Lords of Misrule:
Embodied Masculinities within Vernacular Arts Practices

by

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M.A. (Liberal Studies), Simon Fraser University, 2006

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the
Arts Education Program
Faculty of Education

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Simon Fraser University
Summer 2012

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Abstract

Today maleness and art processes are in a state of flux. In the former case meaning and identity are questioned, and long-standing skills face ongoing technological change in the latter. Each has educational implications. This study addresses these issues by exploring masculine expressiveness within vernacular art practices, in order to discern qualities that may enable young men to create a sense of self through personal agency.

A purposeful sense of who one is in relation to one’s fellows and the world, which we term identity, is essential to both individual growth, and collective human development. Though young people construct their own identities, educators may offer frameworks for doing so that are either in opposition to, or supportive of, their students’ inclinations; both can be equally valuable. Embodied agency, which, in the broadest definitional sense, means art, or art-like, activities, is salient as it too involves doing or making something, not merely thinking or talking. In this capacity art education has greater relevance than it is currently assigned, particularly as regards the encouragement of praxis. This study argues that art work is both more endemic and more varied within society than is acknowledged. It also contends that the value of vernacular or alternative practices may be pivotal to the maturation of men during a liminal period in their lives. To illustrate this, four instances of embodied masculine expression are examined: graffiti writing, tattooing, sports spectator arts and street dancing. Selection was predicated on all being ancient forms with contemporary iterations. Each case’s history is recounted and its contemporary features explored in detail.

This dissertation is propositional in nature, and conceptual and interpretative in execution. It is interdisciplinary; drawing from philosophy, theology, history, literature, the humanities, popular culture, cognitive science and most of the social sciences, particularly anthropology. By concentrating on non-paradigmatic practices, in a non-evaluative fashion, the thesis determines that such activities are essential in developing both identity and a sense of agency in young men, and consequently sustaining the vitality of society as a whole.

Keywords: vernacular art; art practices; masculinities; embodiment; identity; agency
Dedication

To the memory of my Father,
Thomas Dunbar Carter
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude for the support of my supervisory committee: Dr Heesoon Bai, Dr Kieran Egan and Dr Michael Ling. Also the faculty and students of the Graduate Liberal Studies program at Simon Fraser University, particularly Dr June Sturrock, Dr Steve Duguid and the late Dr Michael Fellman. I am indebted to Maureen Nicholson of Douglas College’s Print Futures program, for her unwavering enthusiasm. I salute too my fellow travellers on the academic road, Dr Tom Koch and Dale Hardy, and the long-term members of the When Saturday Comes message board, who provided both rigorous critique and writing practise. Finally, and with much love, I must thank my wife Carolyn, who has affectionately and uncomplainingly suffered my mental absences over the past four years.
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Prologue

May 1967, Stevenage College of Further Education

It was a muggy evening. My knees stuck to the floor as I tried to staple a piece of reflective plastic sheeting to an eight foot wooden frame. This was attached to five similar squares that, allowing for a small entrance, formed the sides and top of a box. The box was mirrored because, well, at eighteen years old what could be more appropriate than something that reflects yourself five times? I’d have preferred it to be six but was advised that a thin plastic floor would scuff and tear. This was disappointing but I was coming to terms with the realisation that, in the main, life consisted of small disappointments. Perspiration glued the shirt to my back and dripped steadily into my eyes. This was — I told myself — important, worth the effort. It was part of my final foundation project at the college’s art department. My first actual public show. It would signal my entry into the world as a creative power. Soon, perhaps not right away, but within a year or two at most, it would be recognised as the formative step on the path that would eventually lead towards my first one-man show at a prestigious London gallery. In the meantime it might also help me get into a proper art school.

At that precise moment however I was oblivious to everything except getting a thin sheet of plastic to look as smooth as a millpond on a calm afternoon. Totally ripple free was my goal but several hours had elapsed and I’d begun to comprehend how difficult that was. My irritation level edged higher at a similar rate to the inside temperature. Then, imperceptibly, a repetitive sound began to damply penetrate the fringes of my consciousness: “thunk... thunk... thunk...” A regular rhythmic pattern, louder now as I became more aware of it : “THUNK... THUNK... THUNK.” It appeared to be coming from behind the wall... my wall, my mirror. In fact the thunking noise was accompanied by small indentations in my mirror! On the other side of the plastic membrane was my good friend Dave, one of nine other exhibition participants whose fantasies and frustrations were, I suppose, running along the same lines as my own. Dave was in the process of attaching a large piece of cardboard to the back of my mirror with a
staple gun. We’d discussed the potential problems of this earlier but evidently he didn’t or
wouldn’t listen, even though I’d patiently explained that doing such a thing would
desecrate the inviolable purity of my reflective surface, perhaps even (unthinkably!) tear
it. But Dave had just ignored me.

The term red mist doesn’t do justice to the anger that overwhelmed me. It was
more an impenetrable wet scarlet fog. I’ve been gripped by uncontrollable rage on three
occasions in my life that I can recall. This was the first and most protracted. The inside of
my skull buzzed incoherently as I hurled furniture around, threw objects out of windows
and slammed doors so hard pictures leapt off walls while I gargled foam-flecked
imprecations at all who approached. It was all very satisfying in a lizard-brain kind of
fashion.

Fifteen Minutes later, Stevenage Town Centre

I walked through the deserted shopping area of the New Town. The sky reflected my
mood — bruised, boiling. A flash of lightning scorched its edges. The first distant peal of
thunder followed, echoing through the empty pedestrian precincts. As I approached the
bus station another sound, more rhythmic in nature, sustained the thunderclap. The
Mecca, the local dance hall, was about a hundred yards away. Outside, stacked like books
on a half-empty shelf, were dozens of shiny motor scooters. Sleek Lambretta GTs vied
for space with chrome-bubbled Vespa GSs, each decorated with as many lights, horns and
aerials as its owner could afford on his apprentice’s wage. A custom scooter was the
essential Mod accessory and Stevenage was a big Mod town. Its local “faces” were well
known throughout Southern England for their part in holiday brawls with rival Rockers
on the beaches of Clacton, Brighton and other seaside resorts.

Going “dahn the Mecca” to see a live band on a Wednesday evening was eagerly
anticipated by every new-towner under the age of twenty, and there were lots of us.
Tonight was especially so because The Who were playing. Just as Stevenage was a Mod
capital so The Who were the culture’s band. They were regular visitors but this was to be
their last local gig. Shortly they would leave for their first American tour and subsequent
international fame. By the end of the year the Mods themselves would be gone, suffocated by clouds of incense, flower petals and floppy shirts. But at that moment no one knew that. As the storm reverberated around it, the building responded with screeching guitar feedback and madman drumming. The effect was blissfully cathartic. I stopped outside to listen and my mood began to lift. Moist bodies pressed up against the glass doors. The hall’s management had, predictably, oversold the show. I strained to hear above the clamour directly above my head. Bollocks! If it wasn’t for that bastard exhibit I’d have been inside, too. Then a massive clap of thunder and my eyes jerked upward. As they did the doors of the Mecca burst open unleashing an intense torrent of noise from within. It carried upon it a single figure who was deposited in a heap at my feet. Small, stocky, clad in a black leather jacket, greasy jeans and motorcycle boots, it was Harrigan.

We were in junior school together, but never friends. In fact I don’t recall him having any. At nine-years-old he’d already cultivated a moody, outsiderish persona. I recall him proudly relating one of the comments from his school-report “language and behaviour: unacceptably Americanised.” More recently he’d gained a reputation as Stevenage’s most visible Rocker. This was physically risky for anyone but in Harrigan’s case it was compounded by an almost pathological need to be confrontational. I’d been in the local cinema as he loudly cast aspersions on the manhood of a gang of Mods seated on the other side of the stalls. His argument was based entirely on the apparently pitiful size of a Vespa’s engine as compared to that of the mighty BSA 650 he longed to own. No doubt the debate was resolved to everyone’s satisfaction around the back of the theatre later. On this particular evening his compulsion to draw fire had led him to purchase a ticket for an event that would be attended by every available Mod within a twenty mile radius. In effect this was like a mouse paying admission to a hall full of tomcats. I’d witnessed the inevitable consequence. Muttering curses, Harrigan clambered to his feet and wiped blood from a cut on his forehead away from his eyes. Without a glance in my direction he limped off into the gathering dusk. Raindrops the size of half-crowns appeared on the pavement where he’d lain. I laughed out loud and walked home in the opposite direction.
Days passed and Dave and I were the best of friends again, though we both knew our respective behaviour had been logged by the other party for future reference. A few of my cohort continued to avoid eye contact but most no longer crossed to the other side of the road when I approached. The work was over, the show was on, all was mellow. Now, collectively and individually, we were ready to deal with our public. Sadly, an exhibit by ten eighteen-year-olds at a provincial college of further education left the greater art world largely unmoved. Critics from the *Sunday Times* and *Observer* were conspicuous by their absence and the BBC camera crew failed to materialise. However, several days after the opening, nearer to the closing in fact, a correspondent from the *North Herts Gazette* appeared. I happened to be manning the reception area when a harried looking reporter, no more than ten years older than myself, materialised. He’d come directly from the local magistrate’s court and, he explained, had to be at a meeting of the Stevenage Carnival Committee in half an hour. “So, I’ve got a few minutes tops. Just let me have quick look round, then you can answer a couple of questions, OK?” Not exactly Sir Kenneth Clark then. His brace of questions, I later learned, are frequently asked of artists, be they eminent or novice, particularly by non-specialist journalists: “What are you trying to say here?” and “What does it mean?” I hadn’t thought much about what I was saying or meaning to that point. However, undaunted and eager to make a strong first impression with the press, I attempted to answer lucidly and in depth — very great depth. My stream of consciousness burbled merrily away for several minutes regarding how our exhibit could be seen as a reaction to over-structured planning within the new town, its uniformity, its chromatic blandness. Or something. I noticed the reporter’s eyes became unfocussed midway through my second sentence. He’d stopped writing altogether by the time I paused for breath. At the time I put this down to his inability to engage with the acuity of my propositions. But he did seem to get their overall gist as the paper’s next edition carried the following headline on page twelve: “Student Art Exhibit Rips New Town Planners.” Initially I was reasonably satisfied. What it lacked in nuance it made up for in directness I felt. Sadly my father, one of the town’s senior architects, was
somewhat less pleased.

Upon reflection I, too, became more perplexed. My comments were, literally, thoughtless yet they’d somehow taken on more weight than the exhibit itself. My fellow students, several of whom were annoyed that I’d had the temerity to speak on their behalf, were also dismayed. We’d never discussed “meanings” among ourselves, or with our instructors. Our conversations, to this point, had been mostly about materials and construction methods. Now there was an expectation that we ought to be able to put into words what we’d made out of wood and paint. It seemed the discourse, such as it was, had taken off in a direction that had no connection with producing the objects.

Several days later I was morosely thumbing through letters we’d received from local junior school students who’d visited the exhibition on a field trip. Their descriptions and reviews were mainly in the form of pictures and notes: “I liked the one that looked like a forest with big coloured trees.” Or: “It reminded me of the pictures the shadows make on my bedroom wall before I go to sleep.” Wasn’t this more relevant somehow, I wondered? Direct imaginative responses that accepted what had been seen at face value. No straining to be clever or attempts to intuit what we were trying to “say.” Somewhere between the child and the man, I decided, a thing that was so obvious and simple becomes a cause for confusion. Why this should be I did not know then and I’m not absolutely sure I know now. However, I’ve come to believe that the series of events that preceded my recognition of this problem, and that have been described here, inform it greatly, so it is with them that this thesis begins.
Collectively, the anecdotes in the preceding Prologue constitute a personal myth. Though based in fact, forty-five intervening years have inevitably altered their emphasis and exaggerated the drama. Memory’s capacity to distill and edit such myths can be powerful. Certainly, they are often more interesting, and possibly more truthful, than reality. Some may consider it conceited to believe this mental residue important, however, we have little choice but to do so. To dismiss such memories — and the ideas that emerge from them — says, in effect, that our life has been trivial; a notion few of us could comfortably entertain. Like a small dog scratching at the door to be let in, our remembrance demands attention. To grant that, we must examine it closely to find that which is relevant today and, with luck, tomorrow. In this myth two elements present themselves forcefully. Art, in one instance or another, is an ever present. Secondly, the actors involved are all young men, of whom I was one. Other qualities are also suggestive. My concentrated investment of effort in manipulating plastic sheeting, Harrigan’s penchant for seeking out painful confrontation, and the supposition that must “say” something.

After the curtain came down on the events of this prologue, I went on to spend a life in and around the visual arts, as a graphic designer for over twenty-five years and a design instructor for a further fifteen. These successive careers were punctuated by significant changes to my working practice. When I entered my craft, its mysteries revolved around the acquisition of hand-skills; like other designers I spent my days primarily with brushes, pencils, inks, and papers. Today, my students rarely touch anything except the mouse or keyboard of a computer. The consequent changes to professional design processes are widely acknowledged and discussed. However, the extent to which these ripples have spread through society at large is less well understood. The wholesale replacement of embodied skills, not only in areas we commonly classify as arts, with intellectually acquired technical information forms both the background to this discussion and, in chapter eight, its body. This technological transition has tended to emphasise finding solutions through goal-setting, instead of building expertise through
practice. In doing so, it has reshaped attitudes to problem solving that have existed for centuries.

In a more passive way, alongside the technological revolution — or the coup, depending on how one interprets it — the assorted ideas of Post-modernism have formed the framework for much intellectual discourse over the past forty years. The apparent certainties of modernism I acquired in my youth — notions of linear development and progress, a belief in authenticity, and the value of working toward simplicity — were replaced, to a considerable extent, by a propensity for talking or writing, instead of looking, or so it seemed to me. Chapter One will explore this in more detail. Unlike my eighteen-year-old self, however, today’s budding artists are at least well-provisioned with answers, though not necessarily cogent ones, should they face the press. The most relevant result of the post-modern period, for me, was the elimination of many critical distinctions between fine and applied arts. This was a liberating occurrence. As a young commercial artist I felt less diminished as a creative person. Most importantly, it opened new worlds of visual expression for consideration that had been unnoticed or ignored by both art educators and the wider cultural world. For example, by the late nineteen-sixties the comic-book and newspaper comic-strip began to receive critical attention as valid forms. These days, we accept their offspring: anime, manga, and graphic novels as vibrant examples of contemporary print culture. This type of vernacular art — often crude in execution and sometimes socially transgressive — has in some ways become aesthetically emblematic of the past half-century. For example, it allows us to consider the Mods’ scooters, Harrigans’s studded leather jacket and The Who’s music as valid artistic expressions, along with the architecture of Stevenage New Town, or my efforts with a staple gun. Such alternative practices are frequently at their most interesting at the point of transition from subculture to wider acceptance. Section two of this thesis will look at instances of embodied masculine expression within vernacular practices that are undergoing this change.

Intense attention to gender and how it plays out throughout society has also been a constant and vital part of social discourse for most of my adult life. Beginning in the late
sixties and driven largely by what has become known as second-wave feminism, it has had — unlike post-modernism and technological change — an explicit as well as theoretical effect at every level of society. As women’s lives became altered, based on new or reevaluated possibilities, so, by choice or necessity, men’s lives began to alter, too. Here, perhaps, is where myth and present day reality meet. In contemporary society, masculinities and art processes are in a state of flux, the former regarding meaning and identity, the latter with long-standing embodied skills that face technological change. Both have educational implications. Schools and colleges provide options and advice for students but, in doing so, inevitably make decisions that emphasise some alternatives at the expense of others. Our principal intention in this study is to address these issues by exploring masculine expressions within vernacular art practices to determine qualities that may enable young men to construct a sense of self through personal agency.

A purposeful sense of self, of whom one is in relation to one’s fellows and the world we inhabit, is surely essential to individual growth and collective human development. We may call this identity. We nominally grant it to everyone but how directed, or directionless it will be, and how passive or engaged it becomes, varies with each person. At an aggregate level, for example, we may interpret anger or frustration among young males as negative social indicators, yet, they are also essential accelerants to regenerating societal vitality. Education has a role in monitoring and influencing this balance. Though young people must construct their own identities, educators can offer tools for doing so that are either in opposition to, or supportive of, their students’ inclinations; both can be equally valuable. Embodied agency which, in the broadest definitional sense, means art or art-like activities, is salient as it involves doing something, not merely thinking or talking. In this capacity, art education has greater relevance than it is generally assigned at present, especially regarding the study of praxis. The significance of this thesis is in arguing that art practices are more endemic and more varied within society than ordinarily acknowledged. More pertinently, it asserts that the value of vernacular practices to young men, during a liminal period in their lives, may be pivotal to their maturation.
This dissertation inhabits the world of propositions and is, therefore, conceptual and interpretative in construction and execution. Its framework is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from philosophy, theology, history, literature, the humanities, popular culture, cognitive science, and most of the social sciences, particularly anthropology. As a study concerning the arts, it touches on the traditional areas of fine art and art history comparatively little. Most writing on the arts is aesthetically based — that is, object focused — and either theoretical or critical in approach. This study, however, concentrates on non-paradigmatic practices, about which art studies tend to have little to say, and does so in a non-evaluative fashion.

It transpires that this is a topic where dualities leap easily to the fore; it is the way many chapter titles and subtitles are framed, for example. Some may argue that embedding the potential for disagreement within one’s writing in this fashion is itself a masculine trait. Gender studies is an area that could be problematic in this regard but it is also an area with relevance. A consideration here is to avoid a leap to an automatic binary question such as: “If men, why not women?” or vice versa. It is not so much that this is an invalid response, it is not. However in this study, it would be a digression. Though women practice all art forms exemplified here — intensively for street dance and tattooing, less so with spectator arts and hardly at all when it comes to graffiti writing — the genesis of each took place within an almost exclusively male cultural context that continues to be referenced within its process. For this very reason, a female eye on these expressions is particularly pertinent and constitutes some of the most valuable sources employed here, including Nancy Macdonald on graffiti, Louann Brizendine on neurology, and Barbara Ehrenreich on carnival. It would be satisfying, if immodest, to believe that a female companion to this dissertation exists somewhere, or may in the future.

The dissertation is organised into eight chapters within three sections. Section One lays out the primary subject areas and discusses the relevant aspects of each of them. It begins by distinguishing art practice from aesthetics, essentially delineating “doing” from “viewing,” and goes on to identify practice and vernacularity as they apply here. Art is the “making of something as well as possible,” it matters little whether it is an oil-
painting or a model airplane. It is also principally seen as an occurrence or activity instead of an occupation, with the implication that anyone could, and should, do something. The section continues by considering differing notions of embodiment, a term describing ineffable and inarticulate physical, emotional, and intellectual states of immanence inherent within arts practices as they occur. A consideration of differing facets of masculinity follows, leading to the conclusion that it is a partly inherited and partly constructed aspect of personal identity, dictated neither by genetics nor socialization alone, but by an interaction of both. An evaluation of existential communitas as a tool by which young men may collectively create working disciplines completes the section.

Section Two explores four instances of embodied masculinity within vernacular practices: graffiti writing, tattooing, sports spectator arts, and street dancing. These were selected because they are ancient forms with contemporary iterations. The history of each is detailed, and its features explored as examples of male expression.

The final section begins by identifying interrelated qualities extracted from within the examples in Section Two. Those that are both conspicuous and important to the construction of identity and agency are distinguished and discussed. The dissertation concludes by scrutinising disembodied practices, particularly those inherent in technological change, their constraints on artistic agency, and the place of formal education within the discourse.

An overview of each chapter’s individual content runs as follows. Chapter One: “Art Described, Art Expressed” introduces questions of meaning and knowledge in art by deliberating on the differences between praxis and aesthetics. It contends that the artist and audience’s relationship lies with the object, instead of with one another, and that these relationships are fundamentally different in nature. The works of Richard Sennett, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Arthur Schopenhauer, among others, are adverted to in this regard. The chapter also discusses inherent problems with the use of words to describe and evaluate non-verbal media. It goes on to propose that art practices are rooted in individual human will and universal nature.
In Chapter Two: “Embodied Understandings and Masculine Practices,” differing interpretations of embodiment are reviewed. These include examples from aesthetics and cognitive science. Tacit knowledge as defined by Michael Polanyi, is discussed in some depth. Other authorities consulted include Arthur Danto, George Lakoff, and Francisco Varela. Norman Mailer’s assertion that manhood is an earned quality, rather than one granted by birth, introduces the topic of masculinities. The writings of Louann Brisendine, R.W. Connell, and Jon Swain, are employed to evaluate the implications of such adjudication. Finally, Victor Turner’s notion of communitas is used as a framework to consider the importance of collective vernacular expression among young men.

Specific examples of these expressive forms are detailed in the second section, which begins with Chapter Three. “The Graffiti Writer” contemplates street tagging as a rendering of text as image, analogous to calligraphy. Graffiti writing’s hierarchical structure is discussed within the context of both communitas and the practice’s socially transgressive aspects. Law enforcement’s role as a necessary adversary is regarded as characteristic in this regard. The graffiti writer’s relationship to his territory/environment and materials are then examined. Lastly, the more general affiliation between identity and graphic signature is scrutinised. The works of Nancy Macdonald, Mai Mai Sze, and Walter Ong are among those referenced.

Chapter Four studies the practice of “The Tattooist.” It recounts the form’s extensive cultural history, including prohibitions and “socially deviant” associations. The “Tattoo Renaissance” of recent years is then considered, as is the maintenance of a traditional apprenticeship system that passes on craft skills. The writings of Samuel Steward, Margo De Mello, and Walter Benjamin are cited. Particular emphasis is placed on the significance of a practice in which skin and blood are actually, not metaphorically, “embodied” in the context of physical intimacy.

Chapter Five: “The Sport Spectator” details this hegemonic male activity as a spectator’s practice, rather than an athlete’s. Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on carnival and the historicism of Richard Sanders and Tony Mason are utilised to explain how praxis emerges from within aesthetics as a collective sub-cultural expression. Here, the Lord of
Misrule is introduced and his reign within the history of sports, particularly soccer, is elucidated. The songs, chants and regalia that emerge are exemplified as is their effect on the creation of both community and communitas. The chapter discusses the stadium as a constituent part of this. Lastly, the detrimental effects of mass media and commercialisation on this ephemeral form are assessed.

In contrast to sport’s male hegemony, Chapter Six: “The Street Dancer” considers how masculine practices emerge in a context frequently perceived as hegemonically female. Choreophobia among men is discussed, as are literal/metaphorical methods of dealing with it such as the “male mask.” Through the work of J.T. Lhamon, Barbara Ehrenreich, John Forrest, and others, African-American urban dance and English Morris dancing provide the framework for considerations of minstrelsy and street dancing and their relationships to contemporary hip-hop and black face morris. Presiding over these alternative practices, again, is the presence of the Lord of Misrule, in physical or symbolic form.

Chapter Seven: “Immanence and Expression,” begins the third section by extracting pertinent characteristics concerning masculinities from the practices described in the previous section. The mask is revisited as both emblematic of the soul and protector of the veridical self. In the context of a work’s physical mutation and evanescence, art making is one of process instead of a series of goals. The interpretation of territoriality, too, is extended to accommodate both place and materials, as the essential immanence of an artist’s practice is located within them. Finally, the necessity of adversarial challenge and consequent “flight or fight” response is examined with particular reference to Peter Pan. The writings of Homer, J.M. Barrie, and Samuel Butler are among those referenced.

The dissertation concludes with Chapter Eight: “Disembodiment and Agency.” Here, the consequences of a lack of embodied skills among young men are identified as factors in personal agency or its lack. The masculine relationship with technology and technological imperatives, particularly in the computer sciences, is critiqued as one that is disembodied. Image making, especially as it applies to materials and tools, is discussed.
Finally, the place of education in both formalising the vernacular in art practices and in evaluating digital technologies is investigated. Once again, the work of Richard Sennett is of importance, as is that of Matthew Crawford.
Section I

Chapter One:
Art Described, Art Expressed

_In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word was with God,
And the Word was God._

“People who make things usually don’t understand what they are doing.”² This blunt statement, from the opening page of _The Craftsman_ by Richard Sennett, paraphrases the opinion of his teacher Hannah Arendt in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. “People” in this case refers to the physicists and nuclear engineers who designed the bombs that might have obliterated life on our planet, or so many of us believed. At the time Arendt considered the human mind only became fully engaged when the making of something was complete. Until then, the joys and challenges inherent to the creative process itself obliterated thoughts of any consequences. Robert Oppenheimer, for instance, thought the designing of an atomic bomb a “sweet” problem, but the consequences, practical or ethical, were beyond its scope. Accordingly, Arendt thought it vital that others, not directly involved in the process, must step in to provide objective guidance and, if necessary, control. Sennett came to believe, or hope, his teacher was mistaken and that: “people can learn about themselves through the things they make, that material culture matters.”³ Maybe it does — many of us certainly want to believe so — nevertheless, that does not necessarily mean Arendt was wrong. In this and coming chapters we will consider the question of meaning, knowledge, and understanding in the less absolute, but sometimes equally controversial, context of the arts.

The arts provide a playground for endless debate. As distinct from nuclear physics, facts in the arts — beyond who did what, when, and where — are of minimal use as they tend to reveal little of substantial relevance regarding a specific work’s power

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1. John 1.1 AKJV.
3. ibid, 8.
or significance. Discourse, therefore, typically revolves around competing propositions that rarely reach a substantive conclusion, particularly in the short-term. As far as possible, it is not the intention here to add an additional voice to that clamour. However, it is important that we establish consistent interpretive criteria before moving on. The principal line of separation employed here lies between art practices and aesthetic tenets, between the “doing” of something and its “viewing.” In an educational context, it is unusual for this to be heavily delineated. The subject in schools is usually “Art” with, perhaps at a secondary level, sub-categories such as “Fine Art” or “Applied Art.” Rarely is a more rational boundary applied between what are two completely different types of experience. Though both may address the same type of object or event — a painting or concert, for example — they involve quite distinct processes. Briefly put, a viewer apprehends meaning from an object, an artist from its manufacture. Art practice always entails an action by an individual, or group of individuals, and a subsequent product which is an expression of that action. Aesthetics, on the other hand, are an attempt to impart significance and value to that expression. In this scenario, the artist and audience are inevitably separated by their differing interactions with the object/event. Neither can know it as the other does because they have not, and cannot, experience it in the same way.

A Pointless Gesture
In Arendt’s view, politics and politicians are required to counter scientists’ zeal with social arguments and construct a framework of understanding for what they are doing. In the case of the visual arts, critics, academics, and other art establishment professionals take on the latter role. They have in common both an interest in art and the ability to use words to express their enthusiasms that, perhaps incidentally, also validate their opinions and status.

History shows that Western societies elevate language beyond mere communication tools or modes of expression. It is, therefore, not surprising that writings about art are held in high regard. After all, the texts of our holy books are frequently deified as well as reified. If the epigraph from John’s gospel at the beginning of this
chapter is taken literally, a word is itself God. Images, on the other hand, tend to be pejoratively described as “graven” or proscribed outright as blasphemous. In Middle Eastern and European cultures, worshipping pictures is generally viewed as secular or even pagan but reverencing text is considered godly. A simplification, certainly, but it is worth reminding ourselves that, elsewhere, attitudes towards language show less unconditional respect. The Tao Te Ching, for instance, is emphatically wary of words. They distract attention from what is genuinely important by making too much noise: “there’s too much talking, it’s really better to stay quiet.” ⁴ They are impermanent: “If nature’s words do not last, why should those of man?” ⁵ Most seriously, they can be deceptive: “Real words are never used to seduce you, and those that do are no good.” ⁶ Buddhism is only slightly more generous. We can be “bewitched” ⁷ by words and so “fail to understand the ultimate and lose sight of the truth.” ⁸ If they must be employed recitation (mantra) is more reliable than text (sutra) because it is “not within reach of the intellect: thus the good is upheld and cannot be lost nor can evil arise.” ⁹ The notion that the intellect is a potential source of evil accessible through language is not one that’s given much shrift in western culture. Since classical times we have privileged reason, and language, its herald, has enjoyed analogous status. Consequently, to varying degrees and at different times and places, other modes of expression and communication — most of the activities we call “art” in effect — have been either marginalised or colonised by

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⁶ Palmer, 133.


⁸ ibid.

⁹ ibid, 119.
words. How did this come about?

Plato and Aristotle did not discuss art in the sense we might today. They wrote of *techne*, the “understanding of correct principles.”\(^{10}\) These principles covered not only poetry, image making, and beauty, but also those tasks we may think too prosaic to be called art, such as goat herding and cooking. Later, the early Christian and medieval eras saw scripture — words — emulate existing classical forms. Though instigated by excitement over ancient bleached buildings and broken statuary, the flowering of the Renaissance that followed was sustained mainly by the writings of scholars. By the seventeenth century, as his subject matter grew more naturalistic and clients more literate, the artisan metamorphosed into the artist. The growing triumph of science and reason required him to take on the task of pictorially describing — a linguistic term — the natural world. Each of these phases represented a new opportunity for language to define or influence other artistic activities, but it was the Romantic era, with its assertions of art-for-art’s sake, that generated battalions of scholars and critics who felt the need to explain things to audiences who were as perplexed as they were curious.

In England it was the heyday of narrative painting, where ethereal, quasi-medieval images of the Pre-Raphaelites represented *le dernier cri*. Meanwhile at concerts throughout Europe audiences sat rapt, scores on laps, dutifully picking out the motifs in Richard Wagner’s “music-dramas.” It was a period when, to appreciate any form of art, it seemed you had to be able to “read” it, looking or listening was not enough. So much is evident from poet and educator Matthew Arnold’s writing: “If the instinct for beauty is served by Greek literature and art, we may trust to the instinct of self-preservation in humanity for keeping Greek as part of our culture.”\(^ {11}\) Art, it will be noted, comes after literature, as a type of appendix or attachment; literature is not, it seems, an art among others but separate and implicitly superior. Perceptively Arnold conjectured that the


\(^{11}\) Matthew Arnold. *Interdisciplinary Seminar in Education Theory. Comp. K. Egan. XVII from Literature and Science.* (Vancouver: Canada, Simon Fraser University, 2009), 13
power of the arts resided within human emotion, a very dangerous place to be approached with tools capable of full control, of suppression as well as expression. Less protean than painting, dance, or music, language provided that facility.

Have humane letters, then, have poetry and eloquence, the power here attributed to them of engaging the emotions, and do they exercise it? And if they have it and exercise it, how do they exercise it, so as to exert an influence upon man’s sense for conduct, his sense for beauty?… I answer that I do not know how they will exercise it, but that they can and will exercise it I am sure.12

Arts, other than language arts, could not be trusted to constrain emotional volatility sufficiently; a person’s moral conduct risked being compromised. If words were not involved in art somehow, explicitly or implicitly, then for Arnold and many of his contemporaries, it simply should not count.

Following Arnold came the century of the “ism.” Impressionism, post-impressionism, cubism, futurism, vorticism, constructivism, expressionism, surrealism, and many more tumbled after each other like letters out of a child’s alphabet box, until modernism topped the pile. Art did not, could not, exist without the holy suffix. With greater powers than ever, language contextualised almost everything we looked at and listened to. Post-modernism, the final “ism” in the box, or so some of its adherents claimed, attempted to draw a line once and for all beneath the preceding two millennia. It declared that art had been about language and only language all along. Words, images, and sounds were merely alternative systems of signification; we had entered the great period of art theory. In 1975, with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, author and commentator Tom Wolfe noted that: “frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can’t see a painting.”13

In contradiction. Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts that: “the function of words is to name — that is to grasp the nature of what appears before us in a confused way and to

12. ibid, 12.
place it before us as a recognizable object... Words do not look like [his emphasis] the things they designate.”\(^{14}\) Despite attempts by those who are verbally facile to convince us otherwise, at no step in the aesthetic process is language essential unless there is a need to impart our ideas concerning it to others. Moreover, in attempting to do so, more often than not, we expose only our expectations of what language, especially written language, is able to accomplish. Music, dance, painting, and other arts are eloquent and communicative but not necessarily easily explained, so we turn to words. Using one medium to explain work in another is arguably unfair, certainly difficult, and often needless. All too frequently, as artist and comedian Martin Mull points out, it is like “dancing about architecture.”\(^{15}\) T.S. Eliot claims even writing itself resists explanation: “Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood”\(^ {16}\) he maintains in his essay on Dante. Yet, still we look to language to describe and mediate these processes. If understanding does not always happen quickly, or even at all, it ought not, as Eliot implies, devalue the work in question. Too often writing on art confuses rather than clarifies and conceals instead of discloses. Should this occur audiences are likely to perceive the object or event as a series of gestures, whether with brush or body, that point to little but the writer himself.

**Playing with Oneself**

The artist’s focus, as should also be the case for the critical viewer, is entirely on the object under his eye or hand. However, in his case, it is active rather than meditative or reflective. This basic distinction is discussed by Jacques Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. In Lacan’s opinion, the creator’s gaze always involves

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intense desire and attention. It has the quality of play, rather than rest or contemplation, as
the artist uses the process as an aid to self-discovery, or — to use his phrase — to “map
himself:”

What is painting? It is obviously not for nothing that we have referred to
as picture the function in which the subject has to map himself as such… it
is as subject, as gaze, that the artist intends to impose himself on us.17

Using a similar metaphor Sennett concurs: “Art plays a particular role in this life
voyage... The work of art becomes like a buoy at sea, marking out the journey. Unlike a
sailor, though, the artist charts his own course by making these buoys for himself.”18 If
Sennett and Lacan are correct then the audience apprehends things quite differently:
“[P]erception is outside us but experienced subjectively. My perception of an object is not
exactly the same as your perception, though the object is identical.”19 says Lacan.
Naturally that is even more true when compared to the perception of the artist himself.
Though the viewer is sure of the artist’s presence he cannot reach him through the work
which, according to Merleau-Ponty, has its own separate existence: “I would be hard
pressed to say where the painting is I am looking at. For I do not look at it as one looks at
a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of being. Rather
than seeing it, I see according to, or with it.”20 Lacan sees this relationship of artist, object
and viewer as a game of hide and seek: “You never look at me from the place I wish to
see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see… the relation between the
painter and the spectator is a play.”21 From this perspective the object/event is always


18. Sennett, 72.


going to tell us more about the viewer — whether ourself or a writer-critic — than it does about the artist.

Following Lacan’s logic, it is possible to make two connected observations. Firstly, that the work acts as a barrier between artist and viewer; effectively it stands between them. Consequently — and this is the second point — an artist cannot truly be “known” through his work as it obscures him. In his lectures James Whistler noted over a century ago that:

People have acquired the habit of looking, as who should say, not at a picture but through it, at some human fact, that shall, or shall not, from a social point of view, better their mental or moral state. So we have come to hear of the painting that elevates, and of the duty of the painter.22

He was challenging the then-modern notion that a work of art is a window into the soul of its creator; that if one peered sufficiently hard at a painting one might glean what the artist was “trying to say” — language, it will be noted, again confers value. Lacan would argue the work under consideration is a mirror, instead of a window, and a catalyst to self-awareness for the viewer. The artist, however, will forever remain a vague figure concealed by the reflective brilliance of his work. There are those who would dispute this analysis. Modern artists, from Wagner to Madonna, have emphatically stated “I am my Art.” They believe subject and object, creator and created, to be inseparable and interchangeable. To know one is to know the other. Some artists and audiences are convinced of this, but that does not make it so. We can listen to Wagner’s music or Madonna’s songs entirely on their own account with no additional reference to their creators. If circumstances made it possible, we might also know, or have known, them as individuals without being aware of their work. As it is, celebrity merely affords them the opportunity to express themselves publicly in new and different forms, but it does not allow additional access to their consciousness, however much they may wish or believe it to be so. We continue to interpret what we see or hear through our own sensibilities. From where we stand what they create is a part of us, rather more than of them.

Naturally, it is not possible to state conclusively whether art is a window, a mirror, or something else. However, Lacan’s position seems more useful from an audience’s perspective. If nothing else, it seems more productive to attempt to understand more about one’s self than that of an artist, either living or dead. What Lacan and Whistler emphasise, and what seems uncontestable, is that the artist stands in quite a different place, as regards his work, to the viewer. It follows that if we desire to know the artist more completely — his motives, his desires, his fears — we are better off looking elsewhere. But, where would that be? Should we listen to what the artist says? Not according to Merleau-Ponty: “The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere [his italics] — not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life.”

Just as art frequently fails the wordsmith, so words fail the artist. When asked to speak about their work reluctance is common and, if pushed, incoherence frequent. Sennett quotes Denis Diderot, a consummate man of letters, on the subject: “Diderot remarked of his investigations [regarding craftsmen]: ‘Among a thousand one will be lucky to find a dozen who are capable of explaining the tools or machinery they use, and the things they produce with any clarity.’” In reply Sennett correctly points out that: “Inarticulate does not mean stupid” and “what we can say in words may be more limited than what we can do with things.” When artists do discuss their motivations or vocation in public, they frequently tend toward the oblique or contradictory or, like sculptor Gottfried Schadow, avoid discussing the more complex implications of their work by framing themselves as simple artisans:

I sometimes think of myself as a worthy craftsman, plying his trade in the town by carrying out his customers’ orders. He has his workshop, his assistants and apprentices, and he will provide you with anything that falls within his own line of business. For neither I, my assistants nor my boys are clock-watchers, it is simply a love of the work that brings us to it.

24. Sennett, 95.
Others, like Painter G.F. Watts, are most comfortable limiting their comments to materials and techniques: “I think from what you say that the potato may be safely used [for surfacing an oil painting]. I like the dullness produced by its application, which, I suppose, would be completely got rid of by repeatedly oiling or varnishing.”

Generalisations are invidious, but it is fair to say that visual artists are not always verbally articulate. Paul Cézanne, for example, “could not tolerate discussions, because they wore him out and he could never give his reasoning,” Merleau-Ponty observes. Conceivably, that is why, instinctively or consciously, they chose to communicate in media other than language. It is significant, as Glasgow School of Art has discovered, that a high percentage of art students have learning difficulties, particularly dyslexia:

Almost 17 per cent of students at GSA have declared a disability, by far the most common being dyslexia. Staff have become adept at detecting possible indicators, with the result that some students first became aware of their condition after entry to GSA.

