and usually startling, alterations such as extensive facial tattooing and surgical implants of horns, feline-like wire whiskers, and bladders that can be inflated or deflated for appearance-altering effect.

In addition to being incorporated into the lucrative world of popular culture, in the latter part of the twentieth century tattooing also became more firmly situated in the world of "serious" art. The general issue of what products constitute "art" and what factors increase or decrease the likelihood that an activity is deemed "artistic" and an actor is defined as an "artist," was the primary focus of Chapter 5 in the first edition of *Customizing the Body* and is an issue we touch upon again in the 2008 Epilogue. Continuing the trend detailed previously, tattooing has remained a focus of attention as academics have continued to produce "serious" analyses, museums and galleries have continued to mount shows of tattoo works, and specialty publishers have continued to produce pricey coffee-table books containing photos and discussions of tattoo works. Tattooing has even been incorporated into a particular "school" of art. Those like Herbert Gans (1999) who espouse an egalitarian view of art that rejects the hierarchical distinction between "high" (serious, real, traditional) art and "low" (popular, mass, "brutal") art commonly see avant garde art as resting on the border between the simple world of commercial

popular culture and the complex aesthetic world of high art where materials are created by specialists ("artists"), evaluated by experts ("critics"), and consumed by monied "collectors." Since the early 1990s, this border space between popular culture and traditional art has been taken over by the expansive category of "lowbrow" art (whose representatives derogatorily refer to traditional fine art as "art-school art"). Grounded on the underground art of the 1960s, and in reaction to the arid, theory-heavy installations that dominated conventional artistic work in the 1980s and 1990s, lowbrow art (sometimes labeled "outlaw art" or "l'art de toilette" by adherents) is composed of such diverse types of products as graffiti art, car art, underground comix, limited-production toys and statuary, customized clothing, "art brut," record-album art, black-velvet paintings, pulp art, poster art, prison art, tiki art, anime and manga, pulp art, and tattooing. Inspired by the dadaists and surrealists of the 1920s and 1930s, advocates and practitioners of lowbrow art reject the constraints imposed by critics, mainstream gallery owners, and other central players in the conventional art world and create an art that is self-consciously representational, dismisses the baggage of art theory, and revels in the aesthetic tastes displayed in urban, street-level culture. Clearly, tattooing has found a home in an established, if somewhat unruly, segment of the larger art world.

Despite its rising popularity and tentative incursion into the world of (at least marginally) legitimate art, it is still reasonable, I would maintain, to regard tattooing (and other forms of permanent body alteration) through the conceptual lens provided by the sociology of deviance. Quite a bit of ink has been spilled recently over the issue of whether "deviance" continues to be a viable and useful analytic category (see, for example, Goode, 2002, 2003; Hendershott, 2002; Sumner, 1994). I have no desire to enter this debate other than to say that I find many of the arguments offered by those who celebrate the "death" of deviance to be unconvincing at best. Creating rules is an elemental feature of social life and, consequently, violating rules and reacting to those violations are of equal importance. Studying misbehavior has been, and continues to be, central to the sociological enterprise. Given its focus on the tattoo as a boundary-setting mark, a sign of subcultural membership, and a potentially stigmatizing identity enhancement and tattooing as a disvalued, officially regulated or

prohibited, and secretive occupational practice, *Customizing the Body* was, and is, a study in the sociology of deviance.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on one's perspective—body modification still retains some of its unconventional character and marks practitioners as "deviants." A writer to the advice columnist Amy Dickinson ("Ask Amy") recently complained:

> You mentioned in a recent column that many people between 18 and 29 have tattoos. Sorry, but when you see people with a tattoo or piercing you can't help but question what they were thinking or whether they were even in their right minds when getting it. If these people were forced to have these atrocities done to them, we'd never hear the end of it. But to think they are willingly defacing their God-given bodies in this way is deplorable and despicable! (*The Hartford Courant*, July 30, 2006, p. D5).

To her credit, Amy did not agree.

Additional evidence of the continuing negative definition of tattooing was seen in 2007 when the U.S. Marine Corps banned new, large, publically visible tattoos. The Marine Corps Commandant observed that some marines are "tattooing themselves to a point that it is contrary to our professional demeanor and the high standards America has come to expect from us" (*The Hartford Courant*, March 29, 2007, p. A15).

