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Doctoral Thesis

Tattooing: The Economic and Artistic Constitution of a Social Phenomenon

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Tattooing



**Copenhagen
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HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

Tattooing

The Economic and Artistic Constitution
of a Social Phenomenon

Christian Wymann

PhD Series 29.2011

Doctoral School of Organisation
and Management Studies

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a Social Phenomenon

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But please try to avoid common sense!

Niklas Luhmann

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1 Introduction

When I received my first tattoo, the tattooist made a statement, which occurred to me again, while writing this study. While the tattooist was creating a black ornamental tattoo design on my left upper arm, I posed some of the typical questions a newcomer to the ‘world of tattooing’ has. When our conversation came to the topic of tattoo prices, the tattooist made a statement of interest here. The tattooist said, more or less accurately quoted from memory, “tattoos are art and art is priceless (invaluable)”. As a nineteen-year-old high school student, saving money over time to get a tattoo, I reacted with a joking manner. What I basically did, it now seems, was simply conclude the initiated syllogism. If tattoos are art and art is priceless, then it was only consistent to state, “well then, I don’t have to pay for the tattoo”. Although the tattooist understood that I was joking, he nevertheless did not agree with my conclusion. In the end, of course, I paid for my tattoo and for the ones I received thereafter.

The involvement of art and economy in the ‘world of tattooing’ is prominently thematized in descriptions. Whether viewed as disparate, complimentary or contradictory to one another by comparison, economy and art play a particular role. Designations such as ‘commercial’, ‘business’, ‘industry’, ‘trade’, ‘service’, ‘art form’, ‘artistic’, ‘business person’, and ‘artist’ constitute an important semantic repertory for descriptions. But this repertory does not limit itself to descriptions from the point of view of tattooists, tattoo organizations and tattoo magazines and books. They play a role, as well, in accounts from other viewpoints outside the ‘world of tattooing’. Newspapers, lifestyle magazines, courts, museums, television documentaries, economic reports and books all refer to or use the semantics of economy and/or art that leave little doubt that these two play a central role for tattooing in one way or another (see e.g. Bolton 1897; Boyer 1898; Belsky 1981; Kimmelman 1995; Meredith 1997; Vail 2000: 56; Anonym 2007; Penn 2007). What the extract of the conversation between tattooist and customer and the examples of prominent semantics both have in common, thus, is that they touch upon the core of what this study is about.

Investigating Tattooing as a Social Phenomenon

The focus of interest in this thesis lies in tattooing and its constitution as a social phe-

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nomenon. From the theoretical perspective I use, namely sociological systems theory from Niklas Luhmann (1995b, 2001), this means looking at what kind of communication constitutes tattooing and how. In doing so, the basic assumption is that everything that belongs to society is constituted by communication.

The question about the constitution of tattooing by communication as such, elicits several possible answers: There may be different communications about tattooing, by which tattooing is a topic. Tattooing, however, can also be understood as a kind of communication itself. Both perspectives depend upon how one conceptualizes communication. The systems theoretical concept of communication allows us to deal with both cases. While the former perspective plays a role in this study, as empirical data for example, it is the latter understanding that is of primary interest. One question I want to answer with this study, therefore, is how tattooing itself communicates. Put differently, I am concerned with how tattooing emerges *through* communication as a phenomenon of its own, instead of merely a phenomenon that is described *in* communication.

This particular focus on tattooing has implications. It means, first of all, dealing with the phenomenon and its emergence as communication. The goal of the analysis consists of showing how it does emerge, i.e., in which form of communication. I thereby conceive tattooing as a phenomenon that emerges and operates in its own manner similar to, but nonetheless distinct from, other social phenomena.

It is crucial not to confuse tattooing with tattoos. The former refers to a process or operation of communication, while tattoos are understood as a medium for this process. Of course, one could conceive of tattoos as communicating in their own right, namely in a visual manner, whether literally, through specific pictures and textual elements, or more implicitly, by conveying information about the bearer. In this case, a tattoo may be understood as the utterance of information about political attitudes (slogans, symbols), romantic relationships (a lover's name), membership in an exclusive club (insignia) or artistic preference (specific styles). Misunderstandings cannot, however, be ruled out. Being the object of understanding in this sense, the tattoo may start, contribute to or even hinder communication. Such a notion of tattoos and their role for communication is implied in many academic accounts (see e.g. Kosut 2009: 212, 220). However, this study does not focus on how tattoos communicate meanings, affiliations and how they are otherwise used for communicating such contents. Although this study conceives of tattoos as a medium of communication, it does so in a different way. It focuses on the tattoo's role for the emergence of tattooing as a process of com-

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munication. The tattoo, in this sense, does not convey contents similar to linguistic expressions (literally and/or visually saying something), but constitutes the basis on which a specific form of non-linguistic communication may take place. As this conception is important, I will come back to it later in more detail.

This focus differs clearly from the more common perspectives and assumptions in the academic literature on the topic. Tattooing and tattoos are usually conceived in relation to what people do and get done or the material aspects involved (e.g. Sanders 1989a; Atkinson 2003a). In contrast, the conceptualization of tattooing as communication does not begin with individuals, but with the phenomenon itself. Tattooing is, thus, basically understood as a phenomenon that has its own particular form of communication, through which it operates.

The privileging of the phenomenon and its workings does not only imply an exclusion of individuals and their doings as the primary focus. It also implies not considering individuals' motives and explanations as central to an understanding of tattooing (motives such as rebellion, individuality, self-expression and others; see e.g. Rosenblatt 1997; Bell 1999; Sweetman 1999; Atkinson 2002; Pitts 2003; Kjeldgaard/Bengtsson 2005; critically DeMello 1995: 43).¹ The question of why people get tattooed also often relates to broader considerations of communities, scenes and subcultures (see Atkinson 2003a: chap. 5, 2003b; Bengtsson et al. 2005; Goulding et al. 2004; Velliquette/Murray 2002). Not denying the insights, which such a perspective may provide, the present study does not follow this path either.

The way I analyze tattooing as a social phenomenon, means taking a different and perhaps counter-intuitive route. If the analysis seems to be disconnected from everyday descriptions, then this is because I choose a theory and terminology that allows one to look at them from a different angle. That is, the theory creates a certain distance, instead of using the same, or close, concepts and ways of analyzing as the phenomena of analysis themselves. For instance, the terms of business, industry or trade, as they are used in descriptions, are not simply used to describe the phenomena from the researcher's point of view. Instead, they are understood as particular semantics in descriptions and therefore considered empirical phenomena themselves. Despite or because of such a theoretical distance, however, it remains possible to take concrete descriptions and phenomena seriously (see Luhmann 2002a: 18; Baecker 2006b: 120). In other words, precisely because one chooses a theoretical framework, disconnected from the phenomena under study, one gains new insights.

¹ This is commonly seen as or expected to be a standard focus when one studies tattooing and tattoos, as implied in the many statements I heard when explaining what topic my thesis is about.

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The main thesis of this study concerns the mode of how tattooing operates as communication. The basic assumption, as noted, states that tattooing is a social phenomenon because it is constituted through communication. Communication always emerges in a particular form, which is the unity of a two-sided distinction. In the case of tattooing, however, I claim that we find a special form of communication. The form of tattooing is constituted by two distinct and incommensurable, but nonetheless closely related, forms of communication. My claim is that tattooing is equally and simultaneously constituted by economic and artistic communication. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's work (2004; 2006), I call this special and intricate form of communication a parallax or parallaxic form. The adapted concept allows for a better understanding of what concretely happens when tattooing takes place.

Conceiving of or theoretically constructing a phenomenon as a form of communication in its own terms allows us to get a differentiated picture of it and its further social context. Instead of solely focusing on descriptions about tattooing, individual's motives or, alternatively, on the organization of it, with this approach one gains a broader spectrum of distinct and related communication. To conceive of tattooing as a particular form of communication, thus, means to be able to conceive of other communication in different terms. The results are new insights into the diversity of communication involved in a phenomenon and its wider context.

A Perspective on the Relationship Between Economy and Art

While the literature shows that tattooing and related phenomena exist in relation to many different aspects and domains of society, it is inevitable that one has to focus on a selection of them for analysis. Depending on one's interest, of course, the selection yields different results. Although it is only one possible way of looking at tattooing and its related phenomena of communication, I suggest looking at art and economy as two important facets of them. However, this is not an arbitrary choice of focus, but motivated by the empirical material.

From the perspective of systems theory, art and economy constitute two distinct domains of society, among many others. Each of them functions as a societal sub-system, with its own function for society and its own way of communicating, by means of a particular form of communication. Society, thus, is differentiated into distinct and incommensurable functional sub-systems (i.e., functionally differentiated). While economy and art work in different ways and only share the basic character of functional systems, they nonetheless enter relations with each other (and, similarly, with other

functional systems). These relations or couplings may present themselves in different forms. I will suggest that in the case of tattooing, art and economy relate in a particular way, which one can call operational or form coupling. This special relation between these systems' forms of communication leads to the emergence and operation of tattooing as a social phenomenon of its own.

Many studies implicitly or explicitly show that economy, art and their relationship play important roles for certain phenomena in society (see e.g. Becker 1951; Christopherson 1974a; Bourdieu 1983; Green 1994; Caves 2000; Hutter 2001; Aspers 2006b; Velthuis 2007; Markowski/Wöbken 2007). This is not what this study will challenge. Rather, it will challenge the way we understand art, economy and their relations and how we can conceptualize them for the analysis of concrete empirical phenomena. The concepts presented in this study are abstract but also empirically flexible enough to analyze the different constellations of communication, through which phenomena emerge in society. This approach allows the conceptualization of more general societal phenomena, such as art and economy. It also, however, makes it possible to go into more empirical detail and look at how particular phenomena such as tattooing are socially constituted.

Thus, while I suggest a specific way to theoretically grasp economy and art as two separate societal domains that nonetheless relate to one another, I empirically approach them through the analysis of tattooing. In other words, this study is not solely the result of a theoretical elaboration. It is equally the result of an analysis of empirical data. Methodologically speaking, the concepts I use are empirically 'grounded', while the empirical data and their use is suitable to the theoretical framework.

Effects on Related Phenomena

The importance of economy and art does not simply show itself in the constitution of tattooing. The communication constellation of tattooing, I furthermore claim, generates perturbations for connecting communications. The particularity and intricacy of tattooing as a social phenomenon affects tattoo organizations and descriptions, especially qualifications of tattoos. Although there are many different kinds of communication that refer to tattooing and tattoos in one way or another, tattoo organizations and qualifications represent two prominent forms that closely relate to and observe them. Organizations and qualifications are perturbed by tattooing and tattoos and deal with them in their own particular ways. Put differently: because of the ways organizations and qualifying descriptions relate to tattooing and tattoos, we see the perturbing effects

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of the latter. The question is how tattoo organizations and qualifications deal with them and, ultimately, how this feeds back to the occurrence of tattooing.

The ways in which tattoo organizations decide how to provide tattooing and tattoos varies, based upon their prioritization of the economic or artistic facets, which are constitutive for tattooing. Because of its particular form of communication, tattooing does not seem to be easy to organize. Dealing with both art and economy, thus, organizations have to find ways, or what I call organizational forms, to stabilize themselves by ‘domesticating’ the intricacy of tattooing.

At first glance, the empirical material includes descriptions from and about a variety of tattoo organizations, differing in size (number of members and establishments), stylistic orientations and many other aspects. But a more thorough look shows that they form their decisions related to the provision of tattooing in basically two different ways (with a third option). The apparent diversity from an everyday point of view is thus replaced from a particular perspective by a few modes of how tattooing is organized.

Similarly, by addressing tattoos, descriptions take differing ways of qualifying them and stabilizing meaning in the face of the intricate relation between economy and art. Although not unique to tattoos, qualifications deal with them in terms of ‘quality has its price’, addressing both economic and artistic aspects while evaluating them differently. As in the case of tattoo organizations, there is not only one stable and final way of dealing with the intricate constellation of economy and art. Rather, the different ways of qualifying tattoos in economic and artistic regards have to be re-stabilized in descriptions time and again.

Scope, Limitations and Contributions

As indicated with the brief discussion of the implications of choosing to conceptualize tattooing as a form of communication, this study deviates from other literature on the subject. This is why the reader might initially be disappointed precisely because he or she has certain expectations about the usual interest and focus of a study of tattooing.

The selected approach does not choose to, nor can it give an account of everything related to tattooing. As pointed out, this study’s approach is limited to the investigation of the specific features of tattooing understood as communication, how tattoo organizations deal with it in particular ways, and how tattoos are observed in regard to economic and artistic qualities – with a more general interest in how art and economy relate to one another as two different societal domains. While this certainly limits the subjects to be addressed and analyzed, it does not necessarily limit the study to only

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one time, place or social context. As will become clear, tattooing in its particular form may emerge anywhere and anytime, as long as a particular constellation of communication exists. While the analysis is, to a great extent, concerned with descriptions from and about tattoo organizations and other organizational contexts (e.g. tattoo conventions), the insights about tattooing itself are not limited to them alone. It is due to the empirical material, on the one hand, and the close connection between tattooing and tattoo organizations, on the other, that I focus on these specific contexts. In contrast, it would be possible to do a similar empirical research on tattooing emerging exclusively in the context of interaction without organizational framing. This, however, would require a different sort of data that might be more difficult to collect (e.g. contexts including ‘hobby’ or casual tattooists creating tattoos on the skin of friends and acquaintances; see Broome 2006). The choice to study tattooing primarily, but not exclusively, in relation to organizations, therefore, is one option among others. However, it offers insights into how the particular form of tattooing perturbs communication that relies on a certain stability beyond, although not entirely independent from, interactions.

Whereas the insights into tattooing as a special form of communication are meant to apply to any instance of the constellation’s emergence, the insights into tattoo organizations and qualifications of tattoos might be more limited in scope. Despite the breadth of the empirical material and the wide diffusion of the analyzed organizational and qualifying communication, the results will probably not apply to every instance of similar communication. That is, they are by no means universal. One cannot rule out that particular organizations work and that certain ways of qualifying tattoos turn out differently. In spite of such exceptions, I nevertheless argue that the insights this study presents apply to the predominant ways of organizing tattooing and qualifying tattoos, recurrently described in different empirical data sources from varying places and periods.

These remarks imply that the study does not concentrate only on one or a few particular cases when it comes to tattoo organizations. Although I conducted interviews and visited tattoo organizations’ establishments, the analyses and insights draw on a variety of empirical data from and about different periods and places. With the focus on the social emergence of tattooing, the functioning of tattoo organizations when dealing with tattooing and the modes of attributing qualities to tattoos, it makes more sense and is more useful to have such a varied data basis. As a consequence, it is more likely to see recurrent patterns of communication and to avoid generalizing more ‘local’ and peculiar ones. While one might find local particularities regarding, for example,

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the organization of tattooing, this study's interest lies in the recurrent ways of how organizations function. Although this is not the subject of systematic inquiry here, it would then be possible to compare the results of local studies (e.g. Sanders 1989a; Atkinson 2003a) with a more general analysis of the present kind, revealing the commonalities and differences.

The abundance of descriptions available in magazines, books and visual material allows us to take a more general or distanced point of view. Even though a systems theoretical approach does not exclude the study of a particular case, it is especially equipped with concepts for analyses that go beyond individual cases. This, however, should not be confused with an exclusive consideration of empirical material of a general type; quite the contrary. Precisely because of its abstractness, systems theory allows us to look at any kind of concrete descriptions and contexts. A claim to more general observations about a phenomenon such as tattooing, organizations or qualifying descriptions, therefore, does not conflict with an analysis of everyday and particular descriptions and contexts, whether provided by popular magazines and books or first-/second-hand interviews and field observations.

Furthermore, while this study draws on concrete empirical material from different contexts and sources, this does not mean that it maintains the ways phenomena are described or conceptualized. Instead of accepting and working with everyday concepts or even theories as such, it takes a different perspective that allows them to be seen as specific descriptions and forms of communication. Ultimately, the general perspective and objective of this study does not forbid but rather relies on an examination of concrete and varied empirical data. While one or a few case studies of specific tattoo organizations would provide valuable insights, it is the more general questions pursued here that require a broader empirical and analytical perspective.

Finally, the specific and delimited scope suggested here does not provide explicit insights into broader and more general issues that concern, for example, (popular) culture, societal changes or trends, social movements or other phenomena linked to tattooing. Although such broader issues could probably also be addressed on the same empirical data basis, one would need a different set of concepts and analytical strategies than suggested in this thesis. In other words, the theoretical and analytical tools used here, as will hopefully become clear, are suitable for the perspective and scope chosen for the study of certain facets of tattooing. They are not automatically appropriate for the investigation of other aspects.

Nonetheless, the study tries to contribute to broader issues of a different type. Aside

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from a contribution to the study of tattooing as a social phenomenon, including its organizational ‘processing’ and modes of qualification, the study tries to contribute to the discussion of comparable phenomena for which art and economy play a crucial role. The way I conceive of economy and art, tattooing, organizational forms and qualifications, thus, may be similarly used for studying other phenomena (e.g. photography, fashion, painting, music etc.). Although this approach might require some adaptations in each case, one can nevertheless take the basic theoretical perspective and analytical tools in order to see how a phenomenon empirically emerges. This is possible because of the abstract and empirically sensitive concepts the approach offers. Instead of looking for the exact same kinds of relations and communication constellations as in the case of tattooing, the approach is empirically open and adaptable to the particularities of a phenomenon and its context. It allows us to find out exactly how a phenomenon works in terms of communication and how it relates to and affects other kinds of communication, such as organizations and qualifications. Ultimately, however, the approach is not necessarily limited to those phenomena for which art and economy play a key role. Although this is the focus of the present study, the same or a similar approach may also prove useful and insightful for the investigation of phenomena that appear in society due to the related emergence of other forms of communication.

Structure of the Thesis

In the first three chapters, I discuss the basic assumptions and concepts for the following analyses. In chapter two, I discuss systems theory as the main epistemological and theoretical approach. Although systems theory consists of many theory elements and concepts, I only discuss those, with which I investigate tattooing. While presenting how I understand and use the concepts, which systems theory offers, I will also suggest a concept not yet included in the theory. The concept of parallax serves the purpose of grasping a special form of communication and the way sub-systems’ forms of communication are thereby related. Chapter three presents the kind of empirical material I use and the way in which I examine it, from a systems theoretical perspective. On the one hand, I theorize the empirical basis and, on the other hand, I argue for an empirical ‘grounding’ of theory. Finally, chapter four shows how I analyze the empirical material. Depending on the perspective and topic of the analysis, I use a different analytical strategy. In the subsequent chapters and interludes, I use four different analytical strategies. Despite their differences, however, they have in common a focus on forms as distinctions.

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In chapter five, I proceed with a discussion of approaches to the theoretical understanding of the relationship between economy and art. The discussion and my own systems theoretical suggestion, present the field of study to which this thesis would like to contribute with the investigation of tattooing.

Chapters six to eight form the main part of this thesis. In chapter six, I analyze tattooing as a social phenomenon with specific communication features. In distinction to definitions in the academic literature, I suggest conceptualizing tattooing as a particular form of communication. In addition to a positive definition of how tattooing emerges and operates as communication, I discuss which phenomena do not operate in the same way, although they are often described as, or seen to be, closely connected with tattooing.

Chapter seven is concerned with the effects, which the form of tattooing has on tattoo organizations. In dealing with tattooing, tattoo organizations need to find a way to manage its special form. I describe two main organizational forms, called 'flash' and 'custom', while a third type of organization exists, which draws on both of the main forms. The two main forms of tattoo organizations differ in terms of their decisions, expectations, roles and semantics and their corresponding emphasis of either economy or art. I discuss the specific features of each organizational form, what kind of challenges they deal with and how they feed back on tattooing.

Chapter eight analyzes the ways tattoos are qualified in terms of artistic and economic qualities. Artistic and economic qualifications are closely connected in the basic observation 'quality has its price'. Qualifications appear in four different versions, depending on how the artistic and economic aspects of tattoos are evaluated.

Finally, the three short 'Interludes' that follow chapter six, seven and eight, propose to broaden the scope. In 'Interlude One', I suggest looking for other phenomena, which are constituted by economic and artistic communication. The goal is not, however, to find the exact same form constellation as in tattooing, but to look closely how phenomena, such as photography or painting, are constituted in concrete terms. 'Interlude Two' considers organizations that deal with the phenomena mentioned in the first Interlude. The question is how organizations, dealing with other phenomena, work. As examples from academic literature show, organizations dealing with fashion, photography or the visual arts bring forth comparable organizational forms with similar economic or artistic orientations. 'Interlude Three', eventually, considers artistic and economic qualifications in regard to the phenomena discussed in the two previous Interludes.

2 Nothing but Communication: A Systems Theoretical Approach

Sociological systems theory, as it was developed and elaborated by Niklas Luhmann (e.g. Luhmann 1995b, 2001), provides the theoretical framework for grasping tattooing as a social phenomenon. With its variety of related theories and concepts, systems theory constitutes a comprehensive perspective on everything of a social nature (on the claim to universality see Luhmann 1983: 995, 1995b: 15-16). The theory includes conceptualizations of communication as the basic social unit, of social evolution, societal differentiation, social systems and many more. In this chapter, however, I do not present and discuss systems theory in its entirety and in regard to the many changes Luhmann and others made. Instead, I concentrate on those theoretical elements and concepts that are central for the analysis of social phenomena in general and tattooing in particular. I therefore use systems theory selectively and only those theory elements and concepts that make the most sense, in regard to the empirical phenomena under study. I do not try to mold the phenomenon according to the entire theory. This does not, however, mean to favor eclecticism either. I still share the basic assumptions and epistemology of systems theory. It simply means, as la Cour et al. (2007: 936) aptly state, not to see systems theory “as a straitjacket”, but more as a “consistent tool box”.¹

I Observations and the Emergence of Reality

Let me begin with the basic epistemological approach of Luhmannian systems theory that is implied in each of the theory’s concepts and elements. Systems theory is a constructivist theory (Luhmann 1988). It considers the social world to be the result of constructions by and in communication, while autologically including itself as both a social construction and a perspective that constructs the social world in a particular way (see Luhmann 1987a: 347).

Observation

The theory of observation forms the basis for this constructivist approach. Luhmann’s

1 This, however, should not imply that Luhmann suggested a “straitjacket” theory or dogma (see Becker/Seidl 2007: 940). Luhmann ‘poached’ outside sociology in order to gain new concepts for the extension and elaboration of his sociological systems theory.

conceptualization of observation draws on George Spencer-Brown's *Laws of Form* (1999) and takes the concepts of observation, form and distinction in order use them sociologically (see Luhmann 1988, 2006c). Although it might be a selective use of these concepts, it constitutes a productive approach for the investigation of social constructions. I therefore follow Luhmann's sociological conceptualization more than the mathematical one of Spencer-Brown.

In order to see (in a broad sense) and identify something, a distinction needs to be drawn. A distinction is conceived as a form that comprises two sides, spaces or states. The form is the unity of their distinction. One of the sides is marked, while the other remains unmarked and yet constitutive for the distinction. The indication of one side of the distinction and the inevitable exclusion of the other one is what happens in the case of an observation. Or put differently, an observation draws a distinction and establishes a form, but it only indicates or marks one of the distinguished sides at a time.

In order to clarify this, I draw on the basic visual representation suggested by Spencer-Brown (1999: 3ff.; see also Luhmann 2006c). Aside from the concepts and ideas, Spencer-Brown's visualizations have been included in sociological research as well and prove useful to illustrate observations in and of society (see e.g. Baecker 2006a, 2007; Andersen 2008, 2009).

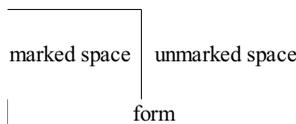


Fig. 1: Mark of distinction

The “gallows” represents the mark of distinction that separates the two sides or spaces. The horizontal line to the left refers to the marked or indicated side. Both sides together constitute the form.

Observations have certain implications. While drawing a distinction and indicating something, the observer drawing it cannot see what is excluded in the unmarked space. The observer, here, is not necessarily meant as an individual or consciousness, but is conceived more abstractly (Luhmann 2002c: 147). Whenever a distinction is drawn, there is an observer making it. Thus, the observer that observes cannot simultaneously also see the distinction used. Its focus lies solely on what is indicated with the observa-

tion. Moreover, the observer cannot observe itself while observing something. This would require another and subsequent observation. In general, thus, an observation implies the indication of something in distinction from something (or, alternatively, everything) else and an observer. The observer and the unmarked side cannot be 'seen' when making the observation. They are in the 'blind spot' of the observation (see Luhmann 2002c: 145; see also von Foerster 1984b: 288-289 on the concept's origin in seeing and perceiving). Despite the exclusion of the unmarked side and the observer from what can be observed, as the included excluded they nonetheless play a constitutive part in the emergence of an observation (Luhmann 1995c: 44, 46).

The characteristics of observation, as described so far, holds true for every kind of observation and every observer. We can nonetheless distinguish two types of observations: first-order and second-order observations (the distinction stems from Heinz von Foerster's second-order cybernetics; see Luhmann 1993a: 767; von Foerster 1984a). While they work the same way, their objects of observation differ. First-order observations are concerned with 'objects' or things in the broadest sense. In other words, they focus on 'what is'. Second-order observations, in contrast, are concerned with observations made by another observer (or the 'same' observer that drew a first-order distinction at an earlier time). They observe how observers draw distinctions and, thus, how they construct 'what is'. Even if second-order observations focus on how observers 'see', they are always also first-order observations that likewise draw a distinction by indicating something and excluding something else (if looked at from yet another point of observation). Second-order observations, therefore, are not superior or better than those of the first order (Luhmann 1999: 26). They simply have a different perspective. With their focus on other observations, second-order observations are able to see what the observed first-order observations cannot see themselves. That means, from a second-order perspective an observer sees how a distinction is drawn, including the excluded, unmarked side of it.

In terms of the illustration presented before (figure 1), one can say that the first-order distinction constitutes the marked space of the second-order observation. There, then, could be yet another observation that marks the previous second-order observation as its marked space, revealing its character as a first-order observation that looks at another observer's observation. It would also shed light on the observation's blind spot. Hence, an infinite cascade of first-/second-order observations can emerge.²

2 Sometimes Luhmann and others talk about a third-order observation (e.g. Luhmann 1987b: 111, 1994: 31, fn 38; Baecker 1988: 315; Andersen/Born 2007). It does not become clear, however, why one needs a third order and how it differs in regard to the other two orders. First- and

Observing and Constructing Social Reality

By drawing a particular distinction each observation establishes its view on what is or also, in the case of a second-order observation, how something emerges. An observation, thus, involves both a certain way of looking (a distinction) and what it looks at. The latter, however, does not exist itself 'outside' or 'out there' as a reality *sui generis*. Like the drawing of a distinction, the 'object' of observation is the product of the observation. An observation, thus, includes the construction of a way of looking at something, the 'something' that is observed in distinction to something else and the observer drawing the distinction. A first-order observation will only see what it observes, but not the constructions involved. A second-order observation, in contrast, will reveal how a first-order observation constructs something. But while doing so, it cannot see its own constructions.

For systems theory, observations constitute the basic 'material' reality is made by and made of (Luhmann 2002e). Observations of both orders construct realities with their particular distinctions and indications. On the one hand, this implies that systems theory deals with observations that are made in the course of establishing the social. It observes observations and observers in order to find out how specific societal domains and society in general are constructed. On the other hand, the prohibition of self-exemption means that the sociological observer does not somehow stand outside these observations, looking at them from a detached point of view (Luhmann 1997a: 77). Sociological systems theory is an observer in and of society like those it observes. That means, the distinctions it draws with its concepts define how and what it can see. It equally constructs a particular reality of society, as do other theories in a different way. No observer whatsoever can escape this.

These two aspects make systems theory a constructivist approach in two senses: It deals with constructions by a variety of observers and it explicitly implies its own constructions of these observers and their observations. Reality is always the result of observations, whether constructed by an academic or non-academic observer. It does not exist in itself and cannot be simply perceived and described. Perception and description constitute a reality or realities in the first place (on perception see von Foerster 1984b). Reality, thus, is observer dependent, that is it depends on how an observer observes (Luhmann 2006a: 211; see also Watzlawick 2008: 9).

On various occasions Luhmann calls this approach radical (e.g. Luhmann 1988: 24,

second-order seem to be enough for describing the phenomenon called 'third-order' (a second-order observation of a second-order observation that observes a first-order observation).

2002b: 666), epistemological (Luhmann 2006a: 211) or operational constructivism (Luhmann 2008e: 68, 2002e; see also Besio/Pronzini 2008). The two former labels refer to what I presently described as the involvement of the observer in every case. The latter is used to describe how the reality is produced and, accordingly, what is required. Although reality is a construct by an observer's observation, it still needs to be made. This occurs through operations or the actual emergence of observations. These operations, however, should not be understood as already existing and thus representing an ontological reality 'out there'. Rather, they are constructions of an observer as well, whether as the actual drawing of distinctions or as something that is observed by a second-order observer. Regardless of which reality construction or system we deal with, they emerge by means of operations that establish distinctions and observations.

The operational emergence of reality or realities by means of observations constitutes the basis for systems theory. As it is a sociological systems theory, it mainly deals with the social system called society. Although the existence of other systems or recursive networks of operations and observations is assumed and in the case of consciousness referred to as a relevant one for the social system, the theory is only marginally concerned with them (see e.g. Luhmann 2002d). While the concepts discussed above may be applied in different domains and for the study of various systems, I concentrate in the following on the social system and its properties. The concepts of observation, observer, operations etc. will be discussed in regard to their appearances and roles in the social system.

II Communication – Society's Sole Constituent

The social system constitutes itself by ongoing and connected communications. Communication in distinction to everything else including consciousness, individuals or animals, figures as the basic and sole element by which society as a system is constituted. Thoughts, human beings and material objects do not as such belong to this system. It may sound strange that human beings do not constitute society and it may sound even more bizarre that they are not the ones who communicate, although society relies to a certain extent on their faculties to think, speak and move (see Luhmann 2002d, 2002f). But the way systems theory conceptualizes communication results in the claim that "[o]nly communication can communicate" (Luhmann 2002f: 156).

The concept of communication closely relates to the concepts of observation and operation and to other elements of systems theory. While one could focus on other concepts of systems theory, I consider it as one of the main concepts for the understanding

of tattooing. This is why other concepts will only be mentioned without being explained in detail.

Communication as a Three-Part Selection

Communication does not work according to a sender-receiver-model in which individuals exchange bits of information (see Luhmann 1995b: 139ff.). Instead, communication is conceived in more abstract terms. Communication constitutes itself through three different but connected selections, forming “a three-part unity” (1995b: 141). Each of these three selections works like an observation, that is they draw a distinction while indicating something instead of something else. But in order for communication to occur and operate, the three selections need to be synthesized (1995b: 141-142).

These three selections are information, utterance and understanding. Information refers to what is communicated, utterance to how it is communicated and understanding to the distinction between these two (Luhmann 2002f: 157). Communication only emerges “if and to the extent that understanding comes about” (Luhmann 1995b: 147). This implies that utterance or information alone do not constitute communication. Only the unity or synthesis of the three selections results in communication. Or as Luhmann (2002f: 157) puts it: “Communication therefore takes place only when a difference of utterance and information is first understood”.

By distinguishing information and utterance in a certain way rather than another, understanding establishes these two. This includes misunderstanding, because the distinction between information and utterance is not given or already fixed. A misunderstanding, however, only becomes one if a subsequent understanding connects to the previous one (distinguishing it in terms of information and utterance) and constructs it as a misunderstanding. Understanding, thus, does not refer to congruence between a ‘sender’s’ intended meaning and understanding of information and the ‘receiver’s’ correct understanding of the same. Understanding means the distinction between utterance and information in a particular way that subsequently may as well be understood as a misunderstanding (see Seidl/Becker 2006: 19, who use the mark of distinction for illustrating the three-part unity of communication).

Take, for example, a situation in which someone says “It is quite cold in here” (see for a similar example and discussion Werber 2008: 453-454). The statement as such does not constitute communication, as long there is no understanding. Let us assume the person making the statement sits with other persons in a room that has an opened window. In this case it seems rather impossible that communication does not emerge.

There are many things that may be understood as an understanding of the statement after it has been made. Hearing the statement, someone may close the window. This can be seen as an understanding that focuses on the utterance as a call to close the window. The closing of the window might then again be understood if the other person says “Thank you for closing the window”. The initial statement, however, does not determine that communication proceeds this way. Instead of closing the window, someone might say “Yes, it is cold indeed” or even “Stop complaining and put on your jacket!”. Each case differently connects to the previous statement and results in a different orientation of communication. How this actually turns out certainly depends on the context (here, e.g., the interaction in the room).

These example should illustrate that communication emerges when something is understood and not simply if something is said (the person might as well be alone in the room and talking to him- or herself). To be clear, understanding does not mean to understand something intellectually, i.e., with one’s psychic system (although that may well happen). Understanding as a crucial part of communication means that a connection to further communication is established, regardless of its content and adequacy (to the statement discussed before, someone could also say “No, you’re not that old!”, what would likely be understood as a misunderstanding; but communication would proceed nonetheless).

As in the case of the interaction, communication leads to connecting communication or it stops. Even if it stops, it can be resumed at a later date and at a different place (as, e.g., made possible by media of dissemination such as books and electronic devices; Luhmann 1995b: 161). The proceeding of communication depends on whether the subsequent communication is connectable and whether it makes further connections possible (a misunderstanding does not necessarily terminate communication, but might simply proceed in a different manner). Communication, thus, goes on and on, even if it might stop in certain contexts while it proceeds in others. As mentioned, this ongoing connection of communications constitutes and reproduces the social system called society.

Types, Forms and Media of Communication

While everything belonging to the social system is communication, we can distinguish between different ways communications emerge in regard to the media they use. The medium of meaning is common to all kinds of communication.³ Communication is al-

3 Psychic systems also draw on meaning as a medium, but in their own particular way (see Luh-

ways meaningful (“sinnhaft”) communication (Luhmann 2001: 44ff.). Meaning makes communication possible in the first place.

We can distinguish between linguistic and non-linguistic communication. Communication should not only be understood in terms of language. Linguistic communication is important, for example, when it comes to descriptions of something in spoken or written form. Language in a broader sense may also include signs, symbols and pictures. Language in the broadest sense, thus, constitutes the medium of communication used in these cases (Luhmann 1995b: 160).

Other communications do not necessarily rely on language. They rather make use of many different media in order to constitute communication. These are called symbolically generalized media of communication or, alternatively, media of success (Luhmann 1995b: 161, 2001: 203). The latter phrase refers to these media’s capability to increase the chance of acceptance of specific communication (Luhmann 2001: 203f.). As I will discuss below, economic and artistic communication (among many others) operate through their own particular, non-linguistic media. The emerging communication is of a different type than if language is involved. Communication may take place, for example, through the media of money, artwork, power and truth, independent of linguistic descriptions. Because of this one can say that economy, art, politics or science do not constitute simply communication about economy, art etc. Although this kind of communication ‘about’ is not excluded, it does not constitute these societal sub-systems. Rather, they constitute themselves through their own particular forms and media that do not emerge as language.

In order to distinguish communications, especially of the latter type, we can use the distinction between form and medium as two closely related concepts. As shown above, form refers to the unity of a distinction. Forms constitute the basis for the constructions of reality(-ies). There is, however, a second, closely related meaning of the concept of form. For forms to emerge they require a medium or media. Likewise, a medium does not exist if it is not formed. “There is neither a medium without form nor a form without medium”, as Luhmann (1987b: 103) notes. This applies to all kinds of forms and media of communication, but also to the material world (see Luhmann 1987b). In this respect, thus, form is the unity of the distinction between form and medium.

In order to define form and medium, Luhmann draws on Fritz Heider’s work on things and media (Heider 2005; see Luhmann 1987b). A medium consists of loosely

mann 1995b: chap. 2, 2002d).

coupled elements, while a form is a strict coupling of these elements. The elements of a medium, offer different possibilities of how to select and couple them in concrete ways (Luhmann 1987b: 102). Because of this, a medium can be formed in various ways, without being fixed permanently. If there was only one form for a medium, Luhmann (1987b: 103) argues, it would disappear. A medium is only established if it is shaped in one way or another by a form. Take the (material) example of air: air figures as a medium for the form we call sound waves, without which speaking or hearing would be impossible (we cannot hear or speak in a vacuum in which the medium of air is missing; see Luhmann 1987b: 102). What we perceive or observe is not a medium but how it is formed in a particular way. Because of the loose coupling of its elements we do not hear air, but only the sound its formation creates (Luhmann 1987b: 102).

Meaning, as indicated, constitutes the basic medium for communication. Communication as the triple selection and synthesis forms meaning as a medium. But meaning is not an entity or identity as such but is also constituted by a distinction. We can conceive meaning in terms of form and medium as well, defining it as the distinction between actuality and potentiality (Luhmann 1995b: 65).

Here we encounter a special feature of the distinction of form and medium: the distinction can function as a medium that is formed by a higher-level form/medium distinction, or a medium may turn out as another, lower-level form/medium distinction. This may produce a cascade of form/medium distinctions. Take again the example of air: in regard to lower-level form/medium distinctions we can see that air as a medium is itself a form that couples elements, that is air molecules that consist of certain kinds of atoms as loosely coupled elements, and they again present yet another form/medium distinction of yet another level, etc. (see Luhmann 2001: 196); in regard to higher-level form/medium distinctions the formation of air by sound (or noise) is not the end, but it figures as a medium for higher-level forms such as words, and they again constitute the medium for speeches or texts and so on. For forms and media of communication this implies that the material world, even as part of the social system's environment, constitutes their basis. The form/medium distinction, thus, allows us to decompose phenomena into their constitutive parts and these, again, into their forms and media.

With the help of the abstract and thus flexible form/medium distinction we can distinguish between the many forms of communication. Communication always operates as a form in the sense of a distinction with two sides, and it operates by means of a medium (or sometimes through several media). The concepts of form and form/medium, therefore, can be linked with one another:

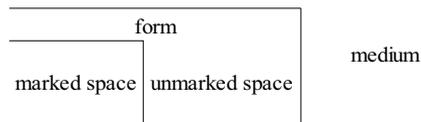


Fig. 2: The distinction of form and medium

Communication can be characterized with the distinction of form and form/medium. The difference between communications can stem from a different way a medium is formed, or, given the same form, from the difference of the media. Such a view on communication, as I will argue later, allows one to investigate a social phenomenon in distinction to other and seemingly similar phenomena.

III Society's Systems and Structures

For every communication it should be possible to determine its form and its form/medium distinction through which it operates. While linguistic forms of communication certainly are ubiquitous and important to consider (especially as it constitutes the main empirical material; see the chap. 3), it is to a great extent the non-linguistic forms that shape modern society.

Functional Systems

Modern society is characterized by forms of communication which constitute so-called functional systems.⁴ By operating in a specific form and by means of a particular medium of communication, they close themselves off according to their own criteria from a social environment. The processing of a form of communication results in a societal sub-system that only connects to itself. This self-reference and recursive operation constitutes the system and its environment. The operating form constantly draws this distinction. For each of the functional systems, therefore, the system/environment distinction turns out differently (Luhmann 1995b: chap. 5, 2001: chap. 1.IV).

There are several functional systems that close themselves off with their particular operating forms of communication. The most prominent ones are politics, law, eco-

⁴ I will not discuss all the connected theory elements and arguments about the social evolution of society and the different forms of societal differentiation (see Luhmann 1977, 2001: chap. 3 and 4). Here and in the following, I will primarily deal with modern society and its characteristics.

nomy, art, education, science, religion, mass media and medicine, though there are perhaps many more (see Luhmann 1996a, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2002b, 2002a, 2003a, 2005b, 2005a).⁵ In regard to these systems Luhmann speaks about their codes and symbolically generalized media of communication.

The code of a functional system constitutes the specific form in which it operates and reproduces itself.⁶ It unites a positive and a negative value, providing a guiding distinction for the system. Each side of the distinction is specified in relation to the other one (Luhmann 2002a: 177-178). Both sides are responsible for the operational reproduction of a system because they always emerge together, even if only one of them can be indicated at a time (Luhmann 2001: 360-361). Even though the positive side of the code's distinction is preferable for a system's reproduction (preference value), it does not mean that the indication of the other side leads to a stop of the systems communication. In such a case, the stream of communication does not automatically become another form of communication. The positive and the negative sides of the code constitute an inseparable distinction. The system reproduces itself only if the code operates. Put differently: if the system is supposed to continue working and existing, it needs to operate in this and no other form. Should there be a form operating with only one of a code's sides together with a different value, it is likely that one observes another form of communication that does not contribute to the system's own reproduction. For example, whenever communication emerges in the form of payment/non-payment, it is the code of the functional system of economy that operates (Luhmann 1996a: 52). Should it be the form of true/false, it is the system of science that communicates in its code (Luhmann 2002b: 172f.). If communication works with the distinction of harmonious/non-harmonious (or, alternatively, fit/lack of fit), it is the system of art that operates (Luhmann 2000a: 194; see Luhmann's monographs cited above for the coding of other functional systems).

A code as a particular form of communication relies on a medium for operating. In the context of functional systems Luhmann talks about symbolically generalized media of communication, which I have mentioned above (Luhmann 2001: 203-205, 316ff.). As an evolutionary outcome of modern society's differentiation into functional systems, symbolically generalized media, or media of success, make it more likely for

5 Systems theoretical research explores or suggests 'new' systems every now and then (see e.g. Baecker 1994; Bohn 2000; Fuchs 2004; Fuchs/Heidingsfelder 2004; Lewandowski 2004; Lindeberg 2007; Werron 2010).

6 Self-reproduction refers to a system's own reproduction by means of its own elements. In other words, a system produces its constitutive elements with the help of its own elements (Luhmann 1996a: 49). This is what the concept of autopoiesis refers to (see Luhmann 1995b: 34ff., 2009).

particular communication to take place (2001: 204-205).⁷ They increase the likelihood that certain communication is accepted that goes beyond interaction systems (Luhmann 2002b: 479). In this sense, they are ‘symbolical’ because they “equip communication with chances of acceptance” (Luhmann 2001: 319; my transl.). They are ‘general’ in the sense that they encompass different situations and facts (Luhmann 2001: 320). Money, for examples, as the medium of economic communication allows one to hypothetically buy and sell everything from vegetables to stocks regardless of the characteristics of the persons or organizations involved – even if a transaction might be immoral or otherwise “uncomfortable” (see Luhmann 2001: 204). Money makes the acceptance of economic communication more likely and it may be spent for many commodities and services. Ultimately, the code and symbolically generalized medium of a functional system emerge together and rely on each other the same way as indicated more generally for the form/medium distinction.

The code of a functional system draws a clear-cut, either-or distinction: either payment or non-payment, either true or untrue, either harmonious or non-harmonious etc. There are no nuances. While the code determines whether a communication belongs to the system or not, functional systems are equipped with programs or ‘semantic apparatuses’ that define the conditions under which the positive or negative value of a code applies (Luhmann 2001: 362). In other words, codes stand for invariance and simplicity, whereas programs introduce variance and complexity (2001: 362). In the economic system, for example, investment programs, budgets and balances figure as programs and condition the solvency and the amounts to be paid (Luhmann 1996a: 139, 226). In the scientific system programs appear as theories and methods, which condition the code true/untrue (Luhmann 2002b: 403; on others see Luhmann 2001: 377, 564). Because of their variance, programs are adaptable and can be changed by the systems in regard to observed perturbations in their environments (Luhmann 2001: 564-565).

Functional systems operate according to a particular form of communication and medium, while connecting to their own communication and thereby reproducing themselves. The different functional systems, therefore, operate separate from one another, i.e., they are not able to connect on an operational level to other systems’ forms of communication.⁸ But despite, or rather because of, their operational closure, they are

⁷ This relates to the assumption of the improbability of communication (see Luhmann 1981).

⁸ Again, this implies that every system constructs a reality according to how it forms communication. For the description of modern society’s constellation of different functional sub-systems with their own perspectives, Luhmann uses the term polycontextuality (Luhmann 2001: 36, 1132; originally from Günther 1979). Non of these systems’ perspective or reality construction dominates society.

‘cognitively’ open (see e.g. Luhmann 1987a, 1996a: 49).

While systems close themselves with their operations, and thereby distinguish themselves from what does not belong to the system (their environment), they also construct a particular perspective of their environment. A system’s cognitive openness, thus, means that it constructs its environment in a certain manner.⁹ This construction determines what the system observes as relevant in its environment for its own constitution. Functional systems, therefore, deal with completely different things when they consider their environment. In the case of a functional system’s observation of another functional system, the observing system will ‘see’ something else than the observed system. If, for example, the legal system issues a new law, the economic system might observe this event as an incentive or a hindrance for new payments. It only becomes relevant for economy, however, if the system observes it as relevant. Even if the legal system should try to address the economy directly with a law, this does not necessarily mean that the economic system considers it relevant. Thus, a system constructs its environment in its own particular manner, making it available for its own processing.

The operational closure of particular forms of communication as functional sub-systems results in modern society’s form of differentiation. Differentiation refers to the way societal sub-systems related to each other (Luhmann 2001: 609). Each sub-system fulfills a function for society that no other system is concerned with (hence the name ‘functional’). In other words, each functional system constitutes the solution to a societal problem with which it continually deals through its particular way of working (Luhmann 2001: 746). Modern society, therefore, constitutes itself as a functionally differentiated society.

The function of law, for example, consists in the stabilization of counter-factual, that is normative, expectations (Luhmann 2002a: 199). The political system has the societal function to keep available the capacity for collectively binding decision-making (Luhmann 2005b: 84). Dealing with scarcity, the economic system solves the problem of securing the future supply (Luhmann 1996a: 64, 2001: 758). The system of art, as a last example, has the function of evoking the world in the world, showing that the world is not necessarily the way it is (referring to contingencies, making visible the invisible; Luhmann 2000a: 149, 2001: 352-353).

Before the emergence of functional differentiation, however, society was differentiated in other ways: according to segmentation (e.g. clans), center/periphery (city/countryside) and stratification (hierarchically ordered strata; see Luhmann 1977, 2001:

⁹ Cognition, according to von Foerster (1984b: 294, 296), is the computation of a reality of an environment, or ultimately the computation of computations.

613). These forms of differentiation prevailed before being replaced by another one. Functional differentiation prevails in modern society. It does not mean, however, that the others disappeared entirely. Rather, they still exist in certain contexts of sub-systems (e.g. segmentary differentiation of the political system into nation or territorial states; Luhmann 2005b: 222). As noted, however, I will primarily deal with modern society and its characteristics as functionally differentiated.

Although functional systems' forms of communication define contemporary society's form of differentiation, they are not the only type of systems. Interactions and organizations are two different types of systems that constitute themselves in their own way (see Luhmann 1982).¹⁰

Excursus: The Communication of Economy and Art

Because art and economy play a central role in the following analyses, I want to clarify their main features as functional systems. How they concretely emerge in the case of tattooing will be the subject of chapter six.

As indicated, economy communicates with the code of payment/non-payment in the medium of money. This, however, is only part of what happens if economic communication takes place (Luhmann 1995b: 462). An operation of the economic system always combines payment/non-payment with something that is exchanged (a commodity, service or 'payment in kind'; Luhmann 2006a: 28).¹¹ In regard to the latter, Luhmann speaks of the distinction of have/not have that works in the medium of possession (Luhmann 1996a: 188ff.). The operational connection of payment/non-payment of money and having/not having of possessions, constitute an economic transaction (Luhmann 2006a: 38-40).

Scarcity applies to both money and possessions. That is, a transaction implies a double movement of scarcity (Luhmann 1996a: 197ff.). On the one hand, a payment leads to the loss of a certain amount of money, which means that the scarcity of money increases. On the other hand, the exchange leads to the reduction of scarcity in terms of possessions. The opposite can be formulated for the other side in the transaction, which means that the scarcity of possessions is increased by giving away something, while

10 In his later work, Luhmann suggested protest movements as a fourth type of system (Luhmann 2001: chap. 4.XV, 2004c). Since they will not play a crucial role for the following analyses, I do not discuss them here.

11 The objects, commodities or services that are exchanged and paid for are not as such part of the economic system. Although they are observed and dealt with as economically relevant, they still belong to the system's environment (Luhmann 1995b: 462). A work of art, for example, is not as such an economic commodity or its creation already a service. Rather, economic communication constructs it as a commodity/service.

the scarcity of money is reduced because one accepts a monetary payment in return (on this paradoxical constellation, see Luhmann 1996a: 179).

Because of their loose coupling and potential for varied and repeated recombination, money and possessions as media for economic communication have to be conceived in a broad sense. Possessions can be everything from objects (commodities) to performances (service) of different kinds and appearances. Similarly, payments can be made in different kinds of money, not only with the officially sanctioned bills, coins and credit cards issued by banks (see Baecker 2006b: 64–65; see also Venkatesh 2008). The medium of money can consist of many different objects, with which payments can be made, as long the potential remains, that future payments can recombine and reuse the same objects again as money. The following example illustrates what kind of money can be in use. A tattooist describes how he started out at “tattoo parties”:

Since we were all punk rock and broke, my rate of charge was based on food and alcohol. A small tattoo would cost you a bag of Doritos and a half-liter of chocolate milk; a medium-sized tattoo would run you a deli style sandwich; and a large tattoo would set you back a case of beer. (*Prick Magazine* 2008, 8/5: 50 and 52)

Because the tattooist’s customers had no money in the form of bills and coins, food and alcohol functioned as monetary equivalents. Although we can imagine that the tattooist consumed the things he received as payments for the tattoos, hypothetically they could have been used in different re-combinations for future transactions (e.g. a few bottles of beer for buying a set of tattoo needles from an acquaintance). Similar forms of payments in different ‘currencies’ can be found in prisons. Inmates not only may pay for their tattoos with money, but also with cigarettes, food and other things (see DeMello 1993: 11; Kuwahara 2005: 201).¹²

Whenever communication operates in these forms, while drawing on these media, economic communication takes place. The emergence of economic communication does not, as such, depend on its favorable or approving observation and organizational coverage. That is, it does not depend on a central bank or institutional acceptance. Although it is very likely that economic communication is observed and as well as often being organizationally structured, its occurrence is distinct from such communication about it in the first place. The same also applies to the emergence and occurrence of

¹² Tattoo organizations, in contrast, may refuse to barter or accept other ‘currencies’ than real money. The following is written on a sign in a tattoo establishment and clearly expresses such a decision: “We accept... cash & credit cards. We do not accept: car parts – pot/drugs – chickens – friendship – checks” (originally written in capitals; thanks to Jessica Mijnsen who sent me a picture of the sign).

artistic communication.

Art as communication emerges and occurs due to a specific coding of communication. It operates with decisions of form, coded according to the distinction harmonious/non-harmonious or fit/lack of fit (Luhmann 2000a: 118, 193ff., 2008d: 393). It is again very likely that observations and organizations address and condition artistic communication in one way or another (supporting or guiding artistic self-reference and the reproduction of the art system; see Luhmann 2008d: 394, 2000a: 291). Even if something is described as non-art or bad art, the described communication may operate as art if it works with the art specific code (Luhmann 2000a: 194).

The medium that allows the creation of decisions of form is the artwork understood as the sum of all possible ways of drawing form decisions. As for every other medium, the artwork as medium is not as such perceivable except if formed by decisions of form (Luhmann 2000a: 118). That is why “[t]he medium of art is present in every artwork” (2000a: 118). While this is the art’s specific symbolically generalized medium of communication, the actualization of artistic communication relies on lower-level media or form/media distinctions of a physical and non-communicational character such as light, color, sound and many more (see Luhmann 1987b). An artwork, thus, combines and condenses diverse media and forms for creating decisions of form as communication of a particular kind.

As indicated, I want to emphasize an operational approach to art. What is of primary interest is communication *through* which art emerges. It should not be confused with communication *about* art (see Laermans 1997; Albertsen/Diken 2004). The same applies to economy and other functional systems’ communication. An operational conceptualization of art and other phenomena differs from conceptualizations which focus on how phenomena are described and thereby emerge (on the sociology of art see e.g. Alexander 2003). I want to illustrate this point with a brief discussion of the difference between an operational and an institutional approach regarding an investigation of tattooing and tattoos as artistic phenomena.

In his book, *Customizing the Body*, Clinton R. Sanders (1989a: 23f.) opts for an “institutional theory of art”. According to Sanders, institutional theory conceptualizes art as an attribute of objects or activities, i.e., “as an honorific label” (1989a: 24). Art, thus, is a matter of communication about something as art. Sanders goes a step further and argues, in line with the institutional perspective, that “art is a matter of constructing a consensual definition” (1989a: 24).

First, the concept of art suggested here differs from Sanders’ perspective insofar as

it does not conceive art primarily in terms of communication about art (its description, definition). Second, while an institutional approach emphasizes a “consensual definition” of art, from a systems theoretical point of view art cannot be a matter of consensus because it consists of communication through decisions of form. Decisions of form can either turn out to be harmonious or non-harmonious, but they are not the subject of consensus. Only if we observe observations of artistic communication, we might describe these observations in terms of consensus or disagreement. However, in both these latter cases art may keep on working as communication regardless of the outcome of the dispute about art.

Independent of these theoretical differences, an institutionalist perspective on art seems to miss the (empirical) point, if one looks at the controversies about tattooing concerning its status as a form of art. While Sanders (1989a: 24, 150) discusses the disputes about the artistic status of tattooing, his approach creates the impression that the artistic legitimation of tattooing requires the consecration of the legitimate art world as an institution. He claims that tattooing undergoes a “transition from a (generally disvalued) craft to a (partially legitimated) art form” (1989a: 24), while acknowledging the resistance and opposition from tattooists as well as “agents of the conventional art world” against this transition (1989a: 150). In the history of tattooing, both in regard to tattoo organizations and other societal contexts, however, consensus about tattooing or tattoos as art existed most likely only at certain times and within limited contexts. Although one can observe past and present attempts at agreeing with the artistic status of tattooing, a permanently fixed consensus about it has never been established. Even today, the artistic status of tattooing (i.e., its observation as art) cannot be taken for granted, neither in the ‘tattoo world’ nor in the ‘conventional art world’.

Both affirmative and non-affirmative observations of tattooing and tattoos as art from the point of view of tattoo organizations existed since their emergence. This is, for example, a recurrent topic in most tattoo magazines and many books (see Hardy 1995; Ferguson/Procter 1998; Webb 2002). Other societal domains and the organizations linked to them judge tattooing and tattoos regarding their art status as well. By exhibiting tattoo related visual material (flash designs, pictures, paintings etc.), museums and galleries help tattooing to attain an art status. In this regard, Kosut (2006b: 75) speaks of an “institutional quasi-legitimacy” (see also The Drawing Center/Hardy 1995; Kimmelman 1995; Mendelsohn 2000; Holmes 2001; Cole 2003; Forment/Brilot 2004). Early on, media reports already talked about tattoos in terms of art (e.g. Hopkins 1895a, 1895b; Bolton 1897; Boyer 1898; Dr Bienvenu ~1900-1903; Brooklyn

1903; Hochman 1947). Other organizations such as courts and art universities, however, may not observe tattooing in equally favorable terms (e.g. *TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/144: 112; *Skin Deep* 2007, Christmas/154: 16-17).¹³ Depending on the point of view, observations and descriptions about the art status of tattooing and tattoos differ considerably. While a consensus might be established in one particular context, this does not necessarily also apply to others, let alone to all the viewpoints in society. While an institutional perspective would probably have trouble finding out or empirically justifying whether tattooing and tattoos are art or not, the perspective suggested here says that artistic communication may take place, even though the descriptions about it may differ considerably.

The concept of art suggested here allows us to circumvent some of the difficulties involved in deciding whether tattooing should be seen as art or not. Such a normatively informed decision is a matter of the communication about art. Systems theory as it is used here starts with the operation, the basic form of communication of art. In a second step it addresses the observations from different points of view. This implies that the theory does not yet work with concepts such as 'high' or 'fine' art. This would lead to a theoretical and normative selection of the phenomena one conceives as art. An abstract concept of art allows one to observe whether communication works in terms of art. Many things can be or become art if the art system's communication is operating (e.g. objects such as Marcel Duchamp's urinal, Banksy's street art, or Wim Delvoye's tattooed pigs; for the latter see Christofori 2009: 165f.). Evaluative designations such as fine art, high- or low-brow art, design, popular or mass art and others can nevertheless be included, that is as semantics that are used in descriptions about artistic phenomena.

¹⁴ Similarly, descriptions of persons as good or bad artist, craftsperson and the attribution of skill, craftsmanship, artistic achievement or genius may be studied as specific semantics.

The different semantics, however, do not necessarily always relate to the process of artistic communication. As with other semantics, they may appear in other contexts than those from which they originate. An artistic semantics is sometimes also used in

¹³ Angela McRobbie (1998: 17) gives an example of 'battles' in fashion design and art and design education, emphasizing the disagreements about basic questions, emerging antagonisms, and the fact that they cannot be resolved. On controversies about Baroque music, see Hennion (1997); about jazz music, see Lopes (2002); about photography, see Christopherson (1974a; 1974b); and video games in comparison to other popular art forms, see Jenkins (2000).

¹⁴ That many contributions in the sociology of art have an implicit elitist perspective by focusing exclusively on fine or high art has recently been criticized by Sanders (2009: 72). This shows, as Sanders notes, in the missing reception of Sanders' (and others') work in the field of the sociology of art.

relation to other areas, occupations and persons (e.g. management and business as art, 'art of living', 'con artist' etc.; the same applies also to economic and other semantics; on the semantics of the customer see Tacke/Wagner 2005). The possibility of observing art in regard to its operational emergence as communication, in distinction to descriptions and semantics of art, implies that it remains an empirical matter, whether the latter is related or referring to phenomena in the sense of the former. When one observes a description in which a person calls him- or herself an artist, one has to look at whether it is actually art that emerges in this context and in connection to this person's description. Equally, the same description may include an economic semantics that describes the person as a businessperson or service provider. The semantics, however, do not necessarily determine if something is art or not or belongs to the economy or not (as particular societal systems). Tattooists may describe themselves as artists, though they may be described by other tattooists as businesspeople who lack artistic skill. While the suggested approach takes seriously such descriptions and semantics, it does not conclude whether something is art or whether something is legitimately called fine art on that basis. This would rather be the approach of an institutionalist theory. The operational approach to art (and every other functional system's communication) leaves such evaluations and disputes to the descriptions it observes. Of course, I rely on the semantics of art, economy etc. to describe these phenomena as well, not least for want of a better and normatively less laden terminology. Using the semantics of art myself, however, means to refer to a particular form of communication through which art emerges. To make this clear once again, when observing tattooists' self- and other-descriptions which use artistic semantics, it is not because of this that I see tattooing or tattoos as (partly) art. Rather, I describe tattooing and tattoos in these terms, because the two emerge in certain contexts (partly) through the operation of artistic communication.

For the analysis of tattooing as a form of communication, it is important to keep in mind the operational understanding of economy, art and other forms of communication in distinction to observations, descriptions and semantics as communication about economy, art etc. The operational approach I suggest is more inclusive than an institutionalist theory of art. Since I want to observe, for example, when a phenomenon operates in the form of art, I do not restrict the concept of art to high or fine art phenomena. Equally, observing economy, I do not limit my focus on those transactions that only involve money issued by a legitimate central bank. If communication operates in the form of art, economy or any other functional system's communication, regardless of its

beneficial or unfavorable description, it becomes relevant to this perspective. The relevant criterion, thus, is the form of the communication through which a phenomenon emerges and not communication about a phenomenon in certain terms, even elitist ones. Although the latter may be indicative of the operation of a particular form of communication, they do not determine for the researcher whether a phenomenon is seen as art, economy or something else.

Interaction Systems

An interaction system emerges and operates “when *present individuals perceive one another*” (Luhmann 1982: 71; emphasis in original; see also Luhmann 1995b: 392). Put differently, interaction is communication among individuals present (Kieserling 1999). While the presence of individuals is crucial for an interaction system, it is nevertheless the communication and not the individuals as such that constitute the operating system (Kieserling 1999: 65). The system’s communication addresses individuals as present, thereby including them as relevant and excluding others as irrelevant for the interaction (even if they happen to be on site but are not addressed as present by the interaction; Luhmann 1995b: 412, 414-415; Kieserling 1999: 66). Those included in an interaction system – family members at the dinner table, the teacher and her students in a class-room etc. – are addressed by communication as specific social ‘addresses’ or persons (e.g. mother in the former case, teacher in the latter; see Luhmann 1995a: 241). The interaction addresses them not only as present and addressable, but also refers to them in a particular way, by attributing certain roles.

Within the confines of an interaction, it is almost impossible that communication does not occur. Because of the situation of mutual perception, everything from scratching ones head, blinking, looking out the window or pretending not to listen may be understood and may lead to further communication (Luhmann 1995b: 412-413; also Luhmann 1982: 71). According to Luhmann, “one *cannot not communicate* in an interaction system” (Luhmann 1995b: 413; emphasis in original). While this quote might convey the impression that individuals (“one”) communicate, this is not the case. Rather, the statement refers to the fact that whatever is perceivable can become the subject of communication. That means that in an interaction system communication has no problem in connecting to further communication. Communication will only stop if the interaction system dissolves, that is if no one can be addressed anymore as present in the interaction.

Interaction systems may emerge and dissolve again quickly or last for a longer time.

They also may change in regard to what the communication of the interaction is about and in regard to the persons it addresses. But as long as the interaction system operates, it distinguishes itself from its environment and reproduces itself with its own elements of communication. Even though there might be many things and people that could be perceived and therefore be included into the communication of the interaction, it is the system itself that decides when and how to include new topics and persons (Luhmann 1995b: 415). Due to this self-determination, several independent interactions may emerge next to each other without necessarily resulting in one overall system. At tattoo conventions, for example, interaction systems emerge and dissolve or change in regard to topics and the people they include. Each convention booth that hosts members of tattoo organizations, may form an interaction, while not necessarily including others from neighboring booths or convention visitors. They are also likely to transform themselves if a visitor or customer enters an interaction's realm. Thus, it is possible that a multiplicity of interaction systems operate simultaneously.

Whenever communication constitutes an interaction system, it always also contributes to the constitution of society as a social system. In this regard, interactions are comparable to functional systems, organizations and any other kind of communication. Because they are a type of system of their own, interactions are not part of any system other than the overall social system. In regard to their way of functioning, they are nevertheless distinct from the overall social system (see Luhmann 1995b: chap. 10, 2001: chap. 4.XIII). Interactions and the communication of functional systems may occur in parallel and can be closely related. As will be shown later (chap. 6), an interaction usually occurs parallel to tattooing as a form of communication. While the interaction may make tattooing its central topic, this is not a necessary requirement for tattooing or the interaction to take place. As can be often observed, an interaction system including a tattooist and customer may address many topics that do not relate to tattooing at all. The interaction can also include other persons such as apprentices, other visitors or a researcher. Thus, while it is almost inevitable that an interaction system emerges, it does neither constitute a condition for nor does it depend on the occurrence of tattooing. If the interaction takes place in an organizationally defined context, it is not part of the organization's constitution either. It may be framed by organizational decision-making, but the way it operates and changes is primarily the result of the interaction system's own functioning. Thus, temporary and partial relations to other types of systems are not as such excluded. Interaction as a system, however, distinguishes itself from them and operates in its own particular manner.

Organizational Systems

Like the other types of systems, organizations constitute themselves on the basis of their elements and a particular way of operating (see Luhmann 2003b, 2005i, 2006b; see also Nassehi 2005; Seidl/Becker 2006). Their constitutive basis consists in decisions and the process of decision-making. Organizational systems operate and (re-)produce themselves with decision communication and thereby distinguish themselves from their environment. Referring implicitly to the system's autopoietic reproduction, Luhmann notes accordingly: "organised social systems can be understood as *systems made up of decisions, and capable of completing the decisions that make them up, through the decisions that make them up*" (Luhmann 2003b: 32; emphasis in original). Decisions need not be limited to linguistic communication, but also include communication of a non-linguistic nature. An organization, for example, may not have any recorded decisions that figure as premises for future decisions, but decides and communicates decisions in the way it concretely deals with its members, its public and other organizations in its day-to-day operation (see Luhmann 2001: 831).

A decision is a selection among alternatives, i.e., the selection of one alternative in distinction to others. Decisions inevitably entail what is excluded or not selected. In other words, by making a selection or choice, a decision shows that it is contingent and could have been made differently (Luhmann 2005f: 394). Ultimately, a decision is the distinction between a selection and its alternatives (Luhmann 2005i: 86-87, 2006b: 135).

One of the special and paradoxical features of decisions consists in the character of the alternatives: the selection is not made among any conceivable alternative, but from a selection of alternatives (on other paradoxes see Luhmann 2005i; Andersen 2003c). That is, a decision can only include a certain selection of alternatives that matter to the organization. The making of a decision, thus, not only makes a selection among alternatives, but it also selects the alternatives among which the decision is taken.

The form of the decision as communication consists in the distinction between fixed and open contingency. Even though after a decision the contingency of the selectable alternatives is fixed, it is still co-determined by the before available alternatives. Luhmann (2003b: 37; emphasis in original) states:

A decision may then be comprehended as the transformation of the form of contingency. *Before the decision*, several possible decisions exist, thus the space of open possibilities is limited. *After the decision*, the same contingency exists in a fixed form: the decision could have been made differently - it is now contingent upon itself..

It is the distinction between fixed and open contingency that matters and not solely what was available before and after the decision.

Decisions have the same temporal properties as any other communication event, that is they are transient and far from stable (see Luhmann 2003b: 35f.; in general see Luhmann 2001: 52). An organization needs to decide time and again in order to reproduce itself and to stabilize what it decided before. A decision allegedly about the same thing, therefore, can turn out in different ways. That is, the decision as a selection among alternatives may be differently taken. Correspondingly, a decision can always be suspended or declared to be a wrong decision by a later decision. An organization therefore continually processes decisions in order to maintain itself. If it did not connect decisions to decisions, including those that decide about the validity of previous decisions as decisions (Andersen 2003c: 247), it would stop operating and existing.