If the School’s experience matches that of other educational establishments, students known to be dyslexic are likely to be equaled by an untested number who struggle with the condition alone. It would follow that the same applies to artists in society at large. In summary, the most that may be claimed regarding art as a personal statement is to echo Merleau-Ponty when he argues that: “Although it is certain that a person’s life does not explain his work, it is equally certain that the two are connected. The truth is that that work to be done called for that life.” [his emphasis]

Deirdre McDonald Books, 1997), 41.

26. ibid, 46.


Looking without Speaking

“Seeing with the mind’s eye,” classicist M.F. Burnyeat observes, was recognised and acknowledged in ancient Greece.\(^\text{30}\) Personal apprehension, with profound but sometimes inchoate meaning, is indubitably powerful and arguably the most significant factor in our engagement with artistic expression. However, the mind’s eye is a singular not collective organ. If art is largely inaccessible and incommunicable through language how then do we “know” it and pass on our knowledge? Given these circumstances how then can art discourse exist?

To risk stating the obvious, before art can be discussed meaningfully it surely must be experienced. This is often not the case, however. Owing to the exertions of the art curatoriat, exhibitions, films, and other events frequently come to us in pre-digested form, and are widely discussed before all but a handful of people have seen them. In so far as it is possible in this information rich age, such linguistic pre-mediation should be avoided. There are two reasons for this. First, prior knowledge creates expectations of both what will be experienced and, more insidiously, around what might or might not be important about it. Secondly, language introduces comprehension and cognition into the experiential process too soon. Words, at this point, are an intrusion, looking, and listening should always precede talking and reading. Otherwise, an object’s personal relevance is likely to be missed altogether. It is fine, even prudent, however, to discuss elements that precede or surround the event or object to be viewed. Inevitably — and ironically — these are exemplified by four words encompassing four ideas: context, \textit{kairos}, catharsis, and \textit{chronos}.

Context usually refers to location or occasion but here it is more nuanced. A painting’s meaning, for instance, will be conditioned not only by its proximity to other pictures but also the colour of the wall it hangs on. The lighting and whether the canvas is clean or dirty are also factors. The physical properties of environment also heavily influence how music is heard. Is it listened to indoors or outside, alone or in company,

\(^{30}\text{M.F. Burnyeat. “Long Walk to Wisdom,” TLS, (February 24, 2006), 9.}\)
during the day or at night? Acoustics are important, but so too is the social space created in an auditorium or gallery.

Contextual qualities may be anticipated but kairos is more difficult to plan for. It means the “right” or most propitious moment and, so far as the acceptance of something new and unexpected is concerned, it is unpredictable. Engagement with a work of art — the ability to acquire meaning from it — is individually specific. Pre-existing moods or sympathies are significant factors determined by a multitude of idiosyncrasies, such as how we are dressed that day, or whether we had an argument with a friend that morning. The conditions that influence context and kairos — though not their effects — are obscure but have pre-experientiality in common. They can, with sufficient awareness, be considered to some degree before the concert or the visit to the gallery.

Catharsis is a term most often used in drama to indicate unexpected moments of emotional climax that change the audience’s mood. If redefined slightly to mean an unanticipated emotional encounter, it may be extended to fit other arts as a word referring to a moment of recognition leading directly to apprehension. A cathartic moment is a mental snapshot of an art-encounter that, when it coalesces, is potentially transformative for the recipient. Initially diffuse and undeveloped, it is, nevertheless, at the core of the aesthetic experience. In the viewer or listener’s memory, it will forever connect the work to the instant it was experienced.

Too often, coherent responses are expected from audiences as the last chord of a concerto fades. This is unreasonable as cathartic reverberations are probably still happening. Few individuals are able to articulate their experience so quickly, but many feel an intellectual pressure to do so. One or two will rightly feel that a requirement to do so diminishes what they have seen and heard. Chronos is the horological time required to process what has taken place. It may be minutes, hours, or days; sometimes even longer. During this period apprehension changes to comprehension and then discussion becomes possible, though it is not absolutely necessary and rarely enriches the experience itself as that has passed. Subjectively acquired meanings cannot be forced, and responses that are hard to articulate will remain. For some people, it could take a lifetime before a “kairotic
moment” regarding a particular piece occurs. Having said that, as vital as this aesthetic response may be for an individual, from a broader cultural and social perspective, considering artistic practices, instead of art objects or events, may be more productive. Looking at when, where, and how art is made, is less speculative and, perhaps, more relevant than any singular response to a particular piece.

The prescriptive process detailed above concerns the viewer’s reaction entirely, and it is true that the artist has other issues whose explication constitutes the body of this dissertation. However, before discussing these it was necessary to delineate an aesthetic framework, for two reasons. Firstly, so that the considerable discrepancies between a viewer’s engagement with an art object or event, and those of its artist, are clear. Secondly, because an aggregate of societal aesthetic reaction and opinion, rather than individual practices, determine what is considered “art” in a given culture. In European societies, for several centuries, art has been parsed and categorised in a variety of ways. Fine Art, for instance, theoretically exists with no instrumental purpose and, therefore, carries different cultural values from commercial art. Whether this was ever absolutely accepted, never mind true, is arguable. However, such dissections create a good deal of confusion about which activities, objects, and events qualify as “artistic” and, to some extent, this continues. Such controversy is rare elsewhere as art objects, like all others, are deemed to have some utility, be it practical or ritualistic.

The expansiveness of our definition requires some elucidation, if only because other writers and scholars may use other terms when discussing practices we refer to as art; crafts or skills being the most common. Briefly stated, we maintain that art is embodied within all crafts and hand-skills but skill or craft is not necessarily involved in making art. Art is a purely creative adventure in that it includes actions where, either no rules or conventions exist or, rules do exist and are consciously broken. Crafts are also creative, but in an applied sense. For example, a carpenter may make a chair that looks and feels like no other, but it should follow the universally understood function that chairs possess, namely, to support the seated human body. Skills too are creative but also entail diagnostic facilities that art lacks. An auto-mechanic is required to repair an engine.
more often than he is asked to design and build one from scratch, for instance. To accomplish that, he must ascertain what is wrong with it, just as a doctor does with a sick patient. It takes a good deal of time — 10,000 hours is frequently quoted — to acquire competency in a valued craft or skill. Outsiders act as brake on a craftsman’s subjectivity, also. The mechanic or surgeon has legal, financial, temporal, and emotional constraints, imposed by a car’s owner or a patient’s family. The artist has no analogous deterrents. His practice consists of distilled expression with boundaries that are entirely self-imposed. Though his work may involve skills of a very high order, they do not define it, only make certain effects possible. A work might equally be spontaneous, crude, and ephemeral in nature, something craft-skills cannot be. They always, however, entail the same attentiveness and expressiveness associated with art practices of a more paradigmatic nature, and produce similar satisfactions, which is why we include them here. More significant, from an artist’s perspective, is whether the external perception of a piece he is working on has any bearing on the challenges and pleasures he finds within it while it is under his hand. As we shall discover, the satisfactions, frustrations, and understandings that emerge during the making of something — anything — have much in common with each other and little to do with whatever value others may place on the work after its completion.

Towards the Will, the Body, and Understanding

In our introduction, we define art practices as activities undertaken with the intention of making or performing something as well as possible. Individual preferences aside, for an audience, “as well as possible” refers to a collective cultural determination made in an aesthetic playground such as a gallery or concert hall. As we’ve stated, this process has little to do with the artist, nor should it. His concerns regarding his own sense of fulfillment are detailed through examples in the following section. They may, however, be broadly described as aspirational. In his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, Friedrich Nietzsche argued that God is the prime artist. He further claimed that: [E]xistence could be justified only in esthetic terms... I [attribute] a purely esthetic meaning — whether implied or overt — to all process: a kind of
divinity if you like, God as the supreme artist, amoral, recklessly creating and destroying, realizing himself indifferently in whatever he does or undoes, ridding himself by his acts of the embarrassment of his riches and the strain of his internal contradictions.  

In effect, the artist tries to emulate God or even become God himself and, of course, he ultimately fails — sometimes tragically. Yet, the impulse is as close to divine as man may attain, and even his failures are worthy of celebration, according to Nietzsche. A generation earlier Arthur Schopenhauer anticipated Nietzsche in some respects but did not need God to explain art. The impulse towards it is the result of a human act of will which is entirely a bodily action.

The body is given in two entirely different ways to the subject of knowledge... It is given as an idea in intelligent perception, as an object among objects and subject to the laws of objects. And it is also given in quite a different way as that which is immediately known to everyone, and is signified by the word will. Every true act of his will is also at once and without exception a movement of his body... The action of the body is nothing but the will personified.

Individual will, inaccessible as a coherent unity and only known by its acts, is restrained by the artist’s consideration of himself as a part of nature, claims Schopenhauer. This unwilled “ideation” induces contemplation and tranquillity. The concept of ideation also implies the acquisition of knowledge or understanding of some kind by the artist. Omitted is the acknowledgement that, optimally, it occurs with brush, pen, or pencil in hand. Thus, art is the expression of the resulting tension between an artist’s unfettered will and the applied recognition that he is an infinitesimal part of something incomprehensibly large.

James Barrie’s Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens captures the Schopenhauerian relationship between human will, nature, and artistic practices analogically:

He used to sit by the shore of the island of an evening, practicing the sigh of the wind and the ripple of the water, and catching handfuls of the shine of the moon, and he put them all in his pipe and played them so beautifully


that even the birds were deceived, and they would say to each other, “Was that a fish leaping in the water or was it Peter playing leaping fish on his pipe?” And sometimes he played the birth of birds, and then the mothers would turn round in their nests to see whether they had laid an egg.\textsuperscript{33}

Nietzsche and Schopenhauer conceived their ideas during Romanticism’s zenith and their lives bracketed its existence as the dominant force in European culture. Had they lived a century or so earlier, a painter or sculptor’s motivations would have been no more worthy of consideration than those of a carpenter or stonemason. That art was made for no reason other than its own existence fundamentally altered opinions about its meaning. It was possible to understand it as something other than an object imbued with orthodox classical notions of beauty, such as those Arnold, for example, accepted. According to Nietzsche, in fact, understanding had nothing to do with making art at all: “Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion.”\textsuperscript{34} The illusion being that, at certain moments during their practice, artists are godlike. They transform into either Dionysus, the ecstatic artist, or Apollo, the dream artist, or a combination of both. This temporary godliness privileges insights an audience can never be granted. The viewer’s illusion, in turn, is that he might somehow share these:

Thus our whole knowledge of art is at bottom illusory, seeing that as mere knowers we can never be fused with that essential spirit, at the same time creator and spectator, who has prepared the comedy of art for his own edification. Only as the genius in the act of creation merges with the primal architect of the cosmos can he truly know something of the eternal essence of art.\textsuperscript{35}

Nietzsche considered that the artist’s emotional disposition took precedence over reason.\textsuperscript{36} Ideas may emerge at a later stage but they are less mutable and, in its literal meaning, less essential than the immanence attainable through affective action. Writing a


\textsuperscript{34} Nietzsche, 51.

\textsuperscript{35} ibid, 42.

\textsuperscript{36} ibid, 37.
century later Merleau-Ponty reinforced this notion by insisting that conception cannot anticipate execution: “Before expression there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, will prove that there was something rather than nothing to be found there.” These beliefs explicitly remove objectivity from the artist’s psychological palette. He must not, indeed cannot, base his practice on reviewing another’s results or methodology as a scientist could. Metaphorically — and ironically — a visual artist is always working blind. Cognitively speaking he never knows quite what he is about to do.

In the nineteenth century Romanticism stood very much in opposition to Enlightenment ideas, and the arts were in its vanguard in privileging individuality, subjectivity, and lived experience over detachment and detailed analysis. Tenets such as originality and inspiration became axiomatic as new notions of self-hood came into play. It was then that terms such as “self-expression” and “self-enhancement” fell into common use, and for the first time “ego” was used to denote self-consciousness. Traditional sciences did not seem to be able to explain these qualities adequately so new ones, such as psychology, were created. The tools they provided would open the portal to the artist’s soul that audiences desired, or so it was hoped. As mentioned earlier, however, if the point of entry is the artist’s work, this is arguably as fruitful as chasing moonbeams on the surface of a midwinter lake. Moreover, much of the time Romanticism merely demonstrated in hyperbolic fashion expressive qualities of art, craftsmanship, and behaviour that had always been evident but rarely emphasised in Europe. Though Nietzsche’s voluble insistence that art cannot provide understanding and/or knowledge to either artist or audience smacks somewhat of the young scholar capering up and down in front of his elders while thumbing his nose, his central notion that the artist is in a different state of mind, if not being, to his audience is not without credibility. Directly or not, it likely had some influence on Arendt’s opinion that the impetus towards understanding and the drive to make things are mutually exclusive. Self-knowledge, which Sennett conjectures, is generated by art practice, is not altogether the same thing as understanding what the consequences of ones ac-

tions might be, particularly when they lack the finality of nuclear annihilation. However, Arendt’s statement is validated by the addition of two words: “People who make things usually don’t understand the implications what they are doing.” Whether they can articulate it or not, artists know what they are doing in their own terms very well; at issue is whether that knowledge constitutes understanding in any broader sense. To address this, we must return to Schopenhauer and his consideration of the human will:

...the knowledge which I have of my will, though it is immediate, cannot be separated from that which I have of my body. I know my will, not as a whole, not as a unity, not completely, according to its nature, but I know it only in its particular acts, and therefore in time, which is the form of the phenomenal aspect of my body, as of every object.\(^{38}\)

This thought, regarding the interconnectedness of the body and the will, which is of the mind, leads directly to the concept of embodiment.

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\(^{38}\) Schopenhauer, 132.
Chapter Two:
Embodied Understandings and Masculine Practices

The hand... is not only a part of a body, it is the expression and extension of a thought that must be grasped and rendered. Neither painter nor poet nor sculptor may separate the effect from the cause, which are inevitably contained the one in the other.¹

Schopenhauer’s observations on the relationship of the will, the body, and nature contributed to a growing questioning of Enlightenment ideas that, in the early nineteenth century, began seeping into everyday life. Many of these had their roots in Cartesian epistemology which contends that reason is separate from perception and other physical properties, thus creating an unbridgeable chasm between the world “out there” (objectivity) and the world “in here” (subjectivity.) Linguist George Lakoff explains and demurs:

Once the separation is made, there are then only two possible, and equally erroneous, conceptions of objectivity: Objectivity is either given by the “things themselves” (the objects) or by the intersubjective structures of the consciousness shared by all people (the subjects).²

In this dualistic framework the mind is separated from its corporeality, as Lakoff says, which means it is disembodied.

This view was an anathema to Romantics for whom consideration of a world “out there,” was an internal inspirational process, not an external analytical one. The latter would, they insisted, turn artists into aesthetic clerks doomed to do no more than prosaically describe the universe. Charlotte Brontë identified the work of Jane Austen as an example. It is, says Brontë:

... shrewd and observant... sensible, real (more real than true) but she

¹. Honore de Balzac. The Unknown Masterpiece (Champaign II, USA: Book Jungle 2010), 18.
cannot be great... What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits
her to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood
rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of
death — this Miss Austen ignores.  

As Nietzsche said, it was vital for artists such as Brontë to sustain the belief, or illusion,
that their practice was touched by the divine through a process both private and ineffable.
To perpetuate the mystery, many Romantics from Byron to Beardsley went to some
lengths to avoid others seeing them at work. Not all artists, however, felt slighted by
being assigned the task of analysing the cosmos. Impressionists such as Camille Pissarro
and, particularly, Georges Seurat thought that was precisely what art was intended to do.
As an instance they attempted, with mixed success, to employ the colour theories of
Michel Eugène Chevreul in emulating the way our eyes create chromatic blends. By
eliminating black pigment from their palettes, they also imitated its theoretical lack in
nature. Significantly, these artists mainly worked en plein air, out in the open where they
could see the world clearly and, unlike the Romantics, where the world could also see
them.

Situational Agency

Schopenhauer both softened the edges of scientific Cartesianism and removed the
necessity of God from the Romantics. This was a synthetic argument in which the cosmos
resides within man, as his idea, but his own will is itself part of the natural world.

Everyone finds that he himself is this will, in which the real nature of the
world consists, and he also finds that he is the knowing subject, whose
idea the whole world is, the world which exists only in relation to his
consciousness, as its necessary supporter. Every one is thus himself in a
double aspect the whole world, the microcosm; finds both sides whole and
complete in himself. 4

Schopenhauer figuratively reconnected — to use Brontë’s terms — the “real” world of

3.  Q.D. Leavis, introduction to Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë (Harmondsworth, UK:

4.  Schopenhauer, 212.
the naturalist artist with the “true” one of the Romantics. In practice, artists rarely drew such firm boundaries, or not for long. It is likely, however, most would have concurred with Balzac that, pace Descartes, their body was self-evidently connected to their mind and what passed between, whether in thought or action, was inseparable from the other. A few might also have agreed with Cézanne’s reply to his brother when asked whether nature and art were not different. “I want to make them the same,” replied the artist. “Art is a personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organize into a painting.” His comment distills Schopenhauer’s thesis into a goal and introduces the notion of embodiment as an active principle into this discussion.

Seamless interactivity between mind and body is something most of us take for granted and apply situationally. That is, in a given context, we utilise vision, understanding, and movement simultaneously. Though they may be hypothetically independent, we do not, indeed cannot, separate them as they constitute an interconnected and indivisible continuum. Merleau-Ponty elaborates:

My movement is not a decision made by the mind, an absolute doing which would decree, from the depths of a subjective retreat, some change of place miraculously executed in extended space. It is the natural sequel to, and maturation of, vision. I say of a thing that it is moved; but my body moves itself; my movement is self-moved. It is not ignorance of self, blind to itself; it radiates from a self....

Nietzsche noted that the Greeks based their mystical doctrines on art on “plausible embodiments, [his emphasis] not [developed] through purely conceptual means.” They recognised that universal laws cannot be prescriptive but only a reference point for agency. Each time we act, we do so in a unique and never to be repeated situation. Therefore, following scientific principles exclusively, or to the letter, is impossible as they cannot account for the variables involved. Moreover, attempting to do so will surely lead to failure, particularly if the actions involved are unusual and/or complex. In his

critique of Cartesian thinking, Merleau-Ponty asserts that:

For all its flexibility, science must understand itself; it must see itself as a construction based on a brute, existent world and not claim for its blind operations the constitutive value that “concepts of nature” were granted in a certain idealist philosophy. To say that the world is, by nominal definition, the object of our operations is to treat the scientist’s knowledge as if it were absolute, as if everything that is and has been was meant only to enter the laboratory.\(^7\)

Being situationally aware, meaning fully “present” — that is, intellectually, affectively, and physically engaged — is essential if one is to exert effective agency.

This hints at what embodied knowledge means within artistic practice. However, the word embodiment is currently fashionable within the social sciences and other disciplines. To produce a viable working definition, it is instructive to consider the use of the term by others, particularly those for whom it has become a core tenet. Three examples follow, one from visual arts theory, one from the sciences, and a third that is, broadly speaking, philosophical in approach. None completely satisfy our requirements but, together, they present a triangulation of understanding that will enable us to locate a meaning that is both cogent and applicable.

**Embodiment as Receptacle**

In ‘Art and Meaning,’ his introductory essay to *The Madonna of the future*, Arthur Danto boldly provides a “definition of art.” Wisely, he also prefaces it as being both provisional and incomplete. He argues that “works of art are always about something, and hence have content or meaning; and secondly that to be a work of art something has to embody its meaning.”\(^8\) It seems clear that Danto is not only suggesting that the second “something” — the object or event — occurs after the formation of meaning but also implies it is of secondary importance.

\(^7\) Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 122.

He illustrates this with an example of how different meanings are attached to similar objects, thereby, in his opinion, making them quite different works of art. Andy Warhol’s ‘Brillo Boxes’ was an installation from 1964 consisting of eighty-five screen-printed copies of an original Brillo scouring pads shipping container. Twenty-five years later Mike Bidlo, in a piece entitled Not Andy Warhol reproduced, as closely as possible, a reconstruction of Warhol’s “original.” In Danto’s view, each of the three iterations of the Brillo Boxes is different from the other two because, in each case, the artist’s intention was different. Artistic intentionality is a subject of much debate among art theorists and Danto’s is one of the most influential voices. It does not overly concern us here, however, except with regard to the status of the object, the second “something” which, in his definition of art, embodies meaning.

Danto insists that Warhol’s boxes, Bidlo’s boxes, and the Brillo shipping container are, to all intents and purposes, visually identical. While acknowledging small variations between them do exist, to him these differences are inconsequential. This being so, visual engagement with any one, or all three, of the boxes without some a priori knowledge must be a “meaning-less” encounter. Danto recognises this himself: “what makes something art is not something that meets the eye. And that makes clear as well why so much rests on meaning, which it is the task of art criticism to make explicit.”9 This is surely just a variety of personification, but instead of investing objects with poetic emotions, as a Romantic like John Keats might have done, Danto imbues them with the meaning of the post-modern critic. Embodiment, in his understanding, is essentially a type of containerisation. A receptacle is required in which store meanings and, in that respect, the Brillo box serves the same purpose as it did when it held scouring pads. As York Gunther points out, Danto only requires the box at all because: “Without the embodiment condition, there would be no way of distinguishing the piece of art criticism from the artwork itself.”10

9. ibid, xxvii.
Even when unverifiable assumptions about intention and value on the artist’s behalf are set aside, there are several reasons to question Danto’s definition of embodiment. First, it should be evident that the object, and his own reactions to it, are clearly the most reliable factors a viewer has at his disposal. Though his opinions will change, sometimes dramatically over time, his own interaction with the piece remains his lens of first and last resort. Secondly, when an aesthetic response becomes no more than a determination of meaning, then looking at artwork turns into a predominantly intellectual exercise. As the previous chapter pointed out, this approach has been central to critical art theory for most of the past century yet, empirically, it seems wanting. Physicality and emotion are deeply embedded in both art practice and aesthetics. For example, art historian and educator James Elkins notes that responses by visitors at exhibitions indicate a sizable number of people are moved to tears by what they have seen. He found this not to be reflected in art scholarship, however, either in published work or when individual academics were approached directly.

The majority of replies were unambiguous and to the point: crying is not part of the discipline, and has nothing to contribute... Based on my somewhat random survey, I would have to say tearlessness is a criterion of good scholarship... I was told, for example, that crying is old-fashioned, romantic, and unfitted to twentieth-century art. I was told serious viewers are right not to cry,... that crying is private, irrelevant, incommunicable, misguided, and ignorant.11

For our purposes, embodiment is best understood as a constituent of practice: an accumulation of actions that are inherent and identifiable in the making of an object, rather than a universally recognisable quality embalmed within it, as Danto would have it. That is not to say that traces of the artist’s actions are undetectable there — indeed it would be strange if they were not — only that they cannot be contained within it anymore than his breath can. The word embodiment surely implies vitality, that an object is imbued, in some way, with attributes we associate with life. Yet a single blade of grass

has more mortality than a piece of artwork in a museum. When an artist applies himself to an object, it alters constantly under his hand. It is as alive as its creator, a part of him, sharing, if only metaphorically, his attributes as a living entity. Sennett explains, “we are now absorbed in something, no longer self-aware, even of our bodily self. We have become the thing on which we are working.”

Complete, the piece may become an object of reverence, an inspiration to others but in itself it is inanimate, a dead thing. The artist himself has left. Devoid of life we look upon it as we might a seashell or dried flower. We try, through memory, experience, or inclination, to find meaning and perhaps understanding there and frequently succeed. When we do succeed, however, it is because these fragmentary qualities are already there, embodied within ourselves, not in the object before us. It acts only as a catalyst, albeit a potent and prescient one. To be meaningful, embodiment must be applied to entities that are dynamic, mutable, in transition, alive; and that is not the case in Danto’s use of the term. “The painter,” writes poet Paul Valéry, “takes his body with him.” Merleau-Ponty agrees: “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.” He continues: “To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body — not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.” Following his suggestion, that is where we now return.

**Embodiment as Science**

“Cognitive science,” says neuro-scientist Francisco Varela, “is not yet established as a mature science. It does not have a clearly agreed upon sense of direction and a large number of researchers constituting a community... it is really more of a loose affiliation of disciplines than a discipline of its own.” On the face of it, this does not seem a very hopeful contribution in our quest to ascertain the meaning of embodiment. However, as

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Merleau-Ponty suggested, scientific flux is maybe more useful, and has more in common with arts exploration, than scientific rigour might, so we will plunge ahead.

One of the pursuits of cognitive science is the discovery of an alternative to the mind and body division posited by Cartesian epistemology. Varela explains that in such thinking:

[T]here is assumed to be an absolute dichotomy between *perception* and *conception*. While *perception* has always been accepted as bodily in nature, just as movement is, *conception* — the formation and use of concepts — has traditionally been seen as purely mental and wholly separate from and independent of our abilities to perceive and move.\(^{15}\)

The contrary claim from cognitive science is that conception arises from how the human brain’s sensorimotor system is structured, and the belief that perception and conception travel along similar neural pathways. To Varela, this understanding has two salient points:

First, that cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities, and second, that these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in an all encompassing biological psychological and cultural context.\(^ {16}\)

One of the frequently cited examples to make such a case for scientific embodiment is that of colour. There is no actual blue “stuff” out in the world, nor red, nor yellow, only light frequencies with physical properties such as refraction and reflection. Colours are also not inherent to the human mind. Photoreceptors in our eyes and nerve cells transmit their signals to the brain. Colour, as Varela says, is neither inside nor outside us but both:

Contrary to the objectivist view, color categories are experiential; contrary to the subjectivist view, color categories belong to our shared biological and cultural world. Thus, color is a study case and enables us to appreciate the obvious point that chicken and egg, world and perceiver, specify each other.\(^ {17}\)

In this understanding, colour is a quality perceived by an artist and modulated by his

\(^{15}\) ibid, 37.

\(^{16}\) ibid, 172.

\(^{17}\) ibid.
environment, but it is a single property of neither. As artist Paul Klee says, colour is “[the] place where our brain and the universe meet.”

These ideas are not conclusive. They exist in a scientific limbo of plausibility. However, as artists and educators searching for a workable accord regarding embodiment, we should not be unduly worried. What cognitive science offers is a view of embodiment as an interactive process, something markedly different from Danto’s repository of meaning. For Varela, Lakoff, and others, “to embody” is not a passive verb; it implies a continuously active biological and physical feedback loop that integrates us with the external world instead of separating us from it. Having established this, we can move on to discover how such enacted embodiments operate in a social and cultural context.

**Embodiment as Tacit Knowledge**

If biologist Michael Polanyi had lived another few years he may well have reached similar conclusions to those suggested by contemporary cognitive scientists. Sadly, he did not. In his book *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi never uses the word embodiment, nor does he speculate on the human body’s sensorimotor system and its neurological capacities. Instead like Martin Heidegger, he emphasises process over theory: “the nearest kind of association is not mere perceptual cognition, but, rather, a handling, using, and taking care of things which has its own kind of ‘knowledge.’”

This thinking is rooted, instead, in the value of knowing through actions that are inexpressible and inarticulate, an approach which, as discussed in the previous chapter, runs counter to dominant twentieth century discourse. Polanyi refers to this method of understanding as tacit knowledge. He believes language lacks the precision to describe experiences fully. Were it to do so, it would be unwieldy and we would spend all our time talking instead of acting.

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Consequently, many of our learned activities are inaccessible via language. Words can refer to actions, but fail to encompass their complete meaning which is, to use Polanyi’s term, “ineffable:”

The area where the tacit predominates to the extent that articulation is virtually impossible; we may call this the ineffable domain.... These observations show that strictly speaking nothing that we can know can be said precisely; and so what I call “ineffable” may simply mean something that I know and can describe even less precisely than usual, or even only very vaguely.21

Ineffability and tacit knowledge are of particular interest to discussions of embodiment. An example Polanyi employs is that of a novice surgeon. During his training he has studied the human body extensively. He has seen images and scans of its organs, both healthy and diseased, and learned, theoretically, how they lie in relationship to each other. Yet, it is only when he is practicing on a patient that any of this will truly mean anything.

[A surgeon] would know a set of data which fully determine the spatial arrangement of the organs in the body; yet he would not know that spatial arrangement itself. Indeed the cross-sections which he knows would be incomprehensible and useless to him, until he could interpret them in the light of this so far unknown arrangement....The two can only happen together. Both halves of the problem set to us by an unintelligible text, referring to an unintelligible subject, jointly guide our efforts to solve them, and they are solved eventually together by discovering a conception which comprises a joint understanding of both the words and the things.22

It seems, then, that action informs language, and language action. Only then do both become fully comprehensible and work to the advantage of complete understanding. According to Polanyi, this reciprocity is not true of pure knowledge, such as mathematics, but only to applied forms like surgery — or, by implication, the arts — where embodied actions take place. In addition, when this type awareness of is procured, it, in turn, cannot be communicated by language alone; it remains fundamentally

(Chicago, USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 78.

21. ibid, 86.
22. ibid, 89, 101.
ineffable: “We may say in general that by acquiring a skill, whether muscular or intellectual, we achieve an understanding which we cannot put into words and which is continuous with the inarticulate faculties of animals.”

In light of these ideas, we can affirm that embodied artistic practices are instances of tacit knowledge, and gained through means other than the absorption of text. Polanyi enlarges on this:

The conceptual framework of applicable knowledge is different from that of pure knowledge. It is determined primarily in terms of the successful performances to which such knowledge is relevant.... there are three kinds of observable things which can be defined by their participation in practical performances: (1) materials, (2) tools, including all manner of installations, and (3) processes.

The introduction of factors other than language as intrinsic to knowledge acquisition is also fundamental to our understanding of embodiment. As previously noted, we are only now emerging from an era of art scholarship when learning was principally a matter of linguistic decryption. Polanyi was writing during that time but, by acknowledging materials, tools, and other processes, he reminds us that the flint axe was as important a means of gaining knowledge as the development of writing, and that ink can be used to express more than an alphabetical code. More than that, he understood implements as extensions of the bodies of artists, carpenters, surgeons, and scores of other trades and professions. Their collective agency creates ripples in the world and a backwash of silently responsive learning that cannot be overstated. Though he never uses the word, we can infer from Polanyi that embodiment is a process, or — more accurately — a succession of processes one within another, interconnected, in motion, forever reverberating.

Polanyi’s approach extends the epistemological ideas of Schopenhauer, Merleau-Ponty, and other philosophers into the practical realm of everyday life. Tacit learning also leads contemporary thinkers such as Sennett and Matthew Crawford to think of embodied

23. ibid, 90.
24. ibid, 175.
agency as a non-language based method of acquiring knowledge:

The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering *interpretations* of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on.  

It is worthwhile, therefore, to purposefully consider the consistent constituent qualities inherent within art-making activities that lead to knowledge acquisition. Some of these are well-understood, others less so. The necessity of showing an action instead of explaining it, for example, is widely accepted. Asking someone to strike a piece of marble says nothing about the angle of the chisel or the force required, and less about how the artist should hold his implement or his posture as he strikes. As Sennett explains, “verbs name acts rather than explain the process of acting” and are all but useless in the latter regard. More obscurely, an artist frequently changes his perspective while working. Even if the painting will eventually hang with the trees pointing skyward, the artist might occasionally turn it sideways or upside down to refresh his point of view. To contemplate anything from the same place, in a similar fashion or for too long, leads one to see it as a mass of details instead of a unity. Again, attempting to rationalise when to do this or why it works is unfeasible. More difficult to explain is the phenomenon and importance of repetition. Replicating an action or series of actions an unquantifiable number of times is essential in building expertise; the artist must draw the limb time and again, the pianist plays the scales, the dancer executes the *plié*. The actions alter incrementally and, almost imperceptibly to the observer, each time, and it is impossible to put into words exactly what is occurring. Sennett conjectures that it is a matter of tuning ones intellect and emotion to the body’s pulse:

The substance of the routine may change, metamorphose, improve, but the emotional payoff is one’s experience of doing it again. There’s nothing strange about this experience. We all know it; it is *rhythm*. Built into the


contractions of the human heart, the skilled craftsman has extended rhythm
to the hand and the eye.\textsuperscript{27}

The body remembers and repeats, remembers slightly differently and repeats again until,
after about 10,000 hours, we are told, a recognisably high level of accomplishment is
achieved. These qualities and others are endemic to almost every art process. They will
be evident in the examples discussed in the following section where every repetition is an
indicator of the choices boys and men make regarding their investments of time and
energy.

\section*{Masculinities}

Norman Mailer’s blunt statement on this subject is a suitable place to begin: “Nobody
was born a man, you earned manhood.”\textsuperscript{28} The assertion impresses with its directness, but
raises more questions than it answers. For one thing, if masculinity — and we will leave
open whether manhood and masculinity are entirely congruent — is earned, who do we
earn it from, whose judgement matters? Women’s judgement is surely of importance to
many of us, not least when it comes to potential fatherhood and a fully realised sexual
life. However, Mailer’s implication, supported by his other writing, is that it is
predominantly within a male context, and under the scrutiny of other men, that manhood
is achieved.

Until recently, the genesis of manhood was clear; it was concurrent with the onset
of reproductivity. However, current thinking suggests that the construction of
masculinity, in a social and cultural if not a biological sense, begins in the schoolyard
before the onset of puberty. Jon Swain, in his studies on pre-teen British schoolboys,
relates that:

\begin{quote}
Some writers describe schools as a “masculinity factory,” or as
“masculinity-making devices,” where boys learn that there are a number of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} ibid, 175.

\textsuperscript{28} David D. Gilmore. \textit{Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity}
(New Haven, Conn., USA: Yale University Press, 1990), 19
different, and often competing, ways of being a boy and that some of these are more cherished and prestigious, and therefore more powerful than others.²⁹

The very multiplicity of methods concerning the building and maintaining of male identity is one of the main justifications why, in gender studies, the word masculinity has been pluralised. Another reason is as a corrective to the sociobiological notion that all men possess generalised genetically based tendencies towards aggression, competition, hierarchy, territoriality, promiscuity, and gender-based bonding. This, according to R.W. Connell, is overly deterministic:

> The usual finding, on intellect, temperament and other personal traits, is that there are no measurable differences [between men and women] at all. Where differences appear, they are small compared to variation within either sex, and very small compared to differences in the social positioning of women and men.³⁰

More recent discussions on masculinity have framed it as a matter of social construction rather than genetic engineering but, as Connell says, this too has its problems:

> Gender is hardly in better case, when it becomes just a subject-position in discourse, the place from which one speaks; when gender is seen as, above all, a performance; or when the rending contradictions within gendered lives become ‘an instatement of metaphor.’³¹

When approached in this fashion, it is easy — as was the case with Danto’s Brillo boxes — for discussions themselves to become disembodied, intellectual games rather than reflections of an all too real struggle for individuality within the schoolyard community, as Swain points out:

> It is a paradox that although pupils attempt to construct their own individual identity, no one aspires to be, or can afford to be, too different, and they are conscious that they need to be “normal” and “ordinary”


³¹ ibid, 51
within the strict codes set by the own peer group.\textsuperscript{32}

While agreeing with Connell that absolute definitional characteristics of masculinity are overly prescriptive and — if implemented as stated — socially divisive, it’s hard to deny some tendencies exist. To begin with, dramatic alterations to body chemistry in young males at the onset of puberty is universal. Testosterone and vasopressin have particularly profound effects on their physical and emotional makeup. As psychiatrist Louann Brizendine puts it: “If testosterone were beer, a nine-year-old boy would get the equivalent of about one cup a day. But by age fifteen, it would be equal to two gallons a day.”\textsuperscript{33} The consequent biological turmoil draws him closer to his peers who, so far as he can determine, share his transformations and resultant anxieties. Whether hegemonic, a subculture, or some more diffuse example of community, the peer group appears to be central to the construction of masculine self-definition. It may manifest itself as a soccer team, a rock band, or a pseudonymous graffiti writing “crew,” but in one form or another it is usually a present and significant constant in young men’s lives. Swain, like Mailer, sees it as part of negotiating identity:

Boys’ notion of status comes from having a certain position within the peer group hierarchy that becomes relevant when it is seen in relation to others. It is not something that is given but is often the outcome of intricate and intense maneuvering and has to be learned through negotiation and sustained through performance, sometimes on an almost daily basis.\textsuperscript{34}

Ordinarily, adolescent and young adult males coalesce around shared affinities or interests. These can be intellectual, economic, physical, or culturally based, but at a peer-group level they are signified by specific abilities or talents. For instance, almost anywhere in the world, at present, success at sport is likely to be rewarded with ready access to a school’s hegemonic student group. Partly this is because athletic competition

\textsuperscript{32} Swain, 217

\textsuperscript{33} Luann Brizendine, \textit{The Male Brain}, (New York, USA: Three Rivers Press, 2010)

\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{34} Swain, 218.
offers easily measurable indicators of success, both within the boys’ world and, importantly, beyond it in the greater arena of male adult culture. More significantly, as Connell notes from our perspective, sport presents opportunities for heavily embodied performances with ramifications that extend beyond the playing field: “The institutional organization of sport embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men, exclusion or domination of women. These social relations of gender are both realized and symbolized in the bodily performances.”

Physicality, whether manifested as strength, endurance, or dexterity, is a quality that bring success in sport and, as Crawford indicates, when directed to other ends, also has value among males:

[W]e are led to consider how the specifically human manner of being is lit up, as it were, by man’s interaction with his world through his hands. For this a new sort of anthropology is called for, one that is adequate to our experience of agency. Such an account might illuminate the appeal of manual work in a way that is neither romantic nor nostalgic, but rather simply gives credit to the practice of building things, fixing things, and routinely tending to things, as an element of human flourishing.

