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CA LEGISLATION P. 28
SUSPENSION OF BELIEF P. 10
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A recent wedding dinner—surrounded by people I didn’t know when the conversation turned to, “So, what do you do?”—I found myself talking about my career as a piercer, my studio, my time on the APP Board, and my work editing The Point. As I am prone to, I spoke enthusiastically about all of these.

I quickly discovered the person who did the asking—Alessandro Braidotti, or Sandro to his friends—is a lecturer who teaches a class titled Analytical Reading and Writing at one of the larger universities here in Philadelphia. I also found he has a particular interest in writing—and writing instruction—among groups where writing is not part of their ordinary practice, and he talked of his start on an academic paper about writing in non-writing fields. Needless to say, Sandro and I found we had a lot to talk about. We made a date for later to continue our conversation.

When we next met for lunch, I talked at length about the history of The Point. For someone from outside our industry to understand this publication, they need to know the history of the APP, and to understand the history of the APP they need the history of our industry. And to understand the history of our industry, that person must know our publications. As Elayne Angel writes in this issue’s President’s Corner (page 4), our industry is not an old one, and it’s not difficult to see clearly back over the last 30 or so years and note the milestones, the moments where the there was a sea-change as we inched toward where we are today.

And what were those milestones? Most of them were published writing. For an industry that often seems averse to writing, it’s easy to forget that many of the most important, and pivotal, moments in our history were marked by the publication of writing by us and about us.

I talked to Sandro about PFIQ, the magazine started in 1977 by Jim Ward and published by Gauntlet until 1997, and about how it connected piercing enthusiasts all over the US—and the world—through articles and “pin pals” personals. I explained Modern Primitives, the 1989 book that took piercing from the gay and leather underground and introduced it to punks and art students (like me). We talked about Fakir’s Body Art, and Body Play magazine from the UK, and how the writing and images from these publications helped define our philosophy and our aesthetic.

I talked about my introduction to the world of piercing: receiving my first Gauntlet catalog—titled Folio #3—that I ordered after seeing an ad in the pages of On Our Backs magazine. I mentioned the May 1985 issue of Adam magazine that had an article written by Veronica Vera about a modern primitives party in New York—with pictures of Fakir Musafar piercing the stylishly punk attendees. (Adam was an adult magazine, and my friend stole a copy of this issue for me from the donations area of a sperm bank where he was paid to make “deposits” several days a week on his way to class.) I told him about finding Doug Malloy’s The Art of Pierced Penises in a bargain bin at an adult bookstore. (Featured in Modern Primitives, this is the book where much of the commonly accepted—and fabricated—history of certain piercings comes from.)

I talked about coming of age as a piercer at the same time our industry was going through its adolescence, about the growth of the internet and how rec.arts.bodyart and BMEzine.com influenced so much by—among other things—creating a digital meeting space for practitioners and fans worldwide. These sources (and others like them) not only distributed writing and pictures in a way that was impossible in years prior, they democratized the publication of content about body art.

I talked about the writing that defined where we came from, who we were, and the face we showed the rest of the world. Even now, in the age of the ubiquitous internet—where information about body art is available in such a surplus that the problem is no longer finding information, but filtering it—there are still important print publications coming out, such as Elayne’s Piercing Bible and Jim Ward’s recently published Running the Gauntlet.

[continued on page 3]
After our lunch, I sent him home with copies of The Point and Modern Primitives. (I have three copies of this book. Whenever I can’t find mine—or don’t get it back from the last person I lent it to—I end up buying another one.) I gave him my duplicate issues of PFIQ and Body Art. I sent him home with my copy of Jim Ward’s memoir, Running the Gauntlet, and told him that was as good a place to start as any. I gave him links to even more information, including one to download Shannon Larratt’s ModCon. (A free PDF of this book is available on Shannon’s blog: zentastic.com/blog/modcon.)

I followed up with him a week or so later, and received this in reply:

“I’ve been busy with work so I haven’t gotten around to transcribing our conversation, but I’m excited for it. The essay I’d like to write and submit to a journal would be something like: “A description of the discourse communities and historiographies of American body piercing.” Minus those intellectual terms, what I want to write about is how the history of body piercing is written by a community (or more than one community) of people who, as you say, don’t typically see it as something that needs to be written about.

I didn’t put it in those terms, but Sandro had pulled out the word that I had danced around in my talk: community. Through our media we establish our community. We define ourselves by what we write about ourselves. The Point is no exception.

And as our industry grows and matures, this conversation becomes more subtle and more diverse. The body piercing industry is no longer just about body piercing. This issue has a lot of content about suspensions. This wasn’t intentional; it just happened this way, as many of the world’s largest annual suspension gatherings all took place this summer: Wings of Desire in Oslo, Norway (page 7), the Dallas SusCon (page 19), the 7th APTPI SusCon (page 25), and even BMXnet, which offers a full range of body modification education in addition to suspension (page 31).

While the articles for this issue differ in how much body piercing is the focus, they all—either indirectly or directly—talk about our community. This is the conversation our community is having, right here, right now, in The Point.

Welcome to issue #57 of The Point: The Journal of the Association of Professional Piercers.
t seems each year passes more quickly than the last, so it’s never too early to start planning for the next APP Conference. The 17th Annual APP Conference and Exposition will be taking place June 17-22, 2012 at Bally’s Las Vegas Hotel and Casino, and it will be here before you know it. This is the same venue we enjoyed in 2011, and the Conference Committee is already hard at work organizing the event, developing the curriculum, and making plans to ensure that the 2012 APP Conference and Expo will be the best one yet.

I can still remember my first event: It was the second APP Conference, held in Orlando, Florida, in May of 1997—about a year after I had become a member. I was pretty nervous being in a new place with so many people I didn’t know. It was intimidating at first, but after opening up and initiating some conversations I found that most of the other piercers there were feeling the same way. Soon, each of us seemed to set our fears and differences aside and we came together to talk about what was important to us and to our industry.

To see a snapshot of that time, all anyone needs to do is look through some of the first copies of *The Point*. In the beginning, each issue was but a few photocopied pages stapled together. It is absolutely fascinating to see the topics and perspectives of the times, “way back when” in the earlier days of our profession. Some articles about “revolutionary” new products, services, jewelry styles, and other innovations for our industry now seem almost humorous, having become so accepted that now no one gives them a second thought. Younger piercers are often unaware of how new our field really is, believing that the body piercing industry has “always” been around. It takes only a quick look through early issues of *The Point* to show this isn’t the case.

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For example, the following is from *The Point* #5, published in September of 1995. It was submitted by a piercer working to get a separate category for body piercing listed in the phone book and serves as a reminder of just how “fringe” piercing was not that long ago. It shows how much the field of piercing, the APP, and the world itself has changed since then:

“In late February I called our US West Direct Yellow Pages ad representative and asked what the procedure was for getting a heading in the phone directory for Body Piercing. I was told that it was just lumped under “Ear Piercing” or “Tattooing.” I explained that it was a totally different business and I did not feel that it fit under either of these categories. I was then told that to request a new heading in the phone directory there has to be a written request and documentation that separate heading is warranted. I composed a letter to US West Direct and enclosed various forms of documentation. I soon received a call that our representative was forwarding the information to the corporate offices.

The closing date for all of the review and documentation process was set at July 11, 1995. I was given the phone number of the corporate reviewer. I called and explained the need for the listing, and gave them a number of names of establishments which would be interested in using the proposed heading. On July 10, I was called and told that the heading was approved, and would appear in the 1996 Yellow Pages Directory for US West Direct. As of August 1, 1995, the heading will be available for the following states: WA, OR, MN, NM, MI, WY, CO, SD, MO, 10, MT, UT, NE, IA. I also inquired whether this case would influence other phone book distributors in the rest of the country—the answer was YES; it will definitely open the door. I strongly encourage businesses to call their phone directory representatives and ask to be listed under the separate heading of Body Piercing.