Basically, organizational systems constitute themselves through decisions and thereby emerge “as networks of decision operations” (Luhmann 2005i: 85). While organizations have to make decisions in order to continue to exist, they need to make decisions about a variety of things.

A central decision about the organization’s limits and the decisions’ scope concerns its members (Luhmann 1996b, 2006b: chap. 9). An organization decides whom it includes as members and determines the criteria such as skills, responsibilities, work profile etc. according to which the selection is made. It establishes particular roles and expectations of the members that correspond to the organization’s requirements. By addressing members, the organization thus constructs particular persons (i.e., not addressing human beings in their entirety; Luhmann 1996b: 343). Because an organization needs diverse personnel with different functions and responsibilities, it decides about each of them differently. The position of the organization’s head will be defined differently than would the one of a secretary, worker, apprentice, or lawyer. Ultimately, the decisions about members result in an organizational structure to which future organizational decisions have to relate (on structures see below). Although people change and positions can be redefined, it always needs to be done in regard to what has been decided previously. In this sense, there is a mutual relation between membership and decisions. As Luhmann writes: “Members become members by decision. Membership is a way to remember these decisions” (Luhmann 1996b: 345).

While the decisions about members determine who can be addressed by and be held accountable for decisions, an organization has to define a variety of functions and tasks for the fulfillment of its central objective (e.g. the production of a product or service,

the formulation and defense of a political orientation, or the education of students). These functions and tasks can also be called decision programs (Luhmann 2006b: chap. 8). Like membership, decision programs are both the result of decisions and affect future decisions. They therefore also function as decision premises for future decision-making (Luhmann 2006b: 256).

An organization comprises a variety of decision programs, such as decisions about legal matters (e.g. statutes, labor contracts), about finances (expenses, income, pricing), about the education of its members and, depending on the kind of organization, those about its ‘core business’. The organization thereby draws on forms of communication of other systems in its environment. It takes decisions in regard to law, economy, education, politics, or art, while not as such producing legal, economic etc. communication. By relating its decisions to other forms of communication, it nevertheless conditions (supports or hinders) their emergence to a certain extent. An organization, thus, is not exclusively linked to one functional system’s form of communication (as sometimes claimed by Luhmann, see Luhmann 2005e: 392, 2001: 841; see also Hutter 2001: 308).¹⁵ They rather establish a variety of links for their different tasks or programs. That is why one can call them “polyphonic” or “heterophonic” organizations (Andersen 2003b; Andersen/Born 2007; see also Luhmann 2005b: 398, who writes about organizations as a ‘meeting space’ for functional systems’ communication). This, however, does not hinder an organization to focus on one or several of these communication references, while others form the required background. As I will show in chapter seven, tattoo organizations have such a focus in regard to their central ‘business’. Although not as important as these main references, others still play their own organizational role as decision programs.

Such a focus on or an orientation towards a certain form of communication gives an organization a particular ‘organizational form’.¹⁶ An organization’s main decisions and structures are closely related to this orientation. They are affected by this overall orientation, but also help to reproduce it. Like decisions, organizational forms need to be constantly reproduced in order to be stabilized. Through the same process, however,

15 In addition to the claim that organizations connect exclusively to one functional system, one also finds the claim that organizations are located within functional systems (e.g. Luhmann 2001: 841). Not only is the spacial semantics inadequate (communication systems have no spacial extension), this would also get into conflict with the distinction of types of social systems (see Kneer 2001). Interactions, organizations and functional systems may relate to each other in different ways, but they do not overlap or are nested within each other. They are all in the others’ (social) environments.

16 The phrase ‘organizational form’, of course, is differently used and conceptualized in organizational research (see e.g. Hannan/Freeman 1977: 935; Minkoff 2002).

they may be altered or switched. While an organizational form results in an orientation of central decisions and structures, thus, the latter affect and may alter the form's reproduction through their own ongoing reproduction.

Organizations with the same objective may share such an organizational form and thus are comparable in how they orient their central decision-making. They may, however, also work with distinct organizational forms. As we will see in the case of tattoo organizations, there are two prevalent organizational forms that differ in their orientations and, correspondingly, the decision-making. Organizational forms, thus, emerge in distinction to other forms, whether actualized by other organizations or solely constituting alternatives.

Regardless of how the organization empirically looks – a bank, church, arts association, law firm, university or tattoo organization –, it constitutes itself by the communication of decisions in regard to many different aspects. It is not the paying of bills, declaring something as legal, or educating people that constitutes the organization. Rather, it is the decision-making about these things that (re-)produces the organization as a system. Organizations, thus, operate and constitute themselves differently and in distinction to functional systems and interactions. Like interaction systems, organizations work parallel to tattooing and condition it, to a certain extent. They nevertheless have their own particular way of working as communication, as do the other involved systems.

Since I deal with a rather uncommon subject matter, I would like to explain why, and in which cases, I observe tattoo 'studios' or 'shops' as organizations or the organizational context of tattooing. We can distinguish between two contexts in which tattooing occurs: an interactional context and an organizational context. The interactional context frames and conditions the occurrence of tattooing for the time of its duration. The persons the interaction addresses may take on the temporary roles of the one who tattoos and the other who is tattooed (as well as possible onlookers). The former is not necessarily an accomplished tattooist, but might be addressed as someone with the required equipment for making a tattoo (whether only a needle and some Indian ink or a tattoo machine). Take again the description of the "tattoo parties" (*Prick Magazine* 2008, 8/5: 50 and 52) and the beginnings of a tattooist (see above p. 25). In the case of these parties, tattooing took place exclusively in an interactional context. Although the interactions eventually recurred, generating certain expectations (one can get tattooed at this party and has to bring beverages or food for payment), it was still a matter of interactions only. Each interaction may turn out differently, depending on how it devel-

ops and what kind of persons are present. In such a context, there are very likely no liabilities or only limited ones concerning roles, expectations and the thematic orientation of the interaction. Here, then, lies the difference to the organizational context.

To be sure, even in an organizational context, interactions will inevitably occur parallel to an organization's processes. However, the difference is that an organization reproduces itself beyond an interaction and cannot simply change its orientation and structure each time a tattooist meets a customer. Rather, it stabilizes itself, even though it continually has to reproduce its decisions and decision premises. In other words, an organization generates and imposes liabilities on itself in regard to its expectations, decisions, roles etc. over time and independent of actual interactions (see Luhmann 2001: 828). It can process and deal with far more complexity than an interaction system (Luhmann 2001: 837). The organization becomes addressable by communication because it communicates its decisions to its environment (its public, other organizations of different types or its environment in general; see Luhmann 2001: 834). That is, it becomes identifiable and liable beyond an interaction, its spatial location or the change of its size (e.g. change in personnel, whether one branch or several, participating at tattoo conventions parallel to normal operations). If it temporarily changes certain decisions that affect how it deals with its public, it can announce them in beforehand (e.g. due to special circumstances at tattoo conventions).

As outlined, organizations, like all other social systems and phenomena, exclusively emerge due to, and are characterized by, communication (Luhmann 2006b: 62-63). The emergence of communication in the form of an interaction, organization or functional system, therefore, is not a question of how many individuals or person are involved.¹⁷ Instead, it is a matter of how and what kind of communication operates and unfolds. Accordingly, the concept of organization is not thought to cover only cases in which a certain number or quantitative range applies. The question is an empirical one, namely whether communication happens in the form of decisions that reproduce and stabilize over time (it is crucial not to confuse organizational decisions with decisions of a psychic system; on their relation see Luhmann 2001: 832-833). While the size of an organization in terms of the number of its members and branches may make a difference for the organization's workings, it does not decide whether certain communication turns out as an organization or as a different kind of social phenomenon.

¹⁷ Luhmann tends to be concerned with large and, for functional systems, important organizations (see e.g. Luhmann 2001: 840ff.). This, however, should not preclude that one can study smaller and maybe less central or known organizations as well. On the issue of organizational size and complexity see Luhmann (2006b: 306ff.).

From this point of view, especially in terms of empirical research, it would be rather limiting if one defined organizations in terms of (large) size. In regard to tattoo ‘studios’ and ‘shops’, which emerge in many variants, the question would arise how one observes them other than as organizations (even if undertheorized, for Sanders 1989a, b; Wicks/Grandy 2007 and Grandy/Wicks 2008 it seems evident to deal with them as organizations). Although linked to interactions, tattoo organizations go beyond them because of their particular operation and capability of reproducing more complex networks of communication. Similarly, though communication of social or protest movements plays its role in connection to tattooing and tattoos (e.g. Rosenblatt 1997; Klesse 1999; Atkinson 2003b), because of its way of operating it cannot be seen as the communication that constitutes what I call tattoo organizations (see Luhmann 2004c; see also below, chap. 6.III). Eventually, organizational communication does not work in the same way as functional systems’ communication as described above, even though it closely relates to it. The concept of organization as suggested here, thus, allows us to observe specific communication linked to tattooing that operates in its own particular manner which can neither be reduced to psychic processes nor other forms of communication (Luhmann 2001: 837).

Structures

So far, the focus lies on the operations of systems. While they constitute the basic elements out of which systems emerge, they both are established and supported by structures. Whether in the form of expectations, persons, descriptions or semantics, structures emerge through communication and, in turn, enable further connections for communication (Luhmann 1996a: 283-284, 2005b: 241). Structures are conceived “as the selection of constrained possibilities” (Luhmann 1995b: 283) that make certain connections of communication more likely and more adequate than others. They have no essence but are the ongoing product of communication that (re-)stabilizes them (Luhmann 1995b: 283, 2001: 437). Certain expectations, specific persons as social addresses, descriptions and semantics become relatively stable structures because they are used and re-established time and again by communication. Because of this ongoing construction and stabilization, they can be altered nonetheless. On the one hand, structures need to stabilize to a certain extent in order to function as structures for communication. Their constant reproduction generates redundancy (Luhmann 1995b: 285). On the other hand, however, they are not invariant (1995b: 284).

Every system in society produces and requires structures in order to reproduce itself

operationally (Luhmann 1995b: 289). Whether functional systems, interactions or organizations, a system generates expectations, communication addresses (persons), descriptions and semantics that it uses to connect its elements to other elements.

Interaction systems, although their lifespan may be rather short, have to generate certain structures in order to guarantee, that communication goes on for a certain time. Themes and the addressing of particular persons in connection with the establishment of expectations function as structures (on themes, see Kieserling 1999: 180ff.). Without specific themes and the possibility of attributing communication to persons who are conceived as present, an interaction system would, if at all, emerge only briefly before dissolving again (for the situation in the elevator as a special case, see Hirschauer 1999). These structures do not need to be fixed once and remain the same for the entire duration of an interaction. If new persons are included into the interaction, expectations and themes may change (e.g. if someone joins a group of people that minutes before gossiped about this person, the theme and expectations need to change quickly). The interaction goes on, albeit with slightly different structures. However, not everything can become a theme or can be expected in a particular interaction. There are only certain possibilities that can be selected. Otherwise, the interaction might not make any sense any more. If an interaction stops operating, however, the structure does not necessarily disappear forever. It can be actualized in a different interaction and enables its emergence and continuance (Kieserling 1999: 180-181).

Similar to interaction systems, functional and organizational systems produce expectations and persons, which enable communication to establish further connections. Unlike interactions, functional and organizational systems rely on more stable structures.

A functional system cannot operate without generating expectations, roles and descriptions. For example, without generating expectations about validity, truthfulness, transparency, reliability and similar ones, scientific communication would not find connections for its continuation. The code of true/untrue would simply not make any sense. Moreover, the attribution of true statements without the role of the researcher or scientist would fail. Equally, the system relies on the production of (self-)descriptions (e.g. texts) and specific semantics, on which future communication can draw (on texts, see Luhmann 2001: 883). The same applies to every other functional system.

In regard to roles conceived as combined expectations, Luhmann speaks of complementary roles. Luhmann distinguishes between performance and public roles (1985: 13, 2001: 739; see also Stichweh 1997). Role distinctions such as artist/layperson or

connoisseur, producer/consumer or seller/buyer, teacher/student, or doctor/patient combine expectations that are defined by the corresponding system's communication. For example, an economic transaction may take place because there is a role distinction between buyer and seller and their corresponding expectations, namely that one will pay for a commodity the other will give and that the latter accepts the money for handing over a commodity. These roles and expectations become relatively stable, even if not unchangeable, and expected themselves. Even the disappointment of expectations will not necessarily alter them immediately, if at all (e.g. fraud in an economic transaction or plagiarism in science communication). In a subsequent case of communication, the expectations and roles may work again as expected for the communication to successfully occur.

Organizations establish their own structures in order to guarantee their continuance. As indicated above, organizations need to decide about its members, membership criteria, tasks and programs. These decisions create a variety of expectations and roles, which constitute the organization's structures and premises for future decisions.

The roles constructed for the organization's self-reproduction are not only limited to its members and performance roles, but also include those the organization tries to address with its offers and 'outputs'. We can thus again speak of a distinction between performance and public roles here (see Tacke/Wagner 2005). The general organizational semantics of clientele or customers refers to such public roles (Tacke/Wagner 2005: 130, 143-146). As I will show, tattoo organizations use this semantics for addressing their public. Depending on the organizational form, however, the definition of the expectations connected to the public role appears in different ways.

For both functional and organizational systems, (self-)descriptions and the use of specific semantics play a crucial structural role.¹⁸ Descriptions produce identities for systems on which they again can draw for operating. They establish a system's unity and identity by drawing particular distinctions and using certain semantics (see Luhmann 2001: 882). They form relatively stable structures in terms of time, but nonetheless need to be flexible in terms of meaning (Luhmann 2006b: 417, 2001: 883). Descriptions emerge prominently as texts, visualizations, proper names or equivalent forms (2006b: 417).

While a system's self-description fits the system's purpose, it does not necessarily seem adequate from a different point of observation. The way an organization operates and the way it describes itself, for example, may be two different things. Moreover, a

¹⁸ Society as the overall social system is also described and needs self-descriptions for its continuance (see Luhmann 2001: chap. 5).

system may draw a variety of descriptions and semantics that differ in their emphases or even may be contradictory (on the general heterogeneity of descriptions and semantics, see Stäheli 2010: 229f.). Their use depends on the context and the public to be addressed (on different organizational identities, see e.g. Albert/Whetten 2004; Glynn 2000; on self-description and organizational identity, see Seidl 2003).

Structures in the various forms discussed, thus, are the result of the operation of systems' communication, on the one hand, and the links for further communication, on the other. They condition the occurrence of communication, enabling a specific type or selection while hindering others.

IV Relations and Couplings

Systems of whichever type do not have direct contact with each other. No system is able to reach and operate outside of itself. Similarly, no system can directly draw on the operations of another system for its own operational autopoietic reproduction. As shown, systems are cognitively open and can observe other systems in their environments according to their own particular terms. Each system has its own criteria on what it considers to be relevant in its environment. The system defines and constructs the information it deals with and the systems that deliver it. Since there is no environment as such, but only one that depends on the point of observation, information as such does not exist either. Even if a system tries to disrupt or steer another system in its environment, there is no one to one relationship (see Luhmann 1997b). A system will be disrupted only if it actually observes something as disruptive. Thus, systems function only according to their own operations and observations of relevant information.

Nonetheless, systems theory offers different ways of how we can conceptualize relations or couplings between separately operating systems. The concept of structural coupling grasps stable relations between systems, while the concept of operative coupling captures relations limited to events. Although mentioned less frequently, Luhmann mentions the concept of multi-system events ("Mehrsystemereignisse"), which takes another look at systems' relations. Despite their slightly different angles, the three concepts seem to address a similar problem. Because of their rather general significance, however, I will introduce a concept that can grasp phenomena on a more concrete level.

Systems Theory's Offers

The concept of structural coupling explains how an operationally closed system,

without direct contact to its environment, relates to it nonetheless (Luhmann 2001: 100). It applies both to the social system of society and social sub-systems. In the former case, the social system establishes structural couplings particularly to psychic systems in its environment (Luhmann 2001: chap. 1.VI, 2002d; see also Luhmann 1995b: chap. 6, where he uses the term interpenetration). In the latter case, social sub-systems establish couplings with other sub-systems in their societal environment (Luhmann 2001: 791). Here, I focus on the couplings of systems in society.

As noted, a system opens itself by observing its environment. Although observing the environment means to construct it according to the system's own criteria, there might be things that perturb the system.¹⁹ This does not necessarily refer to negative disturbances. Perturbations emerge for a system by a comparison of its environment with its established structures (Luhmann 2001: 118). Something in the environment, and not the environment as such (Luhmann 2001: 791), can perturb the system only if the system can observe it in its own terms. But it also constitutes a perturbation because the system cannot match it (entirely) with its structures (e.g. deviations from established expectations).

While systems continually face perturbations of different kinds, they use some of them for their own purposes. In other words, particular perturbations are intensified and result in structural couplings for two systems. In this respect, Luhmann speaks of "tracks of mutual perturbation" (Luhmann 2001: 779; my transl.; see also Hutter 2001: 308). The structural coupling of two systems that observe each other as providing perturbations leads to the establishment of structures in each system relating to the perturbations.

Structural couplings ensure the cumulation of certain, and the exclusion of other, irritations. From this there arise trends in the self-determination of structures which depend on the particular irritations with which they have to deal. (Luhmann 1992b: 77)

Structural couplings do not refer to a system's influencing or instruction of another system (Luhmann 2001: 753). It means that a system may draw on another system's structures by way of observation, in order to constitute its own structures ("self-determination of structures"). In other words, a system relies on particular features of another system by creating corresponding structures of its own (Luhmann 2002a: 441).

Empirically, it is the functional systems, which prominently establish and maintain

19 In German the word "irritieren" or "Irritation" is used. I opt for the terms perturbation/perturb or disturbance/disturb, since I was told that 'irritation' usually is used in connection with people and would sound odd in English in connection with systems (although it is sometimes used in Luhmann's English texts; e.g. Luhmann 1992b: 77).

structural couplings among them (the examples mentioned by Luhmann focus mainly on these; see Luhmann 2001: 781-788; on the coupling of a functional system with organizations see Baecker 2001; Knudsen 2007).²⁰ Examples of functional systems' structural couplings are taxes (economy-politics), the constitution (law-politics), property and contracts (law-economy) or, as I will discuss again later (chap. 5.IV), the art market (economy-art; Luhmann 2001: 781-788, 2002a: 450ff.). While it is an external observer who sees the coupling (Luhmann 2002c: 269), the involved systems have their own particular perspective on what they are dealing with (they remain mutually non-transparent; Luhmann 2001: 106).

Although not as often discussed as structural couplings, Luhmann suggests a concept of operative coupling. The same term, however, appears with at least three different meanings.

First, operative coupling refers to the basic autopoiesis of a system that couples operation with operation (Luhmann 2002a: 440). This version does not refer to the coupling of systems. Second, operative coupling refers to "temporary couplings of the system's operations to ones that the system attributes to its environment" (Luhmann 2002a: 441; my transl.). Luhmann mentions the economic system that fulfills a legal obligation with a payment, or the legal system that symbolizes political consensus or disagreement by enacting a law (Luhmann 2002a: 441). This kind of coupling can only be established for the duration of the event and the event's identity is the product of the system's construction (Luhmann 2002a: 441). The third variant of the concept understands operative coupling as a supplement to structural coupling (Luhmann 2001: 788). Here, Luhmann argues that operative couplings "condense and actualize the mutual perturbations and thus enable faster and better coordinated information gathering in the involved systems" (Luhmann 2001: 788; my transl.). For example, a doctor confirms illnesses in written form, in order that patients can inform the organizations for which they work; interactions are organized in order to allow different organizations to carry out political negotiations; or in economic domains, organizations establish circles in which different topics concerning law, research etc. are discussed (Luhmann 2001: 788). Ultimately, only the last two variants of the concept of operative coupling, deal with systems' relations to some extent. Luhmann, however, does not elaborate them much further.

The third concept I want to mention appears rather rarely as well. It is the concept

²⁰ There are suggestions that organizations (Brodocz 1996; Lieckweg 2001; Hutter 2001: 309-310; see also Luhmann 2001: 784) and interactions (Kieserling 1999: 78, fn 21) enable structural couplings between functional systems.

of multi-system events (Luhmann 2001: 753-754, 2002b: 32). An event can belong to, or be relevant for, more than one functional system at the same time. For an external observer, it might look as though there is 'one' event taking place. But for the involved systems the event turns out entirely different. That is, the 'one' event emerges as two or more events for two or more systems. Such an event, thus, does not have only one history, but a history for each system involved (Luhmann 2002b: 32). According to Luhmann, such a multi-system event can be a payment for the change of a legal situation (Luhmann 2002b: 32; see also Luhmann 2001: 753). One can also imagine that theft may be such an event for both the economic and the legal system (i.e., the illegal taking of something without payment). In each system the event looks different and has different consequences.

The three concepts differ in certain aspects and have others in common. Structural couplings appear temporally more stable than operative couplings and multi-system events. But because of the event-like character of all communication, structural couplings can also only be maintained on the basis of events of communication, albeit perpetuated. The second version of the concept of operative coupling (temporary couplings of operations) is similar to the concept of multi-system events, the difference being that it seems to be thought only from the perspective of one system. They all, however, seem to address relations of a rather general kind. We can say something about what happens in a system, if it establishes structural couplings or co-constructs an event with another system. But it seems that we cannot say much about what emerges in its own right, for example, as the 'one' event or phenomenon when systems relate to one another. That is why I want to suggest a concept that grasps a phenomenon more concretely and not solely from the perspective of (a) system(s) or as an event. Instead this concept needs to do justice to the form of communication through which a phenomenon emerges, even though it may be co-constituted by specific systems' forms of communication. This implies a change of perspective, namely from a view on systems to a view on phenomena in their own terms.

The Concept of Parallax and Form Coupling

I want to suggest the concept of parallax for the conceptualization of certain phenomena and their forms of communication.²¹ The concept does not originally stem from

²¹ This is not the first time a concept of parallax is used in relation to social phenomena. Ginsburg (1995) uses it for the theorizing of ethnographic film making. See also Finley and Normans (1997), who suggest a concept of "social parallax" in regard to dealing with dichotomies. Martin and Deuze (2009: 280) mention the concept with reference to Žižek, but do not explain or use it further.

systems theory, but can be adapted and incorporated into it in a similar way to Luhmann's borrowed concepts from other disciplines (such as autopoiesis, form or second-order observation). The concept of parallax or parallax view originally comes from optics and astronomy (see Ginsburg 1995: 65). However, I draw on the work of Slavoj Žižek (2006; see also 2004; 2009) who uses the concept in a philosophical way that offers a starting point for a systems theoretical adaptation.²² The way I want to conceive of and use the concept of parallax for the characterization of forms of communication, will neither entirely do justice to the concept in science nor to the concept as used by Žižek. The adaptation means to give the concept a somewhat different meaning, which connects to systems theory – albeit not strictly in every respect of the theory as suggested by Luhmann.

Žižek (2006: 17) defines the 'parallax view' as "the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight". This definition is similar to the one used in science (see Ginsburg 1995: 65). In addition to this common definition, however, Žižek adds a "philosophical twist". Žižek argues "that the observed difference is not simply 'subjective', due to the fact that the same object which exists 'out there' is seen from two different stances, or points of view" (2006: 17). Instead, as Žižek puts in Hegelian terms, "subject and object are inherently 'mediated', so that an 'epistemological' shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself" (2006: 17). The 'one' object that might be seen and named, turns out to be as many objects as perspectives involved. Each of the perspectives constitutes the object's ontology differently.

The concomitant epistemological and ontological shifts happen in relation to objects that imply different and incommensurable perspectives. In order to understand such an object, the observer needs to oscillate between the involved perspectives. The "irreducible asymmetry" (Žižek 2006: 29) or incommensurability of the perspectives precludes a simple reduction to only one of them or their blending (Žižek 2004: 121). Here, Žižek deviates from the common definition, since he argues that the reason the parallax cannot be subjected to a procedure of reduction or blending lies in the lack of a "neutral common ground" of the involved perspectives (2006: 4).

Even though the terminology of subject and object might be confusing, Žižek's definition of parallax uses the idea of observer dependence, mentioned earlier in this chapter. As soon as the observer shifts the perspective to look at the object, the object

²² Žižek already borrowed and adapted the concept from Kojin Karatani (2003), who uses it in regard to Kant and Marx.

changes as well. The object, which is one and more than one at the same time, does only exist because of the irreducible but closely connected perspectives and not as such already 'out there'. This is one aspect of the concept of parallax to which a systems theoretical re-conceptualization can connect.

For a systems theoretical concept of parallax, however, one has to conceive of Žižek's 'object' in a different way. Instead of using this term, we better speak of a social phenomenon that is constituted by a parallax. The phenomenon is equally constituted by different and incommensurable perspectives or points of observation. Even though there may be a clear semantics about 'a' phenomenon, it is nevertheless the result of a parallax of perspectives.

A phenomenon is constituted by communication with a particular form. Only then it becomes a 'social' phenomenon. The same applies to a phenomenon that is constituted by a parallax. In this case, however, we deal with a more special form of communication, because it involves (at least) two different forms of communication (Žižek's 'perspectives'). The concept of parallax, thus, grasps a constellation of communication that includes incommensurable and non-reducible forms of communication that together are responsible for the emergence of a phenomenon.

Each form of communication involved in the parallax constructs the phenomenon in its own particular manner. A shift from one form of communication to the other means a shift in the perspective of how the world is constructed (the forms of communication are both 'constructors' and observers at the same time). This shift, as Žižek (2006: 17) describes it, entails "an 'ontological' shift", which is a change of how an 'ontology' of a phenomenon is constituted. As an (external) observer of the phenomenon, one will inevitably oscillate between the different perspectives the involved forms of communication imply. Despite this imposed oscillation for an observer, the phenomenon is constituted by the parallax of the forms of communication.

Žižek's claim that there is "no neutral common ground" (2006: 4) holds true also for a systems theoretical reformulation of the concept. Although we deal with forms of communication, it does not mean that they can be synthesized or one reduced to the other because they have communication in common. Despite this commonality, it is the specific *form* of communication that makes them incommensurable and establishes what Žižek (2006: 29) calls an "irreducible asymmetry". As shown earlier, forms of communication differ because of the specific distinctions each of them draws. The ways they operate and construct a reality of their own, thus, do not establish a common ground.

The concept of parallax does not have to be limited from the start to a specific kind of form of communication. If a phenomenon is constituted of two or more incommensurable forms of communication, forming a parallax constellation, the communication can hypothetically be of any kind. It is important concretely which forms of communication and of what kind constitute a phenomenon. Thus, this is an empirical question in the first place. In the case of tattooing, as I will show (chap. 6), the parallax phenomenon is constituted by functional systems' forms of communication. That means, the parallax consists of two forms of communication that differ in how they work. Neither can one be reduced to the other nor can they be synthesized or blended, as they are communication. And yet they are both constitutive for a phenomenon.

To summarize: The parallax emerges as a particular kind of form. We can also call it a parallax form. It includes other forms of communication that are equally constitutive. One can describe the involvement of the forms in the parallax in terms of 'both-and'. This differs from forms of communication that draw the usual 'either-or' distinction. The codes of functional systems operate like this, creating an asymmetry between a positive and a negative value (see Luhmann 2001: 360ff.). Although the parallax includes forms of communication of this 'either-or' type, it does so in a 'both-and' manner. I will come back to this in the discussion of tattooing and its parallax form (chap. 6).

The concept of parallax allows us to grasp phenomena that cannot be attributed to one definite societal sub-system. Although the spatial rhetoric is not entirely adequate, we could say that the parallax makes those phenomena visible that fall 'in-between' systems. The concept helps us to understand how such phenomena work and on which distinctions, though incommensurable, they rely.²³

The concept grasps in more concrete terms what the concepts of coupling discussed above address in more general terms. From the point of view of functional systems, one can see the establishment of structural couplings in relation to a phenomenon that lead to new system's structures. Equally, one can see that for the emergence of a phenomenon in society more than one system is involved, conceiving the phenomenon in terms of a multi-system event. In both cases we have a general idea about how systems relate in reference to a particular phenomenon. The concept of parallax, in contrast, suggests an approach that starts with the phenomenon itself, conceiving it as a form of communication in its own right. The forms of communication the parallax includes thereby closely link with each other, while not relinquishing their distinct modes of

²³ For an example of a phenomenon that may be seen as falling 'in-between', see la Cour and Højlund's (2008) work on voluntary social work.

working. Similar to structural couplings and in contrast to multi-system events, the parallax is conceived as a relatively stable form of communication (stable insofar as it needs to be re-established by communication).

Finally, if we want to distinguish the type of coupling the parallax establishes from those proposed by Luhmann also terminologically, we can speak of form or operational coupling. The parallax couples forms of communication, insofar as it brings them in close relation under one form. In other terms, the parallax form establishes a coupling of system's operations, through which a new phenomenon with its own way of operating emerges. Regardless of the semantics used for designating the various couplings and relations between systems, however, they are not as such mutually exclusive. What may be seen as a structural coupling or multi-system event in general terms may, upon closer examination, also turn out as a form or operational coupling. As a result, a phenomenon may be described from different perspectives. Whether and how this applies, once again, remains an empirical question.

Systems theory offers a varied but consistent repertory of concepts, which is based on a constructivist epistemology. In order to use the theory productively in empirical research, it seems inevitable that one selects those concepts that are most useful for a specific analysis. As discussed in this chapter, the present study does not use every systems theoretical concept. Rather, it draws on a selection of promising theory elements, while maintaining the consistency of the epistemological framework. Not only does the construction of systems theory allow such a selective procedure, it also allows for the inclusion and adaptation of new concepts – exemplified best by Luhmann himself. The concept of parallax is introduced because it enables us to understand certain social phenomena that the corresponding systems theoretical concepts can only see in general terms or not at all. It allows for empirically more adequate analysis. Theoretical openness is, thus, a crucial aspect of systems theory. As I will show in the following two chapters, the theory is open towards different empirical settings and analytical approaches (see again the discussions in la Cour et al. 2007; Becker/Seidl 2007).

3 Theorizing the Empirical Ground

Systems theory is not self-evidently connected to empirical research in the established sense of the social scientific tradition. Apart from rather rare critical remarks about empirical research and methodology, Luhmann dedicated his attention to the development of a theory of society (see e.g. Luhmann 2001: 36). However, many of his studies rely upon 'second-hand' research and his own studies of literature (e.g. Luhmann 1986). Luhmann strived to produce a theory that was both close and adequate to the empirical world by giving credence to self-descriptions in and about society (Luhmann 2002a: 18). An abstract theory, however, simultaneously serves the purpose of not presuming everyday life as understood (Luhmann 2001: 1133). This is evident in Luhmann's statement "But please try to avoid common sense!", which he made in an interview (in Sciulli 1994: 64). In order to grasp the social, one is well advised to not simply adopt concepts used in everyday descriptions of phenomena. Systems theory introduces abstract and even counter-intuitive concepts in order to establish this distance. It should allow both to take the everyday seriously and to get a fresh view and understanding of it. If Luhmann suggests a systems *theory*, the theory can therefore, nonetheless, orient itself to what actually happens empirically (see Luhmann 1990a: 255). If systems theory continues to play a role, Nassehi (2008b: 2) correspondingly demands, it can only continue 'empirically', i.e., by looking for and using the empirical potential of the theory.

Luhmann recurrently wrote that some issues constitute 'empirical questions' and therefore remain unsolvable for the theory (e.g. in the preface to Luhmann 2005h: 10 or in Hellmann/Luhmann 2004: 189). The present study tries to give answers to such 'empirical questions' in regard to a particular phenomenon. Whereas some theoretical questions can only be answered empirically, the empirical insights may well lead to theoretical refinements. Even though systems theory may build the main frame for empirical research, it is still sufficiently open to be empirically enriched. In this regard, Werner Vogd (2009: 111) draws the distinction between meta-theory and theory of the subject matter ("Gegenstandstheorie"). While, for example, systems theory as meta-theory suggests the concept of structural couplings between social sub-systems, the theory concerned with the subject matter may provide fresh insights into the concrete

results of such couplings (Vogd 2009: 112). The theory itself does not presume exactly how relations between systems have to emerge. It solely offers a concept that can be empirically refined and, in specific cases, be filled with ‘content’.

Systems theory has been increasingly connected to established traditions of qualitative research methods (Besio/Pronzini 2008; Gibson et al. 2005; Hausendorf 1992; Lee 2005; Lee 2007; Lee/Brosziewski 2007; Mitchell 2007; Nassehi 2008a; Vogd 2005, 2007, 2009; John et al. 2010). Similarly, it has been used to enrich and theorize methods (Nassehi/Saake 2002), or has been proposed together with other constructivist approaches to form the basis for qualitative research (Froschauer/Lueger 2003). These efforts show how systems theory can draw on data collected with research methods such as participant observation (ethnography), interviews, conversation analysis, or text analysis. With some adjustments, one can use these methods in line with the assumptions and concepts of systems theory. These adjustments concern the epistemological and theoretical status of data and methods. Instead of assuming that the social world ‘out there’ may be accessed through methods for collecting ‘objective’ data for further analysis, one must think about them in terms of the theoretical framework. Interviews, field observations, text search, and the corresponding kind of empirical data can be incorporated adequately, only if their social characteristics are determined. This is what I will clarify in the following for this study’s empirical basis.

I A Variety of Descriptions

Since the social consists of communication in different forms, a sociological observer has to look for and gather communication in a condition suitable for scientific observation. Communications as events as such cannot be observed. They are temporally bound and therefore too fleeting (Luhmann 2001: 71). Rather, one has to look for chains of such events, because only then does communication become intelligible by inference (and attribution as action; Luhmann 1995b: 164; Besio/Pronzini 2008: 22). This is true in general but also in particular for scientific observation. The best way to observe how communication occurs from a methodological point of view, however, consists in observing observations of what happens.

Whereas observations themselves emerge in the process of communication, they can be observed in regard to how they observe things, persons, or other observations. The types of data collected with established qualitative methods produce and reproduce observations which can be subsequently analyzed. Interviews and the collection of textual and visual material, as well as field observations or ethnography provide ob-

3 Theorizing the Empirical Ground

servations of one or another kind. Whether left in the original form such as recorded conversations, or what is more common, in textual form of transcripts (even for visual material), the researcher ultimately deals with sets of observations constituting descriptions. Unlike the other types of data, the researcher produces descriptions when gathering data by means of ethnography. But they may include descriptions of descriptions as well (e.g. conversations the researcher listened to). Regardless of sort and source of the mentioned types of data, thus, the researcher observes descriptions that consist of observations.

The concept of observation, as argued above, implies that an observer draws a distinction. Correspondingly, various observations that are constituted by different distinctions may involve different observers. When dealing with interviews, articles, letters, books and other types of texts as descriptions, one cannot simply assume that one observer will be found in each individual case. Consisting of several, possibly differing observations, it is likely that one observes several observers. Even if one attributes the description to an author (a person or an organization), this author may in fact speak from different points of view and therefore as a different observer in each case (e.g. a tattooist as a business person in one case, as an artist in another; see Fuchs 2010). The descriptions and (first-/second-order) observations the researcher produces (field observations, interviews, and the final account of them) also stem from a particular point of observation. The researcher has no privilege of being more, or entirely, detached from what and how he or she observes – there is no such thing as an objective point of view (see Luhmann 2005g: 147). The observer dependence applies to every observation and description, including the one of a scientific observer. Since observation always means drawing a distinction and thereby constructing (a part of) a social reality (i.e., “worlding”, Fuchs 2010: 82), scientific observations do nothing more than the observed observations. That means that researchers not only look at how others construct a social reality, but have to be aware of the fact that by being equipped with methods and theory they construct a reality of the social themselves (see Law 2004: 143-145, who puts it in comparable terms). The way the scientific observer ‘cuts’ the world with distinctions (see Luhmann 2001: 355, 2008e: 70) may be more controlled and reflected than the observed observations. But both kinds of observation lead to the same result: a particular construction of and perspective on reality.

Because each source and type of data provides observations and descriptions, it is unnecessary and maybe even obstructive to privilege one above the other. Qualitative data generated by the researcher with interviews and field observations are often

treated as privileged sources. Especially the interview often figures as a “‘gold standard’ of qualitative research” (Silverman 2004: 361). Interviews are seen to produce detailed accounts of people’s experiences, opinions etc. Their alleged goal is to collect data which is as authentic, representative, and objective as possible. Correspondingly, one of the interview principles is that the interviewer influences or steers the interviewee as little as possible (see Atkinson/Silverman 1997; Gubrium/Holstein 2002; Alvesson 2003a; Silverman 2004).

There is no doubt that interviews provide important insights into the functioning of the social. The way in which they relate to other ways of gathering data and in which they are processed and approached within the analysis, however, needs to be reconsidered. It is my opinion, from a systems theoretical point of view, that one cannot privilege the interview or any other type of data, unless there is no other data available (see also Smith/Deemer 2003: 431). The relevance and choice of data source always depends on what one wants to study and the research questions. Ultimately, I do not look at interviewees’ accounts differently than other accounts. All accounts offer comparable descriptions of someone or something from a particular point of view, without being more authentic than others.

The same principle of not privileging certain data also holds true for the analysis and final presentation of empirical material. Even with different kinds of data, first-hand material from interviews and participant observation is often implicitly privileged, and expected to be so, in the final research report. This kind of data, one could say, becomes ‘sacrosanct’ (see Silverman 2009: 9, who is skeptical about the “sanctity” of this data). There may well exist good reasons why this kind of data is privileged in the final analysis, e.g. if it constitutes the only data source or because the research focuses on personal narratives of specific persons. However, with the availability of a set of different data, including various types of texts and pictures, privileging first-hand data might no longer be obvious or acceptable.

For the present study, there is no reason for the focus to lie exclusively on the statements from the tattooists interviewed and my own observations from tattoo establishments and tattoo conventions. Instead of a selection of analyzed examples and quotes in favor of first-hand data, I analyze all the data in the same way. The selection of examples and quotes for the final analysis, therefore, does not depend on who collected or produced the data in the first place. It is more crucial what and how descriptions observe and whether they are illustrative and exemplary for analysis and explanation. A privileging of only one type of data, in contrast, might turn out rather one-sided and, if

not complemented with other data, incomplete. Thus, although this study also rests on empirical data collected by myself, the following analyses work with descriptions from different sources. The reader, who primarily expects examples from my interviews and observations, will probably be disappointed. But, whether taken from first- or second-hand material regardless of the source or method of collection, all observations are worth observing. If they turn out to be clear and informative for certain modes of observation, kinds of observers, semantics etc., this is then the reason why they are analyzed and discussed rather than others.

II Work with Empirical Material: From Data Sources to Quality Criteria

In this section, I first present how and what kind of empirical material I selected and gathered from different sources. Second, I discuss how I processed the collected data with the help of a computer program. Third, I briefly return to the issue of the study's scope and limits as already indicated in the introduction. Finally, I discuss the issue of quality criteria and its relevance for the present study.

Data Sources and Selection

In general, I selected different sources for empirical material, because it made it more likely that a variety of viewpoints and descriptions would be available. As it turned out, while transcribing and coding the data, the various points of view and kinds of descriptions appeared time and again in these different sources. I focused primarily on the collection of descriptions that observe tattooing, tattoos, tattoo organizations, tattooists and the like and that come from contexts that closely relate to these phenomena. They provide rich accounts that allowed me to investigate my main research questions and assumptions. Although I did not entirely exclude other sources or kinds of descriptions, such as news accounts about political debates, court decisions or current events, a focus on such descriptions would not have allowed me to pursue the questions in the same manner. In order to find out how tattoo organizations function, for example, it seemed more plausible and productive to look at descriptions that originate from them. Despite this emphasis on descriptions closely related to and involved in the observed phenomena, the selection still allows for a variety of viewpoints, topics and observers.

Interviews

I draw on two kinds of qualitative interviews that differ in regard to their origin: self-generated or first-hand and generated by others or second-hand (Silverman 2009: chap.

2, draws the comparable distinction between “manufactured” and “found” or “natural” data). Both kinds of interviews are the result of a more or less thematically focused interaction between interviewer and interviewee, in which each is addressed as a particular person with a specific role (see Nassehi/Saake 2002: 74, 77). In the interviews I conducted, the interaction took place between a sociologist and a tattooist or tattoo apprentice. The case of the second-hand interviews taken from magazines and books differs insofar as the interviewer is a journalist or book author. It is the actual interview situation as interaction that constitutes these roles and the themes discussed for a certain time. Due to the study’s focus, I will not analyze the interviews in regard to how the interaction itself unfolded, how themes changed or how each persons roles were thereby constituted. Likewise, I will not analyze the conversations resulting from the interactions in their own right (e.g. in the sense of conversation analysis; see Hausendorf 1992). Suffice it to say that both first- and second-hand interviews are the result of interactions among present persons, i.e. a system with a limited duration and thematic focus (for a methodological conceptualization see Froschauer/Lueger 2003: chap. 7).

On the one hand, I conducted semi-structured interviews with five tattooists and one tattoo apprentice at four tattoo conventions (four males, two females).¹ In one of these cases, another tattooist and the interviewee’s apprentice were present and sometimes contributed to the conversation. The first two interviews I did not record but wrote down notes from memory right after their completion. The other interviews I recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in German and in English. In addition to the formal interviews, I talked to other tattooists as well as convention visitors, but without recording or formally conducting interviews (both at conventions and during visits to tattoo establishments). The interviewees and other persons I talked to came from Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, the USA, Denmark, Singapore and Japan.

Having a list of open questions, but not following a pre-determined order (i.e., semi-structured), I asked questions about the following topics: the interviewees’ careers, their opinions about a tattooist’s skills, about their (favorite) customers, their relations with other tattooists; their attitudes towards tattoo magazines, reality television shows about tattooing, and conventions; the current situation, changes and the future in what is commonly referred to as the tattoo industry; and their opinion about tattooing as art and business. Depending on the direction the interview took, I left questions

1 For reasons of anonymity I refer to the interviews I conducted, e.g., as “personal interview with tattooist, tattoo convention 2007”. I disclose neither the name of the tattooist/apprentice nor of the tattoo convention where the interview was made.

aside or pursued a topic further. Due to changes of the study's emphasis in the initial phase of my research, some questions were replaced with others.

I did not plan to follow a sample according to concrete criteria for selecting interviewees nor would it have been feasible to do so. Tattoo conventions present a selection of tattoo organizations from different countries and therefore provide an opportunity to access a variety of tattooists. But because the tattooists or tattoo organizations participate at these gatherings in order to tattoo visitors and promote themselves, it turned out rather difficult to find an opportunity to talk to tattooists for a longer period of time (the interviews lasted approx. 10 to 25 minutes). Thus, I approached convention participants who were not working at that time. In a few cases, however, the agreed-upon interview could not take place, because the tattooist had one customer after another and could not find the time or forgot about the interview. In one case, I asked a Spanish tattooist for an interview, but because of language problems another tattooist in the next booth offered to translate for me (he was an acquaintance of the tattooist). The only problem was, that this tattooist was just beginning to work on a customer. Because it would have taken a few hours until the interview could have taken place, the first tattooist and I agreed not to do it. However, he referred me to his apprentice whom I interviewed instead. Other tattooists I asked refused to participate in an interview, stating that they had nothing to say about the 'tattoo industry'.

Because I am interested in how tattoo organizations are constituted and at that time could not yet be sure about what kinds of organizations exist, however, I did not try to select on the ground of a preconception. Had I known that specific organizational forms prevail (chap. 7), it would still not have been easy to select among convention participants, simply on the basis of the organizations' visual displays. In order to find out how an organization works, one has to speak with a member or read descriptions about it. In the end, the goal of these interviews was not to get a representative sample. Rather, I wanted to talk to tattooists in order to get a 'first-hand' impression and make my own observations in addition to what tattoo magazines present. It was a pleasant but somehow sobering experience, because my interview partners told me more or less the same things that one finds in magazine interviews and portraits or academic accounts. I consider this a valid result, as I did not encounter extreme cases but the expected variety of descriptions that members of tattoo organizations will give if approached as tattooists or apprentices.² In retrospect, however, it became clear that I

2 Instead of assuming an autonomous actor or individual, the research helps to construct the interviewee in terms of a particular role as social address (here a tattooist in its different facets; see Nassehi 2007: 109).

spoke to tattooists with different stylistic orientations, who produced either custom or flash tattoos or both (more on this distinction later). That is, although I did not approach tattooists or tattoo organizations on the basis of predefined criteria, I did not end up talking only to one kind of tattooist from a particular type of tattoo organization or stylistic orientation.

Tattoo magazines and books, on the other hand, constitute the second source of interview data. Interviews with tattooists form a central part of tattoo magazines, providing insights into ideas, opinions, and the work of practitioners from all around the world. Magazines include one to two interviews with tattooists in every issue. The published interview collections such as Michael McCabe's *Tattooing New York City* (2001), Marcel Feige's *Ein Tattoo ist für immer* (2003), Alan Govenar's *Stoney Knows How* (2003) and others constitute equally rich sources.³ Such collections offer dozens of interviews with tattooists about whom I knew nothing and would not have had easy access to. All in all, books and magazines simplify the collection of data for the researcher. Having these collections at my disposal, I considered every interview. Depending on the content of the interviews, I transcribed them entirely or partially, with the intention of providing the context of observations about tattooing, tattoos, tattoo organizations, and other topics of concern to me. Apart from other descriptions, printed interviews constitute a large part of my data.

As in the case of the interviews conducted by myself, the interviews provide descriptions from an interviewer and an interviewee. The interviews address the two involved persons as a member of a magazine or book editor and as tattooist or tattoo apprentice respectively. This is important, because these two 'social addresses' imply (at least) two points of observation that connect to two different kinds of organizations. It is not the person as individual (a particular tattooist) and his or her personal opinion that is of interest. Instead, these interviews provide insights into the workings of tattoo organizations which are expressed and 'impersonated' by one of its members. Of course, tattooists sometimes speak from a different perspective than that connected with a tattoo organization (as a father/mother, friend etc.). But because they are addressed mainly as tattooists and asked questions about tattooing, tattoos and related topics, the interviews allow us to infer to the functioning and description of tattoo organizations.

3 There are other, newer books which contain interviews with contemporary tattooists (e.g. Grimmelbein/Kitamura 2008). They do not, however, add any other observations and descriptions than presented in tattoo magazine interviews (i.e. redundancy). And many of the well-known tattooists appear in both types of publications.

Working with interviews from magazines and books, one has to be aware of their second-hand character. In the case of first-hand interviews, the researcher is the immediate observer of the interviewee's account. The interviewee, questions, setting and purpose are selected by the researcher. In second-hand interviews, however, these selections are made by other observers, who have different criteria, questions, goals and so on. In other words, the 'found' or 'natural' data, as Silverman would call it (2009: chap. 2), are no less 'manufactured' than what is generated by the researcher. They are also the construct and product of communication. As a consequence, this implies that the descriptions are 'mediated' by a specific context. Nevertheless 'mediated' means neither a simple and neutral transmission nor a 'corruption' resulting in useless data: it means that the descriptions result from selections and observations made by another observer (e.g. a tattoo magazine or book publisher). Taking this into account, we have the choice whether we want to observe how magazines, book editors and other observers observe tattooists, or how interviewers and interviewees observe tattooing, tattoos, tattoo organizations, tattooists etc. The choice of perspective depends on one's interest of knowledge. Since I am not concerned with how mass media organizations function and observe, I focus on the second option.

The first- and second-hand interviews collected constitute a rich source for observing observations and descriptions. I focus on the descriptions and the observations made in them. This is the reason why I consider both kinds of interviews equivalent. In each case observers make observations differently, but non of them is more authentic or true than the other (including the scientific observer). This applies as well to the observations and descriptions available in (other) texts.

Texts

Tattoo magazines and books not only contain interviews with tattooists and other persons, they also provide texts written about and by tattooists. The main difference in regard to (printed) interviews is that they are written as texts without or after an interaction with the described person(s).

Beside interviews, accounts about tattooists, tattoo organizations, tattoo conventions, tattooed people, but also tattooists' commentaries ('rants'), letters to the editor, and similar texts maintain an important place in magazines. In contrast to such continuous texts, magazines also include advertisements of tattoo organizations, both for purposes of their promotion (e.g. business cards)⁴ and for the search of new members

⁴ Business cards of tattoo organizations from the past can also be found in Albert L. Morse's book *The Tattooists* (1977).

with small ads in the 'jobs offered/wanted' sections. Short texts like these sometimes give concise descriptions about the functioning of an organization.

Books are written by, or present texts from, tattooists (e.g. Burchett 1960; Steward 1990; Madame Chinchilla 1997; Webb 2002; Hardy 2005, presenting letters written by Sailor Jerry Collins). These books provide accounts about, for example, the lives, troubles and customers of tattooists, the functioning of tattoo organizations, supplemented with stories from the past, descriptions of the wider social context, important developments, and the like.

While tattoo magazine texts are not necessarily exclusively written by tattooists (except e.g. for commentaries), these books or texts stem from members of tattoo organizations. This does not mean, once again, that there is a difference in authenticity, which one should take into account. Rather, it is a matter of different, but often also quite similar points of observation in connection with the involved organizations (magazines or tattoo organizations).

In order to have various descriptions from differing points of view, I collected different tattoo magazines.⁵ While most of the magazines or text extracts have been gathered in the beginning of the research, I also included a few magazine issues I collected a few years before, independent of any research. Depending on the availability, I either collected single issues of magazines at different points in time or, in a few cases, collected a series of consecutive issues over one year. In three cases, it was possible to download the issues from the magazines' websites. In one of these cases, however, I had only access to two texts per issue (the editorial and the feature article), albeit to almost all the issues dating back ten years (only a few were not available). Due to the language, I only collected magazines written in English and German. But because of the global orientation of many of the tattoo magazines, the reader also gets introduced to tattooists, tattoo organizations and tattoo conventions from other places around the world. As a consequence, with this selection of magazines and issues, I obtained a large amount of descriptions, not limited to one specific place or social context.

In addition to texts from tattoo magazines and books, I also looked at texts in newspapers, magazines, on websites (including blogs), in brochures distributed by tattoo associations and business cards, as well as other promotional material from tattoo organizations. I collected and looked at this material rather more randomly than systematically. During tattoo conventions I sometimes collected business cards and brochures. On occasion I found a newspaper article or someone told me about one. Sometimes I vis-

5 For a list of the tattoo magazines used, see the Appendix following the References.

ited tattoo organizations' websites and blogs, either by chance or deliberately. In contrast to those in the magazines and books, however, I did not analyze these texts systematically or in detail. I will, nevertheless, sometimes refer to websites or events reported in newspapers, in order to give additional examples.

Many of the texts in magazines, books and from other sources have been transcribed or excerpted like the printed interviews in order to facilitate the analysis.

Visual Material

Visualizations play an important role in the world of tattooing: in tattoo magazines, books, on websites, in tattoo establishments, and at tattoo conventions – not forgetting the tattoos themselves. In the past few years, a new form of visual presentation of tattooing emerged with reality television shows such as *Inked*, *Miami Ink*, *L.A. Ink*, *London Ink*, *Tattoo Wars*, *Tattoo – Eine Familie sticht zu*, *Tattoo Highway*, or the documentary series *Tattoo Hunter*. These and other forms and media of depicting tattoos, tattooed people, tattoo establishments' interiors, conventions, and drawings provide their own observations and descriptions (on visual descriptions see Stäheli 2007, 2008; Verdicchio 2006, 2010).

Despite the ubiquity and importance of visual descriptions, I did not systematically collect and analyze the different forms of visualization. Most of the pictures I looked at were contained in the collected magazines and books anyway. While not making an analysis of visual data as such, I nevertheless looked at it in order to find out more about visual self- and other-descriptions. By its depiction, visual material not only provides information about something. It can also be observed in regard to how it is presented. If one looks at pictures displayed in tattoo magazines, for example, one can learn about the depicted tattoos, tattooists, tattoo establishments etc. One can even see, in pictures of an establishment's interior, how an organization describes itself with visual means. If taking a different point of view, one can alternatively look at how a magazine (or magazines in general) observes tattoos etc. from a particular point of view. It depends on the point of observation and one's interest whether one focuses on the mode of observation of tattoo magazines or tattoo organizations.

The latter perspective turns out to be helpful in observing how tattoo organizations can constitute themselves with different descriptions. Organizational self-descriptions in verbal, textual, and visual form do not necessarily construct a coherent identity. An organization may describe itself in texts differently than one might expect when looking at (pictures of) the establishment's interior. As another source of descriptions, the

visual material supplements textual and verbal descriptions and makes it possible to either get a fuller 'picture' or to identify discrepancies between them.

But the former perspective, describing tattoo magazines as observers, produces insights as well for this study. I am not interested in tattoo magazines as organizations and their difference concerning modes of visual presentation as such.⁶ I am more interested in general tendencies of visual descriptions shared by magazines in relation to tattooing and tattoos in comparison with equivalent descriptions (chap. 8).

Field Observations

While visiting tattoo conventions and tattoo organizations' establishments, I not only spoke to people but also took the chance to make 'field observations'. The term 'observation' refers both to its meaning in the ethnographic tradition (e.g. Spradley 1980) as well as to its systems theoretical meaning (Lee/Brosziewski 2007; Lee 2007). Observing, on the one hand, refers to watching, hearing or listening, or even smelling, in a specific context called 'field'. On the other hand, however, it also means making distinctions, beginning with the distinction of a situation or event as a 'field', but also including what one listens to, watches, or on what one focuses in general. Impartial observation is, thus, impossible. What one sees always depends on how one looks (i.e., with which distinctions).

Between 2007 and 2008 I went to eight tattoo conventions in Europe,⁷ visiting each event for several hours over the course of one to three days. I selected conventions that differed in size (i.e. number of tattooists/organizations and reputation of convention) and the ratio of resident and foreign participants (small conventions tend to the former, large ones tend to an equal representation or more the latter, but many conventions were described as 'international'). The number of tattooists at the visited conventions ranged from three dozens to around two hundred. While some of the conventions were already older than a decade and well established, others were newly established. Although I do not analyze tattoo conventions as such, this selection made it more likely that there would be a larger variety of tattooists instead of the same ones time and

6 For an analysis of 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' tattoo magazines and their role in the constitution of a 'tattoo community', see DeMello (2000).

7 The conventions were: Tattoo Convention Basel 2007 (Switzerland); Tattoo Convention St. Gallen 2007 (Switzerland); Evian Tattoo Passion - International Tattoo & Piercing Convention 2007 (France); International Tattoo Convention Liechtenstein 2007 (Principality of Liechtenstein); International Tattoo Geneva Convention 2008 (Switzerland); Frankfurt Tattoo Convention 2008 (Germany); Amsterdam Tattoo Convention 2008 (The Netherlands); Tattoosexpo 14 in Malmö 2008 (Sweden). Without taking notes or doing interviews, I visited the tattoo convention in Evian (France) again in 2010.

again (as it seems more likely if one compares large and well-known conventions). Due to this, I saw many tattooists from a variety of tattoo organizations from all over the world.

At tattoo conventions I walked around, looked into the tattooists' portfolios with pictures of their tattoos and/or sketches and drawings, watched tattooists working on customers or preparing sketches, listened to conversations between tattooists and convention visitors and watched the latter's ways of dealing with the tattoo organizations' offers. In addition, I looked at convention booths and the way the different organizations decorated them and thereby presented themselves visually. I also attended some of the shows in the supporting program, especially the tattoo contests during which I mainly focused on the presenter's explanations and descriptions of the contestants' tattoos.

Depending on the size and reputation of conventions, as well as the day of one's visit (they usually take place at weekends), the atmosphere may vary greatly. I experienced conventions that were poorly visited as well as conventions that were already crowded on the opening day. In the latter case, the aisles between the booths can be jammed, especially since the famous tattooists or those that do not use tattoo machines (by hand in different manners) attract a large crowd of onlookers and prospective customers. Correspondingly, the noise level may be quite high because of the people talking, the buzzing of the machines and the different sources of music (the main loudspeakers of the convention, performances on stage and music from individual booths). At times, this atmosphere made it rather difficult to talk to, or conduct interviews with, tattooists (during the transcription of the interviews it was sometimes impossible to understand and reconstruct what was said due to the noise).

When visiting tattoo establishments, I looked at the visual display and interior, talked to tattooists, listened to conversations, and looked into the tattooists' portfolios. In one case, I took the opportunity to be tattooed myself, while making observations from the perspective of a customer (as a kind of self-ethnography; see Alvesson 2003b).⁸ This allowed me to observe the entire process, beginning with the first conversation with the tattooist to the completion and payment of the tattoo (in total four

⁸ In this context, I was addressed as a customer and not as a sociological researcher. Only in cases in which I spoke to tattooists about my research or conducted an interview, was I observable as a researcher or sociologist. In contrast to the claim of Daniel Lee (2000: 324) that "[w]hen sociologists communicate with the natives, they are not sociologists", I would say that it only matters how someone is addressed and not how he or she 'communicates'. I never forgot about my sociological tasks during convention visits. But regardless of what I *thought*, it only mattered how communication observed me or how I was perceived (e.g. as a convention visitor, potential customer, tattoo enthusiast or researcher).

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visits in one week). Even though my own experience will not be analyzed, it nonetheless helped me to make inferences about the process and the different forms of communication involved, in addition to what can be inferred from other descriptions.

During the convention visits I took notes about what I saw and what I heard and completed them afterwards. These notes include descriptions of the material I had collected at conventions. For the visits of tattoo establishments, I took notes about the different aspects of the establishment and the conversations only afterwards, from memory. As with the other data, I collected and recorded more data than I eventually draw from in the following. Only a few of the events I saw and heard will be reported and analyzed. They are, nevertheless, worth analyzing, because they constitute situations in which conflicting expectations and observations meet. They allow us to see different perspectives and logics and with that, their contingency.

As indicated, an observer always and inevitably has a 'bias'. From the start of my research, it was clear that I was looking for data that allowed me to study the relations between economy and art, although the exact focus on tattooing and its social context changed several times in the first two years of the research. My observations were guided by this focus, as were the interviews I conducted and the various texts I read. This is one possible focus. This means that conversations and events will be seen in one particular way, while a different focus would yield different results. In one case, for example, I watched and listened to a conversation between a tattooist and a convention visitor. From my perspective the conversation was relevant, because it provides material for an analysis about the way an organization deals with its offers, customers' expectations, and art and economy in general. The point is that I did not collect and record every statement, event etc. that I heard or saw during conventions or in tattoo establishments. This would not only have been impossible, it would also not have served the purposes of my study. Thus, while my focus on economy and art in their different appearances limited *what* I observed in the 'field' (and the other material), it does not however preclude an analysis of the collected data in regard to *how* economy and art relate.

The data collected with 'field observations' constitute the same kind of material as described before. The difference, as indicated, lies in my own observations of events, things, persons, and descriptions. The notes I wrote during and after my 'field' visits also provide descriptions that can be analyzed. As in the other cases, one only needs to keep in mind that these descriptions stem from a scientific observer working with a particular focus.

Scope

As indicated in the introduction and as the discussion of the data sources shows, this study deals with a large and various array of empirical data. It does not concentrate on and analyze exclusively one or a small number of specific cases; for example, tattoo organizations, conventions or magazines (on the second see Fenske 2007; on the third DeMello 2000). The scope of the study is broader and more general because it does not deal with a circumscribed context that could be limited, for example, in spatial (district, city, region or otherwise), political (national) or organizational terms. While it is possible that communication addresses specific contexts, I do not limit the analysis to data attributed to or originating from them.

One limitation, though, stems from the languages, German and English, that I am able to speak and understand. This, however, does not imply a 'localized' focus of this study (i.e., to German- or English-speaking parts of the world). These languages still allow me to have access to a variety of accounts from and about different contexts.

Ultimately, I am interested in the ways through which communication emerges, in close connection with and about tattooing and tattoos in general, albeit not independent from concrete empirical events and processes. The variety of empirical data, whether pertaining to particular social contexts or not, allows me to make more general inferences and to observe recurrent observations and descriptions. Thus, while there is no reason one could not investigate one or a few circumscribed cases with a systems theoretical approach, the orientation of the present study chooses a broader view. The use of a variety of data sources and a resulting diversity of descriptions and observation is therefore appropriate.

Data Handling and Analysis

Having a large amount of data available in the form of text, I brought it all together in an ATLAS.ti database. This computer program facilitates the handling and organizing of the different kinds of data. I used it primarily for the storage and coding of the data that form the basis for my analyses. I did not exploit all of the software's potential, but used it more as a helpful tool to arrange my data. In any case, the software does not do the analysis itself but simply supports it.

While still gathering data, I simultaneously began to code the available material. I started out with open codes, i.e., assigning words or phrases as codes that come close to what is expressed in a marked sentence or passage.⁹ With this, I tried to capture what

⁹ Although this approach to coding might be reminiscent of Grounded Theory (Strauss/Corbin

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a specific section is about without yet connecting it to a more theoretical or conceptual code. I always wrote a short comment about when a code applies and when there is another, more appropriate one available. When creating new codes, I sometimes had to specify these comments again, accordingly. While thus coding more and more of the material, codes changed and were merged with one another. The coding process still continued when I began to write the analyses.

Since the project's focus changed several times in the first two years, certain codes became superfluous and others received new meanings. This process was an expression of the attempt to find out what the project deals with, both empirically and conceptually. That is, it was the ongoing examination of the empirical material, both by coding and writing about it (including "memos" in the database), which eventually led me to the analyses and conclusions I will present. In other words, although I did start with systems theory as the main framework, I was open to how to make sense of the empirical material (again, the distinction between meta-theory and theory of the subject matter). Since this was a process of alternating between working with the data and assessing and discussing ideas and concepts (also in paper presentations and with colleagues), it is impossible to reconstruct in detail exactly how this took place.

During this process I also introduced conceptual codes taken from systems theory (e.g. assigning specific semantics, defining observations). They also served to arrange the previously coded sections under more general and abstract terms. This, however, was not yet an analysis in itself, but another means to help make sense of and organize the data for its further processing. In the end, the open coding and the theoretically oriented coding was meant to facilitate the finding of certain observations and topics as well as connections ('co-occurrences') between them for the final analysis.

The coding of the data, thus, constitutes the link between the 'raw' empirical material and the final analysis. The coded sentences and passages provided the analyzable data. In other words, the coded sections could be observed in regard to how they describe and observe something and from which point of view this is done. They also allowed me to infer the observed processes, namely the different forms of communication (interactions, organizational and functional systems' communication). For example, analyzing a tattooist's statements signified to observe what kind of observations from which point of view were made in the descriptions. Such descriptions always

1998), I did not follow the latter's different, systematic coding procedures. I did not do so because they are based on other theoretical assumptions (symbolic interactionism) and have another objective than the present study (building theory from the empirical 'ground' or allowing "the theory to emerge from the data", respectively; Strauss/Corbin 1998: 12).

contain different observations about various phenomena and may include different, not necessarily consistent points of view. The coding made it possible to find all those observations that, for example, refer to matters of organizing the provision of tattooing, in order to compare similar observations from other descriptions and eventually to make inferences about the observed organizational decisions.

Working with the empirical material by (re-)coding and writing about it, while discarding many options in the process, I eventually found the perspective, theses and concepts for making sense of the data. Only at this point was I able to define the analytical strategies with which the data could finally be analyzed (see the next chapter). The entire process of handling and processing the data as well as its conceptual and theoretical understanding, thus, turned out to be more an alternating or circular than a linear process.

Quality criteria

Definite quality criteria that are generally applicable in qualitative research still seem to be missing (Flick 2002: 218, 235). For some there is no need for quality criteria and for others the criteria formulated in quantitative research are adequate enough and therefore transferable to qualitative research (see the discussion in Hammersley 1992: 57-58, 2008: 158-159). Thus, there is no consensus but a variety of suggestions on the issue of quality criteria (Denzin/Lincoln 2003; Flick 2002, 2007; Hammersley 1992, 2008; Seale 1999). Common to most suggestions, though, there seems to be a connection between theoretical framework and the quality criteria (see Hammersley 2008: 170; Smith/Deemer 2003). While objectivist perspectives suggest working with similarly conceived criteria as established in quantitative research such as objectivity, reliability and validity (e.g. Kirk/Miller 1986), other approaches, such as constructivist ones, work for example with the criteria of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, confirmability, plausibility and relevance or redefine concepts from quantitative research accordingly (Denzin/Lincoln 2003: 35; Hammersley 1992: 67ff.; Seale 1999: 43). Although a shared set of quality criteria might facilitate the comparison and improvement of research, it would also have its downside. If it is true that quality criteria correspond to the respective theory used, including its epistemology, then it could be difficult to find such a common ground for the assessment of quality. Even if such criteria are only intended as guidelines, a deviation depending on the research might be necessary (see Strauss/Corbin 1998: 273; see also Seale 1999: 33, on the suggestion of replacing criterion with “‘guiding ideal’ or ‘enabling conditions’”).

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In the same way I considered the empirical data and methods in the light of systems theory, I also want to discuss quality criteria. It should be clear by now that one cannot simply adopt concepts from theories or perspectives with different assumptions and epistemologies. I will therefore discuss those criteria which I think best correspond to a systems theoretical framework and epistemology.

Working with systems theory means looking at how the social is constructed, being conscious of one's own sociological constructions. Far from claiming that there is no reality, this constructivist theory argues that there is nothing with an independent and fixed existence or reality as such. There are always observers and their constructions, which are responsible for what emerges as existing and real (see von Foerster 1993). And again, sociological observers cannot exempt themselves from this (Luhmann 1997a: 77). As a consequence, everything a sociological observer writes about social phenomena constitutes observations from a specific point of view and the result of the use of particular distinctions. In this sense, there can be no objectivity in the usual sense. We cannot know whether the researcher's claims are objectively verifiable in regard to the social reality 'out there', since this reality depends also on how the researcher chooses to observe it. In order to find out more about the quality of research, thus, one has to look at the tools used, without trying to recur to their adequacy in relation to a reality independent of them. Or put differently, the sole possibility for a researcher is to present a social reality from a particular point of view and with a set of theoretical and conceptual tools. The quality of the research, then, can only be assessed on this basis.

