

The Anthropology and Psychology behind “Extreme” Body Modification

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**Containing an interview
with forensic biologist Dr. Mark Benecke.**

**Morgan Joyce & Leon Wittko agreed
in the use of their photographs.**

2,686 Words

Introduction

In the simplest Terms “Body Modification” is the deliberate altering of human anatomy. Usually done for aesthetic, sexual, or religious reasons - body modification is no longer considered a strange and exotic practice. Self-actualization through body modification is increasing in prevalence and positively correlative to the zeitgeist trend towards modernism, as striving for what one considers the ideal appearance is widespread in today’s modern society. While some aim to alter their body to ameliorate their body-image (through tanning, dieting or even cosmetic surgery), others consider body modification as an art form, willing to give up their bodies as a “canvas for creative self-expression” (*Glassmeyer, Danielle et al, 2016*). Within Anthropology, the study of the body as a boundary has been long debated (*Schildkrout, Enid, 2004*). Some examples of culturally and religiously motivated body modifications throughout history include nostril piercings associated with Hinduism, tribal lip and earlobe piercing and stretching in Africa, neck elongation through the stacking of metal rings in Thailand, tooth filing in Bali and scarification in Congo. (*Larkin 2004; Barker & Barker 2002; Bendle 2004*). Body modification was also widespread in western cultures, most commonly to impose societal beauty standards on women. During the Victorian era, many women chose to shape their body by cinching their waists as small as 12 inches with extremely stiff corsets in order to obtain fashionably small waists, which was seen as very feminine (*Riordan, 2007*). With severely tight lacing, women’s bodies came to “literally incorporate the corset as the ribs and internal organs gradually adapt[ed] to its shape” (*Riordan, 2007*).

In terms of body modification, many people interpret “extreme modification” as an appearance altered to such a shocking extent that the process of alteration could pose an underlying health risk. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word “extreme” can refer to something being “1.1 Not usual; exceptional” or “1.3 far from moderate”. Some “extreme” modifications include scarification, eyeball tattooing, tongue splitting, micro chipping, ear shaping, implanting and branding.

In my literature review, I will present my research of the transition of extreme body modifications from a tribal or religious practice to a modern trend. The discussion and analysis will follow up on this, exploring the psychological background and reasoning behind modifications, and why a person may choose to modify themselves in such an extreme way.

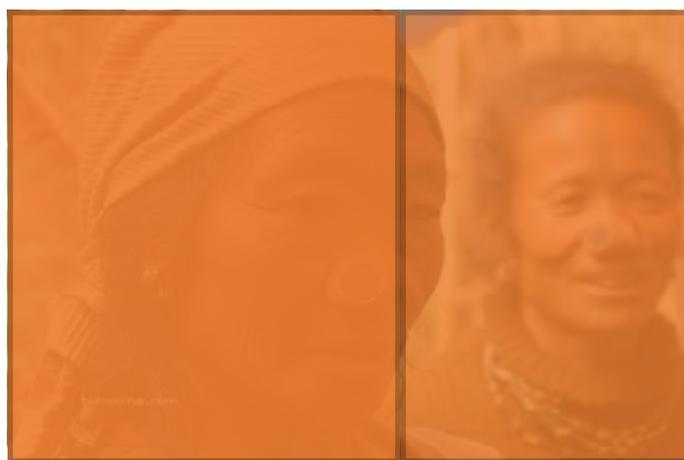
Literature Review

Some of the most well-known “extreme” body modifications include stretched piercings. Stretching (or sometimes referred to as “gauging”) in the context of body modifications, is the deliberate expansion of healed piercings. This practice of stretching piercings with wooden plates or weights has been documented to be around for almost 200 years (*Mursi Online, 2006*) The Rikbaktsa are an indigenous ethnic group from the Mato Grosso region of Brazil. (*Arruda, Rinaldo, 1998*). Traditionally, when a Rikbaktsa boy is capable of hunting large animals and is knowledgeable about traditional ceremonies, around age 14 or 15, he would have his ears pierced in a ritual celebration. This superfluous rite marked the boys' transition into manhood and eligibility for marriage, with the boy receiving an adult name. Although the ritual of ear elongation is not followed anymore by the younger men of the tribe, many elders can still be seen wearing large wooden disks in their ear piercings (*see fig. 2*).