Al D., Playspace Ltd.
Seattle, WA

Now, body piercing is everywhere and printed phone books are becoming extinct in the digital age. And sadly, Al D. Sowers, the first applicant to achieve business member status in the APP, is no longer with us. (R.I.P. Al D., we miss you!). But this time is captured in back issues of *The Point*.

Regardless of whether you’re a rookie or a piercing veteran—or even outside our industry looking in—these early issues of *The Point* show how relatively new the piercing industry really is. They convey how incredibly fast piercing has grown, how far it has come, and the advances the APP has made with it. The next time you have a few minutes, download an early copy and see for yourself.

Each and every issue of *The Point* is available for free download in PDF format at safepiercing.org/publications/the-point.
This past July I was lucky to have attended the Norwegian SusCon, Wings of Desire (WoD), organized by Christiane Løfblad, owner of Pin Point Piercing Studio in Oslo, and Håve Fjell, the “HeadMaster” of the sideshow group Pain Solution. It was my first time attending the event, and after hearing so many good things about it from so many different people I was a little worried I might be disappointed. I wasn’t.

Throughout the three days of intensive suspensions was an overriding feeling of community and teamwork, and it was clear from the beginning that this event evolved into what it is now from years of experience: learning from past mistakes, being critical, and making necessary changes from year to year. It was about health, safety, and community: about maintaining positive interactions in the way people work together. This focus—coupled with a shared passion for suspension—created a familial, supportive atmosphere.

The setting for this year’s SusCon was a club located near a river and flanked by beautiful waterfalls that cascaded past the entrance. Inside were several large rooms with tall ceilings, all rigged with multiple suspension points, and a dark and quiet lounge providing a place to get some downtime. Fruit, coffee, and snacks were always available, and vegan meals were the daily fare.

Wings of Desire’s Ten Commandments—be clean, be polite, be sober, be respectful, be honest, be generous, be active, be aware, be patient, be cool—are simple guidelines for living with very practical applications in the intense atmosphere this marathon suspension event generates. The communication, protocols, team leaders, system set-up (with two separate areas for piercing and aftercare), and clear goals of the organizers were truly amazing to watch in action. This was not a place for people to show off or see how wild they could get—or for the accompanying overblown egos—but there were plenty of people testing their personal limits. (I have never seen so many one-point chest suspensions in so short a time.) By the end of the weekend over one hundred suspensions took place.

There were many beautiful and technically difficult suspensions—too many to describe here—but one in particular deserves to be mentioned: Rolf Buchholz’s 100-hook suspension for his hundredth suspension. Not small hooks either; 8g hooks, with five inserted at a time. At times I felt like I had been transported back in time to the Spanish Inquisition as I listened to him scream into his towel for over an hour. Rolf, however, appeared to be enjoying himself when he was finally in the air. The rigging and hook placement alone were a wonder.
The counterpoint to Rolf’s suspension was Fredrik Bohm’s seated cross-stitch suspension. There is something curiously tranquil about watching a large musclebound Swede calmly working away at his needlepoint while hanging from hooks. When he was finished, he presented the embroidery to Håve and Christiane to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the event. Watching him work on that embroidery brought up childhood memories for me of my Swedish grandmother, Mormor, working on cross-stitch embroidery with my mother.

For my turn, I wanted to try out the spinning beam. Jimmy Buddha (from Diablo Organics) and I took the stage, and it was an exhilarating experience being transformed into an acrobat, spinning in all directions and leaping in big arcs into the air. It turned out the nausea upon stopping was the hard part—aka, “Bring me that bucket!”

The Wings of Desire SusCon is an international event, with attendees this year from Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, Croatia, England, New Zealand, the USA, and Russia. It was also the focus of various artistic and media projects: The Russian suspension group, the SINNER Team, was invited to show their movie describing the evolution of a radical free-fall suspension that they have developed, one that involves leaping off bridges into swinging suspensions. Louis Fleischauer did a chaos-suspension performance with microphones inserted under his skin. Zane Whitmore and the film crew Precarious Egg were filming for their upcoming suspension documentary, “Feet Off the Ground,” and Håve’s sister, Helene Fjell, was taking photographs for the new book celebrating ten years of Wings of Desire to be released in 2012. (Her experience and sensitivity to capturing intimate moments can be seen in her photos for this article.) I am also proud to have been invited to design and manufacture a line of commemorative glass plugs with the WoD star and hook.

Unfortunately, I missed the legendary afterparty and barbecue—where people overcompensate for the event’s sobriety with a big bash—but the fjords were calling and I had an appointment with Santa in the Arctic Circle! Special thanks and respect to Christiane Lofblad and Håve Fjell for hosting one of the best SusCons ever.

Rolf Buchholz, from Dortmund, Germany, has been included in the 2012 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records as the world’s most pierced man. According to the book’s site, Rolf “had 453 piercings, including 158 around his lips, as of 05 August 2010.” Congratulations!

Rolf is an avid photographer, traveler, and suspension enthusiast, and is a frequent photo contributor to The Point. His photos accompany several articles in this issue.
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Suspension of Belief: A 21st Century Adaptation of a Venerable Spiritual Practice, and was selected by the California Community College Honors Symposium to be presented at Stanford University, 2011.

For a millennium, the Tamil Hindus have maintained the sacred act of perforating their skin with metal hooks to suspend their bodies (called chadak puja). During the 1990s, the practice of suspension diffused into non-Tamil cultures. This presentation demonstrates the socio-religious significance of the chadak puja and traces its historical adaptation into the emerging international counterculture of “suspension practitioners.” For both groups, the physiological stresses of suspension trigger transcendent states of dissociation and generate both secular and social benefits of in-group catharsis and cohesion.

This analysis stems from historical sources and qualitative research accumulated through both direct observation of the Sri Lankan Vel festival and participant observation in the Oslo Suspension Convention.

This article narrowly focuses and defines the act of flesh hook suspension to the insertion of metal (usually steel) hooks. These hooks range from approximately 2mm (for the Tamil) to 4 or even 5mm (for Westerners). As a general rule, increased hook thickness gives greater strength and integrity for the hook shape while displacing more skin tissue over a greater surface area.

The Tamil use sharpened hooks to pierce into the hypodermis, the subcutaneous, and the superficial fascia layers of the skin. Westerners innovated a procedure of piercing with special, sterile, single-use hypodermic needles, which the hooks are inserted into either before or after the piercing. Factors that contribute to the physical and mechanical safety of flesh hook suspension include:

- Hook size, material, and construction;
- Placement of the hook(s) on the body (for various skin areas are known to be less or more capable of withstanding the stresses of suspension);
- Amount of tissue within the hook to diffuse skin surface pressure at hook site; and
- Number of hooks proportionally sharing the body’s weight, and the overall weight of the individual participant.

The hooks are fastened to ropes. The Tamil then tie these ropes to a freshly cut, flexible, and strong tree or a constructed frame. For the rigging, Westerners incorporate physics with the existing knowledge and apparatus of rock climbing.

It must be mentioned that this text narrowly defines suspension and only looks at two cultures’ application of suspension. Accounts of suspension manifest in many forms throughout human culture and time including: the Oh Kee Pa ceremony of the Mandan Native Americans; the Sundance Ritual of the Lakota; the pole-fliers of the Nahua, Haustec, and Otomi peoples of Mexico; the “land divers” (known as Naghol) of Pentecost Island in Vanuatu (noteworthy, this is the forerunner of Bungee jumping); the suspension with piercing from a tree of the Norse god Odin; and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Time constraints prohibit—for this article—exploring the details of the variations, the questions about more generalized suspension practices, and the effects and implications of independent origination versus cultural diffusion. However, it is important to acknowledge this macro-perspective exists and needs further study. Most importantly, the analogous forms of suspension introduced here are intended to dissuade the audience from exoticizing what is a universal practice.

