CULTURE

A lasting impression

Tattoo tickets and the shifting facets of artist solidarity and ownership

ANNIE BUTLER WAS HANGING OUT at home when she got a disconcerting direct message on her Instagram art account. The person who sent it was excited to show her the striking image of a woman they'd just had tattooed on themselves. It was Butler's design, but they hadn't asked her permission. At first, she was furious, feeling violated and robbed. However, she soon realized this person was completely oblivious to the fact that they'd stolen from her. Instead of thinking of it that way, they'd thought they were sharing good news.

And they're not alone. In the digital age, we may neglect to realize art found online belongs to someone as intellectual property. In some ways, accessible internet has democratized the art world like never before: while we once had to venture to a museum or buy a glossy-paged coffee table book to see fine art, we can now access fine art of all mediums online. This gives a platform to smaller and disprivileged artists who may not have the means to invest in formal exhibits or have pre-existing connections in an elitist art world. It's created space for more mediums to be explored and accessed, like excerpts of poetry, animation, dramatic performance, and zines.

It's also reshaped how we consume, own, and fund art production. In tattooing, a revolution is happening when it comes to intellectual property and artist-to-artist solidarity. "Tattoo tickets" are digital tokens that people can purchase directly from an artist which allows the buyer to have an artist's design tattooed on them. They can take various forms: a downloadable ticket, an informal agreement, a commissioned tattoo design, or exclusive rights to an artist's pre-crafted piece. This culture of grassroots support has always existed in tattooing, but it's getting a much-needed update in a time of increasing intellectual property theft. Tattoo tickets are changing the ways in which artists are supporting themselves—and helping to address persisting problems of art being stolen or copied online. And for consumers like me, they're a way to support artists I love and discover new works. The parameters around what we can and can't own are changing every day, but the creative community ties that are represented by tattoo tickets are helping to ensure that artists can persevere. Under capitalist conditions and the unfairly glamourized "starving artist" archetype, tattooing art without permission from the artist is indeed stealing.

While tattoo tickets are now a fairly mainstream industry term, Butler, the Ottawa artist behind @artbyheavensfull, began getting messages from her followers over five years ago with a simple question: "hey, can I get this tattooed on me?" From there, Butler began—"accidentally"—creating tattoo tickets in response. Her approach to tattoo tickets is still rather informal: people send her an e-transfer or PayPal, she sends a DM from her art account in response, and the buyer is able to show the tattoo artist her message. Others, like Tkaronto (Toronto)-based artist TheCastleRose, have tattoo tickets for sale on their website, which people can purchase like any other digital-only product—sometimes with "pay what you can" price ranges. Most artists will have some common stipulations: buying a tattoo ticket does not entitle exclusive rights to the design unless you pay extra, a tattoo ticket is for pre-existing designs, as opposed to a custom design, and buyers are usually asked to not re-design or distort the original image too much.

But in the screenshot era, how can this be enforced? There really is no way to ensure that a user isn't getting a tattoo of a design without compensating the artist. Yet there is an honour system in place wherein followers are trusted to purchase tattoo tickets, and tattoo artists will often refuse to tattoo original designs without this proof. "Maybe this is naïve of me," Butler says, "but I trust my followers." For online artists who have grown their platforms organically, there's an element of online community-building that creates an innate trust and loyalty between followers and an artist. Scrolling through the Instagram accounts of artists of all types based in my community—visual, embroiderers, poets, and more—it's not uncommon to see the same people posting affectionate comments across multiple posts, replying to one another, or sharing each other's work on their stories.

Similarly, there is a degree of *a priori* trust between tattoo artists and the artists behind the original designs. Tattoo artists and studios are increasingly creating either explicit policies or de-facto practices that require permission from original artists if a client wishes to have their work tattooed on them.

The overlap and community-centred "code of conduct" is often unspoken and yet strong, and it exists in creative spaces beyond tattooing. In the music sphere, artists are using one another's sounds or promoting one another's work through covers and reel sounds. In online comedy skits or makeup videos, content is often reposted without credit to the original creator. Scrolling through these posts, the top comments are usually from people asking "credit?" or "original @?," in an attempt to source the original creative behind the work (salient comments as social media companies themselves have also been accused of stealing original makeup designs for their filters).