Many corporations and businesses have a similar orientation to "body art," at least when displayed on public skin. Major corporations such as Wal-Mart and Disney, for example, bar employees from having visible body decorations (*The Week*, July 20, 2007, p. 35) and a 1999 survey conducted by researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles found that 90 percent of campus recruiters disapprove of tattoos (Kang and Jones, 2007: 46). This negative response to tattooing has generated some understandable resistance as heavily tattooed people have begun to discuss their problems with employers as a form of discrimination and to talk about initiating legal action (Wessel, 2007).

Clearly then, tattooing retains some of its deviant baggage despite the cultural changes that have occurred since *Customizing the Body* first appeared. Employers still reject tattooed job applicants and parents still bemoan their children's decisions to get

tattooed ("What breaks my heart is the inevitability that [my son] will suffer for this. Whether it's the pain of tattoo removal or, worse yet, the anguish of regret, he will suffer" [Desocio, 2007]). The medical, psycho-therapeutic, and public health industries continue to cast body alteration as a dangerous practice and/or indicative of underlying pathologies. And researchers have developed a tattoo ink (Freedom-2) that may be removed with just one laser treatment and, therefore, requires somewhat less commitment on the part of tattooees (*The Week*, July 13, 2007, p. 22). Given this continuing negative response to tattooing and tattooed people, it is reasonable to see the presentation of tattooing as a deviant occupational practice, the tattooed person as someone who runs the risk of being the focus of negative social reaction, and the "tattoo community" as a deviant subculture that follow to be instructive and worthwhile.

Although *Customizing the Body* turned out to be, I am told, a rousing success in the world of university presses, it enjoyed only moderate attention in the larger media universe. Getting in on the ground floor of a popular cultural phenomenon does generate a certain amount of media attention, and I soon found myself on the journalists' golden Rolodex. In the 1990s I was interviewed for stories in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *Newsweek*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Esquire*, and a number of smaller publications. I also appeared in special tattoo segments on NBC, the Discovery Channel, TLC, and a variety of local programs. While I sometimes found my conversations with journalists and media figures to be relatively interesting, interviewers frequently asked the same basic questions ("Why does someone get a tattoo?" "Does it hurt?" "What would you tell a parent whose child wants to get a tattoo?"), and dealing with the media soon became rather tiresome. Unfortunately, once one's name gets attached to a particular "hot" cultural topic a kind of academic "role entrapment" occurs—until the topic cooled I was hounded for comments even long after my active research interest in the issue was over.

Less tiresome were the calls, letters, and, later, e-mails I received from everyday people who had read the book or seen my comments in the media. The most common communication was from people who had finally decided to get a first tattoo after reading *Customizing the Body*. Some personal tales of initial hesitance

and eventual identity transformation were quite touching and re-inforced many of the basic ideas in the book. For example:

> I had wanted a tattoo since high school . . . but never had the mental courage to get one because of expected major disapproval of family, friends and colleagues. . . . [T]he desire was often suppressed because of little exposure to tattoos. . . . However, I found and enjoyed [biker magazines]. I envied the biker lifestyle image, was discontented by my rigid 9-to-5/8-to-11 television lifestyle and pissed off at my fear of getting a tattoo. . . . Thus, at the age of about 48, I told my wife for about the fourth time, usually late at night, what I wanted to do, and, with a tiny amount of support, I went . . . and got a 6-inch tiger inked on my arm. My wife, surprisingly, after a few days said she liked it, but said not to get any more. Nevertheless, . . . I got an equal sized dragon [on the other arm]. Each time I see them in a mirror, I am amazed how . . . good they look and, bottom line, I am glad to have them. There is no mistaking I am now a tattooed person.

In addition to tales of tattoo decisions and experiences (commonly accompanied by photographs), I received numerous requests from students for help with papers, theses, or disserta-tions; requests from tattoo artists to support their applications to zoning boards reluctant to grant their applications to open shops; a request to testify to the superiority of a newly developed laser tattoo removal system (I declined); and a tentative request from the editor of a popular tattoo publication that I consider writing a column for the magazine (again, I declined).

