

The Commodification of Tattoo & the Modern Black Tattooer.

Digital technologies have afforded tattoo artists, as many others, incomparable access to convenience...yet has cost us our most precious resource; our attention. Short form video content & ever changing algorithms have put artists of all varieties in a peculiar predicament; perform or risk a degree of obscurity. Tattoo, despite its inherent ritualistic and intimate nature, has found its way to the unfavorable fate of being commodified. Body art was determined between the artist, the wearer, and even the tattoo environment itself (by way of flash art on the walls or flash books flipped through while waiting for your artists to become available), creating a symphony of chance and opportunity. Instead of this opportunity for chance, you can open nearly any social media app, and watch your screen become flooded with artists posting pictures, videos, reels clamoring to keep your attention long enough before you scroll to the next, and so on. Everything is an ad, meant to convince one to buy buy buy. It's not just a tattoo, it's an experience! Everything is for sale; not just the art, but also the artist themselves.

The tendrils of capitalism made their way into tattoo, by way of familiar faces that graced tv screens, lunch boxes and t-shirts. Pop culture icons like popeye, betty boop, and mickey mouse graduated from brand merchandise to permanent keepsakes. In the early 2000's with pop culture imagery being widely accepted by tattooers and desired by those that collect tattoos. Tattoos were no longer (in the modern & western context) reserved for those on the fringes of society, the outcasts or societally deemed undesirables. Commercial images of cartoon characters etched into skin with bright imaginative compositions opened the flood gates for tattoos to not just be a marker of culture, heritage or lived experience, but to showcase one's interest, the same way a branded key chain or sticker might serve the same. It is essential to interrogate pop culture's influence on tattoo culture and how it led us to where we are now, unthreatening yet ill-intentioned. Instead of pop culture icons, many artists are now plagued by other familiar imagery, those served to clients via algorithms based on the cross roads between their interests and what's currently trending. Artists now face the challenge of encouraging folks to imagine beyond what has been served to them, willing clients to think outside of the algorithm.

If social media apps were to be clubs, each with their own curated vibe, culture, and audience, their algorithms serve as the bouncers. Choosing who gets to get into the club of visibility and opportunity as well as who doesn't, not based on the quality of what's being presented, but on the presentation itself. It becomes essential for artists to not only create the art, but to create content around the art and the making of the art, to maintain the attention of passers-byers, otherwise the perceived threat of obscurity

looms closer in the foreground. It is not uncommon to come across artists who openly critique the social media game, many feeling forced to play in order to continue feeding themselves and their loved ones, yet not as many believe in the choice to opt out of the performance of content creation. Artists do not create content for consumption, we create art for the body and soul. As these social media platforms continue to prioritize pushing content that can hold folks' attention hostage, in hopes they choose to stay on the app long enough for another round of doomscrolling or impulsive spending, it is essential that artists maintain artistic integrity and resist performing the role of "Artist" for the algorithm's sake.

So how does this all contribute to the commodification of tattoo and tattoo culture? When navigating a world where the next best thing to living the life one desires is to purchase items that represent said lifestyle, it is imperative to resist consumption as a form of participation. This threat is ever-present within black tattoo culture, and black culture at large. In the same ways black style, language, and practices are attempted to be stolen and re-written by mainstream culture, the same is attempted within black tattoo culture, where our lineage and practices are threatened to be rendered obsolete by way of mainstream tattoo culture. The practice of traditional apprenticeship, mentorship, and art practice in the name of tattoo feels antiquated in this digital age. Though these traditional systems may feel archaic to the modern tattooer, they are essential to preserving the legacy of this oral tradition. By resisting dilution disguised as convenience, we are able to preserve and consciously build on these existing structures that have stood the test of time, and prevent the inefficacy of tattoo and tattoo culture for its practitioners and receivers alike. Consumer culture is the crux of American capitalism, and corporations are ongoingly looking for subcultures to strip of meaning, in hopes to sell the aesthetic. While tattoos have become increasingly normalized, tattoo culture and its various subcultures are in a favorable position. You can't fake the funk. Culture, intention, and heritage cannot be bought nor sold. While some may be satisfied with the aesthetics of alternative lifestyle, there are more that are truly desiring to embody defiance of societal norms by way of taking part in their own creation and are rejecting what may be enticing, yet hollow.

Though it may pose an unavoidable threat, avoiding modernity will only harm what it is we are aiming to protect. Embracing the beneficial offerings modern technologies have to offer provides an opportunity to simultaneously protect what it puts as risk of being consumed vs felt and lived. Despite the dilution of tattoo culture by way of consumerism and commodification of the practice, channels of connection are numerous and as clear as ever. Where one was once confined to only having access to practitioners in their immediate area, it is easier than ever to share thoughts, ideas, and the inner workings of this tradition with any tattooer across the globe. With this ability,

we are able to ensure that the context and history of black tattoo culture is able to survive and thrive for generations to come, providing a stable foundation to continue to be built upon. While the systems that be encourage capitalist ideas like perpetual production & broad marketability, both artists and enjoyers of art alike are growing weary of the reliance of social media for one's practice to thrive and excel. Weary of a life not lived, experienced, or relished in, but commodities that signal that one is participating in desired lifestyles & the aesthetics that are coupled with it. We are not slaves to the algorithm, we are willing participants, who have autonomy over how we participate in these digital ecosystems.

Footnotes

[The Arts in the Age of Social Media | Global Leaders Institute](#)

[Tattooing in the Age of the Internet^{\[OBJ\]} - The Trail](#)

[Black TikTokers Get Creative To Fight Racist Algorithms - Media Diversity Institute](#)

[From Cellblocks to Suburbia: Tattoos as Subcultural Style, Commodity and Self-expression](#)