Not everyone is equipped for membership of the dominant group, whatever its defining qualities may be. Therefore, most boys will form associations with others who possess similar interests to their own. In a contemporary school environment, these may include technology, drama, music, or the visual arts. Adherents gather around differing expressions of these to create their own sub-groups. They are frequently inward-looking, exclusive, and their members few in number. Typically they are incapable of or uninterested in threatening the hegemonic majority. But, as Brizendine says, that is not necessarily important: “A teen’s self-confidence is directly proportional to how he looks in front of his peers. If he can’t be on top the next best thing is pretending not to care.” On that basis they are accepted, even respected, if their abilities are seen as either separate from or complementary to the dominant group. Such sub-groups offer a critical

35. Connell, 54.

36. Crawford, 64.

37. Brizendine, 43.
but supportive cultural environment where a boy may nurture and develop his own identity and begin to acquire abilities with tools and processes that provide both self-expression and kudos from the group. His successes and failures happen among peers who share his own interests and so, irrespective of the result, they invest his emerging skills with value.

We see also that hierarchies are inherent to these systems, existing both between different groups and within them. It follows that challenge and opposition are inevitable, too. These are not rigid structures; they evolve with their membership and change as novices join and elders leave. Also, boys tend to define masculinity through action or agency — we have already touched on the importance of sport in this regard — as Swain, again echoing Mailer, puts it:

Masculinity does not exist as an ontological given but comes into existence as people act. That is, the social and material practices through which, and by which, boys’ masculine identities are defined are generally described in terms of what boys do with or to their bodies, and a number of writers have embraced the concept of embodiment.... Boys are viewed as embodied social agents, for they do not merely have a passive body that is inscribed and acted upon; they are actively involved in the development of their bodies throughout their school life (and, indeed, for their entire life span).38

Because group involvement and embodiment are both so fundamental to the cultural development of boys and young men, we have chosen to draw our examples from collective rather than individual practices.

If Mailer’s declaration on manhood is accepted by implication, as Swain, Gilmore, and others appear to do, then it follows that, consciously or not, information regarding a man’s masculinity must be available for interpretation by those adjudicating him. It is not a process that can happen in private, though there are undoubtedly occasions when a subject might wish it were so. Something about an individual is inevitably communicated to others through the expressive actions he publicly undertakes. Such revelations are natural, and inevitably pertinent to the development of masculinities.

38. Swain, 224.
They are also intrinsic to all the arts which, as Heidegger points out, take place in the larger world: “The work taken care of in each case is not only at hand in the domestic world of the workshop, but rather in the public world.”39 It must be also be born in mind that, though these disclosures will apparently concern the subject, they are as likely to be about interpreter.

To recap; the gestation and creation of a boy’s masculinity is to a significant extent a public affair, entailing a wide range of embodied expressive practices to be appraised by others and accepted or deprecated accordingly. The most relevant evaluative groups consist of his peers who, like him, are in a condition of liminality, to use anthropologist Victor Turner’s term — that is, caught between two states of being, in this case, childhood and adulthood. They are without either the social power of the latter or the dependency of former: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”40 As outsiders, in Turner’s sense, youths lack both certainty and definition, so feelings of vulnerability are rife. Shared cultural activities are crucial in counteracting these and creating tentative but potent connections with kindred spirits. This is perhaps also when the convergence between an individual’s expressive process and the aesthetic response of his associates is at its greatest. These ad hoc, inchoate, and frequently volatile groupings are, in Turner’s terms, ones of communitas. Socially they are defined by organisational disinclination or naiveté as much as by fraternal creativity. Quoting Martin Buber, Turner elaborates:

“Community is the being no longer side by side (and, some might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou. Community is where community happens.”41

41. ibid, 127
Extending and, to an extent, renaming Buber’s description of community he continues:

Communitas has also an aspect of potentiality; it is often in the subjunctive mood. Relations between total beings are generative of symbols and metaphors and comparisons; art and religion are their products rather than legal and political structures...[it] breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority.  

Communitas, Turner claims, is “of the now” and, lacking power and experience, “now” is all a young adult, or anyone living on the society’s margins, can be sure of, other than the cognisance his peers are experiencing similar feelings to himself, though never quite as intensely.

As Turner defines it, there are three identifiable, though not distinct, phases to communitas, each more structured than the preceding one. The first, which is our primary concern here, he terms existential or spontaneous communitas. This alliance of individual enthusiasms and energies occurs during a period when action for its own sake is of more value than its consequences. To reiterate Arendt, it is a period when knowing what you are doing is of little significance, but doing it — whatever “it” may be — and doing it now, is all important. Though it has much in common with Nietzsche’s claims regarding the artist’s godlike status, Crawford identifies this single-minded creative desire as the “human element.” It consists of “knowing what to do when the rules run out or there are no rules in the first place,”43 or, we might add, when there is a conscious determination to flout the existing rules. Existential communitas may happen when a group of artists come together to work in a shared space, or when a group of boys throw a ball around between them. The only relevant elements are context and collective will, all else is secondary. Sooner rather than later, however, the artists will want to display their work, the ball players to challenge another team, but doing so requires organisation and the agreement of others. Suddenly, leagues emerge for the athletes, galleries for the artists. The participants have now moved on to the normative and ideological phases of communitas:

42. ibid, 127–128.
43. Crawford, 35.
“Both normative and ideological communitas are already within the domain of structure, and it is the fate of all spontaneous communitas in history to undergo what most people see as a ‘decline and fall’ into structure and law,” says Turner. Existential communitas represents the vital “quick” of human interrelatedness, it burns brightly but briefly. The later stages always refer to their spontaneous origins, but the original situational impetus has vanished. It will reappear in the future, though most likely elsewhere and in a radically different form.

Existential communitas exemplifies chaos and anti-structure, but also inspiration and resourcefulness, in a necessarily structured world. To make the distinction, Turner uses the analogy, familiar to most visual artists, of the figure and ground relationship in a painting. They, like communitas and structure, are mutually determinative, one cannot exist without the other. While the comparison is apposite, he fails to acknowledge an important distinction. Though there is an interrelationship between positive and negative space in a composition, there is no transference between them, no metamorphosis from one into the other. This is not the case with communitas and structure. As Turner clearly states, the former always transforms into the latter. Sometimes this is successful, in the sense that the form becomes institutionalised and long lasting though most often, it is not. The fertile fields of creative chaos must constantly reseed themselves, but the hegemonic forces of order and structure select what will be harvested, and most of the young crop is inevitably ploughed under. “Wisdom is always to find the appropriate relationship between structure and communitas under the given circumstances of time and place, to accept each modality when it is paramount without rejecting the other, and not to cling to one when its present impetus is spent.”

In the following section, we examine four examples of practices with strong visual content. Each has a unique history extending over more than a millennium, but contemporary iterations that were incubated within particular male subcultures. From a Euro-

44. Turner, 132.
45. Ibid, 139.
centric perspective they are also, non-paradigmatic or vernacular in nature. Therefore, to some extent all four remain on the margins of mainstream aesthetic respectability and possess socially transgressive qualities. Collectively they indicate characteristic consistencies regarding embodied masculinities. Each is captured in a slightly different place on the arc of existential communitas, but all maintain connections thorough a cultural *umbilicus* to their situational origins; each is in transition, vital, alive, human.
Section II
Chapter Three:
The Graffiti Writer

In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.¹

Throughout a long, varied history, personal marks made on public walls have rarely moved beyond the salacious, incendiary, or destructive. In purely visual terms they have also included symbols that, while interesting in themselves, were narrow in creative scope and audience. For example, builder’s marks — or tâcherons — relating to payment are found carved in the walls of Romanesque cathedrals. Between the 1880s and 1940s hobo signs, left on fence posts and door frames across North America, communicated information about the residents to penniless travelers. Pictograms and ideographic systems such as these constituted a self-contained, visible language, but they impinged on the cultural consciousness of society at large hardly at all. In the early 1970s, however, a more colourful, detailed, and complex form of street art emerged.

In the crucible of the period’s political protest movements and the urban decay of inner cities, and enabled by new media such as the marker pen and spray can, graffiti took on fresh expressive form. It was practiced by those for whom speed of production and evaluation based on competition were primary qualities. Contemporary graffiti writing is a stress-fuelled art form that appropriately mirrors a stress-filled society. Anonymity or, more accurately, pseudonymity — meaning the work can be identified but it’s producer cannot — facilitates the sometimes rigid nature of the culture’s principle characteristics. The practice is regarded by social guardians as nuisance vandalism at best and crime at worst. In July 2008, five British graffiti writers were given prison sentences of up to two

¹. Daniel 5:5 (KJV)
years, a reason in and of itself for concealing one’s identity. The relative dangers of being caught are closely factored into graffiti’s peer evaluation process and, as will emerge here, public attitudes are more nuanced than authorities sometimes think.

During the early 1980s a few graffiti artists, notably Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, made a transition to the traditional world of the gallery. In doing so, they left behind the pseudonymity of the street. Today there is resistance to this among those who see qualities in graffiti, including the requisite lack of identification, that are worth preserving for their own sake. Banksy is undoubtedly the most widely known graffiti writer of the current generation. He acknowledges that personal recognition would bring unneeded attention and compromise his practice and he has no desire to become a public figure — at least in a traditional sense:

Every other type of art compared to graffiti is a step down… I make normal paintings if I have ideas that are too complex or offensive to go out on the street, but if I ever stopped being a graffiti writer I would be gutted. It would feel like being a basket weaver rather than being a proper artist… I’m just trying to make the pictures look good; I’m not trying to make myself look good. I’m not into fashion. The pictures generally look better than I do when we’re out on the street together… it’s part of the job to shut the fuck up and not meet people… Ultimately, I just want to make the right piece at the right time in the right place.3

Banksy, Shepard Fairey, and their contemporaries produce what may be termed pictorial graffiti or, more commonly, street art. It is image-based, often carefully pre-planned, and executed in a variety of media, frequently utilising stencils. Tagging, which will be discussed here, is a more widely practised parallel form. There is a considerable overlap between the two but it is possible to see them as distinct, particularly in execution and in public response. Tags tend to be more spontaneous than pictorial graffiti and are usually applied with aerosol sprays or some variant of them. Most definitively, they are

essentially based on letterforms and, in that sense, stand in somewhat the same relationship to street art as calligraphy does to painting.

**Text and Word**

While calligraphic masters exist in Western societies, it is questionable whether they possess a similar sense of their craft to those in Asia and elsewhere. Because it possesses certain similarities in process to graffiti writing, where relevant traditional Chinese calligraphy is used comparative purposes in this chapter. Medieval European monastic manuscript production was a collaborative effort that emphasised division of labour. A scribe would pen the text, an illustrator create decorative embellishments, and a bookbinder assemble the pages. In the later Middle Ages, large *scriptoria* sometimes broke down the tasks even further; a monk might do nothing but rule pages, or a colourist fill images. This process contrasts markedly with Chinese documents which were most often the product of a single scholar who authored the text, brushed the characters, and added illustrations himself — a combination of skills unknown in European monasteries. It is still unusual in Western cultures today, where calligraphy is associated with penmanship but has little or no hermeneutic dimension. Theologian and educator Ivan Illich explains how this came about. Beginning in the later middle-ages the reading of books underwent significant change; one more radical, says Illich, than the development of movable type in the early fifteenth century. In the early monastic period, books were viewed — more than read — as windows into nature or God. Then, in the middle of the eighth century, under the auspices of the Emperor Charlemagne, the first standardised script containing both majuscules and minuscules was created to produce the modern Latin alphabet. Together with the *ex authentic libro* mark, indicating accurate transcription, the book began to assume different qualities and purposes. It was transformed from being: “a pointer to *nature* to a pointer to *mind.*”

The application of these scribal rules meant that strings of letters — words

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or lines — would henceforth generate an abstract architectural phantom on the emptiness represented by the page. The page lost the quality of soil in which words are rooted. The new text was a figment on the face of the book that lifted off into autonomous existence. This new bookish text did have material existence, but it was not the existence of ordinary things: it was literally neither here nor there.5

This “bookish text,” as Illich terms it, primarily references information — usually from other texts — and prioritises its retrieval. To this end over succeeding centuries indices, chapters, folios, paragraphs, and the host of visual aids we call punctuation appeared. Nature was no longer read as text, but described by it. Today, says Illich, “the text has begun to float above the page. It is on its way becoming a kind of vessel that ferries meaningful signs through the space separating the copy from the original.”6

Qi — the “Breath of Heaven,” or vitality of spirit which forms the first canon of the Chinese calligrapher— seems a long way from Illich’s bookish text. Distant too from the midnight-creeping teenager dressed in a hoodie and brandishing a spray can. Yet, in his practice, the latter is closer to that of the literatus than may be imagined. The spread of illegal urban graffiti writing over the past forty years has privileged the visual quality of letterforms in a way the Latin alphabet rarely experiences. By limiting literary content to a single word — his own pseudonym or ‘tag’ — a graffiti writer places extreme emphasis on its visual expression. In doing so, he reverses a millennium-long trend.

Contemporary graffiti writers — the term ‘writer’ is generally preferred to ‘artist’ or ‘painter,’ even among pictorialists — make no hierarchical distinction between word and image but, as ethnographer Nancy Macdonald notes: “Lettering is the basis of [tagging] and a central feature of any illegal writer’s work.” Unlike Chinese literati, writers do not claim to be poets or scholars but, in many other ways, their relationship to their craft is not dissimilar. It would be ludicrous to suggest that graffiti writers strive for Tao-like harmony in their working process. However, it would be equally unfair to ignore

5. ibid.
6. ibid, 118.
the dedication and commitment writers such as Grey feel:

I work hard because I need to live up to my standard of what a writer should be... for a few years I wrote specifically because I felt I owed it to the faith of graffiti. If I don’t live up to my own standards, then how can I expect that anyone will.7

Creez too emphasises the obligation and responsibility entailed in graffiti writing:

There’s something that irks me these days. It’s that writers...deny they ever wrote. It’s like they’re denying their roots, their background. But you can’t deny your past. Colt was four years older than us. He was one of the best writers....Colt never denied his past; he kept it real, and that’s something I’ve got to give him props for. I saw him get caught tagging [a] train when he was thirty years old. He’s a father and a husband, and he has his life together, but that’s just how graff is. It’s always in your blood.8

When it comes to his discipline, sense of aesthetic process, and relationship to his peers and environment, the graffiti writer is closer to the scholar than time, place, and culture might initially suggest. Like any novice, a writer begins by replicating the work of his “betters.” Known as “biting,” he will find himself criticised for this approach, as he is for almost everything else. Macdonald explains:

Older writers are “elder and better” and the young novice is “seen and not heard.” Adding insult to injury, they must also carry the label “toy”. As this word infers they represent playthings, figures who are merely there to amuse and entertain others. Indeed, to call an elder or accomplished writer a “toy” or make childlike insinuations, is a common form of insult9

Until he’s proved himself through persistence and visibility, older writers will continue to erase or “cross-out” a toy’s work, irrespective of its quality. Forty years ago, at the birth of the modern graffiti movement, it wasn’t uncommon to find established writers mentoring novices in exchange for paint and look out duties. The neophyte would first imitate, then attempt to emulate his senior, very much in the manner of the master/

8. ibid, 60.
apprentice system in a Renaissance artist’s studio.\textsuperscript{10} Nowadays, as Macdonald explains, there is more formality and distance in the process: “Most activities in this subculture are regulated by unwritten, but recognized, rules, expectations and ethics, and the progression of a writer is no exception.”\textsuperscript{11} The orthodox route to acceptance is first, to get “up”—to reproduce your tag as frequently and in as many places as possible. “Bombing”—the saturation of a single location with your work—is also encouraged. Secondly, you must begin to achieve this with style. Veteran New York graffiti writer ‘Drax’ elaborates:

> There has to be a lot of coverage and the more you do the better and the ability and the quality of the work you put up is all taken into consideration as well. I mean the ideal thing would be to be absolutely everywhere, nice pieces everywhere plus your tags as well, but that’s hard to achieve. I suppose the aim is to be the most up and the best.\textsuperscript{12}

Even if a newcomer can satisfy these criteria there is still no absolute guarantee of acceptance. Graffiti writers are almost monastic in their adherence to traditional codes of behaviour. As ‘Rebel’ of Brooklyn says, these include respect for experience, dedication, and hierarchy: “Basic, learn your history, pay your dues, and respect those who came before you.” Respect is a word that occurs frequently in conversations with writers, however, in context, honour would seem a more accurate term. This emphasis on tradition, even conservatism, among mainly young men practising a recent and lawless art form, seems paradoxical. However, such restrictions and codes of behaviour stem from a recognition among of the culture’s elders about the need to negotiate the terms of their illegal activities with broader society. Paul 107 articulates this:

> No one’s going to tell you what you can and can’t hit. After all, the idea is to paint as much as you can, right? You should, however, avoid hitting places of worship, art installations, cars, small businesses (they have little to no dough), and statues. Basically, stay away from anything that strikes a

\textsuperscript{10} ibid, 186.
\textsuperscript{11} ibid, 74.
\textsuperscript{12} ibid, 81.
chord with the “little people.” It will save you a lot of grief in the future.\textsuperscript{13}

The “grief” in question could emanate from law enforcement quarters, but is just as likely to come from within the community itself. Regulations, traditions, and common practices all serve to create a social order that is deliberately designed to intimidate the newcomer into conformity and support self-policing. To live outside the law you must be honest, or at least obedient; consequently, the outlaws’ rules often require more enforcement than those of the law-abiding.

Eventually, his initiation complete, the novice writer gains admission into his cultural fraternity. Practical benefits to this exist, and they will be discussed later, however, membership also reinforces particular attitudes, none more powerful than a sense of exceptionalism. Probably all toys feel a psychological separation from society at large before their training, but now it is strengthened by membership in an exclusive micro-culture. These are associations, Nancy Macdonald explains, whose relationship with the rest of the population ranges from problematic to symbiotic:

In all senses, writers express the feeling of exclusion, a being and a belonging to something which sits apart. They promote their subculture as literally that — a boundaried group which stands detached from the world surrounding it. And, yet, this, ironically, is exactly what it is not. Look a little closer and one can see that this subculture is actually firmly tied to this “outside world”. It needs these ties to position and define itself.\textsuperscript{14}

The graffiti writer, as Macdonald indicates, consistently self-identifies as a social outsider, he chooses to be the “other,” someone apart from the mainstream milieu. However, writers also crave recognition and elect to employ illegal actions to force acknowledgment or, failing that, the opprobrium of greater society. This is a problematic decision and to succeed the writer normally leads a double life:

When you step into this subculture, you’re expected to leave all traces of ‘real life’ on its doorstep. This includes your background, your identities and the baggage that may come with that. Male writers cross this

\textsuperscript{13} ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{14} Macdonald, 162.
threshold carrying nothing but their graffiti name and persona.\textsuperscript{15}

Graffiti writing represents a classic instance of liminality, as Turner describes it:
“[S]ociety as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated \textit{comitatus}, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”\textsuperscript{16}

**Expression and Embodiment**

Contemporary graffiti writing is a secular activity. Nevertheless, tagging is not without spiritual features or, more accurately, it has aspects that are usually associated with spirituality. This is especially so regarding embodiment, especially if the term is understood as a physically manifested sensation or idea. Zaki, one of the very small number of female taggers, explains:

[She] recognizes this relationship between a writer’s written name and physical self and puts it down to the sensory experience of using a spray can: “With a spray can it’s a different way of applying things, it’s, sort of like, intimate with yourself... a pencil and all those tools are extensions of yourself. But, for some reason, you’ve got this thing coming out with air and color at the same time, it sounds kind of corny, but it is coming from you, sort of thing. As opposed to dip in the paintbrush and apply colour, with spray it’s so immediate, it seems to be coming from you sometimes.”\textsuperscript{17}

Others share that perception: “whenever I paint, it’s just a physical extension of myself”\textsuperscript{18} says Iz. This is clearly what Sennett articulates when encapsulating Polanyi and Merleau Ponty: “If I may put this another way, we are now absorbed \textit{in} something, no longer self-aware, even of our bodily self. We have become the thing on which we are working.”\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} ibid, 192.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Turner, 96.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Macdonald,195.
\item \textsuperscript{18} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Sennett, 174.
\end{itemize}
There is no keener debate among graffiti writers than that regarding the validity of “illegal” and “legal walls.” For most, the spirit, if not the soul, of their art rests in its illegality. Stealing paint — “racking” — and “getting up” where you should not are the point of the endeavour. Some writers, however, make the leap into the art-world’s mainstream; most as commercial illustrators and a very few, as noted earlier, as internationally renowned artists. As is the case with other areas of youth culture — hip-hop and punk, for example — graffiti has grown from a small cult interest to a subculture, to widespread recognition. Like those forms, graffiti writing is constantly required to reestablish and renegotiate its authenticity as it evolves. For the purist writer, criminality protects graffiti’s essence by intentionally alienating outsiders. As we will later see, it also generates indispensable opposition. From this widespread perspective, paid legal work undermines the practice of a writer who possesses Grey’s raison d’etre:

If it’s not illegal, I just don’t understand the point of doing it. Something like design is cool because doing it legally, as an occupation, is the nature of the art. With graff, people try to turn it into an occupation, and they end up losing all their integrity... and having very little monetary gain.\(^{20}\)

Creez agrees:

I don’t hate on legal walls, but I’d rather do illegal shit than a paid mural. There are guys that only do legal walls and contracts, but for me that’s not graffiti. Graffiti is part of street culture...when you cover bombing with legal walls I don’t hate on it but it’s not what graff is about for me.\(^{21}\)

Until recently, the issue was mainly moot. Most writers’ careers ended as maturity, accompanied by financial and family responsibilities, led them in other directions. These days, however, many extend their vocation into their thirties and even forties. They recognise that an artist of Banksy’s stature maintains his illegality because, paradoxically, it enhances his trustworthiness and his work’s legitimacy. Credibility is also augmented by the removal of financial incentives and more so if the tagger’s actions lead to a substantial fine.

\(^{20}\) Paul 107, 171.

\(^{21}\) ibid, 64.
A second quality informing the practice is its environmental context. This is direct and unambiguous; the walls of the city are the graffiti writer’s working ground. In a basic, biological fashion he is marking his territory. Beyond that, the streetscape supplies him with the requisite diversity and risk to frame his creative skills. Non-urban environments lack such challenges and fail to provide opportunities for widespread evaluation. As was the case with Chinese *literati*, the only audience of consequence for the graffiti writer is that of his peers. Their silent judgement determines his status; to a considerable extent, it is based on environmental factors such as location and visibility, along with related issues like riskiness and mobility. Veteran writer Sake lays out the requirements:

I hit almost everything you can think of: rooftops, highways, street levels, riot gates, trains, subways, subway platforms, mini-ledges, building ledges, tunnels, trucks, and water towers...If you come out just doing legal walls and freights in nowhereland and you haven’t put a dent in the city...you ain’t shit. Nowadays, you gotta rock the streets, the subways, the highways, trucks, trains, and walls.22

Unintentionally, graffiti writers draw attention to some of the most desolate and neglected areas of our cities; places where even the crudest tag will radically alter the aesthetic value. We may not like what we see but we at least look where once we did not. Some would argue this alone justifies the activity but on the writer’s part it is most likely irrelevant. Making the most personal and visible mark he can within, or with reference to, an external space, drives the tagger. This urge to engage with and artificially personalize constructed environments with hand-crafted text is at the core of the practice.

Most graffiti writers use common indelible spirit markers and store-bought spray cans, but experimentation is common. “Mops” — homemade markers manufactured from shoe polish containers — are popular. These are filled with a favourite ink recipe then blackboard eraser felt is stuffed in the top. The result is a thick applicator that creates a satisfactorily large and dripping stroke. Innovative ink experiments, like those veteran writer Rebel describes, are prevalent too:

I remember when I was young, I used to go to my mother’s job and get... carbon papers, I used to just steal, like, all sorts of receipts with carbon papers, and we used to pile [them] in jars, and pour rubbing alcohol [over them.] And then... we used to just let it sit for as long as we could think about it, and every now and then we’d shake it — that was like the first purple ink I ever used, ‘cause it was like purple-blue from that carbon paper.23

Apart from being a medium of expression, as Grey explains, a graffiti artist’s ink sometimes fulfills a secondary purpose as a weapon designed to enrage the “opposition:”

That’s another thing that keeps people going — the invention of new tools to write with. Stuff like etch and mops created whole new styles. I like how, in Amsterdam, they mix brake fluid with their ink because it penetrates the plastic interior of the subway and stains it for good. I love things where people just adapted and figured out how to outdo the people that were opposing them.24

Leaving ethical issues surrounding the deliberate destruction of property aside for the moment, this statement illustrates the visceral connection many graffiti writers have with their materials. For some, like Sake, it is profoundly sensual:

The can is king; there’s nothing like the feeling of a can with a fat cap. Just run up to a spot and get loose. I love everything about it: the sound of the paint coming out full force; the fumy tags; color combos... that and any dark ink that’s mad permanent and drips to the floor.25

Along with a sensory relationship with his media, a graffiti writer must also show an understanding of design, especially as it relates to letterforms. Nancy Macdonald quotes ‘Professor’ P-Kay from On The Go Magazine in December 1993:

The most important demonstration of the piecer’s skill, however, lies in his/her letterforms. These are a writer’s principal concern “letters should stand on their own with no help of colours or elaborate techniques .... Colours and designs are secondary, focus in on the primary concept in graffiti and master your letterforms.”26

23. ibid, 144.
24. ibid, 172.
25. ibid, 83.
26. Macdonald, 82.
A letterform is precisely that, a form we expect to remain generally consistent in appearance to preserve linguistic meaning. Yet, in addition to this, each letter or character contains a set of dynamics that is purely visual in nature. These pull our eyes in different directions; left to right, up and down, and so on. Shapes may also be top- or bottom-heavy and strokes of varied thickness. These elements imply meaning irrespective of the cognitive linguistic code that is applied to them. It is within the realm of this separate visual semantic that both the traditional calligrapher and graffiti writer attain their freedom. In both cases, artistic convention eventually gives way to the confidence required to push the boundaries of the craft farther. Formal knowledge becomes internalized and the artist feels fully present both in his work and as he works. When this is achieved, the ambitions of the writer find their fullest expression.

Coincidentally, but appropriately, the names applied to the most extreme styles of lettering are remarkably similar in Medieval China and the present day. So called “wildstyle” graffiti pieces extend the visual possibilities of tagging far past the notational and opportunistic. Likewise, Kuangcao — “wild” or “mad cursive” script — forces the rendering of Chinese script beyond orthodox limits of legibility. Calligrapher Mai-Mai Sze describes the process:

It has often been remarked that the brush dances and the ink sings. Calligraphy at its finest and most expressive is indeed the dance of the brush and ink at its highest point of achievement, when movement, vitality, rhythm, and harmony are uppermost and the intellectual content of the written characters purposely is abandoned in the swift rendering of them by the perfectly disciplined and therefore completely free brush. Absolutely natural and spontaneous (tzu jan) brush work is like the flight of a bird. And works of calligraphy of this caliber might truly be described as the prime examples of abstract art.27

The calligrapher/scholar, elevates the esteem of calligraphy beyond the narrow world of the educated literati. Analogously, equally incomprehensible “wildstyle” graffiti extends the form’s appeal, even among those who equate tagging with vandalism or childish

scribbles. Though, again, Macdonald emphasises, this was never the intention:

A writer seeking fame is generally expected to demonstrate skill through the use of “wildstyle”. This is the subculture’s most complex letter form, characterized by its angular interlocking letters, distorted letter boundaries, accompanying arrows and extensive use of colour. An experienced audience may be able to decipher its obscured letters, but these are not usually apparent to the untrained eye. Accordingly, a great deal of writers’ work only really speaks to graffiti artists.\(^28\)

This may be, but wildstyle seems to resonate with outsiders more than simpler forms, something Valerie Spicer of the Vancouver Police Department’s Graffiti Task Force acknowledges:

> Usually people like the pieces and dislike the tags and bubble letters. Unfortunately in the graffiti subculture these three forms are inextricably linked and the ultimate goal is always fame and subcultural acknowledgement. The pieces have promoted leniency from the general public which is often lured by their artistic content.\(^29\)

This may be because the craft involved is more evident, or because it is clear more is happening within the image than is immediately apparent. Vestigial letterforms are also an attraction; we may not be able to read what is written, but feel we should be able to puzzle it out. Artificial alphabets, exemplified by Luigi Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus*, tend to polarize responses. They irritate some people who feel cheated because they are not seeing a “real” text, yet others find them fascinating. Perhaps wildstyle falls into that category. Anyhow, there is no doubt it liberates lettering from its conventional code carrying role and elevates it’s essential visual qualities instead.

**Essential Opposition**

Artistic embodiment is inherent to all practices. Until recently though it was rarely evident in visual arts processes, which generally occur outside the public eye. Modern

\(^{28}\) Macdonald, 159.

graffiti writing has changed that. The added elements of risk-taking: in choice of location, or in performing an illegal act embody masculine characteristics as much as they do as artistic ones. This is why the form strives to maintain its homo-sociability. “According to **British Transport Police Records** (Jan. 1992 – Jan 1994): ‘The sex of graffiti offenders appears to be almost entirely male, only 0.67% of people arrested are female,”**30 a number reflected in Vancouver where, according to Spicer, 94% of writers are men.31 There is no prohibition on female graffiti writers but they are discouraged, mainly by being isolated, insulted, and demeaned. There is a sense, articulated by Iz that graffiti’s capacity as an arena for masculine display will be diluted if women become involved:

> Look at how masculinity and the male species is under attack. We always have to make the change, in the workplace, home life. How many years were men raised as the breadwinner?...All right, we’re sensible, so we are more open-minded nowadays...but possibly because of the constant attack against masculinity, that is where [this] comes from.32

Danger and opposition are illegal graffiti essentials. The former is provided by crumbling ledges or the third rail on a subway track, the latter by the police authorities. Vancouver, like other large urban police forces, has created a task force to combat the mischief. It is significant that police departments are also male-dominated cultures, possessing similar masculinity-defining characteristics to those of graffiti writers. This is graphically illustrated in New York where the city’s vandal squad sprays ‘VS’ over other writers’ work:

> By writing their own distinctive ‘tag’, using the subculture’s terminology and crossing out writers’ work to disrespect them in their own terms the [vandal] squad remove their ‘official’ mask and effectively present themselves as a rival graffiti gang.33

Such actions understandably infuriate illegal writers, yet they also validate them. The

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31. Spicer, 27.
32. Macdonald, 149.
33. ibid, 120.
contest has been joined and it is being played with graffiti writers’ weapons, and by their rules. This is made evident by the defensive hyperbole used by the police to make their case. In Spicer’s words, graffiti is a “virus,” a “disease,” is “contagious” and an addiction. Finally, it is an “organised form of delinquency” that “always produces a victim.” Blatantly and explicitly pejorative though it is, such language creates a framework that validates police actions, as was clear at the launch of: Vandal Squad, a memoir by ex-police officer Joseph Rivera. The event included several established graffiti writers who took part in a joint panel discussion with the police. Though there was friction, there was also mutual acknowledgement. Globe and Mail journalist Simon Houpt attended:

Afterward, the panelists signed books and posed for photos, often with their antagonists. I asked Ket [one of the writers] if he had extracted some satisfaction from the evening’s events. “It’s kind of an anti-climactic thing,” he admitted. “I’ve always envisioned us meeting them, strangling them, taking all their photos, maybe their money as well, taking their handcuffs, handcuffing them to their vehicles.”

Besides the black humor there was grudging respect too: “Steve Mona, Rivera’s former sergeant, said he liked sitting down with a graffiti artist after an arrest. ‘I enjoy the give and take, I enjoy getting into their mindset.’” The relationship, as Spicer notes is clearly both combative and symbiotic. “The graffiti game is like a bad comic action movie, everyone has a role, and without the appropriate characters, the plot falls apart. I naturally

34. Spicer, 10.
35. ibid, 11.
36. ibid, 39.
37. ibid, 27.
38. ibid, 14.
40. ibid.
become the ‘bad guy’ who chases down the graffiti writers.”\textsuperscript{41} It is a zero-sum contest that serves both party’s needs.

Whether contemporary graffiti writing represents the conclusion of a particular era of embodied practice in the visual arts, or the advent of a new one, is uncertain. One fact is incontrovertible, however; the principal opposition the writers face does not come from the police — as we have seen they are their collaborators — but, as was the case with the Chinese \textit{literatus}, it resides, as Simon Houpt illustrates, within themselves:

“This live off my name,” said Cope. “I’m getting corporate deals. I’m in my 40s now, I mean I’m not gonna paint a subway car now, it doesn't make any sense.” He had a family to support, he explained. “At the end of the day – bills to pay – it’s just not for me any more.” Still, he admitted, he does get the itch sometimes. He began reminiscing about what it was like to bomb a train on the 5 line, then run over and do another on the L. “All these new spray paints, from Europe… oh, I wanna do a train. Is it worth it? Naw, lemme get a corporate deal, a couple of hundred Gs, and relax.”\textsuperscript{42}

Yet there are others, like Grey who, even after the romantic posturing is stripped away, demonstrate an engagement with this process and what it represents that seems likely to be lifelong:

[L]ike everything in my life, the process of graffiti has turned out to be the goal. I used to expect a pot of gold at the end of this. I realized about halfway into my career that this doesn’t ever end. The only things I will be left with are memories, scars, friends, and enemies. But something has obviously driven me to keep going.\textsuperscript{43}

Quite what that “something” is we will consider next.

Identity

In his essay \textit{The Authority of Drawing: Hand, Authenticity, and Authorship} Michael Wetzel points out that in the context of paradigmatic art:

The signature does not belong to the work, it is something different,

\textsuperscript{41} Spicer, 6.
\textsuperscript{42} ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Paul 107, 173.
foreign, a name which is part of a discourse on the work and which constitutes the relationship between the mere existence of the piece of work and the artist as inventor or producer not by the mere act of signing, but by referring to the whole sociological context of reception, publication, attribution, acceptance, recognition, etc.\textsuperscript{44}

This is as true of a signature applied to a cheque or contract as it is to a piece of artwork. A signature makes claims about the object to which it is attached and its signatory, in three interrelated areas: identity, authenticity, and autonomy.

Arguably a signature is a signifier pointing to a particular “self;” however, we contend it is an expression of that self, not merely emblematic of it. My signature is a graphic incarnation of myself. It is accepted as such, in law and by social convention, so that when I am not present it may “speak” for me in my stead. Before literacy and text became commonplace, written testimony was viewed with suspicion.\textsuperscript{45} Without the author present, the veracity of his words could not be questioned and he might deny them later. To prevent this, a handwritten flourish was appended to them, as his surrogate. It was, and is, accepted that this mark — or, more correctly, the performance of it— is invested with personal characteristics that no one else can reproduce. By association, my tag, for that is what a signature is, also testifies to my assertions regarding the authenticity of the object it is applied to. Yet it’s own legitimacy is in doubt, because as Thomas Fechner-Smarsly notes: “Our signature always varies a bit. Authenticity, therefore, seems to be established in a process of constant repetition and constant comparison.” There is, therefore, no original or master-copy to which it can be addressed.\textsuperscript{46}

The connection of the signature — as a mark — to my authority is therefore

\textsuperscript{44} Michael Wetzel, “The Authority of Drawing: Hand, Authenticity, and Authorship,” \textit{Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of New Media}, ed. Sonja Neef, José van Dijk, Eric Ketelaar (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 53.


\textsuperscript{46} Thomas Fechner-Smarsly, “Blood Samples and Fingerprint Files: Blood as Artificial Matter, Artist Material, and Means of the Signature,” \textit{Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of New Media}, ed. Sonja Neef, José van Dijk, Eric Ketelaar (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 199.
tenuous; it only makes sense as an embodied performative act. This is also the case with autonomy, which here principally implies lack of constraint. In artistic terms, an autonomous work is produced without preconception but with craft. This, as Sennett states, is achieved through much repetition.47 Typically, we practice our signature so frequently that it becomes unconsidered. In fact, if it appears too carefully executed it may incur suspicion; therefore, it should be judged on expression — or performance — more than appearance. Once made, our mark becomes an authentic reproduction, though not an accurate one, of such previous marks. It is perhaps the one occasion when each of us explicitly, but unknowingly, acts as a visual artist. We can do so because muscle memory liberates both confidence and skill. We do not think about what we are doing, we merely do it. It is not unusual for a pre-adolescent child to spend hours covering the outside of his school exercise books or backpack with renderings of his name. By practicing in this way, he develops his graphic personality and constructs an important aspect of visual selfhood. For most of us, this process slows down after a year or two. Arguably however, it never completely stops, as the pages of unconscious doodles produced during tedious business meetings will testify. But for some, including embryonic graffiti writers, it continues and mutates. Then, instead of signifying the authenticity of something to which it is attached, it acts on its own behalf. The signature, in effect, becomes a completely self-referential object.

Once the authentication requirement is removed, it seems reasonable to ask what the mark is doing, now that it appears on walls and railcars instead of documents and artwork. It is possibly even more relevant, however, to enquire what it is not doing. Traditional Chinese calligraphy was carefully scrutinized as a manifestation of the literati’s virtue. As Sinologist Amy McNair explains, his brushwork was considered vitally important in evaluating his worth: “Thanks to the force of the belief in characterology, calligraphic style was granted moral significance. And due to the equation of moral significance with fitness for political office, calligraphic style took on

47. Sennett, 37.
political significance as well.”

Thus, handwriting had implications beyond its aesthetics. It must be individual in appearance; copying an earlier master’s characters too closely might be interpreted as evasive or weak; yet, if overly expressive, the writer may be seen as self-centred or narcissistic. This represents a delicate balancing act that Westerners have rarely been subjected to. The ethical implications of our signature are based on the documents associated with it, rather than on its own graphic merit. The question of whether a signature/tag possesses a moral dimension, when disconnected from an object, has relevance, however. Given that taggers embrace the illegality of their practice, it would seem to suggest it does, and one that runs counter to prevalent social beliefs regarding protection of property. They could argue their mark makes a valid claim on the visual space a blank wall represents, and that covering its drab surface represents an overall improvement in the appearance of the urban landscape. Few graffiti writers make such assertions, however. According to Spicer, taggers show “an extreme sense of entitlement [and] complete lack of distinction between public and private space... it is obvious that graffiti writers understand their acts of vandalism and they understand the victimization, they just don’t care.”

This implies nihilism or amorality instead of immorality, and the distinction is significant.