Very few pursue arts for the money. For many artists, tattoo tickets aren't a profit-maximization strategy, but rather

a way to support a deep passion. "If I was consistently financially comfortable, I wouldn't be so upset about [someone tattooing my art without payment]," Butler says. And I don't think she's alone in this sentiment. While artists deserve fair compensation and livable wages like any professional, art as a form of expression has typically come as a product of visceral creativity, emotion, oppression, and human experience, rather than a focus on saleability. However, for the sake of sustaining one's work and financial security, sometimes creating "tattooable" art is necessary. Butler explains that focusing on clean lines, black and white colouring, and creating less "edgy" designs can be important for supporting her artwork, as these are the pieces that can best become tattoos. Thus, tattoo tickets and the economic conditions behind them are also influencing art aesthetics themselves.

The tattoo ticket model is used by other artists, too, including poets and illustrators, which often overlap on social media. Any piece of art that could be tattooed can—and likely does—find a place within the "tattoo ticket" business model (even Rupi Kaur has a formal partnership with temporary tattoo company Inkbox). Moreover, it seems quite rare to find an artist that sticks to just one medium. When one purchases a tattoo ticket, they're likely supporting creative endeavours that go beyond the image they've purchased. They're also directly supporting artists' ability to keep creating. "If you want to keep getting art that you like, then nourish the source," Butler says. "But if you cut the source off from survival, it won't happen."

The rise in tattoo tickets is an opportunity to raise public consciousness of art as a commodity that deserves financial support. While no one would expect to receive an original painting or museum entrance for free, this attitude about the value of art is—hopefully—slowly translating to the new digital world of art, too, thanks to practices like these.

–LAURA O'CONNOR

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"CANADA, QUEBEC INCLUDED, has an excellent international reputation, but to me it is a *spooky* country: riddled with ghosts, fraught with painful history," reads a woman in a pragmatic tone. "I accept it as it is. I am a spooky girl."

The spooky girl is author Tara McGowan-Ross, narrating the podcast "Tio'tia:ke/Montréal". Anyone wanting to take a decolonial look at the city can now do so through a literary walking tour guided by her voice, as well as those of authors Cason Sharpe and Symon Henry.

By looking into our past, the creators of the Foulée|Strides podcast series hope to bring fresh perspectives to how we'll see Canada in the future. Listeners will hear about key moments in Quebec's history interspersed with personal narratives from the authors. As part of Blue Metropolis International Literary Festival online programming, the series kicked off in late February and is currently available on all podcast streaming platforms.

In the series, McGowan-Ross discusses the history of the overpass network and Notre-Dame-de-Grace, or NDG, which is a middle-class, first-ring suburb of the city. At the same time, she talks about her complicated relationship to her home as an Indigenous person transplanted into Montreal from Ontario. And Henry, coming from both an immigrant and trans perspective, talks about growing up in the northwest of Montreal, where long-standing communities of immigrants live.

Sharpe shares about his time at Concordia University, dovetailing that into a look back at the 1969 protest where Black students organized a sit-in at the university's computer centre. They were advocating for a new committee to be established to address six Black West Indian students' complaints about a biology professor's racism, after the committee initially charged with handling the situation dismissed their concerns.

"It's kind of stayed a flashpoint that is really important to the Black community in town," says Darby Minott Bradford, a programmer at large and senior consultant at Blue Metropolis. "It's important to me, it's important to someone like Cason, but isn't necessarily a story that's made its way into the mainstream, beyond certain communities that are connected to Concordia."

"[Writing about decolonial Montreal] is something we've been thinking about for a few years," Bradford says. "Like a lot of people, when I hear 'postcolonial' or 'decolonial,' I wonder what that looks like for different writers and institutions. So, I wanted to do something that started to point in that direction, in a small way."

"I think that there's something really lovely about connecting these unique lived experiences, unique perspectives with broader communal, social, cultural settings," Bradford says.

Over the past couple of years, Blue Metropolis has also created other walking tours about various Québécois communities, such as the Gay Village and Jewish Montreal.

"My approach with all of the podcasts that I've curated has just been to give people lots of room to go after these subjects," Bradford says. "Together, they help tell the ever-changing, ever-growing tale of a city made richer by its polyvocal histories," he says in the podcast's intro. "An invaluable gift for Montreal's future."

– ASHLYNN CHAND