



60 Heads

eX de Medici



60 Heads

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Acknowledgments



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60 Heads

The Canberra Contemporary Art Space is delighted to present *60 Heads* by eX de Medici. The exhibition will first be seen at CCAS in March 1996 and will tour to venues throughout Australia including Performance Space, Sydney; Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; and 24 Hour Art, Darwin.

As a tattoo artist, eX de Medici could work anywhere in the world, but she has chosen to remain in Canberra precisely because of its peculiarities. Canberra is perceived as a white collar, soulless public servant town with roads that go round in circles. *60 Heads* comprises two series – *Portrait* and *Fuel* – that reveal a side of Canberra not to be found in a tourist brochure, or on the 7.30 Report.

Portrait represents a seven year collection from the 'field', positioned within the context of the workplace; the tattoo shop. The catalogue essays focus on aspects of this series – in *No dumb surface*, Jenny McFarlane reveals the complexities and ambiguities inherent in creating and presenting the tattoo portraits; in *eXcess*, Gordon Bull looks at the art of collecting, and hints at the obsessive side of eX's practice.

Fuel arises out of the artist's fascination with Summernats, one of Australia's premier motor sports events and one of Canberra's key cultural events – on a par with Floriade but certainly not acknowledged with such pride, or documented with such vigour. Here eX pays tribute to the substantial creativity of the owners of these customised street machines. After the imperfections of

the bodies in *Portrait*, those in *Fuel*, with their shining chrome and glossy surfaces, seem implausibly smooth, impossibly perfect and absolutely unobtainable. We are given a tantalising glimpse of a complex world that is as rich with possibility for display, discussion and discourse as tattoo, but for now, just out of reach.