Summary

Despite of the best efforts of police departments to frame their activities as vandalism, for the most part contemporary urban societies show a fair amount of tolerance towards graffiti and graffiti writers. Except among those individuals directly affected, there is a recognition that something distinct from mere destruction is happening. As a property crime, graffiti is not, in many eyes, ethically comparable with arson, for example. An objective assessment of the practice must consider why this is so. It is true that we


49. Spicer, 22.
possess a cultural tendency to romanticise outlaws, particularly if their crime seems either minor or morally just. There are other collective attitudes, though, that are less obvious but possibly more pertinent. Times and places when walls were not written, drawn, or painted on, with or without the permission of those in power, are few in number. One of man’s earliest attempts to express his world in graphic terms was practiced on the walls of caves. Altamira and Lascaux contain probably the most impressive and profound examples of graffiti our species has produced. Is it possible that we are cognisant of this and make an analogous connection between image and ground today?

If history works in the graffiti writers’ favour, so too does religion. The epigraph that began this chapter, from the Book of Daniel, is from a tale deeply embedded in Judeo-Christian cultures; so much so that graffiti has inherited from it a certain prophetic aura. To those millions of us who grew up with the story, “The Writing on the Wall” implies being weighed in the balance and found wanting, with ominous consequences. Every tag is, potentially, therefore, a buried reminder of our failure, or potential failure, in the eyes of God. To slough off such an accusation seems, if not blasphemous, then either arrogant or tempting fate. This is not at all relevant to the individual graffiti writer, but our knowledge and moral attitudes towards law, history, and religion create an aesthetic consensus that explains why we might create a cultural sanctuary that allows this practice to thrive.

Nature and art abhor a vacuum so, within psychological and physical urban emptiness, modern graffiti was born. Once claimed, these spaces became places where young men could create a visual practice embodying particular characteristics. These include the provision of risk, from the immediate environment, and opposition, from the police. The cloak of pseudonymity provides protection from the law and — as we will explore in later chapters — also protects the young men’s emerging sense of selfhood. The craft itself has evolved through a competitive, hierarchical sense of communitas, unconsciously designed to foster a strong sense of personal identity within an exclusive fraternity. Its success in this regard is acknowledged by the police themselves:

Overall, the practice of graffiti follows internal ethics and guidelines whether it is done in Denver, South L.A., London, New York,
Philadelphia, Oakland, Washington, Chicago, Montreal or Vancouver. Graffiti is learned in a first instance as a viewer, then as an accomplice-observer, and finally as a full participant. In essence, the rules that govern graffiti are passed on from writer to writer, a modern day urban mythology. Graffiti writers thrive on social interaction and through it they are defined as members of a privileged subculture. Their tag represents an alter ego visibly expressed in the community, a mirror for their personal achievement.50

So it appears graffiti writers do possess a moral outlook — surely that is what such rules imply — just one that is not shared, in its entirety, with the rest of us.

50. ibid, 18.
Chapter Four:
The Tattooist

Me and my brother were talking to each other
About what makes a man a man
Was it brain or brawn, or the month you were born,
We just couldn’t understand

Our old man didn’t like our appearance
He said that only women wear long hair

So me and my brother borrowed money from Mother
We knew what we had to do
We went downstairs, past the barber and gymnasium
And got our arms tattooed

These are volatile times for the magazine industry. Internet use has dramatically altered recreational reading habits, forcing publishers to adapt rapidly or face extinction. Yet, so the cliché goes, a crisis for some represents opportunity for others. While well-regarded popular publications like *Psychology Today* and *Scientific American* look decidedly threadbare in content, other genres are flourishing. A cursory glance through the racks of a large bookstore chain, for example, reveals as many as two-dozen titles on tattoos and tattooing. There are tattoo magazines for people with white skin or black skin, for men and for women, for those interested in tribal designs or those looking for Japanese style full body work. The multiplicity and variety are indicative of burgeoning interest in a craft that has become almost industrial in scale over the past thirty years or so. Indeed, tattooing is probably the only visually-based hand-skill to have experienced growth comparable to digital art-forms over the same period. The fact that it is not only one of the world’s oldest and most ubiquitous visual art practices, but also one that has changed the least over time is, possibly, not a coincidence.

Based on marks on Egyptian mummified remains, the insertion of pigments under

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the skin to create patterns or images is conservatively estimated to be a practice that is at least 6,000 years old. Supplementary evidence, also several millennia old, has been discovered in areas as geographically diverse as Peru, Siberia, and New Zealand. So universally widespread is tattooing that it is more difficult to identify a society that has not practised the craft at some point in its history than one that has. The reasons are both various and obscure. Tattoos frequently possess deeply embedded ritual significance, including the belief that they protect the wearer from illness of a physical or psychological nature. In other times and places, tattoos were applied forcibly as punishments. Within Judeo-Christian cultures they carry both positive and negative connotations, though most frequently the latter. A brief consideration of conditioning factors from different eras highlights the ambivalence that exists towards the form today.

The previous chapter noted how the *Book of Daniel* might influence contemporary attitudes to graffiti writing. In more definitive fashion, the Bible also qualifies responses to tattoos. *The Book of Leviticus* explicitly forbids the wearing of them: “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I [am] the LORD.”3 The prohibition had little immediate effect; as many Jews continued to wear the *Tau*, or “cross of Anthony,” on their foreheads for protective purposes, and mark their arms to commemorate the death of family members.4 As a society, they have more recent and tragic reasons for harbouring negative feelings towards tattoos.

The Church of Rome also issued a prohibition at the Council of Nicea in AD 787. As scholar and tattooist Samuel Steward notes, the fact that the practice required an ecumenical council and succession of restrictive papal bulls suggests it was widespread. The most profound biblical agent regarding our collective attitude towards tattoos is

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3. *Leviticus* 19:28 (KJV)

4. Steward, 186.
contained in one of its best-known stories, that of Cain and Abel. After Cain murders his brother, God provides a suitable punishment:

‘What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand; when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.’ And Cain said unto the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.’ And the Lord said unto him, ‘Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.’ And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.5

A contradiction seems to exist within this tale so far as popular interpretation is concerned. In the text, it is clear God places his mark on Cain for his protection, yet in conventional usage the “Mark of Cain” is understood as stigma. There is no paradox however. Cain is identified as a wrongdoer by his mark — though it is not clear others would have understood what he had done to deserve it — yet the same mark also protects him from the retribution of others. Essentially it establishes that he is “other,” an outsider. He may be shunned, even verbally or physically abused, but not to the point of death. The mark may be interpreted, therefore, as either a punishment, a protection, or — more accurately but rarely — as both. Tattoos have inherited these complexities of meaning that, today, condition responses of wearers and non-wearers alike.

Historian Luisa Gncchi Ruscone notes that, until the nineteenth century, tattoos were considered ‘body punishments;’ the ‘mark of shame’ they impregnated was: “to show society who the transgressors were and to isolate them... the ‘tattoo marking’ of criminals was practiced all over the world up until the end of the 19th century, when it was prohibited until... adopted again [in] Nazi Germany.”6 Such marks illustrate the

5. Genesis 4:10–15 (KJV)

punitive aspect of tattoos. As societies ceased to apply them in such a manner; however, so criminals began to practice the craft upon themselves. The prison “tat” persists to this day. Then, as now, it frequently expressed allegiances to gangs or political ideologies, but also yearnings for love, freedom, or revenge. Sometimes they have been specifically coded. The Naples-based criminal society known as *camorra* employed a pictographic system known in local dialect as “devotion.” Examples include: “The Five Points of Criminality, a schematic representation of a man closed behind four walls, also called ‘man in the well.’ Usually this tattoo is done on the hands... An eye on the top of the foot [is] frequent among thieves [meaning] the eye should guide the feet in the dark.”  

In this context, the protective nature of the mark is clear, as is the radical inversion of meaning by both tattooist and tattooed. The adoption of tattoos by criminals was noted by scholars of the period, including anthropologist Cesare Lombroso. Like many of his peers, Lombroso struggled to interpret the findings of Charles Darwin within the context of his discipline:

> [I]n his book of 1876, *L’uomo delinquente*, [Lombroso] wrote “The practice of tattoo appears only in lower social classes... especially among criminals.” He believed that certain individuals had an “inborn inclination” to commit crimes and that criminals had certain “anatomic and psychological anomalies” that made them different other people and he established that tattoo was one of these “anomalies.”

Many contemporary tattooists believe these notions cast a long shadow over their practice. Jeronimo Lopez Ramirez articulates their concerns:

> [Lombroso’s] theories condemned primitive cultures and assimilated them to criminal ones, because both used to decorate their bodies with “terrible figures.” This guy was in part responsible for the prejudices on tattoo art and its marginalization... I think it is interesting to highlight the fact that his theories were considered valid for years, I think it reflects the conservative part of the world we live in. In my art work I always play with these symbols, ideologies and stereotypes and I use them to question the values

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7. ibid, 67
8. ibid, 65.
of Western society and at the same time to imagine different stories for the bodies of [those] tattooed people.\(^9\)

The adaptation and recontextualisation of a century old practice provides fertile ground for Lopez Ramirez’s work, and it is easy to retrospectively condemn Lombroso’s ill-formed genetic ideas. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that criminals chose to employ a practice recently used to permanently identify them as social pariahs. Tattoos continued to signify their status as outsiders and members of a subculture — a communitas — of similarly marked and potentially dangerous “others,” just as they did when applied coercively. Until approximately thirty years ago, criminals and perceived fellow-travelers — street gang members and bikers — were among a handful of subcultures to defined tattoo culture and determine social responses to it. Two others were sailors and Polynesians.

Captain James Cook is generally credited with introducing the word “tattoo” into the European lexicon. “Men and women [of Tahiti] paint their bodies. In their language, this is known as ta-tu. They inject a black colour under their skin, leaving a permanent trace,”\(^10\) he wrote in his journal; suggesting the technique was new to him, and hinting at the rarity of the craft in Britain at the time. Several members of his crew became inked in this fashion by local artists and, on a later voyage, Cook returned to England accompanied by Omai, a heavily decorated Tahitian prince who was exhibited before curious members of London society. Similar displays of illuminated islanders followed in France and elsewhere, and were succeeded by widespread interest in elaborately tattooed sailors who had spent many years in the southern Pacific. This cultural importation had a significant effect. First, tattooing was established as an overwhelmingly male practice; no exotically embellished Polynesian women were imported to Europe nor were there any female sailors. Secondly, in the popular imagination tattoos became irrevocably associated with maritime life. Not only did seamen visit cultures where tattooing was


\(^{10}\) Clinton R. Sanders with D. Angus Vail, Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing, (Philadelphia, Pa., USA: Temple University Press, 2008), 14.
commonplace or carried high status — the opening of Japan to foreigners increased exposure to the full-colour work of highly skilled artists — but they also began to practice the craft themselves. Like prison, hours of tedium were a feature of naval life, and in both cases time spent decorating the bodies of one’s fellows alleviated the boredom. The results established a generic tattoo aesthetic that persisted for generations. Subjects tended to be limited: hearts, anchors, sweethearts’ names, roses, military insignia, and scantily clad female pin-ups were produced by rote. As the occupation became a commercial trade, these designs were produced from stencils, known as “flash.” These were designed by the individual tattooist or, more frequently, purchased from suppliers that provided ink and needles.

By the mid-nineteenth century the artistry of traditional Polynesian and Japanese craftsmen was indiscernible within the typical dockside tattoo parlour; however, the initial exposure of their work to Europeans had other implications. Their images were not restricted merely to an arm or leg, the entire human body was the artist’s ground. To be appreciated in full the wearer must be naked, or almost so. The physical and, by extension, sexual presence of an unclothed man in a late eighteenth-century upper-class European drawing room was unsettling. It could only be socially tolerated if it was understood that tattooist and tattooed were unaware of the European moral codes. To the more intellectually adventurous viewer the exhibition was validated by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others, for whom such a “noble savage” was an Edenic figure untrammeled by the suffocating mores of, so-called, civilised societies. In either case, the performative act of tattooing as well as tattoos themselves acquired a sexual significance which was either fascinating or disturbing, depending on the inclinations of the viewer.

The final environment into which the tattoo was readily adopted was that of the carnival. In the following chapters we will explore how foundational carnival life has been to many socially transgressive visual practices. Here, the traveling shows of depression era America regularly featured tattooed people as attractions. Wrestlers, dwarfs,
ladies, on occasion entire tattooed families were represented.\textsuperscript{11} As was the case with criminals and so-called “primitive” peoples, “carnies” were outsiders barely surviving on the margins of conventional progressive — as it was becoming frequently termed — society. Yet, each of these outsider communities presented a cracked mirror to the masses of the social mainstream. Though pricked with needles and coloured with pigment, the faces they portrayed, and the things they hid, or revealed, were never less than fascinating.

By the middle of the last century, tattoos and tattooing were widely labelled as socially deviant by many sociologists and the wider public. During this period, Samuel Steward was a professor of English at DePaul University, an associate of Alfred Kinsey, and a friend of André Gide, Jean Cocteau, and Gertrude Stein. Steward turned his back on academia to open a tattoo parlour on the most disreputable part of Chicago’s South State Street in 1950. He recounts perceptions of the craft at the time:

Two reactions seem to be possible in persons who see a tattoo on someone. One is complete fascination, a feeling that here is the ultimate stud, the great macho, the sexual satyr, the Marlboro man, the far-traveling sailor, the incomparable sadistic master, the Genet criminal just released from prison. The other is a complete revulsion: the tattoo represents the epitome of sleaze, of low-class background, of cheap vulgarity and bad taste, everything that intelligence and sophistication have conditioned you to despise.\textsuperscript{12}

Such views were dominant until the mid-nineteen-sixties when countercultural affections, or affectations, began to draw inspiration from marginality in all forms. A permanent mark that identified one with “the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an’ worse,” in Bob Dylan’s words, had widespread appeal. Small tattoos began appearing on the ankles or upper shoulders of middle-class young people with Bohemian inclinations. These merely prefaced the changes that were about to take place during the following decades; however, as anthropologist Margo DeMello observes:

Since the 1970s... there has been a large influx of middle-class, art school-trained young people entering the field of tattooing. While young people have always been drawn to tattooing and the aura of the tattoo shop, this

\textsuperscript{11} ibid, 18.
\textsuperscript{12} Steward, 10.
new group of artists came to tattooing armed with art school theory; a sensibility formed through painting, sculpture, or photography; and a desire to radically transform tattooing. Through these artists, stylistic innovations were rapidly disseminated, the borders of the technology were tested, and styles moved in and out of fashion with a speed never before seen.\textsuperscript{13}

This was the beginning of a so-called “tattoo renaissance”\textsuperscript{14} that continues to this day. However, it is by no means the case that the form has achieved comfortable respectability or, even less, academic acceptability. Tattooing’s origins are not so easy to slough off, but neither is everyone attempting to do so.

\textbf{Commerce and Collegiality}

In North America and Europe, tattooing was a trade long before the practice became a recognised form of artistic expression. One of its earliest professionals was the itinerant Martin Hildebrandt who tattooed soldiers of both sides during the American Civil War. Like other businesses, competition between tattoo parlours — the term divides the pre-renaissance period from the contemporary shop or studio — was frequently intense and, in some instances, continues to be so. Social attitudes exacerbated the situation. In the United States, tattooing was long prohibited in several jurisdictions. Oklahoma and North Carolina legalised the practice as recently as 2006 and it is still heavily scrutinised by public authorities. To avoid prosecution, tattoo parlours clustered in border towns which intensified rivalries between them. Sociologists Clinton Sanders and Angus Vail point out that areas where tattooists traditionally congregate generally tend to institutionalise distrust and risk:

\begin{quote}
While a certain level of risk is characteristic of all service interactions, it is particularly intense in settings where marginal or deviant services (for example, illegal abortion, prostitution, tattooing) are produced and/or consumed. In addition, because of the potentially negative legal, social, and psychological consequences of acquiring deviant or marginal consumer
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{13} Margo DeMello, \textit{Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community}, (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2000), 84.
\end{flushright}

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\textsuperscript{14} Clinton R. Sanders, 18.
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products (for example, illegal drugs, pornographic materials, tattoos), a high degree of risk is a key feature of all deviant consumption.\(^\text{15}\)

Such environments have both real and perceived consequences for the individuals who work in them. In the circumstances, it is unsurprising that fear, occasionally even paranoia, linger today. As Sanders and Vail drily note:

There is [also] a certain amount of danger associated with all businesses that operate on a cash basis. Tattooists, who commonly work at night, frequently have sizable quantities of cash on hand and tend to encounter a rather rough clientele, are well aware of the risks they run... [Consequently] tattooists are attentive to clientele who make furtive movements, ask unusual questions, or exhibit other forms of behavior that are out of the ordinary.\(^\text{16}\)

These considerations have been muted by expansion into more salubrious neighbourhoods in recent decades. If they are financially able to, some tattoo artists forgo walk-in custom altogether and work strictly by appointment. Nevertheless, history walks side-by-side with the present and suspicion or antipathy towards colleagues and customers are part of the craft’s legacy. An editorial in *Total Tattoo* highlights the issue: “One thing that really pains me is when I see un-tattooed people (or those with no visible tattoos) seemingly treated with disdain whilst the heavily tattooed are greeted like ‘one of the family’, even if it is clear they haven’t visited that studio before.”\(^\text{17}\) In her book *Bodies of Inscription*, Margo DeMello attempts to circumscribe a contemporary tattoo community because newly tattooed individuals hold alternative beliefs, congruent with collectivity and social unity. She finds the task difficult. An unnamed but “prominent” tattooist is succinct in his criticism:

I think it’s just stupid. It’s like saying there’s a brotherhood of all tattooed people. There’s no commonality in those people... A lot of them are losers, they’re outsiders who don’t fit in. By and large, the people that go to [tattoo] conventions... [are] kind of pathetic if tattooing is the biggest thing in

\(^\text{15}\) Clinton R. Sanders, 127.
\(^\text{16}\) ibid, 143.
\(^\text{17}\) Sally, “Editor’s View,” *Total Tattoo*, No. 72, October 2010, 7.
their lives... I think a lot of them are misfits, you know, and that’s okay, but they shouldn't pretend that they’re some kind of noble breed.\(^{18}\)

Based on comments in trade publications and recorded statements, the view is not altogether inaccurate, if a trifle misanthropically expressed, largely because, to varying degrees, tattooed people continue to define themselves in such terms. In a modern bourgeois context, a very small tattoo on a concealed part of the body can still carry the *frisson* of rebellion, and even a collection of misfits may share a sense of communitas. However, if tattooists are distinguished from tattooees, associations become more apparent.

Many characteristics of the tattooist occupation mirror those of other professions and are most likely a consequence of any trade as it matures. Others characteristics bear striking resemblances to an activity such as graffiti writing, particularly in regard to peer evaluation and — as we shall see — hierarchy:

For the tattooists themselves, status is gauged by artistic credentials (including training, skill, and degree of innovation); professional credentials (who was the artist’s mentor; whether one runs a custom shop or a street shop); shop locale... and relationships with the factions that develop around certain tattooists and tattoo organizations.\(^{19}\)

The goal for most ambitious novices is to move beyond the repetitious “scratching” of standard flash images and establish themselves in the more highly regarded role of “body artist.” As Sanders and Vail note, a reputation among more well-established peers is an important step in that direction:

Gaining visibility and status within the tattoo subculture is another goal pursued by tattooists. As in other art/craft worlds, one’s reputation is based primarily on the evaluation of other practitioners... Most tattooists aspire to the honorific status of “artist.” A unique “piece” custom designed for an individual client/patron is, almost by definition, a work of art. A design selected from wall flash and reproduced time after time for anonymous cus-
tomers is, in contrast, a craft item despite the fact that it may exhibit the same or superior technical skill.  

Similarities with graffiti writing’s evaluative processes, hierarchical levels, and even vocabulary are striking.

As in other forms of commercial art, tattooists’ attitudes and practices frequently include a commitment to client education. They will tend to encourage the unconventional over the complacent and the individually appropriate over the generic. This is partly because it is more interesting for themselves, but experience also tells them that a client is likely to be happier over time with something unique instead of something worn by hundreds of others. Tattooists, going back to Steward’s time and beyond, have also maintained some basic ethical standards:

- Most tattooists routinely refuse to place tattoos on “public skin” (usually defined as above the neck and below the wrist) or to inscribe overtly anti-social or racist symbols on their customers. Tattooists understandably see their trade as being defined by the general public as, at best, of marginal propriety. The creation of permanent stigmatizing marks could well generate increased public outcry and intensified efforts at legal repression.

Reinforcing and extending these connections are trade publications and conventions, many of which are partly funded by equipment suppliers. These function as portfolios, galleries, and networking opportunities. They also generated practice-specific innovations such as the “visiting body artist,” when a well-regarded tattooist from another city or country is invited to work in a local studio for a few weeks. Some elite artists will even “tour” several locations on this basis over several months. Like well-known graffiti writers, established tattooists have strong international ties and networks.

**Structure and Apprenticeship**

In comparison to most other commercial arts, tattooing is, if not unique, then unusual in its methods of recruitment and training. Unlike most other visual arts, almost no one goes

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21. ibid, 78
to school to become a tattooist. There are few, if any, programs offered by reputable colleges and, if there were, it is questionable whether enrollment would be large or the qualifications credible. The larger issues regarding why this is the case, and whether the situation could — or should — change, will be considered later but, as DeMello points out, as things stand: “The two ways that one can learn to tattoo are through teaching oneself or through apprenticing with a working tattooist.”

The larger equipment suppliers have provided self-help guides for interested novices for many years and continue to do so. These have limited utility, however. Like most craft skills, learning to ink is a tacit process achieved by watching, listening, asking questions and, most of all touching; that is, becoming familiar with handling tools and materials. It also involves hours of necessary repetition. The lack of such opportunities is particularly acute in a practice that requires an ongoing supply of living flesh to use as a canvas; however, some, like veteran artist Daniel DiMattia, do manage: “I learnt by myself, nobody taught me anything. I started on my legs. I would go and get tattooed and watch and feel the vibrations. Then I tried to repeat that on myself and other people.”

Most autodidacts are more tentative, they practice on vegetables, fruit or — following the Japanese tradition — sides of pork. In her short story *Grapefruit Flesh*, Karol Griffin recounts the experience of tattooing a grapefruit:

I rubbed a glob of petroleum jelly on the surface of the grapefruit, dipped the needles into a cup of black ink and pressed the foot pedal. The sound thrilled me. The machine shook with power, fast vibrations that rattled my hand. With the needles poised above the grapefruit, I pressed the foot pedal again, took a deep breath, and touched the tips to the crinkly skin. The grapefruit popped out of my hand and rolled onto the floor. I retrieved it and managed to skewer it on the needles, causing a great burst of grapefruit juice to shoot into my eye. By the time Slade returned, I was covered with black ink and Vaseline. My hair was decorated with sticky juice and pulp, and I was sobbing quietly.

22. DeMello, 110.
Making personal connections with those in the trade is a more productive and profitable path to success, but it too is neither easy nor straightforward. An aversion to communicating their skills and the previously noted distrust of outsiders can be barriers, as DiMattia discovered:

I would spend three days in front of a booth, watching, listening to the machines, trying to speak to the artist, kissing ass a little. It worked well with some and not so well with others, but that’s OK. In those days it was like “I’m a tattooist. You are nobody. I’m not going to tell you anything.” It was how they made their living and they were very protective.25

Occasionally such feelings were expressed with more animosity, as Californian tattooist Robert Atkinson relates:

In 1992 I had four friends chip in and buy me my first tattoo kit, a Spaulding & Rogers starter kit. I don’t like to promote that, really, but at that time things were different. I remember going to the local tattoo shop, and telling them I wanted to tattoo and they said, “Get the fuck outta here. Don’t even think about opening a tattoo shop in this town or we’ll blow the fucking windows off.”26

Atkinson’s account may be a touch hyperbolic. The desirability of the outsider/gangster aura persists and such anecdotes appeal to some potential customers. Parenthetically, there is also a growing narrative interest within and around tattooing. This extends from traditional fiction writing to the tattooee whose body art offers an opportunity to expound on its personal meaning, or the artist whose tales “from the trenches” offer both entertainment and credibility that might lead to future work.

Communitas and community structure exist side by side within the craft and, as with graffiti writing, the latter takes on a highly traditional form. Apprenticeship systems were established under the European trade guild system. “In the medieval guild, male authority was incarnate in the three-tiered hierarchy of masters, journeymen, and ap-

Typically a man would pay a master to accept his son as an apprentice. The length of a boy’s indenture varied but lasted about eight years on average. During much of that time he would do little but clean and tidy the workshop, watch his master at work, and sleep under his workbench at night. By modern standards, it suggests a limited and tedious life constrained by repetitive routine. Yet, it included plenty of time for observation as well as ample opportunities to feel the weight of tools and texture of materials the apprentice would work with for the rest of his life. Eventually he was set to copy his master’s work, first in detail, later in full. The apprentice’s practice was all about imitation; his chef d’œuvre or final examination piece, consisted of as fine a reproduction of his master’s work as he could achieve. As a society, we have learned to disparage copying and copies themselves. The process is seen as repetitive and laborious; its outcome as inherently inferior to a unique or, so-called, “original” item. Consequently, many of us regard reiterations of a work to be decreasingly satisfying to produce and of lesser aesthetic interest to others. Over the past two hundred years, much human energy has gone into devising machines and processes that eliminate, apparently, unnecessarily repetitive uses of our time. However, as Polanyi suggests and Sennett reiterates, acquiring skill in any activity that is not purely intellectual in nature — and that is most of them — requires constant recapitulation and reinforcement. The body can only learn through repeated action and each iteration, if he is alert, provides new information to the practitioner.

His training complete, the apprentice set forth as a journeyman. As the name suggests, this status enabled, and sometimes required him — depending on the availability of work — to travel in order to practice his craft. Such mobility was not a trivial benefit in the Middle Ages. His standing also allowed him, if he was trustworthy and competent, to eventually open his own workshop. Less formal than a guild apprenticeship, contemporary tattoo training is, nonetheless, remarkably similar in its essentials. Like medieval masters, some highly regarded body-artists take on students who pay several thousand dollars to acquire basic skills, while simultaneously functioning as studio assistants. Alternatively a trainee might be hired from among the coterie of hangers-on who tend to

27. Sennett, 58

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populate tattoo studios. Many tattooists discourage this practice as unprofessional, but a pool of interested acolytes does provide a potential source of inexpensive labour. Whatever the method of induction, like their medieval predecessors, initiates spend much of their time doing everything except practicing the craft, as Sanders and Vail illustrate:

Whether involved in a formal or informal apprenticeship arrangement, all initiates are expected to take a major hand in the “dirty-work” of the tattoo establishment. Tattooing involves a considerable amount of backstage preparation that is not readily apparent to clientele. In addition to doing the basic sweeping and cleaning that takes place in any retail establishment, tattooist initiates commonly spend considerable time soldering needles to the needle bars used in the tattoo machines, cutting acetate stencils used to place standard designs on the client’s skin, mixing dry pigment with liquid solvents (usually isopropyl alcohol, water, and glycerine), and sterilizing tattoo equipment and stencils. More experienced novices commonly are involved in shaving and sterilizing clients’ skin, helping during the application process by stretching the skin being tattooed, applying antiseptic salve, and bandaging the completed tattoo.28

Rarely does an apprentice have to sleep on the studio floor these days but, though measured in months instead of years, the “dues paying” period remains sufficiently formidable to deter all but the most committed. A British art school graduate recalls a typical experience:

Once I graduated I finally plucked the courage to really start looking for ways to get into tattooing. [Caledonian Sun Tattoos] gave me a job cleaning, answering phones and all that sort of stuff. I did a lot of the menial things needed around the shop and this really helped me understand how tattoo shops work from the ground up. It taught me some real basic knowledge like how to speak with customers, deal with difficult ones, making needles, cleaning equipment, etc. I did that for a long while and eventually it went from that to watching [the] tattooist to doing my first few tattoos on friends.29

From the master’s point of view training an apprentice represents both a boon and potential threat, as one of Sanders and Vail’s interviewees explains:

28. Clinton R. Sanders, 72.
[My apprentice] started coming in here to get tattooed. He got a small piece and we got to be friends and then he started realizing that he had crummy work and he wanted it covered. He started getting heavy work done. I could see that he was really interested in tattooing. He couldn’t draw a straight line but that didn’t matter to me. I knew I needed someone to help me in here, because I was turning away business. You know I have to have a day off and stuff... So I could go out and get some young kid who is a good artist and teach him how to tattoo and as soon as he knows what he’s doing... he’s going to say, “What the hell do I need this guy for?” He might even turn out better than me. I wanted first of all someone who was responsible and who I could trust is not going to move next year. Then I wanted someone I thought could handle it. [My apprentice] doesn’t draw but he’s a carpenter, he races motorcycles, he’s an achiever. He didn’t just want to do things. He did them. I figure if you can master one craft you can master the craft of tattooing.30

This account is instructive as it reveals the ambivalence of the master/apprentice relationship. Though based on reciprocal needs, it also models the roles of father and son, and is imbued with both the affection and tension that relationship implies. To some extent, every master views his apprentice as a means of embodying his own skills and extending them beyond his own lifetime because, as Sennett points out: “Once the master dies, all the clues, moves, and insights he or she has gathered into the totality of the work cannot be reconstructed; there’s no way to ask him or her to make the tacit [in his work] explicit.”31 Yet, the craftsman also sees his protégé as a potential rival, a threat to his livelihood. At an extreme instance one wonders at the conflicted emotions Ghirlandaio must have felt as he observed the development of the young Michelangelo in his workshop. In this, the master is helpless as his instruction is overwhelmingly tacit and his student’s practice similarly haptic. Little can be hidden or held back as the artist’s hands cannot deceive or dissemble as his tongue could, even if sometimes he may wish them to.

It might be modest, but an explicit component is, Sennett insists, necessary in an apprentice’s training — it usually entails explanations as to why, rather than how, a particular action is performed. Here, consciously, or not, a defensive or inarticulate

30. Clinton R. Sanders, 66.
31. Sennett, 78.
master’s silence preserves his power, or a facet of it, while simultaneously depriving his student.

In theory the well-run workshop should balance tacit and explicit knowledge. Masters should be pestered to explain themselves, to dredge out the assemblage of clues and moves they have absorbed in silence within — if only they could, and if only they would. Much of their very authority derives from seeing what others don’t see, knowing what they don’t know; their authority is made manifest in their silence.\(^{32}\)

Withholding information preserves, or protects, his craft’s secrets — their “mysteries” — from outsiders. It is no coincidence that the words “mystery” and “mastery” share the same Latin root, *misterium*, and make their appearance in the English language at approximately the same time in the late thirteenth, or early fourteenth century during the guild system’s zenith; if not synonymous, their meanings were closely aligned. It was understood that the master needed to conceal or mask attributes he, and others, distinguished as an essential part of himself. This was, after all, a period when men were named after their craft; what they did was, in a real sense, who they were. This protective instinct is not uncommon; other instances of such cloaking mechanisms appear throughout the examples discussed here. It was rationalised, these mysteries must only be passed on when the initiate was judged ready. The master himself was, of course, the sole arbiter of when that would be. The tattooist in the Sanders and Vail’s example above, inherits this complex tradition. Professional fears led him to reject a talented novice in favour of one more diligent, but less creatively threatening. In this he is at least honest but, like many before him, he does his craft a disservice in the long run.

**Ink, Blood, and Skin**

A tattooist’s client has a lot at stake. He or she must live with the consequences of their choice for a considerable time; the capacity for regret is therefore, significant. Tattooing is among the most intimate of art processes. It involves close physical contact with a stranger accompanied by an indeterminate degree of pain which may last for a

\(^{32}\) ibid.
considerable period. It is understandable then, that among first-time tattooees anxiety runs high, occasionally to the point of vomiting or passing out. The practice’s seamy history compounds the fears, as the image of the dirty, ill-lit, skid row parlour remains prevalent. At the other end of the needle, tattooists, like doctors and surgeons, have to deal routinely deal with nakedness and bodily fluids. Unlike medical professionals, however, they possess no diploma, nor do medical councils protect them or confer credibility on their activities. The individual tattooist is alone responsible for convincing potential clients to invest him with their trust and safety. To achieve this, emphasis — actual and symbolic — is placed on hygiene, lighting and decor. One of Sanders and Vail’s interviewees explains:

When someone comes in to get their first tattoo they are usually pretty nervous and don’t know what to expect. What I do is go through this ritual. I take my time adjusting the machines and I prepare the pigments and stuff like that. I’m getting ready to tattoo them but I’m also showing them how professional I am. They’re just sitting there but I know they are watching.\(^{33}\)

The ceremony is calculated to validate and reassure as much as impart actual information. Nonetheless it is necessary as the subject is planning to undergo a singular, and possibly transformative, experience.

Like hairdressing or massage, tattooing creates a particular bond between practitioner and client. Partly this is based on physical intimacy, touching over an extensive period creates close bonds between mammals. A creative interaction such as tattooing, however, is not a relationship of psychological equals. For the duration of the session, power lies almost entirely with the artist. It has been ceded to him by his subject— either willingly or reluctantly, but necessarily— and in so doing, he is granted emotional as well as physical trust. Samuel Steward found this facet of his craft both unexpected and fascinating:

[O]ne of the most astonishing discoveries I made early on about what might be called the mystique of the tattoo [was] a kind of temporary love

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\(^{33}\) Clinton R. Sanders, 132.
affair between artist and customer. If conditions are precisely right, and no one else in the shop, the customer’s defenses fall as soon as the needle starts its work; and he tells the artist things which (I feel sure) he has never told his wife or his girl-friend or his best buddy. The tattoo artist becomes for him a psychiatrist, priest, best boyfriend, mother, father — a kind of “blood confessor,” 34

In this capacity, the tattoo shop confessional has implications that are by no means one sided. Steward recognised that revelations gave him responsibilities to his clients which bit deeper than his needles:

I joshed them, scolded them, sympathized with them, and like a psychiatrist or scientist, never, never criticized. When one announced that he had just got out of the pokey, my response might be, “Whuffor you wanna be such a bad boy?” And once in a while one of them might look distressingly sad at that... This freedom in talking, this unhindered revelation and trust was perhaps the single most astonishing thing noted during all the long years of tattooing. The explanation for this opening of the gates of self-revelation has always lain beyond me and perhaps always will... It was a strange and rewarding experience for me, and learning about my clients emotionally and intellectually was almost as gratifying as a roll in the hay. Yet sometimes I was left as jolted as they seemed to be cleansed and relieved. 35

The possibility of therapeutic transference in situations of such emotional openness may, in some instances, lead to sexual relations as Steward obliquely implies. For much of the last century sexuality was a recurring element in the psychological discourse on tattooing but, at this distance, much of it seems either overly literal, or prejudicial. Just as, in the nineteenth century, Lombroso had critiqued the craft from within a flawed Darwinian framework, so some early Freudians made similar errors. In the 1930s Albert Parry wrote: “The very process of tattooing is essentially sexual. There are the long, sharp needles. there is the liquid poured into the pricked skin. There are the two participants of the act, one active, the other passive. There is the curious marriage of pleasure and pain.” 36 More recently in 1968, Richard Post suggested that homosexual males chose

34. Steward, 41
35. ibid, 102
36. Albert Parry, Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art Practiced by the Natives of the
the profession because “it puts them in almost constant close proximity to the male body, which they can feel, stroke, and fondle without arousing suspicion.”\footnote{37} Without wishing to be fatuous, it is difficult to determine whether this is homophobia or wishful thinking on the writer’s part; it surely cannot be based on research. The simultaneous practice of a craft — any craft — while having sex, given the physical and emotional commitment both activities require, seems preposterous. The tattoo renaissance was, in considerable part, driven by the form’s appeal to women. Their involvement as both subjects and practitioners has helped dispel such beliefs. Nevertheless, in our society, body-to-body contact inevitably retains sexual connotations. The tattoo artist must be cognizant that few are immune to these and take requisite precautions, which one female tattooee describes:

I had anticipated sitting up and I was surprised when the artist pulled this examining table over... I remember changing my clothes right there in the room — just turned my back to the door. It’s not that I wasn’t aware that the artist was a male person but it just wasn’t threatening. I had my shirt off and he applied the outline... He had to lean against me and, at first, I thought that might be uncomfortable, but while it was actually going on it was reassuring. I didn’t have the feeling that he was looking at me in any sexual way. I think he said later that he only sees two inches of flesh at once.\footnote{38}

Body arts in general, and tattooing in particular, are the most explicitly embodied of all visual arts, not only because of the physical proximity described above. Uniquely, the substances the tattooist must deal with are, in and of themselves, part of his subject’s corporeal being. As noted earlier, artists are often more articulate regarding their tools and materials than their works’ content; this is unsurprising as they are handled continuously during fabrication. Thus human skin, the tattooist’s organic canvas, is categorised, qualified and criticised by him in similar terms to a sculptor distinguishing stone from different quarries. As usual, Steward is particularly eloquent:

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\textit{United States} (New York, USA: Collier, 1971 [1933]), 1
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\begin{itemize}
\item [37.] Clinton R. Sanders, 38
\item [38.] ibid, 122.
\end{itemize}
In my own mind I categorized skin in eight types, number one being thin, fine, and delicate as a rose-leaf — very easy to tattoo; the ink seemed almost to sink in by gravity. Type eight I thought of as “old elephant hide” — thick and tough, demanding repeated crossings with the wide shader needle to get the ink to stay in. There was one certain body type, rather plump and heavy with very light white skin, which was both my despair and joy. The colors went in very easily and stayed brighter longer than they did on less delicate skins. The “despair” rose from the fact that on such skin the slightest imperfection, or any wavering of the outline showed with startling clarity.39

One of Sanders and Vail’s interview subjects goes into more extensive detail, including the interaction of skin types with the fluidity of ink.