The Tamil

The Republic of India was formed in 1947, comprising more than an estimated 2,000 ethnic groups. The Tamil are considered one of the main ethnic populations within the major Dravidian linguistic group. The ethnic Tamil homeland is Tamil Nadu, a state in the southeastern region. This region had some of the earliest human habitation outside of Africa. Archeological remains, DNA genealogy testing, and written and oral history all substantiate the Tamil having one of the earliest cultures and one of the oldest continuous religions. This supports the Tamil claim that the origins for the ritual suspension practice predate written history. Though variations of the tradition still survive in parts of India, the practice of suspension in the Tamil Nadu region has greatly diminished. The tradition, referred to by the British as “hook swinging,” was banned in India in the mid-to-late 19th century by British officials with the support of Hindu reformists, members of upper castes, and non-Tamil ethnic groups.

From their earliest dynasties, the Tamil have been seafarers and traders, spreading both their material and non-material culture throughout the region. In the 19th century, the British empire exploited the Tamil as a form of cheap labor, forcing a diaspora of Tamil communities throughout its colonies to such places as Fiji, South Africa, the Caribbean, Burma, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka (the island nation where the Vel festival of this presentation takes place). It is the diasporic Tamil communities that have best preserved the hook swinging tradition.

Chadak Puja

In 1874 a cholera epidemic in southern Sri Lanka caused the colonial government to ban pilgrimages to the sacred city of Katirkamam. In response, the wealthy South Indian business community in Colombo decided to celebrate locally and created its own event and the Vel festival, which stands independent of the Kataragama festival. Vel is held in Jaffna,
the Tamil capital in the north, and Colombo, the national capital. The festival honors the God of War Murugan—also known by other names including Murukan, Skanda, and Kataragama—whose gilded chariot, complete with his Vel (lance), is ceremonially hauled from the Old and New Kathiresan Kovils or Temples usually starting on Sea Street, in the neighborhood of Pettah, to Temples around Galle Road, in the neighborhood Bambalapitiya. The procession of six miles takes approximately four hours of sustained penance to travel. The Vel festival is usually held in July or August.

In general, when the Tamil are asked why participants pierce themselves, they explain that they are fulfilling a vow made when asking help of Lord Murugan—a serious illness, for instance, or difficulty in an examination, a job, or with arranging a love marriage or conceiving a child (particularly a boy). The researcher Elizabeth Fuller Collins notes that “most devotees interviewed do not state enlightenment as their goal but rather had made a vow to Murugan asking [for] help in their everyday lives” (10). Collins goes on to say, “Vow fulfillment has been described by some scholars as penance. However the popular belief is that Murugan has answered prayers and the devotees are upholding their end of the bargain” (52).

Particularly for disenfranchised peoples, one cannot overemphasize the importance of the mutually derived pride, identity, and support which results from maintaining strong cultural signifiers such as suspension. However, an in-depth analysis of the socio-political complexities and consequences for the Tamil minority within the Sinhalese majority’s state system, though significant, are beyond the scope of this presentation.

The Pujari, the term for lay, non-Brahmin priest, facilitates the piercing and monitors the participant’s trance state. External markers of altered states of consciousness, such as glazing of the eyes, speaking in altered tones or languages, dancing and/or moving uncontrollably, though common and expected, are neither universal nor mandatory.

**NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC**

Sporadically, since 1913, (1931, 1966), National Geographic has published accounts of Tamil festivals with photos of suspension practices. The vast majority of reader responses would be interest, curiosity, or repulsion; however, for a select few, these articles inspired personal exploration and experimentation.

**STELARC**

Stelarc is a conceptual performance artist. In the 1970s, using flesh hook suspension as a device, his work shared with audiences the idea that the human body was not equipped to evolve at the accelerating pace of knowledge and technology advancement, and thus was obsolete.

**FAKIR MUСAFAR**

Fakir Musafar is the founder and one of the most influential forces behind the Western Suspension communities. As an adolescent photographer inspired by National Geographic magazine and later by Stelarc, he began a lifetime endeavor of chronicling his explorations of various traditional spiritual practices involving bodily stresses and modifications. In 1967, Fakir performed his first suspension vertically by two piercings (like the Mandan Native Americans) and then, in 1984, horizontally by multiple piercings (like the Tamil) (9). In 1993, starting in San Francisco, others began to follow Fakir’s example. During the mid-to-late 1990s, Fakir inspired, mentored, and trained many of today’s most experienced leaders within what has grown to a greater communitas numbering in the several thousands.

**OSLO SUSCON**

Suspensions are practiced alone, in small groups, or at large gatherings. One such gathering is the Oslo SusCon. From July 18-20, 2008, I attended the 7th annual Oslo
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SusCon. The age of participants ranged from 18 to approximately 50, with 35 women and 44 men from 14 countries. The Oslo SusCon was formed in 2002 by the nonprofit organization Wings of Desire. The founders are performance artist Håvve Fjell and body piercer Christiane Leiblnd. Wings of Desire’s mission statement (wingsofdesire.org) conveys the most common values shared by many of the individuals, performance troupes, and alliances which form the global network of suspension practitioners:

“Wings of Desire promote[s] body suspension in a safe and relaxed ambience to those who feel the urge to fly, regardless of how and why people want to suspend... we are proud to be able to guide anyone with the desire through the wonderful experience of body suspension, first timers and veterans alike. We believe all motivations for suspending are equally valid, it is not our place to dictate your reasons or choices.

Oslo SusCon has since the... first year been an international gathering with two main purposes; first and foremost [as] an opportunity to get suspended, secondly [as] a meeting place to share knowledge amongst practitioners on all levels. The convention is also a social arena for making friends and networking in our community. Every year we invite guest crew from other suspension teams to work alongside our local team, this is a good way to show others how we work and to get feedback and learn from our guests as well. As the Oslo SusCon we cover most bases by having introduction to the weekend and suspension varieties by Håvve, guest speakers who talk about body suspension and other related activities, videos and photos from past events and live performance [enculturation]. As of the past few years the after-party has become a traditional conclusion of the SusCon.

We have chosen to open the doors for outsiders for several reasons. Participants who want to suspend in front of their friends and family can invite them in the open house [only designated times are open], people with an itch for hooks gets an opportunity to have a closer look at how it all goes down, and the curious citizens can come and have peek into our colorful world of body mod and suspension.”

PERSONAL ACCOUNT BY MISTY FORSBERG

So many people in my life have asked me to explain what body suspension is, and more importantly, why I do it. It is as difficult for some of the people I love the most to understand this part of my life as it is for total strangers. I hope this helps a little. Body suspension is, on a very basic level, the act of piercing the skin and hanging from those piercings—but even typing that short description annoys me. It’s like reading the definition of love: the words are all there, but they do nothing to encompass what it really is.

Body suspension is one of the most amazing things in my life. From the moment my toes left the ground for the first time, I knew that this was it for me, that I had found my passion. I am always going 100 miles an hour, trying to be better, to do more, to learn more, to live up to all the expectations of everyone around me, to never refuse anything that is asked of me, and to never stumble while I do it all. When I suspend it’s a moment of silence in my otherwise chaotic mind. I am at peace and I am completely happy. It reminds me of how strong I am, and of all the things I am capable of doing. It is something most people see as impossible, yet I do it with a smile on my face.

Does it hurt? I don’t really know how to answer that. For a lot of people I think the answer is definitely yes. I am fortunate in that I love every aspect of suspension. I love the feeling I get when the piercings are done, the moments as the hooks begin to pull, and the second that I leave the ground. At worst, I would say there is some discomfort involved, but nothing that I would label as actually painful. It is intense emotion and sensation, but all of that can be positive if you can get past the preconception that it is going to hurt.