In order to assess the quality of the tools used, we can distinguish between the quality of the methods that are used in order to generate empirical data, the quality of the data, including in their processed (i.e., no longer 'raw') state, and the quality of the analysis and the insights (adapted from Silverman 2004: 360). The following criteria match best the systems theoretical framework.

First, the choice of methods has to be connected to what one wants to investigate and one's knowledge interest. The methods selected are adequate if they allow the gathering of data that is needed for a study. Thus, depending on the researcher's questions, assumptions and the selected theory, certain methods will be more adequate than others. For the present study, this means that the selected methods should be adequate, in the sense that they can provide what they are supposed to provide. By explaining above how I understand the used methods and the data they provide in connection to systems theory, I think that I show that these methods are adequate. While not exclud-

ing other methods as such, I argue that the conducting of interviews, collection of diverse texts (including interviews) and participant observation do what they are supposed to: they provide me with the results of communication in the form of descriptions that can be observed in regard to observers and observations. In contrast, one could criticize the use of a method as inadequate if it provided data that does not correspond to the research questions and theoretical perspective (e.g. the conducting of interviews if the research is about actual behavior, or ethnography about something that is not observable in everyday life; on the former see Silverman 2004: 360). The choice of methods, thus, needs to be adequate to how the social world is conceived theoretically and what is in the focus of the research. This is the case for the present study.

Second, the quality of the collected empirical data can be questioned. The quality of the data depends on the type and quality (adequacy) of the methods as has just been indicated, on the one hand, and on the theoretical framework, on the other hand. Depending on the theory, something will be seen as data and other things will not be considered as relevant. In the present case, everything is considered to be data if it constitutes observations and descriptions through communication. That is, mere perception or experience is not data as long as it is not communicated in one way or another. From a systems theoretical point of view it would be wrong, for example, to assume that by collecting interview data one has immediate access to and the ability to study the persons' experiences in themselves. The quality of the gathered data, thus, depends first on whether it corresponds to what the theory defines as data. In the present study, as argued, the data collected is of a communicative nature, constituting descriptions and observations of different kinds.

Another criterion for assessing the quality of the data can be defined as recurrence. To have recurrent data does not mean to have a specified number of instances in which the same distinct statement or observation appears. Rather, it means that descriptions, observations, the use of semantics, topics etc. appear recurrently in a variety of ways. By drawing on a variety of data sources from different periods and places, it is more likely that diverse perspectives and descriptions will be collected. But instead of an infinite variety, similar or even the same observations recur time and again. This, then, is a sign of the quality of the data that shows that the data is not biased towards a certain type of observation, semantics etc. In other words, the recurrence of data indicates its own limits of variety. Although this applies only within the frame set by a study in regard to its questions, topics and methodological limitations, these selections may nevertheless allow for a varied and recurrent appearance of data without determining its

richness beforehand.

The research for the present study has collected data that is both varied and recurrent. By accessing different magazines, books, but also by conducting interviews and participant observation, I collected a large variety of observations and descriptions. Although I began to notice it while gathering the data, the recurrence of the varied material became increasingly clear during the coding process. After I stopped collecting new data, I sporadically looked into the latest issues of magazines or newly published books about tattoos and tattooists. In one case, as mentioned above, I again visited a tattoo convention three years later. The purpose of this was to assess whether there were descriptions and observations my data sample did not yet include. This kind of assessment showed me that the collected data covered the recurrent variety of observations, topics, and descriptions on tattooing, tattoos, tattoo organizations etc.

Finally, the third quality assessment refers to the final analysis and insights presented in a study. Most of the quality criteria used and discussed in the literature, as mentioned above, relate to this level of research. For example, the criteria of objectivity, reliability, validity and generalizability, as they are adapted from quantitative research, are mainly concerned with the quality of the conclusions of research (see Kirk/Miller 1986: 20; Kvale 1996: 229ff.). Similarly, other criteria such as credibility, plausibility or relevance aim primarily at this level (see again Denzin/Lincoln 2003: 35; Hammersley 1992: 67ff.). For the present study, a reformulated version of the criterion of validity that matches systems theory seems most useful. But also the issue of generalizability will be briefly discussed.

Critically discussing the criteria of reliability and validity in their different forms, Hammersley (1992) suggests a concept of validity useful for ethnographic and, more generally, qualitative research (for other definitions and types of validity see Kvale 1996: chap. 13; Flick 2002: chap.18). He defines it as follows: "An account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise" (Hammersley 1992: 69). Hammersley explicitly states that this conceptualization implies "a correspondence theory of truth" (1992: 69), implying an independent reality 'out there'. Hammersley calls this a "subtle (as opposed to naïve) realism" (1992: 69). While there is a reality, Hammersley does not claim (naïvely) that one has direct and immediate access to it (1992: 69). Thus, instead of being able to reproduce the reality, research can only selectively represent it, as it has to provide adequate evidence in order to allow others to evaluate the validity of the claims (1992: 69; see also the critical discussion of Hammersley as a "neorealist" in

Smith/Deemer 2003: 432ff.).

Although Hammersley's definition of validity cannot be adopted fully for this study, it nonetheless offers a basis for a systems theoretical redefinition. Systems theory does not share Hammersley's realist perspective. Instead of a "selective representation" (Hammersley 1992: 69) of reality, systems theoretical research constructs social phenomena or reality in a particular way, drawing on the constructions of different observers. In their constructedness the scientific constructions do not differ from the constructions the researcher observes and analyzes as empirical material. The main difference lies in how the outcomes of the research construct the phenomena's reality. Due to this different outlook, it is not possible to speak of representation, as Hammersley suggests, since there is nothing 'out there' that could be represented, even selectively. Validity, therefore, cannot be conceived in terms of the accuracy of representation. This implies that the assessment of the conclusions' validity may not draw upon an independent reality in order to check the results' accuracy. As indicated above, this is only possible on the basis of the research's procedures, tools and offered evidence.

Validity in systems theoretical research, thus, cannot be shown or evaluated in relation to the reality of phenomena. That is why the concept needs to be redefined. Reformulating Hammersley's statement, I would like to suggest this definition: Validity is increased if an account constructs comprehensibly and transparently those features of the phenomena it aims to describe, explain or theorize. The account is made comprehensible and transparent by disclosing not only the selections concerning methods and data, but also its theoretical assumptions and analytical strategies, with which the analysis and the final account were made. The ideal objective, then, is that an observer taking the same point of view and using the same kinds of observations and tools as the researcher, should be able to see the phenomena in the same way.

I deliberately wrote "validity is increased", because it might be impossible to present a study in all of its aspects and valid enough that it will satisfy each and every observer. Constructing the quality criteria according to the requirements of systems theory, implies that other observers who operate with different observations, such as the ones of an objectivist or realist approach, will not necessarily agree with that which is suggested. Ultimately, systems theoretical research may try to offer as much information about its tools, selections and ways of drawing distinctions as possible, in order to facilitate their understanding and use by other observers. This, however, is not meant to be an apology. This is simply the consequential use of systems theory, which must accept that other observers might see things in different ways, if it does not want

to refute itself.

A final comment on the question of generalizability is required. Representing one of the classical quality criteria (see Kvale 1996: 231ff.; Seale 1999: chap. 8), the question of whether and to what extent the present study is generalizable might arise as well. This is, of course, a legitimate question, which needs to be addressed, albeit in a different manner than usual (Kvale 1996: 231-232). That means, I do not want to follow the argument that if results are not generalizable, the research is of lower quality. The issue of generalizability becomes relevant insofar as the significance and scope of results can be evaluated, in regard to other social contexts beyond the studied phenomena.

As previously indicated in the introduction and this chapter, this study has a certain scope as well as its limits. Nevertheless, as I will discuss in the three “interludes”, some of this study’s outcomes may prove useful in a more general sense. However, I would like to differentiate the results of this study in terms of their generalizability.

On the one hand, there are the concrete conclusions about tattooing and related phenomena as an empirical subject matter. Because they first apply to this social phenomenon and its context, the conclusions might not, or only in a limited manner, also apply to other phenomena in society. Although I will draw some comparisons between tattooing and other phenomena in the interludes, I do not suggest assuming or looking for the exact same social processes. An empirically sensitive researcher, as mentioned, will need to study each comparable phenomenon in its own right.

On the other hand, however, some parts of this study may be generalized in a different manner. Instead of generalizing the conclusions about tattooing, it might prove useful to take the approach suggested here, in order to see which phenomena work in a similar, yet distinct fashion (according to Kvale 1996: 233, this is called “analytical generalization”). Generalizing the approach in such a way of course implies the assumption that the concepts, theses and claims connected to it may apply beyond the phenomenon originally studied with them. My brief and inevitably superficial discussions of other phenomena will show to what extent the suggested approach might be useful, while retaining an openness towards adapting it, instead of strictly imposing it. Generalizations, therefore, may be feasible to a certain extent, although more in terms of generalizing the way phenomena are observed and analyzed than in terms of the concrete empirical results about a particular phenomenon. Ultimately, the quality of research might even turn out better if one differentiated the results carefully in regard to their generalizability, instead of claiming their wide generalization too soon, because it supposedly is connected to high quality.

*

This lengthy discussion of quality criteria should have shown how they can be conceived in terms of systems theory and how I think they apply to this study. The recurring emphasis on observer dependence, which implies a certain relativism, was not meant to suggest that anything is possible and valid (see Smith/Deemer 2003). To the contrary, it means that everything is connected to an observer, from the data gathering process, the data and their processing, to the final reporting of one's conclusions. In each stage, the researcher constructs things in a particular way, limiting further choices. I have tried to make these constructions as explicit and transparent as possible. Whether and how other observers observe and understand them, however, I can neither ensure nor determine.

III From Theorizing the Ground to Grounding the Theory

The discussion of the different sources of qualitative data, methods, data handling and processing, and finally of quality criteria serves the purpose of showing the ways in which they can be understood in terms of systems theory. It should also make explicit on what the following analyses and arguments are based.

After “theorizing the ground”, to borrow a phrase from Lee and Brosziewski (2007), I want to conclude with some remarks about the relation between the empirical material and the theoretical insights I present below. I understand this relation as a mutual one: with the theory we are able to see the ‘empirical’ social world in a particular way, whereas empirical research makes it possible to alter theory by refining or adding concepts and relationships – using the empirical ‘potential for surprise’ instead of merely ‘filling in’ the theory (Stäheli 2010: 226). The former stands for ‘theorizing the ground’, the latter for ‘grounding’ the theory.

‘Grounding’ the theory may sound like ‘Grounded Theory’ (e.g. Strauss/Corbin 1998). Some familiarities and compatibilities between Grounded Theory and systems theory may be detected (see Gibson et al. 2005; Mitchell 2007) Here, however, the term ‘grounding’ does not refer to this approach or its procedures and assumptions (for a critique on its basic assumptions from a systems theoretical perspective, see Lee/Brosziewski 2007: 257-258, 267). Rather, it means that the theory is open to empirical particularities, new or newly detected phenomena and arrangements and the like (again, Luhmann’s ‘empirical question’ mentioned above). The theory, while remaining more or less the same in its assumptions, can be adapted to various degrees. With this empirical ‘grounding’, the theory does justice to what it is supposed to describe.

3 Theorizing the Empirical Ground

Thus, the theory is neither simply taken, or emerging from everyday theories expressed in the data, nor is it merely an abstract framework into which the empirical findings are 'molded'. The theory allows one to look at the social world in a certain way, while the empirical data allows one to refine the theoretical view. This relates to the distinction between meta-theory and theory of the subject matter (Vogd 2009: 111). The empirical findings I present will not challenge or transform Luhmannian systems theory in its foundations as a meta-theory. As I want to show with this study of tattooing, however, systems theory is not adequately prepared with concepts to deal with this subject matter. This is why we need to refine some concepts grasping theoretically what occurs empirically.

4 Analyzing Various Forms: Analytical Strategies

After defining the theoretical approach and discussing the available empirical material, how I look at and analyze the phenomena of interest remains to be determined. The definition of the analytical strategy(-ies) means to clarify one's "deliberate *choice* and its implications" (Andersen 2003a: xiii; emphasis in original). Since an analytical strategy or particular way of dealing with a phenomenon constitutes a choice, it implies that many other aspects are excluded from the perspective. Depending on the thematic and theoretical focus, analytical strategies therefore turn out quite differently (see Andersen 2003a, 2008, 2009). Thus, instead of just analyzing the empirical material and trying to include everything, one needs to determine and state, what one considers relevant and how one observes it. The explicit and deliberate choice of an analytical strategy ultimately makes it easier for other observers to judge whether it is as insightful as claimed or whether a different strategy would have been more useful.

Each of the following chapters focuses on a particular theme or phenomenon and therefore requires a specific analytical strategy. I want to introduce the analytical strategies here, in order to make my choices and emphases explicit.

Form Analysis of Theoretical Observations

In chapter five I am concerned with how different theoretical approaches observe economy, art and their relation. I consider these theoretical perspectives as different modes of constructing the social world, rather than ways of simply describing it 'as it is'. They do so by means of particular constellations of observations. The analytical strategy used in this chapter is, thus, an observation of theories' observations. The observation of observations in communication can also be referred to as form analysis (Andersen 2003a: 78ff.).

As noted above, an observation distinguishes between a marked and an unmarked side. The goal of the analysis is to show how theories draw distinctions in regard to art and economy and how they are linked with each other. Ultimately, this analytical strategy cannot only be used for the analysis of theories about art and economy. It will also serve the purpose of constructing my own particular view on the subject matter. The strategy, thus, is a tool for both observing how other theories observe as well as

constructing one's own mode of observation.

In order to clarify my analysis of the different modes of observation, the chapter includes visual representations of them (figures 3 to 6). I draw on George Spencer-Brown's (1999) way of visualizing distinctions with the mark of distinction or "gallows" (see chap. 2.I). The figures have the purpose of presenting, in a synoptic manner, what a text can show only in sequence (see Baecker 2007: 12). They supplement the analysis and summarize its main points (for a similar use of such visualizations, see e.g. Andersen 2009). Although the way I try to visualize the modes of observation relies on the basic concepts of Spencer-Brown, the figures themselves should not be seen to conform to his mathematical principles. Instead of strictly following Spencer-Brown in this respect, I use the mark of distinction in a pragmatic manner, i.e., as illustration rather than calculation.

Form/Medium Analysis

The title of chapter six, "The Form of Tattooing", indicates the analytical strategy I use here. In order to find out how tattooing works as a social phenomenon, systems theory offers the analysis of form and medium. With the analytical strategy of form/medium I choose to see tattooing as a form of communication, which operates through a specific medium. Tattooing, therefore, is neither conceived in terms of an action someone performs, a lifestyle, nor a deviant behavior.

While the observation of observations or form analysis considers how distinctions are drawn in linguistic communication, the analysis of forms and media concentrates on communication of a mainly non-linguistic character.¹ The question of how tattooing is observed in description, of course, always plays a crucial role, as descriptions and observations provide most of the empirical material, with which I work (e.g. by inference). The main question is, however, how a specific form of communication emerges and operates. It is, thus, a question of how a phenomenon communicates or works 'through' communication.

If we study tattooing in this way, as I will show, we encounter a special constellation of forms and media. Although I will introduce the concept of parallax for supplementing the form/medium analysis, this analytical strategy offers the basic mode of constructing tattooing as a social phenomenon.

¹ The former concentrates solely on forms, although these forms require a medium as well. In these cases, though, it is the more general medium of language, while for the cases of the form/medium analysis we deal with particular media such as money, artwork and others. Every form used in communication about something, thus, uses language. In contrast, forms of communication may draw on a myriad of media.

4 Analyzing Various Forms: Analytical Strategies

As in chapter five, I will visualize the form of communication of tattooing by using the mark of distinction (figure 7). In this case, however, the figure will not refer to observations, as in the case of the discussed theories. Rather, it will render the special constellation of the forms and medium of tattooing. The pragmatic use of Spencer-Brown's mode of visualizing forms will become clear at this point, because I slightly adapt the mark of distinction in order to indicate the special form I call a parallax.

Organizational Form Analysis

For the study of tattoo organizations in chapter seven, I use a third analytical strategy. Although one could call it a form analysis of sorts as well, I am concerned with organizational forms. Such forms emerge through sets of decisions, expectations, roles and semantics. They are the product of the ongoing reproduction of organizations' main decisions. At the same time, they feed back and affect this reproduction. In this sense, organizational forms are temporarily stable structures that face challenges by the organizations themselves and their environments. Decisions are made, expectations and roles are defined and stabilized, and semantics are re-used time and again despite and because of challenges from the organization itself and its environment. The stability of a form can only be maintained by its constant reproduction.

As a consequence, I do not analyze tattoo organizations in their entirety. Instead I focus on their main forms that can be characterized by how organizations deal with tattooing. Organizational aspects such as expenses for salaries, material, technology, and facilities, considerations of legal issues (whether contracts or an organization's legal status), hygiene and health related decisions, or the relations with tattoo organizations and other types of organizations, could all be investigated. But I choose not to do so, if these aspects do not relate closely to an organization's form. To include or concentrate on them would imply different analytical strategies.

Form Analysis of Observations

In chapter eight, I once again focus on observations. Here, however, I analyze qualifications of tattoos by various observers such as tattooists, tattoo organizations, customers, and tattoo magazines. I see qualifications as observations that attribute particular qualities to a phenomenon. In this case I am concerned with recurrent qualifications, which construct tattoos in terms of artistic and economic qualities and, at the same time, link the two. The subject of interest is, thus, the different and diverging qualifica-

tions of tattoos. Despite their differences, the qualifications reproduce the same basic observation, which I call “quality has its price”. That is, I abstract from the analysis of descriptions that provide the qualifying observations in order to see what they disagree about. These diverse qualifications are seen to constitute a spectrum of the basic observation’s variations.

While concentrating on those qualifications that attribute artistic and economic qualities to tattoos, I ignore a variety of other qualifications. For example, tattoos are observed in regard to specific meanings they hold for their bearers, the meaning they have in a broader social context (what is referred to as group, scene, subculture etc.), or their legal qualities (copyright). They all play a role in qualifying tattoos in many ways from different points of view. But for the investigation of the effects of the form of tattooing on observations, I consider it more relevant to look at the connections, which qualifications establish between artistic and economic aspects of tattoos.

Once more, I will use a figure to visually summarize this spectrum of observations (figure 10). This time, however, I do not draw on the visual semantics as in chapter five and six. It seems more useful to illustrate the spectrum of the basic observation with an emphasis on its four distinct and opposing versions. These variants are constructed according to how they qualify economic and artistic aspects and how they relate the two. Put simply, each of them defines tattoos differently, in terms of good/bad artistic quality and high/low price, while arguing for a specific relation (e.g. good artistic quality has its high price). Thus, I observe these variants of the basic observation and how they stabilize a certain meaning of tattoos and distinguish themselves implicitly or explicitly from other variants in the spectrum.

Same Strategies, Different Phenomena

Ultimately, in the three short “Interludes” I propose broadening the scope. Taking the analytical strategies that I use in the chapters on tattooing, tattoo organizations and qualifications, I suggest using them for the study of other areas. I claim that these strategies are not only suitable for the study of tattooing but can contribute to the understanding of a variety of comparable phenomena. On the basis of academic literature, I point to similarities and differences between phenomena that relate, in one way or another, to both economy and art. The overall goal of these discussions is to show that the suggested analytical strategies, including the implied theoretical decisions and tools, allow us to see the connections between a phenomenon, its organization and its qualifying observation.

The observation of observations, the analysis of a phenomenon's form and medium of communication and the functioning of forms of organizations, constitute the main analytical strategies for this study. However, it seems to be impossible to use concepts that only belong to these strategies. That means, concepts such as description, semantics and others will be used as well. But here they do not serve as analytical strategies of their own. Instead, they support and enrich the analysis of what each strategy focuses on.

Let me explain this with the example of the concept of semantics. The term semantics refers to the recurrent use of concepts with a condensed meaning in distinction to counter-concepts. They constitute a repertoire, on which communication repeatedly draws for descriptions (Luhmann 2002b: 107) – whether they turn out serious and worth preserving or 'non-serious' and popular (see Stäheli 1997). One could study the semantic history of particular concepts and show how they and their counter-concepts change over time and in relation to social structural changes (Luhmann 2004b; for the semantic analysis as an analytical strategy, see Andersen 2003a: 86-88, 2007). Although I will use the concept of semantics, I will not provide a semantic history of the concept of tattooing. When I talk about how something is described, I will refer to the use of certain concepts, which appear time and again (e.g. "tattoo artist" or "craftsman" as an organizational role semantics). I do not refer to semantics for their own sake, but in order to show how certain structures are described and what can be inferred from them (e.g. organizational expectations, roles, decisions).

Systems theory, thus, offers a variety of concepts. While they all play a role for the theory, about how the social works, they cannot all figure as analytical strategies. Because of my focus on certain aspects of tattooing, tattoo organizations and observations, I select the ones most useful to the task at hand. The other concepts and theoretical components remain crucial for the general understanding of social phenomena. They simply do not guide the concrete analysis that follows.

5 Relations Between Economy and Art Observed

The creation of artwork and its purchase or sale may be understood in a variety of ways, depending on the theoretical lens through which one looks. It depends on how one conceptualizes economy and art, and whether and how one conceives of the relation between the two. While the semantics used for the description of the phenomena (art, artwork, economy or commerce, commodity and the like) seems to suggest a difference, this does not mean that a theory necessarily also incorporates this difference conceptually. Similarly, the semantics of art market or trade, for example, can be understood to suggest a close relation between economy and art. Depending on the conceptualization of these two, however, theories will conceptualize their relationship in different ways.

In this chapter I discuss three different theoretical perspectives, among which two look explicitly at art and economy (cultural economics and P. Bourdieu's approach) and the third more generally at culture and economy (cultural economy perspectives). At the end I suggest a systems theoretical perspective for the study of art, economy and their relationship. While a systems theoretical approach differs considerably from these different perspectives, it may nonetheless draw on some of their insights.

On the one hand, the chapter shows how the different perspectives observe the two phenomena (or related ones) and their relationship. As indicated in the previous chapter, the observation or form analysis of theoretical observations constitutes the analytical strategy. On the other hand, I argue that a systems theoretical conceptualization of economy, art and their relation provides new insights. Because of its abstract concepts, the theory allows for empirical openness and sensibility and may contribute to an understanding of concrete phenomena that are constituted by art and economy.

I Cultural Economics and the Reduction of Art to Economy

The approach called 'Cultural Economics' or 'Economics of the Arts'¹ subsumes a

1 For a discussion and definitions of these two phrases see Towse (1997b: xiv-xvi). Towse prefers the phrase 'economics of the arts' because it refers to visual and performing arts alike, emphasizing that it is 'the arts' and not solely 'art', which according to her commonly refers only to the visual arts.

variety of authors with slightly different perspectives of how to study the arts in conjunction with economics (Baumol/Bowen 1966; Blaug 1976b; Throsby/Withers 1979; Grampp 1989; Frey/Pommerehne 1989; Towse 1997a; Frey 2000; Caves 2000; Abbing 2002). Nevertheless, these various perspectives have something in common that cannot be grasped through their own theoretical or analytical tools, namely a particular mode of observation. In the following, the main interest lies on this mode of observation pervading cultural economics despite the existence of differing approaches to it.

The most obvious and self-evident and at the same time somehow also invisible feature due to its pervading presence consists in an economic approach to the phenomenon of art. Neoclassical economics, including a rational choice approach, plays a prominent role, providing the theoretical framework for the study of different kinds of art ('the arts'). Equipped with the entire conceptual framework of economics, studies in cultural economics observe art in terms of markets, supply and demand, costs and benefits, choices, scarcity, marginal utility, maximization, and so forth.

In *Pricing the Priceless. Art, Artists, and Economics*, for example, William D. Grampp (1989) does not shy away from explicitly claiming that neoclassical economics provides an adequate and successful point of view for studying the arts (Grampp 1989: ix; similarly Towse 1996). In Grampp's book we find an explicit example that shows how neoclassical economics enjoys a taken-for-granted status:

It is that works of art are economic goods, that their value can be measured by the market, that the sellers and buyers of art – the people who create and benefit from it – are people who try to get as much as they can from what they have. In a word or two, the activity of art is a maximizing activity. Without that assumption, economics has no place in the study of art or of anything else. (Grampp 1989: 8)

Especially the last sentence of the quote exemplifies how the approach of cultural economics relies on assumptions of neoclassical economics. Grampp states clearly that without conceptualizing art in terms of a "maximizing activity" or the involved persons' attempts "to get as much as they can from what they have", neoclassical economics has nothing to say about art. Here, Grampp indicates the theoretical dependence of the study of art and the implicit contingency of using this specific, neoclassical approach. As Grampp clearly states, "without that assumption" art would not come into the focus of economics. Grampp's statement, thus, implies the necessity of the assumption of art as a maximizing activity. At the same time, it implies that this represents a contingent theoretical decision. This does not keep Grampp or other authors in cultural economics from starting with this assumption without further scrutinizing its adequacy.

Instead, the use of economics seems self-evident and, for example, is backed up by a kind of syllogistic argument:

The activity of art – the making, the acquiring, and the using of it – is a certain kind of behavior. Behavior of all kinds entails choices, and all choices entail returns and costs. The two are what economics is about. (Grampp 1989: 4)

Consequently, Grampp's syllogistic reasoning results in the conclusion "that the activity of art is an economic activity" and, correspondingly, that art "can be analyzed by economic theory" (Grampp 1989: 113). Similarly, in discussing the distinction between culture and the arts, Towse (1997b: xv) conceives art in the same way when she states, that "the arts are true economic activities".

Although seemingly more critical than Grampp, Mark Blaug similarly opts for economics in the edited volume on *The Economics of the Arts* (1976b). After admitting the "intellectual imperialism of economists" (Blaug 1976a: 13) in regard to a variety of non-economic domains including the arts, Blaug nevertheless underlines the fruitfulness of economics for the study of the arts. Blaug justifies the economists' intellectual imperialism by emphasizing that it entails "a way of looking at the world", adding that economics is "a special case of a much more general 'logic of rational action'" (Blaug 1976a: 13). The concepts used for this endeavor seemingly need not to be of a highly complex kind, but, as Blaug (1976a: 13) puts it, "are those which are acquired in any first-year course in economic principles".

The implicit reductive or simplifying observation of art that is implicit in the quoted statements seems rather symptomatic for the cultural economics approach. Basing economics on the assumption of the "logic of rational action" and generalizing this logic so that economics becomes "a special case", seems to give economics the justification to cast its nets beyond the mere study of "the workings of an economic system" (Blaug 1976a: 13; see also Frey 1997: 39).

Cultural economics implies the assumption that art, if not everything non-economic, can be explained in terms of the workings of the economy as postulated by economics. Art, as a consequence, becomes an economic activity, becomes scarce, and works of art have an economic value, a price in a market, yield (aesthetic) utility, and so forth (see Frey/Pommerehne 1989: 6, 7; Grampp 1989: 9, 21). Cultural economics, thus, tends to reduce art to economy and the postulated economic principles, and appreciates art as exceptional in terms of its economic functioning (Abbing 2002: 11).

This tendency of reducing art to economy and simplifying it according to well-known and taken-for-granted economic principles gives us an answer to the question

of how cultural economics conceives of art and economy, including their relation. Despite the use of the designation ‘arts’, it seems as if this particular domain does not differ fundamentally from the economic domain. Instead, art shares many characteristics with economy, making it comparable with, and ultimately, reducible to the economic domain. Olav Velthuis comes to the same conclusion in his discussion of models of the nexus of art and economy, when he criticizes cultural economics as a “reductive model” (2007: 26). Put in other terms, cultural economics represents one version of the “Nothing But” model (‘art is nothing but economy’; Velthuis 2007: 24, 26, drawing on the work of Zelizer, who uses the phrase in another context; see e.g. Zelizer 2000).

How, then, does cultural economics observe economy and art? The alleged distinction between economy and art turns out to be an observation biased towards the economy. We can put it in observational terms: The observation made by cultural economics does not consist in a simple distinction between economy and art but seems to be more complicated than that: The basic observation of cultural economics consists in making a distinction between economy and non-economy, where phenomena belonging to the non-economic outside are brought into the realm of the economy. Art shows up in the economic space because it is treated like an economic phenomenon. Graphically summarized, this looks as follows:

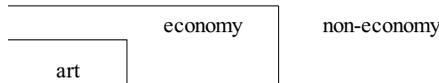


Fig. 3: Observation of economy and art by cultural economics

Even though the contingency of the basic assumptions of cultural economics sometimes becomes the object of observation (Grampp, Blaug),² the approach nevertheless observes its object of study, namely art or the arts, with a focus on economy. Its blind spot is the inclusion of art as a non-economic phenomenon within the space of the economy, thereby addressing it as an economically understandable and explainable phenomenon. The form of observation presented as characteristic for cultural economics consists in what one can call a reduction of art to economy, or in terms of its principles, to economics.

The discussion of the observation of art by cultural economics, which is presented

2 Frey and Pommerehne (1989: vii) go even further and ask “Economists – on the arts? Isn’t this a blasphemy?” and thereby, if only briefly, point to the contingency involved. But, as is to be expected in a book about the economics of the arts, the question is meant to be ironic.

here in rather abstract terms, connects to a general criticism of cultural economics' treatment of art. Here, I only want to mention Arjo Klamer's (1996b) critique in the book *The Value of Culture. On the Relationship Between Economics and Arts*. Even though the book's title also refers to 'economics' and 'art' and thus seemingly connects to the cultural economics discussion, Klamer clearly distances his approach from the line of argumentation presented above. In an explicit attempt to dissociate himself from certain cultural economists, Klamer (1996a: 28) argues that "they are intent to determine the commonalities between art and other economic activities and thus to demystify art as something special". Klamer's (1996a: 28) interest, in contrast, lies in "what distinguishes art", whereby he assumes the position of an anthropologist who "take[s] seriously what the 'natives' think and say". The argument of Klamer, thus, basically points to the same reduction of art to economy prevalent in cultural economics (for a reaction on Klamer's criticism, see Towse 1996: 97).

This rather cursory discussion of cultural economics or economics of the arts does not claim to be exhaustive in any sense. Certainly, the discussion does not do justice to the variety of topics covered by cultural economics, the subtle differences between different ways of understanding and working with the approach, or to any of the insights and results produced by cultural economics (for an overview see Towse 1997a; Blaug 2001). Observers within the field of cultural economics of course attempt to distinguish different perspectives on the economics of the arts.

In his review of Ruth Towse's (1997a) two edited volumes on cultural economics, for example, Tyler Cowen distinguishes three main theoretical perspectives he calls "mainstream neoclassicism", "loose neoclassicism" and "non-mainstream and often institutionalist" cultural economics (Cowen 1998: 68-69; see also Blaug 2001: 124). Focusing on the same problem, Towse (1997b: xvi) looks for "an intellectual core in cultural economics" and finds, similarly to Cowen, no single perspective unifying cultural economics (1997b: xvi-xvii; Blaug 2001: 124). However, instead of giving a representative overview of topics, procedures, and the application of economic models and formulas, or the main perspectives coining cultural economics, I simply pointed to the basic tenets of cultural economics' observation of the economy, art, and their relationship. It is precisely this mode of observation that unifies cultural economics, regardless of the variant of it we observe. One can add that this mode of observation with its inherent blind spot – namely the way in which art becomes the object of observation in cultural economics – keeps cultural economists such as Cowen (1998), Towse (1997b), and Blaug (2001) from finding the unifying features of the theoretically different per-

spectives described by them.

The present study does not follow cultural economics or suggests an economic approach to tattooing. Although discussed later, I can already indicate that a systems theoretical approach has the theoretical potential, if not advantage, of conceiving both economy and art in their own terms and conceding a relation between these two without the need to reduce one to the other.

II Art as a Reversed Economic Field: Observing Bourdieu

In several publications, Bourdieu deals specifically with art and cultural production in a broader sense in terms of his field theory (1980; 1983; 1993b; 1996; on fields see e.g. Bourdieu 1993a).³ Bourdieu recurrently establishes (analogical) connections and differences to the economy, which constitutes the primary ‘outside’ of art and, in a particular way, also its ‘inside’ (on economy alone see Bourdieu 2005). Exactly how Bourdieu conceptualizes the relation between art and economy will be shown below. In doing so, I will inevitably leave many details that pertain to a more general conceptualization of Bourdieu’s theory of practice out of the discussion (see Bourdieu 1977).

Bourdieu describes and analyzes art or cultural production the same way as social space in general and other social fields (e.g. 1989).⁴ The concept of field plays a crucial role because it not only allows Bourdieu to give the phenomenon of art its own societal sphere, but also makes it possible to connect it closely to the general field of social space and the field of power in which it is embedded.⁵ The artistic field, like all fields to a certain extent, maintains a particular relation to these two fields, a relation Bourdieu designates with the concept of structural homology (see Bourdieu 1980: 269). Independent of this relation, art as a relatively autonomous field possesses its own specific characteristics (Bourdieu 1983: 319). These field specific features arrange the positions in the field (position-takings; Bourdieu 1983: 312) and the ‘output’ or manifestations of the field, such as the cultural products or symbolic goods (Bourdieu 1985).

The field of art constitutes a “system of objective relations”⁶ between particular pos-

3 For a comparison of Bourdieu with Luhmann in regard to their concepts of art, and a juxtaposition of these two approaches to actor-network theory, see Albertsen/Diken (2004). For more general comparisons of Bourdieu’s and Luhmann’s theory, see Kieserling (2000) and Nassehi/Nollmann (2004).

4 Note that Bourdieu uses the terms ‘art’ and ‘cultural production’ (and similar ones) interchangeably without distinguishing or defining them explicitly.

5 This is well illustrated with figures depicting the nesting of the field of art within the field of power and the social (national) space (see Bourdieu 1983: 319, 329, 1996: 124).

6 Bourdieu states explicitly that it is possible to talk about art or any other social phenomenon as

itions and institutions, and it constitutes “the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate” (Bourdieu 1980: 265). The ‘power of consecration’ refers to the ability to define what the field’s stakes, rules, conditions of admission and belief are (Bourdieu 1983: 323; see also Bourdieu 1993a). Art is both a field of forces and struggles. The foundations of the field itself are constantly at stake, either by those who try to protect and conserve it or those who try to transform it (Bourdieu 1983: 312).

In the article on “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods”, Bourdieu (1980) emphasizes the paradoxical foundation of the field of art, namely that the “disavowal of the ‘economy’ is placed at the very heart of the field, as the principle governing its functioning and transformation” (1980: 265). Put differently, the “fundamental law of the field” is the “refusal of the ‘economy’” (1980: 269). Bourdieu puts the term economy in inverted commas in order to distinguish it from the same term not highlighted. ‘Economy’ refers to a narrow definition that Bourdieu attributes to ‘economism’ (1980: 261, fn. 1). The difference between economy and ‘economy’ emerges clearly in the following exemplary quote.

In this economic universe [the field of art or cultural production], whose very functioning is defined by a ‘refusal’ of the ‘commercial’ which is in fact a collective disavowal of commercial interests and profits, the most ‘anti-economic’ and most visibly ‘disinterested’ behaviours, which in an ‘economic’ universe would be those most ruthlessly condemned, contain a form of economic rationality (even in the restricted sense) and in no way exclude their authors from even the ‘economic’ profits awaiting those who conform to the law of this universe. (Bourdieu 1980: 261)

On the one hand, the foundation of the field lies in a disavowal or misrecognition of the ‘economic’, of the “commercial interests and profits”. As Bourdieu notes, however, the disavowal cannot be seen simply as a negation or “a simple ‘dissimulation’” of the ‘economy’ and the commercial (1980: 262). Rather, the mastery of this disavowal, but not negation, of the ‘economy’ constitutes the field’s main challenge for the ‘players’. In this article Bourdieu calls this mastery the symbolic capital, which needs to be acquired in order to be able not only to be included in the field but also to have the power to define and consecrate (Bourdieu 1980: 262). On the other hand, as Bourdieu argues, the disinterestedness nevertheless “contain[s] a form of economic rationality” which

a field, namely by constructing it as such. Here, thus, we deal with a methodological construction of the object of research. One of the reasons for Bourdieu to argue for the construction of the object lies in his demand for a relational theory that focuses on the relations between positions and position-takings, instead of individuals and interactions in a substantialist approach (Bourdieu 1983: 311-312).

ultimately does not keep the actors involved in the field from reaping profits stemming from the 'economy' by playing according to the rule of the field. The primary characteristic of the field of cultural production, thus, consists in a parallelism of the 'economy' and its disavowal in the form of accumulated symbolic, field specific capital (Bourdieu 1980: 261-262).

Here, we need to take a step back in order to see how it is possible to think the economy not in terms of the 'economy' in its narrow sense. In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (1977) explains the distinction drawn between economy in a strict sense of the term (economism) and a more general sense of economy:

Thus the theory of strictly economic practice is simply a particular case of a general theory of the economics of practice. The only way to escape from the ethnocentric naiveties of economism, without falling into populist exaltation of the generous naivety of earlier forms of society, is to carry out in full what economism does only partially, and to extent economic calculation to *all* the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation [...]. (Bourdieu 1977: 177-178; emphasis in original)

Bourdieu distinguishes between what he calls 'economism', a strict and narrow understanding of 'economy', and a general concept of economy for which "a general theory of the economics of practice" is needed. The former represents merely a partial and too narrow version of the latter, guilty of "ethnocentric naiveties". It prevents a broader understanding of the economics of "*all* the goods, material and symbolic" that are subject to scarcity (rarity). Bourdieu thus proposes approaching the social by treating it in terms of a general concept of economy of practice to which mechanisms and logics pertain that are similar to those that economism claims exclusively for the 'economy'. As a consequence, to conceive economy in such a broad sense enables Bourdieu to analyze social phenomena in regard to the distribution of forms of capital (economic, social, cultural), the struggle for the monopoly in a field (the power of definition and consecration), and the scarcity of field specific or symbolic capital (disavowal, disinterestedness).

Art or cultural production conceived as a more or less autonomous field results in the acknowledgement of its particularity as "anti-economy" (Bourdieu 1983: 321). Instead of treating it in economic terms by not considering the artistic field's particular character, as economism and cultural economics would have it, Bourdieu argues for considering 'anti-economy' the central feature of art. For Bourdieu, thus, to leave out the fact that the field of art is an "upside-down economic world" (Bourdieu 1983: 321) or an "economic world reversed" (see the title of Bourdieu 1983), means to miss the

point of the field.

The same way the art field constitutes 'a field within a field within a field', the cascade of fields goes yet into greater detail. The field of cultural production differentiates itself again into sub-fields, and even sub-fields of one sub-field. In the article on "The Production of Belief", Bourdieu (1980: 268, 279-280) differentiates the field of cultural production according to the opposition between the commercial and the cultural or non-commercial, and, accordingly, between commercial enterprises or businesses and cultural enterprises or businesses. Here, Bourdieu also designates the two sub-fields as two opposed economies, or two variants of the relationship to the 'economy' in its narrow sense (market, demand/supply and the like; 1980: 286-287). In later publications Bourdieu distinguishes, with a different terminology, between the sub-field of restricted production and the sub-field of large-scale production, which together constitute the field of cultural production (1983; 1985; see also 1996: chap. 2 and 3).

Regardless of the two slightly different ways of describing the sub-fields, the field of cultural production disposes of two central capital forms, namely economic and the field specific, symbolic capital (disavowal of 'economy'). They are responsible for how the positions in the overall field are distributed and how the sub-fields are differentiated within the overall field. The two poles in the field of cultural production, therefore, are constituted by either the prevalence of economic capital or the prevalence of the field specific capital. The sub-field of restricted production is the one part of the overall field of art that is made up of the positions close to the pole of the symbolic capital, and the sub-field of large-scale production constitutes the other part of the field closer to the pole of the economic capital. These two sub-fields of the field of cultural production function differently, as Bourdieu (1983: 333) argues, as they represent "two economies, two time-scales, two audiences". While the sub-field of large-scale production characterizes demand orientation, catering to a non-producing audience and therewith a wider public, the sub-field of restricted production has an inward orientation, producing cultural goods for other cultural producers ('art for art's sake'; Bourdieu 1985: 17). Bourdieu goes even further by specifying again the poles of the sub-fields, i.e., the sub-fields' internally prevalent oppositions. The sub-field of restricted production differentiates "between the consecrated avant-garde and the avant-garde, the established figures and the newcomers, [...] between the 'young' and the 'old', the 'neo' and the 'paleo', the 'new' and the 'outmoded', etc., in short, cultural orthodoxy and heresy" (Bourdieu 1983: 333). Equally, Bourdieu (1980: 287) characterizes the sub-field of large-scale production in regard to the opposition between small

firms and big firms. One could list more oppositions or differences characterizing the two sub-fields or the differentiation of the field of cultural production in general, such as autonomy/heteronomy (Bourdieu 1983: 321) or legitimacy/illegitimacy (Bourdieu 1985: 32). But the indicated distinctions and differentiations of the field of cultural production suffice for the present discussion of the economy/art relation.

Let us take a step back in order to see how Bourdieu observes art, economy and their relation. First of all, he does so rather implicitly. Bourdieu’s way of visualizing how the field of art is embedded in the social space, places it on the dominated side within the field of power. The field of art itself is again differentiated into the sub-fields of restricted and large-scale production (see Bourdieu 1983: 329, 1996: 124). This visual and conceptual picture of the social and the nesting and differentiation of fields gives some clues about the relation between economy and art. Each of the fields is structured according to the distribution of its main capital forms. In general, but also in the case of cultural production, the economic dimension always plays a central role for fields. It constitutes one of the two main axes. In the case of art, economic capital and the field specific, symbolic capital represent these two dimensions (see e.g. Bourdieu 1983: 319, 329). The economic dimensions thus figure as important aspects in the conceptualization of fields and the social. As I will discuss in a moment, Bourdieu conceives of the economic dimension in two different ways.

In order to see how economy and art (or, for that matter, any other societal domain) relate, one can change the focus slightly. From this perspective, Bourdieu’s distinction between two kinds of economy and their relationship to art become more visible.

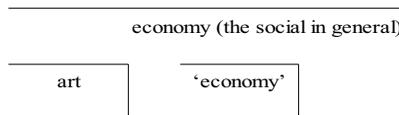


Fig. 4: Bourdieu’s observation of art and economy

The overall mark of distinction refers to the economy (without inverted commas) as the social in general. It refers to the social as a general economy of practices. ‘Economy’ (now with inverted commas), in contrast, refers to a particular field. It is comparable to the field of art in so far as it constitutes a more or less autonomous field in the social space with its own logic, rules etc.

The synoptic view indicates how the relation between art and economy may be

thought according to Bourdieu. This relation, however, turns out to be of two sorts. On the one hand, art and the practices constituting it represent practices in the general economic sense. They form part of the social and are thus the result of the general economy of practices. This conceptualization of a general economy shows itself in the economic concepts Bourdieu chooses for describing the functioning of fields and their constitutive struggles. On the other hand, art has a relation of distance and disavowal of 'economy' in its narrow sense. Its rather negative relation to 'economy' defines art as a field in its own right. Thus, while it is basically constituted by an economy of practices, art constitutes itself by keeping a distance and supporting the disavowal of 'economy'. In the remainder of this section, I want to discuss the problems that may arise with such a conceptualization.

First, Bourdieu suggests to extend the concept of economy in order to understand every material and symbolic good as subject to scarcity, which means that these goods are 'in demand' in particular fields (Bourdieu 1977: 177-178).⁷ For the field of cultural production this means that the disavowal of the 'economy' as the field specific capital is put at stake and is sought after within the field. Cultural production is a field of forces in which the scarcity of this particular form of capital keeps the 'art game' running. The 'players' involved in the field tacitly agree with their participation in the 'game' that it is worth fighting for and demanding a share of the scarce symbolic good needed to play the 'game' – despite the ongoing struggle (see Bourdieu 1993a; on the game analogy Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 98ff.). Bourdieu thus conceives the social and the practices constituting it as functioning according to a general economics, i.e., an economics of scarce goods of different forms.

In line with this proposition of a broad concept of economy pervading the social fabric, Bourdieu makes use of concepts from economics in order to analyze the social. Material and symbolic goods, forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic etc.), scarcity, and the market constitute such economic concepts. In the words of Frédéric Lebaron (2003: 558), "Bourdieu gives economic terms a non-monetary and a non-quantitative meaning". Even though these economic concepts are explicitly not meant in a narrow sense of 'economy'⁸ and are therefore used in opposition to it, their

7 According to Kieserling (2000: 373), scarcity represents *the* 'formula of contingency', signifying that everything could be distributed differently. In contrast, systems theory assumes more than just one such formula of contingency, namely one for each functional system, including scarcity in the functional system of economy (see Luhmann 2001: 470).

8 For example in the following quote: "It follows that the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a field of restricted production is measurable by the degree to which it is capable of functioning as a specific *market*, generating a specifically cultural type of *scarcity* and *value* irreducible to the economic scarcity and value of the goods in question" (Bourdieu 1985: 19; emphasis mine).

use may nevertheless complicate things. One has to deal with different forms of scarcity, markets etc., which can be both of an ‘economic’ (narrow sense) and economic (broader sense) kind. The metaphors from and analogies with economics thereby not only provide unconventional and fruitful means for analysis, but at the same time bear the risk of producing inadequacies (Lebaron 2003: 552, 558; see also the critique by Velthuis 2007: 27). Bourdieu’s (1980) own use of the terms of economy and ‘economy’, for example, shows this, since he needs the inverted commas in order to be able to draw a distinction between the two concepts (in Bourdieu 1983, he abandons this notational distinction).

A second and closely connected problem arises with the way Bourdieu defines a field, i.e., its coordinates on which the distribution and weight of positions is aligned. As indicated, Bourdieu defines every field according to two main dimensions, although others may be involved as well. In the case of the social space, economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital organize the field’s positions according to the distribution of each form of capital (Bourdieu 1989: 17). If we look at the illustration presented in Bourdieu’s *The Rules of Art* (1996: 124), we see the nesting of the different fields as described above. Each field has its two forms of capital: social space and the field of power are both organized by economic and cultural capital; the field of cultural production has economic and field specific capital as its two organizing dimensions. The problem I want to point to lies in the fact that economic capital always shows up as one of the organizing forms of capital. Whether economic capital has positive or negative signs, it always forms a key dimension. For example, it has negative signs in the case of the sub-field of restricted production where the symbolic capital predominates and is responsible for the production of autonomy, i.e., ‘art for art’s sake’. The production of art or cultural goods, therefore, cannot be seen in the latter two’s own, specific terms alone. Bourdieu conceives cultural production always with regard to economic aspects, even if only in negative, delimiting terms (little economic capital but a lot of symbolic capital). At the same time, however, art not only (actively) distinguishes itself from ‘economy’, but is always also structured by the general economy. This is most evident, albeit in a somewhat paradoxical manner, in the field specific capital of art: apart from economic capital, art is structured by the disavowal of ‘economy’ as the other central form of capital.

Does Bourdieu thus commit the same kind of ‘intellectual imperialism’ (Blaug) as cultural economics? Does his approach imply the “‘economistic’ vision of the social world” (Lebaron 2003: 551) that Bourdieu has been accused of (see Velthuis 2007:

27)? In contrast to cultural economics which claims that art can be conceived in the same way as economy in its narrow sense, Bourdieu's general concept of economy clearly distances itself from such imperialism. He does not attribute to cultural production the same logic as 'economism' or cultural economics do, but basically concedes to art its own specific way of working (i.e., in terms of the field's logic, rules, positions etc.). That is why I would not go as far as Velthuis (2007: 27) who considers Bourdieu's approach to follow the same "Nothing But" model as cultural economics (see also Featherstone 1987: 60-61 who emphasizes an analogical relation instead of one of reduction between cultural production and economy).

Unfortunately, Bourdieu makes things unnecessarily confusing by drawing on terms of economics for the designation and analysis of non-economic phenomena. According to Kieserling (2000: 371), who draws on a systems theoretical vocabulary, Bourdieu makes strategic use of other-descriptions for a field with its own particular self-description, in order not to analyze the field in its own terms. Due to the broadening of the concept of economy, however, one faces a situation in which economic terms such as capital, market or scarcity come into use for the description of non-economic phenomena. Especially in the case of the field of cultural production, because of the centrality of the disavowal of the economic in its narrow sense, Bourdieu even speaks of an inverted economic world (Bourdieu 1983: 321). Despite this unconventional and fruitful way of looking at art, the field of cultural production remains an economic world (in the broad sense) for which the misrecognition of 'economy' represents the main issue. The alleged other-description of the field in economic terms probably comes too close to the field's own way of describing itself, namely in distinction to 'economy'.

Although I do not accuse Bourdieu of intellectual imperialism, one should nonetheless be aware of a 'contamination' of the social with economy to a certain extent.⁹ This 'contamination' is evident in the originally economic concepts Bourdieu draws on and the way he conceives of the structure of social fields. I showed that by giving art its own field and own particular social logic, Bourdieu eventually cannot escape the 'contamination' of the field of cultural production with the economy. Precisely because he broadens the concept of economy and uses the same terms in different manners, the end result is a rather complicated conceptual setup. The attempt to present cultural production in its own particular terms, i.e., its disavowal and inversion of the economy, creates complications because of Bourdieu's general concept of economy and his constant focus on economic aspects. One also needs to be aware that even though Bour-

⁹ On the opposite case, i.e., the analysis of the economy in cultural terms by Bourdieu, see Kieserling (2000: 381-386).

dieu relates economy to cultural production in the various ways discussed, he does not show how cultural production and the field of economy relate to each other within social space (that is, except from the art field's point of view).¹⁰ If one looks for a conceptualization of the relation between art and economy (in the narrow sense) one does not get a clear answer. One only knows that economic capital prominently structures every social field and always constitutes a part in the corresponding social 'game'.¹¹

III Culture and Economy Enmeshed: Lessons From Cultural Economy

In contrast to the study of the arts with the tools of economics, cultural economy takes a quite different route (exemplary du Gay/Pryke 2002a; Amin/Thrift 2004b; more implicitly Ray/Sayer 1999a). First of all, cultural economy draws on a broader concept of culture, i.e. a concept that is not limited to art or 'the arts'. Secondly, and more importantly, it tends to see culture and economy not so much as two different and separate domains, but as closely connected and emerging simultaneously. For Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift cultural economy strives to counter the taken-for-granted notion "that there are separate spheres of activity called culture and economy" (2004a: xii; similarly Ray/Sayer 1999b: 4). Instead, emphasize Amin and Thrift, the approach looks at culture and economy in quite the opposite way, "by showing how the pursuit of prosperity is a hybrid process of aggregation and ordering that cannot be reduced to either of these terms and, as such, requires the use of a unitary term such as cultural economy" (2004a: xii). It is exactly this hybrid character, or the claim, as Amin and Thrift put it later, that "economy and culture are inextricably intertwined" (2004a: xiii)¹² that constitutes the crucial point of interest for cultural economy (for concrete cases: Pecknold 2007: 6 on country music; Velthuis 2007¹³ on art dealers; McFall 2002 on advertising).

Even though the focus lies on culture and economy, a focus that is not shared in the present study, cultural economy provides an idea of how to observe two closely con-

10 For a description of the field of economy see Bourdieu (2005: part 2 and postscript). On the emergence of the distinct logics of the artistic and economic field see (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 97-98), yet without any reference to their relation.

11 For a study about theater as cultural production drawing on Bourdieu see Eikhof and Haunschild (2007). Although Eikhof and Haunschild show the intricate and paradoxical relation between the economic and artistic logics, they do not fully employ Bourdieu's concept of field. Rather, they try to understand "individual action in creative production" (2007: 524) and thus deviate from Bourdieu's basic approach to the social.

12 Although Larry Ray and Andrew Sayer (1999b: 7) do not focus on 'cultural economy', they nonetheless see culture and economy at work simultaneously in certain activities.

13 Velthuis' study connects to cultural economy approaches, albeit only implicitly. He argues that markets are "cultural constellations" that are pervaded by symbolic systems (2007: 3, 10).

nected and seemingly inseparable domains. In the following, I therefore analyze how cultural economy observes culture and economy. Although the academic field of cultural economy itself turns out to be hybrid because many a discipline contributes to it (Amin/Thrift 2004a: xviii), I want to show that the approaches share a basic mode of observation. In a first step, I discuss Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke's (2002b) elaborations on cultural economy. They present the approach in clear and explicit terms. In a second step, I turn to a cultural economy discussion of fashion, which is guided by a similar mode of observation.

In their introduction to the volume *Cultural Economy. Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke (2002b) focus on the economy and economics as the result of cultural constructions. Du Gay and Pryke begin by diagnosing a (re-)emergence of culture or the cultural in organizations, management ("corporate culturalism") and the social sciences (2002b: 1-2). Some of the debates about culture, economy and their connection discern an increasing culturalization, making "epochal claims" (2002b: 6; see e.g. Lash/Urry 1994). This, however, is not the direction du Gay and Pryke pursue their argument for the study of cultural economy. Instead of drawing grand conclusion about epochs and large-scale societal tendencies like the culturalization thesis, or conceptualizing the distinction between economy and culture in abstract terms, they suggest to focus on specific cases (2002b: 9, 12).

According to du Gay and Pryke, economy and economics are cultural constructions in the sense of practical performance and enactment. Therefore, they are basically comparable to other forms of cultural constructions. On the one hand, du Gay and Pryke propose a way to conceptualize culture and economy from the perspective of cultural economy. On the other hand, they understand the link between the economic and the non-economic in a particular way. Even though du Gay and Pryke do not focus on the nexus of art and economy, their conceptualization of the nexus of culture and economy nonetheless touches on a problem relevant for the present study.

Du Gay and Pryke distinguish between economy (or economics) and "non-economic cultural practices" (2002b: 5) in the sense of different "forms of cultural knowledge" (2002b: 4). In formal terms, the distinction they draw works as follows (see figure 5): Culture or cultural knowledge forms the starting point, which du Gay and Pryke only indicate (marked space), but do not distinguish explicitly from something in particular (the unmarked space remains empty). That means that they do not, for example, distinguish between culture and society, or culture and nature and the like. Culture forms the first distinction, that defines the general horizon for further distinctions. It marks, in a

sense, the ‘world’ or the backdrop against which everything else becomes possible. Within this space of culture du Gay and Pryke draw the next distinction between economy (or economics) and non-economic cultural practices (or forms of knowledge). Although other distinctions between forms of cultural practices of knowledge would be imaginable, du Gay and Pryke explicitly distinguish between economic and non-economic forms of cultural knowledge. The phrase ‘forms of cultural knowledge’ clearly indicates that culture functions as the broader horizon in which a distinction between economic and non-economic forms becomes possible. Allen and du Gay (1994: 266) refer to the same point when stating that “the economic identity is always already ‘cultural’”.

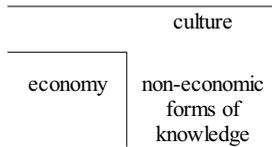


Fig. 5: Culture and economy observed

The theoretical move of interest here, however, does not so much consist in du Gay and Pryke’s conceptualization of economics or economy as the product of culture. Rather, it consists in their suggestion to look at concrete empirical phenomena, such as service work for example.¹⁴ Service work, du Gay and Pryke argue, “involves both economic and other forms of cultural knowledge” and therefore cannot be considered solely in either economic or non-economic terms (du Gay/Pryke 2002b: 4). Such a “binary divide” separating economics and culture, as they put it, does not do justice to “the identity of services” (du Gay/Pryke 2002b: 4). Here, then, lies the theoretical move which becomes important, namely du Gay and Pryke’s (2002b: 4) conceptualization of service work as “a contingent assemblage of practices built up from parts that are economic and non-economic (but always already cultural)”.

In an article about the economic identity of service, Allen and du Gay (1994) speak in this respect of a “hybrid” identity of service work. Unlike the usual economic conceptualizations of service work, the concept of the hybrid takes into account “the subtle imbrication of economy and culture” (Allen/du Gay 1994: 256). They emphas-

¹⁴ See Amin and Thrift (2004a: xiii) for the the Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) and Allen and du Gay (1994) for retail, financial and commercial services, tourism, and contract security as examples of the inextricable intertwining of culture and economy.

ize that culture and economy are inseparable “because the very act of servicing is both ‘cultural’ and ‘economic’ *at one and the same time*” (Allen/du Gay 1994: 266; emphasis mine). The identity of service work, therefore, becomes “irreducibly ‘*hybrid*’” (Allen/du Gay 1994: 266; emphasis in original). Although Allen and du Gay do not discard the concepts of culture and economy altogether, they nonetheless argue “that the boundaries between the economic and the cultural are blurred” (Allen/du Gay 1994: 266). With the concept of hybrid identity and the claim of the blurring of boundaries, Allen and du Gay’s argument goes in the same direction as du Gay and Pryke’s rejection of a “binary divide” and the suggestion of a “contingent assemblage of practices” (du Gay/Pryke 2002b: 4).

It is this co-existence and mixture of the economic and non-economic brought together and constituted as one phenomenon that interests us most. Or to put it in another way, du Gay and Pryke’s essential theoretical argument consists in this both-and-relation of economic and non-economic aspects in contrast to an either-or-relation. In their review of the cultural economy debate, Gibson and Kong (2005: 541f.) seem to make a similar argument when they describe cultural economies as multi- or polyvalent (see also Castree 2004, for a polemical discussion of the economy/culture-nexus). We can add with Amin and Thrift that the attempt to separate the economic and cultural (or non-economic) in order to get them both ‘in pure form’ would result in the creation of “epistemic monsters” (Amin/Thrift 2004a: xiv). Du Gay and Pryke would probably agree, since an understanding of service work or any other phenomena in terms of either the economic or the non-economic, and a concomitant repression of the “mixed origin” (Amin/Thrift 2004a: xiv) of the phenomenon, would miss the point (similarly also McFall 2002).

The present study can fruitfully draw on the conceptualization of a phenomenon as “a contingent assemblage” of different economic and non-economic aspects and their co-existence. However, except for this particular theoretical move, du Gay and Pryke’s overall theoretical framework of culture as practices, discourses, performance, or generally, in terms of cultural framing, will not be shared.

So, even though du Gay and Pryke do not specifically address the distinction between art and economy that is of central concern here, we still learn from them. Whereas their distinction between economic and non-economic forms of cultural knowledge does not provide a theoretical point of departure, their understanding of the relation between them does. Thus, the conceptualization of forms of cultural knowledge as emerging parallel and mixed in (or as) one phenomenon allows us to translate

this for the nexus of art and economy. Similarly, then, art and economy can be thought as parts of a ‘contingent assemblage’, which constitutes a particular phenomenon. Instead of explaining the phenomenon only in terms of art or economy, we need to be aware and need to grasp the both-and-relation or simultaneity of different domains. Only then do we avoid creating a phenomenon as an ‘epistemic monster’, in order to do justice to the ‘mixed’ character constitutive for it.

In many concrete, empirical studies of so called cultural economies or cultural industries the assemblage or mixture of economy and culture comes into focus. The mode of observation, however, is not always as clear as in the case of du Gay and Pryke. In these studies, the concept of the cultural may also assume the shape of aesthetics or art, which is of special interest here. In regard to art or aesthetics in cultural economies, I want to take a recent discussion in order to indicate how the nexus of economy and the cultural is conceptualized. The discussion under the heading *Encounters in the Global Fashion Business* deals with the fashion industry and other phenomena connected to it.

In the discussion of the contributions in the journal’s special issue, Patrik Aspers and Lise Skov (2006) summarize the different empirical studies of fashion by pointing to their shared assumptions and arguments (contributors are Entwistle 2006; Moeran 2006; Aspers 2006a; Skov 2006; Kawamura 2006; see also Entwistle 2002). Aspers and Skov emphasize the crucial role of and analytical focus on economy and aesthetics. The main focus lies not so much on either economy or aesthetics, but, as Aspers and Skov argue, on the “interaction, negotiation and mediation” between these two domains (the same holds true for “people and products, buyers and vendors” and “different professions and different nationalities” as stated in beforehand; Aspers/Skov 2006: 803). Aspers and Skov criticize approaches that study fashion in regard to one of the two domains only and point to the shared assumption “that fashion, as a cultural phenomenon, should be studied in relation to fashion as business” (2006: 806). Although it is now ‘culture’ instead of aesthetics, the emphasis lies on the relationship between the two domains. Concluding their discussion of this nexus, Aspers and Skov (2006: 807) note that “it is critical [...] that in reality economy and aesthetics are enmeshed with one another”.

In his contribution on fashion magazines, Brian Moeran provides an example of how economy and the cultural, or aesthetics, are ‘enmeshed’ (2006).¹⁵ The reason why fashion magazines interest Moeran lies in their twofold character as “both cultural

15 McFall (2002: 534, 545) observes the relation in terms of entanglement and interweaving.

products and commodities” (Moeran 2006: 727). Even though he clearly distinguishes between cultural products and commodities, Moeran complicates the matter by seeing the cultural products as part of “a cultural economy of collective meanings”, while giving the commodities their place in “publishing and print industries” (Moeran 2006: 727).¹⁶ In spite of this further complication, Moeran emphasizes the simultaneity of culture and economy in regard to fashion magazines (2006: 728).¹⁷

One of Aspers and Skov’s main points consists in highlighting the relationship or ‘enmeshment’ of economy and aesthetics or the cultural. In this sense, if not explicitly so, Aspers and Skov follow an argument similar to du Gay and Pryke’s conceptualization of the nexus of economy and the cultural (as non-economic). The problem I see in Aspers and Skov’s reasoning, however, lies in the missing conceptual clarification of the two ‘enmeshed’ domains. In Aspers and Skov’s brief summary of the arguments made in some of the articles of the special issue, we find some hints at what the economic and the aesthetic or cultural apparently stand for. Concepts such as economic exchange and production, or “aesthetic observation and trend formation” and “sense for personal style” apparently connect to the economic or aesthetic respectively (Aspers/Skov 2006: 807). Exactly how economy and aesthetics work or how both relate to the social, though, remains vague or unclear. To state “that the fashion industry is a complex structure with a blend of economic, material and cultural flows, all of which ultimately are social” (Aspers/Skov 2006: 804), does not adequately describe the relation between economy and aesthetics.

In this respect, Aspers (2006a) defines the characteristics of the domains of economy and aesthetics more explicitly in his paper on contextual knowledge in creative aesthetic work. In specifying ‘creative aesthetic work’, Aspers introduces a distinction between economy and aesthetics or art, in order to argue for their blending in the phenomenon. According to Aspers (2006a: 749), the term ‘work’ refers to the economic domain on the one hand, representing “an economic activity [...] for which you are paid”. The design of garments represents such an activity insofar as it pertains to “firms in economic markets, where profit is the ultimate goal” (Aspers 2006a: 749). In contrast to the economic concept of work, on the other hand, Aspers (2006a: 749) defines “pure art” as linked to “values of uniqueness, innovation and creativity (without money as an end goal)”. Aspers (2006a: 749) designates the activity connec-

16 With this concept of ‘cultural economy’ Moeran comes close to Bourdieu’s approach.

17 In another text on fashion magazines, Moeran describes the relation between economy and culture as a “basic structural paradox” and a “Janus-faced structure” (2008: 268, 269). Moeran, however, does not show how this paradoxical relation unfolds empirically.

ted to art as “creative aesthetic activity” and distinguishes it from work as an economic activity. As indicated, Aspers draws this distinction between the two activities in order to subsequently argue for their ‘enmeshment’ in the phenomenon he calls ‘creative aesthetic work’.

Neither economy nor culture or aesthetics provide the main focus for the discussed theories of cultural economy. Rather, the main problem they address lies in the character of the relation between the economic and the non-economic domains. Both du Gay and Pryke and the studies concerned with the fashion industry concentrate on the simultaneity or enmeshment of the two domains. This applies as well to the discussion about the phrase that is most appropriate for designating the phenomenon of interest. Whereas du Gay and Pryke opt for the term ‘cultural economy’ (also Entwistle 2006), Entwistle (2002; 2009) and Aspers (2006a; 2006b) favor the terms ‘aesthetic economy’ and ‘aesthetic market’. The reason Aspers chooses ‘aesthetic’ instead of ‘cultural’ lies in the imprecision of the term ‘cultural’, “since virtually everything is part of ‘culture’” (2006a: 759, fn 1). With this critical statement he refers to du Gay and Pryke’s use of the concept of ‘cultural economy’. The term ‘aesthetic’, in contrast, refers to an economy “in which aesthetics is a key component in the production of particular goods and services within a particular industry, organization or firm, and one in which aesthetics are central to the economic calculations of that setting”, that is ‘aesthetics’ understood not just as an add-on to a product but the very product itself (Entwistle 2002: 321).¹⁸ Moeran, in turn, criticizes the concept of ‘aesthetic’ market used by Aspers because it “suggests an appreciative unity that rarely – if ever – exists in any creative world” and fails to account for the “plurality of competing aesthetics” in such markets (Moeran 2006: 739; see also Aspers/Skov 2006: 807). As a result, Moeran proposes yet another designation: He speaks of symbolic exchange for the cultural and commodity exchange for the economic domain. He thereby tries “to overcome the potential fuzziness of ‘symbolic’ (not to mention ‘cultural’) by focusing on four elements that constitute symbolic exchange: technical, appreciative, social and use values” (Moeran 2006: 740). Despite Moeran’s suggestion of breaking down the domain of culture in order to be conceptually more precise, he maintains the central distinction between culture and economy as two separate domains coming together in industries such as fashion (Moeran 2006: 739, 741 fig. 2).