Clear, white, unwrinkled, and unblemished skin is the best. That’s one reason I like to work on women. The worst kind of skin is on those guys who have laboring jobs or who are out in the sun all the time. The sun breaks down the elasticity of the skin. That’s why when you see sailors or old cowboys they have loose, wrinkled skin that just seems to hang there. You see a lot of that in shops around seaports. Some guys come into the shop and you can’t really tattoo them. You just mark up their skin. I had one gentleman come in. He worked for twenty-five years in a heat treating plant. His skin is like gritty sandpaper. It is a terrible thing to think that this happened to this human being because of the place he worked. You can’t even shave his skin. Red headed people have like albino white skin. All red headed skin is like rubber. The elasticity is unreal. I have small hands and you have a big man come in and it is almost impossible to stretch the skin and get a nice tattoo. Tight skin is excellent to work on. The color flows in well; you don't have to repeat yourself. You can do a tattoo in a third of the time it would take you to do a normal person. There are some men that I can’t tattoo. I won’t because I can't guarantee that the tattoo will come out right. Their arms are so big and the skin is like buffalo hide. You can’t seem to puncture the skin under the epidermis. It just stays on the top. I was taught that if the color doesn’t go in the first time don’t overwork it. By overworking it, it is going to bleed out anyway.40

Unlike skin, practically speaking, blood is a nuisance. It obscures the image as the tattooist works and causes problems should the subject remove the wound’s scab in his or her eagerness to see the result — a frequent occurrence. From somatic and psychological standpoints, however, bloodshed is both symbolic of the artist’s authority and it influ-

39. Steward, 162
40. Clinton R. Sanders, 135.
ences the meaning the wearer assigns to his or her images. Blood is auratic, primal and powerful, the liquid that keeps us alive. When made visible, it is often frightening. Like a signature, it reinforces authenticity — in myth, what is more genuine than a document signed in one’s own blood? The trust blood represents is transmitted to those in society we permit to shed it, either on our own behalf or that of others: doctors, soldiers, or police, and by their clients, to tattooists. The responsibility and power are of a type that few, if any, artists working in other forms are granted. The result, from the perspective of the wearer, is a visible image which is incontestably imbued with his meaning, and only his meaning. She spilled her blood for it and that places it outside discourse, beyond criticism. It is as personal, as much a part of the wearer, as the colour of their skin, which, indeed, is what it has become. The relevance of this to the tattooist is understood if the following quotation by Walter Benjamin is read analogically, substituting the tattooist for the surgeon and portraitist for the magician:

The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient’s body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician — who is still hidden in the medical practitioner — the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him.  

The portraitist’s attention is split between the work under his hand and the sight of his subject. His gaze must travel back and forth to bridge the “natural distance” between them. Like the surgeon, the tattooist suffers no such schism, his focus is on, and within, a small area of his client’s body — the “two inches of space” referred to earlier. As he works, he is in constant physical contact with his subject who responds reflexively to the touch of his hand and the needle. In turn, he acknowledges these responses but, like the

surgeon, will not — cannot — face him or her at such a pregnant and “decisive” moment.
The tattooist enters his subject neither through the body’s orifices — there is no sexual access; nor through the eyes — he is no collector of souls; instead he gains admission through the skin. Like the sun he places his mark upon, and within, the body’s thinnest and most encompassing organ. There can be no more definitive example of both artistic and aesthetic embodiment.

Chapter Five:
The Sport Spectator

To say that these men paid their shillings to watch twenty-two hirelings kick a ball is merely to say that a violin is wood and catgut, that Hamlet is so much paper and ink.¹

Barbara Ehrenreich states that: “To ‘lose oneself’ in ecstasy — to let go of one’s physical and temporal boundaries — is to glimpse, however briefly, the prospect of eternity.”² Such responses are clearly the case among spectators at sporting events but, before proceeding, clarification is required. Sport spectator arts should not be confused with those practices embodied in sport itself. Whether sport generally, or certain sports individually, can legitimately be considered art forms, Wolfgang Welsch and others have argued for elsewhere, but that is not under consideration here.³ The claim in this chapter is that the

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songs, chants, and regalia of those attending sporting events, not the athletes involved, are viable artistic expressions in themselves, or aids to such expressions.

To understand how this is so, we must return to Nietzsche, the division between practice and aesthetics discussed in Chapter One, and consequent schism between artist and audience. In Nietzsche’s allegory, during the act of creation man aspires to the divine. “He feels himself to be godlike and strides with the same elation and ecstasy as the gods he has seen in his dreams. No longer the artist, he has himself become a work of art.”

Unfortunately, this experience is necessarily short-lived as its intensity is overwhelming. Under the strain of being “at once subject and object, poet, actor and audience,” participants readily succumb to exhaustion, debauchery, and even violence. A retreat is necessary to create sufficient distance for Apollonian observation, reflection, and commentary, while simultaneously continuing the revelry. Sennett, paraphrasing Nietzsche, describes the creation of the Greek chorus as the first step in this process of separation.

In the archaic theater there was relatively little divide between spectator and performer, seeing and doing; people danced and spoke, then retired to a stone seat to watch others dance and declaim. By the time of Aristotle, actors and dancers had become a caste with special skills of costuming, speaking, and moving. Audiences stayed offstage, and so developed their own skills of interpretation as spectators.

This invention signified a schism that could be bridged but never fully mended. On a given occasion, we may be either a practitioner or spectator but never truly both.

The simultaneity described in Nietzsche’s Eden may no longer be possible, yet the desire for wholeness remains. On certain occasions, at rock concerts or festivals, for instance, the distinctions between artist and audience appear minimal, but this is an illusion. There may be little physical separation between them, and spectators are frequently as physically engaged as the performers, but their respective activities remain separate. It does sometimes happen, however, that in their eagerness to maintain

5. ibid, 42.
connected to the artist or event, audiences express themselves in their own individual, or collective, manner.

For instance, attendees at recent Vancouver Canuck’s hockey games and thousands watching on television could not have failed to notice two figures capering beside the opposition team’s penalty box. Attired in bright green spandex zentai (full body suits) the pair use mime techniques to mock, ridicule, and taunt the box’s unfortunate occupant. Their visibility and — in this context — skill, predictably brought Vancouver’s ‘Green Men’ instantaneous and probably ephemeral celebrity from mainstream media and the on-line ‘blogosphere.’ Aspects of their performance are worth deeper consideration, however, and we shall return to them later. Now it is enough to note that the two mimes’ practice embodies the twin senses of carnival and communitas that are characteristic of sport spectator arts. Though rarely in balance, the two are ever-present at certain types of event, not just sporting ones. In concrete and abstract terms, the qualities of one tend to sustain and frame the other. To fully explore this phenomenon we will consider each of them separately.

Carnival
Carnival “is a festival that really is not given to the people, but one that people give themselves.” says Goethe. The idea that events of a celebratory nature are acquired, or at least assumed, by a population rather than granted by authority is, simultaneously, radical and commonplace. Officialdom, be it secular or spiritual, reluctantly acquiesce to them but while able to negotiate the time, place, or length of the festivities, cannot risk outright suppression without risking repercussions. Carnival is as much an attitude as it is an event, and one deeply embedded in our collective cultural consciousness, though this is more apparent in pre-democratic societies than our own. It is however, as we shall see, still clearly present.

In Europe during the Middle Ages, social and cultural divisions were explicit, usually with the aristocracy and church on one side and craftsmen, tradespeople, and peasantry on the other. Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work on carnival is pivotal, notes that: “The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and intimidation. These elements prevailed in the Middle Ages.” Those without power frequently employ humour or laughter; they know no limits or inhibitions, and possess the capacity to disarm fear and overwhelm all controls, short of overt violence. This, according to Bakhtin, is why laughter, the language of carnival, became central to the life of common people during the Middle Ages. Through it, they created a viable counterculture — to borrow a term from several decades ago.

It was understood that fear never lurks behind laughter... and that hypocrisy and lies never laugh but wear a serious mask. Laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian... seriousness was therefore elementally distrusted, while trust was placed in festive laughter.8

Intuitively, everyone from noble to beggar understood this; indeed, as individuals, many among the powerful threw themselves into the anarchic pleasures of carnival with as much abandon as the poorest peddler and for similar reasons. “The men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life. Two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing aspect, coexisted in their consciousness.”9 To authority, carnival represented a threat that could not be defeated using conventional methods and barely even be controlled.

The counterculture found its purest expression at fairs, in marketplaces, and during festivals, particularly the latter. At the height of the period these were frequent. As Ehrenreich remarks: “In fifteenth-century France... one out of every four days of the year was an official holiday of some sort, usually dedicated to a mix of religious ceremonies

8. ibid, 95.
9. ibid, 96.
and more or less unsanctioned carousing.”¹⁰ Some were also long, the Feast of Fools, celebrated over the Christmas period could last for weeks. The ribaldry represented an opportunity to poke fun both at each other and, more relevantly, those who wielded power, especially the church. “The barker of a show would not be accused of heresy, no matter what he might say, provided that he maintained his clownery,”¹¹ maintains Bakhtin. In doing so, he would also employ language larded with invective and obscenity. This included references to fornication, excretion, genitalia, and other matters pertaining to what Bakhtin coyly and somewhat clumsily refers to as the “material bodily lower sanctum.”¹² Hectoring and discussion using slang was routine, and its content vacillated wildly between excessive praise and equally excessive abuse. Depending on the inclination of the listener, it could be read ambiguously as comic, candid, or offensive. This culture of the itinerant peddler, the rogue day-trader, the carny, and this language—bawdy, sarcastic, satirical—nurtured the practice of modern sport spectatorship across Europe.

Games of chance, of strength, or of skill, were an integral part of the Carnival. Some were presented by traveling showmen, others organised by communities themselves. Team games tended to be arranged by, for, and between local groups and frequently involved a ball of some kind. Such activities are almost universal and have existed in varied forms for millennia. They may be exceedingly simple: in southeast Asia, groups of males kick a wicker ball around between themselves; the single rule is that only the feet and legs are used; the only goal, to keep the ball from touching the ground. Conversely, competitions could be as heavily ritualized as Pok-a-Tok in pre-Columbian Mexico. This was a game where players used their elbows, knees, or hips to launch a ball through a vertical stone hoop embedded high on a wall. As one may imagine, scoring was rare and, should it occur in an important game, the losing captain faced decapitation. The

¹⁰. Ehrenreich, 92.
¹¹. Bakhtin, 96.
¹². ibid. 151.
immediate precursor of organised ball games in Medieval Europe was the Roman *harpastum*, which involved two teams of players on a rectangular field, each attempting to keep the ball on their own side of a central dividing line.\(^{13}\)

A good deal of scholarship has been done on these and similar competitions. Not all ball games were as systemised though. Records indicate that outbreaks of “mob football”\(^{14}\) erupted on a regular basis in towns and villages across Europe. Some of these were spontaneous. Accounts of unruly apprentices causing mayhem by hoofing a ball through the streets appear in court records with some frequency. Other football games were pre-arranged, however, and frequently tied to the great festivals, thus part of carnival. These could be huge affairs involving hundreds of people from two villages or neighbourhoods. In flesh, not myth, these competitions were analogous to Nietzsche’s allegorical chorus/spectator, as there was no clear differentiation between players and spectators; to some extent everyone — men, women and children — participated.

The largest football games in England occurred during the Shrove Tuesday festivities directly preceding the austerities of Lent. The Lord of Misrule was likely to be present so, preceding the match, insults and pranks directed at one’s ‘betters’ were encouraged. This individual, elected from within the community, held a position of long-standing. In Northern Europe he presided over winter festivals for many centuries, the successor to the King of the Saturnalia in ancient Rome. The Festival of Fools, the period of weeks, or sometimes months, straddling the old and new year was his particular realm, but he would appear on other occasions. His arrival signalled a time when the social world turned upside down: when the beggar became king, and the choirboy bishop; when deliberate disobedience and disregard of authority were officially sanctioned.\(^{15}\)


\(^{14}\) “Early Ball Games, Britain” http://www.expertfootball.com/history/soccer_history_mob_football.php (accessed January 20, 2010.)

As the centuries moved on, many of the brutal “sports” associated with carnival, such as bear baiting and cock fighting, either disappeared or were outlawed. Because of this, football games continued to grow in size and popularity, despite the best efforts of zealous reformers. By the late eighteenth century, crowds for the largest contests numbered in the thousands. Eventually, their scale became so immense as to be deemed a threat to the morality, if not person, of the country’s burgeoning middle class. In 1846 Derby’s city fathers banned the annual game between the parishes of St Peter’s and All Saints. The contest went ahead anyway in defiance of the order. In response, the mayor read the riot act, and troops were deployed. There were no casualties — or no more than usual — but the instigators were arrested, bound over to keep the peace and threatened with transportation to the colonies should they re-offend.16

Though it has recently been revived, Derby’s Shrove Tuesday competition of that year was the last great holiday football game to take place in England. Nevertheless, the attitudes embedded within it, and similar contests around the country, re-emerged in a more clearly defined form within two or three decades. Shrovetide football had little or nothing to do with the skill of the participants and everything to do with Dionysian passion. Writer Richard Sanders claims “The great holiday games were heavily ritualistic, mock-combats rather than sport. They were meant to be anarchic; that was their whole point.”17 This is contradictory, however. Sanders is correct in referring to the contests as ritualised combat; however, ritual, by definition, cannot be anarchic. Though they were rudimentary, the competitions did have rules. They also had a central purpose: to score a goal and win. Their essential simplicity reflected Nietzsche’s Greek chorus in its overlap between players and spectators and their collective willingness to push themselves to extremes in pursuit of ecstasy.

**Community**


17. ibid. 9.
The mid-nineteenth century was the great codification era of modern games. In this window of time most of the group activities we now identify as team sports acquired consistent rules, defined playing areas, time limits, and other recognisable accoutrements. The task was largely completed by the century’s end, at which time some sports had also acquired large numbers of paying spectators. Though their foundations differ in detail, these activities have far more in common than one might suppose. Several are referred to here, but the prime example is association football, or soccer. There are several reasons for this. First, soccer is, by some distance, the most widespread team sport in the world. Consequently, many of its associated practices are general instead of localised, which makes its overriding characteristics evident. Secondly, its popularity and history make it socially and culturally volatile. Many people, especially men, possess a deep commitment to the sport in one way or another, most commonly through an attachment or affiliation with a specific team. The opportunities for such involvement are extensive, meaning the Dionysian intensity quotient, so to speak, of soccer is high. Finally, the development of soccer has been extensively documented, making the evolution of the game and, more importantly, participants’ connection to it, relatively easy to trace. It should be noted in passing that North American professional sports organisations developed along different economic lines to those in Britain, Europe, and elsewhere. Instead of being strictly administrative bodies, part of their function was, and is, to assist member clubs as businesses. If that means moving a team from New York to Los Angeles, or selling games to television networks, then so be it. Association football, particularly regarding the perception and treatment of its spectators, evolved along a quite dissimilar path.

Until recently, a largely unchallenged narrative existed on the origins of soccer. Briefly, it suggested that after the disappearance of large events such as the Shrovetide games, football retreated behind the ivy-clad walls of England’s public schools. There it survived in various eccentric forms until 1863 when a coterie of “old-boys” and aficionados hammered out a set of common rules and handed them down to the common man. This is, at best, an incomplete account that poses as many questions as it answers. In 1840 only seven public schools existed in England; collectively they graduated no more
than a few hundred students a year. How, then, could a small exclusive group, from within an equally small and exclusive section of society, generate interest in a sport that would soon be played and watched by tens of thousands on a weekly basis?

It must be emphasised that the large festive football matches were atypical. They were spectacular in size and historically important but, given their infrequency, less so than their scale suggests. For every Shrovetide game, there were almost certainly hundreds of informal contests involving youths from all classes. Pick-up games of football existed outside school playing fields—on fallow land and village greens, on commons and cobbled streets—they were endemic to English life. However, their very ubiquity made them invisible, so they rarely attracted the notice of commentators. Along with the public schoolmen’s efforts at regulation, two particular factors accelerated the growth of spectator sport in Britain. The first of these was urban migration. The industrial revolution, and associated enclosures of common land, led to a rural diaspora in Britain. Inside a couple of generations, small towns such as Manchester, Leeds, and Sheffield became burgeoning cities, and villages like Burnley and Huddersfield, buzzing mill-towns. Within them, work was repetitive, debilitating, labour for twelve-hours-a-day, six-days-a-week. The result was a national workforce which a young German scholar named Karl Marx termed “socially alienated.” In the modern city, there was little time for play and — outside the public bar — few places to play.

The first recognisably modern football clubs were founded within these dark satanic mills, not on the playing fields of Eton. Those who started them were not public school old-boys either, but more likely the students they had taught at the new urban grammar schools. These young men, often the sons of newly wealthy manufacturers, were destined for careers in business or the professions, not the lives of idle gentlemen. From their teachers they imbibed the rules of football and, more importantly, its perceived moral virtues. These, in turn, were passed on to their associates and athletically inclined employees. The values of fairness, sportsmanship, and playing the game for its

18. ibid. 48
own sake, rather than to win, became deeply embedded during this period. Along with the natural benefits of outdoor physical exercise, these values constituted a recipe for Christian manliness that was seen as an asset in young administrators and citizens of the world’s largest empire. Playing these new games was widely encouraged therefore, among all social classes, by those with power and influence; the growing practice of watching them was not, however. “‘Spectatorism’ was generally thought to be unhealthy. The hunch-shouldered, chain-smoking crowds were the antithesis of... manly participation. Many southern clubs took positive pride in the fact that no one turned up to watch them.”

In truth, it probably never occurred to the Football Association’s founders that anyone, beyond the immediate friends and families of the players, would entertain any interest in attending football matches. There were no provisions in their rules for spectators, or for something as crass as charging admission. Sport was intended to be an entirely amateur affair. Players were unpaid as, it was thought, money provided a corrupting incentive to win. In the beginning, games were irregularly scheduled but, despite this, crowds of onlookers began attending; at first numbering in the dozens, then hundreds, and finally — for some matches — in the thousands.

Little is certain regarding these early spectators or their motives. As historian Tony Mason wryly observes: “it is churlish to complain that Beatrice Webb failed to stand outside the Royal Arsenal ground in 1895 giving out questionnaires to those who went in.” Some facts are either clear or suggestive. The widespread introduction of the Saturday half-holiday during the early 1870s is one of the most significant. This provided most British working men with a previously unavailable afternoon of freedom. These hours would be filled somehow; very likely in a public house unless something better was on offer. Reasoning that an afternoon’s relaxing outdoor entertainment would provide their businesses with employees who were more alert on Monday morning than might be the case otherwise; some employers, out of enlightened self-interest or altruism, invested


time and money in the local football club. By bringing his entrepreneurial acumen to bear, the local businessman could improve his fortune and, in the process, his standing with his workers and the community at large. Success in business is usually quantifiable, and is more likely if a company has a greater number of skillful and committed employees than its competition. A prosperous manager knew very well that the most reliable method of retaining talented workers was to pay them well enough. Accordingly, professional football arrived in 1888. Winning games, not just playing them, became the ascendant purpose of clubs, players, and spectators. Within a few years the participatory, Corinthian, ideals of the sport’s fathers were overwhelmed. The winners of the game’s most prestigious trophy, the FA Cup, were no longer the Old Etonians or Old Carthusians. Inscribed on it instead were names such as Blackburn Rovers and Preston North End.

Regular weekly league games were soon introduced, and crowds flocked to them as never before. They arrived at the stadium on the public trams, which were introduced in the 1860s and, by the turn of the century, serviced over 150 British towns and cities. Dedicated spectators also followed their team on its travels via “football specials,” trains that offered cheap prices negotiated on their behalf by railway companies and the club. It is important to emphasise that, although the most popular football teams were fully professional companies, money making does not appear to have been the main intent at this time. Profits, if there were any, tended to be ploughed back into the organisation. Dividends to shareholders were capped at 5%, directors rarely took salaries, and there was a rigid ceiling on players’ wages. Though unstated, and a somewhat romantic notion, it is almost as if the clubs were already being held in trust for their communities. The dual intention was, it seems, to maintain admission prices at a level that was affordable for an average factory worker, while increasing the standing of the local “pork butchers and scrap-metal merchants” who typified a club’s board of directors. In the wake of these developments a new type of audience was born. No longer composed of interested but emotionally detached attendees; it was instead composed of passionately committed

21. ibid. 146.
groups of supporters who followed their club everywhere, rain or shine. Collectively they indisputably constituted a community of some kind, but what kind was it?

**Spectatorism**

Contemporary accounts suggest that crowds at football matches during the 1880s were overwhelmingly male in gender. Ten years earlier, sources indicate, women were more in evidence, particularly in seated sections of grounds. Mason speculates that the withdrawal of free admission for ladies and an increasing coarseness of language was mainly responsible for this decline. Though men dominated proceedings, it is arguable whether crowds were otherwise as homogeneous as is often suggested. Weekly wage-earners were numerous, but this merely reflected urban society as a whole. Social groups other than the flat-capped working classes were also in attendance. In a male context, during the first century of the sport’s existence, a football crowd was probably as representative an assemblage as one was likely to find anywhere. One of the first infrastructure investments a club usually made, for instance, was the building of a grandstand. This structure signified not only that there were wealthier supporters who wished to remain seated and dry but, more importantly, it served as a symbol of success as a cultural institution within its community. It is likely more can be learned about spectatorship by giving more consideration to such immediate environmental factors. Where supporters congregated within the ground, and what they did when they were there, may reveal more about them than the social demographic they happened to belong to outside it.

The stadium itself, towering over the “two-up-and-two-down” homes surrounding it, could be imposing indeed. Physically it was unlike any building architects, classical or contemporary, had previously created. Though entirely functional in purpose, it is often unclear from the outside just what that purpose might be. High walls, punctuated occasionally by small doors that remain firmly shut, except on match days, give a passing impression of a medieval castle or town. Every traditional soccer ground is severely rectan-

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23. Mason. 152.
gular, the shape defined by its interior playing surface, yet, in other respects, each is
unique and frequently idiosyncratic. Most developed piecemeal, and the survivors exist
as both living monuments to a club’s present fortunes and its history: here a brand new
stand, there a decrepit refreshment hut. Roger Angell, writing on the closing of the Polo
Grounds, late home of the New York Giants baseball team, evokes this quality of Ro-
mantic timelessness.

The things we liked best about the Polo Grounds were sights and emotions
so inconsequential that they will surely slide out of our recollection. A
flight of pigeons flashing out of the barn-shadow of the upper stands,
wheeling past the right-field foul pole, and disappearing above the inert,
heat-heavy flags on the roof. The steepness of the ramp descending from
the Speedway toward the upper-stand gates, which pushed your toes into
your shoe tips as you approached the park, tasting sweet anticipation and
getting out your change to buy a program... The gentle, rockerlike swing
of the loop of rusty chain you rested your arm upon in a box seat, and the
heat of the sun-warmed iron coming through your shirtsleeve under your
elbow... All these we mourn, for their loss constitutes the death of still
another neighbourhood — a small landscape of distinctive and reassuring
familiarity.24

Walking a soccer stadium’s perimeter, one eventually arrives at the main entrance. At a
successful club, this might typically be marked by a set of elaborate wrought iron gates; a
testament to the skill of local craftsmen and, probably, the only concession to conventional-
aesthetics in evidence. Through them, one could perhaps glimpse a flash of green
grass, or a sliver of concrete terrace, hinting of spectacles past and those yet to come.

As is the case with that other local edifice, the parish church, performances tend
to be regular one-day-a-week events. When the factories shut down at noon on Saturday
the stadium’s turnstiles open; soon, wending their way through narrow streets, the throng
of supporters begins arriving. Taking their regular seat, or usual spot against a crush bar-
rrier — perhaps close to a favourite terrace wit or chant instigator — they gaze out at the
field of play and, more pertinently, at the spectators on the other three sides of the arena.
This is the most salient fact regarding sport spectatorship as an artistic form, and how it

differs from a play, a recital, an opera, or other theatrical performance. Only at a sporting event, like a football, baseball, or hockey game is one able to see the other attendees at all times. Nietzsche realised the implications of this: “Given the terraced structure of the Greek theatre, rising in concentric arcs, each spectator could quite literally survey the entire cultural world about him and imagine himself, in the fullness of seeing, as the chorist.” In effect, the stadium represents the obverse of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, with all that implies. Instead of a few in the centre of the structure being able to watch many that surround them, the multitude can observe both those at the centre, and — crucially — each other. It is a non-hierarchical, anti-disciplinarian form of architecture. Though designed in angles rather than arcs, the structure of sports stadia presents supporters with the opportunity to engage with each other as participants. By seizing this time for ninety minutes on a Saturday afternoon they, albeit briefly, become artists.

Their practice falls broadly into two categories: oral and visual. The first consists of songs, chants, and banter (i.e. jokes and other forms of humorous commentary). The second is made up of regalia: clothing, banners, and props. Examples of the latter include bells, rattles, and various forms of pyrotechnics. Vocalisations are usually directed at one of three targets: opposing players and spectators, match officials, or one’s own team and fellow supporters. Sarcastic chants of “Who are you?” greet visitors, and should their team fall behind, ears are cupped and a chorus of “You’re only singing when you’re winning,” reverberates around the stadium. Officials, meanwhile, are regaled with insults regarding their eyesight, parentage, and, sometimes, physical stature:

Who ate all the pies?
Who ate all the pies?
[crowd points in unison at the referee]
You ate all the pies.
You ate all the pies.
You fat bastard!
You fat bastard!

Most remarks, however, are reserved for the home team and its support. Ironic

abuse and criticism is constant, but so is a strong element of affection, often revealed in sentimental, even bathetic form, directed at either the club itself or popular players. The adoption of a contemporary song may reinforce collective identification. Liverpool’s supporters began singing *You’ll Never Walk Alone* when its popularity coincided with the team’s success, and they have retained it since. West Ham United’s attachment to *I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles*, on the other hand, is lost in obscurity. Ehrenreich erroneously places the beginning of the “carnivalization” of sport at the beginning of the 1960s but, as far as we can tell, it has been ever-present. Clear links to the music hall and vaudeville existed from football and baseball’s beginnings. For instance, Manchester City’s supporters crooned this ditty to Billy Meredith, one of soccer’s first *bona fide* stars, in 1904:

Oh I wish I was you Billy Meredith,
I wish I was you, I envy you, indeed I do!
It ain’t that you’re tricky with your feet,
But it’s those centres that you send in
Which Turnbull then heads in,
Oh, I wish I was you,
Indeed I do,
Indeed I do...

Symbiosis between the terraces and cultural forms beyond the stadium is long standing and exists as a type of feedback loop. For example, one of the most skilled and egocentric footballers of the 1960-70s was Rodney Marsh of the west London club, Queens Park Rangers. His talent and attitude drew constant verbal fire from the opposition who created a personalised jeer on his behalf. It consisted of his first name sarcastically extended and repeated indefinitely: “Rodneee, Rodneee... Rodney, Rodney, Rodneeeeee.” Unusually, the chant was taken up by his own team’s supporters who, by altering the pacing and modulation, made it exuberant or plaintive as required. “When winning, it was in a major chord and when losing in a minor, going from G to an E.” Noticing this, musician John

27. Sanders, 220.
Tilbury — a supporter himself — incorporated it into his arrangement of Cornelius Cardew’s *Treatise* which he went on to perform in concert.\(^{28}\) At bottom, however, this chant, like others, was one of affinity, of the individual within the throng, and of the collective itself, expressed by one as all and by all as one. As Bakhtin puts it:

> The words are actually a cry, that is, a loud interjection in the midst of a crowd, coming out of the crowd and addressed to it. The man who is speaking is one with the crowd; he does not present himself as its opponent, nor does he teach, accuse, or intimidate it. He *laughs* with it. There is not the slightest tone of morose seriousness in his oration, no fear, piety, or humility. This is an absolutely gay and fearless talk, free and frank... beyond all verbal prohibitions, limitations, and conventions.\(^{29}\)

If songs and banter represent the embodied communitas of the terraces, the flaunting of team colours sustains it beyond the stadium and into the streets.

Players need uniforms to distinguish teammates from opponents on the field of play. They serve no other practical purpose. It is not essential that they remain the same from game to game, and in sports’ formative years they often did not. To supporters, however, team colours are primary emblems of allegiance; their continuity is of cardinal importance as repositories of history and meaning. Frequent alterations may suggest vacillation, insecurity, or weakness. The association of sports teams with specific colour combinations harkens back to Roman times and beyond. Blue, green, red, or white identified supporters of particular chariot teams associated with one or other of the great imperial families.\(^{30}\) Later, echoing classical tradition, English public schoolboys wore uniforms based on centuries-old heraldic motifs and colours. These, naturally, extended to the playing field. To a supporter of Bolton Wanderers or Accrington Stanley, such connections were tenuous. Nonetheless, he felt as strong a bond with his own community and shared a similar desire to exhibit it. The establishment of consistent uniforms, both in


\(^{29}\) Bakhtin, 167.

colour and pattern, is coincident with the growth of supporters’ clubs and the greater involvement of non-playing members. Both groups raised funds that provided for a variety of infrastructure improvements and equipment purchases, including team kit.\(^{31}\) Though there’s little hard evidence, it seems probable these organizations provided the impetus behind the choice and consolidation of uniform colours on behalf of their individual clubs. There is no record of either the FA or the nascent English Football League requiring team colours to be filed. Nevertheless, only seven years after its birth, all but one of the League’s founding clubs had established the uniforms they wear today.

Just when and how each supporter chooses to interpret his club’s livery varies according to inclination and opportunity. In soccer’s earliest days, the latter was scarce. Workplaces closed around noon and the game kicked off at 2:00 p.m.\(^{32}\) This left barely enough time to get home, clean up, and have a bite to eat beforehand, let alone garb oneself in elaborate costume. Printed cards in appropriate colours with “Play up United” on them and stuck in hatband or buttonhole were as creative as most could manage. Restraint was unfettered, however, for important matches—knock-out cup-ties or “derbies” against local rivals. Like the great festivals of times past, these generally occurred during holiday periods such as Christmas and Easter. With more free time available, the panoply of carnival reappeared in all its garish splendour. Mason notes one instance: “During Barnsley’s run to the FA Cup Final in 1910, a local glassworker, dressed in a suit of red and white and accompanied by a donkey, fulfilled the role of club mascot.”\(^{33}\) He goes on to quote \textit{Athletic News} of January 9 1893 which described “two ladies ‘freely bedecked’ in Sunderland’s colours before a league match at Preston.”\(^{34}\)

As clubs established themselves in the community and recreation time increased, costume and match accessories became commonplace and more elaborate. Wives and sis-

\(^{32}\) Mason, 153.
\(^{33}\) ibid, 158.
\(^{34}\) ibid, 172 n95.
ters knitted scarves, spare evenings were spent painting wooden rattles or constructing teetering top hats out of cardboard and crepe paper. Ethologist Desmond Morris writes:

There are no guidelines for a fan’s costume beyond his team colours and club emblem. Any pattern, any design, any badge, any article of clothing, any accessory he likes to devise, is acceptable... for important occasions he will spend a great deal of time making his own special, personal adornments which will add variety to the spectacle.  

The club is important, not only for what it may achieve on behalf of its immediate neighbourhood, but also because it presents opportunity and focus for artistic practices. Needlework, painting, and three-dimensional construction would surely go on with other ends in view. This objective matters, however, as it is validated by a community including members of a family, neighbourhood, and the complex communitas of the terraces. Such breadth and depth of commitment are rare. Possibly the confluence of church, choir, and congregation represents a similar investment of energy — or did in the past. But, just as secularism and geographical mobility contributed to the demise of Sunday services, other powerful forces are collaborating in the decline of spectatorism as a practice.

Decline

Until the early 1990s, soccer’s governing bodies chose to ignore television. They allowed the most important games to be shown — FIFA’s World Cup competition, the FA Cup final, and a handful of others — but participation was reluctant; it was feared routine broadcasts would dissuade people from attending games. However, especially in Britain, increasingly decrepit stadia and media-fueled anxieties regarding hooliganism had, in any case, eroded crowd numbers during the previous two decades. A series of incidents culminating with the Hillsborough tragedy in 1989, which caused the deaths of ninety-six people, led to a government inquiry. It recommended changes that could only be financed


by making a deal with the devil and accepting money from television companies. This is not the place to directly critique this process or its purpose in detail, but rather to look at its impact on club supporters and subsequent changes to spectatorism in particular.

In the early 1960s the Football League’s enforced maximum wage for players collapsed under legal challenges; and prices began increasing. Over the next thirty years, the price to watch a match at the top level rose by approximately 3,000%. Many supporters, particularly among the enthusiastic throngs behind both goals, could no longer afford to attend regularly. Even the concrete beneath their feet was under threat. Post-Hillsborough requirements mandated all-seating stadia for England’s top clubs. More than any other single change, this one diminishes the creative potential of the crowd. With the removal of general admission, a spectator cannot choose where he stands, or who he is next to. A traditional soccer crowd consists of pockets of supporters, self-selected by volubility, age, appearance, willingness to tolerate vulgarity, and other, often intangible, criteria. What are the chances of breaking into song when the person sitting next to you is not interested, or a club steward insists you stay seated? Sports writer Cameron Carter articulates the problem:

It is astonishing how, merely by sitting instead of standing, the individual becomes so much less a participant and so much more an observer. Standing, we become a part of one organism — the self is exhilaratingly lost in the breathy throng... But I can’t be part of one organism when I’m in a... seat, because if my neighbour is G35 and I’m G36 then we’re different aren’t we, it is shown in the numbers and letters. We’re separate entities and the illusion of fraternity is blown. So we don’t lose ourselves in the experience. We find ourselves watching.\(^\text{37}\)

To compensate, exhortations to “clap” or “cheer” on electronic scoreboards replace spontaneous outbursts. Similarly, home-made costumes and regalia are overwhelmed by a tidal wave of merchandise from the club shop as commercialisation, hand in hand with mass media, facilitate each other’s power. Their increasing control can be measured by the transformation of the football uniform into a consumer item.

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Ever a symbol of what a club represents, this essentially utilitarian item altered hardly at all until the 1970s. A change in material occasionally, or a different collar pattern once in a while, was the only visible concession to modernity. Then large sports clothing manufacturers began adding their logo to products. Initially, it was unobtrusive — a small mark on the front of the shirt on the opposite side to the badge. Soon, though, it appeared in a contrasting colour to those of the club. Then, it appeared in other places, on the cuff of shorts or front of socks. A few years later secondary signifiers — additional marks based on the company logo — began appearing— Adidas’s three stripes down sleeves and shorts are probably the best-known example. Before long sponsors’ logos joined those of the manufacturer; these are corporate marks applied to uniforms for strictly commercial reasons. They have no connection with a club’s supporters, players, or equipment. Nor do they make concessions, in design or colour, to its history and tradition. This type of signage exists elsewhere independently, but needs the uniform in order to exist in this sporting environment. In effect, it is a visual parasite whose survival is dependent on the host whose form it inhabits. Over time, the signals it emits dilute those of the host, which mutates to accommodate the invader’s evolving needs. As traditional patterns alter, or are removed, so the commercial message is more visible, particularly to a television audience. The shirt is the most obvious visible identifier of the club, something advertisers are willing to pay a price to be associated with and, for supporters, a symbol of their allegiance. However, fifty years ago even the most obsessive fan would have felt as foolish wearing a soccer shirt in the street, or even to a game, as they would a pair of boxing gloves. It was athletic equipment, not everyday clothing. Not so anymore. These days, similar to the way in which General Motors once introduced new automobiles, professional soccer clubs produce between two and four new kit designs a year. In their equation, fans are consumers, or must become so, otherwise, the club will not be able to compete with its rivals. Supporters feel that, by buying and wearing the new shirt, they are showing their loyalty and helping the club to succeed on the field. The dedication which led them to follow the team around the country on Saturdays, to sing, to joke, and to spin narratives, now requires them to become mobile billboards.
The merchandising situation in North American sport is materially similar but emotionally distinct. As mentioned earlier, professional leagues on this continent developed along uncontroversial entrepreneurial lines. Therefore, spectators never created communal bonds equivalent to those in Britain, Europe, and elsewhere. There are exceptions; for example, the Saskatchewan Roughriders of the Canadian Football League, and the Green Bay Packers of the National Football League are community owned organisations that generate similar passions to overseas soccer clubs. Nonetheless, it is indicative that the term “supporter” is rarely used here, except as a euphemism for someone who donates money; “fan,” or the more neutral “spectator,” is more commonplace. That is not to say that those attending games lack fervour, nor that they display themselves any less conspicuously. The distinction lies in their motivation.

The costumes of North American fans are frequently as elaborate and no less creative. This, however, is a relatively recent occurrence and one, more or less, coincidental with the growth of televised sport. Unlike their English counterparts, North American organizations eagerly embraced television and adapted their sports to its wishes. Scheduling was organised accordingly, and commercial breaks during games introduced. In this fashion, sport gradually became part of the entertainment industry and, therefore, less a routine masculine occasion and more a “family” event. Consequently fans’ chants, for instance, are predictably rote, lacking both the variety and bawdy wit of soccer supporters’ vocalizations. Expressions involving Bakhtin’s “material bodily lower sanctum” have no place here. The character of carnival, like that of community, has been so diluted as to become almost undetectable. Almost, but not quite.

Television — implicitly by its presence and explicitly by inclination — encourages spectators to perform for the camera. Should one desire to be seen in a million homes, a simple method is to hold up a sign with the name of the television network on it. It lacks imagination but shows an understanding of one’s requisite role within spectator culture, at least as corporate sports and media interests would have it. Flamboyant or comical outfits in club colours are also likely to get screen-time; they provide entertaining visual filler during time-outs in the game. Though there is a physical
resemblance to the type of costumes soccer supporters traditionally wear, the intent is quite different. The supporter’s dress embodies his affinity to his club as it is represented on the field of play and, more importantly, his kinship with the community of the terraces and his neighbourhood. The contemporary sports fan, in the football stadium or hockey arena, dresses primarily to be seen on television. His desire, should it extend beyond simple exhibitionism, is to be a performer instead of a participant. However, just occasionally, the Lord of Misrule reappears and the world, again, is momentarily turned upside.