More than anything, I do this because of the people in this community. I see, in so many of them, the qualities I want to improve in myself. Being involved in suspension has brought some of the strongest, hardest working, most incredible people into my life. I find myself saying “I love you” every day to these people when we talk, and I mean it with all of my heart each time. I have seen my friends come together and give everything they can to help other members of the suspension community that are complete strangers simply because they are so selfless. I have learned more about generosity, friendship, and dedication from those around me than I ever thought I could, and I am a far better person for having their influence in my life. The members of this community inspire and motivate me to be a better person every day, and I know very few people who can say that about the people they surround themselves with.

I don’t know if this explanation helps at all, but I hope it does. I think the simplest thing to understand is that this beautiful art has brought more happiness and joy in my life than I can describe. I am a part of an incredible group of people who bring nothing but positive things into my life. For those that love me, that should be all the explanation necessary.

PHYSIOLOGY OF TRANCE

In “Neurobiology of Ritual Trance”, researcher Barbara Lux notes the emotional and social effects of altered states of consciousness:

Rituals properly executed promote a feeling of well being and relief, not only because prolonged or intense stresses are alleviated but also because the driving techniques employed in rituals are designed to sensitize or “tune” the nervous system and thereby lessen inhibition of the right hemisphere and permit temporary right hemisphere dominance... (144).

What is being “tuned” is the autonomic nervous system (ANS, also known as the visceral nervous system), the part of the peripheral nervous system that acts as a control system, maintaining homeostasis in the body. These activities are generally performed without conscious control. The ANS affects heart rate, digestion, respiration rate, salivation, perspiration, diameter of the pupils, urination, and sexual arousal. Whereas most of its actions are involuntary, some, such as breathing, work in tandem with the conscious mind. Research by Eugene d’Aquili and Charles Laughlin Jr. shows that usually one system predominates, but during prolonged rhythmic stimuli, strong discharges from both autonomic systems create a state of stimulation of the median forebrain bundle. This generates not only pleasurable sensation, but under the proper conditions, it coordinates limbic discharges and creates a sense of union and oneness with the participating group (155-6). This physiological process shares
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similarities with the more widely experienced phenomenon of sexual orgasm. Later studies of altered states of consciousness by Michael Winkelman and Philip M. Peek reveal:

The production of slow-wave brain discharges in the serotonergic connections between the limbic system and brain stem regions... integrate information...from preverbal brain structures into language-mediated activities of the frontal cortex provid[ing] intuition, understanding, enlightenment, a sense of unity, and personal integration (184).

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Dallas SusCon 2011

Eric Gustav “Goose” Johnson
In the Skin Tattoo and Piercing
Victoria, TX

Are you ready? Over and over, you check yourself. You can do this. You’ve seen it done before. What another person can do, you can do. Are you ready? You take a moment to center yourself. You can do this. The hooks shift slightly as you move. Are you ready? You alternate between closed eyes and a faraway stare. You can’t decide whether to pull yourself inside or push yourself out. Are you ready? They huddle around you; attaching ropes, adjusting tension, double- and triple-checking knots and hooks. Shadows just outside your sight talk to you. Are you ready? A deep exhale and a nod and it begins. Lines go taut. Hooks pull slowly at your skin. You feel your skin separate from your muscle. A flutter of fear passes through you, between the moments when the pain is registered and the endorphins kick in. Your whole world becomes your breath. You fill your lungs hoping for more buoyancy. Exhalation becomes a river carrying your pain out into the world. You force your body to relax into the hooks. You’re surprised at how many muscle groups are tense. One by one they stop resisting and start relaxing as you resign yourself to the presence of the hooks. At the moment when you feel your skin about to give you realize your weight is no longer centered on the ground; you are airborne. All that is needed is to draw the limbs close and you can take flight. Another deep breath. You can do this. Are you ready?

The Dallas SusCon is a yearly gathering to trade knowledge and try new techniques with suspension crews from across the world. It began in 2001 when Allen Falkner’s crew, Traumatic Stress Discipline (TSD), realized they had more requests than they could handle and needed help to deal with the sheer volume of suspensions they had been asked to perform. The call went out to the few crews around at that time, and they all descended upon Dallas in the fall of 2001 to create something new: a multi-team gathering, a suspension convention. Since then, the Dallas SusCon has become a (nearly) annual tradition among suspension practitioners. This year, I saw and spoke with conventioneers from all points of the compass and all strata of life, all of whom came together to partake in that most elusive spirit: community.

Lodging & Site
This year we found ourselves in the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport Hotel & Conference Center. Our overseas attendees got a treat when they found their rooms taken care of by BME.com; a more stalwart patron of suspension I would be hard-pressed to find. The distance from the site and opening party was a drive, but thankfully there was bus service ferrying people back and forth. Our traditional suspension site is a nondescript warehouse in downtown Dallas. This year a few crews around at that time, and they all asked to perform. The call went out to the few crews around at that time, and they all descended upon Dallas in the fall of 2001 to create something new: a multi-team gathering, a suspension convention. Since then, the Dallas SusCon has become a (nearly) annual tradition among suspension practitioners. This year, I saw and spoke with conventioneers from all points of the compass and all strata of life, all of whom came together to partake in that most elusive spirit: community.

Classes

• Suturing – Brian Decker: Though labeled as a class, Brian ran his course much more like a hands-on workshop. Many times throughout the weekend, Brian took small groups to a table setup in the back and practiced stitching together pig skin. It reminded me of arts and crafts day in preschool with a slightly morbid twist. Brian showed exemplary patience in guiding people through what is becoming an invaluable skill for the act of human body suspension.1

• Rigging Class – Allen Falkner: Allen does a masterful job of explaining the pros and cons of a wide variety of products available on the market, how each is used, and why each is needed. Cross-contamination, proper use of knots, and the basic mathematical theory of working load limits were all covered by a man who has been a leader of the suspension community since its inception.

• Preparing For Performance – Steve Joyner: Speaking of community leaders, we also had the honor of hearing Steve speak of the hazards and benefits of public performance suspensions. He talked about the pitfalls of inadequate stage layouts, limited resources, team management, and the art of dealing with promoters and venues. All of this was peppered with his own anecdotes from a life on the road with Constructs of Ritual Evolution (CoRE), one of the oldest suspension performance troupes in the world.

• Bloodborne Pathogens – Adam Santos of Health Educators and Jason Shaw of iHung: Not all suspension practitioners are piercers, so this might be their first exposure to aseptic technique and bloodborne pathogens training. If so, they are in good hands with these instructors. It was also nice to hear the variance in techniques between the two—and seeing their different ways to solve problems.

1. Editor’s Note: Depending on where you’re from and the laws in your area (or country), suturing is best left to medical professionals. That being said, suturing is an invaluable skill for suspension artists. Difficulties with torn skin when suspending in remote locations may require immediate attention before licensed medical help can be sought.
• Connecting to Transcendence – Brian Fennig: I’m consistently amazed by some of the people Allen gets to speak at the Dallas SusCon. This year, Brian Fennig, a Humanities Professor from Southern Methodist University, spoke on the transcendental experience and how to connect to a ritual mindset in everyday life. He was a great speaker and showed considerable enthusiasm for suspension and the community around it.