18 In reference to Entwistle, Aspers states that “[t]he notion of ‘aesthetic economy’ [...] captures several more or less interlinked aesthetic markets” (2006a: 759, fn 1), whereas ‘aesthetic markets’ are “characterized by design and marketing as means to create brands and market niches” and by a lack of an established “principle of order” in terms of quality (2006a: 745).

The observation of aesthetics and economy appears more confused in these cases than the clear-cut distinctions we find in du Gay and Pryke's perspective. But we can nevertheless identify a basic mode of observation similar to that of du Gay and Pryke. If we look again at a statement, which I quoted already above, we get an idea in relation to which 'space' economy and aesthetics become observable. Aspers and Skov (2006: 804) note "that the fashion industry is a complex structure with a blend of economic, material and cultural flows, all of which ultimately are social". This is one explicit passage that gives us an indication of the social contextualization of economy and aesthetics. Although Aspers and Skov do not tell us more about what exactly they mean by the term 'social', it nonetheless helps us to discern their observation. The social figures as the context for economy and aesthetics/culture, i.e., it represents the marked 'space' in which these two domains – among others – emerge. A passage in Aspers' contribution (2006a: 759, fn 1) I mentioned before gives us yet another clue about the 'space' in which economy and aesthetics are conceived. Pointing to the differences between the concepts of aesthetic economy and cultural economy, Aspers (2006a: 759, fn 1) claims that the latter is imprecise compared to the former, "since virtually everything is part of 'culture'". Aspers' criticism aims at the double use of the concept of culture, as the encompassing realm and as a characteristic of economy, which for Aspers leads to conceptual imprecision. Hence Aspers decides to use the concept of aesthetic instead of cultural, in order to draw a more precise distinction. The 'space' in which the basic distinction between aesthetics and economy takes place, however, still seems, at least implicitly, to be 'culture' (due to the similarity of the distinctions made in the discussion of fashion and the one of du Gay and Pryke, it is unnecessary to illustrate the mode of observations again as in figure 5).

Despite the different theoretical frameworks suggested by du Gay and Pryke and the approaches about the fashion industry, I want to emphasize again the importance of observing not only the separateness of domains (economy and culture, economy and aesthetics) but also their simultaneity or 'enmeshment' in one and the same social phenomenon. Even though the cultural economy approaches do not always provide clear-cut and well-defined concepts of the domains and their relations, we can still acknowledge their emphasis on the enmeshment/simultaneity of separate domains.

IV Distinct and Related: Art and Economy Observed Through Systems Theory

In each of the cases above presented we saw that economy and art (or its substitutes) always emerge within a context that makes them possible. For cultural economics this

context consists in a rarely explicit concept of economy as pervading everything that might be of interest. For Bourdieu the social space is the basis for a cascade of differentiated sub-fields. Although it differs from what cultural economics subsumes under the concept of economy, the social space is characterized by a general economy of practices that pervades everything social. For cultural economy, culture or the social constitute this context.

With systems theory we start at a similar place as Bourdieu, yet with different theoretical premises. The social system constitutes the context of communication in which art and economy as social phenomena become possible. The social system distinguishes itself from everything that does not constitute communication (psychic, biological and other systems). Although both art and economy represent phenomena constituted by communication, their constitution occurs according to different criteria. Art and economy as two functional systems of society operate in their own specific ways, drawing on a particular symbolically generalized medium, establishing corresponding ways of observations, and so on (as outlined in chap. 2). What I want to stress here is the two systems' separateness and incommensurability. Even though they share the basic characteristics of functional systems and therefore are functionally equivalent, they work differently. The observation made by cultural economics – that art can be explained in terms of how the economy works (according to the assumptions of economics) –, cannot be supported from the point of view of systems theory. To observe from a systems theoretical perspective how artistic communication operates, means to observe something else than economic communication. One needs to take into account the difference the two forms of communication make.

The constellation and contextualization of art and economy can be described and visualized similar to the other approaches.

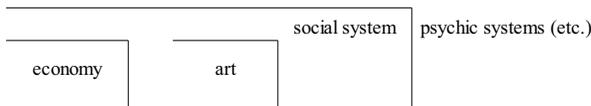


Fig. 6: Art and economy observed by systems theory

The overall mark of distinction distinguishes the social system from its non-communicational environment. Art and economy form part of the marked side as domains in the social system. Their visual separation by two marks of distinction signifies that

they are in each other's environment within the social system.

This is only the basic constellation of economy and art. It points to the distinctiveness of the two domains and their social character. Unlike cultural economics and Bourdieu's field theory, this systems theoretical conceptualization does not assume that art and economy are always already closely related. Rather, their more or less close relation is a possibility that, in certain contexts or for particular phenomena, becomes actualized empirically. As distinct forms of communication, art and economy do not necessarily relate. If they do, and that is our main interest, the question is how they relate specifically.

As described above (chap. 2), systems theory provides concepts in order to grasp relations between systems in general. In addition, I suggested the concept of the parallaxic form that grasps a particular kind of relation (form or operational coupling). In Luhmann's texts, mainly those on the art system, we find accounts of the relation between economy and art. Luhmann concentrates on the relation between the two systems in terms of structural coupling.¹⁹ While mainly writing about 'fine' art, Luhmann considers the art market and art trade as typical outcomes of a structural coupling between art and economy (Luhmann 2000a: 162ff., 243; 2001: 787, 2008d).

Art and economy draw on one another to establish certain structures, in order to deal with the other system's (observed) perturbations. For the economy, the art market is a market, among others, that provides commodities for exchange. The economy establishes particular expectations concerning the features, availability and value of works of art. As commodities, works of art have a price, may be used as investment or seen as luxury goods (Luhmann 2000a: 243). For the system of art, the art market or art trade generates expectations about reputation that can be gained. The art market, however, does not simply steer the art system and lead to a market oriented creation of artwork. As Luhmann notes, because of the expectation, that artwork should be original and unique, the art system's structures prevent a market orientation (Luhmann 2000a: 243). The creation of original artwork, in turn, will again perturb the economic

19 One can compare this concept with Bourdieu's concept of the field. Apparently, Bourdieu has no concept for grasping the relations between fields, if compared with the concept of structural coupling in systems theory (see Kneer 2004: 45ff. who discusses Luhmann's concept of structural coupling but does not refer to a comparable concept in Bourdieu's theory). Bourdieu seems to be able to circumvent the problem Luhmann's concept of structural coupling solves by conceptualizing fields more openly (relative autonomy) and their boundaries as subject to struggles within the fields. Moreover, the basic forms of capital pervading every field indicate also how fields become related to a certain degree (these insights I owe to Peter Streckeisen). However, Bourdieu also points to difficulties with the question of the interrelation between fields. He argues that it is an empirical and historical question whether and how fields relate to each other (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 109).

system, because it observes the artwork in ways that legitimate special prices. The two systems' structural coupling, thus, leads to the establishment of distinct structures and "tracks of mutual perturbation" (Luhmann 2001: 779; my transl.; similarly Hutter 2001: 308).

Following Luhmann's suggestion, Michael Hutter investigates these structural couplings more closely by analyzing concrete phenomena in regard to the interdependency of art and economy (not always in explicit systems theoretical terms, though; Hutter 2001, 2008, 2010d). In general terms, Hutter (2001: 290) postulates "that social systems, notably the major functional subsystems of society, are intricately interwoven". Unlike Luhmann's descriptions that remain on a general level, Hutter shows, in which ways economy and art depend on each other while maintaining their distinctiveness. Economy perturbs and 'frames' art in various ways – and vice versa (Hutter 2001: 294). Economic transactions may be framed by artistic forms such as architecture and linguistic and visual (re)presentations (Hutter mentions trade cards in the eighteenth century and the design of commodities). Similarly, economy may frame artistic communication in terms of themes, prices and the availability of resources (Hutter 2001: 294-308; 2008; see also Velthuis 2005). With such exemplary cases and other, more detailed studies on painting, literature and music (Hutter 2010a, 2010b, 2010c), Hutter demonstrates how systems theory may contribute to the analysis of the relation between art and economy. Whether the economy draws on art or art on economy, distinctions are maintained and relations established.

Hutter clarifies how art and economy relate better than Luhmann in his more general discussions. Hutter's analysis, however, remains still too general for investigating the relations between economy and art, as I will suggest for the phenomenon of tattooing. This is not to say that one cannot observe structural couplings analogous to the ones Hutter describes. It means, though, that this concept does not suffice and cannot fully grasp the phenomenon I will describe as tattooing. In order to clarify this, let me give a few examples of structural coupling between art and economy in regard to tattoos and tattooing.

From the economy's point of view, tattoos may constitute a resource. As commodities, they may become the object of economic transactions. They entail certain expectations about being equipped with a price and their availability and saleability. As tattoo designs, they may serve as decorations of commodities and visual representations of a brand that have nothing to do with tattoos or tattooing. The brand "Ed Hardy", for example, sells clothing and accessories, but also perfume, energy drinks and many other

things decorated with tattoo designs from the tattooist Don Ed Hardy. In such cases, tattoo designs have the purpose to visually support the sale of commodities, in order to attract a certain kind of buyer, convey a particular lifestyle and the like.

From the point of view of art, the economy serves as a visual theme for tattoos (e.g. a tattoo of a bank note; *Skin Deep* 2007, December/153: 20). The economy more generally perturbs art in terms of prices and availability of materials needed for the creation of tattoos. Shifts in prices may perturb artistic communication in terms of changes of styles, content, and materials. For a long time tattoos consisted of only a few basic colors, including black, red, green, brown, and then also yellow and white ink. In the 1960s, the availability of blue, purple and an increasing number of other colors led to new artistic possibilities (Hardy 1988c: 13; Hardy 1995: 16; Hardy 2005: 66). The former palette is characteristic for 'old school' designs, whereas the latter seems to have been an important factor for the coming 'tattoo renaissance' and the adaptation and invention of new tattoo styles (on comparable changes in painting, film and music, see Hutter 2008).

The concept of structural coupling provides some insights into the relations between economy and art. But it remains too general for what I want to investigate in the case of tattooing. The aforementioned couplings play their role, but there seems to be more to it than what can be analyzed with this concept. This is the reason why I suggest working with the concept of parallax as a type of form. This concept is supposed to grasp and describe in more concrete terms what happens on an operational level with economy and art in the constitution of tattooing as a social phenomenon.

The perspective I suggest differs from the assumptions and the basic mode of observation characteristic for cultural economy. But despite theoretical differences, cultural economy has a perspective on phenomena that is similar to mine. Whether describing them in terms of "contingent assemblage" (du Gay/Pryke 2002b: 4), "hybrid identity" (Allen/du Gay 1994), "polyvalency" (Gibson/Kong 2005: 546), "entanglement" (McFall 2002: 534, 545), or 'enmeshment' (Aspers/Skov 2006: 807), they all point to a central feature of certain phenomena. These concepts suggest that phenomena can consist of more than one constitutive aspect. Instead of analyzing service work, fashion, and other phenomena merely as economically constituted, cultural economy perspectives see other cultural or social dimensions as equally constitutive. With the concept of the parallaxic form I want to take up this idea and use it for the study of the relations of the distinct societal domains of art and economy. I use the concept of the parallax in

order to point to a phenomenon that is constituted neither only by economy nor art but rather by both – despite their differences and incommensurability.

Such an approach allows for a view of differences and relations alike. Economy and art differ in how they constitute themselves. But both are part of the social system as different sub-systems or forms of communication. At the same time, the approach allows to look at phenomena as being constituted by differing forms of communication such as art and economy.

Luhmannian systems theory does not preclude such a perspective from the start. The concept of structural coupling, however, looks at it more from the perspective of what happens in each of the involved systems (noticeable also in Hutter's work). My focus, in contrast, lies on the phenomenon itself. I consider it important to look at phenomena in their 'impure' or intricate constellations of communication instead of focusing on one facet alone.

The approach I suggest does not simply imply a different overall theoretical perspective than those discussed above. The central difference lies in the main focus and starting point of the investigation of a social phenomenon. Instead of looking at individuals' behavior, motives and choices (cultural economics) or relations between social positions manifesting a field (Bourdieu), systems theory allows us to study how a phenomenon emerges in its own right. Although not excluding the communication that describes a phenomenon from different points of view as such, this approach focuses first on how a phenomenon is constituted through specific communication. In the present case, this means first looking at economy and art as distinct forms of communication (or societal sub-systems) and, second, how they combine to constitute a phenomenon such as tattooing as another phenomenon of its own.

The abstract concepts of systems theory allow us to look closely at how communication takes place. It makes it possible to take seriously the distinct characteristics of sub-systems' forms of communication and the empirical possibility that they enter relations with one another. This abstract way of conceptualizing art, economy and their potential relations, provides us with empirical sensibility. This means that even though the relation between economy and art might turn out differently for each studied phenomenon, the suggested theoretical approach and its concepts are abstract and open enough for adaptations, that take into account the empirical constellations.

6 The Form of Tattooing

Tattooing will continue to provide rich fodder for the dissecting tables
of academia, but at core its power defies absolute classification.
Don Ed Hardy (1995: 25)

Although distinct in many ways, academic accounts of tattooing have one thing in common.¹ They all fail to clearly specify the social characteristics of the phenomenon. These insufficient efforts to define tattooing and specify its relation to similar phenomena results in both theoretical and analytical imprecision. It often remains unclear how the concept of tattooing relates to other concepts within a given theory and, likewise, how tattooing as a social phenomenon can be distinguished from others. Concepts are problematic when they remain too close to an everyday understanding of the phenomenon they describe, unable to indicate what the concept includes and excludes (Luhmann 1992a: 73).

This rather unsatisfying situation calls for a new way of looking at tattooing. Based on systems theory I want to suggest a new perspective. In this chapter I propose a definition of tattooing as a particular form of communication. Conceiving of tattooing as a social phenomenon with a particular form and medium leads to more precise observations. In each concrete case it will be possible to decide whether the phenomenon in question is tattooing or something else.

First, I give an overview of how tattooing is defined in the academic literature and show that the concepts tend to remain vague. Second, I propose a definition of tattooing and specify it in terms of its form and medium. The form, I will argue, is constituted by both art and economic communication. In dealing with tattooing in terms of communication, we need to follow an initially counter-intuitive path that differs from common definitions in academic literature. Third, I show the forms of communication that tattooing does not operate with and give examples of how they nevertheless play a semantic role. And in the fourth and last section I point to the range and limits of the suggested definition of tattooing. For this purpose I discuss phenomena that are commonly called 'tattooing' or seen closely linked to tattooing. By indicating what the sug-

¹ See Wymann (2010) for a short version of the arguments made in this chapter.

gested definition of tattooing excludes, the definition is further specified.

It is of course up for debate whether tattooing requires a sharply circumscribed form in terms of communication. From a systems theoretical point of view, however, everything social, i.e., everything of a communicative character, has a particular form without which it would not make a difference in society. If nothing made a difference, an observer would not 'see' or be able to distinguish anything. Other theoretical perspectives might not need such a clear-cut definition of tattooing. In order to remain consistent, however, the theoretical framework suggested here cannot do without it.

I Common Definitions of Tattooing

For one seeking a clear and theoretically grounded definition of tattooing, the academic literature on tattooing is rather unsatisfying and imprecise. There is certainly no doubt that authors like Clinton R. Sanders (1989a), Alfred Gell (1993), Margo DeMello (2000), Michael Atkinson (2003a) produced empirically rich contributions to the study of tattooing from a variety of perspectives. What is missing in many studies, however, is a precise, theoretically adequate, and above all, consistent definition of tattooing. Gell's work (1993) on tattooing in Polynesia constitutes an exception. Gell explicitly raises the question of how to define tattooing when one deals with a variety of contexts in which it emerges in different forms. As I will show, Gell ultimately conflates different broad concepts without explicit reflection.

Even though efforts to clearly define tattooing are rather rare and remain mostly implicit, it is worth looking at how the phenomenon is conceptualized. I argue that the academic literature about tattooing fail to provide consistent and clear definitions of tattooing that may be used in a sociological study. With the following discussion my own definition hopefully becomes more comprehensible in its conceptual aspiration, namely that it matches the overall theory and can be grasped better analytically. By explicitly presenting the definition and comparing it with other approaches it may be better evaluated and criticized.

Three prevalent modes of defining tattooing can be discerned in the literature: technical-material definitions, definitions of effect, and social definitions. This list is not exhaustive and the three modes are not entirely distinct. But together they cover the most prominent texts in academic literature. The differentiation of the three types of definitions does not mean that they may not appear simultaneously in the same text. As will be shown, the mixture of these different definitions constitutes the main reason for definitional imprecision.

Eventually, I also want to shed light on how the literature conceives tattooing as a matter of economy and/or art. After all, to propose that tattooing has something to do with economy and art is not new to either the academic literature or the descriptions originating from tattoo organizations, magazines etc. The suggestion is new insofar as it claims tattooing to be exclusively constituted by economy and art.

Technical-Material Definitions

In her *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment*, the anthropologist Margo DeMello (2007: 265) defines tattooing as “the insertion of pigment into the skin with needles, bone, knives, or other implements, in order to create a decorative design”. This is one example of what I call a technical-material definition of tattooing. In the words of Gell (1993: 8-9, 22, 303), the first part of the quote refers to the “basic technical schema” common to every version of tattooing, regardless of the variety of contexts. “The defining feature of tattooing”, Gell notes,

is that it is the making of indelible pigmented traces which are inside or underneath the skin. The tattooing-tool goes through the skin, the ink is absorbed into the interior of the body, and remains there, subsequently being inaccessible from the outside, but still visible, behind what seems like a transparent layer. (Gell 1993: 38)

Both descriptions specify tattooing in terms of a certain procedure (insertion into skin), a set of tools (needles etc.), a particular material to be inserted (pigment, ink), and its visible outcome (decorative design, indelible pigmented traces).

A technical-material definition no doubt offers a common sense characterization of tattooing. It immediately and unambiguously identifies many phenomena as examples of tattooing. In order to show what the definition covers, I want to present concrete examples.

Take the familiar case of the tattoo shop: Here, a tattooist makes tattoos to order: the customer freely chooses to get a tattoo and pays for the service. Customers decide what kind of design they would like to have and the tattoos accordingly show great variety. Though some tattoos are still made by hand, most tattooists today use an electric machine. Or take the case of two friends who tattoo each other: This could take place at home and might involve an electric tattoo machine or needles worked by hand. The costs of this method, both in materials and labor, are normally negligible. The medical application of tattoos is a third type. In the course of an operation, a tattoo may be applied in order to reconstruct damaged skin features such as a mamilla. Ideally, the tattooed spot will not be identifiable as a tattoo. While the patient may pay for the treat-

ment, the tattoo is here merely one part of a larger operation. Finally, consider the concentration camp inmates who were tattooed with their serial numbers (see Kogon 1974: 50; Lasker-Wallfisch 2000: 71-72). The inscriptions were made by hand. The inmates did not pay for these tattoos and had no say in how they looked. At that time they served a mainly administrative purpose. Afterwards, they certainly became stigmatizing.

In each of these cases a tattoo is created with a tool by inserting ink into the skin, whether the tool is an electric tattoo machine, a batch of needles in order to ‘poke’ by hand, or a special medical device. In this respect, the technical-material definition covers each examples. One is always looking at tattooing.

While Gell (1993: 38) describes the final outcome of tattooing as “indelible pigmented traces”, DeMello (2007: 265) speaks of “a decorative design”. DeMello’s qualification of the end result, however, remains unspecified. One does not know under which conditions or by whose decision a design is decorative. DeMello’s definition would see tattooing only in the first two examples. Medical ‘tattoos’, which seldom are visible as such, and identifying tattoos would most likely not count. But since it is not clear according to which criteria a design in the skin is decorative, these two examples, again, cannot be completely ruled out. Gell’s material characterization of the end result, though, covers all of these examples.

In a technical-material sense tattooing constitutes the basic phenomenon in a variety of contexts. But this is also the reason why this kind of definition is not suited for a sociological study.² Due to its wider range, a technical-material definition cannot grasp the social differences between the different cases. As I will show below, it makes a difference whether a tattoo is created in the context of a tattoo establishment or in a medical context. What constitutes the same phenomenon for a technical-material definition turns out to be different phenomena from a sociological point of view. Whereas for Gell and DeMello both the enforced inscription of an inmate and the medical use of tattoos constitute examples of tattooing, I will argue that they do not. Rather, they constitute entirely different social phenomena, even though tattoos may be involved. As a consequence, I will suggest that one should not describe these phenomena in terms of tattooing solely on technically-materially grounds. The immediacy of the technical and material aspects does not mean that they are automatically suitable criteria for a sociological study of tattooing. Rather, it seems more advisable to keep some distance from the immediately identifiable.

2 Of course, Gell’s anthropological study relies on it. But as will be shown below, he complements it with what I will call a social definition.

Definitions of Effect

The next type of definition concerns the alteration of the body and the actual effects attributed to tattooing. The definition does not connect to a particular theoretical outlook but is used by authors with various backgrounds. These range from postmodern sociology (Featherstone 1999), feminist perspectives (Pitts 1999, 2003), anthropology (Myers 1992; DeMello 2000), production of culture perspective (Sanders 1989a), to figurational theory (Atkinson 2003a). Like the technical-material definition it deals with the materiality involved to a certain extent, but it focuses on the effects of the use of tools and insertion of ink. Basically, the definition suggests ways of integrating and comparing tattooing with other phenomena.

‘Body modification’ and ‘body alteration’ represent two general concepts commonly used for the characterization of tattooing. Tattooing is presented as one form of body modification/alteration among many others (e.g. Myers 1992: 267). As a case in point, Mike Featherstone gives an exemplary characterization of forms of body modification:

The term ‘body modification’ refers to a long list of practices which include piercing, tattooing, branding, cutting, binding and inserting implants to alter the appearance and form of the body. The list of these practices could be extended to include gymnastics, bodybuilding, anorexia and fasting – forms in which the body surface is not directly inscribed and altered using instruments to cut, pierce and bind. [...] In addition, we have to consider the ways in which the body is modified by the use of various forms of prostheses and technological systems. (Featherstone 1999: 1)

The factual modification of the body, the alteration of its form and appearance, functions as the main thread in Featherstone’s characterization. Featherstone extends the general concept of body modification to include objects and technology – not only as a means but as part of the alteration. Tattooing constitutes one way of modifying the body among many others. The concept of body modification puts tattooing in a comparative context that points to what the subsumed ‘practices’ have in common.

For the purpose of distinguishing between forms of body modification many authors use additional specifying terms. In order to distinguish tattooing from other forms and, at the same time, relating it to comparable forms, the terms ‘permanent’, ‘voluntary’, ‘purposive’, ‘non-mainstream’ or ‘radical’ further qualify the concept of modification (see, e.g., Sanders 1989a; Myers 1992; DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003a; Pitts 2003).

In contrast to haircutting and cosmetics as temporary (reversible) forms of body modification, for example, tattooing is permanent (irreversible). Likewise, tattooing

also appears radical and non-mainstream rather than normal or moderate, exactly because it is permanent (e.g. Sanders 1989a: 4-9; Myers 1992: 267). It shares these attributes, however, with piercing, branding, and scarification. Contrary to an enforced body alteration, tattooing, branding, and also haircutting are seen as voluntary. And in distinction to forms that simply take place (e.g. in an accident), tattooing is qualified as intended or purposive. Depending on the attributes chosen, the categories comprise certain forms and distinguish them from others. Consequently, two forms can be subsumed under one attribute in one case, and be separated when it comes to a different attribute. The choice of the attributes depends on the context they are used in and the differences one wants to emphasize. Eventually, authors drawing on these qualifying attributes switch between them without explicit reflection of the changing specification of tattooing. They do not address whether the attributes are mutually exclusive and distinct from each other or whether they overlap.

I want to come back to the examples introduced above and look at how the definition of tattooing as a (particular) form of body modification deals with them. Similar to the technical-material definition, the general concept of body modification or alteration covers all of the four cases: Getting tattooed in a tattoo establishment, by a friend at home, after surgery, or in the process of being imprisoned. The general concept does not offer more details about eventual differences between the cases. All it captures is their similarity. If the concept of body modification were used consistently, it would also include the surgical modifications that took place in the medical case. In this context, then, the definition sees two forms or 'practices' of body modification. Here the additional attributes might help to grasp the differences between practices and cases.

The attributes 'permanent' or 'irreversible' are useful for all four cases. The same applies to the attribute 'purposive' or 'intentional'. Each case involves a purposive body modification. But the attribute does not explicitly provide information from which point of view it is purposive (tattooist or customer, physician or patient, warden or inmate). If one takes the attribute 'voluntary', however, differences become visible. Whereas the tattoo establishment and the situation between friends at home result in voluntary modifications, the outcome of the concentration camp procedure would be called 'enforced'. Which one of the attributes applies in the medical example is uncertain. On the one hand, it could be seen as voluntary because the patient asked for it. On the other, it could be a necessary medical procedure regardless of the patient's will to be modified in this way. Ultimately, the attributes can be used in a parallel manner for the same case. The tattoo created in a tattoo establishment could be characterized as

voluntary, purposive, and permanent body modification. The medical case and the case of the homemade tattoo fall into the same category. The case of the identifying tattoo in the concentration camp would require a slightly different constellation of attributes (enforced, purposive, and permanent), while the medical example remains ambiguous concerning the distinction between voluntary and enforced.

The attributes 'non-mainstream', 'radical', and 'deviant' have special implications. In regard to the four examples, these three attributes could probably not be applied in each case. The attributes would be applied more likely to the case of a tattoo establishment and the homemade tattoo, than in the medical and the administrative context. As far as the academic literature is concerned, the two latter cases would not be described in terms of 'non-mainstream' or 'deviant' forms of body modification. One problem is that these attributes and their counter-concepts 'mainstream', 'moderate' and 'normal' imply a normative meaning in both everyday, non-academic descriptions and academic ones. By using them for characterizing forms of body alteration, the academic observer adopts this normative point of view. Tattooing as a form of body modification, then, is seen as existing 'outside' of 'normal' society (e.g. Sanders 1989a; Vail 1999; critically Atkinson 2003a: viii).

The concepts of body modification and alteration subsume and render comparable a great variety of phenomena among which tattooing is only one. This is possible because the definition mainly focuses on the physical effects. But here arises a problem if one wants to use the definition sociologically. This basic definition is not able to account for differences between phenomena in various contexts. In each of the four cases the definition sees tattooing as a form of body modification.

Similar to the technical-material definition, the examples come into view as cases of tattooing even if differences exist between them. While the attributes grasp some of these differences, tattooing constitutes in each case the basic phenomenon the definition of effect identifies. I will propose a definition of tattooing that allows for a distinction between different phenomena where the definitions of effect would see only one form of body modification called tattooing.

Social Definitions

In contrast to the two previous types, 'social' definitions conceive of tattooing as a genuinely social phenomenon. Some authors explicitly define tattooing in social terms corresponding to their theoretical perspectives. Gell (1993) combines a technical-material definition with a Foucauldian framework. Atkinson (2003a) deals with tattooing

in terms of Norbert Elias' figurational theory of the social. Others do not explicitly relate tattooing to their main theoretical perspective (e.g. Sanders 1989a; DeMello 2000). In the latter cases, the concept of tattooing often remains conceptually ambiguous. None of the authors suggesting a social definition, however, sticks to one definition at a time exclusively. The authors frequently make use of social definitions together with one or two of the previously discussed ones.

The following concepts are widely used for defining tattooing in social terms: practice (Sanders 1989a; Blanchard 1991; Gell 1993; Sweetman 1999; DeMello 2000; Sullivan 2001; Atkinson 2003a; Pitts 2003; Kuwahara 2005; Broome 2006); "body project", "social behaviour", and "cultural form of expression" (Atkinson 2003a: viii, x, 7; the last also in Broome 2006: 333); "an interdependent social activity" (Atkinson 2003a: 127); or a mechanism of "social communication" like other forms of body alteration and a 'form of cultural production' (Sanders 1989a: 20, 32). Authors drawing on Foucauldian thinking conceive tattooing as a form of subjectivization, i.e., as a 'technology' that contributes to the constitution of social or political subjects (Gell 1993: 3, 9; Benson 2000; Sullivan 2001). As this list of concepts shows, the social character of tattooing is at times (implicitly) defined in different ways in one and the same study.

If we look more closely at how social definitions conceive of tattooing some problems appear. I do not want to discuss or critique the theories used for the study of tattooing as such. Each research problem requires a particular perspective. It would therefore be rather pointless to claim that the approach suggested below would be best for answering every conceivable question about tattooing. Instead, I want to point to more general problems of these definitions of tattooing as a social phenomenon.

A first problem arises if we ask to 'whom' such definitions attribute tattooing, i.e., to which social 'address' they refer. The concept of 'practice', for example, either describes the practice of making tattoos, implying the role of the tattooist, or the practice of getting and being tattooed, implying the role of the tattooed person. The concept of 'cultural form of expression' shares a similar ambiguity, whereas (purposive) 'mechanisms of social communication' and 'body project' seem to refer more to being tattooed. The Foucauldian concept of 'technology of subjectivization', in contrast, either might address a person's own subjectivization by means of getting tattooed. Or it refers to a more general mode of subjectivizing individuals as subjects of a particular group or society (see Gell 1993).

I want to discuss the four examples again briefly for indicating what social defini-

tions of tattooing are able to describe. The concept of practice is widely used to specify tattooing. Due to its possible reference to both the tattooed and the tattooing person, the concept covers all four examples. In the cases of the tattoo organization and the friends at home the concept applies to both persons' involvement. While it would probably not be seen as a practice in regard to the patient, tattooing could be seen as a medical practice of the medical staff. The concept may even be used for the description of the marking of inmates as an administrative practice. If not specified in more detail, the concept of practice may cover all four examples in one way or another. In doing so, however, the concept loses the ability to differentiate between various kinds of practices. The concept of 'technology of subjectivization' faces a similar problem. While the first two examples would probably be seen as cases of a technology of 'self-subjectivization', the other two could be conceived as more general cases. In the case of the concentration camp tattooing is one technology among many for 'producing' the subject of the inmate as a controllable, totally included, and stigmatized person. In the medical context, this definition of tattooing might be used for grasping the 'production' of healthy bodies and subjects. Surgical reconstruction by means of tattoos would be one general medical technology aimed at (re)constituting or 'repairing' damaged bodies and making them look 'normal' and healthy again. Tattooing conceived as a 'form of cultural production', on the other hand, can differentiate between the four cases. While the cases of the tattoo organization and of the two friends tattooing each other could be described as a form of cultural production, the two other cases could definitely not.

The main problem, however, lies in the parallel use of several of these concepts for defining tattooing. While the conceptualization of tattooing as a 'form of cultural production' may shed light on the social differences between the cases, the combination of different concepts blurs the picture of the social character of tattooing again. In order to understand the ways in which these concepts can become problematic, I want to discuss Michael Atkinson's study as an example.

Michael Atkinson (2003a) defines the meaning of tattooing in regard to the person who is tattooed. Atkinson's book title, *Tattooed. The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*, points to the tattooed persons as the study's main interest. With a figurational analysis following Norbert Elias, Atkinson conceives tattooing as "a deeply social act" (2003a: viii). The conception becomes clear when he writes that "tattooing is essentially a group phenomenon involving a litany of connected social actors" (2003a: xi). At the same time, as he admits beforehand, tattooing constitutes a "highly individualistic act"

(2003a: xi). According to Atkinson tattooing constitutes a social phenomenon because of the involvement and connection of 'social actors' in a group or, in term of Elias, a figuration.

The problem does not lie in Atkinson's choice of figurational theory. It seems to serve the purpose of analyzing tattooed persons, their interdependencies, and the constellation and sociogenesis of a "tattoo figuration" in Canada (Atkinson 2003a: 4ff.). Rather, I take issue with Atkinson's inconsistent use of the term tattooing, i.e., the deviation from its initial characterization. On the one hand, he emphasizes the focus on tattooed persons and their "tattooing body projects" (2003a: 5, 25ff.). On the other hand, though, Atkinson does not use the concept of tattooing exclusively for the body projects ultimately constituting a 'tattoo figuration'. Instead, he employs the concept also in regard to the practice of making tattoos and to tattooists as a different social 'address'.

In the sub-chapter containing the historical outline of "The Unintended Sociogenesis of North American Tattooing" (Atkinson 2003a: 30-50), the inconsistent use of the concept of tattooing becomes evident. Atkinson switches between tattooing as a practice of getting tattooed and a practice of making tattoos, whereas his subsequent analysis focuses mainly on the former concept. At this point one could intervene and ask whether it is not legitimate to use both concepts of tattooing, namely because both represent practices. Such an argument, however, would lead away from a precise concept of tattooing. To understand tattooing merely in terms of practice without further specification does not give the concept a form that is easier to grasp. It would solely gain the status of one practice among many others, lacking any specificity. And, indeed, this seems to be the exact reason why Atkinson ends up switching between the two concepts. Because both concepts of getting tattooed and making tattoos rest on the assumption that they are practices of persons, their mixing becomes possible. Here, then, lies a profound theoretical problem. Although Atkinson initially seems to suggest a particular concept of tattooing as a practice of getting tattooed, its theoretical underpinnings (social act, practice) turn out to be too general. Even attributing tattooing to a particular social address (tattooed person, tattooist) does not conceal the fact that the concept is conceived too broadly.

So far we have encountered a mixture or parallel use of similar concepts. As the list given above shows, several social definitions are commonly used in a single study (e.g. Sanders 1989a; Atkinson 2003a). Additional mixtures occur when different definitions of tattooing are used parallel. Such combinations create further problems. I do not want

to rule out a mixture of types of definitions or concepts as such.

Depending on the theoretical perspective, the mixing of technical-material and social definitions may well be feasible. In the academic literature, however, considerations of the concepts' compatibility, relations to the overall framework, analytical scope and limitations (what and how do they allow to see something) are missing. A case in point is Gell's (1993: 8ff.) work on tattooing in Polynesia, in which he mixes a technical-material definition with a social definition. Although Gell discusses each concepts separately, he does not reflect on their parallel use and its consequences for theoretical consistency and the analytical viewpoint. A different version of a mixture can be found in Atkinson's work. The above-mentioned concept of 'body projects' does not only have a 'social' meaning as practice or act. It also figures as 'form of body modification' and thus has meaning in term of a definition of effect (Atkinson 2003a: 25ff.). How the two meanings correspond or could be incompatible, Atkinson does not problematize.

Due to the mentioned complications of defining tattooing in technical-material, social, and terms of effect, I suggest to take a different approach. The complications stem partly from the use of concepts that are rather close to an everyday understanding of the phenomenon. Because of this, they are taken for granted too easily (see Luhmann 1992a: 73). For this reason I will not refer to individuals, actions, practices, bodily alterations, or techniques. Instead, I propose to approach the phenomenon in terms of the involvement of art and economy as two forms of communication. Before I come to a definition of tattooing in these terms, I want to show briefly how the academic literature deals with economy and art.

Dealing with Economy and Art

Art and economy constitute prominent and important semantic repertoires. On the one hand, academic literature observes how tattooists, tattoo organizations and tattooed persons describe tattooing, tattoos and themselves with economic and artistic semantics (e.g. Sanders 1989a: 19, 32; Vail 2000: 57; Atkinson 2003a: 45). Atkinson notes that "[t]he artistic nature of tattooing is almost universally stressed by the artists in these shops, as is the importance of quality tattoo art" (Atkinson 2003a: 47: 72-73; see Sanders 1989a: 26, 142-143 for an observation of contrasting observations). In this regard, the studies describe and analyze how distinctions are drawn through the use of art and economic semantics. On the other hand, academic accounts rely on the same semantics, expressed in terms such as business, service, industry, products, consump-

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tion, art form, body art, creativity, art world and others (e.g. Sanders 1989a; Vail 2000; Atkinson 2003a; Blanchard 1991; Grandy/Wicks 2008). Marc Blanchard's account represents an exemplary case. Blanchard draws on and oscillates between the two semantic repertoires for the description of tattooing:

Tattooing belongs in systems of cultural commercial productions. Instead of being highly centralized, it is essentially diffused throughout the community and highly competitive. Tattooing tends to be individual, not centrally organized. In that sense it remains a form of art close to craft. However, because tattooing has been up to now part of a marginal economy, it has been limited by a market in which the demand is determined by a group whose tastes are defined by emulation. (Blanchard 1991: 14)

Similarly, Atkinson draws on both semantics when describing the current "the Supermarket Era", which includes a change of the semantics itself (2003a: 46):

With the ongoing expansion of the clientele base (a term now preferred among tattoo enthusiasts), the practice of tattooing has become a highly competitive market economy. Clients are consumers, ready to exchange cash (or other commodities) for artistic consultation and the services provided by celebrity artists in their areas. (Atkinson 2003a: 47)

Atkinson's description comes close to explaining how tattooing might work in terms of economy and art. But it remains too general to provide theoretical insights into the specific workings of the phenomenon. And due to the reference to the "Supermarket Era", it seems as if the description of economy and art only applies to the current historical era.

Both the academic literature's observations of everyday descriptions and its own descriptions clearly point towards economic and artistic aspects of tattooing. In regard to the latter type of descriptions, the accounts use the semantics in a self-evident and, in most cases, theoretically unfounded manner.

In some studies, semantics of art are used as a matter of course. On the one hand, the studies take into account the existence of different opinions about the artistic status of tattooing. On the other, however, they nonetheless tend to take sides by self-evidently referring to tattooing as an art form in its own right (Sanders 1989a; Atkinson 2003a). In their epilogue to the new edition of Sanders' pioneering study, for example, Sanders and Vail claim that "there is *no question* that tattooing is still a vibrant art form" (2008: 166; emphasis mine).

I will likewise suggest conceiving tattooing partly as art. The basis of the concept, however, is a different one from the academic literature. Academic accounts seem to be pervaded by a more taken for granted reasoning based on affirmative descriptions of

tattooing. In contrast, the suggestion made in the following rests on a theoretical as well as empirical basis. The concrete observable descriptions will of course be taken seriously. But in contrast to the mentioned literature, they are neither taken for granted nor adopted. Rather, such descriptions are an inevitable and crucial source for theoretically grasping tattooing by other means than those used in the academic literature presented above.

The present study, thus, tries to distance itself from the usual descriptions of tattooing in terms of economy and art in order to have a somewhat different look. The definition of tattooing as a particular form of communication makes it possible to distinguish between how tattooing operates and how it is described. It allows to take seriously how tattooing is described without having to adopt these descriptions and transform them into a concept of how tattooing works. For there are always various descriptions in both exclusively economic and artistic semantics which would make a definition on such grounds impossible.

Finally, the question remains how studies deal with the relations between economy and art. Although academic descriptions do not exclusively conceive tattooing as an artistic or economic phenomenon (but indicate or imply the involvement of both domains), they do not problematize how they might be related. Since the present study looks closely at the relation between economy and art, it is apparent that academic accounts mostly overlook it. As the two quotes above show, potential relationships are taken for granted. After describing tattooing as a “highly competitive market economy”, Atkinson (2003a: 47) writes that “[c]lients are consumers, ready to exchange cash (or other commodities) for artistic consultation and the services provided by celebrity artists in their areas”. The fact that one pays for getting a tattoo that includes “artistic consultation and the services provided” by a tattooist is evident, or so it seems. It may indeed be evident in the everyday workings, for example, in a tattoo establishment where client and tattooist interact. Its sociological observation and conceptualization, however, does not have to settle for this. Atkinson, I admit, only touches this issue briefly in the course of the description of significant historical changes. But because the relation between economy and art constitutes the core problem of tattooing, as I will argue, the issue warrants more than a passing note.

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In the following sections I now present a concept of tattooing that differs considerably from those proposed in the academic literature so far. In doing so, I hope to avoid the problems pointed out above. This is possible, I think, exactly because I opt for a com-

paratively unconventional approach and thereby can keep a theoretically controlled distance to the observed descriptions and semantics.

II The Parallax of Tattooing: Form(s) and Media

In order to see tattooing through the lens of systems theory, one has to opt for a mode of defining the phenomenon that is different from the approaches presented above. I suggest conceiving tattooing as communication.³ Proceeding from this assumption one needs to look exactly at how tattooing communicates. Communications have a particular form and a medium through which they can emerge. Therefore, one needs to find and specify those that are appropriate for tattooing. In this case, however, one not only deals with a single form and medium but with a form that is constituted of two forms and several media. The main task in this section consists in describing how these forms and media relate and constitute tattooing as a distinct social phenomenon. From now on, if not otherwise indicated, I use the term tattooing in the sense of the specific concept presented below.

If the focus lies on communication, one might wonder what happens with all the material things (ink, tattoo devices etc.) that are characteristic for making tattoos. To concentrate exclusively on communication, however, does not mean one should neglect the material aspects involved. Instead of giving them the central definitional role, however, their part needs to be reconsidered.

Generally speaking, materials ‘populate’ the environment of the social system. On the one hand, they constitute an inevitable source without which communication in general and tattooing in particular could not emerge (see Luhmann 2000a: 99, 2002d). On the other hand, however, materials and technical devices do not constitute communication in and of themselves. Rather, they become either (primary/lower-level) media through which communication can emerge or objects of observation in communication (e.g. skin and bodies observed in an artistic semantics as ‘canvas’, see e.g. Morse 1977: 5; Webb 2002: 75, passim; *TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 36; *Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/8: 46; also Kosut 2006a: 1044; on the ‘observed body’ see Fuchs 2005). Material objects as such, thus, do not play a communicational role. But, to be sure, tattooing could not operate as communication if the material substrate was missing.

As indicated, I want to go a different route than the existing academic literature on tattooing. Instead of primarily asking ‘what is tattooing?’ –, the kind of question impli-

3 Mary Kosut (2009) conceives of tattoos and the tattooed body in terms of (non-verbal) communication. Kosut, however, does not further elaborate on the concept of communication.

citly guiding many of the definitions and specifications just presented –, I propose to ask ‘how’ tattooing becomes a social phenomenon. In other words, the question is how tattooing operates in terms of communication. The first type of question results in ontological statements about states or identities (‘tattooing is...’). Usually the definitions of tattooing stop here (‘the insertion of pigments under the skin’, ‘a practice of being tattooed’ etc.). In contrast, the second type of questions targets the ‘ontogenetic’ character of a phenomenon (Baecker 1996). It concedes that the phenomenon can look different depending on the point of view from which the question is posed. On the other hand, the question implies that the phenomenon may change in its constitutive characteristics, thus not assuming any fixed state or identity.

If one approaches the phenomenon with systems theory, the question of ‘what is tattooing’ is of course answered as well: Simply ‘a form of communication’, equivalent to ‘a practice’. Even though the answer is not unimportant, it seems insufficient for continuing in a theoretically and analytically fruitful way. Understanding tattooing only as a form of communication without further specification would make it impossible to distinguish it from other forms of communication. One would face a similar problem with the concept of practice. The question asking how tattooing communicates provides more promising answers. One can ask, thus, how tattooing can be distinguished as a social phenomenon, and how it distinguishes itself as a social phenomenon according to its mode of operation.

For an answer to these questions, systems theory offers the distinction of form and medium. Both form and medium, or rather forms and media, as will be shown, circumscribe tattooing in its communicational particularity. And they allow for a definition that compares and contrasts it to other phenomena.

For the present purpose the distinction of form and medium has a particular implication. While the medium indicates by means of what communication can take place, form refers to the mode it does so. An ongoing connection of communicational events of the same form constitutes an operation. So, by defining a form for tattooing I conceive it as a particular operation and not as an observation (see chap. 2). Put simply, tattooing is a matter of communication ‘through’ instead of communication ‘about’ something.

I argue that tattooing constitutes an intricate constellation of communication. On the one hand, tattooing cannot be adequately understood in exclusively economic or artistic terms. On the other, it cannot be grasped without a reference to economy and art either. Rather, I suggest to comprehend tattooing as a particular form constituted by

both economic and artistic communication alike. Although operating separately, art and economic communication ‘meet’ in tattooing and function as two co-constitutive sides of its intricate form. In the course of this, neither the economic nor the artistic side of the form prevails. They are, so to speak, on equal footing. Economy and art constitute the form of tattooing simultaneously.

The distinction of form and medium marks the conceptual starting point. However, in order to fully grasp the intricate constellation of tattooing, the concept of form needs a slight extension with the concept of parallax, introduced above (chap. 2). Tattooing, I want to suggest, does not operate as a ‘normal’ form, but as a ‘parallactic’ form. Again, the concept grasps tattooing as a constellation of *both* economy *and* art, instead of either one or the other sequentially.

Three aspects characterize the particularity of the form of tattooing. *First*, the form of tattooing unites two forms of communication, economy and art. Even though they ‘meet’ in the particular form of tattooing, economy and art do not surrender their distinctiveness. Their incommensurability in regard to their actual modes of operation precludes a blending of them. Economy cannot be reduced to the way art communicates and vice versa (on parallax and irreducibility see again Žižek 2006: 29). Despite their distinctiveness, incommensurability, and irreducibility, economy and art are both equally responsible for the emergence of tattooing. Or put in the words of Peter Fuchs (1992: 109), they nevertheless remain “compossible” under the very same form.

Second, and in contrast to a ‘normal’ form, the parallax indicates both sides of the form simultaneously instead of only one at a time. Unlike the codes of functional systems, for example, the parallax form of tattooing does not work according to designation/reflection, positive/negative values, or according to the distinction of manifest/latent (Luhmann 2001: 363, 2008e: 70). In this regard both sides of the parallactic form designate, are positive, and manifest themselves parallel (the distinctions, thus, become obsolete). In this sense, the parallactic form adds to the already existing paradox of the ‘normal’ form. While the latter paradoxically includes what it excludes (the unmarked side of the distinction), the parallax not only involves two sides but also indicates and includes them both as marked states.⁴

4 Quite the opposite, Luhmann argues that only the marked side of the form can be used in the operation. “Whoever wants to use both sides at the same time defies the meaning of the distinction. It does not work, it would result in a paradox” (Luhmann 1993b: 201; my transl.). The paradox is to see different sides as the same, as Luhmann notes. It remains unclear why a paradox becomes a problem here, since paradoxes are a crucial part of the form. In this respect, I do not follow Luhmann, at the risk to deviate from his conceptualization but also Spencer-Brown’s ‘logic of form’.

While not working like a functional system's code, the parallax of tattooing is jointly constituted by art and economy. The form of tattooing, therefore, is not decoupled from any societal domain, nor is it a social system in its own right. Instead it emerges from the 'meeting' of economy and art. How this happens specifically will be discussed in the sections below.

The *third* particular aspect of the form of tattooing concerns its medium. As Luhmann (1987b: 103) notes, "[t]here is neither a medium without form nor a form without medium". The particular form constellation of tattooing, however, deals with more than only one medium. The parallel involvement of economy and art means that tattooing communicates through their media. Whereas economic exchange draws on money and possessions (commodities), art communicates by means of artwork (Luhmann 1996a, 1987b). But because of the intricate communicational constellation, the form of tattooing transforms and links the media. As will be shown, the *tattoo* emerges as a medium of both economy and art. It brings both forms of communication closer together and contributes to their entanglement as the parallax of tattooing. The tattoo's "dissolubility" and "receptive capacity for fixations of shape" (Luhmann 1987b: 102) as a medium, however, allows a variety of forms of communication to use the tattoo in their own particular ways (see sect. IV below).

One can disassemble the tattoo as a medium with the form/medium distinction. That is, one can re-enter the distinction into itself (on the ability of specific distinctions to re-enter themselves, see Luhmann 1999: 31). Consequently, the tattoo is not only a medium of communication. It constitutes also a form of different form/media distinctions, distinctions of a lower-level and 'pre-communicational' type (see Luhmann 1987b). Here, then, the aforementioned material aspects emphasized in other definitions appear. Color, skin, ink, and ultimately the mechanical merging and arrangement⁵ of them represent the central media for a tattoo.⁶ Some of them again constitute the form of a lower-level medium. Color is the form of the primary medium light, skin forms the medium of biological cells, and ink draws on the medium of pigments as a media substrate. That is, they each constitute a pre-communicational form/medium distinction that then becomes a medium itself for higher-level forms (see Luhmann 1987b: 104ff.). One could of course include 'deeper' levels (molecules, atoms etc.) into the analysis,

5 Different manual and electronic devices are in use, i.e., needles or similarly intrusive instruments that are fixed to some kind of a stick or an electronic tattoo machine (on different devices, see Gathercole 1988; van Gulik 1982; Hardy 1995).

6 These media feature prominently in the titles of past or contemporary tattoo magazine such as *Skin&Ink*, *SkinDeep*, *Prick Magazine*, *Inked*, *Urban Ink*, *Skin Art*, *Flesh Canvas*, *In the Flesh*, *Skin Shots*, *Sporting Ink* and *Tattoo Ink* (see also DeMello 2000: 111-113; Kosut 2009).

6 The Form of Tattooing

but this would be of little interest for the present purpose. The next higher form that draws on the media of color etc., then, can be found in the actual lines, patterns, shapes and the like that are inscribed in the skin. These, again, constitute the medium for arrangements (forms) such as ornaments and symbolic, abstract, stylized, or even realistic designs. Eventually, such discernible arrangements in the skin become the material for the emergence of the tattoo. The tattoo, thus, involves an entire cascade of form/medium distinctions, ranging from pre-communicational media such as light to arrangements of patterns that make up a tattoo. The tattoo as the outcome of this form/medium cascade ultimately figures as a medium of communication and offers itself to forms of communication. Although formed in different ways by art and economy, the tattoo becomes the focal point for both of them.

In the same manner as done above one can now visualize the form of tattooing accordingly. The figure tries to capture the particular constellation of communication. For the sake of simplicity, the figure only shows the form's most important communicational characteristics (of course, other distinctions could be pointed out).

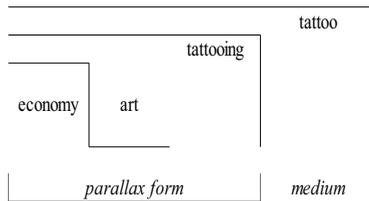


Fig. 7: Form and medium of tattooing

This figure, like every other displayed so far, has the sole purpose of synoptically visualizing the argument.⁷ It displays the form of tattooing in the context of the tattoo as medium. The arrangement of economy and art in the parallax form does not mean that economy, being on the left side, predominates (usually, the left side of the distinction is the marked side of the form). The extension of the symbol for the form by another line on the bottom of the vertical line should visualize that the form indicates both sides of the distinction. In this sense, the parallax form might also be rotated by which art would be on the left side.

⁷ Compared to the original form symbol (Spencer-Brown 1999) and its systems theoretical adaptations (see Baecker 2007; Andersen 2009), the part showing economy/art in the figure deviates from the usual way of displaying a form.

Art and economy as two specific forms of communication, their parallaxic constellation, and the involvement of more than one medium characterize the form of tattooing. In the following three sections I first present the two forms of communication and then come back to the parallaxic form of tattooing. A subsequent presentation to clarify the role of each is indispensable. Even though an observer inevitably switches between the two sides of the form, one needs to keep in mind that it is only their simultaneous occurrence that constitutes tattooing.

The Economic Side of Tattooing

Whether entering any kind of tattoo establishment or visiting a tattoo convention, the first thing one notices are the pictures, tattoo designs, and other things displayed on walls and tables.⁸ One often already enters into the sound and olfactory sphere, consisting of the buzz of tattoo machines, music, conversations, the smell of disinfectant, and maybe even some sweat. This is what creates the first impressions one gets and, less likely, not the sound of a cash register or even the sight of money handed from one person to another.⁹ Despite these first impressions and the rather hidden or sometimes even misrecognized treatment of the economic aspects in interactions and descriptions (e.g. Hardy 2005: 89, 91, 92), the economy plays a constitutive role for tattooing as a form of communication. Let me describe what is going on in terms of economic communication parallel to a typical interaction involving tattooist and customer.

In their interaction, the tattooist and customer first need to find out what the end result should look like. Of course, both know and expect the other to know that the result will be a tattoo. But they need to agree on different aspects of the final outcome of their interaction (be it the same or a different interaction in the future, for which the present would function as consultation). Aside from a variety of details about a tattoo, i.e., its size, placement, colors, shading, motif and the like, the persons involved also need to agree on how much the making of the tattoo will cost. The calculation of the cost of a tattoo, primarily made by the tattooist or alternatively in consultation with another member of the tattoo establishment, takes many factors into account: estimated preparation and actual work time, material used, complexity of tattoo design, location

8 It may look different if one enters the 'establishment' of tattooists who work in their kitchen or living room at home (see Broome 2006).

9 One may perhaps see a few individual bills (of small value) next to drawings and pictures on the wall of an establishment. Sometimes they are signed and deliberately displayed because of their status as a special, symbolically valuable 'payment', for example from the first customer (see e.g. the first episode, season one, of the reality television show *Miami Ink* (2005), in which such a symbolic one dollar bill is shown).

on the body to work on, costs for the rent of the establishment, tattooist's salary and the like. Of course, the tattooist or the organization of which the tattooist is a member might want to make a profit beyond the actual costs as well. In any case, the tattooist tells the customer the calculated price, in some cases explaining to the customer on which grounds the cost has been computed. This situation of announcing the price can reveal differences in the tattooist's and the customer's expectations regarding the price. Attempts at bargaining or 'shopping around' are common and the subject of debates. But for the moment, these emerging misunderstandings and difficulties are set aside (see chap. 8).

The interaction between tattooist and customer described so far prepares economic communication. No doubt this represents only the very start of a prospective economic communication, which could not happen at all if the interaction system dissolved before the actual economic communication begins (e.g. the customer does not agree with the price, the tattooist does not accept the customer's objection, or one of the persons involved changes his or her mind and refuses to proceed). Economic communication begins only when communication in the medium of money emerges. Independently of the continuing interaction system that includes the tattooist and customer, economic communication will take place even if the calculations have been made and the economic aspects are no longer a topic.¹⁰ The calculation of costs and the announcement of a price form an inevitable part of the interaction between tattooist and customer (or including other persons that are present). The interaction may already have switched to a discussion of the tattoo design, the latest news or gossip, but it does not keep economic communication from emerging in its own right.

Depending on the type of tattoo organization we look at, we find differences in how or when the payment for the tattoo takes place. On the one hand, it may happen only at one point during the entire interaction between tattooist and customer, either as 'payment in advance' or after the tattoo has been finished. Signs displayed in tattoo establishments announcing that customers are expected to pay in advance are not uncommon (see McCabe 2001: 95). Alternatively, it may occur more than once, namely first as a deposit, a partial payment in advance, even before the tattoo design is sketched, and then after the tattoo has been completed. If multiple sessions are necessary for the completion, a payment is made after each or after the last session. The deposit as a partial payment in advance (e.g. noted on the tattooist's or tattoo establishment's business card) serves the purpose of diminishing the risk of customers not showing up again

¹⁰ On the differentiation of interaction and functional systems' communication and their relations, see Kieserling (1999: chap. 7).

after commissioning a tattoo design in the first consultation. From a somewhat different perspective, an advance payment covers the costs that arise during the sketching of the design and 'buys' a time slot in the schedule of the establishment.

In all of the mentioned variations in the mode of payment, the creation and completion of the requested end result depend on economic communication. Whether the handing over of money takes place in advance, in several instances, or only after the last session, the expectation that economic communication occurs is closely related to the making of a tattoo.

In general, therefore, what one is looking at here does not differ much from other cases in which economic communication takes place. As with the selling or purchasing of any kind of commodity or service, the payment in money for something in exchange also applies in this particular case. Put simply: The customer pays the tattooist with money for creating a tattoo design in return.

So how does the economic side of tattooing emerge concretely? What exactly is transacted and paid for? An economic operation basically consists in a shift of scarcity (or scarcities; on the duplication of scarcity see Luhmann 1996a: 197ff.). The first shift happens in the following way: The customer pays money and increases the scarcity of money, therewith reducing the ability to pay for other things (limitation of further accesses). On the other hand, the tattooist (or the tattoo organization), reduces the scarcity of money. Compared to the customer, the tattooist becomes solvent (Luhmann 1996a: 134; see also Baecker 2002). Of course, on an operational level the customer and tattooist as persons do not matter. What matters is the interplay of increase and reduction of scarcity of money that allows future events of the same kind to take place. If this was the entire economic communication, however, it would not be very attractive for the customer just to pay the tattooist and thereby lose money. This means, there must be an additional incentive to spend the money.

A second shift of scarcity takes place, namely the exchange of a product or service in the direction opposite to the flow of money. The tattooist creates the tattoo requested by the customer. Put in economic terms, the tattooist performs a service (making of the tattoo) and produces a product (the tattoo itself). Although every tattoo has to be created or produced from scratch (at least on the skin of the customer, but only to various degrees on paper), and therefore could hypothetically be (re)produced infinitely, it is nevertheless a scarce resource. A particular tattoo made for a customer, then, is not scarce as such but becomes scarce since it has been produced for the particular customer paying for it. This means that scarcity emerges because of the customer's selection

of one particular version out of a range of possible and feasible versions of a tattoo design (see Luhmann 1996a: 178). Ultimately, the customer becomes the owner of the tattoo he or she paid for, hypothetically limiting the access to the same product for others, and thus contributing to the scarcity of the particular tattoo.¹¹ As indicated above (chap. 2.III), possession is another medium of economic communication insofar as access to a scarce range of products or services is condensed in the distinction between to have/not to have (Luhmann 1996a: 188). From the point of view of the tattooist or tattoo organization, however, the product produced or service performed is not scarce as such. Of course, both can be observed and ‘marketed’ as scarce by drawing on particular semantics. Even though the tattooist gives away the produced tattoo which thus becomes scarce to a certain extent (namely the loss of one version of a tattoo design), it is still possible to create a similar one at a later point in time.¹²

What does this double movement or ‘duplication of scarcity’ mean in regard to the media through which communication happens? For the first movement money constitutes the medium. The code of payment/non-payment may proceed only through this medium. For the second movement it is the (case specific) medium of the tattoo, as possession or commodity, which allows for an exchange to happen. The exchange of something allows the economy’s other code – have/not have – to work. Economic communication, therefore, occurs by means of such a double movement of communication in two different but closely connected media.

Every time it emerges and proceeds in the manner described, economic communication constitutes a crucial facet of the form of communication of tattooing. At the same time, it contributes to the reproduction of the functional system of economy, and in the last resort, like every other form of communication, to the reproduction of society.

Conceiving of tattooing merely in terms of economic communication would mean to describe it as the selling and purchasing of a service and an end product. Such a conceptualization, however, would not be able to account sufficiently for the making of tattoos. We should not forget that, according to the systems theoretical concept of economy, it is not the making of something that stands for economic communication. In-

11 This reflects the perspective of economic communication. From the legal point of view it may look different, for instance when it comes to questions of copyright and copyright infringement (e.g. Harkins 2006). Furthermore, it poses a problem in regard to the actual copying (‘stealing’) or imitation of tattoos by people, who access what originally was meant to be subject to a one-time access.

12 Again, the legal question arises of who owns the tattoo design and whether the tattooist is allowed to use the same design again (even though it is basically impossible to reproduce a design in the exact same way a second time). This then, represents the other side of the debate about imitation and copying of tattoos.

stead, the making of tattoos is the responsibility of artistic communication.

The Artistic Side of Tattooing

If we return to the entering of an establishment and the setting in which the interaction between tattooist and customer takes place, it seems more likely that an observer first thinks of art rather than economy. A tattoo establishment's interior usually corresponds to a tattoo organization's decisions about the artistic style(s) offered and its primary mode of working or dealing with customers (see chap. 7). But regardless of how the ways of organizing tattooing and furnishing the interior of tattoo establishments differ from each other, the display of visual material constitutes a common characteristic. Be it sketches of tattoo designs made by members of the organization or by others, either in outlines only or complete and colored, photographs of tattoos made by the organization, paintings, sculptures, and other objects more or less related to tattooing – the person that enters is first confronted with a visual display of the tattoo organizations' offers, end results and feasible tattoo designs.

In general terms, the display of visual material constitutes an 'offer for perception' (S. J. Schmidt in Luhmann 2008c: 50), which can and, depending on the type of consultation, will enter communication. That is to say, the displayed drawings and pictures are not solely perceived but may become the subject of observation in communication (see Luhmann 2000a: 48; 2008b: 420). At the same time, the visual display introduces the person entering to what he or she can expect to happen in the tattoo establishment or what the tattoo organization may be expected to offer and create. This becomes crucial especially in those tattoo organizations and establishments that do not reveal right away with their names or exteriors what or whom they actually cater to. A name like "Boucherie Moderne" ('modern butcher's shop'; *TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/144: 44-50), for example, does not reveal that the corresponding store offers tattoos. In this particular and unconventional case, the name of the establishment does not trigger the usual expectations. Here, then, either the customers know about the organization's 'trade' (not butchering but tattooing) or else the visual display creates the appropriate expectations. The visual display in tattoo establishments, thus, both initiates its perception and communication in regard to art and creates the corresponding expectations.

This gives us a first glimpse of artistic communication. The organization uses the visual display in order to attract an audience with specific expectations. This audience eventually turns into customers. However, as I would like to show now, this use of drawings, sketches, paintings, and other objects that can be perceived and observed as

art, is only the initial part of artistic communication in tattoo organizations. Artistic communication of a slightly different kind emerges even more prominently as part of the actual tattooing, i.e., the communicational creation of art works. Unlike paintings, sketches etc., the tattoo emerges on skin as its primary medium instead of paper or canvas. Tattoos as works of art and as an additional offer for perception or provocation are the final results that will lead to observations of one kind or another regarding art.¹³

In the previous section on the economic side of tattooing I discussed the calculation of the costs of a tattoo as one crucial aspect in an interaction between tattooist and customer. To do so, I pointed to the need for determining aspects closely related to the tattoo, namely the actual design to be made, its size, placement, colors, and shading. All these are decisions which have to be made more or less strictly before the actual creation of the tattoo (except for colors and shading).¹⁴ They function as first decisions of form that cannot easily – or not at all – be altered or reversed afterwards. Once the outlines have been made, it becomes difficult to change the tattoo in parts or in its entirety. It is also impossible to place the tattoo on a different part of the body. Even in the case of pre-drawn templates of tattoo designs some of these basic decisions need to be made in advance.

The interaction between tattooist and customer may be coupled to a tattoo organization. If so, the preparatory decisions about the tattoo are supported by, or even steered into, a certain direction following the organization's guidelines for consulting customers.¹⁵ This, however, does not exclude that decisions emerge in the interaction, which are based on the tattooist's own preferences and visions without necessary connections to organizational decisions (this may also apply during the actual occurrence of tattooing; as a tattooist told me in a brief conversation, he often decides about the coloring only during the tattoo process, which he described as 'more like painting').

13 Luhmann claims that the work of art "seems to be made specifically in order to provoke communication" (Luhmann 1985: 7). Especially, though not exclusively, tattoos seem to be equipped with such a provocative potential, either resulting in fascination or revulsion (a distinction made by Steward 1990: 10; see also Hardy 1995: 15; Kosut 2009).

14 However, this is not absolutely imperative, because the 'freehand' creation of tattoos directly on the skin only works with an idea of a design and, maybe, some basic outlines on the chosen spot on the body. 'Freehand tattooing' is seen as the ultimate skill a tattooist can achieve and thus is also in demand by customers or tattoo organizations that look for new personnel (observable e.g. in the 'jobs offered' sections in tattoo magazines; also mentioned by a tattoo apprentice, personal interview, tattoo convention 2008).

15 This issue emerges continually in descriptions of customers' ideas and wishes. The steering or 'manipulation' ranges from persuasion (Friederich 1993: 97), simple suggestions and support (e.g. *Tattoo Life* 2008, 10/51: 44), to open rejection and fundamental changes of idea ("The customer is not always right" as Sailor Jerry Collins remarked, Hardy 2005: 51; see also Wroblewski 2004: 166). Instead of calling it manipulation or influence, it is sometimes described in terms of responsibility of the tattooist to the customer (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/138: 82).

In this first phase of the interaction, thus, the tattooist and customer take the necessary and basic decisions. With this they prepare the subsequent and mostly irreversible decisions of form in skin. If we take a step back again, the interaction works as communication (among attendants) *about* decisions of form. Even though the interaction between tattooist and customer inevitably prepares the decisions of form, it does not itself make the actual, ‘carnal’ decisions of form characteristic for artistic communication. Decisions of form emerge only *through* artistic communication. One needs to keep in mind the difference between forms of communication pertaining to different (types of) systems. The described situation potentially involves communication produced by interaction, organization, and functional systems alike. But their ways of working differ from each other. The interaction between tattooist and customer, and probably other persons, will continue while artistic communication starts to operate. Or to repeat what has been mentioned in the previous section: The interaction may address themes that do not relate to tattooing and tattoos in any way. This does not mean, however, that the execution of actual decisions of form constitutive for artistic communication cannot take place parallel with the interaction.

Artistic communication not only emerges with the ‘carnal’ decisions of form. In general, artistic communication operates already before, namely in the preparation of a tattoo. Sketches and drawings on paper or similar materials, regardless of their completion, constitute artistic communication. They themselves work as offers of perception and may enter descriptions drawing on artistic semantics.¹⁶ They may also become the subject of exhibitions in museums and galleries (see The Drawing Center/Hardy 1995; Kosut 2006b). One can of course speculate why sketches and drawings of tattoos were perceived and subjects of communication in artistic terms. Generally, however, it seems likely that they succeeded because they produce particular styles and conventions not known from other forms of art. In this way, they started to distinguish themselves but also to form connections to comparable works (see Huber 1991: 130).¹⁷

16 Luhmann (2008a: 323) mentions the emergence of sketches and their appreciation as works of art in their own right in the sixteenth century, creating the paradox of the accomplishment of the unaccomplished.