(Figure 2, www.tkayala.com)



(Figure 3, www.tkayala.com)

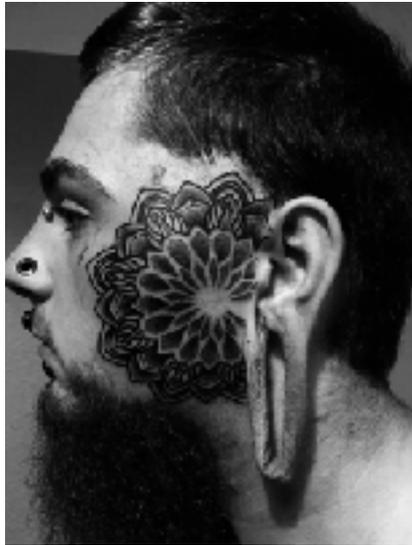


The fact that the practice of stretching body piercings is common in different tribal areas around the world is showcased by the nostril piercing stretching of the Apatani. The Apatani are a tribal group of people living in the Ziro valley in the Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh in India (*Bhattacharyya Rajeev, 2005*). The Apatani women were considered the most beautiful among the Arunachal tribes: so beautiful that they were forced to make themselves unattractive as a protection from invaders of other tribes. (*Kayala, Tony, 2011*) This led to many Apatani women wearing large wooden plugs in their nostrils (*see fig. 3*).

In modern society, the most common form of piercing stretching is done for aesthetic reasons. Individuals may wish to stretch their ear lobe, philtrum, septum or labret piercings (*see fig. 4*). Although this practice is widespread, it is considered very controversial amongst med-

ical professionals. Dr. Ken Stewart, a British Plastic Surgeon, states that stretching a piercing may lead to permanent swelling, deformity or even infections.

Reconstructive surgery that aims to repair damage done to tissue and conceal any signs of the body modification may cost up to 8000£, he explains.



(Figure 4 – Stretched ear piercing to 90mm, stretched nostril, philtrum and labret to 10mm on Leon Wittko)

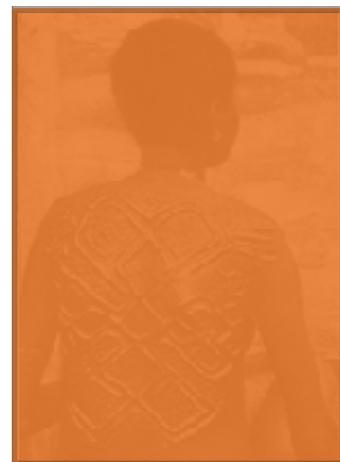
Scarification is the process of scratching, etching, burning, branding or superficially cutting designs into the skin as a permanent body modification. (Schildkrout, Enid, 2004,). Cicatrisation is a special form of scarification, whereby a gash is made in the skin with a sharp instrument, and irritation of the skin caused by applying caustic plant juices forms permanent blisters. Dark pigments such as ground charcoal or gunpowder are sometimes rubbed into the wound to emphasize the modification. These cuts, when healed, form raised scars known as keloids.

This “extreme” body modification is widely performed across Africa. Scarification in West Africa is used for identification of ethnic groups or families, but also to express personal beauty. The scarification of young girls often denotes progressive stages of their life such as puberty or marriage. Scars also assist in making women more attractive to men, as scars are regarded as a sign that a woman is strong enough to withstand the pain of childbirth (Coleman, 2002,). The Tiv of Nigeria, and ethnolinguistic group in West Africa, scarify themselves (Fig. 5) primarily for aesthetic reasons - some of the scar designs may even change just as western clothing fashions do. (Favazza, 1996). The Tribesmen of the Ethiopian Karo tribe scarify their chests to represent a tally of enemies they killed. (Guynup, Sharon, 2004)

(Figure 5 - A Member of the Tiv of Nigeria

with Traditional scarifications, Rand African Art)

Scarification is, in the western world, regarded as a more “extreme” form of modification than piercing or tattooing. In the U.S, scarification for aesthetic purposes first emerged in San Francisco in the mid-1980s (Pitts, Victoria, 2004). By the early 1990s, a movement often referred to as “neotribal” or “modern primitive” first brought scarification to the forefront of the media. "That movement was interested in reviving or reenacting indigenous body rituals from around the