Reviews for *Customizing the Body* were generally positive. For example, *Kirkus Reviews* called it "the most intelligent book avail-able to date on the modern aspects of an increasingly popular form of body decoration" and *Choice* labeled it a "fascinating and well-written study." Reviews directed at sociological or academic audi-ences (such as in *Contemporary Sociology*, the *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Communications Research*, *Symbolic Interaction*, and the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*) were similarly approving.

The book was also reviewed in specialized, non-academic publi-cations such as *Tattoo Magazine*, *Body Art*, and *Piercing Fans International Quarterly*. Somewhat to my surprise, these reviews

were also quite positive (for example, "the book is a wellspring for the novice fan seeking information about tattooing, and it will give even those who think they know all about tattooing a fresh look at many aspects of the art"). While some reviewers (in both academic and non-academic publications) praised my attempt to present tattooing in reasonably accessible prose, the responses of some commentators to the sociological content was not always entirely favorable. For example, after a fairly positive opening, one reviewer for a British body modification publication observed:

> [T]he book is not without its problems. In particular, Sanders' use of the sort of writing style which afflicts most academic sociologists will cause many a reader . . . to exclaim "What Bullshit!" and hurl the book across the room. . . .
> Nevertheless, I strongly urge anyone interested in this . . . occupational world to stick with it . . . because, despite its jargon, sociology does have a way of putting an interesting slant on things which will surprise even those who have been involved with tattoos all their lives. And . . . because the numerous quotes from tattooists and their customers are so often spot on and delightful.

It is sometimes difficult to tell the negative reviews from the positive ones.

The initial spurt and continuing dribble of media attention generated by *Customizing the Body* were moderately ego gratifying but the more significant personal consequences of writing the book had to do with my career as an academic sociologist. I received a number of requests from journals and other publications to write pieces on tattooing and body modification. At first, I was pathologically agreeable when confronted by these requests (see Sanders, 1991, 1998, 2000, 2001). As time went on and my research interests moved on to other things, I passed on the majority of these requests to younger (and more actively involved) colleagues.

One of the consequences of the appearance of my research on tattooing with which I am most pleased is that it helped legitimate academic research on purposive body alteration and prompted, to a greater or lesser degree, a number of young sociologists to explore the general topic. *Customizing the Body* laid the groundwork for later investigations by Angus Vail (1999a, 1999b), Katherine

Irwin (2001, 2003), Kim Hewitt (1997), Margo DeMello (2000), Michael Atkinson (2003) and other young social scientists. One of the best things to happen because of my book was that Angus Vail, the co-author of this edition, enrolled in the sociology graduate program at my university and began to work with me on his doctorate. As we discuss in the Epilogue, Angus moved beyond my interest in tattooing as a form of voluntary deviance and focused primarily on tattoo artists and serious collectors as interactants in an established art world, thus expanding the idea I proposed in 1989—that tattooing is an interesting issue that can be examined using the analytic tools offered by the sociology of art.

The relevance of *Customizing the Body t*o the sociological analysis of art is, to my mind, the book's greatest virtue and its most important contribution. I rely on the view of art as a product created through cooperative activities of people interacting within the occupational network of an art world that was originally proposed by Howard Becker (1974) in a seminal article published in the *American Sociological Review*. Becker expanded on this perspective in his book *Art Worlds* (1982) where he emphasized that the work of creating art was not a unique activity and that products regarded as "art" were designated as such within a stratified occupational world organized around shared conventional understandings. In *Customizing the Body* I use the case of tattooing to explore which factors increase or decrease the likelihood that an activity will be defined as "artistic," its product defined as "art," and/or the worker producing it defined as an "artist."

Despite this central focus of the book—its expansion of the "institutional" perspective within the sociology of art—*Customizing the Body* has had little impact in that particular area of sociology. While often mentioned within the substantive context of the sociology of deviance or popular culture, the book has rarely, if ever, been referred to by sociologists working in the larger arena of artistic production. In my experience, sociologists who focus on the arts tend to be a somewhat elitist bunch and are inclined to study and discuss "established," conventional, or "fine" arts. These works tend to have an aesthetic and art-history spin to them (see, for example, Crane, 1987; Halle, 1993; Martorella, 1982; Zolberg, 1990) and it would be unlikely that many sociologists of the arts would pay much attention to an ethnography of such a plebeian practice as tattooing.