17 In a review (Kimmelman 1995) of exhibitions of tattoo designs, the author seems to have an ambivalent relation to the tattoo drawings or flash that are exhibited. He does not only see them as “banal” but also contends that “in any case, they’re simulacra: drawings are beside the point, which is that tattoos are about the body”. The reviewer criticizes tattoos exhibited elsewhere than on the body, namely in art museums. The reviewer seems to prefer tattoos that are not “assimilated and sanitized by fashion and the art world” as they appear in exhibitions. Instead, referring to the provocative character of artistic communication, he claims that “tattoos are still startling” – apparently this also applies to their exhibition in art museums, even though they might be merely ‘simulacra’ of actual tattoos.

Even though sketches, drawings, and above all flash designs constitute artistic communication in their own particular way, they differ in regard to one of the primary media involved. Whereas paper and similar materials provide the media for sketches and drawings, it is skin that is used for the artistic communication of tattooing. Thus, while artistic communication occurs in both cases, it forms different media. It therefore makes sense to distinguish between these media as well as artistic communication that operates in the medium of stone, bodily movements, or the computer.

In the present case, we are interested in artistic communication that draws, among others, on the medium of skin. It constitutes one of the typical characteristics of the artistic side of tattooing. Drawing on skin as one primary medium, art communicates through constellations of decisions of form that configure art works. Tattooing works with its own particular, identifiable constellations of forms, which make it possible to establish connections to other works of art of the same kind or other art forms (e.g. inclusion of tattoos in photographs). This implies that not all potential decisions of form and corresponding constellations successfully connect to other artistic communication. Especially in regard to other tattoos, not everything is feasible.¹⁸ Connections between works of art have to be established in order to secure the continuation of artistic communication.

The question of failure of art works to connect to or offer possible connection for other artistic communication, then, does not present a problem of the code harmonious/non-harmonious (or match/not match) as such. Even non-harmonious constellations of decisions of form will be comparable to harmonious art works that do a better job. The code remains a matter of the art system, i.e., the application of the negative side of the code of art does not mean that it is outside of art. Instead the failure of connection is a problem of including something as art at all. This ‘something’ needs to make a difference that can be distinguished according to artistic communication. Put in general terms of communication: Something needs to be understandable in a particular way as an expressed piece of information. An indistinguishable ‘blob’ of ink under the skin, for instance, may or may not be distinguished as a non-arbitrary decision of form. Depending on how the distinction, if at all, of utterance and information is made, this

¹⁸ The knowledge and skill attributed to a good tattooist includes the knowledge about what is feasible as a tattoo on skin in distinction to paper. A tattooist needs to adapt a tattoo design brought by a customer before doing it on skin, because otherwise it would not ‘work’. Lines, shadows, dimensions, size, and colors need to be adapted in order to guarantee that the tattoo is recognizable or visible as such, and in order to make sure that it gets old well and will still be discernible (instead of becoming an indistinguishable ‘blob’; e.g. *Skin Deep* 2007 September/150: 51; *Tattoo* 2008, June/226: 30).

'blob' will relate to artistic communication or not and provoke communication about it in terms of art or, alternatively, in reference to something else (e.g. a matter of medicine).

Let me give two examples. The first is about 'tattoos' that fail to establish connections and the second is about tattoos which, despite (or because of) their 'ugliness' or non-harmoniousness, provoke perception and observation.

In conventional descriptions, many things get subsumed under the name of tattooing and tattoos, even though they may not be directly recognizable as tattoos or even be the result of tattooing. 'Tattoos' that mimic body or skin features such as moles, eyebrows, lips and the like present cases in point. Be it for medical or aesthetic reasons, they will probably attract attention if their artificiality is disclosed or becomes apparent as a result of poor craftsmanship. However beautifully executed or perfectly mimicking such 'tattoos' are, they will not necessarily and automatically establish connections to art works (e.g. a full body suit in the Japanese tattoo style or a fine-line, black-and-grey 'Chicano' style work). Precisely because they mimic or reproduce physical features and do not display discernible decisions of form, they will hardly make any difference that is perceived or talked about. Only when such 'tattoos' appear in unusually places on the body, and despite their perfect mimicry, they might be perceived as non-arbitrary decisions of form.

The second example deals with 'ugly' tattoos. These are tattoos that become the object of harsh evaluations in tattoo magazines because they are barely discernible as tattoos. The *TätowierMagazin*, a German tattoo magazine, has a special column for the discussion of such tattoos on the artistic 'brink'. The column is called "Cucumber of the Month" ("Gurke des Monats") and presents the 'worst' tattoos of the month usually sent in by the affected persons themselves or a tattoo organization that is entrusted with covering-up the "Cucumber".¹⁹ A reply to a readers criticism in the "letter to the editor" section states that the column shows "ugly" tattoos produced by registered tattoo organizations (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 10). It includes both a picture of the tattoo and a critical discussion of it. The discussion scrutinizes the tattoo in regard to how it fails to be a tattoo. In other words, the column judges the decisions of form made in skin as failing to offer a harmonious constellation of form. The reason why

19 In an editorial of *Skin&Ink* (1999, January), the editor once considered to make "a special Scratchers Page featuring really bad tattoos" including the names of the responsible tattooists in order to do "some needed housecleaning", i.e., to show "what kind of garbage passes for quality work". In later editorials, the issue is revisited again, now under the (half French) name of "Merde of the Month", but finally abandoned because nobody sent in pictures of bad tattoos for the special page (*Skin&Ink* 2000, May; 2005, April).

these (attempts of) tattoos are observed as “bad”, “ugly” or even “abominable” lies in their hardly distinguishable or ‘readable’ outlines, coloring, shading, and even sometimes the motif depicted. In the words of the rubric, these tattoos represent “accidents”, showing nothing but “slobber” (“Matsch”) under the skin (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 6, 10). Statements such as “or whatever this should portray” (*TätowierMagazin* 2004, 10/95: 7), “what do you identify in this scribble” (*TätowierMagazin* 2004, 10/99: 7) and the like point to the onlooker’s difficulties in deciphering the tattoos. The column consistently refers to performances leading to such incomprehensible results as “scratching”. Thus, even though the tattoos presented in this column come off badly, they nevertheless become the object of scrutiny in regard to what a tattoo should look like. In contrast to the mimicking ‘tattoos’ (moles etc.), these tattoos succeed in establishing (negative or dis-) connections to artistic communication because of their non-harmonious decisions of form. How tattoos work as more or less harmonious constellations of decisions of form represents an usual subject of observation, especially in tattoo magazines. The example of ‘worst-case’ tattoos, however, constitutes an even more pointed case of such observations, exactly because they are situated on the brink of distinguishability (I will come back to this column in chap. 8).

These two examples should show whether something operates as artistic communication or not. Descriptions of art function as structures that guide and support the connection between art and other artistic communication. They indicate that something may be understood as to make a particular difference with communication, since it connects to other works of art and makes future connections possible. Although the second example shows descriptions of tattoos as qualitatively inferior compared to other tattoos, those described may nevertheless operate in terms of art. The evaluation of quality or even the observation that a tattoo completely fails as art, are merely descriptions that could turn out differently (as letters to the editor about the magazine’s statements in the column sometimes show). As descriptions, they do not determine which side of the code of art applies (this is the task of the art system’s programs, namely styles). Thus, artistic communication does not depend on whether it is described positively or negatively, as long as it is understood as non-arbitrary decisions of form and can connect them to other artistic communication (e.g. by using or alluding to established decisions of form, a specific combination of them or their radical but understandable alteration). ‘Tattoos’ that mimic moles and other skin features, in contrast, are rarely or never described in these or similar terms referring to art (as far as my empirical material is concerned). Only if they model specific decisions of form that may

be understood in artistic terms (e.g. an oversized or colorful mole, a specially designed eyebrow), will descriptions address them. But in order to be observable as artistic communication, these tattoos would need to connect, in some way or another, to established decisions of form and styles, whether distinctive of tattoos or other art forms. If they are observed, then, these descriptions support their connection to other art works. If they do not provoke communication, it is rather unlikely that they operate as art and may connect to other art works. In this case, then, it is the question what kind of communication produced them (see section IV below).

Tattooing as artistic communication consists in the formation of primary or lower-level media (light, biological cells, pigments) and higher-level forms/media (color, skin, ink, patterns, lines, designs) that can connect to other comparable formations drawing on the same media. On the basis of the decisions taken in the consultation stage of the interaction between tattooist and customer, the actual work on skin and the implementation of the decisions produce the tattoo as a work of art, a specific arrangement of decisions of form. Although the moment of creating and actually realizing and fixing decisions of form already constitutes artistic communication, the latter does not end after the completion of the tattoo. Afterwards it offers itself for perception or provokes communication. It thereby connects to other works of art, even in the sense that it may be an imitation or reproduction of an artwork (i.e. tattoos, but also of well-known paintings) or function as the point of departure for future artwork.

Let me return to the question of the medium once again. As pointed out above, a tattoo can be seen as the formation (including a combination) of primary media, through which forms become media for other forms and so forth. The cascade of media and forms results in a visible and, most importantly, discernible constellation of decisions of forms. In this sense, a tattoo is a form constellation of a variety of media, or put differently, of media turned form and forms turned medium (again Luhmann 1987b). In line with the argument that the tattoo functions as a medium for economic exchange (besides money), and with Luhmann's general remarks about art and its symbolically generalized medium of communication (Luhmann 2000a), I propose to conceive the tattoo as the medium of artistic communication.

The tattoo as the medium of the artistic facet of tattooing provides a myriad of constellations of decisions of form (see Luhmann 2000a: 118). It is subject to the art system's codification and programs, namely the code of harmonious/non-harmonious and its correct or incorrect application according to artistic styles. Not the colors, ink or skin function as the fundamental media for the communication of art, but the tattoo as

artwork through which artistic communication takes form and becomes perceivable and observable. In other words: In this particular context of tattooing as a form of artistic communication, the tattoo as artwork takes on the role of the symbolically generalized medium of communication of art. It is the characteristics of the medium in general that allows us to conceive the tattoo in such different ways: The tattoo as medium can be strictly coupled by a variety of forms, whether in terms of art as a work of art, in terms of economy as a possession, or other ways (see further below). In each case, the tattoo as medium becomes subject to particular forms of communication. It is this feature of being the same (medium) and different (forms accessing it) that allows the tattoo to play an equivalent role in different communicational contexts.

Communication needs the tattoo in order to be possible and to form tattooing. In turn, the tattoo as medium cannot emerge without its concomitant forms of communication. But what if one observes the corresponding medium and form of communication, without looking at tattooing? This prompts the question in which case tattooing is constituted and in which its communicational constellation does not emerge. For this purpose I want to give an example of something that looks like tattooing, but upon closer examination and with the specific form of tattooing in mind turns out to be a different phenomenon.

In the previous section I discussed what happens if artistic communication is missing and thus only economic communication operates. Now I want to address the opposite example. Put simply, if artistic communication forms the only constitutive aspect of the observed phenomenon, we do not have tattooing in the strict sense. Visual and technical-material similarities would very likely lead to a common sense description of different phenomena in terms of tattooing. But phenomena that look alike need not to be constituted by the same form of communication. And this is what one should keep in mind when looking at tattooing-like phenomena that are not tattooing in the sense defined here.

Take the rather extreme case of the artist Wim Delvoye and his project of creating a tattoo. Delvoye took one of the tattoo designs he had already realized on a living pig's skin (see Bianchi 2006) and put it on a person volunteering for the art project. With the help of a tattooist, Wim Delvoye made the tattoo on the back of the volunteer, including Delvoye's signature. The work bears the name "TIM", the volunteer's first name. The project not only involved the artist, a tattooist, and the volunteer as the "canvas/frame for Wim Delvoye", as it is stated on the volunteer's blog (<http://wim-tim.com/about/>). It also included an art gallery. After completion, the work of art and

its bearer were “put on the market for sale” (<http://wimtim.com/about/>). Eventually, a buyer of the artwork was found and the rather complex legal issues were settled. The bearer of the artwork now ‘belongs’ to the owner and is obliged to spend part of his time as an exhibit – even after his death: His skin will be removed and preserved. The volunteer and his skin “will be an original Wim Delvoye” for the rest of his life and beyond (<http://wimtim.com/about/>).²⁰ Concerning the question about who will own the artwork after his death, the volunteer explained in an interview that this remains unclear as of yet. There are plans to sell the tattooed skin at auction houses like Sotheby’s or Christie’s, that is like other works of art.²¹ In other words, the artwork has been sold on the primary and is meant to be sold on the secondary art market (see Yap 2008: 106).

What happens in terms of communication, in this particular case (evaluated on the basis of the available information)? First of all, we should not be misled by the fact that a member of a tattoo organization, a tattooist, did most of the actual work on the volunteer’s skin. That is, the involvement of a tattoo organization and a professional tattooist does not yet decide if the phenomenon under observation constitutes tattooing (e.g. the tattooist could merely draw the entire design in color onto the skin of the person, as is usually done for fashion shows or commercials;²² see *Tattoo Life* 2008, 10/50: 46, 48). And even though a tattoo design was transformed into an actual tattoo and the project is described in terms of ‘tattooing’, the form of communication at play is strictly speaking not tattooing. What one observes in this case consists exclusively in artistic communication. Until the work of art was sold to an art collector, art was constitutive for Delvoye’s project.²³ Even though the eventual sale of the piece of art has been part of the project from the beginning, the tattoo was not created as both artwork and transacted commodity or service. The artwork’s observation in terms of its future sale in the art market does not constitute economic communication. The actual sale of the tattoo and, inevitably, of the skin of the volunteer occurred only after the creation

20 The mass media, of course, reported on the project and the final sale of the work of art. Among many reports see: http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/front/Human_canvas_to_go_on_show.html?site-Sect=108&sid=9648902&cKey=1220596780000&ty=st (September 21 2009).

21 <http://www.bernerzeitung.ch/kultur/kunst/Mein-Ruecken-loest-sich-von-mir/story/27282947> (January 5 2010).

22 In an episode of the reality television show *Miami Ink* (season one), one of the tattooists is asked to draw tattoo designs on the skin of models posing in a photo shooting for an advertisement of a bar.

23 Neither the volunteer’s blog nor other sources provide information about whether the tattooist received a payment for doing the work. If he got paid for the creation of the tattoo for Delvoye’s project, it would be more likely that tattooing in the strict sense of the definition occurred. However, even in this case the constellation would be complicated, since the volunteer would not actually be the owner of the work but still part of the artwork.

of the artwork. It could have well happened that the tattoo had not been purchased at all. When it did, however, economic communication took place. Like a painting or sculpture, this particular tattoo as artwork constitutes and connects to artistic communication first and foremost. Only in a second step can it enter the realm of economic communication – if it is successful. Even though the sale of the tattoo was the art project's expected outcome its completion did not depend on it.

In this particular case, one observes a succession of distinct artistic and economic communications. It might seem as if one looks at tattooing. The communicational constellation, however, is not the one at work in the case of tattooing. Even though Delvoye's art project also involves art and economic communication, it does so in a manner that is different from tattooing (for similar examples of art projects see Christofori 2009; Velthuis 2005: 71, 73).²⁴ The analysis of something that looks as if it were tattooing but does not communicate like it may seem counter-intuitive and contradictory to common sense (I will present other such phenomena below). But this is precisely why I redefine tattooing: it is the only way to see the social difference particular phenomena make. Despite the fact that Wim Delvoye's project is called 'tattooing' and involves a tattoo that initially works as a medium for art and later for economy, it differs from what occurs in tattooing as defined here. In order to clarify what exactly happens when tattooing occurs, I come back to its form once more.

The Parallax of Art and Economy

The sequential structure of the previous discussion gives an idea of the difficulties we face observing a parallaxic phenomenon such as tattooing. We cannot but shift from one perspective or domain to the other if we want to describe the phenomenon. We have to stick to a sequential mode of observation. An oscillation is necessary and almost inevitable.²⁵ Still we have to take into consideration the parallaxic character of tattooing. That is the reason why I want to try to look at the particular communicational constellation in its unity in order to clarify once again its workings.

24 Other aspects of the project that deviate from the standard context of tattooing could be taken into account: the involvement of a gallery as an intermediary, the obligations of the volunteer after the sale, and the fact that the volunteer received his share of the sum paid for the artwork. In contrast, the world of tattooing is characterized by the absence of "an impersonal and bureaucratized market system" (Sanders 1989a: 29-30), i.e., intermediaries or gatekeepers such as galleries, critics etc.

25 Academic accounts of tattooing implicitly show this inevitable oscillation by referring, for example, to conflicts concerning the roles of tattooists (artist vs. business person; Sanders 1989a: 27) and the different emphases in descriptions of tattooing as business or art (Sanders 1989a: 26, 67). The accounts themselves, in turn, oscillate between descriptions of tattooing as art and economy as well (see Atkinson 2003a).

As indicated above, economic and artistic communications need to be seen as co-constitutive for tattooing. Despite their distinct and incommensurable ways of constituting a particular domain of communication (functional systems), each of them contributes to the communicative constitution of tattooing as a social phenomenon. The unfolding of the two forms of communication takes place simultaneously and closely connected.²⁶ In concrete terms this signifies that tattooing, in one and the same operation, unfolds as *both* economic *and* artistic communication – that is both as decisions of form and an exchange of a commodity for money. In other words, tattooing is the simultaneous actualization of two different functional systems' operations in a particular form. It implies that tattooing contributes to the autopoietic reproduction of economy and art alike. But it implies at the same time that tattooing nevertheless constitutes itself in its own particular way irreducible to one of the two forms of communication involved.

The suggested definition of tattooing means that it is not reducible to what either the tattooist or the customer 'does' in the sense of an action (e.g. Atkinson 2003a). I suggest instead to talk of tattooing only if both economic and artistic communication in the previously described way occur and, together, constitute its particular form. Tattooing takes this special form as an operation in its own right, no matter whether it is attributed to persons called 'tattooist' or 'customer'. It can also happen independently of whether there is an organization drawing on it according to its own premises or an interaction system comprising tattooist and customer.²⁷

Descriptions of tattooing recurrently address its economic and artistic aspects, some more in favor of one of them and others including both. While observing what is going on at a basic level, descriptions may vary greatly. Of course, some descriptions even claim tattooing to be about something entirely different (e.g. sexuality, Parry 2006: 2). But independent from such descriptions, tattooing works in its own way. Even denying the economic and emphasizing the art side of tattooing, or vice versa, will not automatically keep the operation from taking place.

As noted, one should not think of the communicational constellation of tattooing in terms of a sequence. The close entanglement of economic and artistic communication

26 This does not exactly amount to the same as to say "that everything that happens, happens simultaneously" (Luhmann 2005c: 94; my transl.), which constitutes a basic fact of communication. Here, it is a co-constitutive simultaneity.

27 Still it is very likely that an interaction system 'accompanies' tattooing. As a scene in the science-fiction film *Starship Troopers* (1997) suggests, however, there are already ideas how tattooing might emerge even without an interaction in the future, i.e., by means of a computer-controlled machine only.

lies at the heart of tattooing. The fact that economic and artistic communication mutually depend on each other can best be seen in the double meaning of the tattoo. The tattoo constitutes a ‘multiplied’ medium of both economy and art. One could say that it represents what economic and artistic communication share, even though the tattoo as a medium turns out differently in each case. Nevertheless it synchronizes the two forms of communication to a certain extent (see Luhmann 2001: 106). Both forms, thus, draw on the tattoo and communicate partly through it. The tattoo is a work of art, on the one hand, and an exchanged commodity, on the other. For the purpose of clarifying this claim further, I want to present concrete cases that bring the intricacy of the form to the fore.

At the risk of oversimplifying the issue, one might state: the operation of tattooing takes place or it does not. And it does so more or less inconspicuously. It occurs independently of the amount or type of money (a six-pack of beer, cash, credit card, gift certificate) and the kind of decisions of form or styles involved (whether tribal, Japanese, Old-School, or Chinese signs). What counts is the co-occurrence of both economic and artistic communication through which tattooing emerges. One can assume that the occurrence of tattooing as an operation as such does not necessarily or automatically trigger its observation. The non-occurrence of tattooing, though, possibly provokes its problematization. Such cases of problematizing the non-occurrence of tattooing may reveal its basic constellation. Such a non-occurrence, for instance, may emerge together with the disappointment of expectations that connect closely to the operation of tattooing.

In one example, a tattooist problematizes the non-occurrence of tattooing in regard to a guest tattooist (in Feige 2003: 198-199). The problem leading to the non-occurrence was the rejection of a demand for a tribal tattoo. The guest tattooist informed the owner of the tattoo establishment, who reports the case, of his general refusal to produce ‘tribals’. Because of a particular tattoo style, the operation of tattooing could not occur at all. This bore not only on the creation of a tattoo as specific decisions of form (a black ornament), but also on the money that could have been made by doing the tattoo. According to the reporting tattooist, the reason for the non-occurrence lies in the guest tattooist’s bad treatment of the customer. Generalizing the problem from this particular case, the tattooist and owner of the affected establishment claims that “people could earn significantly more if they treated their customers better” (in Feige 2003: 198; my transl.).²⁸ Such treatment is seen as arrogant. For the tattooist it is not under-

²⁸ Sanders (1989a: 86) quotes a tattooist who makes a similar statement about refusing tattoos: “Turning down work because it’s just not artistic enough is ok if you’re a S- or F- (two well-

standable, since he depends on customers. And if the tattooist treats the customers badly, “the best art is of no use to him” (in Feige 2003: 199; my transl.). The guest tattooist’s refusal to produce a tattoo in the tribal style may be seen as a matter of specialization, although both the interviewer and owner interpret it as a matter of arrogance. The guest tattooist, as a consequence, differs from the reporting tattooist who sees himself as an all-rounder, i.e., “as a tattooist who will do anything” (in Feige 2003: 199; my transl.).

The non-occurrence of tattooing does not pose a problem in itself. Neither tattooing as an operation nor the involved forms of communication ‘have’ a problem with their own non-occurrence. Again, either the communication occurs or it does not. The non-occurrence only poses a problem for the tattoo organization, its future decision making, and its reputation.

The case shows how the operation can be obstructed because a basic structure accompanying and supporting the connectivity of tattooing is undermined. What follows needs to be discussed exactly because it may seem self-evident or trivial. One might say that the structure that accompanies tattooing consists in the expectation that a tattoo will be created if money is paid in exchange, and vice versa.²⁹ The tattoo organization involved considers this expectation implicitly when the tattooist and owner emphasizes his role as an ‘all-rounder’. Here, then, the organization does not specialize in certain tattoo styles at the expense of others (such as ‘tribals’).³⁰ The disruption of this premise and the ensuing obstacles to tattooing to take place lies in exactly such a specialization of the guest tattooist. The refusal to produce a tattoo on artistic grounds (no tribal tattoos), however, does not only affect the artistic side of tattooing.³¹ The custom-

known artists). But I run a business here. If I turned down all the Harley wings or panthers I’d never make any money...You like to do artistic work, and you like to do things that will enhance your reputation, but it is still a business, and you have to make a living, and you have to pay expenses”.

29 Such an expectation is critically observed in the following quote of a tattooist: “So many people come into my shop with the attitude that if they’re going to put money down for a tattoo, they can get anything they want. In today’s tattooing, if you can draw it, it can be tattooed, and if it can be tattooed it can be bought and sold. It’s no different than going to a hair studio or buying a new pair of earrings... it’s all about having the money and the demand for something... So when a White guy comes in and asks for a black panther, I just laugh... it’s all I can do to keep me sane” (quoted in Atkinson 2003a: 103).

30 The view of this tattooist represents only one opinion on the matter. Elsewhere, specialization is often seen as positive and a good way to avoid fierce competition. If every tattoo organization has its “niche”, everyone will get along easier (e.g. *Skin Deep* 2007, Christmas/154: 20). As a consequence, customers will be sent to another organization that specializes in the requested style (e.g. stated a tattooist I talked at a studio’s opening, 2008). Here, then, the fact that tattooing does not occur at every available opportunity is not a problem, but is organizationally accepted and included in the decision-making premises.

31 A more general reason to refuse to do specific tattoos is attributed to ‘old school’ tattooists. On

er obviously did not change her mind and did not opt for another style favored by the guest tattooist. If she had, tattooing would have taken place. The refusal of the tattoo equally affects the economic side of it. In fact the tattooist did not get any money for refusing to make a tattoo. Nor did he get paid for the time spent with the customer he eventually turned down. The non-occurrence of artistic communication, therefore, leads to the inevitable non-occurrence of economic communication. The unfolding of tattooing does not take place.

A comparable case in which tattooing did not occur can be traced to a rejection to do a tattoo as well. The reason tattooing did not happen was, however, different than in the previous case. At a tattoo convention I visited, I was standing next to a tattoo booth where a tattooist explained to a woman why he refused to make the tattoo she asked for (I was simply a bystander and happened to be there without inquiring).

Before I began overhearing the conversation between the tattooist in the convention booth and the woman, she must have described the tattoo motif she requested. On the table between the tattooist and the potential customer lay open folders with photographs of tattoos to which the woman seemed to refer in the interaction. After listening to her ideas the tattooist told the woman that he had to decline the request and explained to her why. The reason why he refused to make the tattoo was that he participated at the convention to make money and to promote the tattoo studio. This implied that if he drew a tattoo design from scratch like the one the woman asked for, he would spend several hours just drawing without making any money. In the end the tattooist would earn only 200 Euro for this tattoo instead of more by doing several less time-consuming tattoos in the same time. If she opted for a pre-drawn design from a 'flash sheet', though, it would not be a problem to make the tattoo. Such a tattoo would not involve as much work and time as the one requested. Eventually, he advised her to get the tattoo done in a tattoo studio. In order to make sure that the result would be exactly the way she wanted the tattoo to look, he offered her to create it in his studio. There the tattooist would also have more time than at a convention. With that the tattooist and the woman agreed not to do the tattoo and the conversation ended.

The tattooist's refusal was not grounded in a particular specialization that would exclude the style of the requested tattoo. The refusal was nevertheless connected to decisions of form. Here the distinction between 'custom' and 'flash' plays a role (I come

the basis of preferences for particular decisions of form (black and broad outlines, black shading, identifiability or 'readability' of tattoos at a distance and after many years), old school tattooists tend to refuse to do Chicano-style, fine-line tattoos – "they do not feel that it holds up over time" (DeMello 2007: 60).

back to this distinction in chap. 7). Custom means to produce an individual or ‘customized’ tattoo design which implies that it needs to be sketched and then accurately drawn first (whether on paper or onto the skin). A flash tattoo, however, is easier to do because it already exists as a finished drawing to be copied and then transferred onto the skin. As the tattooist’s statements imply, the former needs more time until it is finished than the latter. If she had chosen a flash tattoo instead of an individual piece of work, the tattooist would have accepted the woman’s request.

But the tattoo was not refused for artistic reasons only. Money plays a crucial role as well. The tattooist stated quite clearly that he participated at the convention because, among other things, he wants to earn money. This is why he preferred to do comparatively simple tattoos that did not require much time to be completed. His calculation shows that custom work including the sketching and drawing needs as much time as several pre-drawn and ready to do flash pieces. One may assume that the individual tattoos made at a convention would probably not have differed that much in price.³² But, as the tattooist’s statement indicates, the quantity of tattoos produced in a certain period of time makes all the (financial) difference. The kind of tattoo created, therefore, is closely connected to the possible economic gain.

The rejection, thus, might be motivated primarily by the potential economic loss caused by the requested tattoo. But it cannot be disconnected from artistic considerations such as time time needed for sketching, drawing and eventually creating it on skin. To be sure, the tattooist would have liked to earn the money he would have made with the woman’s tattoo. But in the context of the tattoo convention it would not have yielded as much as several, quicker to make flash tattoos.

Both cases presented above exemplify that an understanding concentrated on either art or economic communication would miss out on equally constitutive aspects. In the first case, it seem to be primarily the specific decisions of form that led to the rejection. In contrast, the reason for rejection in the second case seems mainly to lie in the total economic gain of one convention day. But, as I want to show with these concrete examples, this represents only half of the truth. Because of their connectedness, neither art nor economic communication occur, if one of them is absent. Each of the two forms of communication must emerge in connection with each other in order to let tattooing take place.

³² Usually there is a starting price to cover the expenses of the material and infrastructure used. At this particular convention there was an announcement of a minimum charge for each tattoo of 100.- Swiss Francs (on the convention website under the heading “Conditions” for artists/exhibitors; the website is no longer available).

The reasoning of the tattooists illustrates the intricate nature of artistic and economic communication as well. Of course, the problematization of the financial loss caused by the rejection of the tribal tattoo in the first case arises primarily because it affects the tattoo organization and probably its future decisions about passing customers on to guest tattooists. In the second case, the organization tries to make as much money as possible in a day and therefore rejects a custom work request. Financial gain is after all among the main reasons for taking part in the tattoo convention. There is no doubt then that the non-occurrence of tattooing has organizational effects or organizational reasons.³³ This is, however, not the point right now. The point here is to see the intricacy of the form of tattooing. The non-occurrence of one of the forms of communication involved (for which reason whatsoever) leads to the non-occurrence of tattooing as a form of communication in its own right. Or, again, put simply: Either artistic and economic communication take place in close connection with each other, and thus constitute tattooing as an operation – or they do not.

Some cases cannot be clearly defined as tattooing as specified above. Common sense and a focus on what is materially visible, for example, would seem to tell us that it is tattooing we are looking at in any case. ‘Tattoos for free’, for example, constitutes such a potentially ambiguous case. Regarding the unfolding of communication, however, the situation will probably look a little different than one would expect. Although I agree that it would be bizarre and counter-intuitive not to call a ‘tattoo for free’ tattooing, one should not be deceived prematurely by a seemingly familiar appearance. Rather, from a systems theoretical perspective, one needs to question the mere appearance and common sense view by closely observing the forms of communication involved.³⁴ The question here is what happens in terms of communication if a tattoo is created explicitly free of charge?

In accounts about the beginning of their careers, some tattooists talk about working for free during a certain period. Some did not charge for the tattoos because they were beginners. The beginners’ results, it seems, would not have justified any payment in return. The following describes the first steps of a tattooist: “he faced the initial ordeals of not being able to insert anything [ink], and says he worked for free for the first year”

33 There are many more reasons why organizations reject requests: Offensive tattoo designs for which the organization does not want to be held responsible; age or inexperience of customers; or the placement of tattoos on the face, hands, and other “public skin” (Sanders 1989a: 78; see Madame Chinchilla 1997: 24; Webb 2002: 41). But in any case of rejection and regardless of the reasons, tattooing will not take place.

34 I am obliged to Thomas Basbøll who challenged me with a discussion about tattoos ‘for free’ as opposed to those that cost.

(*Skin Deep* 2007, December/153: 50-51; similarly *Skin Deep* 2007, Christmas/154: 49). Another tattooist did not charge anything in order to “get a reputation” and show people what she could offer (tattooist in *Skin Deep* 2007, December/153: 37). In other cases, tattoos are created free of charge because the customer is a friend of the tattooist (Kuwahara 2005: 141). There are even special offers by tattoo organizations, who give tattoos away for free once in a while. One tattoo organization, for example, announces tattoos for free in a web blog. The announced tattoo features a design the organization’s tattooists would like to create on skin. Aside from a description and picture of the design, the announcement includes rules and requirements for the prospective customer (a design the tattooist wishes to do at a time it is convenient for him; the customer must be of legal age and sober; see <http://fatetattoo.com/wordpress> [December 2009]). According to the website, one such tattoo has been created so far.

For whatever reason tattoos are made for free, something is happening that ‘looks’ like tattooing. The question is, however, whether it constitutes tattooing.

The special constellation of communication in this case differs only slightly from the form of tattooing presented so far. Basically, it involves both art and economic communication, yet in a somewhat twisted way. The tattoo ‘for free’ still constitutes a product of artistic communication, i.e., the outcome of decisions of form. The creation of a tattoo ‘for free’ does not automatically make it non-artistic communication, or less drastic, a non-harmonious, ugly tattoo. The main difference is of course that the creation of the tattoo is done without any payment in return. The economic semantics ‘for free’ and similar expressions explicitly observe this non-occurrence of a payment. The semantics basically indicates what constitutes the communicational event resulting in a tattoo ‘free of charge’.

In systems theoretical terms, the difference lies in a partial inversion of the economic code. In the ‘normal’ case the economic side of tattooing constitutes itself by means of a payment (in money) in exchange for a tattoo (as a commodity that can be possessed). In the case of a tattoo ‘for free’, the payment is turned into non-payment, whereas the exchange of a tattoo remains. In the first case, then, the part of the economic communication is coded as payment/non-payment, payment being the preference value of the economic code. In the second case the communication is coded as non-payment/payment. Non-payment, however, is still part of the economic domain as the reflection value of payment. It does not ‘fall outside’ the economy but constitutes an inevitable part of economic communication. This leads to the conclusion that even though a tattoo might be created ‘for free’, that is in exchange for no payment at all,

the communicational event responsible for it nevertheless constitutes tattooing.³⁵

An objection might be raised. Everything could be seen as a matter of non-payment whenever it does not involve a payment. Regardless of the phenomenon, it could always be described as non-payment or the negation of any other code.³⁶ The point, however, is to see how a communicational event concretely operates. Non-payment, then, cannot just be attributed as such, but needs to be seen in distinction to payment as the other side of an inseparable form of communication. Tattooing resulting in a 'free' tattoo therefore (partly) operates with the inverted economic code.

The same argument holds true for the art side as well. Whatever the equivalent semantics for a tattoo 'for free' in regard to art might be, the inversion of the code of art would not preclude tattooing from occurring. To be sure, not every tattoo represents an artistically successful or outstanding creation. This becomes quite clear in observations of failed tattoos in tattoo magazines. But even though an observer would probably not see a particular tattoo as a harmonious artistic outcome, it nevertheless was tattooing as a form of communication that led to its creation. Similar to the form of economic communication, the inverted artistic code (non-harmonious/harmonious) still constitutes part of the form of tattooing. Consequently, an artistically non-harmonious tattoo 'for free' is the result of tattooing as well. The inversion of the involved communicational forms does not preclude the form of tattooing from actualizing, regardless of the effects the outcome may have on its description and the semantics used for that purpose.

The discussed cases should clarify how the parallax form of tattooing works. On the one hand, one can say that the parallax form of tattooing does not actualize itself gradually. As for every kind of communication, tattooing takes place in its entirety or it does not. On the other hand, as the example of tattoos 'for free' showed, if tattooing takes place it does not make a difference operationally which side of the code is indicated. It may, however, make a difference for its description and the linked semantics.

III How Tattooing Does Not Communicate

So far we only have a positive definition of how tattooing operates as communication.

³⁵ One can expect that the provision of tattoos 'for free' is not viable for a long time. Since it precludes further connections of economic communication (there is nothing that could be spent in another economic exchange), it would rely on other economic communication in order to get access to the required material. Alternatively, the communication stops. A tattoo organization, for example, can decide not to charge for anything the apprentice creates, while it still has an income from the other tattooists.

³⁶ Such attributions are the result of an observer's observations characterizing the event with third values in addition to the operating code. But, in general, when it comes to an operation and its coding, third values are excluded (see Luhmann 1994: 15, 2001: 1132).

In order to make this definition plausible, I want to check other functional systems' forms of communication and their status for tattooing. Forms of communication that clearly do not play an operational role for tattooing can be excluded. This, however, does not mean that some of the communications or communicative contexts listed below cannot play a descriptive and semantic role for tattooing.

There are certain forms of communication we can exclude rather quickly. Tattooing does not operate in terms of legal/illegal in the medium of binding character (law; Luhmann 2002a), of true/false in the medium of truth (science; Luhmann 2002b), or of immanence/transcendence in the medium of belief (religion; Luhmann 2000b). Tattooing is also not a matter of superiority/inferiority or government/opposition in the medium of power (politics; Luhmann 2005b), a matter of better/worse in the medium 'child' (education; Luhmann 2004a), nor one of performance/non-performance or win/defeat (sport; Werron 2005).

However, all of these forms of communication may play a role in the way tattooing becomes the object of observations (but also tattoos and tattoo organizations). For the present purpose it must suffice to give two examples of how other contexts of communication may enter the scene without being part of the operation as such. The first example concerns observations drawing on politics and protest, and the second considers observations drawing on education.

Politics and Protest

While tattooing does not operate in terms of political communication, we can observe observations and semantics, which draw on it to a certain extent. Observations of tattooed persons' motives for getting tattooed and the meaning of particular tattoos may draw on a particular political semantics. The persons' motives are described in terms of resistance and rebellion, and the tattoos as explicit or implicit symbols of political affiliations and opinions. In these particular cases of political observations and semantics, therefore, we do not observe tattooing as political communication as such but as the object of a specific kind of observation.

It may be possible to conceive of these connections between tattooing and political semantics as a form of protest that uses tattoos and the act of being tattooed as media to which political meaning is attributed (on protest see Luhmann 2001: chap. 4.XV; 2004c). Protest and protest movements, often addressed in terms of 'subculture',³⁷ rep-

37 For the concept's different uses in the tattoo literature see Bengtsson et al. (2005), Kjeldgaard/Bengtsson (2005), Goulding et al. (2004), Sanders (1989a: 30), Velliquette et al. (1998), Velliquette/Murray (2002) and critically Atkinson (2003a: chap. 5).

resent some of the abundantly discussed phenomena connected to tattooing. The movements known as ‘modern primitivism’ (Vale/Juno 1989; Rosenblatt 1997; Klesse 1999; Atkinson/Young 2001) and ‘straightedge’ (Atkinson 2003b) draw on tattoos and being tattooed as media for the proclamation of the content of the protest.

In the case of modern primitivism the movement consists in resistance to, on the one hand, “the strong Judeo-Christian body programming and emotional conditioning” (Fakir Musafar in Favazza 1996: 326). On the other hand, it criticizes modern ‘materialist’ and ‘consumerist’ society by affirmatively living and celebrating the alleged way of life of ‘primitives’ and ‘tribes’ of past times (including the imitation and revival of, e.g., tattoos, piercings, scarification, rituals, drug use; for a critical discussion see Rosenblatt 1997; Klesse 1999; Cummings 2001; Pitts 2003: chap. 4). Countering a pathologizing semantics that associates forms of body modification with sickness and self-mutilation³⁸ (also drawn upon by media reports Pitts 1999), modern primitivism introduces positive semantic associations of ritual, “physical enhancement”, “body play” and “state of grace” (Fakir Musafar in Favazza 1996: 326, 327, 334).

Similarly, the ‘straightedge’ movement stands for a particular way of life, for which tattoos of a special kind are used as means of expression (e.g. the letter ‘X’ alone or in a row of three; Atkinson 2003b: 210). Like modern primitivism, ‘straightedge’ came into existence in the 1980s. However, the movement proclaims rather the opposite. ‘Straightedge’ is understood as a physically aware, pure, and non-excessive lifestyle (e.g. no drugs, vegetarian/vegan, no premarital sex). As Atkinson (2003b: 215) points out, this results in “a controlled and rationalized form of dissent” or protest against the excessive and unhealthy lives of ‘non-straightedgers’.

There are certainly other movements that make use of tattoos as media of expressing their protest. They are observable to various degrees in terms of political opinions, affiliations and protest as well (e.g. movements such as punk and right-wing extremism).

It must be noted that such political observations and uses of tattoos cannot be merely seen as forms of protest as such. Depending on the political affiliations and opinions connected with the protest movements expressed in the tattoos, they affect the working of tattoo organizations. Tattoo organizations not only have policies concerning the appropriate age of their clients or the clients’ physical condition (i.e., sober, clean). They often also have a policy concerning what kind of tattoos they do not offer. The reason for such a policy does not only consist in the potentially different political out-

³⁸ A semantics that media reports draw on as well (see Pitts 1999). It is also still in use in academic articles (Jeffreys 2000).

look of the organization compared to its customers, but also in the self-attributed responsibility taken on by the organization. Concretely, this becomes apparent in tattooists' refusals to tattoo specific, politically meaningful designs (e.g. certain phrases or symbols such as the swastika). As with refusing to tattoo hands, neck, and face of first-time customers (e.g. *TätowierMagazin* 2002, 9/77: 3; *TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/138: 82), the organization does not want to be held responsible for and does not want to be associated with customers' premature, spontaneous, or politically delicate decisions that they could regret some time afterwards. Here, thus, the organization's policy tries to prevent future perturbations, namely unhappy customers, other tattoo organizations' allegations, or possibly legal repercussions in the long run (see e.g. Hill 1972: 248).

Tattooing, thus, as such does not operate in the form of politics. But it may be indirectly limited by political and protest communication, in so far as organizational policies prevent the creation of certain politically meaningful designs. As a consequence, tattooing does not occur because of the organizational rejection of particular tattoos (similar to the cases of economic and artistic reasons for refusal described above).

Education

Tattoo organizations' refusals do not necessarily or always imply the termination of the interaction between customer and tattooist. Instead, these refusals often initiate what is called the 'education' or 'steering' of the customers. Whether this happens with regard to how to choose a tattooist or tattoo establishment, or how deal with tattoo magazines' supply of tattoo designs (no copying or imitating, but inspiration), a semantics of education enters descriptions (e.g. *Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/6: 41; see Hofmann 2004; Green 2005; Reardon 2008). This pedagogical semantics emerged in the wake of an increasing focus on originality, individuality or, in negative terms, an increasing dissatisfaction with copying and imitating tattoo designs. But the semantics is also linked to the growing popularization or 'mainstreaming' of tattoos and the accompanying dissemination of information about tattooing made possible by the mass media (television reality shows, magazines, movies, books, but also tattoo conventions; *Prick Magazine* 2008, 8/5: 52). Education, thus, does not function on the operational level of tattooing as a form of communication. Rather it plays a semantic role, on the one hand, in the observation of the organizations' public both as actual and potential customers in particular, and as the "public en masse" in general (tattooist quoted in *Prick Magazine* 2008, 8/5: 52). On the other hand, education plays a role in the observation of organiz-

ations and their members.

Of course, pedagogical semantics already plays a crucial role within and for the organization. It contributes especially to the observation of existing or prospective members of the organization in descriptions about becoming a tattooist (apprenticeship in distinction to self-taught, or learning by getting tattooed). A new member's inclusion into a tattoo organization may thus take the form of education for which learning to tattoo, among other knowledge and skills, is the focal aspect. Like the education of customers and the public in general, mass media and platforms for pedagogical interaction serve the need for teaching and learning how to tattoo.

So called 'schools' for tattooing, based on correspondence courses, emerged already early in the history of organized tattooing. For example, around the middle of the twentieth century, Milton Zeis, an American tattooist, offered courses in 'The Zeis School of Tattooing' (see Morse 1977: 15; Forment/Brilot 2004: 59, where a diploma and a welcoming letter from Zeis' school are displayed).³⁹ Such 'schools' or correspondence courses never established themselves as educational institutions in the world of tattooing. With the exception of self-teaching, tattoo organizations dominate the educational field. Instead of through correspondence courses, 'tattoo schools' nowadays try to call attention to their courses on the internet.⁴⁰ With the advent of tattoo conventions in the 1970s, seminars from and for tattooists were organized in order to disseminate particular skills and new knowledge about styles, ink, techniques etc. These seminars are seen as important additional platforms for tattooists' further training that complement getting tattooed by other tattooists. In addition to these 'schools' and seminars, books and videos are offered in order to learn how to tattoo (e.g. Alayon 2005; Mitchel 2006; Herren 2007-2008).

With these different examples of pedagogical semantics I wanted to show that tattooing as such, as a form of communication, does not operate in terms of education but becomes the object of pedagogical observation in various indirect ways. I re-emphasize that tattooing and learning to tattoo constitute different forms of communication that should not be confused. The former is a matter of economic and artistic communication, whereas the latter works according to educational communication.

³⁹ See also Steward (1990: 12) who started out with Zeis' course and, according to Zeis himself, was the only one who ever finished it.

⁴⁰ See e.g. the 'Tattoo Learning Center' (www.tattoosbylisa.net), 'World's Only Tattoo School' (www.tattoo-school.com), 'Learn How to Tattoo' by the 'Tattoo Body Piercing Institute' (www.learnhowtotattoo.com), or 'Tattoo School' (www.tattooschool.com). The descriptions of learning how to tattoo on these websites draw clearly on a pedagogical semantics, when they speak of classes, students, graduation, certificates, learning centers, institutes and so forth.

While the just described forms of communication may be discarded as not being directly involved with tattooing on an operational level of communication, the exclusion of medical communication is less self-evident. After all, medical communication also works through the medium of the human body or certain parts of it in order to treat and cure diseases (on medicine in general Luhmann 2005a). As I will show further down, medical communication and tattoos may even become closely coupled. Tattooing, therefore, does not function as a form of communication in terms of treating disease either.

Although we could go on like this and look for other functional systems' forms of communication, the focus on economy and art should have become plausible by now. Instead I want to discuss concrete phenomena that are described as tattooing in the literature and in everyday communication. But, as I will show, most of them cannot be called tattooing if we follow the definition suggested above.

IV Differing Forms of Communication and the Tattoo's Many Facets

One reason why various phenomena are commonly identified as or subsumed under the tattooing lies in a seeming material and visual resemblance. But despite such resemblances the forms of communication at work differ in many cases. Exactly because of these differences some phenomena usually described as tattooing fall outside the suggested definition and others (tend to) work in its sense. The tattoo, however, often also acts as a medium for those forms of communication that do not constitute tattooing. As a medial substrate the tattoo allows other forms than economy and art to draw on it in their own particular manner. The medium's characteristic seems to be the (visually) most obvious reason why phenomena that are different in terms of communication become subsumed under the term tattooing. To put it rather simply: This way of connecting differing cases seems to follow a logic of "if it looks like tattooing it has to be tattooing". In the following, though, I want to argue that allegedly identical social phenomena turn out to communicate in different ways than tattooing. The purpose of the following discussion is to distinguish between tattooing and phenomena that look similar but communicate differently and are usually described in terms of tattooing or, for that matter, seen as closely connected to it.

Marks of Punishment and Inclusion/Exclusion

What has been called branding, marking or stigmatizing⁴¹ is often equated to tattooing. Marking functioned as a means to punish criminals by inscribing signs into their skin. These signs often referred to the crime committed or the sentence to be served. From the point of view of systems theory, this kind of punishment forms part of legal communication. It uses the physical inscription as its medium for communicating law.

This form of law enforcement dates back to ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt (Delarue/Giraud 1950; Gustafson 1997, 2000; Jones 2000). Delinquents found guilty of a specific crime were often marked with a sign on their forehead. The marks referred either to the committed crime, the punishment or the ruler the criminal offended by committing the crime (Gustafson 2000). Markings were also used during the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century in Europe (Oettermann 1995: chap. 6; Jones 2000: 13; Gustafson 2000: 28; Burchett 1960: 156) and in India by the British colonizers (Anderson 2000).⁴² A comparable form of punishment was applied in China and Japan (Reed 2000: 364-366; van Gulik 1982: 10-14; McCallum 1988: 115-118). In the Japanese case, however, a terminological difference exists between a punitive form of marking, called 'irezumi', and a non-punitive form called 'horimono' (van Gulik 1982: 93).⁴³ Due to the simultaneous involvement of both artistic and economic communication, 'horimono' falls within the definition of tattooing suggested here.

The marking of persons, in the course of attributing membership to a group, is also seen as closely connected to tattooing. In this case, applying specific marks, signs, or designs constitutes a genuine social mechanism of inclusion/exclusion. This form of marking resembles the punitive form insofar as both draw a socially meaningful distinction by including particular persons and excluding others. Inclusion/exclusion refers to a mode of constructing social addresses, that is persons (Luhmann 1995a).

41 In his book *Stigma*, Erving Goffman discusses briefly the Greek term 'stigma' and its derogatory meaning: "The Greeks, who were apparently strong on visual aids, originated the term *stigma* to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor – a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places" (Goffman 1986: 1; emphasis in original).

42 Franz Kafka (1999) puts the marking as punishment in the center of his novel *In the Penal Colony*. The machine for the inscription of the crime, however, not only figures as a device of law enforcement but executes the criminal along with it.

43 Van Gulik notes that tattooing in general is nevertheless called 'irezumi'. Only the tattoo 'masters' themselves, at least back then, sharply drew this distinction (van Gulik 1982: 93; Richie/Buruma 1980: 114). When it comes to Japan in magazines and books today, both terms are in use for designating tattooing or tattoos. As a sideline, the title of van Gulik's book contains the term 'irezumi' as well, even though it does not deal with the phenomenon of punishment exclusively.

Marking the human skin represents such a communicational attribution of persons as the included (members or ‘us’), while determining the excluded outside (non-members or ‘them’; see Oettermann 1995: 14). The crucial difference between this and the punitive form of marking, however, consists in how people become a part of a group and thus members. In the case of punitive markings, we can define it as a forced inclusion. These markings have further social effects on the persons’ connection to other societal domains, including their “hyperinclusion” (Göbel/Schmidt 1998) in the form of prisons or work camps (see Schrader 2000). Or put differently, the addressed person becomes one with severed social links. In contrast, the non-punitive form of inclusion/exclusion by marking refers to a non-forced, ‘voluntary’⁴⁴ form of inclusion. Here, then, inclusion signifies a more positive social mechanism. It implies that everyone else is excluded from a group. The marked criminal on the other hand is excluded from other domains of society.

Marking the body represents one way among others (clothes, haircut, language, objects etc.) of drawing attention to one’s membership in a particular group. This kind of inclusion/exclusion mechanism plays a crucial role for the constitution of different types of groups and their boundary maintenance (in the sense of Barth 1994). Street gangs, religious groups, professions, military units, criminal and ethnic groups draw on this mechanism of inclusion/exclusion (e.g. Govenar 1988; Philips 2001; Steward 1990; Gathercole 1988: 175; Baldaev et al. 2005; Schrader 2000).⁴⁵ In this case, therefore, tattoos or marks on the body function as a means for organizing a group into members that distinguish themselves from non-members.

The use of tattoos as a means of (‘voluntary’) inclusion/exclusion cannot be called tattooing in the sense defined above. This, however, does not preclude the possibility of externalizing the actual creation of group specific tattoos, which would involve tattooing (for specific descriptions see Steward 1990). The tightness of connections between membership based groups and tattooing may vary. A strict coupling between a group and tattooing may well result in a tattoo organization more or less exclusively established for one or several groups of the same type (e.g. in the case of biker groups).

44 The proposed distinction forced/voluntary probably evokes a misleading connotation, suggesting the involvement of a will or intention attributable to individuals or groups. The distinction, however, should rather be conceived as an observation that may shift its values depending on the point of view. This means that what is observed as voluntary from the point of view of the included may be observed as forced from the point of view of the excluded (for the distinction between non-consensual/voluntary in regard to criminal anthropology, see Fisher 2002: 94).

45 Movies draw on this phenomenon as well, especially in cases in which tattooed persons and tattoos play a significant role for the narrative. Inclusion/exclusion becomes a recurrent mode of cinematic observation, both in terms of the story and the forms of visualization (see Wymann 2009).

As a consequence, the manner in which persons are marked and addressed socially can be connected in one way or another to tattooing. But it does not in and of itself constitute tattooing. Neither in the (forced) marking of persons in the name of law nor in the (voluntary) marking of persons as members of a group, does one observe the form of communication peculiar to tattooing.

Medicine and Cosmetics

The application of ‘tattoos’ for reconstructive, therapeutic and diagnostic purposes in medicine constitutes another phenomenon commonly subsumed under tattooing (for an overview see Vassileva/Hristakieva 2007). Modern medicine observes tattooing and tattoos in two different ways: On the one hand, it considers them in terms of probable health risks such as the transmission of diseases and in regard to the procedures necessary to remove the pigment under the skin (see Cattani 1922; Adatto 1993; Nishioka/Gyorkos 2001; Haley/Fischer 2003; Vassileva/Hristakieva 2007: 368). On the other hand, it views the application of marks and the (visual) reconstruction of particular areas of the body as a part of restoring health (see Cattani 1922: 22, 49; Zeller 1941; Schönfeld 1960: 125-131; Guimaraes 2000: 276).⁴⁶

In the case of medical marking called ‘tattooing’ it does not communicate like tattooing as defined above. Instead, it constitutes part of medical communication. The medical semantics of ‘micropigmentation’, ‘dermatography’ (Vassileva/Hristakieva 2007: 369) and many other medico-technical descriptions refer to this medical form of communication. Even if persons usually (seen as) working in the role of tattooists offer such reconstructive treatment, it is medicine that constitutes it as communication. Instead of the (paid) creation of artwork, one deals with the (paid) restoration of health. Similar to the punitive marking, ‘tattoos’ or marks created in the course of medical treatment work as media ready to be formed by medical communication.⁴⁷

But what about cosmetic ‘tattooing’? Does it constitute tattooing or does it tend towards reconstructive medical treatment? Here, it seems rather difficult to assign a def-

46 Already the Tyrolean Iceman (known as ‘Ötzi’) found in 1991 in the Austrian Alps shows ‘tattoo’ marks (see <http://iceman.eurac.edu/>). Researchers assume that his ‘tattoos’ were applied for therapeutic-medical reasons, since the spots are medically relevant (acupuncture spots, meridians) and effective against certain diseases (see Dorfer et al. 1999). See also Tannenbaum (1987) on the mainly medical use of ‘tattoos’ in a south-east Asian context, or ‘tattooing’ seen as a cure in a Middle Eastern context (Carswell 1965).

47 A current example of the tattoo as a medium of medical communication comes from research on a special nano-technological ink that shows the glucose level by changing its color. This would help diabetics monitor their illness more easily (coincidentally found at <http://dsc.discovery.com/news/2009/02/12/diabetes-tattoo.html> [June 5 2009]).

inite system's reference to cosmetics or 'beautification'. However, we certainly can argue that it represents neither 'purely' artistic nor medical communication. It more likely connects to the economy. As indicated above, the imitation of a mole or the extension or accentuation of lips and eye brows do not constitute decisions of form as a work of art that ultimately connects to the network of artistic communication. Beautification marks do not make a communicational difference that is comparable to works of art. If they succeed in their imitation or (disguised) reproduction of physical attributes, cosmetic 'tattoos' will not offer themselves for perception and observation (in the case of failure, they certainly will, yet the subsequent observations will not necessarily connect to an artistic semantics either). Thus, quite contrary to works of art (Luhmann 1990b: 26), cosmetic marks do not make distinctions in order to be observed as distinctions. Their purpose is to be indistinguishable, natural marks.⁴⁸

Descriptions of cosmetics draw on a slightly different semantics than those of tattooing, including 'beauty salons', 'permanent make-up', 'permanent cosmetics', 'cosmetic tattooing', 'beautician' and 'beauty industry' (see e.g. Vassileva/Hristakieva 2007: 369-370; or the website of 'The Society of Permanent Cosmetic Professionals', <http://www.spcp.org>). The key concept of beauty, with its latent counter-concept 'ugliness', addresses the successful appearance of individuals.⁴⁹ Making beauty is only successful if it cannot be recognized as the result of a deliberate creation. As we will see in a moment, the observation of beauty closely connects to a semantics of the natural. If it looks natural, as if 'nature' itself was responsible, the beautification of an individual has accomplished its goal. If it fails, its artificiality becomes all the more apparent. Despite the unclear communicational status of beautification and cosmetic marking, thus, we may claim that in this case we do not deal with the form of tattooing.

George Burchett's memoirs provide a good example of the shifts not only in the basic communication but also in the semantics on which its description draws (Burchett 1960: chap. 8, 9). Usually working as a tattooist in the early twentieth century, Burchett also took part in cosmetic 'tattooing'. Together with a medical practitioner Burchett offered 'complexion' or 'beauty treatments' in a 'salon', advertising the service quite differently than his usual tattooing business. While Burchett's advertising placard in the window of one of his tattoo establishments referred to "artistic tattooing" (Burchett 1960: 52), the advertising campaign launched for the 'beauty treatment' did

48 Regarding such communication, then, it is not surprising when tattooing is clearly distinguished from beautification or cosmetics (*Skin Deep* 2007, December/153: supplement, 5).

49 On the problematic status of the concept of beauty during the differentiation of the art system see Luhmann (1985). But see also Luhmann (2005d), where he argues for beautiful/ugly as a code of art, something he changed later (see Luhmann 2000a: 195, 227).

not mention the word tattooing or tattoos at all. Rather, it emphasized the newness of the treatment, the fact that it does not harm one's health, and the "wonderfully *natural* permanent colouration of the skin" (Burchett 1960: 111; emphasis mine). Not only the advertising, but also the entire staging of the treatment, including the outfit of the 'salon', suggested seriousness, medical supervision and, thus, harmlessness (Burchett 1960: 112ff.). The enthusiastic newspaper coverage of Burchett's beauty treatment indicates the public effect it had. The reports' observations focused on the impossibility of telling the difference between the contribution of 'nature' and the treatment (Burchett 1960: 115, 130). Eventually, Burchett chose to rededicate more of his time to tattooing because of his preference for "proper designs" – even though he could have made his "whole living and possibly a fortune from beauty culture" (Burchett 1960: 130). Again, the descriptive connections between beauty and nature show that 'beauty treatment' communicates differently than tattooing.

Rituals, Valuables and Aesthetic Artifacts

So far, the range of tattooing as a form of communication may look rather limited. It might probably also seem as if tattooing in this particular form emerged only with the first tattoo organizations in the middle of the nineteenth century. Although the present work focuses mainly on the appearance of tattooing in modern society, one finds cases of tattooing in social contexts from the past, reported by travelers, ethnographers, and social anthropologists. Again, however, tattoos or marks did not play the same social role in every context. The examples I want to give should once again clarify that the form of tattooing is a matter of a particular communicational constellation, i.e., the parallax of art and economy. This implies that it is neither a categorically fixed phenomenon pertaining to a specific form of societal differentiation nor to a specific type of social system. In other words, one should look for the communicational difference of tattooing instead of for an alleged identity or its mere appearance.

Anthropological accounts about societies in which persons get marked for different reasons (rite of passage, mark of distinction or status, societal inclusion/exclusion etc.) usually describe the various phenomena in terms of tattooing. Gell's (1993) comparative study of Polynesian societies provides an exemplary analysis of 'tattooing' in different contexts. Using both a technical-material and a social definition of tattooing, Gell discusses the different appearances of what he perceives as the same phenomenon in varying political contexts. For the present purpose, Gell's (1993: chap. 7) concluding comparison of four forms of political organization in regard to the appearance of

what he sees as tattooing allows me to discuss in which cases tattooing as the simultaneous and closely connected communication of art and economy occurs. For the present discussion it does not matter whether we can transform Gell's categories of political organization into the forms of societal differentiation suggested by Luhmann. It is more relevant which ones of the observed cases seem to come close to or actually constitute tattooing.

Gell (1993: 291-295) distinguishes between forms of political organization he calls conical (hierarchy of segments), feudal (stratified into aristocracy and cultivating population), devolved (fragmented and agonistic-competitive), and eventually a mixed type combining features of the three other forms. Without going into detail about the theoretical and empirical characteristics of each form of political organization, I want to discuss Gell's main argument. He claims that each form of political organization may be characterized by the way they focus on a particular aspect of the procedure of 'tattooing'. In line with his technical-material definition, Gell proposes that the making of a tattoo "has an invariant processual contour" and divides the procedure into three stages: first, the wounding, bleeding and inserting of the pigment; second, the "scab formation, scarring, healing"; and third, "the subsequent acquisition of a permanent indelible mark, frequently ornamental" (Gell 1993: 304). Whereas of course the procedure always takes place in its entirety, Gell argues that each of the political contexts weighs the three stages differently. With this perspective Gell provides insights into the contextual 'reading' of the procedure, i.e., its role for forms of inclusion/exclusion and the overall reproduction of society. If we follow Gell's suggestion of the different social prioritizations of the procedure's stages, we can see which of the cases work in the form of tattooing and which one contextualize the making of 'tattoos' differently. In order to make the point and not to get lost in all the details, the presentation of each case can only be short and schematic.⁵⁰

Gell begins with the mixed type of political organization, exemplified by the Society Islands (Tahiti and others). In this case the primary focus lay on the first stage of bleeding (blood-letting), the secondary on the stage of healing, and the smallest focus on the marks left (Gell 1993: 304ff.). The procedure was embedded in ceremonies of bloodletting connected to "the ritual control of personal *tapu*" (1993: 305; emphasis in original). For 'tattooing' in the mixed political form, Gell concludes that "tattooing

50 Note that Gell's study is concerned with Polynesia during a period in which European colonization and proselytization began, or what Makiko Kuwahara (2005: 1) calls "the pre- and early contact period". Since then Polynesia changed considerably, including the contexts of creating tattoos especially in the wake of their revival in the past few decades. For the case of Tahiti see Kuwahara (2005), and in general see Gilbert (2000: 187-195).

was not a form of graphic art, but only an abiding trace which testified to the occurrence of socially salient blood-letting transactions” (1993: 306). Here, then, the procedure of making marks on the human body had more the function of a ritual, for which the marks themselves were “both the arbitrary sign of the completion of certain ritual procedures, and at the same time the analogical evocation of these procedures” (1993: 306). The clear focus on the first stage by means of rituals represents the reason for Gell not to call it art or “body decoration” (1993: 306-307).

In the case of conically organized societies such as Samoa, the first priority lay on the stage of healing, followed by the third stage of the actual tattoo. The stage of wounding and bleeding was least important (Gell 1993: 307). Because the ritual, an initiation ritual for men, surrounding the procedures played a crucial role here as well, the end result did not represent an “aesthetic form” in its own right (Gell 1993: 308). But compared to the Society Islands, Gell (1993: 308) notes, the Samoan tattoos were “much more aesthetically elaborated”. Whereas in the previous case the actual marks left from the bloodletting procedures were not as important as the making of them, their status was slightly different here. Tattoos represented “a much more concrete panoply of symbolic expressions of the notion of ‘protection’” (1993: 309), which Gell interprets as “the beginnings of the conversion of the tattoo from an abstract sign into an artefact” (1993: 309). This is of interest because Gell conceives the tattoo artefact as a “transactable wealth-item” (1993: 309) comparable to other valuables. As valuables tattoos entered “the flows of valuables” (1993: 309) responsible for vertical and horizontal social integration, including other closely related societies. By having the status of valuables, tattoos were accordingly paid for with fine mats (1993: 309, also 51, 53). Since the flows of valuables were embedded in the alliance system and the political organization, the ‘tattooing’ procedure was seen in terms “of transaction and acquisition under chiefly patronage” (1993: 309). This implied “political loyalty and indebtedness” in conically organized society. The crucial point to note here is the emergence of tattoos as valuables or, in our terms, as exchangeable economic goods.

The third case – devolved or fragmented political organization – focused on the third stage of the procedure, namely “the tattoo as independent artefact” (Gell 1993: 310). The stage of healing and bleeding came second and third, respectively. The Maori of New Zealand and the Marquesas represent prominent examples of this type. Visibility (i.e., face, entire body), graphic elaborateness, and stylistic variability characterized tattoos in these societies. As Gell puts it, “[t]attooing became more individually idiosyncratic, less uniform as well as less confined” (Gell 1993: 310). Thus, by fo-

cusing on the end result of the procedure, in contrast to the first two stages, it was seen as “honorific” (Gell 1993: 311). Although Gell does not dwell here on economic aspects in his concluding analysis and only mentions them briefly for the case of the Maori (1993: 246), it should be noted that the person doing the tattoo was reimbursed with gifts and payments in the form of artefacts (see Robley 2003: 98-99; for the Marquesas see Handy 2008: 3-4; von den Steinen 1925: 60).

And finally, we come to the fourth case of political organization that Gell calls “feudal”. Hawaii was an exemplary case. Here, tattoos represented “an independent artefact”, characterized by their incorporation “into the realm of free-floating signifiers, available for use in the private elaboration of a public self” (Gell 1993: 312). In contrast to the use of tattoos in the three other cases, Gell emphasizes “the disarticulation of tattooing from social reproduction” (1993: 312). According to Gell (1993: 313), this comes close to contemporary tattooing in the ‘West’ which he sees as ritually disembedded as well. The only difference between the feudal and the Western use of tattoos, Gell (1993: 313) notes, lies in the feudal society’s first priority on the end result, followed by the first stage of wounding (“an act of individualistic masochism”). Western tattooing, however, puts the entire focus solely on the third stage of the procedure, Gell argues.