Jane Barney
Assistant Curator
Canberra Contemporary Art Space

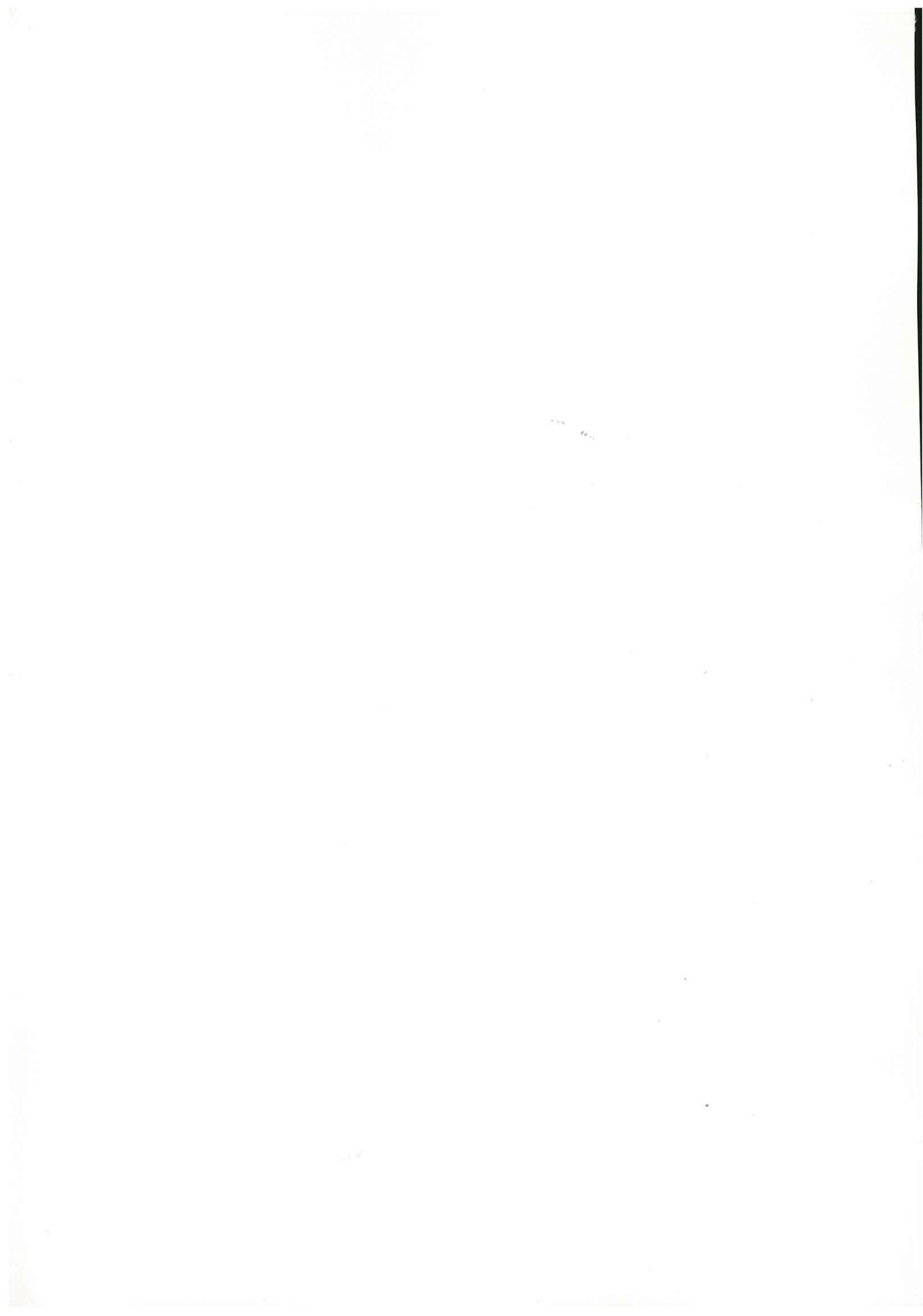
eX de Medici

eX de Medici was born in country New South Wales, schooled in Canberra. Studied painting and photomedia at the (then) Riverina CAE, Darling Downs Institute and the Canberra School of Art. Further dimension was added at the Canberra School of Music in multi-track recording and sound sampling. Flirtation with performance, film, video and computer generated forms. Participating member of the defunct Bitumen River Gallery Artists Collective. Group shows include Anzart, Auckland '88, Performed and Present (Chameleon, Tasmania), Vessage (First Draft, Sydney), ARX '87 (Perth), Canberart (Drill Hall Gallery, ACT), Adelaide Biennial '90 (AGSA), New Acquisitions (NGA, ACT), Art in the Age of AIDS (NGA, ACT), Adelaide Biennial '96 (AGSA). Solo'd at Bitumen River Gallery, Australian Centre for Photography, Canberra Contemporary Art Space and Australian Girls Own Gallery. Currently resides and works in Canberra, ACT.

The photocopied portrait series in *60 Heads* are a compressed group from approximately 400 images which have been collected in tattoo studios in Australia and the USA since 1989.

The individuals in the images represent a miniature of the vast and wondrous group of tattooed people out there.

The tattoo process is entirely dependent on the presence of two. It is a collaborative form. Not all tattoos in these images are the work of eX de Medici. Where possible the individuals comprising *60 Heads* have been sought and notified of this exhibition.



excess

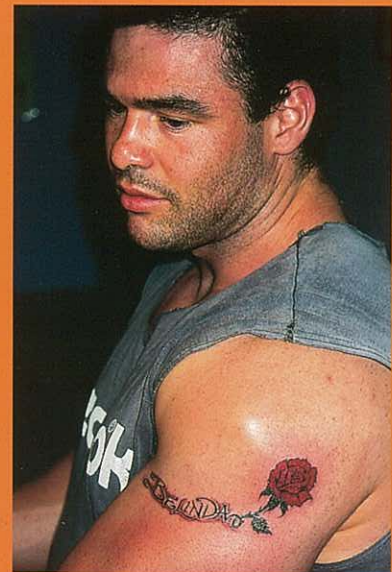
If collecting is meaningful, it is because it shuns closure and the security of received evaluations and instead opens its eyes to existence – the world around us, both cultural and natural, in all its unpredictability and contingent complexity.¹



Andrew



Romany



Mark

What is most cunningly artful about this collection of ostensibly artless photocopies is just that it is a collection. Even these dozens of images of freshly tattooed people represent only a fragment of a much larger group: there are several hundred others. The photocopies have been produced from photographs taken and collected by eX de Medici. eX is also a tattooist and the author of many of the tattoos represented.

The images are overwhelming and confronting: how are they to be looked at? As images of tattoos? As portraits of people? As records of tattoo work done? At least all of these. What gives the key to looking at the tattoos in the photographs, or to looking at the photocopies/photographs themselves as images, is the collection itself: the practice and the exhibition of collecting is a mobile frame which may draw attention to first one, then quite other sets of characteristics of the images.

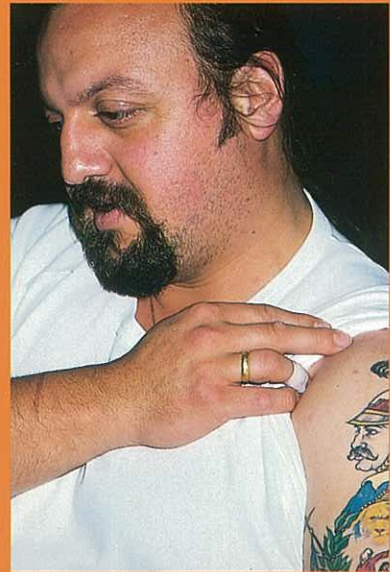
This is not a banal point that might equally be made of any collection or of any set of objects or images exhibited together. Collections differ as the principles of classification which precede them differ, as well as for contingent reasons. The extraordinary strength of this collection, and its artfulness, is grounded in points of contact between tattooing, photography and collecting itself. All have been spoken about as machines for the formation of individual identity; as slicers of time; and as reminders or celebrations of mortality and death. They all testify to lived experience.



