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Written in Skin

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Christiansen, Steen Ledet

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WRITTEN IN SKIN: SUICIDEGIRLS

Steen Christiansen

The female body, as opposed to the authentic male body, is considered vulnerable as sexually accessible, susceptible to penetration and exploitation (Benthien 2002, 127). This is no less the case for the nude female body, which is transformed into an object instead of a subject – a spectacle for the desiring gaze of the male spectator. However, I will argue that there are strategies and spaces where the cultural production of the nude female is negotiated and normative borders are crossed and transgressed. The alternative culture website *Suicidegirls.com* represent such a space and offers such a strategy, through the use of tattoos and other alterations of the body and the skin.

Skin

Skin, as Caudia Benthien points out, has often been seen as the border between self and the world, and as the only boundary where subjects can encounter each other (Benthien 2002, 1). However, what interests me here, is not so much the materiality of the skin, but instead the symbolic boundary established by the skin, especially as it is given to cultural and historical change. Historically speaking, skin and its markings have been seen as representative of the inner character of a person. Smooth, unblemished skin has been the desired norm for most of Western history. Blemishes, flaws and scars are markings of bad character and psychological failings.

Skin is important, because it is perceived as that which maintains the integrity of the body, keeping it safe from the outside world. At the same time, the skin also “mediates the world by mingling with it” in Steven Connor’s words (Connor 2004, 29). The skin is not just something we display to the world, but also something with which we perceive the world. Our skin is therefore more intimate than is perhaps immediately obvious. The wholeness of the skin is important to us, because we feel that the rest of our sense organs are mostly made up skin – it is through our skin that we connect with life, the

universe and everything (Connor 2004, 34). Any breach of our skin is a danger as it exposes us to the outside, yet at the same time, the skin should not be imagined as “possessing an inside which is on the other side of its outside” but rather “a complex manifold” impoverished by “simple alternatives of inside and outside” (Connor 2004, 37).

The skin is, rather, a site of encounter, a place where touches, traces and markings are negotiated in a productive struggle of meaning. We constantly inscribe meaning to what touches our skin, whether it is a lover's touch, a creepy look that makes our skin crawl, the scar of a childhood accident or the trace of needle. Such interruptions of the skin, are always filled with meaning and signification, to the extent that the skin constantly undergoes a semioticization: we always try to understand the signs left upon our skin, and the markings left on the skin are always read as culturally significant signs. The skin and the gaze thus exist in a close relationship of meaning-making.

Gaze

The gaze, although immaterial, certainly also leaves its mark on the skin of the other. The act of looking must be understood as performative in Judith Butler's sense of the word. We know from Laura Mulvey onward that pleasure in looking has always been considered active on the male part, and passive on the female's part (Mulvey 1999, 837). Not only does this act of looking turn women into erotic spectacles, emphasizing their to-be-looked-at-ness as Mulvey states it, it also produces a certain type of femininity and female subject position.

What is more significant is that Mulvey also turns the male gaze back on itself and points out that the image of woman as erotic object is necessary to complete the male subject; that it is only by possessing the female object that the male subject is fully a subject. It is because of this male lack that the male gaze becomes one of control as well as desire. The male gaze thus exerts power over the female by only allowing it to exist in the cultural space as an object – the female is objectified as erotic spectacle and is therefore bound by the patriarchal culture's phallogocentric conventions.

In the case of the pinup girl, we find a very specific case of this male ascription of meaning to the female body. Anette Kuhn points

out that:

The pinup's singular preoccupation with the female body is tied in with the project of defining the 'true' nature of female sexuality. Femaleness and femininity are constructed to a set of bodily attributes reducible to a sexuality which puts itself on display for a masculine spectator. In these ways the pinup invites the spectator to participate in a masculine definition of femininity. (Kuhn 1994, 43)

The gazer and the gazed-upon thus enter into a complex relationship, which negotiates issues of subjectivity and objectification. This operation partakes in what Judith Butler discusses about the production of the female subject, and is a place where her notion (which she borrows from Louis Althusser) of the 'bad subject' comes into play. The operative word in the Kuhn quotation – properly italicized by Kuhn herself – is 'true'. The typical pinup images as seen in magazines from *Playboy* and onward, reproduce a distinctive view of female sexuality as not only passive, but as sexually accessible, as I noted already at the beginning concerning nude female skin.

My argument is, that by problematizing the notion of nude skin, the suicide girls produce a new territory for themselves, a territory not only contingent on a transgression of cultural borders, but also contingent on injecting their nude skin with a different meaning, one they may control themselves, through a material and oppositional practice of an interpellation of pinup conventions, gender categorization and sexual practices. This material practice is both one of semioticization and one of performativity: it is an injection and interjection of ink in their skin.