OPENING PARTY
Like in years past, The Church (also known as the Lizard Lounge, the perennial feature of the Dallas gothic/industrial scene) played host to the opening party in the form of the annual Freaks & Fetish Ball. Cruising room-to-room and sampling the different atmospheric music, the jovial side of the suspension community came forth. A wry—dipping into black—sense of humor and a fervent love of life is the norm for this crowd. Socializing with old friends and meeting new ones, we waited for the show to start. A cavalcade of dark splendors paraded before us that night: suspensions by Hanging City Suspensions, body manipulation feats by Swingshift Sideshow, and even a fashion show of the cenobite-esque work of Genne Laakso. [You can read about Genne’s work in the last issue of The Point, #56.]

SUSPENSIONS
Events began on a solemn note as the gathered crowd took a few moments to remember those who were lost this year (Arwen and ZiD; you are missed), and those who couldn’t be there. But we had no mourning moment of silence; instead, Allen led us in a righteous cacophony, an exultation of life. The Disgraceland chant screamed by over a hundred voices echoed and shook the rafters, proving that we do not go quietly into that good night.

Jazzed up and ready for the action to start, we piled out of the orientation and into CoRE’s cleansing ceremony. A ring of practitioners from many different crews and countries gathered about as the smell of sage burning wafted over those assembled. The solemnity of the moment forged our passion into a quiet strength to do what was asked of us these next few days. Then the suspensions began in earnest.

With more than 150 suspension practitioners gathered together over the course of three days, documenting all that happened was a vigorous task. Several scenes stand out: Neil Chakrabarti’s roar of triumph after a five stage transition, the deep belly laugh after Bradde Hamman revealed his “Frogman Fondue,” and the tense silence and ecstatic cheering as Andrew S. of Swingshift Sideshow rose above the crowd. These and the other suspensions are blended together in my crazy jumble of memories of the event.

ADVICE TO NEW ATTENDEES
It has been said many times before, but it is a truism: We do things a little different in Texas. The same can be said of our conventions. Come expecting to work. Dallas SusCon is a teaching event; the best way to learn something is to dive right in and do it. Yes, you will screw up. Yes, someone will point out what you have done wrong. Don’t take it personally. Learn and be stronger for it. One of the best things about having so many talented people under one roof is that the stumbling rigors of those new to this field are watched over by many experienced eyes.
Things you should bring: your own hooks, shackles, a sharp knife (and a spare knife, and a knife for a friend who forgot one, and another knife just because), eye protection, a lighter, work gloves, comfy shoes, and at least one change of clothes. Hydration is crucial. North Texas in late spring/early summer is a hot, dry place. (Thanks is due to Industrial Strength Body Jewelry for sponsoring the water bottles distributed to all attendees this year.) No excuses; keep your water bottle handy and keep it filled. You will receive a communique from the convention detailing a series of suspension protocols. It is very important to know these, as you may at any moment be asked to participate. For this event, Health Educators has codified the many and varied practices of different crews into a standardized system. Read them thoroughly and carry a copy with you for reference.

Remember to always support the people who support you. Patronize suspension sponsors like Industrial Strength/Sharpass Needles, Statim.us, Plaza Supply, Black Sheep Hooks, and Obscurities Tattoo & Piercing. Give these businesses your money!

Lastly, a request of SusCon resident rigger extraordinaire, Stewart “S2B” Stephens: Next year, bring your flag. Doesn’t matter if it’s your state flag, your national flag, your crew’s flag, your whatever flag. We set up large trusses for outside suspension at the site. This year we got a handful of flags mounted on that structure flowing in the wind, mostly USA and Texas. But we are such a diverse and multicultural community, next year we want to see a flag from every nation, state, and state of mind in attendance.

**PARTING WORDS**

The desire to pierce your flesh and hang your body from that hole can be a scary prospect to come to terms with. It was not that long ago that those who felt that desire to test themselves were isolated and alienated if they made their feelings public. Unfortunately, this is still true in many circles today. Thanks to pioneers like Jim Ward, Fakir Musafar, Stelarc, and Allen Falkner, human body suspension has evolved over the last few decades from a curiosity into a full-fledged performance art form—as well as a recreational sport and spiritual pursuit. There are even those who have re-created the spirituality of the initiatory ordeal using suspension. This evolution couldn’t have been possible without events like the Dallas SusCon, where rising stars and old hands come together in part to speak and show each other different techniques and practices... but mostly to enjoy the company of those who share a fervent zeal for testing the limits of their bodies. This love—and it is a deep familial love—is the binding strength of this community. As to the future, I’ll leave you with a quote that best sums it up:

“It’s going to grow, be nurtured, if people have love for it. [With] the amount of passion that goes into suspension, it was an inevitable growth and it’s going to keep growing. I don’t think we’ve seen the half of it yet.”—Arwen “Spliff” Rosa
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It seems like only yesterday we organized the first Italian SusCon in Amelia. Now, almost without realizing it, we are in the seventh year! At the very first gathering we offered drawing lessons for tattoo artists in addition to suspensions, as we were not sure that we would be able to cover all the expenses. It was a shot in the dark but every year our number of attendees steadily increases, especially those from abroad. More and more people who attended the SusCon for the first time have learned to suspend themselves safely. Others have set up crews and are now performing all over the world. Some attendees are now so fond of suspensions that they attend SusCons all over Europe.

APTPi is very proud to promote this movement in Italy.

Our goal has been always to do suspensions with the highest level of safety and hygiene, in every type of environment, and in every kind of weather. We have achieved that with the great help of the Wings of Desire suspension team from Oslo, who joined us from the very first edition and combined their experience with leading figures from the international scene.

This year, we hosted Steve Joyner, founder of Constructs of Ritual Evolution (CoRE), who told us about his suspension group’s history. He gave an interesting lecture illustrating how CoRE, performing before an audience of up to 5,000 people, combines music, dance, theater, stage costuming, and suspensions in an unpredictable and unusual way.

In addition to Steve Joyner, we asked the guys from the Sinner Team to join us and they enthusiastically accepted. They got past all the red tape and came to Livorno to show us their beautiful documentary about their new way of suspending: free fall suspensions.

During the 2011 SusCon we had forty-three suspensions and five pulls in three days. This represents a remarkable amount of effort—both physical and mental—by the crew, who worked nonstop from morning to night to please all the attendees.

New this year was the pyramid-shaped structure that allowed us to enjoy the beach for the first time; thanks to its mobility, we had the chance to suspend on the beach, and we experienced really intense and evocative suspensions. We also had indoor suspension points, so we were able to suspend even in bad weather, and suspension points in the pine forest for when the heat became too much to have suspensions on the beach.

As we do every year, we want to thank all the attendees, from those who have attended our SusCons from the beginning and those who attended for the first time; the international guests who lent us credibility and fame; and the volunteers, without whom this SusCon couldn’t take place.

Join us for the eighth edition! Keep in touch with us, and subscribe to our mailing list for any updates.

The September 2011 issue of Vogue Italia features a photo editorial of particular interest to body modification enthusiasts. In it, photographer Steven Meisel and model Stella Tennant pay homage to Ethel Granger (1905-1982), well-known corset enthusiast and early piercing pioneer. To see the full issue online—and more pictures of Ethel Granger—go to vogue.it/en/magazine and search “Ethel Granger.”
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On September 9, 2010, California Governor Jerry Brown signed the Safe Body Art Act into California law.

APP representatives, members of my studio and I have worked closely with the California Association of Environmental Health Administrators (CAEHA) and the Health Officers Association of California (HOAC) in an effort to ensure that the new Safe Body Art Act (Assembly Bill 300) is not only protective of public health, but fair and reasonably enforceable. AB 300 establishes statewide minimum standards for all facilities and practitioners of body piercing, tattooing, and cosmetic tattoooning in California.