Unknown



Brettski

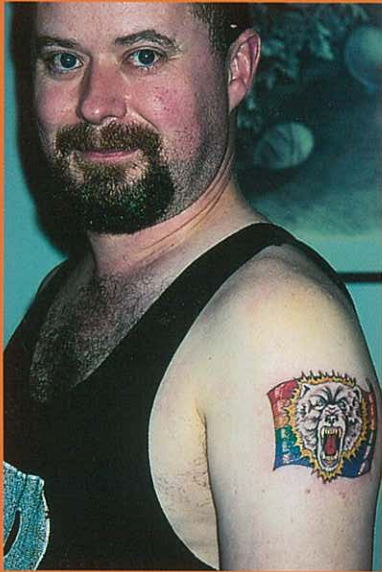


Ike

It is easy to imagine why a tattooist might begin to photograph and collect photographs of tattoos. Tattoos are ephemeral for the tattooist, firstly because the bodies they are on walk out of the door. For the tattooist, the photograph doubles what the tattoo is for the tattooed: something that they can keep as a permanent reminder of a fleeting moment. To collect such photographs is to do something more: to collect them is to gather, to recall, to bring together images which are dispersed through the social body on individual bodies. This is to make something entirely new from the fixed, fragmented memories. The collection, the photograph and the tattoo all work with and against dispersal and time.

Tattoos have several kinds of time. A tattoo, like a photograph, is a mark of a moment: for its owner it signals "I was marked then"; they are often commemorative. For their owners, they are permanent (they can be removed, but usually not without leaving a scar), but for others, and perhaps especially for the tattooist, they are ephemeral: they only last as long as the body that they inhabit. It is possible to preserve tattooed skins, but it is a rare procedure. A drawing with ink on paper is likely to have a much longer life.

In a simple sense the photograph makes the tattoo practically collectable for the tattooist. Once the collection is begun things are not so simple. Collecting the photographs again doubles the practice of many tattooed for whom acquiring successive tattoos on an individual body may take the form of a collection. It isn't unambiguously clear just what is being collected in collecting tattoos: a variety of images or the work of various tattooists, ostensibly. Yet the act of collecting makes something more. This is reflected in the language of tattoo which may describe the addition of tattoo to tattoo in order



Ted



Lyn



Matt

to eventually achieve 'an arm' or 'a leg'. It is possible to collect a whole body in this way, or at least 'a suit': the dispersal of the collection over the individual body is a crucial ordering principle of the collection itself. In a sense one might collect oneself.

What is most important about this sense of collecting oneself is that it is a process. The self is always being made. To complete the collection and arrive at a stable self is unthinkable, for to complete the collection would signal the end of the process of collecting and so be analogous to death, the achievement of a non-self or an erasure of self. While this is unthinkable it is, of course, also inevitable.

This collection of photographs balances on unstable moments, between living change and the change from life to death. Eventually, the cut of the photograph into the flow of time is itself temporary: the permanence of the photographs is relative. There is something excessive in their appearance in this particular collection in the form of photocopies, a relatively unstable, fugitive form doubling as a reminder of the provisional, impermanent status of the collection, and by analogy of life itself. If you had time to stand still long enough you could watch them fade.

Gordon Bull is the Head of the Art Theory Workshop, Canberra School of Art, Australian National University.

¹ 'Introduction' in Elsner, J. and Cardinal, R. (eds) *The Cultures of Collecting: from Elvis to antiques – why do we collect things?*, Melbourne U.P., 1994. p. 6.

No dumb
surface



Luke



Mabelline



Peter

As contemporary art circles the boundaries checking for openings, this exhibition by eX de Medici is a timely opportunity to focus on some of the issues raised by her practice. *60 Heads* resonates with the tension of a flying trapeze artist's work. In this installation de Medici has brought the practice of tattoo and photography into dynamic interaction. The encounter provokes a productive interchange, perhaps a new tool with which to fashion our understanding of contemporary practice. The life size photocopies present a crowd of individuals who have for separate and multiple reasons taken the radical step of permanently fixing an image or images to themselves. Through her work in tattoo de Medici touches base with the earliest role of the artist—image maker for an individual. These close-ups charged with intensity encourage a critical examination of aspects of contemporary practice which had seemed until now settled and unquestionable.