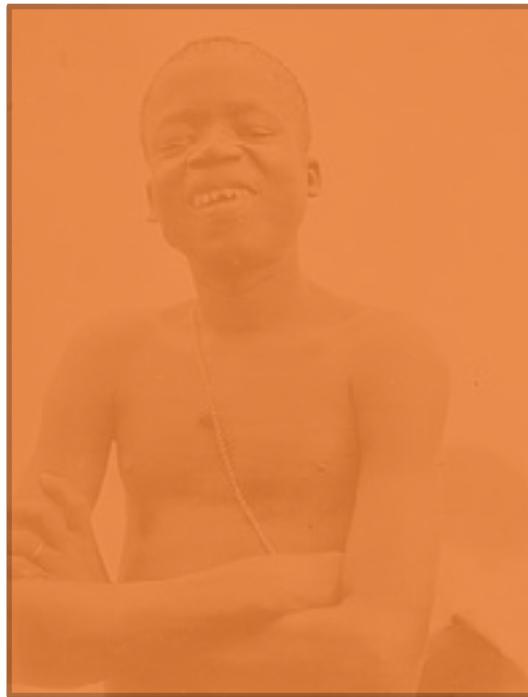
world—trying to get in touch with a more authentic or spiritual experience of the body," Pitts stated.

Those who consider themselves to be “modern primitives” may imbue the practices of body modification with as little or as much meaning as they want to, as they chose to modify their bodies for the purpose of expression, not necessarily as part of tribal rituals (*Phair, Colette, 2013*). Contemporarily, many people chose to undergo scarification modifications to set themselves apart, as tattooing has become very common in the western world. (Fig. 6)

(Figure 6 - Fresh Scarification, Morgan Joyce)



Human tooth sharpening is another well-known form of tribal body modification. Filed teeth are customary in many different cultures, including remojadas figurines in Mexico and most famously the Zappo Zap people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Zappo Zap are a group of Songye people from what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo. They were well known for trading in ivory, rubber, and slaves. The Zappo Zap became well known when a missionary of the Presbyterian Church, William Henry Sheppard, spent 20 years in and around the Congo free state. (*Phipps, William E. 2002*) He observed that most of the Zappo Zap people had their faces tattooed and their teeth filed to a sharp point. (*fig.7*) Sheppard speculated that the Zappo Zap sharpened their teeth for spiritual purposes, but also to intimidate enemies.



(fig. 7 - Ota Benga, a well known Congolese pygmy who was exhibited in the Bronx Human zoo in 1906)

The practice of tooth sharpening has various meanings in different cultures around the world. In Mayan culture the teeth were sharpened and sometimes had designs carved into them to distinguish those who were wealthy enough to have the procedure done. Many cultures would sharpen their teeth to imitate animals, such as the Wapare of intertropical Africa, who sharpened their teeth to imitate sharks (Frazer, James George, 2006). The Ta-ya Kih-lau of ancient China required young brides to knockout and file down two of their front teeth in order to "prevent damage to the husband's family." (Frazer, James George, 2006).

One of the most well-known procedures of tribal body modification is the process of neck-elongation, famously practiced by the Kayan People of Myanmar (or Burma). The tribe attracts many tourists due to the fame of their "giraffe women", or women who wear brass coils around their necks to give the appearance of an elongated neck. (fig. 8) Kayan girls will often start wearing the brass coils when they are aged 5 years old (Mirante, Edith T, 1994). When the girls age, their coils are replaced by heavier ones with more turns. Despite common misconception, this process does not elongate or stretch the women's necks, but instead the collar bone is pushed down and the ribcage compressed, which gives the appearance of an elongated neck due to the deformation of the clavicle. (Keshishian, J.M. 1979)

(fig. 8 - A modern Kayan women practicing neck elongation)



These coils are rarely removed, as uncoiling is a very lengthy and painful procedure. Many modern Kayan women chose to wear the coils despite being examined medically, as the neck often becomes discolored and bruised. Many women also report that the brass weights have become an integral part of their body after years of wearing them. In 2006, many young Kayan women decided to remove their coils in protest of the cultural exploitation that was occurring, as the Kayan people had become a popular tourist attraction. The government of Burma began discouraging the procedure, wanting to appear civilized and modern to the rest of the world. This resulted in many Myanmar women breaking the tradition, although a few women in remote villages still continue to wear the rings. In Thailand, the practice has gained popularity in recent years, as it attracts tourists who bring revenue to the villages.