Ink

The ink of the tattoo needle does not paint upon my skin, nor does it penetrate my skin to settle below it. Instead, it becomes part of my skin and so a part of me. In that becoming, the tattoo exceeds mere signification and becomes a mark that something real has happened – a something which is both a sign and a denial of the sign (Connor 2004, 53). Mindy Fenske argues in her book *Tattoos in American Visual Culture* that tattoos are not simply images placed on the skin, but that these images generate and participate in discourse (Fenske 2007, 4).

Tattoos thus help in the production of subjects – in the case of the suicide girls, I will argue that they produce ‘bad subjects’.

While skin is usually in the background, “tattoos and other markings push it in the foreground” (Connor 2004, 39), because we notice the transgression against the purity and wholeness of the skin that we have come to take for granted. This also goes for pinup images – especially so, I would argue – despite the fact that we see nothing but skin in these images. In fact, we do not see the skin of the nude woman: we see sexual invitation and the to-be-looked-at-ness that Mulvey discusses. What happens when we encounter the tattoo, is that we are interpellated by the tattoo and forced to reconsider our (male) possessive gaze’s production of the female body as sexual object. Unlike plastic surgery and diets, which also discipline the body according to a specific (often unspoken) ideal, tattoos are still considered a mark of deviance. Tattoo is close to taboo and has often been understood in that sense.

As Judith Butler points out, “the very contours of ‘the body’ are established through markings that seek to establish specific codes of cultural coherence” (Butler 2007, 178). A tattoo is a subversive mark, because it breaches the specific codes. We need to keep in mind, however, the point that Christine Braunberger makes: a tattoo is a mark of excess and “when a woman’s body is a sex object, a tattooed woman’s body is a lascivious sex object” (Braunberger 2000, 1). I agree that tattoos can serve as heightening the sexual image of a woman, but we also need to distinguish between the ‘feminine’ tattoos of flowers, butterflies, unicorns and so forth that have been incorporated into mainstream pinup conventions, and the more elaborate and less femininely coded tattoos so often found on the Suicide Girls’ website.

The significance of the tattoo, becomes clear when we keep in mind Butler points about Mary Douglas’ conception of taboo: the boundaries of the body become the limit of the social. In the case of the suicide girls, the tattoos serve as a challenge to conventional conceptions of beauty. Just as gender usually conceals its own construction, so do beauty ideals tend to be unspoken until they are breached. The suicidegirls, by invoking the conventions of traditional pinups, deconstruct the power relation of the male gaze and the conventional image of the pinup is disrupted. One suicidegirl presents of herself as follows:

James is on the road less travelled. She defines herself and allows others to be themselves and amazingly creates a wonderful community full of true individuals. To know her is to love her... and to love yourself. (<<http://suicidegirls.com/girls/James/>>

This is how suicide girl James describes herself in her profile on suicidegirls.com. This brief description is one of the ways that the models of the website can use to establish their own identity and provide readers with a sense of the person of whom they are looking at pictures. As can be seen from this brief description, James views herself as different from most people (“the road less travelled”), but emphasizes that she does not judge people, nor want them to behave in a specific way or be anything other than what they are (“allows others to be themselves”). This creates a sense of idealizing individual freedom, which will in turn create “a wonderful community of true individuals”.

The word “true” here is significant and overdetermined with meaning. One sense of the word could be in conjunction with individuals, so that the community established around James is filled with true individuals as opposed to other (presumably more mainstream) communities which are then “false individuals”, indicating a sense of conformism in mainstream society. Another sense of the word could be that it is necessary to accept and respect other people’s decisions in order to be a true individual, or that “true” is simply meant to indicate a separation from what is seen as false individuality, originating in mainstream society but not indicating any sense of connection to the sense of community also established in her profile.

What this shows us, is that the suicide girls see themselves as more than simply erotic spectacles due to the community-driven nature of the site, where the models knowingly display themselves to an audience, reflect on the process and open up for discussions regarding these images. This is an indication that the suicide girls are more than simply passive objects consumed by the male gaze. The power typically exerted over individual female bodies when they are displayed nude through the socially constructed norms of pinup photography is thus challenged on suicidegirls.com. By inviting people to look at her and engaging with the viewers (male and female alike) James (and other [suicidegirls](http://suicidegirls.com)) engages in the network of power

as an active agent, and pushes against the cultural understandings of the pinup as quiet, passive object for consumption. While the pinup convention might not be fully disrupted or displaced, it is at least challenged.