While these life size bubblejet prints began life as a personal collection, the installation is no simple documentation of de Medici's tattoo work over the last six years. Nevertheless the tattoos captured in these photocopies are so alluring that they appear to be the subject of the installation. A close examination of these prints reveals that while many of these tattoos are by de Medici, others are not. Nor are all the tattoos contemporary with the photographs. The sitters display a mixture of new and old tattoos, the most recent sitting proud on flesh still rosy with the defensive flush of blood. Tattoos which could not be photographed with the face of the subject visible are not included. As we are drawn to the tattoo we are also seduced by the lure of uncommon access to the sitter's private space, perhaps to a greater truth about their inner self.¹ The sitter's street clothes are drawn back to reveal the concealed tattoo just as their face appears stripped of any normal veiling poise after the trauma



John



Rena



Unknown

of the tattoo. The stress, pain and satisfaction associated with the tattooing process are inscribed in the faces of the sitters. Yet the voyeur in us is frustrated, neither the tattoo nor the personality of the sitter is fully exposed by the frame. Each is cropped and what we are offered instead is the point where the individual, the tattoo and the photographer meet. Thwarted, we can only scan across the surface of this flattened image. The photographer has refused to allow us to focus in depth on either the tattoo or the tattooed subject. Finally we are seduced by the interplay of the individual faces and the assemblage of tattoos. The seductive play of the surface is integral to this installation. *60 Heads* foregrounds the complex traditions of tattoo and contemporary art, exposure and revelation, appearance and essence, issues bound by traditions which at each encounter shatter and reform. Each encounter feeds the next, influences are formed and reformed.

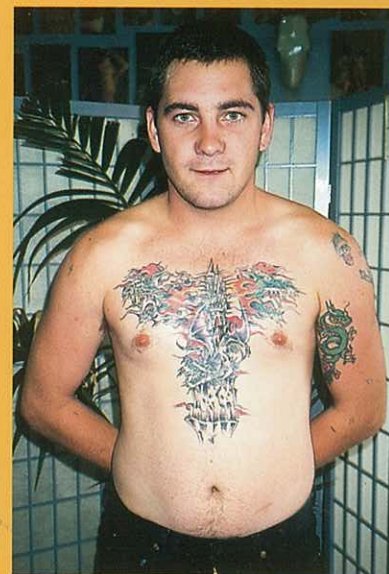
Tattoo has a long and complex history with many internal traditions ranging from intensely ritualised and codified tribal practice to the highly developed art form adopted by the privileged classes of 19th century Japan. de Medici's practice, while ranging across these traditions, is more properly situated within the anglo-celtic tradition which has its own conventions and structuring principles. When speaking of tattoo during this text I refer to this anglo-celtic tradition. Her practice has led de Medici to work with a system of representation which is radically different to those current in the field of contemporary art. In these photocopies we see the sitters proudly display their creative act, the tattoo, to the artist who documents their vision. de Medici's role in the contract is to negotiate an image which is custom made for the commissioner. Patently de Medici must abandon many traditional expectations of the artist's relationship to their work. Her limits are moral or ethical and only rarely aesthetic. The



Emmanuel



Charlie



Unknown

client will commission from the tattooist an image with which they feel a clear and personal identification. While the tattooist may work to develop and clarify the client's ideas, brokering a more meaningful relationship between the individual's self image and the realised graphic, the image is ultimately authored by the client. Each individual produces on the surface of their skin an appearance which is a reflection or fantasy of their personal imaginary. Amongst the images presented as part of *60 Heads* we see fragments of spider webs, scissors and thread and Australianana, images as diverse as the faces and personalities of their commissioners. Perhaps the only unifying feature is their common enjoyment of the seductive potential of the surface. The surface operates here not as an imperfect reflection of the subject's inner self but rather represents the self within another framework again. The only physical results remaining to de Medici after the tattoo are a personal collection of slides and the grungy swabs and patches smeared with ink and blood. The images walk out the door and may never be seen by more than a select few intimates. Nevertheless de Medici has an audience for her work whose level of commitment and dedication would find few rivals in the field of contemporary art.