It is still unclear why the women traditionally execute this procedure to this day, but many anthropologists have theorised that it may be to make the women more unattractive to enemy tribes, whilst others believe that it makes the women more attractive due to the exaggerated sexual morphism of women having more slender necks than men. Many anthropologists also believe that the coils are supposed to protect the women from tiger bites, although it is unclear whether this is meant symbolically or literally. (*Mirante, Edith T, 1990*)

Discussion and Analysis

After researching the correlation between tribal body modification and modern modification, it was crucial to me to look at Body Modification from the perspective of an expert in the field that has experience with modification both through his lectures and personal modification. Dr. Mark Benecke, a German forensic biologist who is often referred to as one of the main experts in the field of body modification, agreed to answer a few of my questions.



Dr. Benecke believes that the “baseline of any body modification, including body building, is to claim or reclaim your body — all according to your mental profile”. In a modern context, body modification is often seen as an eccentric way to stand out in a conformist society. Although many believe that the line between body modification and body mutilation may be blurry, Benecke disputes this; “mutilation is something you will be either ashamed of afterwards (...) or you limit yourself through the modification instead of expanding your mind or body”. He quotes Keith Alexander, a body modification artist from Manhattan: “Piercings heal wounds you cannot see”, and adds that this is similar with body modifications and may hint at the fact that many people see body modifications as an outlet for their hardships. When asked if those practicing

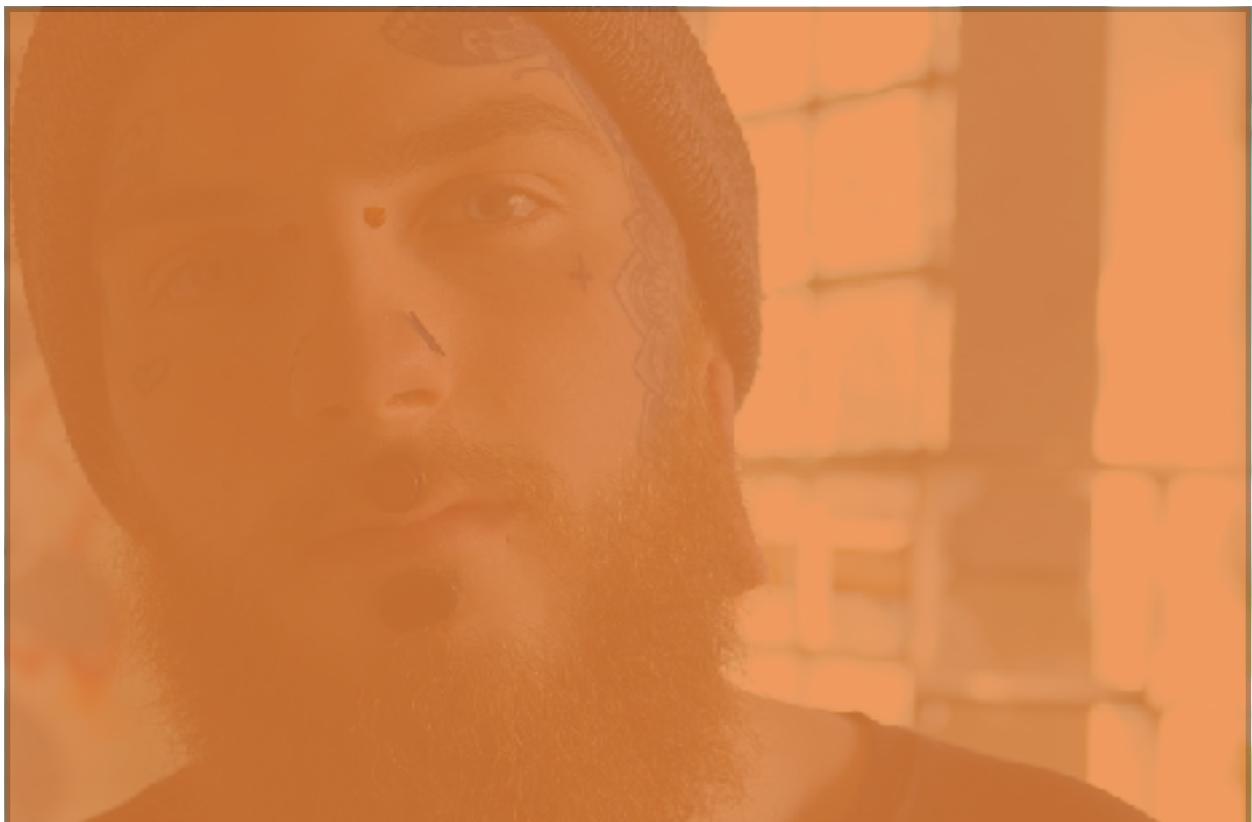
body modification always have underlying personal issues, Dr. Benecke comments that “there are many people in the allegedly ‘normal’ population who have the same issues” and that body modifications may therefore not always be resulting from or expressing mental disorder.