The four forms of political organization and the corresponding uses of marks or tattoos function as extreme cases of his model, which I presented in a less complex and more schematic manner here. There is no doubt that other Polynesian societies would show other types of linkages between the making of tattoos and the form of political organization. We can nonetheless draw cautious conclusions from Gell’s comparative analysis.⁵¹

In the case of the mixed type of political organization, the marks are the result of communication that neither seems to connect explicitly to economy nor art. The blood-letting rituals took place in a ceremonial context, contributing to social reproduction. The outcome of the rituals, as Gell argues, did not represent art. The case of conical organization involves an economic aspect. Gell claims that the tattoos enter the sphere of exchangeable valuables, indicated not least by the fact that the making of tattoos was paid for with other valuables. But because the making of tattoos is also embedded within a ceremonial context (initiation ritual), the outcome does not have the same pri-

51 Cautious because, on the one hand, Gell’s analysis rests on material written by travelers and ethnographers from Europe and therefore has certain ethnocentric biases (of which Gell is fully aware; 1993: 4-6). On the other hand, Gell does not present the cases such a way as to allow for an analysis of all the forms of communication involved from a systems theoretical perspective.

ority as the healing process and thus does not represent art in its own right either. Neither the mixed nor the conical type of political organization prioritizes the outcome of the procedure. Instead they focus on the first two stages around which rituals revolve. These two cases, thus, tend to fall out of our definition of tattooing, because there seems to be no simultaneity of economy and art at work (despite the economic aspect of tattoos in the second case). Instead, the making of tattoos or marks under skin takes place in a ceremonial-religious and political context, thereby forming a crucial part in the reproduction of the corresponding social system.⁵²

The devolved and the feudal form of political organization, however, seem to be closer to tattooing. In both cases, the primary focus lies on the outcome of the procedure, while they differ in their secondary prioritization. As a precondition, this focus introduces the possibility of an artistic dimension in regard to the outcome of the procedure. Whereas Gell clearly notes the absence of art or aesthetics in the first two cases, he does not emphasize it in equally clear terms in the other two cases (in the case of the Marquesas, e.g., the reference to graphic elaborateness and stylistic variability, and, in regard to the Maori, to “*moko art*”, Gell 1993: 247; emphasis in original). Even though there may still be some degree of ceremonial embeddedness or contribution to the reproduction of society in the case of devolved societies, there seems to be a tendency to a communicational constitution of tattooing in its own right in both cases. It remains an open question, however, whether we can speak of artistic communication in the way suggested above or in an even broader sense. If one followed Horatio Gordon Robley’s (2003) account of the Maori, written at the end of the nineteenth century when tattoos were vanishing, one would certainly observe descriptions drawing on a semantics of art (similarly also Handy 2008 for the Marquesas). The way Robley describes the persons making tattoos, for example, would justify the observation of tattooing as the parallel working communication of both economy and art. Robley writes:

The operators in moko [the facial tattoos of the Maori] were generally *professional artists who worked for hire*, and their different degrees of excellence were as well known as that of painters among the moderns; [...] If the operator suspected that he would not be properly remunerated, his work became careless; and there is little doubt that some of the coarser specimens of moko were due to some such cause. On the other hand, *presents and payments* flowed into the coffers of the man of talent from all quarters, according to the means and ability of the givers. Double-barrelled guns, canoes, clothes, and

52 Gell’s concept of reproduction refers to what he calls “types of social and political regimes”, on the one hand, and the continuation of life cycles on the other (Gell 1993: 8). In contrast to a systems theoretical concept of reproduction (communication always reproduces society as a social system), Gell thinks of the replication and continuation of specific types of relationships (social, political, religious-ceremonial etc.).

even slaves have been presented to these distinguished persons as marks of esteem in which their talents were held. (Robley 2003: 98-99; emphasis mine)

According to Robley's description one would legitimately talk about tattooing because both artistic and economic communication seem to be at work. Still, we need to be aware of the Eurocentric orientation of Robley's and others' descriptions (Handy 2008; von den Steinen 1925) and the possibility (if not actuality) of a semantic imposition.

We probably cannot assume functionally differentiated systems of economy and art in the politically devolved and feudal societies described by Gell. But as his observations suggest, the focus on the outcome of the tattoo procedure indicates a tendency towards tattooing as artistic and economic communication in a broader sense. The other two cases suggest the opposite: that marks under the skin or 'tattoos' are constituted by a different set of communication, giving them a reproductive purpose in the social system.

*

We could certainly search for the communicational constellation of tattooing in a myriad of other examples commonly described in terms of tattooing.⁵³ But the point I wanted to make is that we need to query empirical material in regard to the communicational constellation at work and not, for example, the technical-material aspects of making a tattoo or mark under the skin. So, paraphrasing Luhmann's recurrent statement, it remains an 'empirical question' if we observe tattooing or not (see the preface in Luhmann 2005h: 10). The examples of punitive, group-based, medical, cosmetic and other forms of making marks and tattoos should have made this clear. Not everything that 'looks' like or seems similar to tattooing is necessarily constituted by the same form(s) of communication.

In this chapter I introduced a definition of tattooing in terms of both economic and artistic communication. I showed how tattooing assumes a parallaxic form. My admittedly counter-intuitive definition differs from others insofar as it highlights the basic constitution of tattooing by communication. Only this communicational main feature makes tattooing a social phenomenon. By giving the phenomenon a particular form and particular media of communication, I limit tattooing to this specific constellation pertaining to a phenomenon. My suggestion, thus, counters to some extent Don Ed Hardy's (1995: 25) remark that tattooing's "power defies absolute classification" (see also Taylor 1995: 39). Although I do not want to 'classify' tattooing in an absolute

53 See e.g. Krutak (2007) for many more examples from around the world.

sense, I nevertheless give it a specific social form in a particular context.

With the discussion of phenomena that look similar I tried to distinguish the cases of tattooing in this specific sense from others. These examples help to delimit tattooing in order to receive a more precise definition of the phenomenon. It should have become clear that the tattoo is a multifaceted medium of communication. For tattooing as a form this medium plays a role as a connection between artistic and economic communication. In the case of other social phenomena it figures as a medium for other forms of communication.

The exclusive use of the concept of tattooing for the present purpose certainly does not claim to be the only legitimate and last suggestion of a definition. There exist still a variety of everyday and academic definitions. But a study of tattooing needs a clear theoretical and conceptual concept of the phenomenon at hand. On the basis of systems theory and the assumption that the phenomenon makes a difference in society, tattooing can only be defined in terms of communication.

Finally, the particular definition of tattooing discussed here does not need to be imposed on everyday uses of the term. Rather, the differences between everyday and academic uses and definitions of the term reminds us of the variegated constructions of social reality by science and other domains of society (see Vogd 2007: 308). The question, then, cannot be whether the academic approach to the phenomenon is 'better' or 'worse'. Rather, it is how an academic perspective such as the present one contributes to understanding the phenomenon in a particular way. The use of a possibly counter-intuitive and abstract definition instead of one that is commonly used serves this purpose accordingly.

In this chapter I presented how tattooing operates in terms of communication. The next step will be to look at how organizations draw on and deal with it. While tattooing operates always the same way, one can distinguish various types of tattoo organizations and their descriptions. It is the close relation between economy and art manifest in tattooing that again plays an important role for the functioning of tattoo organizations.

Interlude One: Economy, Art and the Form of Phenomena

Tattooing is by no means the only social phenomenon constituted by artistic and economic communication. Other phenomena are associated with and constituted by economy and art in one way or another, such as painting, dance, music, theater, poetry, fashion, film, and photography (see e.g. Becker 1951; Battani 1999; Troy 2003; Craig/Dubois 2010). One could even perhaps consider hairdressing and cooking belonging to this group (on the latter see Fine 1996a). The question, however, is how these phenomena involve the two forms of communication in each particular case.

We cannot simply assume that all of these phenomena operate in the same way. Some of them may share a parallax or similarly intricate form of communication with tattooing; others might operate in different forms. While certain phenomena share the same form of communication, we can expect to find differences in regard to the media, on which each of them draws. That is, the parallax form might be constitutive for different phenomena, whereas they distinguish themselves from one another because they draw on differing media of communication (both those I called pre-communicational and those that are crucial for the parallax itself). Finally, as I showed for tattooing, each of the initially mentioned names for phenomena may be an umbrella term for a variety of phenomena that differ in regard to their forms. To investigate the various forms and media that constitute a specific version of a phenomenon would, therefore, shed light on the commonalities and differences of phenomena that are commonly designated with the same name. As a result, this will require a (scholarly) choice or reservation of designations for each version of a phenomenon (such as tattooing in distinction to legal marking, medical dermatography/micropigmentation and beautification/permanent make-up). Only then can a phenomenon be identified both conceptually (its form and media) and semantically in order to distinguish it clearly from others. The analysis of the form of a phenomenon, thus, allows us determine how it is constituted through communication, which forms of communication play a role in its social emergence and how it distinguishes itself from other phenomena that are commonly subsumed under the same name.

I would like to speculate about the communicational appearance of phenomena for which artistic and economic communication seem to be constitutive. Further research, of course, would need to study them more closely.

The commissioned taking of photographs seems to work similarly to tattooing (see

Battani 1999; Aspers 2001). In this particular case, the taking of photographs can be understood as artistic communication, while at the same time it constitutes a commissioned service that is purchased. The photograph thereby functions as a medium for artistic and economic communication alike, that is both as artwork and commodity.

There are other forms of taking photographs, for example what one might call artistic, amateur, scientific, and other types. While they all share the photograph as a medium, the forms of communication constituting them differ. Amateur photography seems to operate only in the form of art, even though it might not be observed in terms of art. The taking of photographs, one could describe as artistic, first emerges through artistic communication, whereas it is likely that the photographs later become formed by economic communication. In this case, one could speak of a sequential, instead of a parallax, involvement of economy and art. In contrast, scientific photography exclusively operates in the form of scientific communication, without any relation to economic or artistic communication.

As these examples show, the taking of photographs, despite this umbrella term, appears in different forms, while drawing on the same medium of communication. It is the commissioned taking of photographs and what I called artistic photography, which seem to be constituted by artistic and economic communication. The difference, however, might lie in how they form the two forms of communication (a parallax in contrast to a sequential involvement).

A certain form of painting is also comparable to tattooing. As in the case of photography, there are different variants of painting one can distinguish if one looks at their forms of communication. Painting may be constituted by artistic communication alone. Only subsequently does it become the object of economic communication when, for example, an art dealer or gallery sells the artwork (see Velthuis 2007; this also applies to other artwork).

In contrast, we find cases of commissioned painting, such as the making of portraits, which would not occur without payment (see Plattner 1996: 110ff.). The same applies to other commissioned artwork such as sculptures, installations, drawing and playing music that operate in the same parallax form, albeit each communicating through different media. In all these cases, for which the semantics of “commercial art” is used, both artistic and economic communication seem to be constitutive for the emergence of the phenomena.

There are many other phenomena that could be considered in regard to their forms and media of communication and the involvement of art and economy. What, for ex-

ample, about hairdressing and its form? Is there a version that operates in a parallaxic form of economy and art? Could we find a similar case of cooking that differs from other versions operating in a different form but using the same medium of food? I think it is likely that a closer examination, of the way these and other phenomena work, can provide new insights into the operational differences and the variously involved forms of communication.

The analysis of form/medium constellations of communication can also be expanded to other social domains. The investigation of parallaxic forms should not be limited to artistic and economic communication. This means, whenever two different forms of communication figure as co-constitutive sides of a form of communication, we observe the working of a parallaxic operation. Perhaps one can find even further special and intricate forms of communication that are responsible for the emergence of certain social phenomena.

This approach suggests an openness towards new constellations of communication and a close empirical investigation of them. Their investigation could be guided by the thesis that the forms of communication of modern society prove more varied and complex than implied (yet not as such excluded) by the theory of functional differentiation. The assumption of differentiated functional systems offers a theoretical starting point for looking at how phenomena emerge, for example as a combination of distinct functional systems' forms of communication. Instead of looking solely at phenomena that are constituted exclusively by a single form of communication, we should also consider those phenomena, which cannot easily be attributed to one functional system or societal domain.¹ An analysis of forms and media of communication will contribute to the understanding of the empirical differences and commonalities among phenomena. In regard to the theory, one will be able to better grasp the variety of operational couplings between forms of communication and the role of media in it. Instead of an exclusive concern with the broader societal contexts, we can thus go into more (empirical) detail and investigate social processes less prominent or, alternatively, all too familiar. This enables us to come increasingly closer to doing justice to the complexities of society.

¹ For alternative approaches that similarly look beyond functional systems, see Opitz/Bayer (2007) and Henkel (2010).

7 Flash and Custom: The Organization of Tattooing

Tattooing as an operation, does or does not occur, regardless of whether it does so in the context of an organization. Nevertheless, it remains likely that an organization can be found, if tattooing takes place. From the inception of the first reported tattoo organization in mid-nineteenth century America, it became more expected that tattoos would be performed by professional tattooists, working in tattoo establishments.¹ Though tattooing may well have taken place without occurring in the context of an organization (e.g. among soldiers, sailors, or prisoners), the emergence and diffusion of tattoo organizations led to an increasing stabilization of the expectation that it does. Throughout the twentieth century this expectation became more or more plausible, even in cases where tattooing, tattoos, and tattoo organizations were negatively described as deviant, bad, and the like. This is best seen in the cases of bans of tattooing and tattoo organizations (on the prominent case of New York City, see McCabe 2001: 10; Webb 2002: 59-72). Political decisions and new laws targeted tattoo organizations precisely because they are seen as the places where tattooing happens. Regulations and even legal bans implicitly recognize tattoo organizations as the expected and 'privileged' context in which tattoos are produced, while ignoring other contexts where tattooing might take place (framed by interaction or organization, e.g. in private homes; for a debate about this one-sided consideration, see Mullen 2007). In short, tattooing happens prominently in tattoo organizations. The question to be answered in this chapter is, how organizations deal with tattooing, i.e., how they decide and thereby generate expectations about the conditions under which tattooing can take place.

Tattoo organizations provide tattoos as their main output. In order to do so, they have to make use of tattooing. Since organizations work in their own particular way as one type of sub-system, they do not directly operate 'in' tattooing. Rather, they relate to it by means of their decision-making. Tattoo organizations basically make decisions to offer tattooing and tattoos for customers. By doing so, however, tattoo organizations

¹ The first known tattoo organization in America and Europe is said to be the one of Martin Hildebrandt, a German immigrant setting up shop around 1850 (Parry 2006: 44; Jaguer 1990; Webb 2002: 23). It is very likely that there were already organizations at work elsewhere, but the historical material is rather scarce (on Japan see the literary description in Loti 1888: 307-311; see e.g. also Boyer 1898; Dr Bienvenu ~1900-1903).

not only face challenges and perturbations from their environment such as other organizations, their public, or specific societal domains such as law, the media etc. Tattooing itself constitutes a source of perturbation and challenge for a tattoo organization's functioning. I want to suggest, in this chapter, that precisely because of its intricate communicational constellation, its parallaxic form, tattooing constitutes an organizational challenge. The way tattoo organizations work, in other words, is the result of their dealing with tattooing.

To say that the parallax of tattooing perturbs tattoo organizations does not necessarily mean a negative organizational challenge. It may also trigger flexibility in how organizations deal with economy and art. The perturbation can therefore turn out productive as well. The decisions and expectations, with which an organization stabilizes itself, are not fixed or unchangeable. They need to be constantly produced and stabilized anew by an organization's decision-making and descriptions. Organizations can therefore find new ways of dealing with and conditioning the occurrence of tattooing when altering their decision-making, expectations, and/or descriptions.

While tattooing occurs (or not) as the parallaxic form of artistic and economic communication, one finds different outcomes in how organizations deal with it. Since the beginning of tattoo organizations, two contrasting forms of organizing tattooing have emerged and stabilized. I will call them the organizational forms of 'flash' and 'custom'.² If the form of tattooing poses a challenge for tattoo organizations, then these two forms represent two prevailing organizational solutions to deal with it. The decisions and expectations responsible for the occurrence of tattooing in an organizational setting differ primarily in how they relate to economy and art. That is, the two ways of organizing tattooing deal with the communicational constellation of tattooing differently. The organizational form called 'flash' comprises decisions and expectations that emphasize or are oriented towards economy. Those constituting the form called 'custom' are oriented towards art. In other words, economy or art constitute the main reference points for the central decisions in order to organize tattooing. An emphasis of, or orientation towards, either economy or art does not mean the exclusion of the other aspect altogether. It signifies that the other remains constitutive as the unmarked side of the distinction between economy and art. Each organizational form, therefore, generates with its central set of decisions and expectations an asymmetry between economy

2 If the terms refer to the organizational forms, i.e., to a set of decisions, including expectations and semantics, I put them in inverted commas (e.g. 'flash' or 'custom' organization). If they refer to more concrete things such as tattoos or tattooists, they are written without inverted commas.

and art, while maintaining this distinction.

It is important to keep in mind that the two organizational forms do not constitute themselves or emphasize one of the two aspects as such. 'Flash' and 'custom' do not represent 'essential' forms of organizing tattooing. Each set of decisions constitutes one possibility to fix contingency, i.e., a selection among alternatives. While not precluding the possibility of other alternatives, 'flash' and 'custom' represent the prevailing ones. This also implies that each single decision is one possible selection that could have turned out differently. Thus, whether one looks at single decisions or an entire set of them (what I call an organizational form), they do not make sense as such but only in distinction to their alternatives. The same also holds true for the main orientation or emphasis of a form in terms of economy and art. An organizational form or, for that matter, an organization has only a certain orientation in relation and distinction to others (this is highlighted in self- and other-descriptions).

Besides 'flash' and 'custom' there is a third type of organizing. It does not constitute an entirely new form of its own, but instead the meeting of the two prevailing forms in one and the same organization. Oscillation between the two, running in parallel, and the partial mixture of the two distinct forms, constitute variants of this third type. In the case of an oscillation and a parallel of the two forms (but less so in the case of partial mixture), the emphasis on either economy or art is suspended. The meeting of 'flash' and 'custom' in one organization results in a switch between or parallel emphasis of both aspects.

The primary aim of this chapter consists in analyzing how tattoo organizations deal with the same form of communication in different ways. Put differently, I want to show how different sets of decisions and expectations that deal with economy and art in their own particular way, lead to the emergence of the form of tattooing. At the same time, pointing to the limits of the organizational forms, I want to show under which conditions the occurrence of tattooing is hindered or made impossible.

Note on the Appearance of Tattoo Organizations

The forms of tattoo organization, which I will describe below, concern primarily the modes by which tattoo organizations decide and work. I therefore want to briefly describe some of their features, in order to give an impression of the variety of their more obvious appearances. These features, however, do not necessarily connect directly to an organization's form, although they are also the result of decisions. Similarly, the features do not determine whether a phenomenon works as an organization or not (see

the discussion in chap. 2.III on organizations).

On the one hand, tattoo organizations differ in how many members they include. One could say that they appear in different sizes. An organization may include between one and several dozens or even hundreds of members, which may be replaced or supplemented by others; some organizations rarely do so, others quite frequently. Tattooists and other personnel (e.g. the reception) may be replaced, tattoo apprentices may enter or leave and guest tattooists may be included for a certain period of time (some organizations include guests on a regular basis). It therefore seems rather difficult to state an average number of members.³

On the other hand, organizations maintain one to several establishments that may be located in a city or spread in different locations in one or several countries (in the past, organizations sometimes traveled around during the summer season; see e.g. Govenaar 2003; on traveling organizations see also Nordstrøm 2009). The latter case of distributed establishments may also be the result of franchising (McCabe 2001: 114; Feige 2003: 195; *Prick Magazine* 2007, 8/2: 20; for an early case see Burchett 1960). In addition to the maintenance of the establishment(s), many if not all organizations participate at tattoo conventions with one or several tattooists and apprentices. This may mean that a part or the entire personnel changes location for a certain period of time.

As outlined in chapter 2, the workings of an organization are based on the inclusion of members. They make it possible to define for whom the decision communication applies, in distinction to all those that are not part of the organization (its public or, more general, its environment; Luhmann 2001: 829f.). It cannot be ruled out that with new members an organization will change in one way or another its decision-making and structures. However, the described changes and spatial distribution do not necessarily affect the continuance of an organization's workings, as they will be described below. An organization continues to operate in its particular manner despite these changes. For example, as will be shown, the participation at tattoo conventions may lead to temporary changes of certain decision in the sense of an adaptation to a particular context. But this does not entail an entire and permanent restructuring of the organization (on the variability of organizational size see Luhmann 2006b: 310-311).

While these remarks should give a general impression of tattoo organizations' various appearances, as it may be observable from an everyday point of view, I would like

3 A quantitative analysis of the average number of members in an organization would be difficult and time-consuming to ascertain; especially for all the organizations portrayed in the tattoo magazines. Their descriptions rarely give complete information on this matter. Since this study is not concerned with quantities, I did not inquire about it in the interviews I conducted.

to re-emphasize that they are not the determining features. The organization is in any case constituted by decision communication, regardless of the number of members or the size and the number or location of its establishments.

Organizational Considerations in Academic Literature

While Sanders' seminal work (1989a; 1989b) investigated organizational processes, an organizational perspective is not that common in the academic literature. Only a few studies bring organizational aspects into focus (Vail 2000; Wicks/Grandy 2007, Grandy/Wicks 2008). These studies answer the question of present interest, if and how organizations differ from each other, in different and in a more indirect manner. Not organizations as such but tattooists seem to be of primary interest.

Sanders (1989a: 67) draws a distinction between "street" and "fine art" tattooists (putting the terms in quotation marks himself), characterizing the former as economically and the latter as artistically oriented. Sanders argues that conflicts may arise, especially for the latter role ("conflict between the roles of creative artist and practical business person", 1989a: 27).

Vail (2000) and Wicks and Grandy (2007), in contrast, distinguish between tattooists on the grounds of how someone becomes a tattooist. Both studies distinguish between apprenticeship and being self-taught as the two main types of a tattooist's training.

Vail (2000) relates the two types to prominent designations of tattooists. Apprenticeship connects to "old school" and self-taught to "nu skool" tattooists. These designations are used in the struggle for legitimacy of tattooists, especially from the 'old school' tattooists' point of view. Vail argues that 'old school' includes different (organizational) aspects that constitute a particular "ethic" that is defended against 'nu skool' tattooists and their neglect of it.

Drawing the same distinction regarding the training of tattooists, Wicks and Grandy (2007) speak of two different cultures and collectivities. They do not draw on, or refer to, the use of the semantics of 'old' and 'new school' like Vail.⁴ The collectivity of apprenticed tattooists relates to a culture of "professionalism, tradition/respect, and sacrifice" (Wicks/Grandy 2007: 357), while the collectivity of self-taught tattooists connects to a culture that highlights art (2007: 358; before that, however, the authors state

⁴ Wicks and Grandy (in both Wicks/Grandy 2007 and Grandy/Wicks 2008) miss to connect to or quote the discussion in sociology, especially the studies by Sanders and Vail. They mainly establish a link to the consumer research literature about tattooing. Even though the semantics might not have appeared in their data, it seems rather odd that they do not mention it as prominent self-/other-descriptions.

that this collectivity does not share a clear culture or cultural identities; 2007: 358). Wicks and Grandy (2007: 361) emphasize the ambiguities which show, that tattooists may in fact be members of a collectivity, without participating in the respective culture. In the other study, Grandy and Wicks (2008) work with an institutional theory. They focus on legitimacy created by tattoo 'firms' by means of a "discourse of professionalism based on artistry and medicine/public health" (2008: 22). According to Grandy and Wicks (2008: 22), this discourse contributes to "competitive differentiation" and the generation of expectations of customers towards the organizations. While Grandy and Wicks provide characteristics of tattooists they interviewed, such as the number of competitors, "product offering" ("custom art" and/or "flash"), socialization (apprenticed/self-taught), and pricing strategy, they do not suggest a differentiation of types of organizations (2008: 26, table 1).

One difference between my approach and these organizational perspectives, lies in the object of analysis. Although statements from tattooists and other persons constitute the main empirical material, as in the studies quoted, it is not the tattooists as persons, who make the organization. As outlined in the theory section (chap. 2), the focus lies primarily on the constitution of organizations through decisions. While working with descriptions, they are of interest because they look at organizations from different points of view. That is, they figure as self- or other-descriptions. From these descriptions one can infer how organizations organize tattooing, by means of their decision-making. Instead of only referring to how tattooists describe themselves (as artists, business people or the like), one can show how organizations make decisions and thereby produce descriptions of tattooists as their members.

Sanders' (1989a: 27) reference to role conflicts of 'fine art' tattooists as artists and business-persons, seem to go further than simply adapting descriptions. However, he does not relate these conflicts and their resolution to organizational characteristics and processes. According to him, tattooists deal with them "by exercising some degree of guidance during their interaction with clients" (1989a: 27). In contrast, I would like to suggest that both the conflicts and their (temporary) resolution is a matter of how organizations function. From this perspective, the interactive defusing or resolution of conflicts is closely related to organizations' decision-making (e.g. about the tattooist's role).

In the following sections, I suggest a differentiation between organizational forms, which does not correspond to the one made by Vail (2000) or Wicks and Grandy (2007: 358). Instead of distinguishing between 'old' and 'new school' organizations on

the grounds of the training mode or the style of tattoos, I draw a basic distinction between ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ organizations. I use these terms for referring to a set of decisions and expectations that connect directly to the occurrence of tattooing. In other words, I want to concentrate on the ‘core business’ of tattoo organizations, i.e., their dealings with tattooing that leads to the making of tattoos.

Limitations of the Organizational Analysis

The following analysis of tattoo organizations is not exhaustive. It excludes many aspects because of their own particular characteristics and the complex relations between them. Moreover, these aspects cannot be considered, because of the diverse perspectives (i.e. analytical approaches) such an endeavor would imply. The focus suggested in the following, I think, nevertheless sheds light onto a crucial and basic facet of tattoo organizations. I only want to indicate briefly what could be studied as well, if one had a different focus.

A focus on the organization as a system of its own could, for example, look at its polyphonic setup.⁵ One could investigate the different communicational domains the organization draws on (e.g. economy, art, law, mass media) and how the organization decides differently about them (decisions about salaries, costs, about artistic styles, advertising, contracts, etc.). A different perspective would give insights about how tattoo organizations deal with what they construct as their environment. One could analyze how and to what extent tattoo organizations deal with descriptions from the viewpoint of law (bans, court cases), politics (attempts to regulate the ‘tattoo industry’), and the mass media (reality television shows about tattooing).

In some cases, tattoo organizations offer more than exclusively tattooing and tattoos. One could look at how they not only organize tattooing, but also deal with other phenomena simultaneously. In the first half of the twentieth century, for example, it happened that an organization concealed its identity as a tattoo organization when offering cosmetic ‘tattooing’ (Burchett 1960). Though still including the same members, the organization switched to a different decision-making program and self-descriptions, in order to attract a different clientele (in Burchett’s case high-society women instead of sailors, workers etc.). The organization seems to have also switched to occupy itself temporarily with a phenomenon of a slightly different kind. In more recent cases, tattoo organizations expanded their offers to body piercing, scarification and similar forms that relate to the physical alteration of the human body. In these cases, the organ-

⁵ On polyphonic organizations see Andersen (2003b), Villadsen (2008) and Wagner (2009).

ization determines who among the members is responsible for which of the offers and establishes corresponding programs. Yet another way of adding to the main purpose of a tattoo organization is the incorporation of an art exhibition or gallery. These often relate to tattooing and tattoos, presenting exhibits from the history of the tattoo world or paintings and other artwork (e.g. Lyle Tuttle's tattoo museum; *TätowierMagazin* 2002, 9/78: 80). The focus of such an analysis could lie on how the organization deals with different phenomena (with particular communicational characteristics) simultaneously or consecutively by equipping itself with various modes of decision-making.

Organizations that indirectly deal with tattooing could be studied in their own right. Tattoo conventions and tattooists' associations, for example, constitute two kinds of organizations closely related to tattoo organizations (in some cases, it is a tattooists' association that organizes a yearly tattoo convention; see DeMello 2007: 197). Convention organizations gather tattoo organizations (among others) for a few days, during which they present themselves next to each other (see e.g. DeMello 2000; Fenske 2007). Convention organizations decide which organizations can participate under which conditions and about the supporting program including staged contests (best tattoos), shows, seminars etc. Similarly, tattooists' associations deal primarily with tattoo organizations, which form their members. They provide services to tattoo organizations (e.g. certificates, seminars, legal assistance, collaboration with political and medical organizations) and formulate conditions, with which its members have to comply (e.g. hygiene, artistic quality, professionalism). Even though both convention organizations and tattooists' associations may formulate conditions under which tattooing should take place, they do not directly organize tattooing themselves, but tattoo organizations. The study of the organization of organizations, thus, means to look at something other than what is suggested here.

I accept that I cannot give a complete picture of all the aspects of organizing tattooing and related phenomena indicated above. The rather narrow focus suggested here might exclude many of them, but it deals with what constitutes a central issue: how tattoo organizations manage their primary task differently.

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Subsequently, I give a brief overview of what happens during a typical tattoo session that can turn out generally in two ways. In the following sub-chapters I contrast the central decisions and expectations characteristic for 'flash' and 'custom' organizations. The decisions concern the type of tattoos created, how the organization attends to customers, what can be expected from the tattooist and what is expected from the custom-

ers (including an excursus about ‘bad tattooists’), and eventually the organization’s identity. For each case I show how these decisions and expectations produce either an economic or artistic focus of the organization. Finally, I discuss those organizations that draw on both forms in one way or another, and the effects this has on how they orient themselves to art and economy.

Two Typical Tattoo Sessions

In order to understand the contrasting decisions and expectations, characteristic for each organizational form, I want to show what happens in a typical tattoo session. The organization sets the conditions by which the interaction between tattooist and customer unfolds. The two organizational forms allow, each in their own way, to stabilize the organization itself and its way of dealing with customers’ requests and expectations (whether corresponding or diverging).

I first describe the order of events for the ‘flash’ organization and then for the ‘custom’ organization.⁶ While the two organizational forms shape the tattoo session differently, they nevertheless have certain general features in common. In each case the customer basically needs to make a choice, sit down, get tattooed, and pay for it. The tattooist, in turn, has to talk and listen to the customer, prepare the workstation and utensils, do the tattoo, inform the customer about the healing process, and receive the money. The conversation during the actual process of doing the tattoo is often concerned with non-tattoo related topics. It may even be purposefully directed to different topics by the tattooist in order to distract the customer from the procedure and pain (see Steward 1990: 101).⁷

Entering the establishment⁸ of a ‘flash’ organization, the customer is confronted with hundreds of tattoo designs displayed on ‘flash sheets’ covering the walls, in sample books and folders.⁹ Each sheet shows several designs of different sorts. In the past, described as the time of the ‘Old School’, they contained maritime designs, pin-up girls, daggers, snakes, eagles, designs with scrolls and phrases (such as ‘Death Be-

6 For a start, I describe the situation in concrete terms not yet much filtered by theory.

7 In this regard the tattooist is said to figure as psychoanalyst, psychologist, spiritualist, priest, and many others things (Steward 1990: 41; Madame Chinchilla 1997: 61; McCabe 2001: 106; *Tattoo Energy* 2007, 9/48: 66). Or simply as “a kind of jack-of-all-trades” (Steward 1990: 173).

8 ‘Establishment’ is meant as a (historically) neutral term for the physical space a tattoo organization uses. Approximately until the 1960 it was common for a tattoo organization to travel with carnivals and circuses, or to be located in arcades, barber shops, bars and other spaces used primarily for other purposes (see Spamer 1934; Steward 1990; Govenar 2003).

9 Flash originally refers to ‘flash sheets’ and designs, which were invented in the early twentieth century for display purposes, i.e., as ‘eye catchers’ (Hardy 1995: 16; Govenar 2003: 32). The designation implies “the immediacy of their appeal” (Govenar 2003: 18).

fore Dishonor', 'Man's Ruin', 'Sailor's Grave', 'Mom' etc.), and many more (see Spamer 1934; The Drawing Center/Hardy 1995; Govenar 2003; Hardy 2005). Today, one finds flash sheets of almost all kinds of tattoo designs, including (neo-)tribal (black ornamental) designs, fantasy, horror, Japanese and Chinese motifs. In addition to flash, the organization also often displays photographs of tattoos. In the past, these pictures showed well-known tattooed entertainers or attractions from sideshows and circuses, or other tattooed persons (see e.g. Govenar 2003). Today, it is rather common to display pictures of tattoos, which the organization produced itself, in order to show what its members are able to do. This display of tattoo designs has the purpose of inviting the customer to look around, walk from sheet to sheet along the walls, and to browse through the books. In other words, the organization visually describes itself and its capabilities, and directs its (potential) customers' expectations.

After browsing through the designs, the customer eventually chooses a design. Until the use of photocopiers, the tattooist searched for the corresponding template ('stencil') of the chosen design in order to apply it onto the customer's skin. Alternatively, the tattooist used the flash drawing as a template for drawing the design 'free-hand' onto the skin (see Govenar 2003: 115, 120). As described in the previous chapter, the customer and tattooist discuss the placement of the tattoo and other aspects not yet determined by the design itself. While the size, for example, could not easily be adjusted in the case of ready-made templates, this became possible by using photocopiers for the preparation of the template on special paper (see Hardy 1995: 19).

Most of the designs displayed on 'flash sheets' are small to medium in size, enabling the tattooist to make the tattoo in a short period of time, ranging from a few minutes to a few hours. In the past, the designs on the sheets were frequently tagged with prices (see e.g. The Drawing Center/Hardy 1995: 18; Govenar 2003: 16, *passim*).¹⁰ In the case of contemporary 'flash sheets', this is no longer common. In regard to both past and present, however, the organization demands a price per tattoo design, possibly with consideration of the size, placement and complexity of the tattoo (Rubin 1988: 233).

After the preliminary considerations and the preparation of the tattooist's utensils, the tattoo is made in the customer's skin. At the end, the tattooist instructs the customer about the after-care procedures during the healing phase of the tattoo. If it did not take

¹⁰ During the same period, special sheets were displayed for those who could not afford expensive designs. The tattooist Doc Webb states about the early 1930s: "Almost every shop had a large-sized sheet (about 28" x 44") of 25¢ designs. They called this a 'porkchop' sheet (the end of this sheet supplied porkchops instead of hamburgers). Everyone headed for the porkchop sheet" (in Hardy 1988a: 7).

place in advance, the customer then hands over the money (McCabe 2001: 95; Morse 1977: 74-75). When the customer clears the seat and leaves the tattoo establishment, the next customer will talk to the tattooist. Then, the entire procedure starts all over again.

If one wants to get a tattoo from a 'custom' organization, the tattoo session looks different. Before the customer enters the tattoo establishment at all, he or she might need to know about the organization beforehand (see e.g. *Inked* 2008, February: 102). It is likely that the organization does not have a 'street' establishment, where potential customers can simply 'walk-in' (Hardy 1995: 22). If it features some visible indicators or advertising (e.g. in a show case), it will probably be subtle or unobtrusive (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/139: 59). If the establishment is in a publicly visible location, however, it does not mean that the customer can get tattooed immediately. This is because the 'custom' organization attends to its customers 'by appointment only'. In order to establish contact with the tattoo organization, the customer either calls for an appointment or stops by to get one.

Visiting the establishment at the arranged time, the customer and tattooist enter a conversation about the customer's idea of the tattoo design. In order to generate ideas and to show the organization's main stylistic orientation, the customer can look at drawings and probably also flash displayed on the wall and in folders. But it is more likely that the organization presents its already completed works with photographs collected in 'portfolios' of each tattooist. This display of finished work or work-in-progress (e.g. of large-scale tattoos) collected in the organization's visual 'portfolio' allows customers to see the tattooists' abilities and preferences (see Rubin 1988: 235). The conversation between customer and tattooist serves the purpose of determining how the tattoo design will look, in terms of motif, colors, size, placement, and its price. But at this stage there is probably only a rough sketch or material for visualizing the idea of the design. Only now do the tattooist and customer arrange an appointment for the actual making of the tattoo or the first of several tattoo sessions.

At this point, the price of the tattoo is determined. The tattooist calculates the price according to criteria such as the basic materials needed, the size and complexity of the tattoo, and the time needed to complete it. For a small or, conversely, a large one the tattooist can fix the price for the entire tattoo, no matter how long it will take until completion (similar to flash). More commonly, the tattooist demands a fee per hour or session until the completion of the custom tattoo. Because the tattooist needs to prepare the design before the customer comes back for the appointment, a deposit is re-

quested. This gives the organization a financial guarantee, because then it is the customers' loss, should they not keep the appointment.

Between the first consultation and the actual tattoo appointment the tattooist works on the draft of the design. Depending on the size and complexity of the design, the completion of the tattoo can take from one session to several ones, lasting months or even years. Unlike the completion of a flash tattoo, 'custom work' needs more time, both for its planning and realization.

Hypothetically, a custom-made tattoo design can be done in every conceivable style. Although they were created before, the 'tattoo renaissance' fostered the making of large-scale and elaborate designs inspired by Japanese tattoos mixed with existing designs. The tattooist Sailor Jerry Collins is considered as one of the pioneers (Rubin 1988: 235; Hardy 2005). Other styles emerging in the wake of the 'renaissance' comprise 'traditional' art genres (e.g. conceptual art, cubism)¹¹, fantasy/science-fiction, bio-mechanical (e.g. inspired by H.R. Giger), but also 'tribals', portraits, and more (see e.g. Rubin 1988; Webb 2002; *Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 52). Since the customers need to come up with ideas for a design themselves, anything can be adapted to a custom tattoo.

For the actual tattoo session the tattooist creates a sketch of the design in its outlines. Either the tattooist transfers the sketch onto the skin as in the case of flash tattoos, or the outlines are drawn onto the skin directly with a pen. Especially in the case of large-scale designs the use of paper might turn out to be rather cumbersome (*TätowierMagazin* 2006, 12/122: 133). 'Freehand' is a variety of the latter. In this case, the tattoo is made directly, with only a few points of orientation: drawn with a pen on the skin. This allows the tattooist to make changes during the process.

In regard to the actual tattoo process, custom does not differ much from flash. It involves more or less the same procedures, materials, and eventually the same healing advice.

I Standardized or Customized: Types of Tattoos

A tattoo organization has to make a decision about what kind of tattoos it offers. This decision has different results, depending on whether the organization operates either in

11 Connecting to art in descriptions, Rubin describes the 'new generation' of tattooists of the 'renaissance' as "avant-garde", distinguishing them from the "international folk style" tattooists (Rubin 1988: 235ff.; also e.g. *TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/144: 44). Such an artistic semantics is not unusual for the observation of tattoos and tattooing during and after the 'tattoo renaissance' (see Hardy in Gilbert 2000: 202; McCabe 2001: 41).

the form of ‘flash’ or in the form of ‘custom’. Standardization and the reproduction of established designs characterizes ‘flash’, whereas ‘custom’ stands for the customization of unique tattoos.

Flash

The flash sheets displayed on the walls and in folders present the organization’s offered selection of particular tattoo designs in one or more styles. With this selection the organization gives itself a limited amount and variety of designs that can be produced. The decision of a particular selection is not taken once and for all, though. It can be altered slightly and on a constant basis, within the parameter of flash designs put on sheets (adding a new design once in a while, improving or re-drawing old ones, adding entirely new sheets; e.g. Govenar 2003: 131).

The designs offered are standardized in two ways. On the one hand, they originally come from a standard repertoire in terms of style. The so-called ‘Old School’ designs with which flash sheets began, for example, became “formulaic” (Spamer 1934: 109) because organizations either copied tattoos from the skin of customers, exchanged designs with each other, or sold flash sheets. The effect was their ongoing reproduction and wide diffusion (Hardy 1995: 19; DeMello 2007: 115). They became “the tried and true designs” (McCabe 2001: 30). Consequently, organizations ended up with the display of more or less the same tattoo designs (McCabe 2001: 108). Today, flash sheets displaying a variety of styles (‘tribals’, Chicano or street style, biomechanical etc.), often signed by the creator, are still widely distributed, while some of the old ones are again available.

On the other hand, flash became increasingly standardized because the same designs were chosen time and again by many customers. The tattooist Samuel Steward refers to this standardizing effect due to customers’ design choices. Many customers, Steward (1990: 168) notes, turned down his “collection of original [flash] designs” even though they asked for original tattoos nobody else yet had. Steward summarizes:

The clientele was not notable for its originality. A tattoo to them ought to ‘look like a tattoo’, which was to say that it had to *conform* to their idea of all tattoos. It had to be like something which they had seen before on someone. The designs, therefore, had to be completely stylized. (Steward 1990: 168-169; emphasis in original)

Due to preferences for designs seen on somebody else, customers expect to find the same or similar designs on the walls of a ‘flash’ organization. This makes customers’ demands rather predictable (Hardy 1995: 20). Even if they might ask for something ori-

ginal, the tattoo should not be too different but has to be similar to the already existing ones (Steward 1990: 168). Customers' choices reproduce this idea of what a tattoo should look like and contribute to the stylistic standardization of designs. Even though Steward's organization provides flash, it nevertheless expects customers to be more original than just choosing what has been chosen repeatedly before. Originality here, however, refers to original designs already produced on paper to be selected, and thus does not mean the same as for a 'custom' organization.

Another tattooist sees customers' choices just as problematic. He argues that it was easier to convince tattooists to change the designs they offered than to influence customers.

Tattoo customers are about as conservative as Republican bankers. They buy the same designs year after year and they stick with what's safe. Peer group pressure is really intense. They're afraid to get something different or so unusual that their friends will laugh at them, so they get the panther over and over. (in Hardy 1991: 66)

The reproduction of the same design repertoire characteristic for 'flash' organizations is not so much the organization's fault. Rather, it stems from the dynamics among customers (peer pressure) and the fear to be too different, compared to other tattooed persons. Customers' individuality seems not to be of paramount importance, as it turns out for custom tattoos. Similarity, comparability, and conformity are seen as the main reason for the standardization of tattoos.

Descriptions such as these come more likely from the viewpoint of organizations, which work in the form of 'custom' or oscillate between the two forms. Because of this, customers are considered responsible for the organization reproducing standardized tattoo designs. As the example of Steward shows, however, despite critical descriptions, the organization continues to offer standardized tattoos. In other words, the organization continues to decide in favor of its customers' expectations (i.e. what it expects customers to expect of it). As a consequence, this is one decision that establishes it as a 'flash' organization.

From the perspective of an organization exclusively operating in the form of 'flash', the use and request of the same visual repertoire constitutes its very basis rather than a problem. Flash tattoos are "the bread and butter" of this type of organization (McCabe 2001: 79; Hardy 2005: 51).¹² A tattooist's statement establishes quite clearly a close relation between what the 'flash' organization offers and what customers request and le-

¹² This applies also to standardized tattoos in general, even if not described in terms of flash (see Burchett 1960: 75).

gitimately expect. Recalling some “tattoo guys” visiting his establishment and laughing at the traditional tattoo designs, the tattooist notes:

When you're in Rome you have to do like the Romans do; you have to do what's called for. With the amount of people I tattoo, I cannot do intricate tattoos. I provide a service and I am catering to my clientele. In my area, these are poor people; they can't afford to spend \$300 for the tiger, dragon, eagle, clouds backpiece with the Chinese nonsense. They come in and say, 'Give me this... Give me that!' I do heavy, solid, traditional tattooing the way it's been done for years. (in McCabe 2001: 80)

This organization's customers cannot spend a lot of money for large and elaborate tattoos. Rather, they demand affordable and readily available tattoos (“easy tattoos to apply and reasonable prices”, McCabe 2001: 81).¹³ The organization self-evidently complies with these requests (“you have to do what's called for”). Because of the number of customers, the organization expects the customers not to request “intricate tattoos”. It would be unable to deal with them. That is why it offers flash designs on sheets displayed on the walls of the establishment (shown in pictures of its' interior, McCabe 2001: 79-80; see figure 8). The customer is expected to select one of the tattoo designs, even if this means that another customer may pick the same design as well. The description, thus, clearly establishes the link between the decision to provide flash tattoos and the expectations of the organization and those attributed to its customers. But even if the organization legitimizes the decision with reference to its customers' demands as inevitable, it is still the organization itself that takes the decision.

Both the offer and the customers' selection of flash designs lead to reproduction and standardization. It equally leads to the creation of mutual expectations between the organization and its customers. By offering flash, the organization expects its customers to make a choice from the wide selection of tattoo designs. In this sense, it visually informs about its decision to produce a particular type of tattoo. Likewise, the decision and the connected expectation in turn generate customers' expectations to find flash designs in the establishment and to be able to make their choice.

Custom

As some of the tattooists' statements indicate, ‘custom work’ clearly differs from flash. While flash tattoos constitute a selection of already existing and pre-fabricated designs, custom tattoos originate from a comparatively more time-consuming collaboration between tattooist and customer. In comparison to a flash tattoo, custom work is non-

¹³ Flash tattoos are said to be “a little less taxing on the mind” (*Skin Deep* 2006, April/131: 36) than custom tattoos.

standardized because each tattoo represents a unique creation.

While the tattooist and customer may make use of reference and inspirational visual material of any kind, it is not copied and simply transferred onto the skin for a tattoo. Custom refers to a new and original arrangement, even if existing designs and images are incorporated. The demand of uniqueness and originality implies that tattoos will not be reproduced. The decision to offer custom work, therefore, connects to the expectation that each tattoo should represent a single copy.¹⁴ The organization is expected to advise customers in regard to original tattoo designs, and it expects customers to request individual work instead of imitations (e.g. *TätowierMagazin* 2002, 9/77: 20). In distinction to 'flash' organizations, Don Ed Hardy puts succinctly, a 'custom' organization has "the mandate" to produce "one-of-a-kind original designs developed in collaboration with the client instead of offering a set image bank into which the customer had to fit his or her psyche" (in Gilbert 2000: 197; similarly in Vale/Juno 1989: 52).

Because they are custom made, the motifs of the tattoos can be of any conceivable kind. Ranging from small to full-body tattoos, there seem to exist only technical limits as to what can be converted into custom work. It can be a dragon or carp in the Japanese style covering an entire arm, leg, back, or even body, fantasy and horror motifs, a realistic portrait of a person, single black dots forming a large-scale tribal composition, and many other (un-)conventional motifs. The creation of a custom tattoo with the motifs usually found on flash sheets and stylistically attributed to the 'old school' (bold outlines, black shading, simple motifs) is possible as well. It is not so much the elaborateness or size of the tattoo and its motif that makes it custom, as long as it constitutes a unique and original piece of work imagined and developed by both customer and tattooist.

Because the making of custom tattoos is based on original ideas and a collaborative design process, they are costlier in more than one sense. As remarked by the flash tattooist quoted before, the differences in effort and cost between custom and flash are significant. While flash is described as "quick and cheap", custom turns out "costlier, not just financially, but in time and dedication" (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: supplement, 8). The entire process of developing and creating the tattoo in skin takes more time and effort, for both the tattoo organization and the customer, than flash does. Because each tattoo constitutes a unique piece of work, tattoos have to be created from

14 The *TätowierMagazin* (2006, 12/122: 88ff.) started the campaign 'Copycats – No thanks!' against copying and 'theft of ideas', defending unique tattoos from being reproduced. It is argued that a personal and meaningful tattoo is devalued and, through its reproduction, becomes a mass commodity reduced to a 'nice look'.

scratch every time. Whereas the ‘flash’ organization may draw on existing designs that are very likely selected repeatedly, the ‘custom’ organization has only sources of inspiration available. Each time designs and ideas have to be adapted to the current customer in order that already existing ideas are not produced on other customers’ skin.

The comparatively higher expenditure of time and financial effort for custom work is described in a ‘guide’ about portrait tattoos. Portraits, it is explained, can be made either on the basis of flash designs or as custom work.

A good portrait takes time and is usually tattooed at an hourly rate. Some studios have portraits of famous stars as flash, which will usually have a set price, but if you require a personal portrait, then expect a custom price. (*Skin Deep* 2007, September/150: 36)

Because custom work takes more time, the mode of pricing differs from flash.¹⁵ Instead of a previously fixed price, the organization charges per hour, or alternatively, per session (the time needed for developing and drawing the design is already included in the hourly rate without extra charge). That is, a personalized or customized tattoo has a “custom price”, justified by the invested time and effort (dedication). The standardized procedures of flash, by comparison, go well together with (lower) prices fixed in advance. Such a correspondence, as it is formulated, needs to be expected.

The decision to offer and create either flash or custom produces accompanying expectations, i.e., the expectation that customers will know and even have expectations about the relation between effort and price (e.g. also *Skin Deep* 2008, July/161: 6).

*

Standardization and reproducibility characterize flash tattoos; originality and uniqueness characterize custom tattoos. The expectations an organization generates with the decision about the type of tattoo, turns out equally distinct: In the case of flash, customers are expected (to expect to be able) to choose from a selection of pre-drawn designs. For custom tattoos, customers are expected (to expect to be able) to make up their own mind with the help of the tattooist.

The flash producing organization opts for an economic orientation. Offering a selection of designs that are more or less reproduced on the skin signifies that the organization can save time and effort. In principle, it does not need to create designs anew for each customer. Rather, it can rely on a set of pre-drawn designs and their existing or easily made templates. The organization reproduces the same designs time and again,

15 The extra time the organization invests into custom work is sometimes considered critically. Tattooists have to draw in their spare time in order to fulfill individual requests. Aside from the usual work related ailments such as back pain, a tattooist remarks in a commentary, the extra effort can result in psychic conditions such as burnouts (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/141: 123).

without necessarily having to alter them or offer new ones. Flash does not only refer to “the immediacy of their appeal” (Govenar 2003: 18), but equally, so to say, to their immediate availability. They constitute ‘ready-made’ and ‘ready-to-apply’ tattoos.

The organization producing custom tattoos, in contrast, relies on its customers and their own ideas for tattoos. Because the tattoos should be unique, original, and customized in each individual case, the organization has to take its time and make an effort. The organization has an artistic orientation insofar as it focuses on the creation of custom work by transferring customers’ ideas into personalized tattoos. It may offer a particular style or be known for certain motifs. Even then, custom means to convert a recurring request anew for each customer so that there are no two tattoos the same.

The decision on the type of tattoos offered indicates an economic focus in the case of ‘flash’ and an artistic orientation in the case of ‘custom’. This will become clearer when we look at the other decisions. As explained at the beginning of the chapter, however, such a focus does not exclude the other aspect as such. The flash producing organization does not simply reproduce any kind of tattoo. It has to decide, of course, which kind of flash designs it offers (whether created by itself or bought from others). Not only saleability but also artistic quality, diversity of motifs and styles, and other criteria may be taken into account. Similarly, the custom tattoo producing organization does not just consider artistic quality, uniqueness, and the translation of customers’ ideas into a tattoo design. As the quoted statements from both flash and custom tattooists show, custom tattoos have also their price and it is comparably higher than the one of flash tattoos. That they turn out more expensive does not automatically mean that the ‘custom’ organization is economically oriented. Rather, the price is an indication of the effort put forth for the creation of custom work. It is the artistic uniqueness and originality that (partly) justifies the comparably higher prices (as also argued by the flash tattooist who establishes the link between intricacy and higher price). It is crucial to see that both economic and artistic aspects are relevant for both types of tattoos. But the main point is that the decisions to do either flash or custom work differently emphasize economic and artistic aspects.

Diverging Expectations

The decision to offer either flash or custom produces expectations both in regard to the organization and its customers. This bears the potential for a clash of expectations and their disappointment. Customers may be disappointed when going to the ‘wrong’ establishment. A ‘custom’ organization, for example, might display flash designs on the

walls and in folders. The organization, however, refuses to actually reproduce the displayed designs exactly the way they are drawn on paper. Such an organization, then, decides to use flash only as reference material and sources of inspiration (e.g. *Skin Deep* 2008, February/156: 37). Customers who would like to get an identical copy of a flash design on their skin will be disappointed if the organization turns down their request. From the customers' point of view, the organization's display of flash designs might be understood as a message about its offers and ways of working like a 'flash' organization. While the organization lays the emphasis on the visual content as an inspirational source, customers might connect to the fact that the designs are visibly displayed as if one could simply select one of them.

A similar encounter of diverging expectations happens if customers confront the 'custom' organization with requests for copies of tattoos they saw on someone else. As in the case of requests for flash, the organization gets confronted with expectations that do not match its own decisions and expectations. Consequently, the organization refuses such requests.

As tattoos became more visible and 'mainstream' especially through the media, organizations were confronted with special requests. This is the subject of discussion in a magazine interview. The interviewer talks about the not yet realized possibilities ("untapped market") of tattoos that customers increasingly seem to notice (e.g. seen in tattoo magazines as the interviewee remarks). But, the interviewer adds, "it's quite nice that things are still a bit selective within tattooing" (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50). Responding to this, the tattooist explains how the organization deals with certain requests in the wake of the ubiquity of tattoos. While agreeing with the interviewer's assessment, the tattooist notes:

But when it started to become more mainstream recently with the whole Robbie Williams/Beckham thing, it got a bit stressful, people asking for those same celebrity tattoos all the time. We don't copy any work and we got pissed off telling people we don't do the Beckham angel/crucifixion or the Williams arm piece! Luckily now our customers are more discerning, who want something a little (or a lot) different! Which is good, coz that's what I do. (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50)

Because the organization operates in the form of 'custom', it does not simply copy existing tattoos, which customers have seen on famous people's skin. Confronted with customers expecting the organization to do exactly this, the organization had to turn down requests repeatedly. As the tattooist remarks, the organization increasingly met customers with a better corresponding idea of tattoos, i.e., custom tattoos that are not simply copies but "a little (or a lot) different". Emphasizing this newer trend of cus-

tomers' requests and mentioning the so-called "'do whatever you want' clients" (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50), the tattooist comments on the neglect of this organization's flash designs. "Our flash books", the tattooist jokingly states, "would probably have dust on them if we didn't wipe 'em down occasionally, and I'm sure I heard the tribal folder weeping to itself the other day!!" (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50). The organization both constructs itself in terms of 'custom' and describes its favored customers as those requesting unique or 'different' tattoos. A confrontation with requests for copies and flash leads to organization's perturbation and, eventually, more cases in which tattooing cannot take place.

The same case also shows the difference flash and custom make in regard to their pricing. The creation of custom work can be expected to be linked to the organization's "hourly asking price" (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50). Customers who choose those tattoo organizations that "deal with the 'low rent' side of things", go there because they do not have to wait as long and do not pay as much (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50). The 'custom' organization, thus, expects customers to expect higher prices precisely because it provides custom work. Accordingly, "price checkers", who try to find the organization with the lowest price for a particular tattoo, are sent away (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50). The request for a lower price than usual or a bargain perturbs the organization as well, because its 'custom' orientation is faced with a diverging expectation. While the organization focuses on the creation of unique custom work, 'price checkers' orient themselves by the price of a tattoo. Even if the person likes the tattooist's work, the request for a bargain makes the impression that the tattooist is "not worth the money" (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50). The perturbing potential of the customer's request and expectation is eventually evident in the organization response. As the tattooist states, the customer is told that he feels insulted. At the end of the encounter, the tattooist explains, the 'price checker's' request is refused at any price.

The opposite case of confrontations may happen as well, when customers with individual and personalized requests confront a 'flash' organization. The expectations of both the organization and the customer will be disappointed. The 'flash' organization expects the customer to simply choose a design from the organization's selection, while the customer wants to get a personalized tattoo that does not yet exist, neither on someone's skin nor on the wall of the organization. The statement of the flash tattooist cited earlier implies this, because he notes that he cannot do and has no time for intricate tattoos. From the way he portrays his customers ("'Give me this... Give me that!'",), one can infer that the organization expects them to pick their designs from the offered

selection (McCabe 2001: 80). Similar to the opposite case, the ‘flash’ organization will very likely reject customers looking for custom work.

The emergence of a situation in which expectations get disappointed, however, is not, in any case, necessarily (attributable to) the fault of customers. It occurs, so to speak, that a ‘flash’ organization ‘adorns itself with borrowed plumes’ by featuring a misleading display.¹⁶ In such cases, what the organization displays on its walls, in folders or in the display window, does not match what the organization produces. This is the case if designs or tattoos of other tattooists are offered as the organization’s own results. The organization may decide to take flash designs and delete the name of their original creator while replacing it with the one of the organization’s tattooist (see Hardy 1995: 16 referring to habits in the past). Today, an organization can display pictures taken from tattoo magazines or other organization’s websites without mentioning the creator’s name (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/139: 5). Eventually, as an interviewed tattooist remarked, an organization may use pictures of tattoos produced by well-known organizations, taken at tattoo conventions (personal interview, tattoo convention 2008). The organization disappoints the expectations it generates with the decision to display others’ work if it is not capable to actually produce the same style or quality. A customer who wants a custom tattoo will very likely notice the deception, when the tattooist is unable to translate the ideas explained in the first consultation. Should the customer not notice anything at this point in the process, it will become clear during, or at the end of, the making of the tattoo.¹⁷ If the ‘deception’ is revealed before the actual work in skin begins, the proceedings can be stopped. In other cases it might be too late since tattooing is taking place. The disappointment of fueled expectations might result in a dispute about the continuation of the procedures or even the already made or pending payments.

An organization’s visual promise of tattoos, which it is unable to verify in its creations and the generation of misleading expectations, thus, may have far more serious consequences in this case than in the previous ones. While the organization can refuse certain requests, customers of such a misleading organization might at worst end up with a bad tattoo, unlike those promised.

These different examples of encounters show that the type of tattoos offered gener-

¹⁶ Instead of misleading customers with the display of others’ work, an organization may resort simply to a different semantics. By this it also generates expectations to which it might not live up (e.g. *Skin Deep* 2008, February/156: 33; see further below on the relationship between organizational form and semantics).

¹⁷ ‘Unscrupulous’ organizations very likely proceed even if they are not capable to deal with certain (or even any) requests properly (see the excursus below).

ates expectations, with which customers have to reckon and to which organizations ideally correspond. Perturbations arise if the organization faces demands and expectations not in line with its decision to offer either flash or custom. Each set of expectations linked to either standardized or customized tattoos, is taken for granted and defended, for example by attributing expectations to customers, by reference to tradition, or the organization's own decisions. The discussion of confrontations with diverging expectations, semantically supports the organization's decisions and accompanying expectations. Organizations' self-descriptions legitimate why they turn down certain requests. At the same time, however, these discussions make it possible to observe the maintenance and defense of expectations' and decisions' self-evidence.

The reproduction of flash designs and the exact copying of other people's tattoos, constitute requests that the 'custom' organization will very likely reject. Equally, the 'flash' organization refuses to create custom work. The reason for each organization's rejection lies in their respective orientation. The 'custom' organization opts for the creation of unique pieces of work, laying the emphasis on the artistic aspects. Requests for copies or pre-drawn tattoos therefore, as observed in descriptions, would interfere with the organization's functioning. In contrast, the 'flash' organization decides to produce standardized and comparatively simpler tattoos that need less time and effort until completion. While quality remains an important factor, the emphasis lies with the economic facet of the creation of tattoos. This does not necessarily mean that the organization tries to make as much money as possible. Rather, as one quoted tattooist remarks, the prices have to be reasonable for the type of tattoos it offers. Since customers will not wait weeks or month but want their tattoo right away, there is not time for much consultation and artistic elaboration. Flash work can and has to be kept simple and be made quick. The procedures, therefore, have to correspond to the type of tattoo and the accompanying expectations. As the next section shows, the procedures turn out differently for the two organizational forms.

II Modes of Attending to Customers

The descriptions of the two tattoo sessions indicated that the production of flash and custom each connect to a particular way, by which the organization attends to customers. Seen from the customers' point of view, it is about how they participate in the creation of the tattoo. 'Walk-in' and 'working off the wall' represent the key features of the 'flash' organization. The corresponding modes of the 'custom' organization can be called 'by appointment only' and 'collaboration'. Let me start again with the modes

characteristic for ‘flash’.

Walk-in and Working Off the Wall

The term ‘walk-in’¹⁸, on the one hand, refers to the fact that the organization’s establishment is publicly visible and that customers can literally walk in. The designation ‘street shop’ characterizes this type of establishment exactly and its accessibility. Although not necessarily and exclusively used for the description of a ‘flash’ organization, ‘street shop’ often becomes used synonymously.

On the other hand, ‘walk-in’ describes the organization’s decision to attend to customers more or less immediately after they entered the establishment. If the organization faces more customers than it can handle at the moment, the ‘first come, first served’ principle may apply. Alternatively, the organization selects those customers who made their design choices first. Customers, therefore, can literally walk into the tattoo establishment and can get a tattoo after only a short waiting time during which they make their choice. There is no need for special appointments or first-time consultations. It suffices that the customers know that they want to get tattooed, even if they might not yet be sure which particular tattoo design they would like to get. The displayed selection of flash designs facilitates the customers’ choice.

‘Working off the wall’ constitutes the organization’s decision to provide a selection of readily available tattoo designs and to (re-)produce them for customers (see figure 8). This applies to all designs whether they are on the wall, in folders or displayed with other means (nowadays computer screens serve the same purpose). With the visible display of the designs the organization indicates its decision and the accompanying expectation (except for the previously discussed cases of ‘custom’ organizations).

¹⁸ Descriptions also use the terms ‘walk-in trade’ and, in reference to customers, ‘walk-ins’ (e.g. McCabe 2001: 37, 73, 88; *Prick Magazine* 2008, 8/4: 52; in German it is called ‘Laufkundschaft’, Feige 2003: 83).



Fig. 8: A 'flash' establishment (from McCabe 2001: 79; courtesy of M. McCabe)

The organization relies on and expects requests to work with its selection of designs. Accordingly, customers are expected to pick a design from the displayed selection of 'flash sheets'. In some cases, though, the organization also accepts pictures or designs brought by customers, as long as they can be transferred onto the skin with a template or freehand, that is directly tattooed onto the skin (see e.g. Govenar 2003: 115). Customers, in turn, are expected to expect the tattooist to transfer the designs they choose to their skin appropriately.

Only rarely might an organization disappoint this particular expectation implied in the decision to 'work off the wall'. The organization of New York City tattooist Charlie Wagner, operating throughout the first half of the twentieth century, seems to have done so, even though it displayed flash designs on the walls and worked on a 'walk-in' basis (see the picture in Hardy 2005: 116). While Wagner's organization offered and created flash designs, 'working off the wall' did not constitute the same decision as just described. The organization did not let customers make their own design choice. According to a tattooist who once stood in line but eventually did not get a tattoo, Wagner "would do daggers one week, ships one week, and maybe hearts the next weeks" (quoted in Hardy 1991: 35; see also *TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/145: 64). Leonard "Stoney" St. Clair recalls Wagner's method in a similar way. With a dia-

logue between Wagner and a customer, St. Clair's gives an idea of how the organization dealt with requests for designs:

He sold them sailors what he wanted to. "Oh, you don't want an eagle today. I'm not putting on eagles". A Sailor was sitting there, about half drunk one day. "Yes I do. I want this eagle right here". "You don't want an eagle". Charlie went to fooling around, mixing colors, put a heart on the guy. (in Govenaar 2003: 83)

Wagner did not let the customer make his own choice. Instead of creating the requested eagle, Wagner tattooed a heart. The reason was clear for the organization: it was not the day on which eagles were produced. The displayed flash designs in Wagner's establishment, and also the methods of the other organizations nearby, nevertheless generated the customers' expectations to be able to select a design themselves. The organization disappointed this expectation by determining itself, what kind of design it produced at a certain time. But it continued to operate, offering and creating standardized tattoos on the basis of flash designs.

Together with the decision to produce flash tattoos, the decision about how to attend to customers makes it possible for the organization to cater to several customers a day. Even if there are some changes or adaptations of a design, it can be transferred and created in skin rather quickly. The availability of a standard repertoire of flash designs signifies, a more or less, a standardized procedure and amount of work. As a consequence, the organization allows the tattooist to deal with customers at a fast pace.

A fast-paced handling and a constant change of customers, as indicated in descriptions, may be experienced by customers as rather rough. Recalling the experience of being a customer of a 'flash' organization for the first time, a tattooist notes:

First, waiting in line for hours, 20 minutes for choosing something from the wall. Pass the cash, in advance of course. Sit down. By no means move and shut up! A moment later: done and out... (*TätowierMagazin* 2006, 12/122: 58; my transl.)

The 'staccato' mode of expression used here reproduces the pace and character of the tattoo session. It translates the 'roughness' and fast pace, if not the impatience of the interaction between tattooist and customer. In addition, the tattooist mentions that this represents how many tattooists of the now older generation experienced their first tattoo session.

The 'flash' organization's simpler processing of customers is also compared with the demanding procedures in a 'custom' organization. In the past, a tattooist writes in a commentary, it was easier to cope with the work because there was a limited selection

of designs available. Organizations displayed “30 roses, 15 snakes, 20 skulls, 10 Old-School pin-ups” (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/141: 123; my transl.) on the walls of their establishments. In these times, customers always found something appropriate in the available selection. Eventually, the way the flash tattooist dealt with customers is similarly described in this commentary as in the previous quote: “That’s it, pick something out, sit down and shut up” (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/141: 123; my transl.). The description similarly uses a ‘staccato’ tone to render the rather rough way the tattooist dealt with customers.

Certainly there were and still exist exceptions. Samuel Steward’s organization is one of them. While he maintained a “running line of chatter” (Steward 1990: 101) during a tattoo session in order to distract the customer from the pain, other tattooists dealt with their customers in the way just described. “Many tattooists”, Steward (1990: 101) notes, “worked in surly silence, interested only in slapping on the design, getting the money, and making room for the next customer”.

Producing flash tattoos allows the organization to process customers quickly and to have a high ‘output’. Michael McCabe describes how this manifests itself when characterizing a tattooist known for his way of working.

He embodies everything there is to know about the traditions and has never wavered over the years in his resolve to tattoo clean, crisp, straight ahead designs as fast as lightning. In the time it takes most young tattooers today to tediously pander to their customer, place a stencil on the body and start to tattoo; Tony is off to the races, finished and on to the next customer. (McCabe 2001: 78)

While young tattooists spend a lot of time until they begin with a tattoo, the older and more experienced tattooist works very quickly. His organization consists of two tattooists only, yet still has a large ‘output’. “During the busy summer season”, McCabe (2001: 80) notes, “he and his helper Willie bang out more than 50 people a day, no problem”. Because of a fast-paced processing, the tattooist earned a corresponding nickname. “People call me the Mechanic”, the tattooist explains, “because I go quick and I get the ink in quick. I bang out a line of people” (McCabe 2001: 80).¹⁹

Similar to the standardized character of flash designs, the organization has to standardize its handling of customers. Otherwise, it would not be able to deal with the amount of customers. From the perspective of a ‘custom’ organization, this way of

¹⁹ In order to support this description, a picture shows a large group of people waiting in line in front of the establishment. The caption says that this is “on an average summer afternoon” (McCabe 2001: 79). For another picture of customers standing in line in front of and in a tattoo establishment, see Hardy (2005: 18).

'processing' people looks quick and impersonal (even rough, as shown above). From this point of view, for example, the 'flash' organization's functioning is likened to industrial production methods. A portrait describes a 'custom' organization's way of working in distinction to the opposite option. The fast paced and economically oriented 'flash' organization seems to constitute this other option.

Not that making the quick cash isn't nice, but their goal is not to be a conveyor belt of the cheap and easy tattoo. (*Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/12: 37)

While the portrayed organization seems not to decline "quick cash" as such, it does not function like a "conveyor belt". Rather, it stands for "a passion for body art" and, instead of producing "cheap and easy tattoo[s]", creates "in-house custom drawn tattoos" (*Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/12: 37). As the examples above make clear, the opposite organization of the portrayed one constitutes a 'flash' organization.