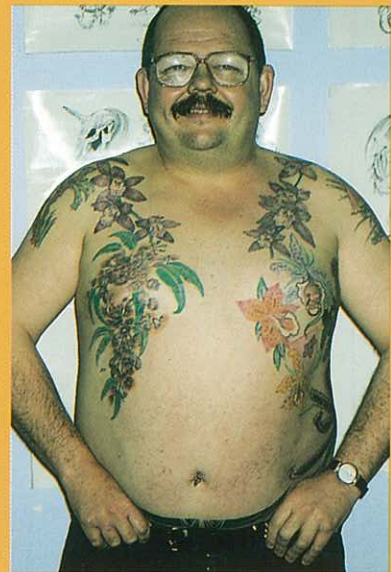
For both traditions the meeting of the artist and the tattoo is an aberration. While contemporary theory has explored alternative genres, dry theory cannot interact with a living tradition. Only practice is flexible enough to respond to the flux of another equally strong tradition. de Medici's tattoo work intersects two agendas, two communities. This meeting of two worlds is neatly described in the movie *Kalifornia* directed by Dominic Sena where the yuppies meet and reckon with representatives of the world they have previously only observed voyeuristically. In such an encounter the separation of the



Chad



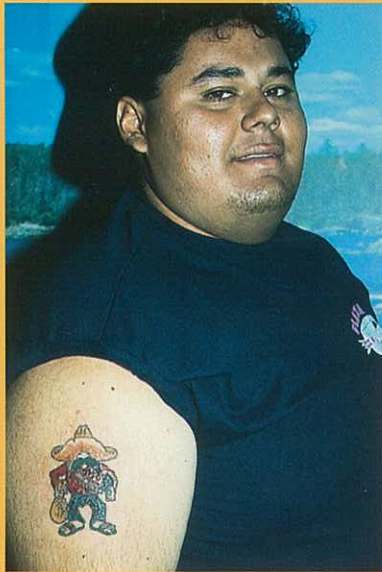
Louise



Geoff

voyeur from the broader community cannot be maintained, the critical distance is broken down and the voyeurs become embroiled in the agenda of a world which is very different to their own. From the moment of first real engagement with this other world their own lives are inevitably marked by the encounter. Concepts don't have pores. They cannot respond and interact as people can through regular encounters of daily practice. de Medici has brought to the tradition and practice of tattoo the focus and discipline of theoretical investigation. Her achievement is to place both traditions continuously and actively at risk through her practice. Inevitably, *60 Heads* is provocative for both traditions.

A critical analysis of the regime of tattoo reveals that rather than seeing surface as a superficial and illusory membrane over the visceral, tattoo has chosen to work with the surface as a space replete with its own potential. A tattoo exploits and enhances the lure of surface and promotes the pleasure and trust in the surface as sufficient. By contrast, contemporary art has traditionally sought to convey reality through reduction rather than addition. Scarification has been used as a metaphor for stripping away the surface dross to reveal a reality which lies below the skin. Mike Parr lacerates himself both literally and metaphorically to reveal a tortured but more simple truth. Tattoo reverses this metaphor. The surface, the skin, is the active reality. Just as the skin protects the vulnerable life of the viscera, it also presents through the muscles, posture and facial expressions the persona of the individual. Tattoo scarifies to add, to enhance the life of the surface. The accusation of 'superficial decoration' is irrelevant in this context. In this sense tattoo can be seen as a viable and active tradition which posits an alternative to a key structural principle of contemporary art.