I was curious to find out what sets apart “extreme” body modifications from those that are no longer statistically infrequent or uncommon, like piercings or tattoos. Dr. Benecke commented that “stretched earlobes were not necessarily thought to be ‘extreme’ most recently, but at least ‘something curious’ for a while; but some people make a living out of reducing holes in earlobes for clients who now think that the stretchings are too extreme.” He states that the volatile trends in modifications may be “(due to) fluctuations of conservative vs. Liberal values that happen all the time through history”. This could explain why body modifications are at a peak in the current western society, with more than 45 million Americans having at least one modification in 2016 (statisticsbrain.com).

Being modified himself, Dr. Benecke explains that his modifications are mostly accepted by the general population, and that he is often faced with curiosity. His magnetic implants, for example, are “good fun at kid’s shows, and no kid ever thought of them (or described them to teachers) as freaky or extreme”. When asked why he thinks there may be a negative stigma or stereotype facing those who have undergone extreme body modifications, Dr. Benecke states

that “maybe it comes from a world view or character trait in which new experiences frighten somebody, and the frightened person then tries to feel superior and "safer" by devaluing the person with the new or unusual trait”.

Besides interviewing an expert, I also wanted to investigate the reasoning behind someone choosing to modify their body in an extreme way. Leon Wittko, a 19-year old student from Cologne, has several modifications which others would consider “extreme” or unusual. Besides facial tattoos and stretched facial piercings, Leon also has a split tongue. He explained that he received his first piercings and tattoos aged 14, and explains that he liked the overall aesthetic of being pierced and tattooed. When asked about his personal definition of Body Modification, his response was “being extraordinary and not fitting in with the norm, doing what you want to do with your body and not what others expect of you just because you’re supposed to fit in with society and get a good job.” Leon explains that those with modifications often face a stereotype or stigma. He believes that modifications often “scare people”, as it is something unusual they seldom see. “Because I have had this ‘unusual’ appearance for almost 6 years, I don’t really mind when people stare at me, I’m used to it. If someone feels the need to remark something negative about my appearance, I usually just wave them off, but I don’t really get upset or angry anymore”, he states. He plans to further modify his body, getting cuttings, implants (Hand and genital beading) and more facial tattoos.



Conclusion

Body Modification has been historically practiced in cultures all over the world, including tribal modification such as tooth sharpening, scarification and neck elongation. Body modification was also historically present in the western world in practices like corseting and plastic surgery. More recently, the modification of one's body has become integrated into mainstream western culture, often aiming to shock or impress others with how far one is willing to go. Starting with the modern primitive movement, individuals often strived to showcase their creativity and who they are as a person by modifying their bodies. Tattooing and piercing has become widely accepted within most western societies, whilst more extreme practices like scarification and tongue splitting are still perceived as unusual and often as scary or repulsing.