One finds a similar 'industrial' semantics in the term 'factory'. It is also used in order to distinguish between two types of organizations. A customer describes an organization, comparing it with other organizations he visited. Because of the tattooist's imagination and his ability to translate the customer's ideas into drawings, the customer says: "In other tattoo studios I got the impression of being in a factory, here at a tattooist" (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/139: 60). The factory-like organizations seem to be those unable to do what the custom tattooist can. One can, of course, only speculate about these 'factories', but it seems reasonable to assume that the short description refers to organizations reproducing designs quickly and many times a day.

Both kinds of descriptions of how 'flash' organization 'process' customers, point to the consequences of the decisions called 'walk-in' and 'working off the wall'. While the 'flash' organization's point of view highlights speed and quantity, the 'custom' perspective critically evaluates and distances itself from the effects of 'flash' decisions. Before I discuss the equivalent 'custom' decisions, I want to indicate problems that may arise when an organization works with the 'flash' decisions and the linked expectations.

Because of these decisions that lead to a fast paced procedure, the organization becomes susceptible to customers' interference. Customers who are not sure about getting tattooed or unable to find a tattoo design slow down the organization's work with customers. For this reasons, the organization either sends indecisive customers home again or tries to 'talk them out of it' (Steward 1990: 153; Govenar 2003: 142; Feige

2003: 246). The tattooist Samuel Steward dealt with such customers he calls “browsers” in his own particular way. Quoting himself, Steward for example used to say to a customer:

My boy, a tattoo shop is *not* a place to decide if you want one [a tattoo]; it’s a place you come to *after* you decide you want one. Why don’t you go home now and think about it a while longer and then come back and pick one – if you decide to get one. (Steward 1990: 154; emphasis in original)

Steward sent the people who looked at the flash for a long time home and made remarks that indicated indecisiveness. In most cases, he never saw the browsing person again. If the organization has to deal with indecisive customers, however, it cannot attend to those customers who already made their choice. ‘Browsers’, then, become “a time wasting nuisance” (Steward 1990: 154). The decisions that should allow a quick work rhythm tend to be undermined and the organization’s expectations of the customer get disappointed. That is why the organization may decide to not attend to these customers, not even by trying to consult them (Govenar 2003: 142). As an example from the past shows, a tattooist might reject such customers rather harshly. A tattooist with only six flash sheets on the wall, another tattooist recalls, used to say to his customers: “Hell, if you can’t find one there, you don’t need one” (quoted in Hardy 1988a: 9).

There are, however, exceptional cases of organizations that do not reject indecisive customers. To the contrary, their indecisiveness may be turned into an organizational advantage. The decisions of ‘walk-in’ and ‘working off the wall’ allow the organization to actively ‘sell’ tattoos to customers, without giving them time to decide on their own. As Steward’s (1990: 153) remarks indicate and he himself describes, he never tried “to ‘sell’ a customer on the idea of getting one”. Other, especially ‘bad’ tattooists took the advantage of the decisions. Steward (1990: 153) calls this “the hard-sell method”. These tattooists tried to convince passersby or people visiting their establishment to get a particular tattoo. The organization decided for the visitors that they wanted a tattoo (sometimes even by promising low prices while raising them during the tattoo session when it was too late; see Spamer 1934: 14; Nordström 2009: 23).

It is significant here that Steward’s description refers to the involved economic aspects of the decision of how to serve customers. To sell a tattoo means not missing a chance of making money. Regardless of the customers’ ultimate decision about whether to get tattooed or not, the organization may try to make the decision in order to make profit. From this point of view, Steward’s reluctance or “conscience” (1990: 153) was seen as “non-salesmanship” (1990: 154). Similarly, however, Steward de-

scribes his way of dealing with indecisive customers with an economic reference. Every time he sent someone home again, he saw the customer “walking out the door with a large dollar sign glimmering on his back” or “the dollar sign fading on his back” (1990: 154).

While these cases exemplify how a ‘flash’ organization deals with diverging expectations inferring with its central decisions, the economic orientation of them appeared now and then. I will come back to the focus of the decisions after the discussion of the ‘custom’ decisions and expectations.

By Appointment Only and Collaboration

While the decision of ‘walk-in’ generates the expectation that customers enter the establishment and get tattooed in a short period of time, the equivalent ‘custom’ decision generates a different work rhythm. Because it takes some time to develop and create unique custom work, the organization has to regulate its way of attending to customers more rigidly. Instead of addressing anybody passing the establishment, the organization decides to limit the stream of customers it can reasonably serve. The decision to attend to customers ‘by appointment only’ allows this. Whether the organization’s establishment is located like a ‘street shop’ or is hidden from view without any signs indicating its existence, the customer needs an appointment. The customer is expected to arrange an appointment with the organization for the first consultation, whether in the establishment, by phone or in another way (e.g. *TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/142: 49). This allows the organization to plan ahead, in some cases up to months or years (e.g. *TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/141: 29; *Inked* 2008, April: 43). Consultations and actual tattoo sessions need to be arranged in parallel, so that the organization has enough time for developing and realizing custom work.

As indicated above, the customer of course needs to know about the organization and its expectations regarding contact in the first place. If it is a private establishment without visible clues, the organization needs to either attract attention by advertising or to count on word-of-mouth and referral. In the case of a ‘hidden’ establishment, Hardy (1995: 22) places the emphasis on referral instead on foot traffic, as the main mode of how the organization receives customers (e.g. also *Inked* 2008, April: 43). It might not apply exclusively, if the establishment is in a street where passersby can see and visit it. Foot traffic, then, would be possible even though the entrants would still need to arrange an appointment.

The ‘by appointment only’ decision generates a pre-selection of customers. On the

one hand, it creates expectations of how customers have to contact the organization. Those who approach the organization in the expected way represent a first selection. The fact that certain persons know about the organization and its expectation does not make them yet customers. In a second step, 'by appointment only' also leads to a selection of those who have an idea of the tattoo they would like to get. People who would simply drop by on a whim, not sure if and what kind of tattoo they would like to have, and who want it right away, will probably not go to a 'custom' organization in the first place. A waiting period of weeks, months, or even years for an appointment deters many of them in beforehand. If they still go to a 'custom' organization, they will very likely be rejected during the first contact, very likely even before the agreement about an appointment. The organization will explain that they do not belong to the clientele whom it serves. Giving persons an appointment and thus accepting them as customers for the first consultation, however, does not automatically mean that the organization will proceed with any request whatsoever. The organization may still refuse to go further than the first consultation if the customer's ideas and request do not conform to its decisions and expectations. All in all, 'by appointment only' allows the organization to generate a preliminary selection of its customers, without excluding further selections.

While the 'by appointment only' decision makes it possible to plan ahead and schedule the time slots for each day, it also allows the organization to control the presence of customers in the establishment. Unlike the 'flash' organization's establishment that at times can be crowded with onlookers, prospective customers and those who wait for their turn (see Hardy 1991: 59; Steward 1990), the 'custom' establishment has a more quiet and private atmosphere (Hardy 1995: 22). In the case of 'hidden' and not advertised establishments, ideally only the tattooist (and maybe other staff) and a customer are present. In order to control not only the presence of customers but also the organization's availability for inquiries, the organization may announce publicly during which period (days or weeks) new appointments will be arranged for new customers. In some cases, these new appointments are only made for a limited period in the future, after which a new time frame for arranging appointments will be announced (examples can be found on websites of 'custom only' organizations).²⁰ 'By appointment only', thus, allows the organization to take control of its customers and its own workload to various degrees. Ultimately, the decision, its accompanying expectations, and the different ensuing organizational possibilities have the purpose of freeing the 'custom' organization from time pressures the 'flash' organization faces due to its way of organiz-

20 See, e.g., www.myspace.com/conspiracyintattoo or www.lefix-tattoo.com.

ing. The time saved with the 'by appointments only' decision can then be invested in the development and creation of custom tattoos.

The decision to attend to customers only if they have an appointment, means that the 'custom' organization has a smaller 'output' than a 'flash' organization. All things considered, the creation of custom tattoos need more time than that of flash tattoos. The quantity of tattoos produced in one day, usually figures as an indication of an organization's output. As a subject of descriptions this serves the purpose of distinguishing between 'flash' and 'custom' organizations. Emphasizing the diverging orientations of the two organizational forms, an 'Old School' (flash) tattooist makes the following remark.

These guys are working by appointment, they do four tattoos in one day. What are they kidding? In our day, any savage would come in, sit down and demand to get tattooed. Tony P. has 20 guys come in and say that they're first. How do you tattoo under them conditions? (quoted in McCabe 2001: 9)²¹

The two types of decisions about how to serve customers make a clear quantitative difference between 'custom' and 'flash'. From the perspective of a 'flash' organization, to attend to twenty and more customers a day is normal. This is organizationally feasible, only because the tattooist does not have to develop and draw a new tattoo design for each customer. The tattoos, which a 'custom' organization produces, are more time-consuming and, consequently, decrease the number of customers that can be 'processed' in one day. Although the tattooist does not mention how much time custom work requires, he nonetheless admits that it is made differently than flash ("it belongs on a wall", "very flashy", McCabe 2001: 9). From a 'custom' organization's perspective, in contrast, it is rather normal to have only a few customers each day. A 'custom' tattooist gives an explanation for the comparatively small number of customers: "Usually I do one to two pieces a day or so, only custom; this is more than sufficient if one adds the time for drawing on top of that!" (quoted in *TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/142: 49, my transl.). Aside from the expectations of customers, the decisions to attend to customers either on a 'walk-in' or on a 'by appointment only' basis entail expectations for the organization itself. In each case, the making of a particular kind of tattoo connects to an expectation about how many customers can typically be attended to. Each decision about serving customers, then, supports the corresponding decision about flash or custom work. It regulates the flow of customers in regard to the time need for

²¹ As a side note: The statement presents the exact opposite view on the same situation as the statements about how customers were treated in 'flash' organizations quoted above. Here, the customers are the rough ones, while in the other cases it were the tattooist who allegedly dealt with customers rather roughly.

the creation of a tattoo.

While ‘working off the wall’ has the purpose of making the ‘flash’ organization rather fast, the ‘custom’ organization needs time to prepare and realize custom work. ‘Collaboration’ represents the opposite decision of ‘working off the wall’.²²

A ‘custom’ organization may be open to a variety of styles or be specialized in a few styles. It very likely displays its stylistic orientation by means of photographs, drawings and paintings (see figure 9). While this material should present the organization’s stylistic orientation visually, on the one hand, and serve as an inspiration, on the other, customers are expected to outline their own design ideas and wishes (e.g. Webb 2002: 45-46; *Skin Deep* 2008, February/156: 37; *Prick Magazine* 2008, 8/5: 52).²³ The ‘custom’ organization decides to give customers the opportunity to do so in collaboration with the tattooist. Don Ed Hardy, as quoted above, draws the distinction between what may be expected from a ‘custom’ organization in comparison to a ‘flash’ organization. He speaks of the collaborative development of “one-of-a-kind original designs” between tattooist and customer and distinguishes this mode from the offer of “a set image bank” of flash into which customers have to fit their psyches (in Gilbert 2000: 197).



Fig. 9: A ‘custom’ establishment (from: <http://www.brightsidetattoo.com/about.php>; courtesy of Bright Side Tattoo)

22 “A tattoo is inevitably a collaborative effort, with each party taking part of the responsibility or credit” (Hardy 1995: 25). While this is certainly true, the difference between ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ is considerable. That is why I reserve the term ‘collaboration’ for the latter, because the “collaborative effort” is comparatively larger.

23 Customers of ‘flash’ organization certainly can ask for certain changes of the selected tattoo as well. Depending on the flexibility and abilities of the tattooist, size and colors may be changed, and elements be added. The organization, however, does not necessarily expect the customer to do so. In contrast, the ‘custom’ organization would be perturbed if the customer did not.

Customizing a tattoo means to take customers' ideas seriously and develop them together. In this collaborative process, the tattooist can advise customers in every aspect of the tattoo and respond to changes of ideas. The tattooist's overall task consists in the 'interpretation' of customers' narratives and references to visual material and their subsequent transformation into tattoos. "Tattooers", Hardy states about the collaboration, "often function as interpreters, honing in on the form which the customer struggles to articulate" (Hardy 1995: 25; see also Hardy 1988c: 51, 1991: 48). The consultation serves the purpose of finding out what the customer wants. As a tattooist explains, the task during the consultation meeting consist of getting the customers "mind into our mind" (*Skin&Ink* 2003, November/feature article). Or as another tattooist states, implying a distinction between 'flash' and 'custom' organizations: "Our goal is not to put something on you, we want to pull something out of you" (*Inked* 2007, Winter: 98). While both tattooist and customer might have a different picture in mind, the challenge for the organization lies in the creation of a design that comes close to what the customer imagines (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/141: 27). The collaboration should eventually result in a custom tattoo that satisfies both customer and tattooist, regardless of how long the developing process might take until the tattoo can be realized (*Inked* 2007, Winter: 98; *Tattoo Energy* 2008, 10/52: 65).

Tattooists emphasize the aspect of satisfaction of the collaboration. In a personal interview (tattoo convention 2007), a tattooist told me that he only creates tattoos he likes and that are rewarding for him. At the same time, he highlighted that he does not simply tattoo anything customers request. An organization therefore may want to announce this preference for example on its website, generating an additional selection mechanism. Similarly, other tattooists argue that "custom work should be half me and half the customer" (McCabe 2001: 102), or point to the importance of dedication for custom work by both customer and tattooist (e.g. *TätowierMagazin* 2002, 9/78: 16, 19).

Whereas the collaboration for custom work usually implies the expectation that customers actively contribute to the design as much as or even more than the tattooist, a 'custom' organization may as well follow a different approach than described so far. Still offering and creating custom tattoos, the organization alters its decision of 'collaboration' to some extent.

An organization may offer individual custom work by generating a tattoo that suits the customer as a person "by reading his/her aura" (as done by tattooist Jamie 'La Palma' Summers; Hardy 1995: 25). With this kind of collaboration, which Margot

Mifflin (2001: 64) calls “a shamanistic approach”, the tattooist tries “to conjure designs from the depths of her clients’ psyches during preliminary consultations” (see also Vale/Juno 1989: 61). A comparable approach to creating a unique custom tattoo is to gather information about the customer with which the tattooist goes to an astrologer. On the basis of the information, the astrologer then chooses a design that fits the customer. This kind of collaboration results in a unique talisman tattoo (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 87-90). Such ‘shamanistic’ or ‘ritualistic’ approaches to customizing tattoos, however, represent extreme cases rather than the rule.

Another special version of collaboration may happen occasionally in a conventionally working ‘custom’ organization. In this case, customers refrain from having a say in how the tattoo looks. Usually an organization does not expect customers to do so, but readily takes on the challenge (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50). Others prefer such customers (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/141: 20). Because they like the offered style or a particular type of motif, customers give the tattooist “carte blanche to do whatever he or she wants” (Webb 2002: 46). For these “do whatever you want’ clients” (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50) the tattooist can choose the design in the particular style that pleases the customers. The customers will still very likely determine where and how large the tattoo should be placed on the body, sometimes giving an overall theme, and eventually also say whether they accept the tattoo suggested by the tattooist. While refraining from determining the design themselves, customers might also allow the tattooist to pursue his or her own projects (Hardy 1991: 48). An extreme case represents what the tattooist Spider Webb did when given ‘carte blanche’. He created tattoos by asking someone else (i.e. not a tattooist) to make a design he then realized in the offered “piece of skin” (Webb in Morse 1977: 46).²⁴ Like the more ritualistic variants, the ‘carte blanche’ constitutes a special case, even if a special variant of the decision to offer and the expectation to expect collaborative work between tattooist and customer.

A noticeable aspect of the collaboration for custom work concerns the time needs. From the first consultation until the completion of the tattoo, the organization collaborates with the customer. Depending on the size and intricacy (e.g. details, colors, shading) of the tattoo, the process of its development and realization in the skin, ranges from two meetings (consultation and tattoo session) up to dozens of sessions.²⁵ Both

²⁴ On an inquiry about his by e-mail, Spider Webb kindly responded and confirmed his description. He added that “it was a kind of performance art” (e-mail, July 9 2010).

²⁵ The reality television shows *Miami Ink*, *LA Ink* and others show the creation of custom work on the basis of ideas and/or pictures and drawings the customers bring along (they show the “custom side of tattooing” as a tattooist remarks about the shows; *Tattoo Life* 2008, 10/52: 69). The encounter between tattooist and customer, however, is staged as if they meet the very first time

the development and sketching and the actual realization of the tattoo in skin may take many hours (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/141: 123; e.g. also *Inked* 2007, Winter: 98; *Tattoo Energy* 2008, 10/52: 65). Whereas the consultation time for flash work is rather short and collaboration, if any, plays a rather minor role, for a custom tattoo the latter can last until completion. That is, the collaboration does not necessarily end with the first consultation. Even though the tattooist creates a sketch for the basis of the tattoo, there is still the option for adding, removing, or simply changing particular elements as long they are not made in skin. The collaboration between customer and the organization, therefore, may last as long as it takes to finalize the tattoo.

The temporal difference between ‘collaboration’ and ‘working off the wall’ closely connects to the relationship between tattooist and customer. The quick ‘processing’ of customers and the (re-)production of flash tattoos seems not to allow more than a transient acquaintance based on small talk or “a running line of chatter” for distracting the customer (Steward 1990: 101). In contrast, the often long-term collaboration between tattooist and customer in the case of custom work allows for a closer relationship. The following description of a ‘custom’ organization’s customers exemplifies this:

‘We cater more to the serious collector who wants bigger, custom piece’ [...] ‘For us, clients aren’t just customers’ [...] ‘Since we see the same person several times, we end up becoming friends. Half the time we all end up hanging out’. (*Inked* 2007, Fall: 106)

Not only does the organization address its customers with a particular semantics (“serious collector”, “clients aren’t just customers”), it also emphasizes the effect a long-term collaboration with them can have (i.e., friendship). As the comment on the organization’s description explains, it is “[t]he accumulative hours spent working on a piece” that results in the development of “personal relationships with their clients” (*Inked* 2007, Fall: 106).

This and other accounts describe the relationship between tattooist and customer as personal, emotional, or intimate. ‘Good vibes’ and comfort, for example, may play a crucial role when tattooist and customer work together over a longer period (McCabe 2001: 45-46, 102; Morse 1977: 5; *Inked* 2007, Winter: 98). The tattoo as the outcome

(‘walk-in’ customers). The custom work, then, is developed and realized in the same episode from scratch to completion, i.e., in one meeting including a short break for drawing the design. Although this is feasible for certain tattoos, it is known that the customers of the show go through a casting and present their tattoo wish before the shooting of the show (in this regard, e.g., the German show *Tattoo – Eine Familie sticht zu* is said to differ because there the usual customers appear; *TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/143: 3, 39). This abbreviation of the customizing process is due to the special television format and the mass media’s own logic to communicate (see Luhmann 2000c).

of the collaborative process depends on whether the relation was good (Hardy 2005: 145; *Tattoo Energy* 2008, 10/52: 65). ‘Collaboration’ gives rise to another relationship than ‘working off the wall’ tends to, because it structures the time frame and the involvement of the customer differently.

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Each set of decisions presented above closely links to a type of tattoos. The decisions to attend to ‘walk-in’ customers by ‘working off the wall’ fit the decision to create standardized and reproducible flash tattoos. Equally, the decisions to collaborate with customers on an ‘appointment only’ basis goes with the decision to make unique and personalized custom tattoos. In connection to the type of tattoos produced, the decisions about how to deal with customers have yet wider organizational effects. They structure the organization’s time and pace, the quantity of tattoos produced, and the relationship between tattooist and customer.

The decisions of ‘walk-in’ and ‘working off the wall’ imply a fast pace and only a limited amount of time for each customer. They make it possible to produce up to dozens of tattoos each day by one tattooist. The character of the relationship between tattooist and customer accordingly tends to be transient, superficial, and impersonal. The amount of customers waiting, browsing, or merely looking, forces the organization to ‘process’ them as efficiently as possible. The recourse to standardized procedures facilitates this.

The decisions called ‘by appointment only’ and ‘collaboration’, in contrast, have different implications. ‘By appointment only’ allows the organization to control its time and pace each day, as well as in a long-term perspective. The organization plans enough time for each customer for the collaborative process, which results in custom tattoos. Because of this, the organization produces only a small number of tattoos a day. The lesser or lack of time pressure and the collaboration between tattooist and customer tend to create a longer and more personal relationship.

In the previous section I indicated that the decision to create either flash or custom tattoos produces an economic emphasis in the former and an artistic one in the latter case. The decisions about how to attend to customers equally contribute to the emphasis of each organizational form.

The ‘flash’ decisions structure how customers are handled and the focus on speed and quantity with which the tattoos are made. The fast paced and standardized processing of many customers and tattoos, made possible by the ‘flash’ decisions, gives the organization an economic orientation. Whether from the perspective of a ‘flash’ or

the one of a ‘custom’ organization, as shown, descriptions point to such an economic focus. The ‘flash’ organization’s concern with customers and tattoos primarily lies in their economic significance. In other words, with its decisions the organization does not put the artistic process or the relation with the customers into the foreground. That is what the ‘custom’ organization characterizes.

The ‘custom’ decisions of ‘by appointment only’ and ‘collaboration’ structure the production of tattoos and the handling of customers in a manner that generates an artistic orientation. Compared with the effects of the ‘flash’ decisions, the ‘custom’ organization takes the required time to focus on each customer and tattoo individually in order to collaboratively develop and realize customized work. Here, too, descriptions from different points of view distinguish these more artistically oriented features from those of the ‘flash’ organization. Because of its slower pace and focus on the creation itself, the way the organization ‘processes’ customers does not evoke descriptions as those linked to the functioning of a ‘flash’ organization (e.g. ‘conveyor belt’). The stronger focus on what and how it is produced, enabled by the corresponding ‘custom’ decisions, gives the ‘custom’ organization an artistic orientation.

III Tattooist or Tattoo Artist? Role Semantics and Expectations

Each set of decisions presented thus far structures the way a tattoo organization offers and produces tattoos. Each decision generates expectations in regard to the organization and its members, and the organization’s customers. Some of the expectations have already been discussed or indicated to some extent. In this section, I look more closely at the roles and their accompanying expectations that are structured differently by each set of decisions. The focus lies on the different expectations connected with the performance role of the tattooist in regard to ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ organizations. In an excursus on ‘bad tattooists’ I will show how both are distinguished from those performers (and organizations) that do not correspond to these expectations.

Semantics of the Performer’s Skills and Role

The availability of sketched tattoo designs allows the tattooist to transfer them onto the customer’s skin. Of course, the designs have, at some point in time, been conceived of, drawn, and ultimately put on the sheets of paper – and continue to be – by those who have the required drawing skills (e.g. *Tattoo Life* 2008, 10/51: 87; *TätowierMagazin* 2006, 12/122: 132). While the method of copying tattoos from customers’ bodies and the distribution of designs on paper played a crucial role for their dissemination, over

time tattooists also created tattoos or adapted them on their own. After their initial invention and availability as designs, though, tattoo organizations did not necessarily need to produce original designs themselves. The collection of flash designs and the copying from skin allowed an organization to establish a visual repertoire that could be used repeatedly. Today, organizations sometimes still draw on the old flash designs, but they also use stylistically different ones produced more recently (e.g. ‘tribals’, ‘new school’ style, and many more).

Basically, a flash tattooist is expected to be able to trace the designs and transfer them as tattoos on the customer’s skin (McCabe 2001: 31, 35; Feige 2003: 364). The tattooist still has to find out where the customer wants the tattoo to be placed, how big the tattoo should be, and whether there are any requests concerning the coloring or shading. In contrast to the demands of a custom design, the tattooist can basically rely on pre-drawn designs developed by a rather small number of tattooists.²⁶ As a result, the flash tattooist can work as fast as described above.

The close connection between decisions constituting the ‘flash’ organization and the tattooist’s role expectation is recurrently thematized in descriptions. It becomes the subject of description, for example, when the organization faces expectations diverging from its own expectations. Explaining that he works “off the wall”, a tattooist states:

In my day almost everybody worked off the wall. Now you got these kids walking in with magazines asking, ‘Can you do this?’ A lot of it, I don’t relate to. I can’t draw *per se*. That’s what made me become a tattoo artist. I had a pattern to work from. (quoted in McCabe 2001: 107; emphasis in original)

Inquiries for tattoos inspired by those seen in tattoo magazines are likely to be turned down. The expectation of drawing skills accompanying such inquiries comes into conflict with the organization’s expectations of its tattooist. Because the ‘flash’ organization favors ‘patterns’ or templates, it does not expect the tattooist to be able to draw designs as such. The organization refuses to do what is not available as flash. Due to its exclusive ‘flash’ orientation, thus, the organization is only capable of dealing with those requests, which fit its decisions and corresponding expectations.

An exclusive focus on readily available and reproducible tattoo designs, is also problematized in a description by the tattooist Michael Malone. In this case it is the

26 There are still some ‘flash’ organizations that produce their own designs, which they themselves then create in skin (e.g. *Tattoo Life* 2007, 9/47: 45). Similarly, ‘custom’ organizations connect to the tradition of drawing flash while sticking to their stylistic orientations. These flash designs and sheets, then, are displayed in establishments, put on sale (on the Internet), or shown in tattoo magazines. Those made by custom tattooists, however, are supposed to serve as sources of inspiration and not simply as copyable designs (e.g. *Tattoo Life* 2008, 10/50: 85).

confrontation of slightly different expectations about the offered selection of designs and their implications.

Visiting tattoo shops in Europe in the mid-1970s, Malone tried to sell his flash sheets to tattooists. The tenor, however, was rather disillusioning for Malone. Although the tattooists liked Malone's flash designs, they nevertheless declined his offer. The reason why they did so seems to lie exactly in the organization's decision about what it provides. Malone reproduces the explanation of a Dutch tattooist who stated:

Well, they're nice fucking designs but if I buy those designs then I'll have to learn how to do them. I already know how to do the stuff on the wall. Why should I learn something else? (in Hardy 1991: 64).

This might be a rather extreme case of an inflexible organization that holds on to what it once decided. Its orientation corresponds to what Leonard "Stoney" St. Clair remarked about himself and other "old tattooers" of the 'Old School': "We don't want to add anything to these old designs" (in Govenar 2003: 131). The case nevertheless exemplifies the expectation of a tattooist providing flash tattoos.

In contrast to this extreme case, organizations working in the form of 'flash' may of course collect and offer the newest flash sheets available. Their tattooists, then, merely need to be able to reproduce these new designs. Whether working exclusively with the same designs or adding new ones once in while, the basic expectation remains. Without flash templates, however, tattooists lacking drawing skills would be lost (Hardy 1995: 19, stating this in regard to the past).

The ability to transfer a tattoo design onto the skin of the customer properly is seen as important. Instead of drawing skills, the tattooist of the 'flash' organization is expected to produce 'technically clean' tattoos. Whereas creativity plays a less important role for flash designs than for 'customized' ones, 'clean techniques' remain crucial. The finest tattoo design artistically does not help if a tattooist is unable to transfer it neatly onto the skin (*TätowierMagazin* 2006, 12/122: 132-133). The technical aspect of making a tattoo is contrasted with the creativity necessary for the drawing of individual designs. Because of the possibility to rely on flash designs, the tattooist is expected to have more technical than artistic skills. While the 'flash' organization would not categorically exclude those who can draw, it does not necessarily construct its performance roles in terms of creativity and artistic ability. Instead, the term 'mechanic' constitutes the semantic equivalent to the emphasis of the technical skills for the characterization of the flash tattooist.

Flash tattooists are not as such 'mechanics' and equipped mainly with technical

skills. Only in contrast to, or comparison with, other possible expectations linked to the performance role do these characteristics make sense. This is best exemplified through a statement made by a flash tattooist working in the 'Old School' style. In regard to "artists", who's skills he sees as "incredible", the tattooist states:

There are people who are mechanics and there are people who are artists. Tony can draw but is more a mechanic; a tattooer like Ed Hardy is more an artist but knows his mechanics. (in McCabe 2001: 83)

The tattooist draws a clear distinction between two types of tattooists who each have their focus, either on the technical or the artistic aspects. In each case the other aspect, though, is not radically excluded. The flash tattooist might be able to draw, but the main characteristic constitutes the technical ability. The other type of tattooist, here called 'artist' (corresponding to a custom tattooist), is equipped with the necessary technical skills. This type's main characteristic consists in drawing skills that manifest themselves in the tattoos ("These people can draw and apply it in their tattoos", McCabe 2001: 83).

In other descriptions, that basically draw the same distinction, the role designations turn out even clearer. In an interview, for example, a tattooist differentiates between 'tattooists' and 'tattoo artists' or 'craftsmen' and 'artists',²⁷ respectively, as two types of the performance role:

A "tattooist" has to be equipped with perfect technical skills and has to be able to make a detailed copy of other people's designs. A "tattoo artist", that is what I mean by that, has to be able, apart from the knowledge about perfect technical possibilities, to produce personal designs. Now, to answer your question: When I tattoo the pictures of somebody else, I see myself as a craftsman. When I tattoo my own artwork, it makes me an artist. (in Feige 2003: 350; my translation)

The use of the designations, the tattooist clarifies, depends on the performer's skills and the way tattoos are created. The terms 'tattooist' and 'craftsman' apply in the case of technical skills and the reproduction of tattoos developed by others. 'Tattoo artist', as the opposite, characterizes those performers who create unique and customized tattoos. As the tattooist explains, the performer takes on these roles depending on the type of tattoo and way of working. From our perspective this means that the performance role depends on how the organization operates. If it operates in the form of 'flash', it gives the performer the role of the 'tattooist' or 'craftsperson'. If it operates in the form

27 George Burchett's account of the tattooist Sutherland Macdonald shows well the semantic variety of these designations and their differentiation: "Macdonald insisted that an artist is a tattoo-ist and only dabblers and low alley-fellows should be described as tattoo-ers" (Burchett 1960: 89; emphasis in original).

of ‘custom’, the performer becomes a tattoo ‘artist’.

In a description of what to look for during the first visit of a tattoo establishment, the tattooist Spider Webb draws the same distinction. According to Webb (2002: 145), there is “the application of a standard and/or prefigured design onto the skin without any alteration or improvisation”, on the one hand, and “the creation of an original work of art, a totally unique design”, on the other. For the creation of the first kind of tattoo, Webb (2002: 145) states, the tattooist “must only be a competent craftsman”. For the second kind of tattoo the performer “must be an accomplished artist” (2002: 145). Thus, Webb equally emphasizes the performer’s skills in relation to what kind of tattoo is produced.

These examples show the relational quality of a tattooist’s skills. Each set of skills is characterized in regard to different organizational decisions. While the skills are not necessarily mutually exclusive (e.g. the ‘artist’ should also master the technical aspects), each version of the performance role has its particular emphasis. As pointed out, it seems rather unlikely that a ‘flash’ organization categorically excludes tattooists with drawing skills.²⁸ In comparison to a ‘custom’ organization, however, these skills are less necessary and therefore also less or not at all expected (Feige 2003: 278; *Prick Magazine* 2007, 8/3: 52). The reproduction of existing designs on the basis of templates, does not demand the same skill ‘profile’ as required for custom work. The examples also showed a corresponding semantic difference. Each designation generates expectations about the tattooist’s skills and particular skills legitimate the use of the corresponding semantics.

Whereas the distinction remains, other designations are used to observe the performance role from a slightly different angle. Instead of referring to the performer’s skills, they connect to the modes of attending to customers above discussed. Tattooists are described as ‘servants’ of the customers, for whom they provide a service or, similarly, as ‘business men’ (McCabe 2001: 80, 92-93; Feige 2003: 65-66, 341; Govenar 2003: 6, 158). The service provider or business person basically satisfies the requests of the customers while intervening only minimally.²⁹ It is the performance role of the ‘flash’

28 In the collected tattoo magazines, for example, I did not find any advertisement with which an organization (identifiable as operating in the form of ‘flash’) explicitly looked for a tattooist without drawing or other (artistic) skills. To the contrary, almost in each job advertisement drawing skills were emphasized (in connection to custom only or also flash work).

29 According to Feige (2003: 341), state organizations hold on to this semantics in their decisions not to treat tattooists as artists. Like this they are able to deny them financial advantages regarding commercial taxes usually given to accepted artists. As one interviewed tattooist made clear, the semantics of art becomes a means in the struggle for such financial advantages (personal interview, tattoo convention 2008).

organization to which this semantics prominently refers.

The ‘artist’, in turn, constitutes the contrasting semantic figure. While it is the same term as used in reference to skills, its meaning slightly shifts. In distinction to the tattooist providing service, the artist may act out his artistic preferences in the collaboration with the customer. In the end, the customer should not be the only one satisfied. The tattooist as artist has an interest in the result as well and, at best, should therefore be given some artistic freedom (*Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/7: 10; *TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/147: 40).

Although both semantics do not emerge exclusively linked to either ‘flash’ or ‘custom’ organizations, they represent important semantic repertoires, not only for descriptions of one of them as such but also for purposes of delimiting one from the other (e.g. McCabe 2001: 94; Feige 2003: 341).

Contended Appropriations of Semantic Repertoires

The operations and structures of an organization do not necessarily and causally determine the semantics. Nor is the opposite the case. An organization can draw on each of the two semantic repertoires presented. While the discussed correspondences between organizational form and semantics seem to constitute the established and legitimate ones, organizations nevertheless can decide to work with a different semantics than expected. For example, nothing hinders an organization from using an artistic semantics in order to promote itself in a favorable light. In this case, it is more likely that the organization has to deal with descriptions that address the constellation of its self-presentation and actual way of working as unexpected or illegitimate.

Since the beginning of organized tattooing certain ‘flash’ organizations decide to draw on an artistic semantics for the description of their offers, performers, and tattooing in more general terms. The ‘flash’ organization of August “Cap” Coleman, for example, advertised with the following statement printed on its business card:

Rated by *Colliers* and Other Magazines as One of America’s Best Tattoo Artists! If You Must Be Tattooed, Have It Put On by a Reliable Tattoo Artist!
(ca. 1946, printed in Govenar 2003: 62).

The organization may promote itself by using the phrase ‘tattoo artist’ to attract customers, but nevertheless continues to operate as a ‘flash’ organization. From the point of view of ‘custom’ organizations, the use of a semantics of art by ‘flash’ organizations may be disturbing and a reason for criticism. Descriptions problematize this because these ‘flash’ organizations do not live up to the expectations evoked by the semantics

of ‘tattoo artist’.

In a magazine interview, a custom tattooist talks about those who call themselves artists. Asked about what he thinks of the present tattoo scene, the tattooist describes his quarrels with the “custom tattoo scene” (*Skin Deep* 2008, February/156: 32). While having respect for and no problems with the good “street shops and flash making tattooists”, the tattooist does not like repetition (*Skin Deep* 2008, February/156: 33).

I’m just sick of seeing the same thing over and over and of hearing self-proclaimed ‘tattoo-artists’ brag about their art form and custom this and custom that when I’ve rarely met one who could draw his way out of a phone booth! If you say you’re an artist then you come up with original work, you master your technique but you also come up with your own original material and twisting a mustache on a dragon copied off a book, pasting two stencils together or changing the way you shade your scales on a koi fish is not original work! (*Skin Deep* 2008, February/156: 33)

The tattooist criticizes the lack of a correspondence between what the alleged “tattoo-artists” proclaim they do and what they actually produce. From this point of view, these flash tattooists pose a problem for ‘custom’ organizations since they interrupt the close connection between the artistic semantics and the custom way of creating tattoos with their ‘misleading’ self-descriptions. To call oneself a ‘tattoo artist’ means having drawing skills and creating ones own original tattoos. Those lacking the skill and reproducing existing work do not deserve the label. Rather, as a remark before the quoted criticism shows, the good ones among them deserve the terms “craftsmen and tattooists” (*Skin Deep* 2008, February/156: 33).

The alleged incongruity between semantics and way of working may only disturb organizations or, as shown above, may affect customers as well (i.e., generating expectations that are disappointed by the organization). The ‘illegitimate’ use of the label ‘tattoo artist’, though, may affect other organizations more directly. Complaining about this, Sailor Jerry Collins disliked “to see a *crud* to cash in on somebody else’ pioneering and call himself a master tattoo artist” (in Hardy 2005: 37; emphasis in original). Creating pioneering work, the organization sees itself exploited by those merely able to reproduce designs. Not only do these tattooists “cash in” on Collins’ work, they also, so to speak, adorn themselves with borrowed semantic plumes (“master tattoo artist”).

These examples show that ‘flash’ organizations can mobilize a semantics that is seen as incongruent with their main set of decisions. The promotion of a ‘flash’ organization with a different semantic repertoire, therefore, might generate misleading expectations. From the perspective of ‘custom’ organizations, this may be observed as an illegitimate semantic ‘upgrading’.

The inverse may apply to ‘custom’ organizations as well. Custom tattooists are sometimes described as craftpersons and service providers instead of artists (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/138: 81). Even though the organization produces custom work, the tattooist’s description does not necessarily, or only under certain conditions, draw on the semantics of art. Instead, they make use of the craft semantics with reference, for example, to the need to make a living (Feige 2003: 223; personal interview with tattooist, tattoo convention 2008). In contrast to the previous case, however, the use of the opposite semantics for the performance role of the ‘custom’ organization seems not to disappoint expectations and generate criticism.

Descriptions link an organization’s decisions (type of tattoo) and role expectations (skills) to particular semantics for the performance role. Craftsperson and artist, but also tattooist and tattoo artist, figure as prominent semantic figures. But as shown, nothing hinders a tattoo organization or any other observer from making use of specific semantics. There is no ‘central’ organization regulating or sanctioning the use of semantics.³⁰ In contrast to the examples presented, which draw clear distinctions, it seems common to mix semantics today. Magazine texts, for example, may portray tattooists as artists, whereas the portrayed tattooists describe themselves differently. The choice of semantics by tattoo organizations may show effects, however, if the chosen terms connect to particular expectations that are not organizationally grounded. An organization that describes its performer as an ‘artist’, but cannot provide high quality and artistic tattoos, will likely disappoint customers’ and other organizations’ expectations.

Excursus: The Figure of the Bad Tattooist

Apart from these distinctions for the description of the organization’s performance role there is yet another semantic figure that needs to be mentioned. This figure constitutes the opposite of flash and custom tattooists and their role profiles. It is the figure of the

30 As it is put in an editorial, referring to organizations’ decisions about their offers and ways of dealing with customers, “there are no fixed rules (luckily!) that regulate a tattoo artist’s activity” (*Tattoo Life* 2008, 10/52: 6). Tattooists’ associations or unions, however, may adopt such a role for its members (i.e. tattoo organizations). Emerging in the 1970s, they began to organize tattoo organizations on a national and international basis. Among them are associations such as the German *Deutsche Organisierte Tätowierer*, the *United European Tattoo Artists*, the American *National Tattoo Association* and the *Alliance of Professional Tattooists*, the French *Syndicat national des artistes tatoueurs*, and many more. But since membership of tattoo organizations is voluntary and each association has its own criteria of inclusion (quality standards, hygiene, controlling, licensing etc.), they do not have the authority to regulate and sanction every existing organization. Their range of decision-making, thus, only encompasses their members. They can publicly (e.g. in tattoo magazines) complain about organizations that mislead their customers, but they cannot do anything about it outside of their range of decision-making.

'bad tattooist'. A variety of designations are used to characterize such tattooists: "back-alley 'scratchers'" (Burchett 1960: 56); "scratch artists" (Hardy 1988b: 42) or simply 'scratchers' (also used in German); "jaggers and hacks" (Steward 1990: 169); "'butchers' or 'scab vendors'" (Hardy 1988b: 49); "tattoo amateurs" (*Skin&Ink* 1999, November/editor's comment); or "scab merchant" (Hardy 2005: 102).

Both 'flash' and 'custom' organizations distance themselves from those who produce poor quality tattoos, work uncleanly, operate without official license, and over- or undercharge (Hardy 1988a: 81; Feige 2003: 198; *TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7, 10). They are succinctly characterized in an editorial of the tattoo magazine *Skin Deep* (2008, July/161: 5):

In many people's eyes, a scratcher is someone who may not have their clients' best interests at heart, will tattoo a poorly designed image that will probably not stand up to the test of time, don't give a fig about cleanliness and are only interested in the money it can bring them.

In short, the bad tattooist is the one not taking tattooing seriously enough (*TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/145: 66). Whether attributed to organizations working in the form of 'flash' or 'custom', located 'at home' or in a publicly visible tattoo establishment, the semantic figure characterizes those who are despised for bad working conditions and results.³¹

Although also (re-)producing flash tattoos for his customers, Samuel Steward (1990: 168), for example, describes how flash templates make it easy "for even the least-skilled hack to put on a design, no matter how crudely". As he adds, the "hack" only needs the design template in the right size (Steward 1990: 168). But according to Steward, even the use of templates does not help them produce anything else than crude work (see Steward 1990: 20, 26). Characteristic of bad tattooists, thus, is not the use of pre-drawn designs in the form of templates. It is the resulting quality that makes these tattooists bad.

When describing major changes in the world of tattooing, particularly those in the early twentieth century, Steward (1990: 190) argues that "[g]reat artists like Britain's Sutherland Macdonald and George Burchett gave way to inept non-artists and hacks, 'jaggers', carnival and circus operators who by no stretch of semantics could be called

31 In tattoo magazines bad tattooists only appear as the object of descriptions or (more or less harsh) criticism (as in the 'Cucumber of the Month' column of the *TätowierMagazin*; see chap. 8). To be portrayed in a tattoo magazine, it seems, tattoo organizations and individual tattooists need to fulfill basic criteria in regard to their work. In one case this becomes clear: the *TätowierMagazin* (2007, 13/139: 8) shifted a photo submission meant for a section, in which readers show their tattoos and thereby promote the tattoo organization, to the 'worst tattoo of the month' section.

artists”. In contrast to the “*accomplished* artist” (1990: 171), the artistic semantics does not apply to the unskilled and incompetent ‘hack’. Rather, the term “non-artist” seems more adequate for their characterization. Some descriptions of bad tattooist go even further in questioning the adequacy of the term tattooist for them, by putting it in inverted commas (e.g. *TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7; similarly *Skin&Ink* 1999, January/editor’s comment).

Similar to the complementary roles of ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ performers, the figure of the bad tattooist is semantically equipped with a corresponding customer. The customers who look for the best price instead of the best quality, “the bargain hunters and the cheap skates that don’t know good work from bad”, represent those that bad tattooists willingly attend to (Collins in Hardy 2005: 145). Instead of the appreciative tattoo enthusiast favored by a ‘custom’ organization, a bargaining customer is seen as unappreciative and therefore rather left to ‘scratchers’ (Hardy 2005: 145).³² Since customers can select their tattooists, even bad ones, the properly working tattooist “can be choosy” of customers as well and may refuse to tattoo the unappreciative ones (Hardy 2005: 145). In the end, the argument goes, it is the customers’ own fault if they choose to go to someone working out of the kitchen. An expression says accordingly, everyone gets the tattoo they deserve (Feige 2003: 263; Vale/Juno 1989: 63). That is, those who do not care about quality but about prices will have to live with the consequences of going to a bad tattooist (*TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/144: 57).³³

Customers are nevertheless asked not to go to unskilled tattooists to get poor quality work done. For bad tattooists damage the reputation of every other tattoo organization, i.e., the ‘business’, ‘craft’, or ‘industry’ altogether (Govenar 2003: 83; *Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/9: 3; *Skin Deep* 2007, Christmas/154: 17). Rather, tattoo organizations and magazines alike ask customers to be critical about tattooists and their work. They should inform themselves sufficiently before committing their skin to any tattooist. Only then will the bad tattooists have no more work do to (*TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/147: 7; *Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 24).³⁴

32 In retrospective descriptions, tattooists sometimes admit to have been one of those scratchers attending to anybody as long as they got paid (*Tattoo Life* 2007, 9/49: 26; similarly *Prick Magazine* 2008, 8/5: 52; *TätowierMagazin* 2006, 12/122: 118-119, in the ‘jobs wanted’ section).

33 While working on a project on tattoos and tattooed persons in movies (see Wymann 2009), I talked to a tattooed person who had many qualitatively rather poor tattoos. Inquiring about the tattooist and the tattoos, I was told that the person went to the tattooist because he did not charge as much as an official tattoo organization. In turn, the person accepted that the tattooist was not very skilled and made visible mistakes.

34 In this regard descriptions draw on an evolutionary semantics of natural selection and survival. They argue that bad tattooist will eventually fall prey to natural selection and disappear (Hardy 2005: 91, 147; McCabe 2001: 78; Feige 2003: 199, 263; *TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/144: 57-58;

In descriptions of bad tattooists the attribution of economic reasons plays a central role. Whereas they neglect the qualitative aspects of tattoos and matters of hygiene, it is argued that money is of main interest to bad tattooists (*Skin Deep* 2008, July/161: 5). “They don’t care about the people or the art”, a tattooist explains, “[t]hey just care about the money” (in McCabe 2001: 76). Instead of a “commitment to the art form” (McCabe 2001: 76), financial gain constitutes the primary reason why people without skills and knowledge begin to tattoo at all. Bad tattooists “are moved by easy money-making” (*Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 24) and are after ‘fast’ money (“schnelles Geld”, *TätowierMagazin* 2004, 10/99: 52; Sailor Jerry Collins talks about “fast buck artists”, in Hardy 2005: 29, 100).³⁵

With the re-legalization of tattooing in New York City, many new tattoo organizations emerged that did not exist during the approximate 35-year ban. From the point of view of the tattoo organizations operating ‘underground’ during the ban, these new organizations simply jumped on the bandwagon (in general terms, e.g., *Skin Deep* 2008, July/161: 48). “Now that it’s legal”, a tattooist remarks, “you get some ham and egger’s comin’ out because they can try to make a couple bucks” (McCabe 2001: 31; similar 32). Neither dedication to nor a serious interest in tattooing and tattoos, but a prevailing concern with the economic side to it, thus, characterizes the figure of the bad tattooist.

An exclusive concern with money is most obvious best in the work produced. As noted, bad tattooists either over- or undercharge. On the one hand, they charge their customers too much for the (artistic) quality they provide. On the other hand, descriptions refer to their option to charge less than others and thereby attract customers. This is only possible because they are not licensed and registered (e.g. those working at home) and, therefore, avoid being taxed and controlled accordingly. As a consequence, bad tattooists can charge ‘affordable’ and competitive prices (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 10). Economic competition, then, is not seen as emerging between ‘artists’, but between ‘artists’ and bad tattooists (*Skin&Ink* 2007, September/feature article). The fact that bad tattooists cannot keep up with the artistic and quality side of tattoos shows itself when their customers go to accomplished tattooists, in order to cover up what the bad ones produced. This, then, means additional work for properly working organiza-

Skin Deep 2008, April/158: 23). But there are also objections against such statements, because there are still masses of bad tattooists and corresponding customers (*TätowierMagazin* 2008, 14/147: 7).

³⁵ In a job advertising a tattoo organization looks for someone with a serious interest in and dedication to tattooing. It is highlighted that those who are “thinking of a fast buck” should not apply for the position (*Skin Deep* 2006, April/131: 66).

tions (Hardy 2005: 100, 102).

From the descriptions of bad tattooists one can infer that such organizations cater to anybody with a request. Whenever a customer brings money, the organization will comply with the request. Despite the lack of artistic skills, the tattooist will provide the tattoo regardless of the likelihood of a poor quality result. They are seen as those who tattoo anyone and anything as long as they receive money (see Steward 1990: 89-91).

The semantic figure of the bad tattooist with its attributed characteristics, is not seen as worthy of the name craftsperson or artist, and sometimes even the term 'tattooist' seems inappropriate. The main and negatively evaluated characteristic of the bad tattooist consists in a lack of interest in everything deemed important except for economic gain. This exclusive economic orientation attributed to bad tattooists is observed as a deviation from the usual ways of organizing tattooing. While both artistic quality and monetary compensation play their respective roles for 'flash' and 'custom' organizations, compared to them, bad tattooists' organizations neglect the former and lie their focus only on the latter.

In spite of the recurring predictions of their ultimate disappearance and warnings for future customers, descriptions of bad tattooists and critical accounts of their work suggest that organizations of this kind keep on functioning (and perturbing other organizations). Although the work produced by them is described as qualitatively poor, and even if 'scratchers' are said to either over- or undercharge, tattooing as communication obviously keeps on taking place. The tattoos they create might look like those discussed in the 'worst tattoo of the month' column of the *TätowierMagazin*, and very likely are too expensive for their quality – but they constitute the result of tattooing. The difference to the two established organizational forms lies in an exclusively economic orientation, particularly noticeable in the performance role's attributed skills (or lack thereof) and expectations.

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Depending on the form with which an organization works, the performance role is equipped with a different set of expectations. The corresponding semantics observe these differences in regard to the skills attributed to the performance role (technical/artistic skills; technician or craftsperson/artist; tattooist/tattoo artist), and the way the performer is expected to deal with customers and vice versa (service provider or business person/artist).

'Flash' and 'custom' organizations tend to establish a close link between their decisions and expectations. The performer of each form features skills and a role identity

that suits the decisions. It suits and supports their primary focus on either economic or artistic aspects. This comes out most clearly in the semantics that observes the performance role in relation to the customers. The ‘flash’ organization sees the tattooist not only as a craftsman but also as a service provider and business-person. The organization expects the tattooist to provide a service, namely the (re-)production of tattoos. The way the organization decides and deals with its customers requires a corresponding role profile that includes a business orientation. The ‘custom’ organization, in contrast, constructs the tattooist as an artist, whether in regard to the expected skills or how the role relates to the customers. The ‘tattoo artist’ is not expected simply to provide a service, but to create unique tattoos together with customers.

The connection between decisions and the construction of the performance role do not always or necessarily appear as clear as discussed. Organizations can decide which semantics they use and which expectations they thereby generate. There is no organization that would have the means to police the use of semantics or construction of expectations and roles. The disappointment of customers’ expectations and critical observations by other organizations, however, indicate incongruity between the way an organization operates and presents itself. In extreme cases, descriptions refer to the performance role of such organizations as ‘bad tattooist’.

IV Organizational Identity

All of the aspects mentioned so far contribute to the constitution of a tattoo organization’s identity. The decisions discussed and the expectations that are closely linked, on the one hand, generate an organizational identity on an operational and structural level. Self-descriptions, on the other hand, add to this on a descriptive level. The cases of an incongruity between these two modes of identity construction, though, leads exactly to such critical other-descriptions as presented above (the organization does not necessarily have problems with this incongruity as observed from a different point of view).

In general, a tattoo organization describes itself in various ways. Self-descriptions mostly take place with linguistic (speech and written texts) and visual means (tattoo designs, other artwork, appearance of tattoo establishment).³⁶ The particular display of designs and other visual material in an organization’s establishment does not only constitute the result of its decision-making. Rather, the set-up and designs on offer (inevitably) also serve a descriptive purpose. Pictures of existing tattoos and similar material

³⁶ Visual self-descriptions represent what Luhmann (2006b: 417) calls functional equivalents to texts (on visual descriptions, particularly of the economy, see Stäheli 2007).

add to an organization's linguistic self-descriptions. This kind of description, though, is not limited only to the confines of an organization's establishment. Self-descriptions, for example, are made public through an organization's presentation in tattoo magazines. In addition, tattoo organizations describe themselves by means of texts, in the form of magazine portraits and interviews, but also business cards, advertisements in magazines and the yellow pages, signs in the tattoo establishment, and the like. With all these descriptive means, the organization characterizes itself for its own ongoing (re)constitution and for its presentation to a public. But again, from an external point of observation, incongruities between an organization's description and its way of operating might arise. Such an organization, however, might well know about its incongruent self-descriptions, because it produces them on purpose. In oral and textual self-descriptions, for example, an organization may draw on an artistic semantics, while the visual display and arrangement in its establishment may characterize the organization as 'flash' oriented.³⁷

The decisions of an organization do not constitute the organization and its identity on their own. The result of these decisions such as the particular mode of display, the establishment's spatial orientation and visibility, and signs and explanations, all contribute to the self-description of the organization as 'flash' or 'custom'. They co-construct the organization's identity, while facilitating the organization's identification by its public and other organizations.

Among the clearest self-descriptions are the names and designations that the organization gives itself. Some of these designations imply aspects of the organization's way of working. The recurrent use of the same semantics by similarly working organizations establishes a link between particular designations and the main decisions and expectations of the organizational form. A more or less close relation between the semantics used in descriptions and the organization's form, however, seems to apply much more to the past than to the contemporary situation. Today, organization's self-descriptions and other-descriptions (e.g. by tattoo magazines) do not necessarily hold on to the historically prevalent semantics.

Tattoo 'shop' and 'parlor' represent the most prevalent terms used to designate both past and contemporary 'flash' organizations (on the past see e.g. Hardy 1995: 16; Webb 2002: 17; Govenar 2003; on the corresponding terms in German such as

³⁷ It is rather difficult, however, to judge only from the appearance of an establishment how the organization actually works. A 'custom' organization may display flash designs for the sake of the tradition, without offering this kind of work 'off the wall'.

“Tätowierstube” and “Tätowierladen”, see Gerds 1989: 35; Feige 2003: 65).³⁸ The designation of ‘street shop’, in addition, includes a reference to one of the main decisions of the ‘flash’ organization. ‘Street’ not only points to the establishment’s location, but also to the decision to attend to customers on a ‘walk-in’ basis.

The “tattoo renaissance”, as the period of major organizational changes, offers a point of connection for descriptions to establish what becomes the self-evident link between a certain semantics and an organizational form. An account of ‘custom’ organizations which became increasingly prominent during the ‘renaissance’, for example, not only describes their functioning alone. It mainly distinguishes them from the working of ‘flash’ organizations in order to indicate major changes. The identifying designations of each type of organization play a crucial role.

Over the past 25 years, as personalized or custom designs became more readily available, many workspaces transformed from parlors to studios, emphasizing work by appointment and privacy for the clientele. Many trend-setting tattooers moved their operations into private office buildings or apartments, attracting clients by referral rather than from foot traffic. This has always been the case for Japanese studios and actually inspired some leading turn-of-the-century British artists to adopt an *atelier* format[...] The evolution of ‘tattoo boutiques’ and a widening of the practice from marginalized sectors into society at large has taken a toll on the raw spirit of the old underground art. Admittedly, the streetwise sensibility required of someone working in a public shop is invaluable to developing a deep capability of tattooing under any circumstances. (Hardy 1995: 22; emphasis in original)

The characterization of the, then increasing, availability of ‘custom’ organizations contrasts them with the previously prevailing ‘flash’ organization. The changes are seen in some of the central features of tattoo organizations (private instead of public setting; by appointment and referral instead of ‘foot traffic’; Hardy 1995: 22). It is significant here, that the two ways of organizing are linked to two sets of designations. ‘Parlor’ and ‘public shop’ stand in contrast to ‘studio’, ‘atelier’, and ‘boutique’. Both sets of designations describe and identify the two ways of organizing. The account, thus, establishes a clear relation between how tattoos are offered and produced and the way the organization is called (similarly also Hardy in Gilbert 2000: 197).

In contemporary descriptions the term ‘shop’ is still recurrently linked to the organization’s decision to produce flash tattoos. In characterizations of typical ‘Old School’ establishments that offer the original flash tattoo style (hearts, daggers, banners etc.),

³⁸ George Burchett called his various establishments quite differently. Rather than solely speaking of tattoo shop or the like, he used to call them “surgeries”, “consulting-rooms”, “workshops”, “workrooms” or “salons” (Burchett 1960: 62, 65, 88, 98). In this case, the designations depended more on the clientele Burchett attended to than a distinction between ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ (‘salon’, e.g., was used when it came to “society clients”; Burchett 1960: 98).

‘shop’ figures as the main designation (McCabe 2001: 79, 83, 93; similarly *Inked* 2007, Winter: 94). A portrait of a German tattoo organization that provides both flash and custom work, for example, shows that this semantics can be deployed purposefully. In this case, it is clearly stated that the organization does not want to be seen as a ‘studio’, but identifies itself, in line with the ‘Old School’ tradition, as a tattoo ‘shop’ (‘Tätowierladen’; in Feige 2003: 271).

The link between ‘flash’ and ‘shop’ is also established in descriptions in which an organization distances itself from organizations it observes as functioning differently. ‘Shop’ or ‘parlor’, then, are described in distinction to how ‘custom’ organizations describe and identify themselves. With a paradoxical sounding statement, a tattooist explains that the portrayed ‘custom’ organization is not a ‘shop’. The portrait, then, explains why this self-description applies:

‘We are more or less the anti-shop shop’ [...] ‘We’re more like a fine arts tattoo gallery.’ Why? To begin, there is no flash of any kind in the store. Instead the walls are decorated with paintings by the artists, many of who have had shows at galleries in and around San Francisco. (*Inked* 2007, Fall: 104)

The quote shows how the description constructs the ‘flash’ organization’s identity and, at the same time, its own identity by the use of distinct semantics. According to these statements, a ‘shop’ characterizes the display of flash designs, whereas this “anti-shop shop” looks like a gallery decorated with fine art created by the organization’s members. The organization’s description establishes a link between ‘flash’ and ‘shop’, while distancing itself from the designation (albeit in a paradoxical manner) and the organizational way of working attributed to it. The differences among the ways of working warrant a semantic distinction.

Today, organizations may identify themselves with the supposedly past form of the ‘flash’ organization. Talking about the organization in which she manages the tattooing section, a tattooist refers to the “production shop setting” as one crucial part of the organization’s workings (in McCabe 2001: 68). This particular setting, she adds, constitutes “the essence of tattooing” in the past. It represents the setting historically formed by those traveling with the carnival or providing tattoos for the military on pay-day (McCabe 2001: 68). The creation of flash tattoos is linked with the notion of ‘production shop’. Even though the organization also provides custom work, the account distinguishes it from its ‘flash’ aspects (“I love a production shop setting, [...] plus the custom work aspect”; McCabe 2001: 68).

As already discussed in the case of role descriptions, organization can decide to use

a particular semantics, even if it might not do justice to the actual functioning of the organization. An organization, for example, may choose to describe itself in terms of studio or salon or in turn as a shop or parlor, irrespective whether it corresponds to established ways of connecting the form and identifying semantics of organizations. Self- and other-descriptions of an organization, consequently, may diverge in their semantics. This, however, does not necessarily take place strategically. Thanks to a diverse semantic repertoire that formed in the twentieth century, one and the same description may well draw on different of the mentioned terms. Especially accounts in tattoo magazines sometimes provide other-descriptions of tattoo organizations that noticeably deviate from the semantics used in an organization's self-description. Moreover, an organization may well mix semantics in its self-description without further ado. Today, for example, the phrase "custom shop" may well be found without necessarily provoking confusion or criticism (*Inked* 2008, April: 95; e.g. also Hardy 2005: 17, 18; *TätowierMagazin* 2006, 12/122: 131, 132; *Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/9: 39; *Prick Magazine* 2007, 8/2: 20, 22). The more established connections between the organizational forms and their descriptions (identifications) continue to exist. The availability and non-binding character of the different designations, however, leads to semantic mixtures. But if descriptions compare and contrast organizations, the semantics retain their distinguishing function.

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An organization's description and identification may well turn out differently depending on the audience addressed. In distinction to organizations that work differently, on the one hand, an organization might hold on to a particular semantics that represents its way of working. In this case, the identifying semantics will support the organization's primary orientation. The designations 'shop', 'parlor' and additional terms (e.g. street, production) semantically reinforce the economic focus of the 'flash' organization. Likewise, designations such as 'studio', 'gallery', and 'atelier' reinforce the artistic orientation of the 'custom' organization. Each semantics, thus, contributes to the construction of an organization's identity.

On the other hand, the organization may decide to present itself in different terms on business cards and in magazine portraits. It may try to attract customers by using another semantics that does not necessarily connect to its main decisions. As examples show, a 'flash' organization may describe itself in art terms and a 'custom' organization in more economically oriented terms. While implicitly constructing part of its identity with its decisions, expectations, and the resulting visual descriptions, an organization

retains the option to construct its identity differently with linguistic descriptions. While in such cases criticism might be provoked, there are organizations that seem to be able to switch between these different self-descriptions more easily. As the next section shows, they not only switch descriptions but also decisions if not the entire form of how to organize tattooing.

V Oscillation, Parallelism and Mixing: Combining Flash and Custom

Both in the past and today, ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ represent two distinct approaches to organizing tattooing. The discussion of their characteristic decisions, expectations and semantics had the purpose to show how each organizational form operates. The presentation of each form in a more ideal typical manner should have nevertheless shown with examples how the two forms concretely shape the way tattooing is organized. Thus, even though these clear distinctions play a major role in shaping organizations, we have to turn to a third option of how to organize tattooing. This third option is shaped by ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ as well, but in this case they meet in one way or another in the very same organization.

Precursors

The two forms of organizing tattooing seem to have existed parallel already around 1900.³⁹ While the semantics of ‘flash’ emerged after the invention of flash sheets in the early twentieth century (see DeMello 2007: 115), ‘custom’ came into wider use only in the wake of the ‘tattoo renaissance’. Although it is difficult to determine exactly when it first appeared,⁴⁰ the rather late emergence of the concept of ‘custom’, however, does not signify the late arrival of the organizational form. Rather, it seems to be the final semantic consolidation of an already present form that had a comparatively shadowy existence until the 1960s/70s’ ‘renaissance’. One has therefore to assume a parallel, but

39 Descriptions of this time might not always be as clear as contemporary ones, though. But there are still indications: See for example the accounts of Hopkins (1895a: esp. 695-696), Boyer (1898), Dr Bienvvenu (~1900-1903) and Brooklyn (1903), in which an artistic semantics prevails and sometimes photographs of tattoos are shown that look more like custom tattoos than flash; but also Burchett (1960: 20, 86-87, and chap. 6), Riecke (1925: 29), Spamer (1934: 52) and Hardy (1995: 22). Other commentators of tattooing, however, deemed it to have disappeared in the ‘civilized nations’, not mentioning the then contemporary tattooists in Britain or the U.S. (e.g. Anonym 1881: 27).

40 In a letter from 1971, for example, Sailor Jerry Collins makes a comment in which he refers to “[t]his custom stuff” (in Hardy 2005: 48; see also 149). The expression suggests that it has been a rather new way of describing for the pioneer of the ‘tattoo renaissance’. For Germany, Riecke (1925: 29) and Spamer (1934: 52) refer to a rather rare way of creating tattoos that resemble what later will be called custom in German as well.

initially asymmetric existence of both ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ organizations, even if it was not yet as distinctly observed in these and similar terms as during and after the ‘tattoo renaissance’.

With some exceptions, the form of ‘flash’ dominated the world of organized tattooing until the increasing emergence of ‘custom’ organizations in the second half of the twentieth century. Accompanying the ‘tattoo renaissance’, descriptions appearing in the growing number of special books and magazines emphasized differences between ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ organizations and thereby supported their differentiation. Because of an increasing demand for custom work satisfied by the new organizations, organizations that already operated in the form of ‘flash’ for decades held on to it (e.g. the organization of the ‘old school’ tattooist Leonard “Stoney” St. Clair, who sceptically described the then new ones as the “Now Generation”, Govenar 2003: 95; see also McCabe 2001). Many newly emerging organizations decided to operate exclusively in the form of ‘custom’, distancing themselves from ‘flash’ organizations. But they nevertheless often paid tribute to the ‘tradition’ seen to belong to the past (i.e., the ‘old school’; see Hardy in Gilbert 2000; Webb 2002).⁴¹ Today, many an organization still decides to operate either in the form of ‘flash’ or ‘custom’ exclusively, distancing itself more or less explicitly from organizations working differently.⁴²

The previous sections already indicated that in some cases organizations do not necessarily operate in only one of the two forms. An organization may decide to operate in one way or another in both forms. From a historical point of view, one finds at least one precursor of this in the first half of the twentieth century. Only with the ‘tattoo renaissance’ does this seem to become a more prominent organizational alternative. At this time, organizations that operated in both forms also seem to have triggered a new interest and emphasis of the hitherto only rarely present form of ‘custom’.

The organization of British tattooist George Burchett (1960) represents the mentioned precursor that seems to have worked to some extent with both forms.⁴³ While mainly producing similar and standardized designs throughout his career (1960: 75, 81), Burchett’s customers sometimes requested custom tattoos (Burchett does not use

41 See Vail (2000) for an analysis of the conflicts between ‘old school’ and “nu school” tattooists.

42 Of course, organizations also distinguish themselves from others working in the same form, sometimes drawing on the semantics of the ‘bad tattooist’ discussed above. This is expressed in terms of competition (e.g. Steward 1990). In case of good relations with other organizations of either form, it is put in terms of collaboration and exchange (of ideas and customers; personal interview with tattooist, tattoo convention 2007).

43 Whether one can speak of one organization linked to Burchett’s name during his entire career, lasting from the late nineteenth until the middle of the twentieth century, is debatable. Here, I concentrate on how his work is described for the main period he spent in Britain (excluding, e.g., his early years on the sea).

the terms ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ himself, though; 1960: 86-87). One of these personalized tattoos is described in detail, which he and Tom Riley, another well-known tattooist at that time, developed. A “very wealthy gentleman” commissioned a tattoo of a detailed train around his arm (1960: 86). On the basis of drawings given by the customer and impressions collected at a train station, a personalized and unique tattoo was created. Burchett’s description is quite clear in this respect: “while the reproduction of a picture, often difficult enough, can be in all conscience copied, the train had to be specially designed” (1960: 86-87). The distinction between copied and specially designed, as shown, constitutes one of the central distinctions for the characterization of flash and custom work until today. Burchett (1960: 87) adds that this customer paid a large sum “for this masterpiece”, but expressing the conviction that they did not charge too much. The tattoo’s elaborateness justified the (customized) price. Although Burchett’s description does not give more information, which would allow to infer every of the above described features of ‘custom’, his organization might be nevertheless seen as operating with some of the elements that later in the century become characteristic for this form. Burchett’s organization, thus, seems to have temporarily switched to the form of ‘custom’, while most of the time operating as a ‘flash’ organization and attending to requests for standardized tattoos.