Paulie



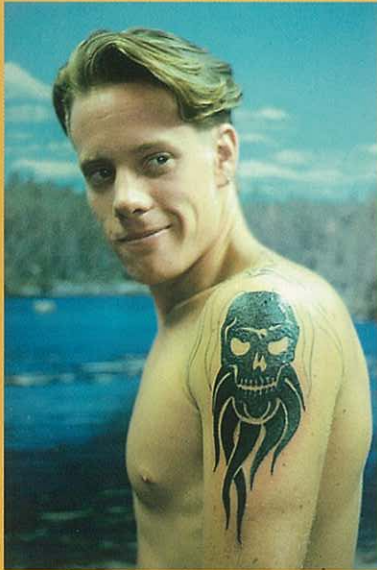
Cathy



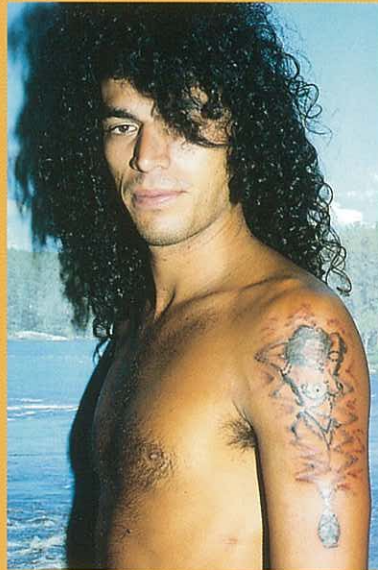
Howie

In this sense tattoo provides an important tool for those seeking a point of departure from the burnt out cynicism of an earlier generation. Instead of entering the cul de sac of 'all is illusion but illusion is hollow', we should remember Baudrillard's point that "Illusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible"². If, following Pierre Klossowski, we push this concept a little further we understand that if truth can no longer serve as an ultimate referent for the world of appearances then the traditional relationship between truth and appearance is brought into question. Where surface appearance was understood to be deceptive and could only be made to communicate (visceral) truth by an artist/ philosopher with unique insight, Klossowski, following Nietzsche claims that if truth is no longer possible then the world of appearance can no longer be seen as fundamentally deceptive.³ Baudrillard and Klossowski thus collapse the classic binary opposition between surface appearance and inner reality. On Klossowski's invitation we are encouraged to interrogate the regime of appearances to open up a space in which appearance is understood as productive rather than deceptive.

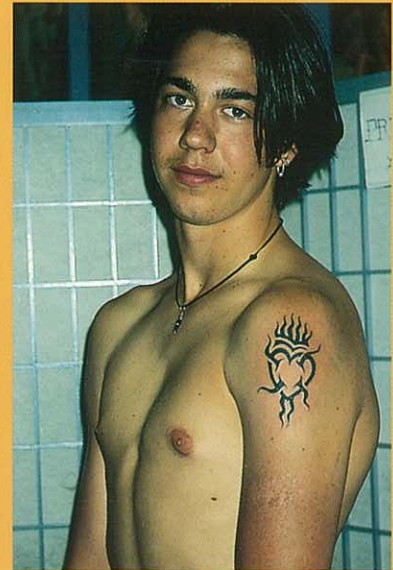
Tattoo recognises no binary opposition between surface and reality. The 'true self' is not seen as fixed but is in flux and appearance is produced from this flux. The individual's sense of self is intermittently reflected by each inscribed image. The image can only ever point to a fragment of the subject's perception of self, which while often sincere is inevitably a desired self image. Yet as a reflection or fantasy of the individual's imaginary, once realised it becomes an even more potent part of the individual's life. Inscribed on the skin, the position held at the moment of the tattoo must always



Unknown



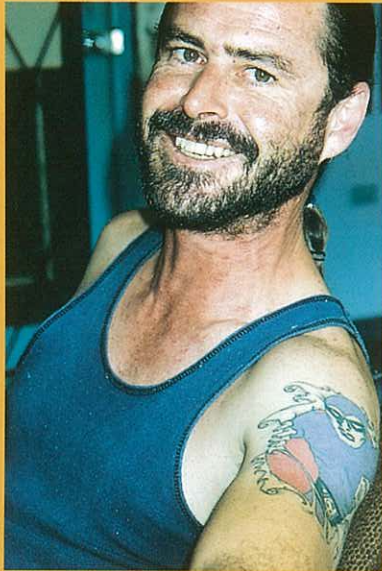
Unknown



Peter

be accounted for and can never be denied, it calls reality to itself. Like other scars on the body it documents the passage of an individual through life experiences, it becomes a part of the body, as real as any other bodily feature. Far from being deceptive, the image inscribed on the surface of the skin adds to the fluid reality of the self.

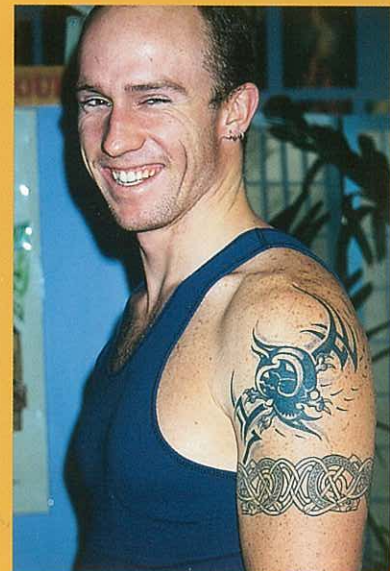
The intensely seductive quality of the tattoo is difficult to ignore. The breathing tactility of the surface delights the senses. Baudrillard has suggested seduction as a possible passage beyond the morass of binary opposites, truth and appearance, copies and simulations of 'reality'.⁴ Indeed this is the lure of tattoo and the gambit proposed in this installation. What is proposed is not reality but a play of surface, not visceral truth but appearance. The seductive potential lies in the interplay of signs of reality not in the promise of the delivery of any ultimate truth. In the tradition of tattoo we find an aesthetic which values above all the production of appearance. Where surface traditionally veils visceral truth we are encouraged in tattoo to range across the surface enjoying its seductive potential. When we admire a tattoo we enjoy not only the interplay of line and colour on the grained surface of the skin and the ripple of the image as it moves with the body but also the tattoo's intersection with the flux of the subject's psyche. Whether an accumulation or a single motif, the tattoo seduces both the tattooed subject and their intimates. The allure lies in the intersection of the known person with the strange image or combination of images. The seductive appeal of the tattooed image and its love of a multiplication of images means that the appearance of self is in a state of constant and creative production.