During my research, I discovered that varying degrees of body modification are prevalent in virtually all cultures, and that the beauty standards vary greatly within different cultures and contexts. It was interesting to research different reasons for the modifications, both within tribal and modern context. Whilst some choose to modify themselves for spiritual or religious reasons, others strive to achieve to modify their body in a way they consider to be aesthetically pleasing. Although many psychologists claim that body modification is rooted in pleasure derived from pain or the want to self-mutilate, I have discovered that this is not true for the cases I have looked at. It is very rare for individuals to enjoy the pain induced by modification, and they seem to merely endure it in order to achieve the desired outcome.

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Appendix

Transcript of Interview with Dr. Mark Benecke (via email):

1. What is your personal definition of “Body Modification”, both in modern and tribal/indigenous context?

I grew up with body modification in a time when there was no true difference anymore between (a) "modern primitives" (that was the title of the best known book then: <https://www.researchpubs.com/shop/paperback-modern-primitives-20th-anniv-also-deluxe-hardback-2/>) and the work and art of fakir from SF compared to (b) the modern, urban forms like suspensions in a mobile (i.e., human mobile built with several persons) and of course (c) the BDSM background out of which it all came. So to me, it is all one. In Manhattan, especially, where I lived in St. mark's place (i.e., 8th St. i.e., east village, of all places), the body modification studio across the street (Andromeda piercing) would give you any piercing literally in a minute, e.g. my PA.

The suspension people (sun dancers etc.) are still more spiritual than the girls and guys with implanted magnets and RFID chips (like me) but I think we belong all into one big family. When I talk at conventions or medical conferences, I always stress that the baseline of any body modification, including body building etc. is of course to claim or reclaim your body — all according to your mental profile.

2. What do you think sets apart “extreme” body modification from modifications that have become common on western streets (facial piercings, tattoos)?

I have absolutely no idea. My magnets, for example are good fun at kids shows, and no kid ever thought of them (or described them to teachers) as freaky or extreme. To them, it is interesting yet normal, a way to go, a possibility.

Stretched earlobes were not necessarily thought to be 'extreme' but at least “something” for a while; nowadays, some people make a living out of “reducing” holes in earlobes for clients who now think that the stretchings are too extreme. Maybe it's just fluctuations of conservative vs. liberal values that happen all the time through history?

It is maybe interesting to stress that body modification was quite common yet under the radar in BDSM contexts, even in Germany...people just wouldn't talk about it and had neither magazines nor marketing like in the U.S. to sell it, or to push it out in the open.

Also, in Germany, TÄTOWIERMAGAZIN decided not to cover the topic of body modifications much which was also an artificial split in my opinion. however, many tattooed people did (and still do) perceive tattoos not as body modification — so they were or became conservative in a way by defining tattoos as 'normal and accepted' even though they were not, and by defining the 'new shit' as more crazy, more extreme and less acceptable.

3. Do you believe that those practicing body modification always have underlying personal issues (body image, self-esteem, depression etc.?)

Yes. However, there are many people in the allegedly 'normal' population who have the same issues. So...

4. Do you believe that body modification is equated to self-mutilation?

Yes, I hear that a lot. No, I do not know exactly where this idea came from. Keith alexander (http://wiki2.benecke.com/index.php?title=2005-08_Taetowier_Magazin:_Keith_Alexander) whom i knew and who did a lot for the urban, modern body modification scene, said that piercings (and i add in his sense, because it was often synonymous then: body modification) heal wounds you cannot see. Even twenty years later, i experience this to be true when talking to people with body modifications.

5. If not, where would you draw the line between modification and mutilation?

A body mutilation is something you will be either ashamed of afterwards, or you use it as a weapon against yourself or others, or you limit yourself through the modification instead of expanding your mind or body or both.

6. Do you think that Body Modification can be called an “art form”? Why/why not?

Most certainly because stelarc just did that experiment very early (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stelarc>), decades ago, and it worked even in art galleries. People reacted as to other art forms, and he sparked quite a discussion. so his work alone proves experimentally that body modification may or can work as art.

Also, <http://www.amfkorsets.com/Fleischauer-Creations/index.html> does incredible shows that mix sound with body modification, visual experiences, beautiful craftsmanship etc., so that is also art at it s best -- probably, if you will, in the tradition of stelarc.

As in tattoos, not all is art of course, and not all wants to be art.

A cup of coffee can be quite fancy but it can also be just a quick and dirty start in and into the morning. Kind of like tattoos, body modifications, drawings...they can be rough and quick or skillful and spirited.