Which brings us back to Vancouver’s Green Men. First impressions suggest they, too, might be dismissed as a pair of media-savvy attention-seekers. In their vivid zentai, they are impossible to miss in the crowd and, more tellingly, their chosen location beside the penalty box makes it difficult for cameramen to keep them out of the frame. Their skill as mimes also does nothing, in and of itself, to counter the suspicion that the primary goal is to attract an audience. The focus and content of their antics, however, are quite the contrary, being neither distanced nor neutral, but fully Dionysian in both involvement and practice. The taunting gestures and visual heckling constitute a fully realised response to what is happening on the ice. It is commentary and critique that points, not to themselves, but to actions by others elsewhere. The Green Men’s anonymity is another indicator that something other than fame-seeking is taking place. Like many male performers, as we shall see in the next chapter, they wear masks and, in their case, they are more than merely facial, completely obscuring their identities. Their celebrity is based on being a costumed character, so their private self retains its privacy. A further piece of evidence in favour of the Green Men’s carnivalesque qualities is the response they draw from both media and public. Their popularity with the latter was evident from the outset. If laughter and applause are not clear enough barometers, then an increasing coterie of similarly clad, but less talented, imitators must be.

Television was initially hesitant as to how to respond to the pair. They were clearly not run-of-the-mill sign wavers or face painters, yet they did nothing that could be construed as offensive. Nevertheless, in the highly formulaic context of North American
sports media, they were viewed with suspicion of being somehow potentially subversive. It should be said that, if this view was held by sporting bodies, it would not have been altogether inaccurate, as all art tends toward subverting hegemonic interests. At the very least, the Green Men bring attention to the question of whether sports broadcasting is a documentary or entertainment enterprise. Faced with no clear answer, television ignored the Green Men to the extent of reserving comment that would lean one way or the other. Pretending they were not there, however, was ludicrous when they were such a kinetic presence. Television eventually acknowledged their existence with lukewarm enthusiasm. There were studio interviews — two grown men in tight green body suits sitting on a couch being interviewed did look somewhat absurd — and a few perplexed, jocular comments during games.

The National Hockey League, however, has been somewhat less than amused. The Green Men’s antics imply loss of control on their part. Realising that, as paying customers, they cannot be arbitrarily refused admission, the NHL has imposed petty restrictions instead — no handstands, no touching the perspex — in the hope that, if life is made too uncomfortable, the couple will find some other venue for their activities. In microcosm, the issue is about who claims ownership of the event, the participants or the administrators. The pair of mimes has cogently restated Misrule’s authority within spectatorism; whether they can do the same for its sense of communitas however remains moot.

Summary
Towards the conclusion of Association Football and English Society, social historian Tony Mason makes this point: “Football seems to have helped further a kind of local consciousness although it may have had no positive results outside the fact that supporting Bolton Wanderers reminded you that ‘you were a Bolton lad and not one of them Bury lot.’” Mason reveals himself here as something of a captive to his own discipline. To
begin with, in their appreciation and understanding of the game as it plays out before them, supporters reveal themselves to be members of a substantial aesthetic collective. More significantly, with their responses, collectively and individually, to what they have experienced, are experiencing, or will experience, they form a singular community of expression. Their relationship to the game is congruent with that of dancers to a piece of music in that it provides both stimulation and emotional context. Mason is right, in that physical bonds forged with family and neighbourhood certainly exist, but beside the intensity of those shared instances of transcendent joy and despair, they pale into relative insignificance.

These moments, sometimes as brief as a second or two, are embedded in the memories of those present and, by extension, within the fabric of the stadium itself. It is an archive of transient flashes of time. The sixty-year-old man remembers precisely where the ten-year-old boy he used to be stood when that last minute goal was scored. The frozen concrete that numbed his toes that day is still there, as is the rusty crush barrier he was pushed against as the crowd leaped forward in joyous abandon. Place is an important player in spectators’ practice; to lose it is like a painter losing a hand or a dancer a foot. It is why supporters of Charlton Athletic, informed on arriving for a game one day in 1985 that the club would immediately have to vacate The Valley — its home of eighty-six years — carried out ground repairs, organised their own local political party, and eventually garnered enough support to overturn the decision and return seven years later.39

Finally, the carnival, brash, vulgar, crude, and exuberant as it is, can also be a dangerous place. It can sometimes be physically threatening, through accidents or violence — though, thankfully, both are uncommon. Greater however, especially to a young man, are the emotional and ethical hazards. The traditional carnival had a dark side; animal torture such as bear baiting and freak shows were common. At various times and places, soccer supporters have trumpeted their racism, religious or political sectarianism

and, regrettably, their homophobia which is, even now, all too evident. Unsettling and repulsive as these sentiments are, they are also inevitable. Art is not always as socially progressive or “nice,” as contemporary mores might like it to be. In its necessary honesty — the honesty of the Bakhtin’s “fearless man” — it periodically also reveals the ugliness of his ignorance. Furthermore, as Nietzsche points out, the ecstasy of the bacchanale contains within it the risk of degradation, and courts its own destruction, as was all too clear on the streets of Vancouver during the 2011 Stanley Cup Finals. To some young men, indulging these instincts is undoubtedly part of the appeal, and neither prohibition, nor cultural emasculation of the practices is likely to change that as, sooner or later, they will merely be replaced by others. Such repugnant aspects of masculine communitas will be explored in more detail in our concluding section.
Chapter Six:
The Street Dancer

\[
\begin{align*}
&Just \text{ like Pagliacci did} \\
&I \text{ try to keep my surface hid} \\
&Smiling \text{ in the crowd I try} \\
&But \text{ in a lonely room I cry} \\
&\text{The tears of a clown}\end{align*}
\]

Though it is usually categorized as a performance art, it is also appropriate to consider dance one of the visual arts, as a form of kinetic sculpture for instance. More pertinently, dancers’ costume, including masks, make-up, and other forms of facial adornment, are practices in their own right. As we shall see, this is especially true if the work is of a ritualistic or vernacular nature and more so when the dancers are male. The medium’s intrinsic sensuality and physicality so overwhelm the viewer that any strictly visual elements are frequently overlooked altogether or contemplated separately. This is unfortunate but unsurprising. When discussing embodiment in an arts context, dance is generally not only the first example that springs to mind but, in this one respect at least, also the most uncontroversial. It is explicitly and uncompromisingly physical (i.e. of the body) in nature. Secondly, there may be no form of expression as innately gendered as dance. The sex of the artist is inevitably and consistently in play during performance, and it is nigh on impossible for either the practitioner or the audience to set it aside. The involvement of men in dance frequently ensures controversy or discomfort among other males.

Though other practices under discussion here involve women, it is fair to say that

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only dance — in its broadest sense — is widely regarded as hegemonically female in form. Whether that is accurate, numerically or in terms of power, is debatable, but the perception is common, and particularly so among men, many of whom view dancing as an indicator of femininity or femaleness. The consequences of this are significant. As has been noted, sport today is the hegemonic form of masculine athletic expression; it is also probably fair to say that dance is its female equivalent. Recently, however, the practice of most sports by women has gradually gained widespread social acceptability, but dancing has achieved no comparable favour among men. Unless he is performing with a female partner in a social situation, choreophobia, fear of dance, is widespread among males. There are significant exceptions, discussed later in this chapter, but even so, a man dancing alone, or especially with another man in the context of a display performance, is likely to invite scorn, abuse, or worse from other men.²

There are several interpretations, or rationalisations, of why this should be so. In a scenario from within the history of classical dance itself, the ballerina, that paradigmatic image of romantic femininity, is at centre stage. Her male partner, though strong and agile, is emotionally neutral, his role essentially subservient. He is a mere athletic prop, a frame for her elegance and grace. Now — changing our lens — we note that, in nineteenth century France, the ballerina quite likely has a wealthy “protector” in the audience. From his peers’ perspective, the dancer’s performance is a means of displaying a possession. This is emphasised by her onstage female partner, who is frequently dressed as a man.³ Through her artistry, the contemporary ballerina has been able to transcend such Sapphic voyeurism. Her male colleague, however, is likely to be perceived by many men in a contemporary audience as figuratively neutered; thus, not present in any significant way.


In the past century, attempts were made to rescue dancing’s masculinity from its gendered ghetto. One of the most notable contributions was that of Rudolf Laban, a choreographer and teacher who established a chain of dancing schools in Germany between the World Wars. Laban resisted the intellectualisation of dance but, perhaps paradoxically, was also extremely analytical in his approach towards it. His emphasis on structure is best illustrated by the system of movement notation he devised. This is of no little graphic interest on its own merit but, more relevantly, another goal was to involve more men in dance by constructing a form that would not challenge their masculinity. To accomplish this, Laban theorized three different body types, defined as “low,” “medium,” and “high.” These are not exclusively gender based — the nomenclature refers to the physical “centre” of the body — but most of the time “low” equates to men and “high” to women. The centre of “low” dancers is in their legs and lower abdomen; they move mostly in a grounded fashion, frequently with knees bent. “High” dance involves more raised-arm motion and standing on point with the dancer’s centre in the solar plexus.

Laban’s choreography also emphasised spatial relationships between participants instead of synchronisation. This allowed for individual expression within the group but, in keeping with his socialist principles, avoided the elevation of a single dancer to the status of star soloist. Laban’s ideas found their primary expression in “movement choirs,” organizations comprised mostly of lay dancers. These were an outcome of the socio-cultural debate on community which was characteristic of the Weimar republic. A choir’s principal purpose was the group experience itself, not performing for an audience. The hope was that this would make them appeal to men. Based on photographic and cinematographic records, the choirs do seem to have been, at least somewhat, successful in this regard. Their existence, unsurprisingly, was abruptly truncated by the rise of the

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5. ibid, 264.
Third Reich, however, a contemporary revival is presently underway.

Dance then, at least as it is presented in the concert hall and on stage, is likely to challenge or discomfort many men, but this is not the entire story. Its tapestry is a complex weave and where we stand at a given time determines its pattern. Fascinating though they are, Laban’s ideas cannot be presented as a complete answer to male choreophobia. However, a contrived solution, such as his, may not be necessary. Men have been dancing alone, and together, since before recorded history — possibly before the invention of language — and continue to do so, but rarely on the stage.

**Men in Masks**

Anthropologically, it is a widely accepted that dance is an evolutionary ritual that encourages people to come together in large groups.\(^6\) The practical benefits for humankind are clear; alliances for hunting, protection, and mating may be forged outside the extended family group. It is also widely recognised — though not fully understood — that collective rhythmic movement forges nascent communal ties. The bonding attribute of shared motions is probably the reason soldiers march in time with each other; for example. Today, in clubs or at concerts, we experience the transcendent exhilaration of moving to the collective pulse of dozens of perspiring bodies, just as our remote ancestors did. Barbara Ehrenreich, quoting Turner, notes that there is more to this process, however, than ecstatic movement:

> “Each kind of ritual, ceremony, or festival comes to be coupled with special types of attire, music, dance, food and drink... and, often, masks, body-painting, headgear, furniture and shrines.” These ingredients of ecstatic rituals and festivities — music, dancing, eating, drinking or indulging in other mind-altering drugs, costuming and/or various forms of self-decoration, such as face and body painting — seem to be universal.\(^7\)

While acknowledging their interest, traditional dance aesthetics tend to view these other forms as distinct, sometimes even peripheral, and divorces them from a practice that is

\(^6\) Ehrenreich, 23.

\(^7\) ibid, 17.
essentially about movement. We need to remind ourselves that those far-off audiences, watching by flickering fire-light, are unlikely to have made any such demarcation and the participants even less so. Dance was a genuine multi-media event back then and, fundamentally, remains so today.

Ehrenreich observes that in the earliest known illustrations of dance: “Some of the male figures wear masks in the form of animal heads or abstract designs.”

This raises a couple of questions. Aside from its symbolic content, we might ask what the purpose of such a mask could be? Why was it only men who needed to cover their faces? Costume in dance has three main functions: display, when the performer reveals himself; disguise, when he hides himself; and protection, when he shields himself. The three are neither mutually exclusive, nor are all always evident. From an audience’s perspective, character identification is a principle consideration so, most of the time, only disguise and display are detectable. For the practitioner; however, protection may be the most important of the trio and the mask his greatest asset.

Ecstatic transcendence generated by communal dancing requires the dancer to merge physically and emotionally with the group. In doing so, he becomes part of an organism larger than himself. Therefore, his “selfhood” — the part of him concerned with independent thought and action — becomes freer to express itself, yet less cognitively accessible. The fear that, by immersing himself fully in the group, his “self” may become damaged or even lost completely, may be overwhelming. It is easy to understand why this is so. Men often danced together before a challenging event — a hunt, a fight, or a battle. On those occasions he would be expected to kill, or risk being killed, and expect the same of himself. The sense of transcendent brotherhood engendered by dancing with other men enabled him to take part in such extreme activities. However, if his liberated self — or soul — were not shielded from such deeply inhuman actions, it risked becoming irrevocably corrupted. The wearing of a mask offered protection on such occasions. There were two other, less scarring but still potentially mortifying, reasons to safeguard one’s

8. ibid, 22.
self. Young men sometimes danced to compete for a mate. To lose such a contest was not only humiliating but, on an evolutionary level, an indication of reproductive failure. A mask protected his soul from the former and allowed him to dance in pursuit of the latter on another day.

Men don masks of one kind or another, in many different circumstances and frequently for self-protection. Should we accept, for example, that the executioner’s mask is employed to conceal his identity? Is it not more likely intended to conserve some essential shred of humanity in the face of the horror he must perform? The notion of “the mask” as a head or facial covering must not be taken literally either; body or face paint may serve the same purpose, as do certain forms of costume, especially uniforms. Dance, particularly vernacular display dancing, requires men to provide themselves with a considerable range of such prophylactics to protect their soul as it attempts to escape.

**Dancing in the Dark**

When men want to dance but feel constrained from doing so, a same sex group offers two important features: support and anonymity. Performing an action collectively feels emotionally safer than doing so alone. Synchronised movements enhance this feeling of security, as is the case with many so-called folk dances. This somewhat patronising term is used to describe lore-based, non-classical dancing that evolved outside urban centres. Typically it involves gender-specific, as well as mixed, performances and, though soloists exist, their moments don’t constitute the bulk of the presentation. Uniformity of movement thus acts as a kind of camouflage, possibly at the expense of individual expression. This is not necessarily an issue in localised traditions where the point of the dance is reinforcement of communality, but it may become difficult when the struggle for personal identity is a dancer’s priority, as it often is with young men. In embryonic communities without common cultural touchstones, the oppositional requirements of an embodied individualistic response, and the need for concealment within a group, is likely to be heightened in intensity. The mass migrations associated with industrialisation and consequent urbanisation, along with the growth of mass media, generated many examples
of this process. We will consider two of them here.

Though it was the place from which they were abducted, the first slaves to arrive in the Americas would not have considered themselves African. Plucked from homes hundreds, even thousands of miles apart, the Ashanti, Tekrur, Lunda, and countless others were impelled to pool their stories, their rhythms, and their steps to create that rare thing, a brand new culture. There are few records of those early plantation dances, but we know some elements of them have proven extremely durable. The circle of performers who surround a pair, or single, improvising dancer to clap in time and call encouragement exists in Africa as a “ring shout,” in nineteenth century minstrelsy as a “walk-around,” and in contemporary hip-hop as a “cipher.”

The form’s continuity is obvious, but the content less so. However, English scholar W.T. Lhamon Jr. thinks satire comprised a good part of it. In their “cakewalks,” slaves began parodying the behaviour of their white oppressors in movement and costume before the reverse occurred.

Before US whites started in describing, painting, and staging black talk, song, and dance at the end of the eighteenth century, slaves had long been performing public put-ons of whites. The cakewalk is probably the most familiar example. The John Canoe revelries of Jamaica and coastal North Carolina are a second example. A third is the needling songs that punctuated cornhuskings.

The incremental emancipation of slaves, coupled with immigration from Europe and rural areas of the American colonies during the first decades of the nineteenth century, created a new, unskilled urban population. Young black men, in town to deliver farm-produce, danced for pennies or food in the street markets and quays of New York. They


were watched by, slightly less penniless, white youths; then, according to Lhamon, a crucial trade-off occurred:

At the material level, a performer gives steps (or enjoyment) for food and a buyer gives food for steps (or enjoyment). A crude replacement occurs. I give something I have for something you have. At the same time, another transfer occurs — the passing of cultural gesture or identity tokens... in cultural exchange, the transfer is not of one good for another, but the compounding of goods, one onto others... when one group passes its gestural practices on to another group, there is not a loss of those practices. Nor is there a unilateral ownership on either side. Instead, there are mutual transactions.\(^\text{12}\)

The consequential cultural accretion produced that most awkward and divisive form of entertainment, black-face minstrelsy. The young white apprentices of Albany and New York took these tokens, gestures, and parodies performed by their black peers and added them to their existing cultural attitudes. Lhamon, controversially, suggests the intent, at first, was to neither ridicule nor demean but to broadcast kinship with the most obvious social outsiders. “They were choosing to see themselves in terms of blackness and to align themselves with ciphers of rootlessness and transgression.”\(^\text{13}\) Blacking up also provided a protective bulwark, a mask, for their emerging but vulnerable identity.

White or black, the generation of young men that came of age in the United States between the 1820s and 1840s was among the first in modern times to feel excluded by virtue of age, class, ethnicity, or some combination of all three. Significantly, this was also the period when the term “juvenile delinquent” became used by middle-class social arbiters. It was towards them — the “knickerbockers” and other guardians of New York’s cultural propriety — that Lhamon claims the first blackface performers directed their expressions of otherness. However, more importantly, their dances and songs were also signals between themselves:

These workers are between traditions, between controls, and between phases of their lives. The interludes they begin to perform, and attend, for-

\(^{12}\) ibid, 91.

\(^{13}\) ibid, 72.
mally express their in-between stage, quite literally. All at once these mingled cohorts not only are between controls but very much more positively are among themselves, cuing on one another’s moods...\textsuperscript{14}

So began, within this typical framework of existential communitas, a new lore cycle — an interchange of expression, gesture, signs, steps, and rhythms between young black and white males — that continues to the present day. As minstrelsy gained popularity, however, its initial impetus became diffused. In a pattern that would be repeated regularly over the next century and a half, black-face rapidly became conventionalized, and performances turned poisonously against that which they had unconsciously sought to celebrate. By the beginning of the Civil War, parody had turned to derision and the slapstick drew jeers instead of laughter. Only the sentimentality remained but, it too, eventually became an embarrassing corruption. However, even at its most decadent, Lhamon maintains it retained a ghostly palimpsest of its original vitality. Finally, by the mid-nineteen-fifties, due primarily to pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, public black-face performance was effectively banned in the United States of America. It was far from the end of a cycle which had already been reinvigorated by ragtime, jazz, and swing, however. It may only be coincidence that one evening, during the period when the last minstrel shows were closing, a young white man named Elvis Presley walked into a studio in Memphis to make his first record, a song written by a black singer-songwriter. Such is the nature of communication and cultural tenacity however, that, within a decade, legions of middle-class British schoolboys became inspired to imitate performances by long-dead blues singers from the Mississippi delta. Simultaneously, though less dramatically and more slowly, another much older lore cycle was turning in England. In an almost uncanny echo of minstrelsy, it too involves dancing in black-face and the reinvention of a rural form in an urban context.

\textbf{Steps and Tatters}

\textsuperscript{14} ibid, 36.
In an English high street or market square, on any given holiday weekend, a visitor might unexpectedly come upon a dozen or so prancing men. They are usually in their middle years and dressed, as likely as not, in white clothing with brightly coloured ribbons and bells attached to their arms and legs. Most carry sticks they occasionally smash together to the accompaniment of loud shouts and whoops. This is a performance by a ‘side’ (i.e. group) of morris-men —they are always referred to as “men,” even if the group includes women, as they frequently do these days. Local passers-by ordinarily tend to regard them with indifference mingled with mild amusement, the novelty of watching dancing men banging sticks and waving handkerchiefs having long since faded. Yet, embedded within their movements and costumes is an obscure but tenacious practice that is neither historically dated nor artistically static. As journalist Cole Moreton notes: “The thing about morris dancing is that everybody thinks they know what it's all about, but nobody really does.” Scholars are in accord. John Forrest, for example, defines the practice more by what it is not, than what it is:

- Morris has no single origin point.
- Morris is not and never has been a single or simple phenomenon.
- Morris has evolved continuously throughout its documented history.
- Morris is not especially “folk” or rural.
- styles of Morris from different contexts have had a constant evolutionary influence on one another.15

Circumstantial evidence indicates that “morris” is a corruption of “Moorish,” and, certainly, there are men’s dances in Arab societies that involve a similar banging of sticks. Early documentary evidence also exists for a dance character named “Ye King of Morocco”16 and, more intriguingly, the use of black-face make-up.17

17. Ibid.
intriguingly, the use of black-face make-up. Nevertheless, nothing conclusive connects the continent of Africa to the English village green.

The origins of morris dancing are so vague because, in most instances, it was performed by labourers and farm-workers. If political history is written by the victors, then social history is written by the wealthy, and they tend to pay little heed to the activities of the poor. Some trade guilds supported their own morris sides, but by the late sixteenth century they had “diffused out to the provinces.”

18. Until the reformation the church was, by some distance, the main sponsor of local dancers largely through local “ales:”

Churches sponsorship of the Morris is closely tied to the economics of rural parishes in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries because the dance was used, starting in that period, as a special attraction at church ales, that is revels whose primary economic purpose was to provide the parish with a cash surplus. There are different kinds of church ales recorded in primary sources — May ales, king ales, bid ales etc — but the bewildering array of rubrics should not distract us from the underlying similarity of structure of all types. All ales had three basic components: entertainment, food, and ale (or beer).  

19. In return for food, beer, and — occasionally — money, morris men provided amusement. Additionally, the church usually paid for and stored the side’s costumes and props, thereby maintaining a degree of long-term control over the dancers.

During the eighteenth century, the documentary record almost ceases, but that does not mean that morris dancing did the same. Until recently, however, the contemporary form was largely a product of the folklore movement of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly the work of Cecil Sharp. Sharp amassed dances and tunes predominately from the Cotswold region of Southern England. This was important work as it legitimised and revived a practice that had become little more than begging so far as the public was concerned. Unfortunately, it provided a rather restrictive, and well-scrubbed version of what had been a diverse and complex set of transgressive

18. Forrest, 126.
19. ibid, 140.
Morris men were more youthful in the past than they tend to be today. Most were probably in their late teens or early twenties with the same inclinations to young men of that age in any era. In country districts they would typically have been agricultural labourers, either seasonally employed or tied to large estates. Hard workers when work was available, and penniless when it was not. Dancing, for several hours or, in the case of morris tours in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for days or weeks, was a way of both using surplus energy and making a little extra money.

In relation to the profits made, to note that all the original dancers on the tour (with the exception of the boy/Maid Marian) were nineteen or twenty years old, a tightly associated age group. When one of the dancers fell ill before the team arrived in Canterbury an older man from Herne was recruited to replace him. Possibly, therefore, tours were undertaken by small groups of young, unmarried age-graded peer groups, who toured for several years and then passed on the tradition to a younger peer group to take over.

Sometimes boisterousness would spill over into petty vandalism, or so it was perceived by the social watchdogs of the day. Less frequently, minor transgressions extended to apparent desecration. Historian Gordon Ashman cites an indictment from 1619 for borrowing a communion cloth from the altar of a local church and using it as a flag:

People who appeared before the court were Nicholas Mylychap for using the communion cloth of Abdon for flag in a Morris dance... William Millichap and Walter Pugh denied they were party to the borrowing, though they admitted dancing, and knowing that it was the communion cloth... John Bottrell cited “for carrying a sword in Morris dance;” denied knowing the cloth's nature, Adam Wilding, the drummer at the dance, said the same. Richard Eudlicke “the hobby horse” admitted the offence, Walter Millichap “my lord's vice or son,” admitted knowing about the cloth, and said John Barrett and the rest of the Morris dancers, “were consenting”... It gives the names of eight dancers and by inference, if there was my lord's son here there may well have been the lord [of misrule.] It happened at Whitsun time, the May Games, or the Robin Hood

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20. Morton, “Hey nonny no, no: Goths and pagans are reinventing morris dancing.”
time... What were they doing; why were they doing it?  

The incident might have been a prank, but two points are of interest. The first concerns the involvement of the church who, since the proceedings took place in an ecclesiastical court, was both victim and prosecutor. The institution’s relationship with morris dancers was complex; according to the tenor of the times it was either benefactor or oppressor. Either way, over the centuries the clergy were indubitably the most immediate and constant authorities morris men faced; here it is possible they acted as children might in defying a parent or teacher. However, the elaborateness of the affair suggests some degree of planning, and the presence of the Lord of Misrule, or his deputy, reinforces the possibility. As Forrest explains, the Lord of Misrule functioned as the captain — or in modern parlance, manager — of the morris side and, more significantly, as an elected intermediary with the church on the community’s behalf.

Chief among the methods of selling entrances to ales was the election of mock officials, who, acting as delegates of the church and wardens, toured the neighbourhood with a band of deputies to wrest contributions from all and sundry through a mixture of cajolery, mockery and tomfoolery. [Phillip] Stubbes in his [1583] description calls the leader the Lord of Misrule... [Stubbes] makes the affair sound as if the election is itself a mockery but, though it may have been accompanied by some badinage, it was not usually a jest conducted solely by the parish hooligans, but more of an honour or a duty conferred by all the village.  

The use of an altar cloth as a dancer’s flag is precisely the type of activity that would have taken place on such an occasion. For the morris men of Abdon such occurrences would have been part of their community, or even personal memory, as vestiges of these festivities lasted well into their times. Most significantly, however, this case underlines the communitas represented by morris dancing itself. A quality that, if only superficially, seems to be reasserting itself today. The Edwardian folkloric research carried out by Sharp in the Cotswolds shaped the paradigmatic image of morris dancing and dancers for most of the last century. Elsewhere, meanwhile, diverse local versions of the practice continued, though they struggled to survive. Beginning in the nineteen-

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22. Ashman. “Border Morris: Roots & Revival (Transcript of Talk)”
23. Forrest, 145.
sixties, one particular form began to gain popularity and today constitutes the basis of an urbanised morris with decidedly contemporary characteristics.

With its origins in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, adjacent to the boundary with Wales, Border morris differs significantly from its south-easterly cousin. The bands are larger and noisier, featuring fiddles, tubas, and a variety of percussive instruments including tambourines, triangles and, on occasion, multiple drummers. The dancers’ steps are less complex, their sticks thicker, shorter, and wielded more vigorously. It is in their appearance, however, that Border morris men differ most from Cotswold sides. Gone are the white shirts and pants; also the bells and sashes (“baldricks.”) White has been replaced with black, the shirts with ragged coats (“tatters,”) and, most strikingly, the dancers’ faces are painted black. Quite where this black-face tradition comes from, no one is sure. However, despite a lack of evidence either way, everyone vehemently agrees it is definitely not racist in either origin or intent. Maybe it is a reference to the practice’s legendary Moorish origins, but the most common explanation is that blacking-up was a disguise, as Laurence Ranger, of Hunters Moon morris explained to Cole Moreton of The Independent:

“These dances would traditionally have been done during winter by itinerant seasonal labourers who had no work and were busking for money to survive. As they were busking before potential summer employers, or the squire, or the vicar, they didn't want to get recognised.”

That is plausible but begs a couple of questions. Would blackened faces really have concealed a dancer’s identity from someone local who would probably have known him, at least by sight? Also, is it likely a member of the gentry or squirearchy would have cared what their casual summer labourers did in the winter? Is it not equally possible that the black mask enabled a poor, unworldly young man to present parody to power by safeguarding his inner being against the fears his actions might inspire within himself? Undoubtedly the support of his fellow morris men helped — as, very likely, did the consumption of substantial quantities of ale — but, in his thoughts and dreams every man

24. Morton, “Hey nonny no, no: Goths and pagans are reinventing morris dancing.”
is alone, and here as in other cases, the mask could act as his ally.

On a macro visual level it is possible to argue the ascendency of Border over Cotswold morris represents a victory, of sorts, for contemporary post-modernist ‘black’ over traditional ‘white’ modernism. While such an analysis is entertaining, if somewhat facile, it is true that practitioners of Border morris, unlike Cotswold sides, have attempted to breach the conventions of the form to sustain its relevance. Lately, their costumes have become more elaborate, with coloured tatters added to the plain black, and make-up applied more decoratively. Some sides such as Wolfshead — and their female counterparts Vixen — also write their own music utilizing guitars and other contemporary instruments. Recent cultural trends such as ‘punk,’ ‘goth,’ and neo-Paganism are clearly integrated into their practice, as are inclinations toward radical politics, as Paul Kane of Wolfshead told Cole Moreton:

He sees the dance... as a way of resisting the “complacent nostalgia” of Englishness “founded on the detritus of imperialism, Christianity, racism and xenophobia.” His England has more primitive, inclusive roots, and for him the morris is a way of expressing that.\(^{25}\)

An analogous process of constructing identity by reinventing, or revalidating, existing forms is also at work in present day versions of American street dance.

**Krumping in Compton**

Like Border morris the dances that fall under the general heading of hip-hop represent a turn of their particular lore-cycle. The rejuvenated British form, however, gives the impression of being a recreational choice, as much as it fulfills the emotional needs of its participants. Contemporary American street dance, however, emanates from necessity, even desperation. Here the stakes seem much higher.

As black-face minstrelsy descended into stereotypical racism, African-Americans responded by creating a succession of music and dance forms that, in each case,
profoundly influenced the cultural landscape of the past century. From jazz to rhythm and blues, from tap to jive, each was swiftly adopted and absorbed into the hegemonic cultural mainstream. Few of the original practitioners achieved wealth and fame, and the lives of the majority remained materially unaltered. Some might have felt a degree of validation as their steps and sounds were reproduced on records and in film and television, by white performers but, by the early nineteen-sixties, Lhamon’s “cultural exchange” was looking distinctly one-sided. Ron Mann’s documentary film Twist
explores teen dance crazes of the period, particularly as they were expressed on ABC television’s popular American Bandstand. The Twist, the Mashed Potato, the Hully Gully, the Fly, and dozens more appeared in flickering black and white in American homes on an almost weekly basis, and disappeared just as quickly. The new moves were introduced to the watching millions by dancers selected from the studio audience. These were almost all white couples from Philadelphia where the show was produced. Mann’s film reveals that the parade of new dances was largely gleaned from watching black couples in the city’s clubs; something the originators, who received neither exposure nor credit for their creativity, still resent. Partly in response to such exploitation, innovative African-American dance moved from the safe confines of clubs out into the streets — their streets — where visitors were unlikely to venture and where minstrelsy had begun over a century earlier.

Hip-hop is best defined as a meta-category that includes, among other practices, rap music, certain types of graffiti, and a variety of dance styles. The latter most likely began among rival gangs in Brooklyn during the nineteen-seventies. As a lead-in to a fight, rival leaders would “uprock” — a dance form in which aggressive gestures are mixed with elaborate footwork — to determine where the battleground would be. Soon the dance itself began to replace actual combat, though the original terminology survived. Although women participated in this style of dance, it was usually danced by two men facing each other. The underlying philosophy of uprocking

was to undermine your “opponent” with hand gestures called “burns”. One would “burn” his opponent with a variety of these hand gestures that would mimic an action that would be considered detrimental to the dancer’s adversary... The “winner” of these mock battles was usually the individual who was able to choreograph and execute his... burns creatively and even artistically to the rhythm and syncopation of the music. A sophisticated and rhythmic form of rock-paper-scissors, one would have to dance thoughtfully so as to not step forward and inadvertently get [one’s] head “sledgehammered”. Although it is common knowledge that uprocking is supposed to be a mock battle, those who are less professional sometimes get carried away with the dance resulting in real violence.28

Uprock is by no means the only male dance form to evolve out of physical conflict; the Brazilian dance/martial art capoeira has a not dissimilar history. Violence and sex are both deeply embedded in masculine dance practices — a modern expression of the latter is seen in the “biker dance” performed by Hells Angels motorcycle club members.29

“Breaking” succeeded uprocking and was followed, in turn, by a plethora of related styles, rivalling the turnover achieved a generation earlier by the dancers on American Bandstand. Popping, locking, jerkin’, turfing, b-boying, clowning, krumping, and others each had, or have, their passionate adherents. To an outsider, they are likely to seem so similar they barely warrant their own name. Viewed from within the culture however, as Krump dancer ‘Dragon’ does, each differs significantly from both its variants and anything danced before.

A group of us got together, and we invented this. This is our ghetto ballet. This is how we express ourselves. [It] is the only way we see of storytelling, the only way we have of making ourselves feel that we belong. This is not just a bunch of people acting wild; this is our form. [It] is just as valid as your ballet, as your waltz, as your tap. Except we didn’t have to go to school for this, because it was already implanted in us —


It is impossible to ignore the passion in this statement, and difficult to deny its claims to cultural authenticity. For, despite the perceived similarities of hip-hop forms, there are small but crucial differences between them — a half step here, a head tilt there — that indicate inventiveness. Striving for originality is crucial in the quest for identity, both individual and collective, and the struggle to achieve it is evident in most adolescent activities. Nothing is more irrelevant to a teenager than an elder sibling’s interests or passions. His music, appearance, and moves, and those of his peers, must not merely be emulated, but transcended. Accomplishing this requires searching out and magnifying details, and replacing characteristics. Location and costume are important in this. Hip-hop’s beginnings were in Brooklyn and New York; a decade later the generational gaze shifted to the west coast; first Oakland and then, a few years later, on to southern California. Each move reflected a new dance style, accompanied by a change in the dancer’s appearance. These variants were coded by distinctive clothing designed to separate the practitioners from their predecessors. In Los Angeles: “People who dance the jerk usually wear skinny jeans (varying from the unusual to the usual colours and washes), [it is] considered a rejection of the baggy pants style.” On the other hand:

Lockers commonly use a distinctive dress style, such as colourful clothing with stripes and suspenders. [It] can consist of loud striped socks, pegged pants that stop at the knees, bright and colourful satin shirts with big collars, big colourful bow ties, gigantic Apple Boy hats, and white gloves.

Note the similarities between those costumes, and the parodic styles worn by some of the early minstrels, described here by Lhamon: “Other gestures gather into distinctive costumings, which minstrelsy gleefully caricatured in its extreme collars, long-tailed blue

coats and endmen’s rags. [They] cull and enforce a style”33 This seems to be precisely what each iteration of hip-hop is attempting to achieve as well. It is not only dancers’ costumes that echo the early days of the lore cycle. Lhamon has studied the performances of M.C. Hammer — arguably the pre-eminent hip-hop entertainer of the late nineteen-eighties — and claims to have identified three basic steps consistent with illustrations of minstrel shows from the early nineteenth century.34 Along with the desperation to express change, difference, and originality, these practices embody a strong and consistent cultural continuity. By looking in detail at one particular contemporary dance form, we can see how the notion of the male dancer’s mask has been reinterpreted.

Krumping evolved in the Compton area of Los Angeles during the nineteen-nineties:

Unlike other hip-hop dances krumping is rarely choreographed; it is almost entirely freestyle (improvisational) and is danced most frequently in battles or sessions rather than on a stage... [It] is very aggressive and is danced upright to upbeat and fast-paced music.35

The genesis of krumping lies in a slightly earlier dance known as “clowning” after its creator, Thomas “Tommy the Clown” Johnson. Tommy’s troupe, the Hip-Hop Clowns, are children’s entertainers who, as part of their performance, encourage young neighbourhood audiences to emulate their steps and moves. Clowning evolved into the more physical krumping as Tommy’s acolytes grew older. This process is documented in David LaChappelle’s motion picture Rize.36 Throughout the film Johnson, wears a traditional clown’s costume and make-up, indicating that, besides dance, he introduces his young audiences to the possibilities of greasepaint. The multiple meanings of the white-faced clown’s visage — what it reveals or conceals — have been widely discussed in the context of the commedia dell’arte, in particular, and European history, in general.

33. Lhamon, 72.
34. ibid, 220
36. LaChappelle. Rize.
The clown’s mask is opaque, never alters expression, and is rendered in exactly the same way for each performance. The mask offers security; it is an alternate identity, one that clearly separates the artistic persona from the individual who wears it—if not as permanent as a tattoo, at least more substantive than an ephemeral costume, and more meaningful than mere festive face-painting. Additionally, though Tommy never acknowledges it, the irony of a black male dancer wearing white pancake make-up — the inverse of the blacked-up white entertainer — is inescapable, and not without significance among African American artists.

What Tommy also achieved, again probably unintentionally, is the reintroduction of the mask into North American vernacular dance where, since early minstrel times, it had almost disappeared. Some dancers, such as Dragon, now wear it in full recognition of its function:

If I know someone’s looking at me, it’s going to be hard. Some people can’t dance if they have someone looking at them. But, if you know that there’s a mask, sort of covering your face then you feel that it’s just you by yourself and that your identity is hidden. So you can dance as freely as you want to.\textsuperscript{37}

The quality Dragon defines as “identity” is, as we have discovered, something more profound than that term ordinarily suggests. In krumping the dancer’s mask is merely gestural, a type of facial graffiti tag, neither elaborate nor concealing. Like the Lone Ranger’s mask or Clark Kent’s spectacles, we instantly recognise it could never seriously be considered a disguise. The mask provides something more important, a protection of the self, or soul, that allows the dancer’s confidence to grow. Confidence, in turn, enables power; power to trust one’s imagination and allow the body to express itself in ways that were previously unobtainable. In this fashion the dancer emerges from the clown, and the clown resides in the land of carnival, where the spirit of Misrule is always close at hand.

\textsuperscript{37} ibid.
Section III
Chapter Seven:
Immanence and Expression

_I wish I was there to help her,
but I’m not there, I’m gone..._¹

_I cannot be grasped in immanence._
(Paul Klee — self-composed epitaph)²

Within the embodied vernacular practices detailed in the preceding section there are several identifiable predispositions. Not all are categorically male, but they possess characteristic qualities regarding masculine expression as it concerns younger men; though they may be discussed separately, they are complementary in nature. The number of these propensities is unknown, and some are omitted here; hierarchies, for example, are intrinsic to tattooing, graffiti writing, and other practices. However, four tendencies are integral to the construction of certain masculine identities, and will be distinguished and discussed in this chapter. The concept of the mask and its capacity to protect the inner self, or soul, was introduced in the previous chapter. There is more to be said on male masquerades, and the subject is pursued further here. The implications of ephemerality must also be considered, along with the transience of a peer group’s existential communitas. Territoriality; as both a physical environment, and as the command of materials, is redefined. Finally the ostensibly male requirement for opposition, or an adversary, is analysed and discussed analogically. To begin, we return to the ambiguities

¹. Bob Dylan, _I’m Not There_, by Bob Dylan (Dwarf Music, 2007)
of concealment.