Ross



Eve

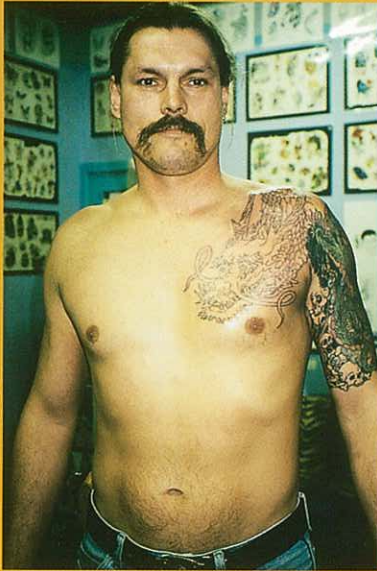


Leif

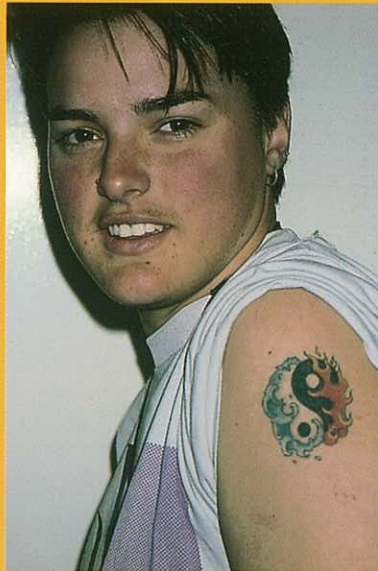
The real of tattoo is not fixed, but in flux. The real is not only an endangered referential, in the context of tattoo the concept has no meaning. Tattoo services the desire of the subject to make visible an aspect of themselves which they wish to be seen. It inscribes an aspect of the desired persona on the surface of the individual and in so doing realises that aspect. The copy has the power to bring forth that reality. Decorative Australiana reinforces the patriotism of the wearer or the image of a dragon may represent a very real act of allegiance. The logic here is closest to the concept of transubstantiation. We witness here the transubstantiation of the self into signs by the desiring subject. The idea of a fundamental existential personality is rendered valueless. The subject is constructed from a layering of veils because it is itself a veil or surplus that hides something else. The tattoo is only one veil among many. This ritual order of signage replaces any possible natural order. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that

If identification is a nomination, a designation, then simulation is the writing corresponding to it, a writing that is strangely polyvocal, flush with the real. It carries the real beyond its principle to the point where it is effectively produced by the desiring-machine. The point where the copy ceases to be a copy in order to become the Real *and its artifice*.⁵

The image goes beyond being a copy or representation of the inner self to become both the real and a desired reality. Tattoo recognises that the self is not fixed but has many voices.



Shaggs



Kylie



Jim

Deleuze and Guattari speak of the breakdown of the relation between the signifier and the signified in capitalist societies, a breakdown which is markedly different to the situation in what they call 'primitive societies'. For them tattoo is exemplary⁶ in that it has a fixed meaning and an almost talismanic effect on the tattooed. While such an interconnected relation of signifier and signified is no longer a feature of contemporary anglo-celtic tattoo, neither can the total deterritorialisation of signifier and signified described by them as a characteristic of capitalist societies be seen. Rather, contemporary tattoo can be seen as a model of representation in which the meaning of the tattooed image, while often disconnected from its roots, is intensely significant and personally relevant. Both the flaming skull and the blue flower articulate a reality for the bearer of the tattoo which is a reflection or fantasy of the individual's persona or birthright. Once inscribed, the self image is effectively realised.