7. Can you explain the stigma those with unusual modifications face?

I have not heard that recently. Maybe I do not know persons with such unusual, very conservative views? Scientifically, it is known for a century that such beliefs are not based in reality, please if you wish translate from here: http://wiki2.benecke.com/index.php?title=2010-05_Kriminalistik:_Diskussion

8. Do you have any anecdotes of stereotypes/hardships you had to face as someone with body modifications?

The most and most constant chitchat emerged when I still wore any socks I found — i.e., often two different socks — in my Birkenstock sandals at my first internship, and later my Ph.D. at an institute for legal medicine. Socks in sandals was already something but two (sometimes) different ones - that was too much. I kid you not, that the first and last time I got comments I am aware of concerning any unusual halfway bodily ‘modifications’. Also, in summer people often comment that I look thin (truth is that I just wear less clothing in summer).

9. How did indigenous body modification transition into being (mostly) accepted in contemporary/western culture?

That is very hard to tell. When I lived in Manhattan, I could still order magazines from fakir (personally) from SF but I never saw him at the east coast.

The high time of the gauntlet (piercing shop: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gauntlet_Enterprises) in Manhattan (I can only speak for Manhattan) were probably over coz other shops had already opened and were sometimes cheaper and not as clearly related to subcultural (but more to ‘cool’) contexts, e.g., Andromeda (see above; <https://www.facebook.com/andromeda.cassioppia/?rf=219220521477369>) existed already.

Gauntley of course originally got the money from Dough Malloy (https://news.bme.com/tag/bme_trivia/), i.e. via the gay subculture SF thing, and probably this is how the ‘modern primitive’ idea (from fakir as the most prominent person who also did very good photos since he was a young man, i.e., far pre-internet) came to the east coast.

My guess is that Manhattan made the whole thing a little more profane, ‘normal’ and party-oriented even in non-gay, non-spiritual environments.

Still, my friend Essie (http://wiki2.benecke.com/index.php?title=1999_Mark_Benecke:_Body_Modification_Autophagy) did most of her scarifications in a "spiritual" way with esoteric, relaxing music, a feather to touch her, etc. even though she did not come from that background — so the shift probably came at the end of the 1990s due to a change in generations, and by mixing ideas that had been around with new ideas and habits.

10. Why do you think there is a negative stigma towards those with unusual modifications?

Maybe it comes from a world view or character trait in which new experiences frighten somebody, and the frightened person then tries to feel superior and "safer" by devaluing the person with the new or unusual trait?

Transcript of Interview with Leon Wittko (in German):

1. How old were you when you first "modified" your body? What was your first modification?

Mit 14 hab ich meine snakebites bekommen und den Handrücken und den Arm tattowieren lassen Handrücken ein Modifizierter Elefant und auf dem Arm mehrere Sterne und ein Kirby

2. Why did you chose to first modify your body?

Weil es mir gefallen hat und ich es schön finde / fand

3. What is your definition of "body modification"?

Außergewöhnlich zu sein, nicht der Norm zu entsprechen und das zu tun, worauf man Lust hat und nicht das was andere Leute von einem erwarten, nur weil es einem nachher im Beruf vielleicht mehr Geld einbringt.

4. Why do you think tattooed/modified people face a negative stereotype?

Diese Frage kann und konnte ich auch noch nie wirklich beantworten und das wissen glaube ich selbst die Leute die diese Behauptungen aufstellen nichtmal.

Als Tattowierter/ modifizierter ist man nunmal anders als andere und das macht den Leuten "Angst" (oder misstrauisch, wie auch immer)

5. How do you deal with that stereotype?

Da ich seit mittlerweile fast 6 Jahren so angestarrt werde durch mein auffälliges Aussehen, interessiert es mich mittlerweile nicht mehr was andere denken und sagen - vielleicht drücke ich so Leuten manchmal noch ein dummen Spruch rein oder Wink sie mit einer Handbewegung weg aber mich großartig aufregen tu ich mich nichtmehr.

6. What are your future plans for body modification?

Eine Menge an cuttings, Implantate (beadings, Hand, Brust etc) weiter tattowieren lassen (komplett); aber als nächstes Hals und Gesicht zuende.