It all began back in 1994, in San Francisco. California lawmakers put together AB 101, the first draft of the Safe Body Art Bill. The proposed law empowered local jurisdictions to adopt a health ordinance for public health safety in the practice of tattooing, body piercing, and cosmetic tattooing. AB 101 was uninform ed and poorly written and actually threatened our practice. It did, however, bring together local practitioners in collaboration with local health officials—which eventually gave birth to the Association of Professional Piercers. The four major California piercing studios at the time—Gauntlet, Body Manipulations, Nomad, and Primeval Body L.A.—realized it was time to band together and build a team to get the law done the right way. We wanted regulation and inspection, but we wanted it to be fair and informed.

The APP was born from this group, but as it grew—changing focus and taking on additional political issues—California was once again left to the locals.

In 1997, AB 186 (Brown) was signed into law. AB 186 mandated local health officers to draft standards for body piercing, tattooing, and cosmetic tattoooning. The bill did not define any new code or recommend any regulations that should be adopted other than registration of practitioners and inspections of facilities. It was up to local health officers to provide the California Department of Health Services (now the CDPH, the California Department of Public Health) a set of standards for theses body art practice of tattooing, body piercing, and cosmetic tattoooning.

In practice, very few counties actually created an ordinance for Safe Body Art. In San Francisco, the local Health Department created a task force of practitioners to create these standards. We pushed for reasonable regulation on a local level and within one year we had written a new local ordinance. The trouble was, an actual law is easier to enforce than an ordinance. We still had hack shops piercing minors without ID—as well as reusing needles. Although local health officers took away the permits of these shops, it could not force them to shut their doors without the intervention of the District Attorney. In the meantime, the harmful facilities simply posted a sign that stated they were piercing and tattooing without a local permit—and therefore no ID was required.

For the next ten years, the CDPH worked on adopting regulations. Their statement of reasons identified a need for a single statewide regulation. Local agencies put ordinances on hold pending a statewide ruling.

In February 2008, Justin Malan, Executive Director of the CAEHA picked up where the state left off a decade earlier. We quickly had an Assembly Member willing to author the bill (Fiona Ma) and went to work collaborating with state health officials, practitioners, facility owners, blood banks, lobbyists, and local health inspectors.

AB 517, the current Safe Body Art Bill, was introduced in February 2009, albeit in its first form. After several hearings, meetings, and even lunches with some politicians, both Senate and Assembly passed the bill without opposition. In September of 2009, then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed the bill for seemingly arbitrary political reasons.¹ Part of his veto message for our bill read:

"While I appreciate the author’s attempt to provide minimum statewide standards for body piercing, tattooing and the application of permanent cosmetics, I do not see a compelling need at this time for additional legislation. Body art guidelines were developed several years ago, and local jurisdictions have the option to establish these requirements in their own county. Many counties have chosen to do so, and I am unaware of why the state must take further action to regulate these businesses."

It actually had nothing to do with party politics. Many members of the assembly, including some Republicans, did not approve of the way Governor Schwarzenegger was handling his office—and Schwarzenegger acted out in subtle, aggressive ways when someone spoke up against him. There is a video of him waving around a big knife talking about his budget cuts as if they were a trivial joke.

(Rumor has it this same knife often sat on his desk during individual meetings with certain members of assembly.) The budgets cuts were a serious issue, and Members of the Assembly called many of them cruel and foolish. As a California resident, it felt like his term in office was just like one of his family movies: comedy, but not all funny.

1. The bill was written specifically at no cost to the state, and was not vetoed because of any budget concerns. The political atmosphere in California that year was very confrontational, and it was rumored that the governor was playing a game to get back at the assembly for standing against him on budget concerns. Not all assembly bills were vetoed, but many were.
In the 12 years between the passage of AB 186 and this veto, only six of the 62 districts in California had adopted local ordinances. The confusion and variability from district to district had caused the other districts to wait for a single, clearly defined set of minimum standards. Until California had enforceable state regulations, public safety would continue to be at risk.

In March 2010, Assembly Member Ma found an available bill number: 223. We added some amendments and presented AB 223. The bill again advanced to Senate Floor with no opposition and awaited a signature from the governor. Despite being presented with various statistics and personal experiences to impress the need of regulation upon him, the “Governator” vetoed our bill again! This time his veto message was strangely facetious in its objection, stating, “This bill, among other things, tells tattoo artists how to wash their hands”—as if that is too much to ask from someone exposed to your bloodstream.

Finally, in February 2011, we found another available number and enrolled our bill as AB 300. Round three was more than ten years in the making—I don’t give up easily! This time we pulled out all the stops: I made friends with some new lobbyists on the inside, went bowling with Senator Feinstein’s California aide to get an endorsement, started a letter writing campaign to the governor, met with the governor’s aide to show her the absolute need for this law to pass, and never missed a single phone call, meeting, or news interview. When September finally came, we could only wait for the governor’s signature.

Governor Brown signed AB 300 into California Law on September 9, 2011. At last, California has uniform statewide minimum standards for all facilities and practitioners of body piercing, tattooing, and cosmetic tattooing. Now fully enforceable with fines and jail time, we hope this bill will put an end to all businesses and individuals who cut corners with public health just to make an extra buck. Those of us who already adhere to appropriate standards of clean practice will find it very easy to comply with the new regulations. The state is sponsoring a series of one-day compliance workshops to be hosted by the larger counties. California practitioners will be notified of the upcoming dates.

Republicans typically seek to limit regulation of businesses. Schwarzenegger did state he felt the regulations were too far reaching, but that is only one opinion. As a professional in the industry, I feel we must tell tattoo artists how to wash their hands. Scrubbing a procedure site in an up-and-down motion is the wrong way to actually clean it, therefore, it shouldn’t be permitted. As practitioners we know that a circular outward motion prevents cross contamination on the site being cleaned. And bloodborne pathogens need to be contained by ensuring a 3 gallon trash bag isn’t used in the bottom of a 12 gallon bin. His statement may sound compelling but it is misinformed. He’s just talking “Republican,” while this is a public safety issue.

There are shops that struggle to compete with the hack down the street: people who do a similar procedure for half the price (or less), with often disastrous results for their client. This client then draws the conclusion that every procedure is this way and abandons our services altogether. It doesn’t have to be this way! With informed—and enforceable—regulations we work to ensure every tattoo or piercing has a safe, positive, and healthy result—and we give a boost to the industry that supports us. I see the regulations encouraging growth to the businesses who offer positive experiences for the people and positive revenue for the state by eliminating the businesses that cut corners with public health. As a veteran in the body art industry, I am working for these regulations to strengthen us—and others like us—who share our passion.

2. The full veto message:

   To the Members of the California State Assembly:

   I am returning Assembly Bill [AB] 223 without my signature.

   It is a common complaint within the business community that “overregulation” is driving businesses out of California. Look no further than AB 223 for such an example. This bill, among other things, tells tattoo artists how to wash their hands (use running water, lather hands with soap for at least 15 seconds, dry using a single-use towel, and turn off the tap using the towel or elbow or foot-pedal); instructs tattoo artists to clean the procedure site using a circular motion (the bill does not appear to authorize a back-and forth or up-and-down motion); tattoo artists are also told they need to answer questions regarding the procedure site (assuming this is to answer a question from a client, but this detail has been left strangely vague in the bill); and, of course, tattoo facilities must have washable walls, be equipped with waste containers lined with plastic bags specifically manufactured for use in waste containers and large enough to fold over the top rim of the waste container by a minimum (!) of one inch, and have light sources of at least 150 foot candles of light at the procedure area. Of course, this bill also authorizes no less than 3 new fees to fund this new regulatory oversight. I realize this issue may be important to few, but it is not appropriate to tell tattoo artists through the statute how to wash their hands and fold their trashbags one inch over the rim of a trashcan. If the sponsors wanted a bill that addressed the purported problem, a simple statutory authorization for the Department of Public Health to promulgate standardized regulations would have been acceptable.