**Who is that Masked Man?**

As has been noted, the facial markings on dancers and full body coverings of the Vancouver Canucks’ Green Men are masking made explicit. And, though subject to differing interpretations by audiences, in both cases their intent is to imbue the artist with confidence and emotional security. The same cannot be said of the tattooist, however. Though frequently he is as heavily “inked” as his customers it is not always the case. Moreover, tattooed or not, he appears that way always, not just when he is working. The graffiti writer might wear a “hoodie” while he paints too, but as he has no direct audience its clear intention is to prevent identification, rather than provide emotional protection. In the latter’s case affective reassurance is provided by his tag, or pseudonym. It constitutes an *alter ego* in graphic form, and functions in a similar fashion to a comic book superhero’s costume, which is perhaps the definitive modern interpretation of the male mask. In his public persona Banksy, for instance, is “Superman” but elsewhere, off the streets, he is a Clark Kentian figure who goes about his life as an ordinary mortal. The artist’s agent claims even his parents are not aware of his activities: “They think he’s a painter and decorator who’s done very well for himself.”³ Like Charles Dickens as “Boz” or Charlotte Brontë as Currer Bell, Banksy joins a long line of figures in the arts who, temporarily or permanently, choose to conceal their identity behind a *nom de guerre*. Traditionally, most have been involved in literature or the performing arts, it is only recently that visual artists were numbered among them.

There are several justifications for artists choosing to employ pseudonyms. Nineteenth century female authors — such as Brontë, Georges Sand, and George Eliot — often did so thinking, rightly, that their work was more likely to be accepted if it were

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believed they were male. Some men acquired a *nom de plume* for other practical reasons. Dickens originally began his fiction career writing as Boz, to distinguish the work from his journalism. Once he felt confident of success as an author he stepped out from the behind the mask without fanfare. Conversely Robert Zimmerman, ever elusive or evasive regarding questions about his work or life, made the decision to became Bob Dylan when he began performing in public. He is a classic example of the artist using a pseudonym as protective cover. In effect, Bob Dylan shields Robert Zimmerman from the attentions of the world. The fact the world knows that Robert Zimmerman is the name on Bob Dylan’s birth certificate is inconsequential. By employing a different name for his public self he creates a protective separation within his personality establishing that, in an essential sense, “he” really is “not there.” This is an example of something sociologist Chris Rojek, quoting social psychologist George Herbert Mead, refers to as: “the split between the I (the ‘veridical’ self) and the Me (the self as seen by others).” The latter is the public self, perceived by an audience but largely unknown and substantially inaccessible to its possessor. The former is the private inner-self of the practicing artist; access to which, as we have seen, many in his audience crave, but he must prevent. The maintenance of a separation between the two selves is crucial to an artist’s mental health, according to Rojek. He identifies the invasion of the veridical self — or soul, to use the traditional term — by the external self as a significant issue for some public personalities. A less controlled manifestation of this is the habit of referring to oneself in the third person known as illeism. This is not an uncommon trait and one often associated with narcissistic male personalities. If we accept Freud’s definition of a narcissist as one: “who inclines to be self-sufficient, [and] will seek his main satisfactions in his internal mental processes,” then it seems to apply to many creative individuals. Dickens, Emile Zola and modern celebrities, such as German soccer player Lothar Matthäus, frequently refer to themselves in the third person. Does a pseudonym circumvent this need by providing a

more explicit and more socially acceptable mask? Some psychologists conjecture that mask-making in some form is a requisite part of being male, as Brizendine notes:

For a man to physically strike a pose of self-confidence and strength, he must train his facial muscles to mask his fear... [studies] concluded that the men consciously — or at least semi-consciously — suppressed showing their emotions on their faces... According to the researchers, this suggests that men have trained themselves, perhaps since childhood, to automatically turn off or disguise facial emotions.  

Constructed masks, painted faces and false names are one thing but training one’s body to deceive, particularly to deceive oneself, is surely quite another. Art is substantively about expressing and communicating emotion. With skill it may be convincingly feigned, as an actor consciously misleads an audience in the service of a play; but, if he also deludes himself, as the studies Brizendine cites suggest, he risks damaging that which he is trying to protect. The task of guarding the vulnerable veridical self is of cardinal importance, and men will go to great lengths to do so, often unconsciously.

A master tattooist may teach all but a fraction of what he knows to his apprentice. Consciously or not, a shard may be withheld because to give away everything puts at risk the meaning of his own existence. In this circumstance he may feel that avoidance, by withholding knowledge, is preferable to deceitfully imparting false knowledge. That men behave in this fashion is frequently more obvious to women than it is to themselves, or other men. If Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen could agree on one thing, it might be their male characters’ capacity for withholding information. Both Darcy and Rochester are prone to vanishing suddenly and inexplicably, leaving Elizabeth Bennett and Jane Eyre perplexed and frustrated. It is possible a man compartmentalises and separates his life, between business, social, and domestic concerns; for example, as a form of masking his trail. Again this is not done to deceive others, but to safeguard himself and, by extension, those he feels responsible for. The veridical I is too fragile to allow people; however intimate, to come too close to it, or know too much of it. This suggests a man believes his soul to be as vulnerable as a butterfly in a hurricane, and as evanescent as a snowflake.

Mythologies, both ancient and modern, bear this out, and warn of consequences regarding the soul’s neglect or lack of care.

Peter Pan becomes so immersed in eavesdropping on Mrs Darling telling her children stories he loses himself in them and, accordingly, loses his “self” too. Startled when she notices him, Pan flees leaving behind his shadow. Citing examples from Edgar-Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, and Hans Christian Andersen among others, editor and scholar Maria Tatar points out that shadows are: “[o]ften seen in symbolic terms as a manifestation of the soul.” Pan pays a steep price for his forgetfulness and recklessness. Fortunately, the conventions of make-believe allow his shadow to be reattached with needle and thread. However, an adult audience is free to make the inference that a “lost” soul is unlikely to be repaired so easily.

In an early issue of *Amazing Spider-Man*, the central character’s angst-ridden teenage alter ego, Peter Parker, decides to quit being a superhero. His classmates sneer at him, his girlfriend is seeing someone else, finally his elderly aunt is ill and he has no money to pay for her medicine. Moreover, his superheroic deeds are often misinterpreted, leading the public to mistake him as either a “phony” or dangerous. In a moment of gloom Parker throws his Spider-Man costume into a wastebasket, with a “Goodbye, Spidey!!... I’ve a hunch nobody’s gonna miss you!” Instead, he decides to settle down and concentrate on school, with the hope of getting a steady job so he can look after Aunt May. She however has other ideas, “Even though I’m an old woman, I’m not a quitter!... You mustn’t worry about me so much, Peter dear!” Indeed, the old lady shortly begins to make an unexpected recovery. Reflecting on this Peter realises he has “been wasting too much time in self-pity” and retrieves his costume from the garbage “For I know at last that a man can’t change his destiny and I was born to be Spider-Man!!” Behind the simplistic language and superfluous exclamation marks lies a serious point: one’s soul cannot simply be abandoned, and — though they are not spelled out in the comic book —

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attempting to do so has unforeseeable consequences.

Even with the best of intentions a soul cannot be given away, anymore than it can be discarded. Book XVI of The Iliad describes Achilles lending his armour to his close friend Patroclus. Fooling the Trojan enemy into believing the hero himself is leading the Greek army is the intention. In meaningful detail Homer recounts Patroclus girding himself in Achilles’ battle raiments:

First he wrapped his legs with the well-made greaves, fastened behind the heels with silver ankle-clasps, next he strapped the breastplate round his chest, blazoned with stars — swift Achilles’ own — then over his shoulder Patroclus slung the sword, the fine bronze blade with its silver-studded hilt, and then the shield-strap and the sturdy, massive shield and over his powerful head he set the well-forged helmet, the horsehair crest atop it tossing, bristling terror.9

It is evident that here arms, literally, make the man. Just one item is missing, and it turns out be crucial: “Achilles’ only weapon that Patroclus did not take was the great man’s spear, weighted, heavy, tough. No other Achaean fighter could heft that shaft.”10 Initially, the deception is successful, and it saves the Greek fleet. In his flush of triumph; however, Patroclus ignores Achilles’ orders, and attempts to press home his advantage by attacking Troy itself. It is a step too far. His own spear shatters, and he is mortally wounded by the blow of a youth in his first battle, and subsequently slain by Hector, the Trojan general:

Hector waiting, watching the greathearted Patroclus trying to stagger free, seeing him wounded there with the sharp bronze came rushing into him across the lines and rammed the spearshaft home, stabbing deep into the bowels and the brazen point went straight out through Patroclus’ back.11

The lesson is obvious, it is impossible to borrow another man’s soul; therefore, it is futile and inadvisable to try. Something essential will inevitably be missing and provide the

10. ibid, 417.
11. ibid, 439.
weakness that leads to one’s downfall.

If a soul is not transferable with an owner’s blessing, taking it without without his knowledge is impossible. The protagonist of the television drama Mad Men, Don Draper, steals the dog-tags of a fallen comrade on the battlefield, and assumes his identity. As with Patroclus the ruse is initially successful, Draper parlay’s his deceit into a successful career in advertising, where dissimulation is arguably an asset. In time, however, his fraud is discovered, first by a colleague, later by his wife, and the lie becomes increasingly difficult to live with. Clearly, it is as impossible for a man to replace his own soul with another’s as it is to expect both to coexist in the same body. Our task is surely to make the best of the one we are born with.

Each of these parables concerns a youth, or young adult, whose soul is metaphorically embodied in an easily detachable, or fugitive, identity related object. The lesson for us, as men, is to guard it steadfastly, or so we are encouraged to believe. But, there is a paradox because, as the title of the Rainer Werner Fassbinder film suggests: Fear Eats the Soul; and the requirement to protect that part of us which we know to be indispensable, is itself a cause for anxiety. These mask-as-soul myths point out that symbolic identity is not fully congruent with the veridical self. The mask itself does not come with vital qualities, like temperament or character, attached. Except for the graffiti-writer’s tag — which, as discussed in chapter three, makes a claim to be a direct expression of his self — the other instances of masks discussed here are emblematic of the veridical self, not part of it. Even a tagger’s pseudonym can be shrugged off, though — crucially — it’s expressive graphic qualities remain embodied within his later writing and artwork. In short, a mask may protect a man’s soul but it does not constitute it, and the accoutrements of identity are not synonyms for the soul they merely point to it.

Forever Changes
Acts of artistic expression, even those as modest as a scrawled signature, provide reassurance of the veridical self’s existence. The making of marks, movements, and sounds that are incontrovertibly one’s own, and no one else’s, are foundational to the
construction of who we are. This is the self-mapping process referred to by Lacan and Sennett in chapter one. Unlike the soul itself the results are both concrete and transitional, in that a point is plotted, then the practitioner moves on; an artist rarely has much interest in the result of his work after its fulfillment. It exists, and does so through his agency; therefore, he also exists. His point, both analogically and literally, is established and he is ready to depart. Dwelling on the accomplishment is a waste of time.

This transition is a given; instead of trying to understand an artist’s practice as a series of singular goals, or pieces, it is better understood as a continuing process, where solutions create new objectives and, in turn, suggest new solutions. Sennett elaborates: “We might think that a good craftsman, be she a cook or a programmer, cares only about solving problems, about solutions that end a task, about closure. In this we would not credit the work involved... [There is] a nearly instant [his italics] relation between problem solving and problem finding.”

This is especially advantageous to younger men whose brains, so Brisendine suggests, find it difficult to conceptualise or grant value to anything beyond the immediate moment. For them, even the short-term future is a hazy notion, at best. Turner points out that as liminal beings their output has little currency within the rigidity of the hegemonic status system. Their considerable energies are better applied to building skills, rather than planning what to do with the results of them. A corollary to this for the artist is that after a piece has left his workspace it becomes significantly less of a consideration for him, and one that is subject mainly to the attention, or neglect, of the world at large.

This is valid irrespective of time or place, and illustrated when we compare the treatment of calligraphic scrollwork by Chinese scholars with that of contemporary graffiti writers. There is an acknowledgement by both groups of artists that, once it is out of their possession, a work will be transformed in some way. There is no expectation of

permanence, indeed transition is an anticipated, even a desirable state. So far as the scholar is concerned acceptance of natural and harmonious change is embedded in Taoist philosophy, it is to be embraced not resisted. Time will add and remove layers of meaning to and from an object, and the actions of others affect it even more. As Maggie Keswick notes probably the most direct evidence of this is the accumulation of collectors’ writings and seals on scholars’ scrollwork:

[T]he addition of...(various comments and short poems) and collectors’ stamps enhances and develops the subject matter and, equally important, provides a certificate of authority and venerability which gives the object depth and meaning.  

The placement of such markings by a collector is intended to be respectful of the calligrapher’s work. Usually, it is given deep consideration and never considered a defacement, as it would with a classic piece of European art, for instance. Whoever has claims on a piece, be it the artist, or owner, the Taoist realises it is the expression of something greater, and more fundamental, than either of them.

In the early hours of the morning, a graffiti-writer wielding a spray can has different motivations and ethical standards to those of a calligraphic master. Yet, an underlying acknowledgement remains, the wall where he makes his mark is a shared, not a personal space; therefore, whatever he produces is likely to be short-lived. As Creez says this is a balance he is comfortable with:

The old school writers get tons of respect here. Back in the day, we did cross people out a lot. We didn’t have beef with anyone in particular, but we did it to get talked about. There wasn’t really any one to respect back then. The dope writers were all my boys, so I didn’t cross them out. We didn’t give a shit about those that came after us. These days, I don’t bother with that too much. Kids cross me out in yards, but it goes back and forth. In the streets though, I show people respect and I get it back in return.

Graffiti culture has similar forms to the seals and colophons attached to scholars’ scrolls.


16. Paul 107, 63.
Dedications and “crew” tags — the collective name of a writer’s associates — may be placed next to an admired piece. Not too close however, as that could be interpreted as an insult. A tag placed above someone else’s is definitely construed that way, as it implies being better than him. Writing on someone’s piece — or “dubbing” — is a cardinal sin and demands a “cross out” in response. The tattooist understands too, that whether positive or negative, interactions beyond his control affect his work’s mutability and fragility. Though discussed as if it were permanent, ink fades, softens, and ages just as paint on a wall does. He knows too that he may not be the first, or last, allowed access to his work. Occasionally he will be required to alter a disliked piece, or add ink to an existing one, and others may do the same to his work. Nothing is ever really “finished,” in the sense of being framed in time. Neither the scholar, the writer, nor the tattooist expects this because, for differing reasons, each knows such assumptions are illusory.

When an artist gives attention to his process, rather than its result, he implicitly acknowledges the temporal transitional qualities, both of his work, and within it. How he acts, and what he produces, are part of “nature” as Schopenhauer alludes to it: living, dying, ever-changing. Conversely as Crawford, quoting philosopher Talbot Brewer, suggests, if a practitioner concentrates on what might happen to it when complete, rather than what he is doing, his energies diffuse and he is likely to become distracted.

If one were struck only by the instrumental value of the activity... one’s evaluative attention would be directed not at the activity but at its expected results — that is, at something other than what one is doing. This sort of attention... absents us from our activity and renders it burdensome. A considerable part of that burden consists of previously produced work. Pieces executed in the past are no more than empty husks of the person the artist used to be. As his body sheds skin, so his soul sheds expression. To pick up an old sketch book, for example, can be an oddly disturbing experience. Like photographs of oneself as a child, they are curiosities and intrigue but represent nothing one can return to. Musicians, required to play a tune they have performed on numerous occasions, will often seek to change

17. Macdonald, 204 –13
something to imbue new meaning: their accompanists, the context, the rhythm, or tempo. Frequently this is precisely the opposite of their audience’s wishes however and, unless watchful, artists risk becoming captive to them, as the public tends to prefer the performances of their youth, to hear the song as it was sung forty years ago. Crawford notes that, beyond the applause, and allowing for the compromises required to earn a living, only from his peers will an artist hear what is worthwhile:

Only a fellow journeyman is entitled to say “nicely done.” A judgment on the finer points can arise only within, and receives its force and justification from, a shared orientation toward the more basic functional ends that are captured by the objective standards of the practice.19

“Nicely done,” is the relevant phrase. It is the “doing,” the active execution not the static result, that carries meaning for the practitioner. Moreover, his agency happens, not in the past or future, but in the moment. There, in his “immanence,” as Paul Klee observed in his epitaph, he may be observed but remains unknowable. For Klee, ever the cosmic joker, this is also because he is dead; making our presence even less likely.

**Room for Oneself**

Territoriality, the establishment, and protection of physical space, is widely regarded as a key masculine trait. Given the quantity of empirical evidence it seems futile to claim otherwise. Wars continue to be fought over reified terrain known as nations, and the equation stating that a man’s home is also his castle seldom requires justification in everyday conversation. Nevertheless, though these archaic examples of geographic parochialism maintain their currency, the term carries wider and more profound implications.

In ancient China, theological historian Karen Armstrong tells us, the legendary Yellow Emperor Huang Di walked around around the world “as the sage kings had [done] to [maintain] the regular cycle of the seasons by traveling around their territories,

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19 ibid, 207.
following the path of the sun.”

By 2300 BC the emperor Yao was sending emissaries in his stead and his successor, Shun, merely performed a ceremony at each of the four gates of his capital. A thousand years or so later the Zhou dynasty kings reduced their exertions further by building a room in their palace with a corner dedicated to each season where they would stand at the appropriate time. Two points are evident here. First, from a very early period the notion of territory clearly had elemental and temporal significance as well as geographical aspects. Secondly, as a concept it became ritualised and abstracted. We must discern how place related qualities continue to evolve in the context of artistic practices. Doing so does not mean we ignore conventional physical manifestations of territory, or believe that they no longer exist. We have already acknowledged the importance of the street, stadium, studio, quayside and marketplace in this regard. Viewed within the framework of communitas, the existential common ground provided by such areas is as crucial to vernacular expression as the participants themselves are. So far as the individual artist is concerned though, the notion of territory provides a twin framework for us to understand his practice. On the one hand it transports us into the domain of the imagination — which we shall explore shortly — and on the other into materiality.

It will be recalled that Polanyi notes that man’s mastery of tools, and materials are contributory to his acquisition of knowledge. In a sense Heidegger extends this idea in the opposite direction. By the using natural tools, nature itself may be apprehended. “Hammer, tongs, nails in themselves refer to — they consist of — steel, iron, metal, stone, wood. ‘Nature’ is also discovered in the use of useful things, ‘nature’ in the light of products of nature.”

So an implicit connection exists between the things we make, the things we use to make them, and the things they are made of. The mason’s arm becomes one with the steel of his chisel, which in turn is bonded to the stone it strikes. The painter’s hand is indivisible from the brush, made of hair, and wood, which carries the


amalgam of vegetable, minerals and animal matter we call paint. An elemental synthesis is inherent to these processes, one which traditional Chinese painters honour by referring to the brush, ink, inkstone, and water employed in their practice as “The Four Treasures.”22 Through them, artists establish their presence. Not, says Sennett, recounting the practices of slave-brickmakers of Rome, by asserting his identity, but by expressing his selfhood:

“Presence,” in the modern way of thinking, seems self-referential, emphasizing the word “I.” Ancient brickwork established presence through small details marking “it”: the detail itself. In the lowly Roman craftsman’s way, anonymity and presence could combine.23

In this way, the artist establishes himself within a natural order of substance; a continuum of materiality that is infinite, ineffable, egoless, and timeless. It is forged for brief, broken moments by the singing crowd on a concrete terrace, by the sweating dancer shaping space with his body, by the graffiti writer’s paint emerging from the end of his finger onto a brick wall, and by the tattooist’s ink as it penetrates the skin of his subject. All represent a circuit of organic completion of which the artist’s presence is but one part. Philosopher and calligrapher Heesoon Bai describes the artist’s consciousness while in this working state:

When a calligrapher brushes the characters, his/her very motion/movement is the spirit expressing itself through the sensitive (wet, fluid) medium of brush, water-ink, and rice paper. The medium of water-ink-brush-paper is the container and carrier of this spirit. [The] words we write are not indexical, pointing outwardly to something else — e.g. to the spirit in the cosmos, or in heaven, out there. All is in here, everywhere, in the tip of the brush, in the water, in the ink block, in the rice paper, in the hand that holds the brush. It is about immanence rather than transcendence.24

Once again the word immanence emerges. Here, it suggests immersion in the act together with presence on the artist’s part. Obliviousness to other people or events and temporal unawareness is marked. Though it shares certain characteristics with them, immanent

22. Mai-mai Sze, 64.
23. Sennett, 134.
24. Heesoon Bai, Vancouver, Canada. e-mail to the author, (12 October 2005).
materiality is neither contemplative nor meditative, instead it is an engaged and active place. That it is a territory — physical in nature at least as much as it is emotional or intellectual — is certain, and so may accurately be termed embodied. However, to discuss in more depth its importance to an artist immersed within the immanence of his craft we need to borrow language from the church.

An incident occurred during the Woodstock Music Festival of 1969. The Who were in mid-performance when political activist Abbie Hoffman spontaneously decided to make a speech. Between songs, he wandered onstage, grabbed a microphone and began lecturing the million or so onlookers. At the time Pete Townsend, the band’s guitarist and principal songwriter, was adjusting his equipment. Not knowing who Hoffman was, or what his intentions were, he strode briskly to the front of the stage and hit the intruder on the back of the head with his guitar. Hoffman promptly fled into the audience. Crawford considers Townsend’s a completely natural reaction.

It is characteristic of the spirited man that he takes an expansive view of the boundary of his own stuff — he tends to act as though any material things he uses are in some sense properly his, while he is using them — and when he finds himself in public spaces that seem contrived to break the connection between his will and his environment... this brings out a certain hostility in him.¹⁵

It is worth delving deeper into why this should be so. Years later, when asked about the Woodstock occurrence, Townsend claims he had no regrets and would respond again in a similar fashion, because Hoffman had: “violated the sanctity of the stage.”²⁶ To many people, the word sanctity unambiguously evokes holiness. To many more it at least suggests intense spirituality. By extension then we may infer that, to Townsend and others, the stage is a sanctuary: a protected place where activities by a practitioner should not be interrupted or interfered with. Is it hyperbolic or pretentious, even blasphemous, to describe a rock music performance in such terms? As Ehrenreich and others have noted, 

¹⁵ Crawford, 55.

art and religion — especially ecstatic forms of worship — are historically irrevocably intertwined. Our relationship with the arts has become secularised in recent centuries, but whether it has also been altered as an expressive act on the artist’s part seems unlikely. At such times his attention to his actions is profound in its totality, leaving him exposed in body and soul. The territory of the stage offers protection in a similar sense to a mask. However, like an instrument, the stage forms part of the innate materiality of his performance. Once he is immersed in the elements of his practice everything without ceases to exist. If this state is breached by an outsider he is likely to react reflexively out of fear, anger or both, for such an intrusion he may well consider synonymous with sacrilege.

Finally, by the reasoning above it might be maintained that territoriality is not a specifically masculine attribute, but one dependent on characteristics of agency not gender. This may well be the case. Though the latter are important, as we are attempting to show, they may not be fundamental to the artist’s state of mind and body while he is at work. The attempt here is to redefine territoriality as a notion of place that, independent of gender, is both more abstract and yet more inclusive than restrictive contemporary usage allows. Its masculine characteristics are revealed through instances rather than attributes.

**Fight or Flight**
Adversarial challenges are a component of all the practices detailed in section two of this commentary. They are physically present for graffiti writers and sports spectators either in the form of the police — representing society at large — or, in the latter instance, opposition fans. The dancers’ foes are more diffuse but no less real; disempowerment fostered by class, ethnicity, age, or some combination of all three is axiomatic. Meanwhile, outsiders by cultural inclination, tattooists adopt the practices and techniques of the traditionally marginalised within society. It is apparent that a substantial number of

27. Ehrenreich, 10.
young men, frustrated by their liminality, conspicuously seek transgressive ways to express their cultural “otherness.” This impulse likely has long-term socially beneficial consequences, so Brizendine and others suggest: “[It is believed] that adolescent bravery has contributed mightily to the success of the human species and that the curious, incautious, and flexible nature of the teen brain makes teens society’s purveyors of new ideas in every generation.”

The assertion that young male oppositional energies act as social caffeine is attractive, but begs the question of what types of act constitute bravery in their case.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the Western tradition was reasonably consistent. For a young man bravery entailed proving himself to his elders, primarily through physical courage, but also via actions that revealed certain affective and intellectual qualities, such as calmness under pressure and cunning. These attributes, employed in the service of established social norms, may be termed brave. An archetypal example of youthful valour is the biblical King David. He achieves manhood by slaying a more powerful adversary than himself, who threatens his entire people. Dangerous in prospect, difficult in execution, and altruistic in motive, the qualities exemplified by David’s killing of Goliath are mirrored in the exploits of every young male hero who followed him, from King Arthur to the schoolboy Tom Brown. All showed determination and enterprise but, importantly, did not challenge the hegemonic social order, usually, their actions reinforced it. This, Turner suggests, is potentially problematic: “Exaggeration of structure may well lead to pathological manifestations of communitas outside or against ‘the law,’ [which] may be speedily followed by despotism, overbureaucratization, or other modes of structural rigidification.” He implies an inevitable and necessary fluctuation between existing social structures and existential communitas. The resulting polarities must, so far as is possible, be kept in balance:

28. Brizendine, 47.
29. Samuel 1.17 AKJV.
30. Turner, 129.
“Maximization of communitas provokes maximization of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed communitas. The history of any great society provides evidence at the political level for this oscillation.” If Turner is right then an alternative to the hegemonic King David model of hero is needed and, at the dawn of the twentieth century, one emerged.

Europeans and North Americans experienced a shift in their perceptions of childhood during the final decades of the nineteenth century. A guilt-driven pendulum-like swing towards sentimentalism, replaced the widespread child exploitation of the formative years of the industrial revolution. This was exemplified by the success of Charles Kingsley’s didactic story The Water Babies (1863) and John Everett Millais’s painting Bubbles (1886.) Slowly, more complex views of infancy began emerging; ones which intimated that the transition from child to man was more than merely biological. They also suggested that, though the path from childhood appeared well marked, the exit into adulthood was by no means clearly signposted. Popular literature of this period, particularly that shared by adults and children, marked this trend. In the United States Mark Twain’s resourceful The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) are key examples. So too, from the pen of Britain’s Robert Louis Stevenson, is Treasure Island’s Jim Hawkins. Some years earlier, Lewis Carroll with Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871), introduced readers to a particularly articulate and, by the standards of the day, precocious juvenile protagonist. Edith Nesbit continued the pattern of youthful intelligence and ingeniousness in a string of successful novels beginning with The Treasure Seekers (1899), other writers followed. From the perspective of this discussion; however, the most relevant character made his debut on the stage, not the page, during Christmas 1904. It was then, the season when the Lord of Misrule traditionally reigned, that the world was introduced to the boy who refused to become a man.

31. ibid.
Peter Pan possesses lineage reaching back into myth — and indeed the early chapters of this dissertation. In ancient Greece Pan, son of the trickster God Hermes, belonged to the retinue of the ecstatic, anarchic Dionysus. In early performances of the play, Peter made his entrance playing pipes while seated on the back of a goat.\textsuperscript{32} Though soon omitted this explicit connection with Nietzsche’s “amoral, reckless” artist-God would have been clear to contemporary adult audiences. In a modern context J.M. Barrie’s Pan is usually presented as someone with a fear of growing up, and indeed that is how the so-called “Peter Pan Syndrome” is ordinarily presented.\textsuperscript{33} But, when the play and its subsequent book: \textit{Peter and Wendy} (1911) are scrutinized, the fears of the adult characters, particularly the male ones, are striking, not Peter’s. For example Wendy’s father, Mr Darling, is satirised throughout as a successful man, financially and socially, but also a very dull one.

Mr. Darling used to boast to Wendy that her mother not only loved him but respected him. He was one of those deep ones who know about stocks and shares. Of course no one really knows, but he quite seemed to know, and he often said stocks were up and shares were down in a way that would have made any woman respect him.\textsuperscript{34}

His weaknesses lead him to deceive his own children over a triviality, and his subsequent humiliation requires him to live in a dog kennel as a penance. Both he and Peter’s main adversary, James Hook the pirate captain, are consumed with maintaining appropriate social conventions. Mr Darling frets about whether he will be perceived as a good middle-class parent, “No nursery could possibly have been conducted more correctly, and Mr. Darling knew it, yet he sometimes wondered uneasily whether the neighbours talked. He had his position in the city to consider.”\textsuperscript{35} Hook too, as an old Etonian, despises Peter for his lack of “good form,” but is pursued by thoughts of his own

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{32} Barrie, 1.
\bibitem{34} Barrie, 14
\bibitem{35} ibid, 17.
\end{thebibliography}
mortality. It is his, and the other adults,’ fear of death matched against Peter’s lack of concern for it that separates them most crucially. Hook’s life is being ticked away by a clock inside the stomach of a crocodile, as he confesses to Smee his first mate:

“I have often,” said Smee, “noticed your strange dread of crocodiles.”
“Not of crocodiles,” Hook corrected him, “but of that one crocodile”...
“Some day,” said Smee, “the clock will run down, and then he’ll get you.”
Hook wetted his dry lips. “Ay” he said, “that’s the fear that haunts me.”

In contrast to Hook, when he is faced with almost certain death, Peter: “[Stood] erect on the rock... with the smile on his face and a drum beating within him. It was saying, ‘To die will be an awfully big adventure.’”

In the years following the play’s premiere this statement, or versions of it, were in everyday use. Theodore Roosevelt employed it after his son’s airplane was shot down in the latter days of World War I. It was on the lips of Peter Pan’s first producer, Charles Frohman as he went to his death on board RMS Lusitania in 1915. In one form or another, according to Tatar, the phrase contributed considerably to both wartime and pre-war discourse. This is significant as, before the Edwardian period, the archetypical hero confronted peril with the belief that should the worst happen he would be transported to a “better place” of some kind. For Peter, and a growing number of young men, dying itself was enough. Just as art for its own sake had fuelled the activities of Romantics, so death for its own sake, in suitably adventurous circumstances, validated young men on their way to the trenches. Dying in action could thus become a purely secular existential event grounded in neither doctrine nor mythos. Pan, like all children — and all young soldiers marching off to fight an old men’s war — has only the vaguest comprehension of the future, but in addition he also has almost no memory; therefore, no fear. Peter lives entirely in the present so the world is always new for him. He resists growing up because it lacks adventure and unpredictability, not because he is afraid of it. Though a lover of

36. ibid, 74.
37. ibid, 108.
38. ibid.
stories he forgets them almost immediately, and has no interest in learning to read or write himself: “[He] was the only boy on the island who could neither write nor spell; not the smallest word. He was above all that sort of thing.”39 Writing is part of the world of grown-ups with its baggage of rules and history, these have no meaning for Peter as all grown-ups are pirates. A distrust of adults and a desire for a world unconstrained by chains of propriety devised in the past found common cause with many young men of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, including the author of a controversial book published the year before Peter Pan appeared.

Samuel Butler’s semi-autobiographical *The Way of All Flesh* tells the tale of Ernest Pontifex, the son of an autocratic clergyman. Coerced by his family into the joining the church Ernest becomes minister to a poor parish in London. There, he finds his faith thrown into doubt, due largely to his parishioners’ cynicism or disinterest. To this point, Ernest’s story is essentially Butler’s own. Through a series of adversities Ernest is duped out of his fortune, then thrown into jail for attempted sexual assault. On his release he becomes a simple tailor, marries, settles down and has a family, only to discover his wife is a bigamist. Despite his attempts to conform, social structures and conventions fail Ernest at every turn. By comparison, to escape his family, Butler himself fled England to become a successful sheep farmer in New Zealand. The marked difference in response to similar adversities between Ernest and his creator cogently illustrates the male “fight or flight” response as Brizendine describes it:

> Together, testosterone and vasopressin [make a young man’s] brain territorial... and sensitive to putdowns — perceived or real. And when these hormones got mixed with the stress hormone cortisol they supercharged his body and brain, preparing him for the male fight-or-flight response in reaction to challenges to his status or turf.40

Put bluntly, Ernest struggles and loses, while Butler flees, and succeeds. Ernest’s choice to fight is based on social expectation, but Butler’s makes his on the basis of objective assessment and self-knowledge. The latter decision was more difficult than it would be

39. ibid, 92.
40. Brizendine, 33.
today. Fleeing in the nineteenth century carried the stigma of cowardice; heroes did not run away. The fictional Peter Pan — whose flight is literal as well as allegorical — and the actual Samuel Butler thus combine to create the modern anti-hero. Someone who would not fight, except when he chose to, but would rather run away, and possibly never return. He presented a viable alternative to the traditional heroic archetype by refusing to trade his lack of belief in an existing social order for acceptance as a man.

Over the following century more and more young men chose the option of flight from an established adversary in order to face one of their own choosing. They sailed for the South Pacific, took a train to Paris, or hitch-hiked across the USA. Once there, they argued with themselves on paper, wrestled with stone, or paint, or tried to capture sounds which no one else had yet heard. If they lacked the wherewithal to flee in body they could always do so in their imagination, where an unquantifiable number of faraway places exist. Neverland was just such an imaginary land, one which famously could be found: “Second on the right, and straight on till morning.” Barrie created it but, poignantly, felt he could never visit himself as it was only accessible to children: “On these magic shores children at play are forever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more.” Barrie felt the loss of childhood most profoundly, but Neverland allowed him to peer into it vicariously, as the eldest of Peter’s communitas of Lost Boys.

Adolescence, as a term, was not in common parlance when Barrie created his world and the concept barely more so, yet it captures the disorientation of that period in a boy’s life graphically. For instance, it is never clear how old the characters are or what their roles are in the story. Hook aside, the pirates are presented as bloodthirsty adults yet have the same yearning for their mothers as the children. Because no one’s age is spelled out illustrators of Peter and Wendy have portrayed them as being anywhere from about five years old to twelve or thirteen. In the context of the tale; however, only the upper

41. Barrie, 53.
42. ibid, 19.
limit makes sense. “Nothing that happens after we are twelve matters very much”\textsuperscript{43} wrote Barrie. A young child is unlikely to resist adulthood because he does not know what happens then. Unlike a boy on the doorstep of puberty, he has no intimation of what it might mean to him. Peter balks at manhood because it does not seem exciting or interesting, and he senses he will lose those qualities himself. That resistance to growing up will result in failure to experience aspects of life he has no understanding of, like sexuality, means nothing to him. He differs fundamentally in this from the principal female characters in the story: Wendy, Tinkerbell and Tiger Lily. A conversation between Peter and Wendy regarding what is make-believe and what is not in their relationship makes this clear. “‘Peter’ [Wendy] asked, trying to speak firmly, ‘what are your exact feelings to me?’ ‘Those of a devoted son, Wendy.’ ‘I thought so,’ she said, and went and sat by herself at the extreme end of the room.”\textsuperscript{44} Peter’s development is arrested just before the physical and emotional cloudburst of adolescence engulfs him. The rest of us do not have that option, and it’s unlikely many of us would exercise it if we had. However, we are considering the possibility as adults. Would we have felt the same at eleven, twelve, or thirteen years old? And the other qualities Peter represents, the desire to escape, for renewal, the fearlessness, lust for adventure, creativity; is it as easy to sustain those in our maturity as when we were young? Those who make the decision to flee, instead of fight, attempt to nurture those childlike qualities through the turbulence of the teenage years and beyond. So that they, like the man-child in songwriter Bruce Springsteen’s signature composition, can plead to Peter’s companion across the years and over the chasm of adolescence: “I wanna die with you Wendy on the streets tonight in an everlasting kiss.”\textsuperscript{45} Because, though living is better with her than without her, dying remains an awfully big adventure, and is still the greatest adversary of all.

\textsuperscript{43.} ibid, lxx.
\textsuperscript{44.} ibid, 120.
\textsuperscript{45.} Bruce Springsteen, \textit{Born to Run}, by Bruce Springsteen (Laurel Canyon Music Ltd., 1974)
Chapter Eight:
Disembodiment and Agency

We are content with the “given” in sensation’s quest
We have been metamorphosised
from a mad body dancing on hillsides
to a pair of eyes staring in the dark

Section two considered examples of embodied expression and the last chapter discussed what may be gleaned from them regarding masculinities and manhood. To complete this study we will look at disembodied practices, their constraints on artistic agency and what effects these should have on education. To begin the discussion on aggression touched upon in the previous pages will be revisited.

“Now he crawled forward like a snake; and again, erect he darted across a space on which the moonlight played: one finger on his lip and his dagger at the ready. He was frightfully happy.” Violence has forever played its part in the lives of boys and men if only at the level of the schoolyard scrap. Most of the time these tendencies are controlled through codification of some kind, through the rules of sport or war, for instance. They are fragile however and on occasion inapplicable. During the summer of 2011, for example, riots broke out in Vancouver and London. Though different in scale, and separated by almost 5,000 miles, there were clear similarities between the occurrences. They were not unusual in that the participants in both cities were predominately young men. In almost any civil disturbance, irrespective of cause or location, male youths are


2. Barrie, 146.
likely to be in the forefront. In recent times it has also become a convention to wear ski-masks or similar facial covering. For protection — as discussed in previous chapters — or to prevent identification, which seems more likely, or just to imitate how terrorists, criminals and other violent individuals are portrayed in the media. The two events have more striking elements in common. Though the riots had nominal causes in both instances, in fact they appear to have been tenuous pretexts or, more generously, catalysts for unlicensed mayhem. The destructive turmoil in Vancouver followed the final game of the Stanley Cup hockey finals but is clear, both from the use of petrol bombs and postings on social media websites, that whatever the score in the game, the outcome on the streets would have been similar. The events in London followed a comparable pattern. They occurred after the killing of a taxi driver by police in Tottenham but the violence began a full four days later. The riots led to fatalities, injuries, stores looted and property burned but lacked evidence of any clear issue provoking the perpetrators. The continuation of disturbances in areas far from the original incident on succeeding evenings once again indicated that coordinated on-line communication was at the hub of these episodes.3

The employment of Facebook, Twitter and similar programs to organise “Flash Mobs,” that speedily bring large numbers of people to a particular location for a specific purpose, has increased in frequency in the past few years. Most of the time these result in pranks, art events, or peaceful demonstrations of one kind or another. Last summer, however, on these two occasions harmless Flash Mobs became dangerous Flash Riots. Like Robert Oppenheimer and others before him, Mark Zuckerberg and other information technology innovators have, once again, unintentionally illustrated Arendt’s contention that people who make things don’t understand what they are doing. Nor do we, as men, fully understand how close the technologies we use are to the core of our masculinity.