One need only to take in a couple of episodes of "Inked" or "Miami Ink" to recognize that much of what I wrote about tattooing in the late 1980s continues to be relevant. The occupational world of tattooing and the interactions that take place within the tattoo shop are essentially the same as I first described them. The impact of the tattoo on the recipient's personal and social identity and the symbolic meaning of the tattoo for the tattooee have not changed. What has changed, as I have mentioned, is that tattoo consumption has spread widely within Western culture, and simply wearing a tattoo no longer stigmatizes the tattooed person or acts to outrage members of conventional society. The fad-like spread of tattooing and its incorporation into popular culture have decreased its power to symbolize rebellion.

However, these changes have not made tattooing and other forms of permanent body modification any less sociologically interesting or significant. What Angus Vail and I have done in expanding and updating *Customizing the Body* is to provide an account of the changes that have occurred within the artistic and cultural world of tattooing and the larger world of body alteration in the past decade and a half. One change—and a fairly superficial one—is seen in the rise and decline in popularity of certain tattoo styles and images. As we emphasize in the Epilogue, innovations in the technology of tattooing are partially responsible for stylistic changes. More fundamental changes have occurred in the increased availability of specialized tattoo and body art publications and the related changes in the established organizations that mount tattoo conventions and compete for dominance in the larger tattoo world.

As the tattoo world has expanded, established tattooists and tattoo organizations at the local, national, and international levels have lost their ability to control entry into and knowledge of the "hidden" techniques of tattooing. This is another key issue we present in the Epilogue. The decline of the traditional apprenticeship structure discussed in Chapter 3 has "softened" the borders of tattooing practice and has led, as we emphasize, to an occupational world in which behavior previously seen as not permissible is now more common.

We also explore the central actors in the tattoo world—those who are serious and committed collectors, who spend considerable sums on their collections, who are most familiar with the

aesthetic conventions of tattooing, and who patronize the most skilled practitioners of the art/craft. The conventions used by these committed collectors to plan and execute their collections are presented in some detail. We then explore the more extreme fringes to which body alteration has moved, due, in large part, to the desire of some (typically young) members of the society to outrage and to symbolically set themselves apart from mainstream society and its more conformist and conventional elements. Finally, we present the "serious" literature on tattooing and other forms of purposive body modification that has emerged since 1989. As seen in Chapter 2, prior to the publication of *Customizing the Body* there was only a very limited body of academic discussion. Apart from the anthropological discussions, most of this material emphasized the medical dangers of tattooing and the psycho-pathological factors that impelled people to permanently decorate their bodies. As we stress in the Epilogue, this sort of psycho-medical bias is still common in the literature. However, arguably prompted by the perspective offered in the first edition of *Customizing the Body*, much of the more recent literature on body alteration is less condemning and more appreciative.

Angus and I see ethnography as, most centrally, an attempt to reveal a world that is relatively unfamiliar to the reader. In encountering this unfamiliar world, the reader, we hope, will come to realize that the worlds and actors that may appear to be rather bizarre at first glance have ordinary interests and pursue ordinary goals just like the rest of us. As Erving Goffman (1961) so eloquently put it when introducing his ethnography of a mental institution:

> It . . . still is my belief that any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject (pp. ix–x).

In the following pages we hope to introduce you to a social world that is both exotic and ordinary, and we base our portrayal on years of being and interacting with tattooed people. We hope this

exposure whets your curiosity and, with *Customizing the Body* as your tour guide, prompts you to venture out into the often mundane, sometimes bizarre, but always interesting, world of body modification on your own.

> *[T]he tattoo culture on display at Daughter Alice made Jack ashamed of his mother's "art." . . . The old maritime tattoos, the sentiments of sailors collecting souvenirs on their bodies, had been replaced by tasteless displays of hostility and violence and evil . . . skulls spurting blood, flames licking the corners of the skeletons' eye sockets. . . . Jack took Claudia aside and said to her: "Generally speaking, attractive people don't get tattooed." But this wasn't strictly true. . . .* (Irving, 2005: 339–340).