The pinup performance which the suicidegirls engage in is obviously a bounded act, circumscribed with rules and conventions. Any performance involves the deployment of signs which have already attained meaning in the social space. What is particular about the suicidegirls is the fact that they blend two conventions in order to perform a contestation of their sexual objectification. The pinup conventions are part of a mainstream, dominant discourse but are contested by the introduction of the body modifications: the body modifications alter the mainstream conventions, as the girls repeat the pinups but with a difference; they perform a different subjectivity.

This performance is achieved through a reflexive use of the pinup conventions; the suicidegirls are aware of the tradition in which they exist and due to their own degree of control over their photos, they are free to playfully engage critically with these conventions. Since it is the model rather than the photographer that chooses the conventions and poses to be used, the girls are able to play with or against these conventions. This is not to gloss over the fact that some suicidegirls may be tempted to reproduce the mainstream pinup conventions uncritically, but the fact is that the institutional practices surrounding the suicidegirls are different, and the power relations are different from magazines such as *Playboy*.

The suicidegirls, by using the same visual conventions and inviting the same sexual looks as the mainstream pinups but displaying a body altered from the conventional image, disrupt mainstream society's erotic spectacle and insist that there are alternatives to mainstream beauty. This disruption is deliberate and confronts the social norm of a masculine definition of female sexuality. In this case, the nude bodies of the suicide girls take on a meaning more than just the image and the representation of their female nakedness. Rather, their marked bodies become material sites for the disruption of mainstream nudity. Simply put, their nude bodies represent a different view of gender and sexuality, and become part of the way these girls to achieve their own sense of self. I will argue that this is a liberating move on behalf of the suicide girls, who are able to

resist the oppressive view of woman as passive, erotic spectacle.

By producing their own version of the erotic spectacle, they enter into the productive network of power and subvert it until it becomes possible to produce their own identity through the strategy of alternative representational modes of the pinup. In other words, they insist on being subjects who chose to offer themselves up as erotic spectacles but in a way that is controlled by them and done in the way they desire. In this case they insist in their femininity by showing off their nude bodies, but they reject and resist the mainstream norm of socially accepted beauty, and so represent an alternative. As Braunberger insightfully points out: "There is a reckless kind of freedom in horrifying others, in making one's body into the seductive and scary and strange combination that is monster beauty." (Braunberger 2000, 12)

By entering into the productive network of power, the suicidegirls take power for themselves as active subjects rather than by being given a passive object position. Replacing the mainstream pinup aesthetic, they construct their own cultural space for representing sexualized versions of femininity which are endowed with cultural power. They achieve this by aestheticizing their own bodies and controlling the appearance of their own bodies by modifying it with tattoos and piercings. While some suicide girls may also use cosmetic surgery such as breast enhancement or similar procedures, the majority of the girls transgress cultural norms by choosing alternative modes of bodily appearance.

It is this aesthetic reconstruction which is the greatest difference, flying in the face of the mass media culture where nude images of women are airbrushed to make them appear more smooth. Instead, the suicide girls deliberately modify their bodies and so challenge the construction of the masculine subject position for the spectator and no longer is the project of the "true" nature of female sexuality viable. Instead, it is complicated by employing the same mode of representation, the same sexual invitation, and playing up to the same male gaze, but then offering up a markedly different body for consumption. The male gaze is thus turned back upon itself and forced to confront itself with the kind of desire it had expected as opposed to what is actually there.

What the Suicide Girls succeed in doing, I think, is to mark out a

territory for themselves where they can negotiate both pleasure and beauty on terms which they themselves help produce. In this way, their tattoos succeed in an interjection against mainstream beauty standards, their tattoos do violence to the primary violence that deprives me of my body, the violence of representation, naming, abstraction, the alienation of the body into significance. (Connor 2004, 72)

This is why there are photo sets of pregnant suicide girls and why one of the longest running suicide girls – Amina – actually has a prosthetic leg which is featured openly in her photos. The monster beauty of the suicide girls thus extend beyond tattoos and into other territories, which are otherwise closed off and taboo for mainstream pinups. My argument is that this would never have happened, unless the tattoos had been there first.

The creasing and folding of the skin that tattoos represent, contaminate the gender discourse otherwise established and serve as a disruption and challenge of the conventional image of the female body. It articulates a territory which lies folded inside the sexual pleasure of the image, and allows the production of a subjectivity where female sexuality is not dependent on the male gaze, but rather invites a broader conceptualization of desire.

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