Homo In Machina

Technology seems irretrievably bonded to our sense of maleness. To overhear conversations between men in coffee shops and other public places is to find this repeatedly confirmed. After sport — usually the most common icebreaker — topics are likely to include fast cars, heavy trucks and, increasingly, computer applications and hardware. To Connell this is no surprise:

Western science and technology are culturally masculinized. This is not just a question of personnel, though it is a fact that the great majority of scientists and technologists are men. The guiding metaphors of scientific research, the impersonality of its discourse, the structures of power and communication in science, the reproduction of its internal culture, all stem from the social position of dominant men in a gendered world.4

Moreover to be close to technology, irrespective of one’s ability to use it, appears enough to imbue many of us with confidence and even comfort. To return briefly to the coffee shop. Rather than explanations about what the speaker has produced with his tools, often one hears no more than a catalogue of devices and applications he either owns or is familiar with. Perhaps he is merely situating himself in the discourse, but it is as if possession of these items, proximity to them, or even knowledge of their existence invests him with special power. Perhaps once upon a time it did. The first hominid to wield a burning branch undoubtedly commanded the attention of his peers, but the same cannot, objectively, be said about the teenager in his basement with several terabytes of untried computer software on his hard-drive. From his perspective though that is not the point. They are in his domain and he feels able to exercise power through them if required. Where men are concerned power, whether actual or potential is, as Connell says, fundamental to the attraction of computer technologies:

The marketing of personal computers... has redefined [information technology] as an area of competition and power — masculine, technical, but not working-class. These revised meanings are promoted in the text and graphics of computer magazines, in manufacturers’ advertising that emphasizes “power” (Apple Computer named its laptop the “PowerBook”), and in the booming industry of violent computer games. Middle-class male bodies... now find their power is spectacularly

amplified in the man/machine systems... of modern Cybernetics.\(^5\)

Online communication via message boards, chat rooms and other social media are of particular appeal as they, apparently, enable us to express power from behind highly sophisticated electronic masks. Compared to graffiti writers’ tags or the facial markings of dancers, these are all but impenetrable and create unparalleled levels of expressive security. Pseudonymous user names and passwords allow the manufacture of entire synthetic personalities in either text or graphic form. For example an individual can replace his physical appearance with an on-line avatar, a virtual version of himself. If desired an entire life history may be created from scratch and no one need be any the wiser. The appeal of this to many young men undergoing tumultuous transition, whose lives seem to be controlled by everyone except themselves can be profound. It enables them to interact with the world from a position of power and safety, or so it seems. It also makes possible mischief and deceit on an unprecedented scale, including everything from outright fraud to the phenomenon of the internet “troll.”

In reality whatever power these keyboard warriors possess is being transmitted from great emotional and physical distance. As Illich points out, online communication creates nothing more than phantoms: “digital strings [that] form arbitrary font shapes on the screen, ghosts which appear then vanish.”\(^6\) The words and images thus created are no more than specks of dust on an electronic wind. One that is so detached and so instantaneous the imprint of their maker is negligible. The connection between himself, his work and ultimately his audience is not only distant but disembodied.

**Technological Imperatives**

It is certain that every technological breakthrough exacerbates disembodied agency to a some degree. Tools increase the effectiveness of our engagements, in terms of speed and facility, but they also detach us from both the intimacy of our actions and their consequences. For example two men fighting will grapple, trade blows, scratch, bite and

\[5.\] ibid, 55.

\[6.\] Illich, 118.
otherwise attempt to injure their opponent. However if they are similar in age, health, and experience and — most importantly — if their only weapons are their own bodies, they are unlikely to inflict serious harm on each other. Cuts, bruises and residual aches and pains are the most likely repercussions. Should either of them pick up a rock or branch, though, the situation alters. Tools create physical distance. No longer do the combatants feel the direct impact of bone on bone as a fist meets a jaw. The transition from rocks to knives, to guns to bombs, to chemical weapons is more than one of employing increasingly sophisticated means to visit harm on others. It is also intensifies the separation both between adversaries, and between each of them and their actions.

As technology creates physical distance between assailants so emotional detachment is increased and it becomes harder for them to appreciate each other as individuals. They become nameless, faceless “enemies;” who, in present day conflicts, are frequently not actual combatants at all but misidentified victims or “collateral damage” to use the current dehumanising term. The user’s own relationship with his tools is of equal importance. In many cases a modern soldier’s engagement with weaponry differs little in appearance, process and application to that which he employs playing video games at home on his couch. There is, of course, danger involved in conflict, however his equipment, or that part of it his senses apprehend in combat provides him with no embodied clues to that. Though more complex, it is fundamentally similar in operation to his X-box; and sometimes, at least in terms of on-screen representation, so are the results. When his opponent stood an arm’s length away armed only with his fists, or even a “lo-tech” sword or knife, the situation was different. Physical danger was ever present, yet so were connections with his foe. Being able to see, hear, and perhaps touch him would initiate those connections. There would also be a necessary, not merely aesthetic, analysis of his opponent’s artistry, one’s survival depended on it. This would be revealed in both the craft of his adversary’s weapons and his ability to use them. In combination these constituted the “arts of war,” a term most of us would find embarrassing in connection with modern conflicts, but the phrase “war technologies” we let pass without comment. Implied in the former usage is a mutual acknowledgment and evaluation of individual skill that the latter lacks. As Sennett explains, when skills are
minimised or undetectable disembodiment results: “Skill is a trained practice; modern technology is abused when it deprives its users precisely of that repetitive, concrete, hands-on training. When the head and the hand are separated, the result is mental impairment.”

Sennett believes that technology itself is not the obstacle. Rather it is the failure to integrate it into our lives in a comprehensive and fruitful manner that is at issue. Only when they are used to avoid, or curtail, skill development or replace learning do technologies become problematic. He quotes physicist Victor Weisskopf: “The problem... is that people may let the machines do this learning, the person serving as a passive witness to and consumer of expanding competence, not participating in it.” As an ideal it is hard to disagree with this. Unfortunately the social virtues of technology are frequently presented as being exactly those which Sennett and Weisskopf believe to be counter-productive. For well over a century machines, from electric irons to home computers, have been introduced as labour and time saving solutions. Instruments that would enable us to enjoy our lives, instead of being slaves to the mundane and necessary. Following those other machines — radios, plasma TVs — were introduced to help us appreciate our new-found leisure. In the overwhelmingly masculine world of industrial production too, three factors are always in play: speed, cost and quality. While the latter is desirable, and the explicit objective of skill acquisition, it is also subject to variable contextual influences which make evaluation difficult. Consequently for over two hundred years technological innovation has proved most effective in accelerating output and cutting costs, and that seems unlikely to change soon. “As boys grow up,” says Connell “their masculinity is shaped to fit the needs of corporate work. Masculinity as a whole is reshaped to fit the corporate economy and its its tamed culture.” If this is so, it is easy to see how attitudes toward technology and its applications are conditioned to suit external

7. Sennett, 52.
8. ibid, 44.
socio-economic requirements. Another discouragement to the acquisition of hand skills applies particularly to computer and digitally based technologies, as Crawford points out: “The motivation previously supplied by the intrinsic satisfactions of manual work [has been] replaced with ideology... [the] partition of thinking from doing has bequeathed us the dichotomy of white collar versus blue collar, corresponding to mental versus manual.”

This is both a class and gender driven concern, as Connell points out:

The new information technology requires much sedentary keyboard work, which was initially classified as women’s work (keypunch operators). The marketing of personal computers, however, has redefined some of this work as an area of competition and power — masculine, technical, but not working-class.

Crawford and Sennett share the belief that skills acquired through repetitive manipulation of materials and objects builds not only expressive competence but also an understanding of the constraints and possibilities of agency. Both use learning a musical instrument as an example of this: “I believe the example of the musician sheds light on the basic character of human agency, namely, that it arises only within concrete limits that are not of our making. These limits need not be physical; the important thing is rather that they are external to the self.” In this case the musician’s actions are circumscribed by the physical properties of his instrument and the musical range of the human ear. It is certainly possible to engage with computers as we might a guitar, a lump of clay or a bowl of bread dough but only the most IT savvy among us are able to intuit an entry point. In any case there are signal differences in this regard between digital technologies and those that preceded them.

It has been said that if Archimedes, or another highly intelligent and curious individual from antiquity, was presented with a familiar modern mechanical device, an internal combustion engine or electric vacuum cleaner perhaps, given enough time he

12. Crawford, 64.
could comprehend the principles by which it worked. His own experience and deductive reasoning would enable him to discover this, by looking at, handling it and then thinking about it. However if he was presented with an object containing a circuit board he would be able to divine little or nothing about its operation. From a sensory perspective there are few clues by which he could grasp its meaning or utility. Most of us remain in a similar degree of ignorance to Archimedes when it comes to the machines we use every day. When a basic tacit understanding of our tools is impossible to apprehend they are likely to become disembodied from us. Consequently armed with only partial or incomplete knowledge we also risk becoming disempowered. This is paradoxical because as we have discovered, technology — especially computer technology — is so closely aligned with contemporary masculine notions of power. These according to Connell draw their strength, albeit often indirectly, from the logic of scientific reason:

Science and technology, seen by the dominant ideology as the motors of progress, are culturally defined as a masculine realm. Hegemonic masculinity establishes its hegemony partly by its claim to embody the power of reason and thus represent the interests of the whole society.¹³

Argument is difficult when the opposing position appeals to reason. Yet how reasonable is it to choose disempowerment over practised and knowledgeable control over one’s tools? Connell also notices that for many of us a lack of skilled understanding — as opposed to functional utility — with frequently used electronic devices limits personal instrumentality, leading to feelings of helplessness. “It seems that the embodied rationality of the technology has squeezed out the sense of agency, and left the world controlled by chance or esoteric forces.”¹⁴ There is a certain irony in realising that the value of possessing a deep familiarity with one’s materials and implements was understood by William Morris and others a century and more ago. They were also aware that the alternative to such lack was not necessarily to stand trembling in the face of fate or unseen powers. “Never forget the material you are working with and try always to use it for doing what it can do best; if you feel yourself hampered by the material in which

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14. ibid, 177.
you are working, instead of being helped by it, you have so far not learned your
business.”¹⁵ Determining what can be “done best” and devising alternatives to being
“hampered” by one’s lack of ability in a particular medium are Morris’s salient points and
ones frequently missed, particularly in the rush to accept and employ digital media in art
practices.

The Perils of Pixelisation
Few art forms have escaped the past quarter century’s onslaught of technological change.
The visual arts have been markedly affected with many craft-skills, such as film based
photography and various printing processes, becoming commercially marginalised or
irrelevant. In itself this is not a novel occurrence, all media flourish and decline. Stained
glass and ceramic tile work are still practised, though neither possess the primacy among
crafts they once did. Change, in all its forms, is something artists are inclined to strive for
and embrace. However this instance of it has deeper implications than most, in that it
alters not only expressive methodologies themselves but, to an as yet undetermined
extent, the expectations and interests of those drawn to them. For example Sennett and
Crawford claim there is now a fundamental division between the physical/affective aspect
of a skill, and its intellectual counterpart. Sennett argues this schism happened long
before the advent of computers, they have merely emphasised it: “The blueprint signalled
[a] decisive disconnection between head and hand in design: the idea of a thing made
complete in conception before it is constructed.”¹⁶

In fact the separation is several millennia old. According to Giorgio Vasari’s —
probably apocryphal — anecdote, the young Giotto was able to draw a perfect circle

Teaching the Visual Arts* (New York, USA: Teachers College Press, Columbia University
1990) 284.

¹⁶. Sennett, 42.
using only a brush. The question as to why the artist should want to draw a perfect circle, and also why the Pope and others should be so amazed by the feat is left unasked. This is because, to any educated Renaissance man, it was all too obvious. Giotto was replicating an idealised platonic form. This was then believed to be the principle task of the artist, and to accomplish it a mental blueprint of the ideal circle — or female beauty, or God, or anything else — was required before the brush touched the paper. As Sennett says, in this view the result of the action must be conceived prior to its physical execution. This is plainly at odds with art practices elsewhere and as they have been discussed here. At bottom the debate is between classicists interpreting prescribed goals in visual form, and expressionists believing that anything that is of value must have emerged out of an individual’s working process. To the latter group being able to draw a perfect circle is akin to a dog walking on two legs, a neat trick but of no real importance. The discussion has entertained theorists for centuries but until recently it was an almost completely academic conversation. As much as a Florentine artist like Giotto might have held idealised forms in his head, he was still required to execute them with his hand. Any actual division between the two was theoretical. However computer technology has realised what classicists down the centuries had been unable to fully achieve. Using vector based drawing tools, like those used in CAD (computer aided design) applications, anybody can “draw” a circle, and the chances are it will be even more perfect than Giotto’s. What is more they are able to do so without years of practice.

When “forms are resolved in advance of their use” says Sennett, then an artist loses the prospect of “embracing the incomplete... If CAD does not cause this problem, the program sharpens it: the algorithms draw nearly instantly a totalized picture.” This leap towards completion also erases the artist’s opportunity — through drawing, looking,


18. Sennett, 43.
then redrawing — to learn his craft and improve as a designer.

When CAD first entered architectural teaching, replacing drawing by hand, a young architect at MIT observed that “when you draw a site, when you put in the counter lines and the trees, it becomes ingrained in your mind. You come to know the site in a way that is not possible with the computer... You get to know a terrain by tracing and retracing it, not by letting the computer ‘regenerate’ it for you.” 19

In place of these acquired skills comes, not additional creative time but a requirement to learn the requisite software and keep pace with its upgrades. As a consequence there are growing indications that a facility with applications is becoming equated with tacitly obtained design knowledge. Crawford cites an example:

One of the hottest things at the shopping mall right now is a store called Build-a-Bear, where children are said to make their own teddy bears... what the kid actually does is select the features and clothes for the bear on a computer screen, then the bear is made for him. Some entity has leaped in ahead of us and taken care of things already, with a kind of solicitude. The effect is to preempt cultivation of embodied agency. 20

Aside from the complexity of their respective GUIs (graphical user interface), there is little difference between the process the child undergoes in choosing clothes for his bear and that of a graphic designer selecting “brushes” in Adobe Photoshop. Both are constrained by alternatives imposed by an external “entity.” Though one may be five years old and the other fifty they are essentially using similar operating equipment, the ubiquitous monitor, keyboard, mouse or touch screen. The accountant across the street will be doing the same, as is the librarian, and the musician. The time each of them once spent deepening his understanding of a craft and broadening his specific skills with its particular utensils and elements has been usurped by the need for competency in a generically used commercial computer system and its programs. The exclusive but identity rich sense of communitas generated by feelings of shared skill with like-minded fellows is also dissipated. The ubiquity of computer technology imposes an orthodoxy of approach on all tasks irrespective of their end result. The reason for this, as Crawford

19. ibid, 40.

explains, is that we are forced to engage with them in a logical, but highly prescribed, non-intuitive fashion:

With electronic equipment, the facts of physics operate on such a scale that they do not present themselves to immediate experience for the user. The computer “interface” adds another layer of abstraction, as it screens the user also from the human generated logic of the program running the software. Logic, like physics, is something hard and unyielding. 21

In the past tools were, more or less, craft specific and, as illustrated in section two, mastery of them a vital part of an artist’s sense of identity. Application developers understandably tend to use familiar terminology culled from traditional skills, but words like “tools,” “palettes,” “swatches,” and “brushes,” carry expectations as to use. Repetition can assign alternative meanings which our understanding accommodates, and GUIs can be manufactured that are more physically engaging than keyboards and mice, but our bodies are not fooled. We cannot handle and manipulate these simulacra in anything like the way we do their source objects.

The uniformity of computer technology’s interface extends to imaging. Whether the device is a monitor, a camera or a television the picture will be rendered in pixels. Depending on resolution they will vary in number or size but the form of the small squares themselves never alters. In comparison with the range of papers and pigments an visual artist working in traditional media is familiar with the pixel represents a kind of expressive tyranny. This can be illustrated by comparing digital photography with one aspect of its film-based predecessor. The latter’s emulsion possesses a characteristic “grain” created by the silver halides suspended within it. This will vary depending on the film’s speed and manufacture, it can also be manipulated by adjusting exposure and development chemistry. Discussions among photographers often revolve around the granular qualities — size, shape and overall effect — of one film over another and how resilient or accommodating each might be to modification. Digital photography provides no such expressive flexibility. One may assign different values to pixels, within the range permitted by the software, but that is all. It can be argued that this is a small price to pay

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21. ibid, 60.
for the advantages digital imaging offers: being able to alter colour and tonal values instantly, creating seamless montages and so on. However few of these properties are actually new, computers merely make them easier to accomplish. Moreover the limitations can be readily seen in the results, particularly in the CGI (computer generated imagery) that is so familiar in modern films. While a good deal of creativity is evident at the concept and story-telling level, in execution the animated characters have a similar surface sheen. They look, in fact, as if they emanated from the same source. Which, as most production companies use similar applications, in a sense they did. Whether a circle, or a rendered cartoon character, “perfection” arguably lacks affective points of contact for the audience. As poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen understands, we need to be able to grasp the flaws in an object in order to divine its meaning

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.²²

From an artist’s perspective digital media’s boundaries are, at least at this point in their development, limited by a rigidity of form preset by others. To exaggerate somewhat, when image making on a computer is not a sophisticated “paint-by-numbers-picture, it is an elaborate “connect-the-dots” puzzle. This is evident when we look at some of the expressive gestures of past masters. Though Auguste Renoir’s assertion “I paint with my prick”²³ is assumed to be metaphorical (or a mistranslation,) a variety of body parts have been used by artists to execute their work. The Tang period scholar Zhang Xu (AD 675–759) for example was probably the most celebrated exponent of the wild cursive style of calligraphy. Xu’s alcohol inspired brushwork breaks all formal boundaries and skirts total incoherence, yet its aesthetic qualities have rarely been matched. McNair quotes a near contemporary of Xu who describes his working method:

Xu would drink wine and then execute his cursive script, wielding the brush and shouting, or dip his head into the ink and write with it, so that

the whole world referred to him as Crazy Zhang. After he had sobered up, he would look at what he had done. He pronounced it demonic and prodigious, and he was never able to reproduce it.²⁴

Zhang’s is obviously an extreme case. Yet when it is juxtaposed with the minimalist motions that are necessary, not optional, to operate a mouse or keyboard we can appreciate how intangible and distant those actions are from their results. Also how disembodied the artist’s own agency is. Digital technology dilutes expressive potential — and thereby tacit learning — just as water dilutes paint.

**Action and Education**

It would be facile, futile and unjust to play the Luddite and condemn every manifestation of computer technologies and digital imaging in the arts out of hand. For example it has been responsible for an unsurpassed broadening of interest among the public in previously specialised areas such as typography and animation. So much so that, what might be termed, cottage industries in font design have emerged. The groundswell of popularity in graphic novel production is also largely down to the availability and, relatively, inexpensive cost of home computers. In fact prompted by the ubiquity of phone texting and use of online social networks the practice of writing has increased considerably in recent years. Generally, since the turn of this century, Canada and other nations have seen marked upswings in graduates in the field of visual and performing arts and communication; at least in comparison to the humanities and other areas of the social sciences. Even more dramatic is the gender split between male and female students. While young women dominate fields such as education, in the visual arts the balance is closer to even.²⁵ That these changes are being driven in large part by access to computer technology is highly likely. It is almost certainly the case that many people, particularly young men, who felt excluded from participating in the arts due to perceived lack of hand

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²⁴. McNair, 22.

skills, now have the desire and confidence to do so. This surely cannot be a bad thing, can it?

The reply, unsurprisingly, is yes and no. In providing ready access to information and introductions to previously unconsidered areas of interest the answer must be a resounding “no.” However, as noted, the acquisition of knowledge consists of more than being able to follow instructions in a user manual, and embodied skills more than moving one’s finger on a mouse. Moreover, so long as accomplishments on a computer are circumscribed by the capacities of their applications, they provide at best an illusion of personal power as no real sense of agency is generated. This is ironic because, as we have seen, a perceived relationship to power is central to most men’s understanding of masculinity. The connection however is weaker than most of us realise. Expressive agency in modern technology is largely manifested in the actions of its creators. Unfortunately computer science belongs in the narrow spectrum of knowledge that Polanyi identified as lacking a tacit dimension. There are indubitably intellectual challenges in their field which computer scientists are passionate about, but there is no embodied experience. Nothing to touch, or listen to, nothing to look at — except to decode. For most human activities, however, that is simply not the case. The Hobbesian phrase “knowledge is power” is a cultural truism today, yet knowledge that lacks the ability to exert that power — which is the meaning of agency — is all but useless. According to Crawford we risk becoming a society of generalists with no underlying skill-set enabling us to act with certitude or confidence: “[C]raftsmanship entails learning to do one thing really well, while the ideal of the new economy is to be able to learn new things, celebrating potential rather than achievement.”\(^{26}\) In order to address this we need to consider not how to acquire more information, computerisation has allowed us to become rather good at that, but rather how to stimulate agency. It is necessary to return to the previous chapter for a moment and, once again, consider the term immanence as an immersive, engaged locus of action.

\(^{26}\) Crawford, 19.
We bring to an activity our pre-existing knowledge and a collection of affective characteristics, but more is required of us. To achieve immanence we need to fully engage our sensory attentiveness. As art educator Arthur Efland writes this was recognised by certain nineteenth century teachers such as Francis Wayland Parker:

Attention involves the senses. We attend by looking, listening, and touching. Parker also believed that attending stimulates “intense acts of imagination” and that attending makes one want to express, while expressing makes one want to attend more. The modes of expression were gesture, voice, speech, music, making, modeling, painting, drawing, and writing.27

It is noticeable that, writing aside, these are highly embodied practices that, if not intuitive, then readily apprehensible by a novice of any age. Parker also introduces imagination as a quality, or perhaps consequence, of immanence. Appeals to the imagination have frequently been met with nervousness, particularly among educators. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, thought its influence should be restricted.28 Comenius spoke of “vain imaginings,”29 Mary Wollstonecraft lobbied for fiction that would “regulate the imagination,”30 and John Dewey wrung his hands over potential “mind wandering and wayward fancy.”31 It is as if Imagination were the bad sibling of the mind, one that cannot be expected to behave in company so must be confined to its room while the more compliant child Reason is allowed to remain downstairs with the grown-ups. Nonetheless, in spite of its delinquency, imagination is assumed to be fundamental to creative expression and tolerated accordingly. Whether, as Parker suggests, there is direct

27. Efland, 168.
causality between attentiveness and imaginative agency is moot. Certainly many artists assume that to be case and, to a certain extent, it may account for their inability to fully explain what they are about to do prior to beginning a work, and what they have done when it is completed. To Merleau-Ponty the imagination is not something vague or ethereal but irrevocably connected to the body, in both a physical and analogical sense:

For the imaginary is much nearer to, and much farther away from, the actual — nearer because it is in my body as a diagram of the life of the actual, with all its pulp and carnal obverse exposed to view for the first time... And the imaginary is [also] much farther away from the actual because the painting is an analogue or likeness only according to the body; because it does not offer the mind an occasion to rethink the constitutive relations of things.\textsuperscript{32}

Here the imagination is, to use Benjamin’s metaphor at the conclusion of chapter four, as much, or more a part of the “surgeon’s” toolkit, with its physically diminished distance, than it is the “magician’s.” It enables the artist to penetrate his interior and extricate a likeness, even though it may not be recognisable as such either to himself or others. As Merleau-Ponty says that type of analysis the mind sets aside until later. Crawford, quoting, Iris Murdoch, also articulates the fundamental corporeal quality of imagination during immanence:

\begin{quote}
[G]etting outside [his] own head is the task the artist sets [himself], and this is the mechanic’s task, too. Both, if they are good, use their imagination “not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real.”\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

By externalising products of his imagination in this fashion the artist makes concrete parts of himself he was unaware of and exposes them to others. As objects outside themselves they tend to perceive his work as substantial in form but make-believe or fantasy in concept. To the artist however, the relationship is reversed, the greater reality is not the piece he has created but the process he went through while doing so. This almost always contributes to confusion, in meaning if not perception, between the parties

\textsuperscript{32} Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 126.

\textsuperscript{33} Crawford, 100.
concerned. Barrie hints at this in an amusing aside: “The difference between [Peter] and the other boys at such a time was that they knew it was make-believe, while to him make-believe and true were exactly the same thing. This sometimes troubled them, as when they had to make-believe that they had had their dinners.”

**Formalising the Vernacular**

Inducing a state of immanence in order to render the imaginative is, arguably, the definition of embodied expression. The virtues and difficulties of the process and it’s practices have been explored and weighed in preceding chapters. Whether they should be formally encouraged however, particularly in young men, and if so how, is a consideration for educators. To conclude this discussion we therefore look at the issues involved from the educational perspective.

One of the key words in the title of this thesis has been left largely unaddressed to this point. In chapter two it was stated that vernacular forms were selected for exploration because they reflect the existential communitas that is integral to the lives of young men. This not the only reason vernacularity is important however. One of the major problems teaching arts, crafts or any skill based subject in a collective setting is that the results are public and immediately comparable on an aesthetic basis. For example, at a young age children recognise who the “good draw-ers” are in their class, consequently they are inclined to lose interest in drawing themselves. This continues through higher education and beyond, as Sennett notes:

> Enlightenment through practice — or as modern educators have it, learning by doing — raises the question of one’s talent to act and so the possibility of learning little, because one is not good at actually doing the work... Daring to fail evinces a certain strength; one is willing to test why things don’t or do work out, reckon limits on skill one can do nothing about. In this light, learning by doing, so comforting a nostrum in progres-

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34. Barrie, 83.
sive education, may in fact be a recipe for cruelty. The craftsman’s work-
shop is indeed a cruel school if it activates our sense of inadequacy.  

At art school or university level this “cruelty” frequently becomes formalised in the class critique. This evaluative process, where each student’s work is reviewed and discussed in their presence by their peers and faculty, is one of the few consistent elements on college curricula according to James Elkins. The intent is to provide constructive criticism in a public forum which is no bad thing. Art, after all, is required to impose itself on the world and the artist must be prepared to deal with the response, both negative and positive. In practice, however, Elkins says:

> Ulterior purposes, rhetorical questions, and dishonest judgements are not uncommon in critiques. It is not judgement itself that is “evil”... but the underlying intentions. There are many reasons why panelists might have axes to grind in critiques, and since critiques are avowedly on the side of good, destructive impulses have to be hidden.

The effect of this on an individual student may not be so different to that of the six-year-old who’s work is displayed on the wall of his homeroom. The latter is unlikely to be subjected to the verbal barbs of his cohort; nevertheless seeing his own work in the context of that his classmates still inevitably leads to value judgements on both his part and theirs. Part of the problem, according to Efland and other educators, is “the age-old belief that artistic aptitude [is] a special gift; and as long as it [is] seen as special, its place in general education [is] vulnerable.” This view, that certain abilities are innate, therefore essentially unteachable — though not non-appraisable — is one the establishment of alternative expressive practices into the classroom would address.

> Foundationally the introduction of vernacular forms at elementary and secondary school level would eventually alter the societal definition of what art can be, while simultaneously broadening individual choice as to skills. The person who feels inadequate

35. Sennett, 96.
37. Efland, 191.
wielding a brush or throwing a pot may be quite comfortable rebuilding a bicycle or making a sandcastle. There seems to be no obvious reason why he should not have those options. A vernacular curriculum is also able to deal with Sennett and Efland’s point on the widespread perception that artistic talents are inborn, rather than a matter of industry. Because these forms arrive in the classroom with little in the way of cultural credibility or canon of masterworks, aesthetic expectations on everyone’s part would be reduced. However as teachers are going to be making assessments based on students’ application to a process, rather than on its results, this is an advantage. There is no necessity for display or discussion of completed work but should there be so the variety of media, materials and forms involved would make direct comparison difficult. This approach is unlikely to appease those who require evaluation based on measurable data, but in the arts that is already almost always the case. At a more senior level if existing communitas relationships are integrated into teaching methodologies, presentation and critique are likely to become less emotionally brutal affairs, as Turner explains.

Spontaneous communitas is richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones. Life in “structure” is filled with objective difficulties: decisions have to be made, inclinations sacrificed to the wishes and needs of the group, and physical and social obstacles overcome at some personal cost. Spontaneous communitas has something “magical” about it. Subjectively there is in it the feeling of endless power.38

For a student that power will be expressed with the support of his confrères. Instead of feeling vulnerable and isolated he will part of an exclusive group, one able to challenge “structure” — as personified by instructors, school and faculty — and be challenged by it.

Not all qualities identified here with masculine expression can be indulged in the classroom and academy. Ephemerality of work and territoriality, at least as the latter applies to media, are already accommodated, and adversarial propositions can be entertained in certain forms, though extreme social-transgression would likely not be. Graffiti writing as an illegal activity could not be countenanced but using sprays and mops to

38. Turner, 139.
produced tags, throw-ups and pieces in an educational context could. Similarly tattooing fellow students in class-time is unlikely to find instant acceptance, but there’s no reason why using the tools to practice on fruit or other inanimate surfaces should not be. So far as overall process is concerned, outside a performative context, most instances of the mask would probably be unacceptable also. It is, after all, necessary for instructors to know who to identify with a piece of work. The school, college or university is very much an establishment structure in Turner’s sense. By his definition it is therefore resistant to change — though perhaps less so than similar social institutions. This is inevitable and even desirable. Young people, perhaps young men especially, require traces to pull against and schools are able to supply more than most. Hook, Peter Pan’s adversary, with his English public school background and insistence on good form above all else, is very much a metaphor for education as an engine of social order. Peter despises both order and learning, therefore Hook is his foe, but after the pirate captain is killed: “[Peter] had one of his dreams that night, and cried in his sleep for a long time, and Wendy held him tight.”39 This aspect of education may be disliked but it is necessary, even those who detest it most acknowledge that albeit unconsciously.

To centralise embodied practices within art education mainly it involves a shift in perspective. As we have discovered art is something transcendent for the viewer but immanent for the artist. Those who advocate on its behalf — within the academy and outside it — tend to be viewers. Change can take place if there is an adjustment in methodological emphasis: from the transcendent to the immanent and from the aesthetic to the expressive. However, it is worth asking why we should bother, who benefits from such an overhaul? These alternative approaches are already happening out in the streets, where there are no lack of practitioners and growing audiences. Should schools and colleges have any role in this process at all? Perhaps not. It is true that young men and women will find ways to express themselves whatever the social or cultural situation. However according to Crawford we live at “this weird moment of growing passivity and depen-

ence,” one where the implements we utilize at work and play do not encourage the depth of expression that we are capable of and perhaps require. That being the case it prompts a further question: is it not, therefore, the responsibility of education to act as a cultural counterweight? Many young men do build a praxis that provides them with a means of expressing their identity in a fully embodied way; through tagging, inking bodies, experimenting with chants, dancing in the street or something else, but many more do not. Ultimately we must ask ourselves whether a young man who picks up a brick in the heat of the moment and hurls it through a store window has made a worthwhile decision. Or would it be more fruitful for him to pick up the brick, feel its weight, warmth and texture in his hand, then be drawn to myriad colours residing within it and ask himself: “What can I make with this?”

40. Crawford, 32.
Conclusion

This dissertation’s intention was to discover qualities embodied within vernacular art practices that enable young men to develop a sense of identity and personal agency. To do this we initially distinguished art practice from aesthetics as a principal defining factor, and created generous boundaries as to what counted as art: painting a picture, arranging a vase of flowers, building a wall, all qualified as practices, as do all creative processes that possess physical, intellectual and affective aspects. It followed that these should be considered activities rather than occupations, and artistry interpreted as an action not a career. The notion of embodiment and what it means in different contexts was discussed, then established as an ineffable and inarticulate state of immanence inherent to the arts and other practices, one which is most evident within actions performed by artists during the creation of an object or event.

We moved on to consider masculinities, and decided that they are a partly inherited and partly constructed aspect of personal identity, solely determined by neither genetics nor socialization, but an interaction of both. Finally, the value of existential communitas as a framework by which young men collectively manufacture identities and develop tools to facilitate expressive agency, was identified. Section two went on to describe in detail examples of embodied masculine expression within vernacular practices. These practices included: graffiti writing, tattooing, sports spectator arts and street dancing. From within them four interrelated qualities important in the construction of masculine identities were extracted and amplified in section three. They consisted of the male mask, expressive transience and the ephemerality of results, territoriality as an
instance of both place and materiality, and the need for adversaries. The concluding chapter dealt with disembodiment, particularly as it relates to technology, and finally whether there is a place for formal education in practices which possess socially transgressive aspects.

In *Raising Cain*, his historical study of blackface performance in the USA, W.T. Lhamon Jr. writes of socially marginalised young men:

There are... at least three reasons why [these] groups... give fugitive and fleeting rather than monumental form to their expression. First, they are continually emerging. Second, they are excluded from the technologies of representation, curation, and production (all three of which purport to enable permanence). Third, they reject this technology.¹

This is almost always the position of a young male artist working within the constrictions of his liminality, resisted from above and pushed from below by his younger brothers. It is his time, and it is brief. The impulse is to act but he feels squeezed into society’s margins, so when he does so it is often in haste, occasionally with anger, resentment, or uncertainty, but almost always with humour. His agency lacks skill, since he has had little time to learn, and he compensates with enthusiasm. He and his peers are the Lords of Misrule, they have always been with us, and most likely always will. Their rejection of technology, on the other hand, is not at all as evident as Lhamon suggests. In myriad forms computerisation is endemic throughout contemporary society. It will not go away. Open-minded conversations about its effects involving young men are required. The all too frequent default response that innovation equals advancement needs to be questioned more often than it is.

Educators can offer young men much, but they offer us even more. For example in seeking out of opportunities for collective support and expression among their peers, they remind us that the visual arts tend to be individualistic, even lonely, activities. It is not a choice, but a requirement, that leads us to interact with others of similar age and interest in practices that are inevitably exclusive. Formal education has tolerated, rather than encouraged, this process; policies of inclusivity and the fostering of broader societal

¹. Lhamon, 74.
norms mitigate against it. This is understandable, the role of Captain Hook is an necessary one, as Peter Pan came to understand. However by paying more attention not just to what young men do but to how they do it we may learn much. For example, among the musical groups that emerged from Britain during the closing decades of the last century, there was hardly one without at least one member who did not attend art school. Music was not part of the curriculum, yet hundreds of male art students became musicians instead of designers, illustrators or architects. As art educators we should try to understand why. What was it about the environment and experience that lead to such an explosion of unexpected activity?

Based on the vernacularity of the practices described here and elsewhere educators should also begin a broader discussion on the importance of arts process; one that considers praxis an parallel framework to aesthetics, and equally worthy of study. It was reassuring to discover during the writing of this thesis that a discourse on the importance of embodied skills in education is underway. It is timely. Both Richard Sennett and Matthew Crawford, in *The Craftsman* and *The Case for Working with Your Hands* respectively, lucidly articulate the potential problems for a society when more than 90 percent of high school students report their guidance counselors encourage them to go to college.² Universities are designed to teach people how to think, not to teach them how to do, yet the world surely needs educated “doers,” or agents, at least as much as educated thinkers. As publisher and politician Ron Unz points out, this is an issue with considerable ramifications:

> [T]he typical professional background of a member of China’s political elite is engineering; they were taught to build things. Meanwhile, a remarkable fraction of America’s political leadership class attended law school, where they were trained to argue effectively and to manipulate. Thus, we should not be greatly surprised that while China’s leaders tend to build, America’s leaders seem to prefer endless manipulation, whether of words, money, or people.³

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² Crawford, 143.

Conversely, a society led by agents instead of thinkers risks illustrating Arendt’s assertion that those who make things are unable to perceive the consequences of what they do. A balance, or dialogue, similar to that between artist and audience, must surely exist — one person makes and the other assigns value. It seems clear however that agency must precede evaluation and currently that is rarely the case.

Most of us do little that is “by our own hand” any more. We can even append that most ubiquitous and personal graphic flourish, the “signature,” to a document from a JPG file. No one seems to bother too much about the consequences should this file be copied, nor that execution more than representation provides its authenticity. That a manifest need exists within our species for embodied activities is empirically clear. One evening each week at a stationery store on Vancouver’s Main Street a crowd gathers. It consists mainly of men and women in their twenties and thirties who have come there to type. Not to learn how to type — most have grown up with computers — but to experience the physical sensation of typing: hitting a key and watching it print a letter through an inked ribbon onto a piece of paper. The store owns a dozen or so old typewriters, most have broken keys and other mechanical problems, but that does not matter to people whose only knowledge of the machines comes from reading about them. For several hours the sound of tapping keys and ringing carriage returns mingle with laughter and gasps of delight.

We need this kind of visceral connection to natural processes. Until recently our lives were filled with activities like typing. For example, until recently publishing a book or magazine involved many people before it even reached the print shop: writers, editors, layout artists, illustrators, photographers, typesetters and more. Each possessed a sense and responsibility to their craft that was respected by their peers. Today publishing still involves many people but they are collectively referred to as “content providers.” There is nothing particular about being a content provider, nothing that connects one to an art, craft, or skill. It is through embodied activities like these, however, that we apprehend our place in a natural process. The totality of attention represented by the human will acting upon and within nature, as Schopenhauer described it, allows us entry into the state we
have identified as immanence. There — and perhaps only there — do we not only see the world in a grain of sand, we realise we are the grain of sand, and perhaps also the world itself.

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