   Sincerely,

Arnold Schwarzenegger
he 5th annual BMXnet Conference took place this year in Essen, Germany from October 13 - 16.

This is one of my favorite annual industry-related gatherings, as it maintains an intimate feel, yet still draws artists from all over the world. I have attended the BMXnet conferences in Germany for the last three years, and seeing this vast array of artists of varying disciplines and industry backgrounds coexisting for four days at the same event is incredibly inspiring. Though predominantly European, attendance this year included representatives from around the world. Conveniently for me, the vast majority of attendees were proficient in English—if not completely fluent.

As it has been in the past, the Unperfekthaus in Essen hosted the conference. This cultural landmark is a great fit for BMX, offering us an amazing space with seminar rooms, a theater, accommodations, food and drinks, and a very pleasant staff to take care of us all. I look forward to this event being held there again in 2012.

This year the BMXnet staff took an intriguing new approach to keeping track of class attendance: All attendees received wristbands embedded with implantable passive RFID (radio-frequency identification) ampules that were then scanned at entry points of the seminars to track attendance. (Though there were still a few bugs to work out, this inspired much conversation in regards to public thoughts on RFIDIs being implanted for other applications. At least two of the BMXnet staff had their chips actually implanted in their hands rather than in wrist bands.) Unfortunately, it was physically impossible to make it to every single seminar. There simply weren’t enough hours in a day!

Friday’s seminars touched on all kinds of different body modifications. Body piercing seminars included sessions on stretching, aftercare, and surface piercing. Tattoo seminars covered lasers in the tattoo industry, different tattoo techniques, analyzing inks, and a complete overview of tattoo machines. Scarification seminars included advanced scarification and techniques in laser branding. There was also a dermal punching seminar and some technical seminars covering Statim autoclaves and anodizing jewelry.

After attending 12 hours of workshops in a single day, there was no better way to unwind than by watching the amazing performers who tore up the stage at BMX this year. CoCo Katasura and crew opened the show on Friday and put on a chilling and abstract suspension performance, followed by a tantalizing burlesque number by Courtney Crave. The last act of the night was the HeadMaster of Pain Solution (Håvve Fjell), who served up equal parts intensity and hilarity.

Saturday’s seminars delved into a wide range of different body modification subjects and even offered an introduction to Japanese bondage (shibari). Tattooing classes covered more information on machines and on cover-ups. Other topics included integrative piercing with less tools, hygiene in the studio, blood clotting and complications in piercing, glass as a material for body jewelry, skin care, needleblade piercing, freehand piercing, and surface anchors. Workshops on heavier modifications included genital bead placement, magnetic implants, and an earlobe reconstruction roundtable. There were also body suspension seminars covering responsible and organized suspension practices, fundamental suspension skills, rigging, and history and anthropology. A suspension video presentation and a suspension practitioner roundtable also took place.

Lucky Hell kicked Saturday night into gear by performing a comedic array of glittery stunts with a special appearance by Jussi Paradise (The Saviors). If those two didn’t have everyone’s jaws on the floor already, Courtney Crave followed and fired up the stage for a second time with another of her sexy burlesque spectacles. The final chapter was a knotty performance by The Superfly Suspension Team, putting together a triple tandem suspension which built up to a three step cut-down. All of the performers really stepped it up and stuck their necks out to entertain and astonish this discerning crowd of industry professionals.

The final day of classes was a shorter one, but still covered quite a lot of ground. The ongoing tattoo techniques and machines seminars concluded, and a class covered the history of tattooing. Piercing seminars included advanced freehand piercing, piercing ethics, standard materials (focusing on initial piercing jewelry), and a final jewelry anodizing seminar. Other seminars included suturing techniques, color systems from art and science, electrocauterization, beginner’s bondage, and the Thaipusam Festival. There was also an opportunity for many attendees to suspend, since this day the theater was not being used.

This year I absorbed more from my BMX experience than ever before. The classes have progressed, and the BMX Conference organization continues to tighten as the years pass. This event is so much more than just a gathering of artists and information: it is teaching, sharing, learning from one another, networking and creating new business ventures, having a blast making new friends, and hanging out with old ones. Even the occasional butting of heads proved to be a priceless learning experience that demands and deserves appreciation. I highly recommend this conference to any and all artists involved in the body art industry, from the most seasoned practitioners to apprentices and studio owners. If you have knowledge and experience that would benefit other artists, I encourage you to contribute to future BMX conferences as a speaker, attendee, or performer. I hope to see YOU October 11-14, 2012, at the Unperfekthaus in Essen, Germany for BMXnet, round six!
To build commitment when making decisions about research topics, mentors always tell colleagues to be sure to select an area that they can be passionate about for a long time. While I have told many students that same thing, I did not think that my own journey exploring the world of tattooing (since 1989) and body piercing (since 1994) would last over 20 years. And interestingly, my walk with the topic doesn’t seem over yet, because there are so many more aspects to explore and try to explain.

I am frequently asked, “How did you ever get started with this research? You don’t have a tattoo, do you?” “No,” I reply—but I had been a nurse for over 25 years at that time. As a Colonel in the US Army Reserves, participating in hundreds of monthly physicals for other “weekend warriors,” I began to see high-ranking enlisted and officer women with tattoos; when I talked with them, their reasons for and stories about their tattoos were fascinating.

As a health care professional I quickly discovered that I did not know anything about tattoos, yet my interest in body art was piqued to find out more. In the late 1980s, most of the medical literature on tattooed people was about complications, men in prisons, juvenile delinquents, or reporters visiting studios to notice that more people were obtaining tattoos. It wasn’t uncommon to find biased statements like, “When those who are tattooed or pierced enter the Emergency Room, it is important to check if they have STD.”

Tattooing and body piercing had not been part of our medical/nursing education, so hopefully further realistic, scientific information could provide more applicable healthcare data and publications to assist in better care for those with body art. In order to accomplish that, more investigation and research would need to be conducted. I first had to gain the confidence of the studio artists so they would talk with me about the tattooing procedure and their client instructions for care; at that time, they were reluctant to talk with health personnel because they thought “we” could close them down. Later, during our conversations after they became comfortable talking with me, many artists would ask me for a physician referral to someone that would understand and be non-judgmental about body art when caring for them.

One female engineer told me, “Tell the docs that just because I have a tattoo doesn’t mean you need to check between my toes for needle marks.”

One outstanding, helpful individual was Lyle Turtle, the famous tattoo artist and owner of a very interesting San Francisco tattoo museum. He himself had a complete custom-designed, Polynesian Island original, tattooed body suit. His message (used with permission) to me on why people had tattoos, and sometimes regrets, was that “tattoos are external designs for internal feelings, yet unfortunately sometimes those feelings change.” Another was Dr. Clinton Sanders, a tattooed college professor from University of Connecticut, who published excellent sociology-rich articles about tattooing, as well as the book Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing. Additionally, over the years David Vidra, Troy Amundson, and Elayne Angel have also been extremely helpful when I have had body art questions.

As no one gets their work published unless it is original, the first group I selected to survey was career-oriented women, such as businesswomen, teachers, social workers, nurses, and even engineers who had sought a tattoo. I did a pilot study and I found 25 tattooed professional women within two months in Dallas, TX, which at that time was thought to be quite a conservative town. Their questionnaire responses were interesting and I gained more confidence in my knowledge of the topic. As this was pre-internet, I then placed a small advertisement in alternative newspapers across six states asking for women over 25 with tattoos to answer an anonymous survey. Within six months, I had over 150 surveys mailed back to me, and all 154 questions answered, an amount that defies all rules of survey development. Respondents wrote comments on the back of the surveys, sent me their names and addresses for follow-up, and even sent pictures.