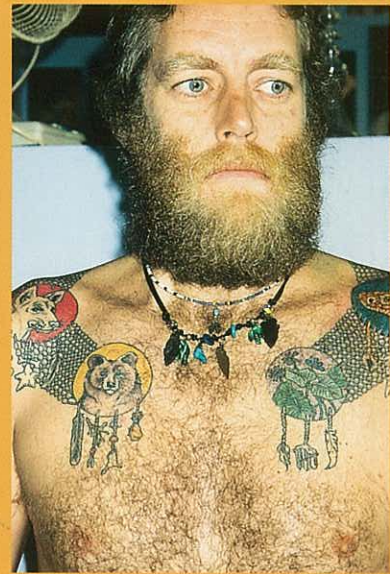
The photocopies which de Medici has enlarged from slides for this installation present a challenge for the viewer. If they are not to be read as a simple documentation project we must look beyond the tattoos of the sitters for subject matter to the interaction of tattoo and contemporary art practice. Of all the media photography holds closest to this promise to deliver reality. The more raw and blemished the image the more 'truthful' it appears to be. The photocopy likewise plays on the idea of faithful documentation of the original. The slides, like the swabs and patches, are the detritus of the tattooing process, the imperfection of the original slide is further distorted by its enlargement as a photocopy. These raw images charged with intensity lure us with the promise of voyeuristic insight into the



Cliff



Terri



Don

strange truth of other lives, or de Medici's work in tattoo. Yet as we well know, this is all a play of appearances. The real perversity lies in our own expectation that we can read this exposure as a fixed identity. The individuals photographed here are no more defined by their tattoo than de Medici is defined by her practice of the medium.

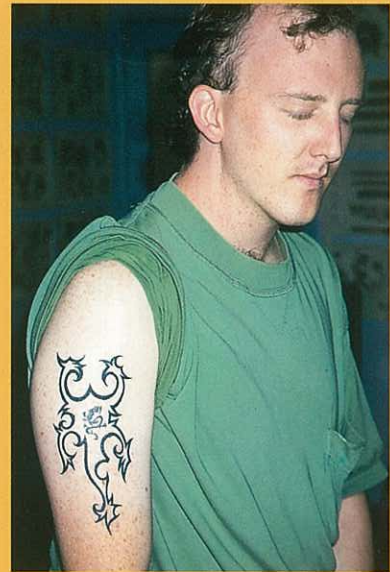
However, this play of appearances need not be seen as fundamentally deceptive. If the installation is not a documentation project in the sense that the photographic tradition has led us to understand it over the last century and a half, it can be defined as such within the much older tradition of tattoo. Like the tattooed blue flower represented here this installation documents an imaginary. de Medici has selected these images to reflect on her practice as the sitters reflect their personal self image through the tattoos they proudly show the camera. Passing beyond the point where they document or replicate reality these images have become both the real and its artifice. By making her personal experience visible de Medici has brought forth a vision which is layered and ambiguous as the photographs in tattoo magazines are not. An important part of this vision are the active voices of the many different people she tattoos and the many different reasons they have for being tattooed. de Medici has tattooed the gallery space with photocopies reflecting a reality characterised not by irreducible essence but rather by an active production of appearance. A photograph of the tattoo which did not also represent the face of the subject would reduce the seductive potential of the tattoo. The domestic quality of the photocopy only enhances the regular humanity of the subjects. This is no dumb surface but rather an articulate construction with many active voices and many polyvocal realities.



Unknown



Catherine



John

In this installation de Medici has brought two visual cultures into dynamic interaction. The structuring principles of photography and tattoo, reality and artifice are weighed one against the other and an elegant and uncompromising synthesis is achieved. The quality of excess which marks this installation is tightly structured by a rigorous discipline. de Medici's engagement with the traditions and practice of tattoo and her daily encounters with those she tattoos, as well as her understanding of contemporary theory, have led her to redefine boundaries of contemporary art practice. Building on the inheritance of tattoo she explores alternative strategies and histories for visual culture. This installation is a marker on the way. With elegant simplicity she has forged a gateway leading out of a theoretical impasse which comes ready made with a pathway leading forwards and backwards in time.

Jenny McFarlane
Assistant Curator
City Gallery, Canberra

¹ Importantly each sitter has given permission for these photographs to be taken and exhibited.

² Baudrillard, J 'The Precession of Simulacra' *Art & Text* Spring 1983 p. 3-47 Trans. by P. Foss & P. Patton.

³ Klossowski, P *Un si funeste désir* p. 193 Gallimard, Paris 1963

⁴ Baudrillard, J *The revenge of the crystal* p. 134 ed. and trans. Foss, P and Pefanis, J Pluto Press, Sydney, 1990

⁵ Deleuze, G and Guattari, F *Anti-Oedipus* p. 87 Trans. Hurley, R et al The Athlone Press, London, 1984

⁶ *ibid.* p. 189



Zoc



Gretchen



Paul

60 Heads touring March 1996–August 1997

VENUE	PLACE	DATE
Canberra Contemporary Art Space	Canberra	March, 1996
Performance Space	Sydney	May 1996
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art	Melbourne	March 1997
Institute of Modern Art	Brisbane	June/July 1997
24 Hour Art	Darwin	August 1997



Brett



Charlie



Unknown

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