No one had talked to them about their tattoos before and they were eager to share their information—and I was pleased to have it. The initial findings from the women, which have been repeated with every group we have ever studied since then, is that the motivation for tattooing is self-identity, because “it makes me feel good, special, unique.” One female engineer told me, “Tell the docs that just because I have a tattoo doesn’t mean you need to check between my toes for needle marks.” My first article about the study was published in a nursing research journal in 1991 and I included that engineer’s quote. When body piercing gained popularity, we found almost the same findings.

From that research, and from other studies with adolescents, college students, and the military, I was able to talk with thousands of adolescents and young adults. I was able to design educational pamphlets and a video on a topic they were interested in so they could become better consumers when considering body art decisions. This research journey has also led me to be Expert Witness when court cases about body art arise; a Consultant
to three federal agencies, including the Department of Defense, regarding military body art policies; and countless interviews for TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

Conducting research and publishing the information always takes a long time—I usually estimate about five years per project from initial thoughts to published work. In 1999, I was fortunate to form a Body Art Research Team comprised of two sociologists (Drs. Jerry Koch and Alden Roberts) and another nurse researcher (Dr. Donna Owen). Others have joined us along the way, depending on the subject, and their additional professional perspectives always provide more depth to the topic.

We have been pleased to have Elayne Angel join us on our author team for some of our recent publications on genital piercings. More information about this research team and many of our published articles can be found at our website: courses.ttu.edu/jkoch/Research/Tattoo%20Team.htm

While I retired from my faculty position at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center in 2010, I still continue to publish some further information on body art and review body art articles for medical and nursing journals. Our information over the years has focused on the body art customer’s demographics, attitudes, decision-making, and complications to help health care personnel in their clinics, offices, and hospital settings, and I know we have been able to make changes in care.

I have learned so much about body art over the years, not only from your fine Association work, but also from your individual members. Thank you for allowing me to share some of my body art research journey. Watch for several other new healthcare personnel who have published good material nationally and internationally on body art over the past ten years, such as Scott DeBoer (USA), Dr. Nicholas Kluger (France & Finland), and Dr. Marika Tiggemann (Australia). My suggestion is to keep building your collaborative relationships with health care personnel. These this will be very helpful as the APP institutes more education and practice standards for your profession. For any further questions or information, you can contact me at myrna.armstrong@ttuhsc.edu.

Steve Joyner
Director
Constructs of Ritual Evolution (CoRE)
Los Angeles, CA
Oakland/San Francisco, CA

On October 16, 2011, the piercing and suspension communities lost someone special, someone who had touched many people in so many different ways. Arwen “Spliff” Rosa was a husband, a father, a son, a brother, a friend, a mentor, a leader, and a character none of us will ever forget.

He had been in a traumatic car accident in July 2010 that left him bedridden and on a ventilator until his last days in our physical world. I had the honor of marrying Arwen and his wife Jill in July 2011, just months before his passing. I also had the honor of spending time alone in conversation, just days before that ceremony, with the man I called my friend and brother. He was so excited to know that so many cared about him and his family. We spoke about the path we had walked together over the many years of our friendship. He was upset that he might not ever share the stage with me or others again, and was still trying to be involved with our communities as much as he could, even from his bed. Arwen had a huge heart and shared it with so many.

Arwen’s service was held in Long Island, NY on October 22, 2011. It was attended by individuals from the many communities touched by him: suspension, body modification, the Boy Scouts, the circus sideshow community, the NY hardcore scene, family and childhood friends, and others. The suspension community came together to share their flesh, spirit, and energy. People around the world who could not be at the service participated in suspensions and bloodlettings in Arwen’s name as a farewell to a man full of ideas and vision who liked to “push the envelope.”

He was a man who would not want our communities to bury ourselves in depression. He would want everyone to pick up a PBR beer instead and think about the good times that we all shared.

He will be missed, but he will definitely never be forgotten.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR - ELAYNE ANGEL has been a professional piercer for more than 20 years and has performed over 40,000 piercings. She was awarded the President’s Lifetime Achievement Award by the Association of Professional Piercers in 2006 and is a contributing writer for PAIN Magazine. She lives in Mérida, Mexico. Visit www.piercingbible.com for more information.

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1. His Prince Albert disgraced a member of the Royal Family
2. Your client participated in women's mud wrestling after having her navel pierced
3. Your client or your piercer didn't understand the difference between Ampallang and Apadravya
4. Your client lost the key you gave her for her chastity piercing
5. You’ve been charged with sexual molestation by the client who got a Christina
6. Your piercer thought "Autoclave" was a new Superhero and didn’t think they needed to use it.
7. Your client’s tongue piercing got caught on his girlfriend’s braces
8. Your piercer thought the "eyelet ring" worked well on the eyelid
9. She looked 18 but was only 15 and "Dad" was her Sugar Daddy
10. Your client went pole dancing after piercing her nipple

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As you walk the streets of San Francisco, you notice the hustle and bustle of tourists and locals alike as they enjoy the sights and sounds of the iconic Fisherman’s Wharf area. At the Wharf, when you look around, you’ll see shrimp, crab, and fish on display in various shops. What you may not be expecting to see in one of the storefronts is a live woman—especially not one hanging from shark hooks.

The woman is UK suspension artist Alice Newstead, better known as “Alice Ofthedead,” and the storefront is Lush Cosmetics, a company well-known for taking a strong moral stance for environmental justice and animal and human rights. Alice has worked for Lush’s London store for five years, and she has never been secretive about what she does in her off time as a member of London suspension team Constant Elevation. In 2008, Lush approached Alice and asked her to be the star of their new campaign to save the sharks.

Over 70 million sharks are killed each year, a number that has drastically increased due to the increased demand for shark fin soup. This expensive delicacy has been enjoyed in China since the Ming Dynasty and was usually only offered on rare and special occasions. Because of China’s recent economic boom, this meal has become increasingly popular and affordable. Sharks are pulled out of the water, stripped of their fins, and then tossed back to die. This enormous waste is devastating to the ocean’s ecosystem—and the irony is that this cartilage adds no flavor to the soup.

Alice explains, “When you see a shark caught on a long line the hook doesn’t look like very much, but when you see that same hook stuck through the flesh of a human it looks much more shocking.” Alice did her first suspension for this project in London, then proceeded to Paris and Hong Kong (facilitated by Constant Elevation) before finally landing here in San Francisco. “I was very worried about the reaction I would get in Hong Kong, as it is the trading capital of the world for shark fins,” she said, but surprisingly “the press and reporters were incredibly polite and the press coverage we got was mostly positive.” While the other demonstrations were done inside a Lush store, the Hong Kong event was performed in an art gallery. There have been no legal issues since the events have been on private property.

The San Francisco event was also a great success. Store employee (and former counter person with HTC Body Piercing) Lilly O’Neill was on site. “I was very worried about the reaction I would get in Hong Kong, as it is the trading capital of the world for shark fins,” she said, but surprisingly “the press and reporters were incredibly polite and the press coverage we got was mostly positive.” While the other demonstrations were done inside a Lush store, the Hong Kong event was performed in an art gallery. There have been no legal issues since the events have been on private property.

The San Francisco event was also a great success. Store employee (and former counter person with HTC Body Piercing) Lilly O’Neill was on site. “What really impressed me was how many people seemed to be supportive of what Lush was doing and why they were doing it,” she said. “I had to remind myself that this was a live suspension performance at a soap store, not a tattoo convention or a rock show where something like this may be more expected!” The day of the suspension, Alice had a smile on her face and was happy to answer any questions.

Many have become well-known by using their bodies to make a statement: Ron Athey, Bob Flanagan, ManWoman, and Annie Sprinkle to name just a few. For performance body modification to appear outside the context—and our limited circles—and still be well-received is a beautiful and impressive leap for us! I am excited to see more of Alice’s style of inspiring activism in our community in the future. ♡
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