The very beginning of the ‘tattoo renaissance’ seems to be closely connected with the emergence of organizations that operated in both organizational forms. The organizations of Phil Sparrow (alias Samuel Steward, see Steward 1990), Sailor Jerry Collins and their followers (Cliff Raven, Don Ed Hardy, and others) are seen as the pioneers of the ‘renaissance’ (Rubin 1988; on the last two, Steward 1990: 190). Even though these names are mostly linked to the, then increasingly, emerging custom tattoos, each of them worked also or at last initially as flash tattooists (see also the case of Spider Webb 2002: 17-18).

Sailor Jerry Collins’ organization represents an exemplary case of one that worked in the form of both ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ (Hardy 2005). On the one hand, Collins’ organization offered standard flash designs selected by many sailors and soldiers visiting his establishment in Honolulu (Hawaii). Until today, Collins is known for his own interpretations of naval tattoo designs in the ‘old school’ style.⁴⁴ On the other hand, Collins was inspired by Japanese tattooists and their work. In the 1960s, he began to

44 They are again made available in recent publications about Collins and on flash sheets. But they appear also on shoes and clothing (see <http://www.sailorjerry.com/shop>). The same applies to Don Ed Hardy’s tattoo designs, sold under the brand name ‘Ed Hardy’, which are available on clothing, accessories and many more (see <http://edhardyshop.com>).

experiment with new design versions, colors and techniques (Hardy 2005: 21). Instead of just imitating the Japanese tattoo style, Collins' tried to produce original tattoos (Hardy 2005: 58). As a consequence, Collins' organization started to operate in the form of 'custom' as well (e.g. Hardy 2005: 64, 139, 149, and the many photographs of his work).

Variants of the Meeting of Flash and Custom

Since these precursor organizations, drawing on both forms became a viable alternative compared to an exclusive organizational focus on one of them. How this alternative becomes operationally effective for an organization can be inferred from descriptions. One can distinguish two modes of how this occurs. Although these modes differ, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

First, an organization can oscillate between the two forms. The following variants constitute decision premises that define when and under which conditions the organization switches between 'flash' and 'custom'.

An organization may decide to have a stable temporal pattern about when it switches between the two forms. It can decide to schedule one day of the work week in order to attend to flash requests and 'walk-ins'. The organization makes itself available to those who do not want to wait for an appointment and prefer to be attend to on a "first come, first-served basis" (*Tattoo Life* 2008, 10/52: 6).

Alternatively, the organization offers both flash and custom work but decides to switch depending on customers' requests. This is expressed, for example, in terms of proportions of the work done. Custom tattoos might constitute "two thirds/three quarter" of the work done, while the organization is "available to do walk-ins" (*Skin Deep* 2006, April/131: 36). An organization can also decide to offer flash and custom work "half and half" as "a combination of both" (McCabe 2001: 88). The same is also described in terms of proportions in percent, while the higher percentage recurrently is attributed to custom work. Identifying an organization as "street/custom shop", for example, a tattooist clarifies what this mix of contrasting terms signifies: "We mainly do high-end custom work, but you can still walk in off the street and get whatever you want" (*Skin&Ink* 2002, September/feature article). It is added in the article that "[a]round 80% of the clients come for custom work, while the rest tend toward small, traditional designs" (*Skin&Ink* 2002, September/feature article; similar examples in Morse 1977: 98; McCabe 2001: 60). In these cases, the organization may expect its tattooists "to split their creative energies between their custom work and a booming street

shop atmosphere” (McCabe 2001: 66).

In order to make a clear distinction between the forms, however, an organization may as well decide to have two or more establishments. In this case, it can run ‘flash’ and ‘custom’ each in a different establishment (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 46).⁴⁵ Alternatively, it determines who of its tattooists attends to which kind of tattoos and how. These latter two cases signify for the organization that it can run both forms in parallel. In each of these variants, thus, the decision premise allows the organization to actualize either form according to specific criteria.

An organization not only decides about how it oscillates between the two forms, it also makes its decision observable. The organization may describe itself in both semantics identified before as recurrently connected to either the form of ‘flash’ or ‘custom’ (like the just quoted “street/custom shop”; e.g. also in advertisements, job descriptions, on signs). But it can also make it observable with its visual means of display.

In an interview, a tattoo apprentice described how such a tattoo organization may look (personal interview, tattoo convention 2008). The establishment, in which she works, includes both flash designs on the walls and in folders and portfolios with photographs showing the most recent work done by each tattooist. With this the organization allows the customers to either select a tattoo design or get inspired by the work already produced. In this case, the organization runs both forms in parallel, for example appointing the creation of small flash tattoos to advanced apprentices, while the other tattooists attend to custom work, especially ‘freehand’ designs.

An oscillating organization, however, still has the option to temporarily hold on to one of the forms. Even if that means that it faces requests that are incompatible with its current form, but with which the organization could hypothetically deal. Under certain circumstances such as tattoo conventions, the organization may prefer to decide not to oscillate if required. The case of an observed interaction at a tattoo convention (visited in 2007), exemplifies this well (discussed from a different angle already in chap. 6.II).

An organization that seems capable of oscillating between ‘flash’ and ‘custom’, opts to operate in the form of ‘flash’ for the duration of the convention. In order to not spend too much time developing and drawing custom tattoos, the organization provides only reproducible flash work. In an interaction between the tattooist and a convention visitor, the visitor explained her ideas and wishes to the tattooist. Her request, however, was turned down. The organization decided to provide flash only on a

⁴⁵ Even though the descriptions are not that clear, Burchett’s organization with its different branches in London might have been a precursor of this (see Burchett 1960: 64f., 98, 19).

‘walk-in’ basis during the convention, because it could make more money and promote itself better than if creating time-consuming custom tattoos. The tattooist’s explanation of the refusal and the final offer to make the tattoo exactly the way the visitor requested in the organization’s establishment, indicate the organization’s oscillating capability. Despite this capability, the organization nevertheless decides for itself when and under which conditions a switch from one to the other form occurs. As this case exemplifies, this includes the decision not to make use of the option to oscillate temporarily.

The second mode of drawing on both forms consists in deciding to mix them partially. Decisions from one form can be exchanged with the corresponding ones of the other form. A ‘flash’ organization may decide to offer tattoos ‘off the wall’, but on a ‘by appointment only’ basis instead of ‘walk-in’ (e.g. I received my first tattoo in such an organization). An organization that provides both flash and custom may similarly decide to offer both kinds of tattoos by appointment only (personal interview with apprentice, tattoo convention 2008). Even though customers might not need an appointment for visiting the establishment in the first place (they literally walk in), they will not get a tattoo immediately after selecting a design from the wall or a folder. Rather, after talking to the tattooist about their choice, they are given an appointment for the actual tattoo session. The reason for this decision, regardless of the kind of tattoo provided, may be that the organization prefers its tattooist(s) not to work in a crowded establishment where people wait for their turn. Or, the organization thereby invites its customers to take time to consider their choice of the design or to be tattooed at all (if customers really want the tattoo, they will show up at the appointed time).

The reverse case, though, takes place as well. A ‘custom’ organization can decide to temporarily and partly exchange its ‘by appointment only’ decision with the ‘flash’ equivalent. The special circumstances at tattoo conventions, such as the presence of many potential customers and the chance to perform in front of an audience, again may prompt an organization to do so. In such cases, customers do not have to arrange appointments in beforehand. This, however, might also signify that convention visitors may have to wait for their turn if the organization is occupied with other visitors. Otherwise the visitor will be attended to on the spot. After a consultation with the customer, the tattooist will need time to prepare the customized design before the tattoo can be made (again, I received my third tattoo in this way). From the customers’ point of view, this temporary exchange of the decision and the accompanying expectation allows them to get in contact with organizations that otherwise are not as easily accessible (e.g. because of the establishment’s location, or the ‘by appointment only’ policy

and a long waiting list). Similarly, with such an exchange the organization establishes contact to a new public and future customers. In the case of ‘custom’ organizations that hold on to their ‘by appointment only’ decision, however, visitors do not have the opportunity to get tattooed at a convention if they did not contact the organization in beforehand.⁴⁶

An organization can decide between these two modes and the different variants of each one. But it can also decide to change between the modes or mixing them. For the further discussion, however, I want to concentrate mainly on the case in which an organization switches between or runs parallel the two sets entirely and not only partially as in the second mode. While mixing or exchanging individual decisions does not completely change an organization’s main orientation, an organization drawing on both forms equally switches between the corresponding orientations. The question is, how this affects the organization.

Flexibility and Challenges

In contrast to those operating exclusively in the form of ‘flash’ or ‘custom’, an organization deciding to operate with both forms turns out to be more flexible when it comes to customers’ requests. This applies more to organizations that oscillate between the two forms than those that only mix specific decisions. In the latter case, for example, a ‘custom’ organization allowing ‘walk-ins’ will still hold on to its other ‘custom’ related decisions and expectations, and therefore be primarily characterized by it. An organization working exclusively in the ‘flash’ or ‘custom’ form, however, most likely faces requests and expectations which it cannot meet on the basis of its decisions. This is why the organization will refuse customers with such requests, or alternatively will send them to another organization with whom it collaborates. To the contrary, the capability of switching between the forms or even running them in parallel is likely to prevent an organization to send customers away.⁴⁷

Organizations exclusively working in either the form of ‘flash’ or ‘custom’, as ar-

46 This is often the case with well-known organizations at prominent international tattoo conventions. Some of these organizations either bring their own customers or announce publicly (e.g. on websites), and long beforehand, that interested persons can contact them for appointments at a particular convention. This, however, is also seen as problematic. Organizations holding on to their ‘by appointment only’ decision preclude contact to new customers. Because of this, organizations and their tattooists appear “unreachable” for customers (*Tattoo Life* 2008, 10/52: 6).

47 Except if non of the tattooists is able to create a special tattoo style requested; if requests run counter decisions about the tattoo’s e.g. non-political content; or e.g. also, if the customer just wants to have a tattoo without any idea of the concrete design (personal interview with apprentice, tattoo convention 2008).

gued, are characterized by an emphasis of either economic or artistic aspects. Organizations working with both sets of decisions and expectations emphasize both aspects, in turn or in parallel, accordingly. Decisions and the connected expectations can be actualized, either with an artistic or an economic emphasis. The different variants or decision premises about when to switch to or run the forms parallel constitute at the same time decisions about the actualization of the organizations emphasis. Due to their single focus, 'flash' or 'custom' organizations lack the structural option of easily adapting to temporary environmental changes (here primarily its public).⁴⁸ A change of semantics may be feasible, but could eventually turn out not to be based on the organizations' decisions and expectations and could lead to conflicts and criticism. Organizations using both forms have the option to switch to the required form. They seem to be more capable of dealing with differently oriented expectations and requests, than are 'single-form' organizations.

Organizations that deliberately decide to oscillate, or simultaneously use both forms, gain in adaptivity, compared to 'single-form' organizations. But even though they are flexible enough to deal with different kinds of requests and expectations, these organizations are not immune to challenges. Rather, the involvement of both forms generates other organizational challenges. With the following two cases I want to show what this means.

Running both forms parallel in one establishment with several tattooists signifies a "challenge on a daily basis", whether creating custom work or standardized tattoos for tourists (McCabe 2001: 66). In such a case, the organization not only offers the creation of both flash and custom tattoos, it also gets the chance to do so side by side. In other cases, however, this may turn out differently.

An organization may well be capable and ready to attend to both types of requests. Depending on its main public, however, its actual output may turn out one-sided. In order to continue to operate, it needs to adapt to its customers' requests. According to the owner and tattooist of such an organization, it is

because of the neighborhood we're in, we do flash work. The artists at my

48 In case of other disturbances observed in their environment such as political decisions, new legal restrictions or regulations, every type of tattoo organizations might be affected the same way. A legal ban of tattooing, as it was the case in New York City until 1997 (and elsewhere still today), hypothetically stops tattooing in any case (see McCabe 2001: 10, passim; Govenar 2003: 25). If an organization then decides to 'go underground', it might need to change some of its decisions (a 'flash' organization will not do 'walk-ins' anymore but 'by appointment only'). If the law prescribes new rules about sanitation and hygiene that turn out impractical and costly, tattoo organization of any kind might have severe problems in implementing them (personal interview with tattooist, tattoo convention 2008).

7 Flash and Custom: The Organization of Tattooing

shop are capable of doing amazing custom work. Given the chance, they do it immediately but we're in a neighborhood that demands what they want and that is mostly flash. (McCabe 2001: 30)

The location of the organization's establishment and, accordingly, its 'catchment area' are seen to be responsible for the kind of public the organization attends to. Flash work, thus, will not be turned down, since requests for custom tattoos would mean fewer customers. An abundance of flash requests is nevertheless appreciated. As the tattooist notes, "[o]n Saturday, it's like rush hour here and everybody's makin' a livin', nobody's complainin'" (McCabe 2001: 30). But the tattooist emphasizes once again, that when the tattooists "get a chance to do a custom thing, they jump on the chance to really show their skills" (McCabe 2001: 30). This organization's challenge does not consist of customers' requests as such, which would diverge from its decisions and expectations. Instead, they do not cover the entire spectrum of the tattooists' skills available. Even though the organization maintains its offer of flash work (and continues to signal this by means of flash sheets; see McCabe 2001: 28), it nonetheless would like its' tattooists to be commissioned to do more custom tattoos.

Despite its use of both forms, especially seen as manifest in the tattooists' skills, the organization sees itself as compelled to primarily attend to flash requests. Making money due to many requests for flash work on a busy Saturday is appreciated. But because the organization also features 'custom' skills, it nevertheless laments the mismatch of requests. In regard to the organization's focus, one can thus draw the following conclusion: appreciating the economic focus that results from the use of the 'flash' form, the organization would prefer a stronger artistic emphasis by operating more in the form of 'custom'.

An organization with both forms at its' disposal may be oriented, as well, contrary to the one just discussed. Mainly creating custom tattoos, such an organization may explicitly decide to also attend to flash requests. Presenting such a case, McCabe (2001: 73) quotes a tattooist's statement about the organization's "philosophy". The tattooist emphasizes the seriousness with which the organization works ("We don't cut corners") and states that it produces "mostly custom work" and "a really nice quality product" (or "great, intelligent artwork and very well done tattoos"; McCabe 2001: 73). Although the production of custom tattoos prevails, the organization decides to operate in both forms.

To be a well-rounded New York City tattooer you have to be able to deal with the walk-in trade and the custom thing. This is a business, you gotta pay the rent. [...] The attitude here is very open and friendly and not snobby. We

won't shy away from doing flash because it brings food to the table and if you get some custom stuff, that's like all gravy. I'm always grateful that I'm in this business and that I get to do great custom work. (in McCabe 2001: 73)

Even if the creation of custom tattoos constitutes the main part of the organization's output, it continues to cater to flash requests. Similar to the previous case, it is partly the area that is described as being responsible for what the organization has to deal with. Accordingly, although generally attributed to "tattooers" in this particular place, the organization defines its performers as "well-rounded" tattooists that can attend to "the walk-in trade and the custom thing" alike. But, the 'catchment area' of the organization seems not to figure as the sole reason for its functioning in both forms. The option to operate in the form of 'flash' allows the organization to emphasize the economic facet of tattooing. To offer both flash and custom means to be 'realistic', since "[t]his is a business, you gotta pay the rent". As the tattooist expresses, the ability to create custom tattoos is appreciated. But one can infer that the organization would probably not survive by attending exclusively to custom tattoo customers. In regard to its working in both forms, it describes itself as unpretentious ("not snobby", "We won't shy away"). The making of flash tattoos "brings food to the table", i.e., it allows the organization to earn money it would obviously not gain, if it dedicated its efforts exclusively to custom tattoos (for a similar description of an oscillating organization, *Skin Deep* 2007, December/153: 37).

For the organization, it is clear that it works both in terms of 'custom' and 'flash' because it deals with a diverse public. It externalizes, to a certain extent, the reason why it works the way it does. However, it addresses this diversity of customers and their requests because it operates in both forms. That is, exactly because it oscillates between the forms (even if 'custom' prevails), it constructs its public accordingly in regard to both kinds of requests. The quoted description suggests that an exclusive occupation with custom work is seen not as an economically viable alternative. In order to earn money, the organization decides to operate as well in the form of 'flash'. It is the organization's decision to operate in both forms, which leads to the corresponding constructions of its outside. That it is possible to operate either in the form of 'flash' or 'custom' only, in contrast, becomes clear in descriptions of other organizations that run establishments in the same area (for other cases see e.g. McCabe 2001: 73; Hardy 1991: 32ff.).

Similar to the previous case, this organization switches between an artistic and an economic emphasis by oscillating between the sets of decisions of 'custom' and 'flash'. While drawing on a semantics of art in general ("pump out some great, intelli-

gent artwork”, McCabe 2001: 73), it can describe without problem its orientation also in terms of “business” and the need to pay bills and bring “food to the table”. In case of doubt, the organization can ‘ground’ its claims made with this semantics by referring to its different ways of working.⁴⁹

An organization that draws on both forms by oscillating or by running them in parallel (and less those that partially mix them) has the option to decide when and under which conditions it does so. The decision to switch to the other form or running them in parallel always implies a decision about the organization’s focus. While ‘single-form’ organizations maintain their focus on either economy or art with their decision-making and the linked expectations, ‘double-form’ organizations switch between an artistic and economic focus or decide to have both simultaneously. While it seems well possible that organizations simply switch forms without considering about the effects on their general focus, they can also deliberately take these into account and decide accordingly. An oscillating organization creating mostly custom tattoos, as the examples above show, may decide to dedicate some time to flash work in order to earn money. Although custom work, of course, costs money as well, it seems to not generate as much income as the creation of comparatively smaller and less time-consuming flash tattoos. At a convention, as one case exemplified, an organization therefore might opt to spend the time earning money and promoting itself instead of creating personalized and elaborate tattoos that yield less. In comparison to the exclusive functioning in one form, thus, the use of both forms and the option to switch turn out as a strategic advantage. Ultimately, it is the organization itself that makes these decisions (about when and how to decide), even if the organization’s descriptions suggest the cause for the decision is in its environment. For what the organization deals with and reacts to is its’ own construction of its environment.

To relate to tattooing with communication does not seem to be a simple endeavor. Rather, communication that links to it has to deal with its parallaxic form that brings art and economy together. This chapter presented how tattoo organizations relate to tattooing with decisions, expectations, and semantics. The decisions an organization makes determine under which conditions tattooing, as a form of communication, can occur.

⁴⁹ The organization, however, shares with other, including ‘single-form’, organizations that it distances itself from those that “don’t care about the people or the art” and “just care about the money” (in this case in the wake of the re-legalization of tattooing in New York City; McCabe 2001: 76; similarly e.g. *Inked* 2007, Winter: 99). To focus exclusively on economy and to capitalize on tattooing is out of the question for these organizations.

Not by chance, the thesis of this chapter claims, organizations operate in two basic forms. In dealing with tattooing, organizations have to find a way to structure and stabilize the parallaxic form of tattooing. Empirically this shows in the forms I call 'flash' and 'custom', i.e., two different sets of decisions and expectations, accompanied by a particular semantics. Each form has a different focus or emphasis in regard to the forms of communication involved in tattooing. The decisions and expectations of the form of 'flash' have an economic emphasis, whereas those of the form of 'custom' feature an artistic emphasis. The respective other facet, however, does not disappear. It merely plays a less prominent, less emphasized role. That is, an organization operating in the form of 'custom', for example, may emphasize artistic aspects with its decisions and their accompanying expectations. Although deemed secondary, however, economic considerations do not disappear completely. Even if the decisions and expectations are art oriented, the 'custom' organization has still to consider economic questions (whether close to it regarding price setting, or more distancing when it comes to the role construction of the tattooist as artist). These two organizational forms, thus, deal with the parallax of tattooing differently by 'taking sides' in regard to economy and art. But even by focusing on one aspect rather than the other, tattooing still occurs in the parallaxic form of economy and art.

An artistic or economic emphasis of the set of decisions and expectations has organizational consequences, though. Organizations face a variety of requests and expectations with which they can deal only according to their own decisions and expectations. Confronted with diverging or opposite expectations, organizations cannot merely adapt to the customers. They will hold on to their decisions and expectations, maybe trying to change the expectations and requests of the customers instead. Should the expectations turn out incompatible, it is more likely that customers' requests will be turned down completely. Because of the two forms, organizations will not (be able to) deal with any requests, customers or expectations. The forms define under which conditions tattooing can occur or not, inevitably resulting in rejections of requests.

Alongside the two forms 'flash' and 'custom', organizations have a third option of how to organize tattooing. Organizations can either draw on both forms, by oscillating between the two or running them in parallel, or they mix decisions by, for example, supplementing one of the forms with a decision of the other. While the latter does not necessarily entail considerable changes of the supplemented form, the former introduces an increased adaptability. Because such organizations actualize both forms, they are capable of dealing with a diversity of requests and expectations. In this respect, the

rejection of requests becomes comparatively less likely since double-form organizations can switch the form. However, as the examples showed, working in both forms produces its own challenges and options. Double-form organizations, thus, constitute another mode of how to deal with the parallaxic constellation of economy and art. These organizations might come closer to ‘capturing’ the parallax of tattooing than those working exclusively with one of the forms – they nonetheless deal with its special form and the effects it produces in the process of organizing it.

Interlude Two: Organizations Between Art and Economy

Tattoo organizations are not unique in their close linkage of art and economy. Other organizations deal with and make decisions about economy, art, and their relations, in order to provide their main output. Art galleries are prominent organizations of this kind (e.g. Fitz Gibbon 1987; Plattner 1996; Velthuis 2007), but there are many other organizations for which concerns about economy and art play a central role. Among them are organizations that are responsible for the following ‘output’: fashion (Green 1994; Troy 2003; see also Entwistle 2009), advertising (McFall 2002), films (Baumann 2007; Hutter 2008; see also Faulkner 1976), stage plays (Eikhof/Haunschild 2007), dance, opera (Martorella 1977; DiMaggio 1992, for the latter three), music (Becker 1951; Peterson/Berger 1975; Stratton 1982; Glynn 2000), photography (Christopherson 1974a, 1974b; Aspers 2006b; Battani 1999; Rosenblum 1978), pottery (Sinha 1979), or hairdressing (Lawson 1999; Smith 2008). Other organizations presumably deal with art and economy as well, for example those that create video games (Martin/Deuze 2009), and the ones offering food (i.e., restaurants; see Fine 1996b; Ferguson 1998).

In many of these studies, we find discussions or indications of the involvement of art and economy in the organization of the mentioned phenomena. Some of these studies deal with the different ways organizations operate, i.e., what I called organizational forms. Moreover, these organizational forms seem to be comparable to those I described for tattoo organizations. This does not seem to be an arbitrary result of organizing. Rather, I would like to suggest, the social characteristics of the different phenomena and the ways they are organized, seem to relate in a similar manner as in the case of tattooing and tattoo organizations (not necessarily in the same way, though).

After considering how a phenomenon is socially constituted, whether in the way proposed for tattooing or otherwise, one can proceed with an analysis of the specific ways organizations deal with and condition the phenomenon. Because the phenomena mentioned (seem to) involve both art and economy, organizations must address these aspects. Of course, it remains an empirical question how exactly organizations deal with such phenomena and the two distinct forms of communication. It nevertheless seems that the organization of (some of) these phenomena results in differently oriented organizational forms, i.e., one oriented more towards economic and the other towards artistic aspects.

Art galleries do not create, but exhibit, promote, and sell artwork (paintings, photo-

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graphs, objects, sculptures, installations etc.). Art galleries nevertheless deal with art and economy. Although the artwork stems from artistic communication in the first place, they become economically observed and possibly part of an economic transaction. Dealing with both art and economy, the organization can take on two distinct forms. Velthuis (2007: 29) speaks of a “clear-cut separation between avant-garde and commercial galleries”. The avant-garde gallery orients itself towards art and the commercial gallery, as the name indicates, towards economy. In art galleries, this becomes apparent in the way the interior is arranged, how prices are displayed, and which kind of selling techniques the organization uses (Velthuis 2007: 29-45). Despite an emphasis on art, the avant-garde gallery must nonetheless deal with economic aspects. The commercial plays its role in the back room of the gallery, in the secondary market activities, and in a second mode of selling artwork (Velthuis 2007: 29, 36). Commercial galleries deal with similar issues, but with an opposite focus (Velthuis 2007: 49-51; see also Fitz Gibbon 1987; Plattner 1996). As in the case of tattoo organizations, thus, art galleries seem to deal with economy and art in two basic organizational forms. Despite a main focus on either art or economy, it seems more complicated, because the other aspect continues to play a role.

Organizations producing and providing fashion function in a comparable manner. From the beginning of organized fashion production, art and economy have played a central role, even though their relations and meanings have shifted (Green 1994; Troy 2003). Organizations were concerned with uniqueness, reproducibility, mass production and similar commercial and artistic issues. It was the distinction between uniqueness and reproducibility in particular, as Green argues, that led to a differentiation in the “garment industry” between “two distinct branches [...] *haute couture* and ready-to-wear” at the end of the nineteenth century (1994: 723; emphasis in original; for slightly different terms, see Troy 2003: 20-21). The former, the successor of “tailor-made” fashion (Green 1994: 730), represents the artistically oriented way of producing fashion and the latter the economically oriented approach. As Troy shows, with a study of the leading fashion makers in nineteenth century France, economic and artistic facets were both issues for organizations despite their orientation to one of them (e.g. observable in descriptions that try to hide the economic aspects; Troy 2003: 46-47, 51, 192). As these examples show, organizing the creation of fashion has as much to do with economy as with art. The prevailing forms of organization are two ways to address them.

Similarly, studies on photography indicate the importance of economy and art for

the organizations that provide it. Christopherson (1974a: 134), for example, refers to the crucial distinction between “commercial-practitioners” or businessmen, who take photographs in order to make money, and “fine art photographer[s]” or “professional artists”, who do not primarily work for money and try to dissociate themselves from commercial work (for the case of fashion photography, see Aspers 2006b¹). The ways of organizing the production of photographs correspond to the two semantics of the performance role. The semantics indicates the organizations’ different orientations in terms of art and economy.

Battani (1999) shows how this distinction dominated organizations since the beginning of photography (daguerreotype) around the middle of the nineteenth century. Battani not only refers to the distinction of persons or roles – artists or “first-class operators” versus commercially oriented photographers (1999: 614, 616) –, but also to the corresponding difference of organizations and their establishments – “parlors” with “elaborate waiting rooms and picture galleries” (1999: 616) in distinction to “picture factories” with “an assembly-line approach to seating patrons and producing large numbers of portraits” (1999: 614).

These few examples should suffice to indicate the recurring ways of distinguishing organizations, performance roles, and the ways they are described. While there are certain commonalities between tattoo organizations and these examples, one has to do justice to each case’s particularities. Their comparability and differences would be worth a closer look at and reconsideration of how exactly each phenomenon perturbs organizations and how they constitute decisions, expectations, and descriptions for dealing with them.

While we observe the stabilization of organizations in one form or another, we have to keep the possibility of the destabilizing, perturbing effects of a phenomenon’s form of communication in mind. Because of its parallaxic form, tattooing creates perturbations for organizations. The organizational forms described, represent ways of stabilizing the communications with which they work. They nonetheless face expectations and situations, which they cannot, or at least not easily, manage. They do not simply continually reproduce themselves as organizations (the necessary autopoiesis of the organization as a system). They also have to reproduce the particular form with which they operate. Thus, neither the organization nor its form are stable and permanently set. It

¹ Aspers (2006b: 146) asserts that the business of fashion photography “resolved” the “traditional conflict between ‘art’ and ‘money’ [...] through the separation of two markets: the market for editorial fashion photography (‘art’) and the market for advertising fashion photography (‘money’)”. The fact that the distinction is still controversially discussed, though, suggests a different conclusion (see e.g. Aspers 2006b: 99).

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therefore seems worthwhile to find out whether the form of communication of a phenomenon creates disturbances, and how organizations re-stabilize or, alternatively, transform or adapt themselves, while dealing with these disturbances and those generated in the wake of their stabilization.

8 Quality Has its Price: Qualifications of Tattoos

Tattooing operates without necessarily being in the focus of communication about it. The same also applies to tattoo organizations. As I showed in the previous chapter, expectations and descriptions support the ongoing operation of a tattoo organization and the occurrence of tattooing. When faced with diverging expectations, the organization will not simply stop working but deal with them and maintain its own expectations. In such a case, tattooing might not take place. In another situation, however, its occurrence may be supported by expectations and modes of observing. In general terms, tattooing in its parallax form perturbs expectations and descriptions, while they again feed back, supporting or hindering its occurrence.

Qualifications of tattoos play a crucial role in the support or hindrance of tattooing. They appear in various contexts and versions. The qualifications of interest, here, are those dealing with the artistic and economic aspects of tattoos. They can be found in descriptions of tattoo organizations for the purposes of promotion, and feature prominently in critical descriptions of tattoos and other observers' qualifications. In regard to the critical descriptions, one can distinguish between qualifications taking place before tattooing occurs (whether or not it comes to fruition) or after the completion of a tattoo. Before tattooing, qualifications mainly involve the point of view of tattoo organizations and customers, while those which follow may involve also other observers, such as tattoo magazines and their readers. Qualifications include (linguistic) descriptions as well as certain kinds of (observed or attributed) behavior and organizations' methods.

Basically, qualifications constitute descriptions that attribute certain characteristics to a phenomenon and establish particular connections between characteristics (see Callon et al. 2002). They construct a phenomenon as equipped with specific features and delimit them from others (see Hutter 2007a: 34). In this sense, the term does not exclusively refer to 'quality' as such. It may entail many more attributable characteristics (for a more general perspective on qualifications see Boltanski/Thévenot 2006). Since qualifications do nothing more than observe and thus construct characteristics and values, they remain communicational attributions. Even though qualifications inevitably communicate characteristics as ontologically existing and take them for granted, characteristics do not become stable. Quite to the contrary, as an observer of qualifications,

one can see that they represent contingent offers of what a phenomenon characterizes (see Callon et al. 2002: 199; also Hutter 2007b). As we will see, different points of view entail differing qualifications. Phenomena, therefore, do not have intrinsic, stable, or always existing features and values. They need to be established in communication.

In this chapter I focus on descriptions of tattoos in regard to economy and art. I thereby exclude other ways of describing and qualifying tattoos. Descriptions from the perspective of tattooed persons or onlookers about the meaning of tattoos and the motives to get a specific design for example, will be excluded (for such a focus see Kjeldgaard/Bengtsson 2005; Orend/Gagné 2009). Similarly, I do not deal with different forms of communication that provide their semantic repertoires for qualifying tattoos in one way or another (e.g. legal or medical semantics).

Although none of the possible modes of qualifying tattoos has primacy, economic and artistic qualifications come to the fore because they recurrently emerge in close connection with each other. I want to suggest that these qualifications emerge due to the parallaxic form of tattooing and the tattoo. In addressing and qualifying tattoos, they deal with the two aspects involved in tattooing and try to stabilize their meaning in one way or another. The spectrum of possible connections and qualifications of the two aspects shows that there is not solely one way to describe tattoos. The confrontation of diverging qualifications makes clear their contingency and how the meaning(s) of tattoos become the subject of contestation and continued (re-)stabilization.

While it is the form of tattooing and tattoos that, by being observed, generate different ways of stabilizing the involved economic and artistic meanings, this is not merely a one-sided relation of perturbation. Qualifications feed back and may in turn condition the occurrence of tattooing and the creation of tattoos.

The phrase 'quality has its price' represents the guiding observation in the following discussion. It figures as a basic observation for qualifications, appearing in different variations. The observation as such, however, does not explicitly emerge in this form. It is only observable in its various appearances. The question is, how the artistic and economic aspects are qualified, and how the observation relates them, in each case. In other words, the question is, how the parallaxic meaning of tattoos is stabilized.

The observation 'quality has its price', one might object, appears in many other contexts as well. Certainly, it plays a role in many areas and situations, in which qualifications, and especially the observation of quality, are important (see Akerlof 1970). On the one hand, this shows that the way tattoos are observed is not entirely different from observations of other phenomena. However, from a sociological perspective, this

does not yet provide much insight. For the present purpose the results of the observation is of greater interest for tattoos in particular. The question is, how it becomes meaningful in different ways, when appearing as a qualifying observation of tattoos. Thus, I am concerned with how something emerges rather than just the fact that it emerges (and is perhaps comparable to other phenomena).

The variations of the basic observation can be characterized in terms of how they qualify the relationship between artistic quality and price. One can reduce the various appearances to four extreme ‘poles’, each characterized by either high/good or poor/bad artistic quality and high/adequate or low price (indicated with +/-). The following analyses, though, will present the cases with more nuances than outlined in the figure.

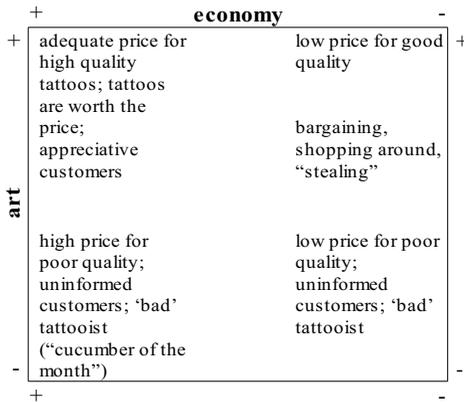


Fig. 10: Qualifications of tattoos

Each case of qualification not only observes tattoos in a particular way, but also implies different points of observation (e.g. tattooist/tattoo organization and customer). The empirical material, however, does not provide descriptions for each of these poles. Instead, some are only described from another point of observation, as ways tattoos should not be qualified. This applies, for example, to the poles on the bottom right (a-/e-) and left (a-/e+) which are mainly observed from the top left position (a+/e+).

These variations of qualifying tattoos do not necessarily relate to specific organizational forms. As discussed above, descriptions and observations recurrently emerge with organizational forms, but do not exclusively and necessarily link to one of them. An organization, for example, may qualify tattoos in descriptions with favorable terms.

Another organization, however, might observe that this organization qualifies tattoos in the opposite way, when it comes to how it works (the organization's members, then, might be described as bad tattooists). Qualifications can also be a strategic means for organizations, for example serving promotional purposes, for differentiating among organizations or for the construction of a public.

Tattoos, however, are not only qualified by tattoo organizations. Tattoo magazines and customers also produce qualifications. Magazines qualify tattoos both in textual and visual descriptions, while customers' qualifications may be of a descriptive or 'behavioral' nature. The latter, for example, appear in descriptions from the point of view of organizations, which address customers' attempts to find the best deal (observations of qualifying behavior). Qualifications of tattoos, thus, emerge in different contexts and from different points of observation. They constitute a separate dimension of communication than the communication of tattooing and tattoo organizations.

First, I describe cases of organizations, which promote themselves by qualifying what they provide. I then discuss critical accounts of tattoos, choices and search strategies of customers. Even though these descriptions and qualifications of tattoos, dealing with the connection between artistic and economic qualities, might seem trivial, we should keep in mind that their variety, confrontation and (re-)stabilization is due to the social characteristics of what they address.

I Qualifying Tattoos and Promoting Organizations

In tattoo organizations' self-descriptions, the observation 'quality has its price' prominently appears in two versions. On the one hand, tattoo organizations highlight their artistically and qualitatively good tattoos and the justified (high) prices they demand (a+/e+). On the other hand, organizations make the same statement about the artistic output, but in contrast try to rival their competitors by indicating their lower or 'cheap' prices (a+/e-).

Good Work is not Cheap

Descriptions of Sailor Jerry Collins' tattoo organization offer illustrative cases for the first version of the observation (Hardy 2005).

In a letter from 1971, Collins qualifies tattoos when speaking about customers and pricing (Hardy 2005: 79). As Collins makes clear in several letters, customers cannot simply demand anything they want. The tattooist has to take charge of the business. In this letter, Collins says that customers should pay in advance, in order that the tattooist

not lose money, should they not come for their appointment. Equally, if there is too much demand for the tattooist to handle, prices should be raised twenty percent. When doing so, Collins advises, the tattooist should not feel badly about it: “I know it’s a bad feeling to think you are overcharging somebody but you’re *not*, really – ‘*Good work is not cheap and cheap work is not good*’” (in Hardy 2005: 79; emphasis in original). This expression qualifies tattoos in both an artistic and an economic sense. It includes two of the four versions of “quality has its price”. “Good work is not cheap” positively qualifies artistic quality and price, while “cheap work is not good” qualifies them negatively. Both variants make clear what customers may expect from the organization. While they should expect to pay a certain amount, they can equally expect to get good quality tattoos. Should they choose to go to another organization because it provides tattoos for lower prices, however, they should expect to get the corresponding quality. It is significant that the saying uses euphemisms, which mitigate the meaning of the terms. The good work is not qualified as expensive, but as ‘not cheap’. Customers should not, it seems, be afraid of expensive tattoos. But, they should expect to pay an adequate price for the artistic quality. Equivalent to this way of putting it, the cheap work is euphemistically qualified as ‘not good’ instead of bad.¹

Collins’ statement does not solely function as advice for other tattooists, on how to conceive of their work and how to legitimate their pricing. Publicly displayed, it figures as an organizational self-description and directly addresses customers.

On the same page as the letter, a poster is displayed, which makes the same observation. It looks as if the poster was put on the wall of Collins’ tattoo establishment. The poster consists of handwritten text and two drawings of childlike devils’ heads with cowboy hats and dog collars. One of the devils smiles, the other sheds a teardrop and looks sad. Below the drawings are two statements made by the devils. The text above the drawings says: “If you are going to get a tattoo, get the best... It’s on forever! Good tattoos are not cheap... And cheap ones are not good!” (in Hardy 2005: 79). The dialogue between the happy and the sad looking devil re-emphasizes the point made in the text by letting the smiling one say “I went to Sailor Jerry’s for my tattoos!” and the other “I wish I had!” (Hardy 2005: 79).

The poster qualifies tattoos with the same observation as the letter, with the addition of a visual interpretation. The organization describes itself as the provider of good or even ‘the best’ tattoos and thereby creates expectations. As the drawings suggest, those

¹ Sharing the same perspective, Leonard “Stoney” St. Clair distinguishes himself from his competitors that “cut prices” by quoting a saying: “We’re not at quarrels with those who work for less, for we know what their work is worth” (in Govenar 2003: 94-95).

customers who go to Collins will be happy with their tattoos, while those opting for low prices end up with qualitatively inferior tattoos. The difference is even more important, because they are “on forever” regardless of the quality of the tattoos.² The qualifying statement suggests, therefore, that one invests money in order to get the best quality available.

The saying Collins uses in the two cases establishes the relationship between artistic quality and financial expenses as evident and legitimate. From this perspective, there is no doubt that good artistic quality justifies a certain price that is seen as not cheap. The tattooist does not need to worry about “overcharging somebody”, as Collins writes in the letter. There is no need to undersell one’s work. In contrast, customers who pay low prices should not be surprised if they get correspondingly poor quality work.

The evidence of this relationship, however, becomes contingent at the very moment the observation is made. The qualification’s evidence is only established with the observation. That is, if it were evident, there would be no need to express it in this way. The statement itself refers to the fact that it could be made differently, namely from the perspective that emphasizes low prices. With this qualifying observation, the organization not only describes itself and its expectations, but also the fact that they may diverge or conflict with those of other organizations and customers.

Another letter by Collins observes these diverging ideas and expectations about the relation of artistic quality and prices. Collins tells the story about a customer who grumbled about the high costs.

... Had a guy in last night bellyaching about the high tab – said, “Well, I guess you have to pay for a *name*”. I said “no, the *work* is what you pay for, the name is merely an indication of where you can get what you pay for, instead of getting *screwed*” - He bought the idea & I did a Sagittarius on his shoulder blade for \$18. Had a rampant lion (?) on his forearm from Diego somewhere and offered to “sell” me the design. Told him, “Jesus, I’m sorry, but I’m all *out of pennies*”... (in Hardy 2005: 100; emphasis in original)

The dialogue shows the diverging expectations about what determines or relates to the price of a tattoo. While the customer thinks that he pays for a name and the tattooist’s reputation, Collins relates prices to the work itself. The tattooist’s name functions solely as a reference to good work.³ In this case, it is the statement “where you can get

2 At the time of Collins’ statement, tattoo removal was not yet as feasible as today. The argument that a tattoo is ‘on forever’, is however still used when tattoo organizations address customers (as warning advice, for carefully considered choices). As stated by a tattooist: “It’s on you for the rest of your life, don’t settle for less than the best” (*Tattoo Energy* 2008, 10/52: 24).

3 This is one way of describing tattooists’ names and their function as points of reference. As a tattooist stated in an interview with me, famous tattooists called “superstars” sometimes overcharge for what they do. Their tattoos, the tattooist argued, are not necessarily better. In these

what you pay for, instead of getting screwed” in which the observation ‘quality has its price’ appears. Not his name but the work he produces justifies Collins’ prices. Thus, from his point of view, the customer does not pay too much, as he gets the tattoo for which he spends his money. Despite his initial complaint, the customer eventually accepts Collins’ perspective on the relationship between quality of the work and its price.

In regard to the connection between price and quality of the work, the second part of the quote is equally instructive. Collins describes a tattoo the customer tried to sell him (by which he means to copy and use it in the future for other customers). Collins, however, pretends not to have any money left (“all out of pennies”) to buy the design. It is significant that Collins does not pretend to lack money in general. Rather, he says that he does not have any “pennies”. The statement can be read in the sense that the design is only worth some pennies (as may be indicated with the question mark after the description of the tattoo). That means, that the artistic quality of the tattoo does not justify a higher price. Collins prefers not to buy the design, not even for so little money. Collins’ initial statement “you can get what you pay for”, thus, applies here as well.

After convincing the customer that the price relates to the work and not the tattooist’s name, the customer’s initial perspective takes hold again when he tries to sell his tattoo. In both cases the observation of artistic quality and price appears. Similar to the statement made in the other letter, Collins’ perspective establishes a positive relation between quality and price. The phrase “you can get what you pay for” has its meaning for both situations Collins describes in the quote. Paying a high price, the customer can expect to get a tattoo of good quality. Or put differently, the artistic quality justifies the price (i.e., $a+/e+$). As the second situation shows, this relation applies also to the case if the artistic quality is not good. If Collins paid the little money he seems to think the “rampant lion” is worth, he would have gotten a bad tattoo design ($a-/e-$). As a consequence, he rejected to buy the design because offering it to his future customers would have signified the inability to demand much money for its reproduction. Otherwise, the organization’s perspective would change considerably.

By qualifying tattoos and simultaneously promoting the organization, Collins’ statements also characterize the preferred customers. From Collins’ perspective the preferred customers are the ones willing to pay the demanded price for good quality. Collins calls them “appreciative clients” in distinction to “unappreciative” customers or what he calls the “slob mob” (in Hardy 2005: 145). The latter “wants mink, but

cases, a tattooist’s reputation does not legitimize the prices charged (personal interview, tattoo convention 2007).

wants to pay rabbit prices” (in Hardy 2005: 145), Collins argues. He does not want to deal with customers who try to get good quality tattoos (mink) for low prices (rabbit prices), because they do not share and appreciate the ‘good work is not cheap’ perspective. The appreciative customers, however, accept the relationship between quality and price the way Collins qualifies it.

To this day, the perspective guiding Sailor Jerry Collins’ statements emerges time and again in different guises. A modified version of Collins’ ‘good work is not cheap’ can be found on a poster displayed in a tattoo establishment. The big format poster with a text in bold, black letters on orange background is clearly visible for the organization’s customers. The poster states: “The bitterness of poor quality is remembered long after the sweetness of low price has been forgotten” (McCabe 2001: 95). The wordplay points to the regrets a customer might have after getting a ‘cheap’ tattoo. The initial joy of the low price lasts only briefly. Soon, as the poster evokes, its ‘sweetness’ gives way to the ‘bitterness’ of the unsatisfying quality of the tattoo. Since the tattoo stays in the skin permanently, it is the bitter ‘after taste’ that remains.

The wordplay advises customers to make the right choice by qualifying the artistic result in regard to the financial investment. Similar to Collins’ statement, the phrase links ‘poor quality’ to ‘low price’. With the negative phrasing, the wordplay discourages customers from favoring the financial ‘sweetness’ and ultimately regretting their choice. While a low price might be tempting for the moment, the regret about ones bad choice will endure. According to the statement, the positive relationship between expenses and artistic quality is evident. To invest more money for better quality will have worth in the long run.⁴ The price can be forgotten while the joy of the good quality remains. To formulate this observation in positive terms on a poster, however, would probably not have the same effect as its negative version.

The relation between artistic quality and economic expenses observed in these cases can be summarized as ‘the better artistically, the higher the price’. While emphasizing its positive version (a+/e+), it correspondingly applies also to its negative version that has to be avoided (a-/e-). With this perspective, a tattoo organization advertises itself and at the same time tries to dissuade customers to go to a different organization.⁵ Aside from qualifying tattoos, thus, the observation always also qualifies the organiza-

4 Talking about saving money and earning one’s tattoo, a tattooist explained to me that he cannot understand why people do not want to spend much money. In this case, he did not emphasize artistic quality but time as a crucial aspect. Since a tattoo is forever and not exchangeable, a tattoo for 500 Euro is not expensive in the long term (personal interview, tattoo convention 2007).

5 According to Callon et al. (2002: 205), this is a matter of attaching and detaching customers to an organization.

tion, its competitors and customers.

Good Work but Low Price

Organizations may also use the observation's other version that emphasizes the good artistic quality while keeping the price low and affordable (a+/e-, the right upper corner in figure 10). It similarly serves a promotional purpose, qualifying tattoos and the organizations that use it, in distinction to their competitors.

Qualifications of this kind, feature prominently on business cards and other promotional material of tattoo organizations. Early on, tattoo organizations advertised by means of business cards, in order to convince potential customers of their competences, methods, and equipment (for the variety of content see Morse 1977). Especially during the first half of the twentieth century, the 'Old School' era of tattooists, business cards included descriptions of the designs offered in particular or tattoos in general, and indications of the price level.

An exemplary business card stems from the tattooist August "Cap" Coleman (Govenar 2003: 62, 64). Operating during the greater part of the first half of the twentieth century, Coleman's organization produced 'flash' tattoos. Coleman's business card from around 1946 displays the following text:

COLEMAN'S PLACE
ARTISTIC TATTOOING
Norfolk's Leading Tattoo Shop for 25 Years. Known and Recommended From
Coast to Coast.
Guaranteed better tattoo jobs at lower charges... Three tattooers... Special
chemically pure permanent bright colors used. Compare our work with others.
Coleman can remodel and cover your old crude tattoo marks by freehand
drawing. Special tattoo needles, designs, colors, stencils and machines for
sale.
LOOK FOR COLEMAN'S PLACE ON MAIN STREET
(business card printed in Govenar 2003: 64)

As on another business card, the general qualification of what Coleman's organization offers is expressed in an artistic semantics (here "artistic tattooing", "tattoo artist" on the other business card; Govenar 2003: 62). Such a general description sets the tone for the subsequent descriptions and comparisons ("Compare our work with others", "cover your old crude tattoo marks").

The most interesting statement in the present context is: "Guaranteed better tattoo jobs at lower charges...". In regard to the phrase "artistic tattooing", the characterization "better" suggests that the "tattoo jobs" done by Coleman's organization constitute artistically better work. In spite of that, the "tattoo jobs" are also financially affordable

because they are done for “lower charges”.

Aside from this factual qualification, in terms of artistic quality and financial expenses, the way they are presented seems significant as well. The statement ‘better tattoo jobs at lower charges’ compares Coleman’s work in general. The text then invites the reader to “compare our work with others”. That the organization produces better tattoos than others is indicated by the reference to the customers’ “old crude tattoo marks” that can be improved or covered with better work.

Compared to Sailor Jerry Collins’ qualification, the artistically better work does not imply or justify higher prices. To the contrary, as the business card seems to suggest, Coleman’s organization tries to be both artistically and economically competitive. Formulated in the comparative logic used on the business card: It does not suffice to be better in terms of the art produced alone, the tattoos need to be cheaper as well. Despite the indicated reputation of “Coleman’s place” (“Known and Recommended From Coast to Coast.”; similarly on the other business cards, Govenar 2003: 62, 64), there seems to be no reason to demand high prices.

The connection established in Coleman’s case, thus, is quite the opposite of the previously discussed version of ‘quality has its price’. The quality of Coleman’s organization has its price, but the price does not need to be high because of that.

We find other variants of this version of relating artistic quality and price on promotional material of other tattoo organizations, such as on the business card of tattooist Phil Sparrow (alias Samuel Steward). Along with the outlines of an anchor, the card contains this text:

BEST WORK – LOWEST RATES IN THE WEST
Phil Sparrow’s Anchor Tattoo Shop
-MODERN SANITARY METHODS
-MILITARY DESIGNS A SPECIALTY
-FINE LINE WORK [...] (in Morse 1977: 50)

Like on Coleman’s card, the first line “best work – lowest rates in the west” establishes an inverse relation between artistic quality and price. In contrast to Coleman’s comparative reasoning, however, Sparrow makes use of the superlative. The tattoos Sparrow’s organization produces are not only better and cheaper than those of others. Rather, Sparrow’s work is the “best” for the “lowest rates”. Only the geographical reference “in the west” implies a relativization of what Sparrow’s organization produces. Within the west, however, no one seems worth comparing with.

Similarly, an exit sign in an establishment displays an old school tattoo design of an eagle and a tattoo machine, including three phrases (in Hardy 1991: 19). The phrases

say: “Best Work”, “Brightest Colors” and “Cheapest Prices!”. Bidding farewell to its customers, this organization reminds them not to forget where they got tattooed and saw quality work. The superlatives used in the phrases summarize the reason why people should visit once more. Unlike Sparrow, the organization claims to be on top without comparing itself to others. While both organizations draw on the same version of ‘quality has its price’, they promote themselves with the qualification of their work even more self-assuredly than does Coleman’s organization.

However, one also finds (partly) ‘modest’ variants of the observation. A picture shows the front of a tattoo establishment, dominated by a variety of signs promoting the organization and its work for passersby (in Morse 1977: 61). These are some of the signs’ statements that can be read in entirety on the picture: “Tattoo Expert” on two big format signs next to each other above the entrance, “This Is The Corner For The Finest Tattooing In The World”, and below it with an arrow pointing to the entrance “Reasonable Prices” (Morse 1977: 61). While the organization’s statements also use the superlative for the artistic qualifications of tattoos (“finest tattooing in the world”), it does not for the economic qualification. Whatever “reasonable prices” exactly means, the statement in (visual) conjunction with the artistic qualification suggests that the tattoos do not cost as much as their quality might justify. While prospective customers reading the signs may expect to get the best work possible, they may expect, at the same time, to pay less than they might otherwise expect. The qualification of the prices as reasonable does not seem to be detrimental to the artistic qualification. Quite the opposite, it seems to help promote the organization in distinction to its competitors that might not produce the ‘finest’ tattoos but demand ‘unreasonable’ prices.

A second and more recent example of a similar variant can be found in a tattoo organization’s advertisement. Along with the expected information about the organization’s name, location, and hours of operation, the advertisement also refers to the price level. It says: “Always Professional Work At A Reason[a]ble Price” (*Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/8: 43). While the advertisement does not make use of an artistic semantics, it describes the work created by the organization as “professional”. There is no indication to what exactly this term refers. Since the term describes “work” and not ‘working’ or ‘procedure’, we can assume that the phrase refers to the (artistic, qualitative) making of tattoos and not its context (sterilization, hygiene conditions, with proper educational preparation etc.). Unlike the other examples, however, the qualification does not draw on comparative or superlative terms. The qualification of the work is not presented to be better or the best. But the term “professional” nevertheless distinguishes the organ-

ization's creations, even if not in comparison to others. The linked economic qualification of the work as "reasonable", however, seems to suggest something similar as in the previous case. Even though the work might be "professional" and therefore of quality, it does not justify making the tattoos more expensive.⁶

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The version of 'quality has its price' in the case of Sailor Jerry Collins suggests that artistically good (or the best) tattoos justify 'not cheap' prices (a+/e+). This perspective is explicitly distinguished from its opposite (a-/e-). The version found in the cases of Coleman, Sparrow, the store front sign and the advertisement proposes in its different variants that better or the best quality does not need to be expensive (a+/e-). Moreover, neither version qualifies tattoos alone. As observations made by tattoo organizations, they always also serve a purpose for self-promotion and distinction.

Despite the difference between the two versions of the basic observation, the organizations' qualifications achieve the same results: they stabilize the double meaning of tattoos in a way that legitimizes the organizations' functioning and should attract customers. While this is made possible by the qualifications, they inevitably entail their own contingency. Whether made explicit, as in the case of Collin's statements, or implicit, as in those that draw on the superlative, the relation between economic and artistic qualities can be established in various and diverging ways that benefit an organization.

Although it is possible for an organization to qualify the economic or artistic aspect of tattoos separately, these examples show that the two closely relate to and mutually qualify one another. In particular, Collins' expression of 'good work is not cheap and cheap work is not good' establishes this mutual qualification. That qualifications observe and establish this close relation, indicates the inevitability of dealing with the artistic and economic meaning of tattoos generated by the parallax of tattooing.

II Strategies, Choices and Results: Diverging Qualifications

Tattoo organizations promote themselves in a favorable light with qualifications. As we saw, they sometimes discredit other organizations' tattoos at the same time. Even if an organization chooses to qualify its tattoos in the way those previously presented did, there is no guarantee that other observers will adopt the same perspective. There may

6 Similarly, a German tattooist speaks about the reasonability of prices when asked about the contemporary boom of tattoos: "I can only say one thing about this: A tattoo should be reasonably priced, but worth its price..." (Feige 2003: 209; my transl.).

be a discrepancy between an organization's descriptive qualifications and its actual making of tattoos that qualifies them in another manner. This discrepancy may be observed from a different point of view. Accordingly, the tattoos are (re-)qualified in terms of another version of the observation 'quality has its price'. The (re-)qualification not only addresses tattoos but also refers to the responsible organizations and their customers. Tattoo organizations, customers and tattoo magazines may attribute this perspective to others for the purpose of criticism. It always entails that the observers constitute themselves in distinction to those deemed to have adopted the criticized perspective.

Cucumber of the Month

The *TätowierMagazin* offers a good example of how tattoos are critically re-qualified. The column "Cucumber of the Month" ("Gurke des Monats"), already discussed above (chap. 6.II), qualifies tattoos mainly in regard to their artistic failures. Economic qualifications linked to artistic ones, however, play a role as well. In these cases, the observation 'quality has its price' emerges.

This is rather special because tattoo magazines usually do not themselves thematize economic aspects (except for statements in interviews and tattooists' commentaries). While positive artistic qualifications prevail, magazines rarely offer economic qualifications. If they do, they are critical or negative, like the ones we find in the column. Magazines show many tattoos from portrayed tattoo organizations, interviewed tattooists, and readers, thereby qualifying them as artistically good. But magazines do not display costs or prices next to the pictures of the tattoos. Tattoo magazines, thus, favor the artistic side to tattoos and tattooing and for the greater part exclude the economic aspects.⁷ This is why the column of the *TätowierMagazin* offers a good opportunity to observe how a magazine (re-)qualifies tattoos in both economic and artistic terms. It seems that the observed relation between (bad) artistic quality and (high) price warrants criticism. Conversely, the tattoos typically shown do not require extra review of their economic aspects because they correspond to the perspective the magazines seem to take (i.e., a+/e+).

Normally, the column deals with pictures of tattoos that are sent in by the tattooed person or the tattoo organizations involved. Rarely, however, tattoo pictures originally

⁷ This seems also to apply to "trade only" magazines such as the *Tattoo Artist Magazine – The Quarterly Trade Journal for the Professional Tattooer* (www.tattooartistmagazine.com) or *Tattoo Master* (www.tattoomaster.co.uk). Although I was not allowed to look at or buy such magazines, their preview on the websites suggest that they are concerned mainly with the artistic side of tattooing and matters of technique and technology.

sent in for the readers' tattoos section end up in the column.⁸ While the column addresses the tattoo's artistic aspects in every case, issues of the financial side are less frequently discussed. Although the magazine's decision, of when to address the economic aspect, remains unknown, we can guess that it depends on the information that the senders of the pictures disclose. In the case of the pictures not meant for the column, it is unlikely that the senders mention the price since they want to promote an organization for artistic reasons.

Following two examples of the column and a letter to the editor with the reply by the chief editor, we can see how tattoos are re-qualified and in which versions the basic observation appears. First I present the examples and then discuss the observation's versions.

The first example of the column shows a black tattoo design of two CD covers of a famous German band, arranged as one motif (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/138: 9). Comparing the tattoo with the one presented in another column for the "cool" design of the month ("Coole Sau des Monats"), the text emphasizes the excess of lines. In contrast to the minimalist design of three birds on a wire presented as the 'cool' tattoo, the 'cucumber' presents many odd and broken lines and attempts at shading. But above all, the column points out, the actual motif does not emerge properly from this excess of lines. As the column states, the many lines did not make this design better than the minimalist one at all. This is why the column speaks of a scratched "picture" (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/138: 9; my transl.). The column's use of quotation marks signals that the tattoo does not deserve this designation. The column explicitly mentions what it is that the central motif of the tattoo represents, explicitly addressing the difficulty the onlooker may have in deciphering the design. In addition to this description of the tattoo's motif, the caption notes that there are two CD covers "hidden" in the tattoo (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/138: 9; my transl.). The tattoo, the column and caption suggest, does not manifest itself well enough. In order to make sense of the tattoo and its motif, the onlooker needs help in deciphering the apparently failing decisions of form.

After the observation of the failed decisions of form, the column shifts to the observation of the costs of the tattoo. As the column notes, the tattooist who (literally) "perpetrated" or is responsible for this "garbage", earned 600 Euros (*TätowierMagazin*

⁸ There is an economic incentive for sending in pictures of such 'ugly' and unsuccessful tattoos. Each submission is rewarded with 10 Euros 'compensation for personal suffering' ("Schmerzensgeld", mentioned in *TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 6). In the case of pictures not particularly sent in for this column, the magazine seems not to award any compensation (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/139: 8).

2007, 13/138: 9; my transl.). The column then ends in a similar tone, concluding that what happened in this case is called “transforming shit into gold” (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/138: 9; my transl.).

Compared with the first example, the second adopts a harsher tone about the tattoo’s artistic quality and the skills of the maker. The column’s title expresses the discontent by saying that “this botched work is outrageous” (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7; my transl.). Whereas normally tattoos discussed in the column are referred to by the term ‘cucumber’, the present one represents a “downright cucumber plantation” (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7; my transl.). The outrage about the tattoo is clearly expressed in the remark that the editorial team at first could not believe that it was a tattoo. It seemed as if they were looking at something painted onto the skin. When looking at the picture of the tattoo characterized as “botched work” or “junk”, the outrage becomes more understandable: The black tribal tattoo, placed on both sides of a woman’s belly, shows unequally thick fillings of unequally wide bands, unsteady and ‘broken’ lines, and an asymmetry of the two sides of the design. The work experience the “tattooist” (if one could call him that) supposedly has, gives reason for more astonishment and outrage (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7; my transl.). According to the owner of the tattoo, the tattooist works since ten years. The column adds that statements about years of experience do not prove anything. This particular “scratcher”, the column remarks, succeeded to learn nothing in his ten years (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7).

Aside from the descriptions of the tattoo in the main text as “a downright plantation of cucumbers”, “botched work”, and “junk”, the caption adds to the already harsh description. It compares the unsuccessful tattoo with the performance of an inebriated animal. The column states: “A drunken orang-utan with bandaged eyes would get something better than that with a permanent marker” (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7; my transl.).

All of the descriptions as well as the comparison made in the caption observe the tattoo as artistically unsuccessful. But the story ended well nonetheless, the column remarks. Another tattoo organization “rescued” the “garbage” or “eyesore” with a cover-up tattoo (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7; my transl.). Now the owner of the tattoo can again publicly show her tattooed skin in the swimming pool. The column, however, not only emphasizes the successful re-creation textually. In addition to two pictures of the failed tattoo, another picture shows the new tattoo. With this the column adds a visual qualification to the textual one, reinforcing its evaluations.

As in the previous example, the financial aspect comes into focus briefly as well. The owner paid 450 German Marks for the “garbage”, as the column never tires of calling it (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7; my transl.). In comparison to the high costs, the “compensation for personal suffering” of 10 Euro the magazine gives the tattooed woman, however, is only a “drop in the bucket” (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 7; my transl.). It need nevertheless be noted that the costs for the failed tattoo alone are highlighted. The reader does not get information about the costs for what was paid to the other tattoo organization, who salvaged the tattoo.

These are two examples of the column in which both the economic and artistic aspects become the subject of critical discussion. The magazine’s qualifications, however, do not represent the sole way of looking at the tattoos. This is made clear in “letters to the editor” about this column.

In contributions to the “letters to the editor”, a section called “Hautnah” (‘close to the skin’), readers sometimes contest the descriptions and qualifications of the “cucumber of the month” column. By questioning a particular column, readers present their own qualifications of the tattoos.

In the case I want to present, a reader criticized the discussion of a dragon tattoo in the previous month’s issue. A reply of the chief editor on the letter has been published right after the letter (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10).⁹ Basically, the letter to the editor launches into a defense against the column’s verdict of the dragon tattoo as a ‘cucumber’. It thereby focuses on and re-qualifies the column’s artistic qualifications.

Describing himself as “a passionate tattoo fanatic” and owner of tattoos from well-known tattooists, the writer emphasizes the effect which time has on tattoos (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.). Even though established (and implicitly competent) tattooists created the writer’s tattoos, they nevertheless changed over time. That is, colors fade, the design is no longer as “sharp” as it was when it was new, and lines soften (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.). The writer points to the basic and quite normal way of how the ink changes. Comparing his own tattoos with the one discussed in the ‘cucumber’ column, leads the writer to the conclusion that the alleged ‘cucumber’ is nothing else than another “victim of time” (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.).

Subsequently, the writer defends the decisions of form, made for the dragon tattoo. The customer must have agreed on the placement on the upper part of the back, so the “artist” cannot be solely blamed for this decision (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10;

⁹ Since I did not collect the magazine regularly back then, I do not have the issue with the original ‘cucumber’ column the letter discusses.

my transl.). The tattooed person must have agreed to the clouds surrounding the dragon, whether it was the tattooist's idea or not. The picture is clearly discernible, as the writer tries to strengthen his defense, even though the dragon motif is not to his liking.

On the one hand, the writer does not agree with the column's criticism of the decisions of form. On the other hand, he admits that in contemporary times "shoddy work" is unnecessary and therefore agrees with the column's general orientation (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.). However, he immediately relativizes his agreement, adding that "everyone starts small" (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.). Even great artists ("Spitzenkünstler") initially produced work one would laugh about. The writer demands that "small artists" get a chance because not every "backyard tattooist" is a "dabbler" (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.). Concluding his letter to the editor, the writer again defends his qualification and vindication of the alleged 'cucumber'. He argues that until this case the 'cucumbers' were clearly discernible as such. This is not the case with the one presented in the magazine's previous issue, now defended by the writer. The dragon tattoo is not the outcome of "shoddy work" but looks like this because of the time passed. The writer is sure that the tattoo looked better just after being made.

The chief editor's reply is published right after this letter, because the column's qualification has been called into question and the chief editor wants to clarify the arguments presented in the column once again. In addition, the picture of the 'cucumber' in question and another dragon tattoo design are displayed next to each other. The caption below the two pictures summarizes the argument made in the reply: "Art and junk: fantasy dragon can be pricked either way (easy to identify: on the left the February-cucumber)" (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.). While the pictures provide for a visual comparison and qualification to the detriment of the 'cucumber', the caption adds to its qualification by describing it as "junk" in distinction to the tattoo that represents "art".

As the editor writes at the beginning of the reply, he studied the 'cucumber' again. Despite reconsidering the tattoo, the argument about the effects of time, put forth in the letter, does not convince the editor. Although he does not know how old the tattoo actually is either, the "sludge" cannot be excused (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.). The editor admits that the writer is right to indicate how the lines, color and contours of a tattoo change over time. But, the editor adds, even after one or two decades a tattoo does not necessarily "smear up" (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my

transl.). Connecting to the writer's claim that the motif is clearly discernible, the editor concedes that one may identify it after a while. The editor, however, does not want to speak of "clear" distinguishability of the tattoo's motif (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10; my transl.). Mere distinguishability does not match the higher ambitions of the tattoo magazine, the editor adds. In the case of prison tattoos, simple distinguishability might suffice. This is not so in the case of tattoos that are created in a "studio" and for which one also pays a lot of money ("teuer Geld bezahlt"; *TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10).¹⁰ However, the editor agrees with the writer of the letter that the customer is equally responsible for the "disaster". It is the fault of those who do not inform themselves sufficiently and commission work to "scratchers" (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/86: 10). There are more than enough good tattooists to choose from, the editor concludes his reply.

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In each of the three examples, tattoos are observed in regard to their artistic and economic qualities. The main point is that each case in the magazine critically re-qualifies their relation. The way the tattoo was created originally and how much it cost the customers, is subject to debate because these initial qualifications are implicitly observed as diverging from the magazine's perspective. Although the responsible organizations or their tattooists might share the same perspective in their self-descriptions, the column argues that the end result does not show this. As the column criticizes in the second example, the years of experience the tattooist allegedly has does not show in the tattoo. The covering up of the bad tattoos, should ultimately remedy and transform them into work that is both of good artistic quality and costs what it is worth. Only then do they deserve the favorable qualification advocated by the magazine. What we can observe here, thus, is a clash of diverging perspectives about the relation between quality and price.

The fact that these persons got the tattoos and paid a certain price implies a provisional qualification of the work as both artistically good and financially justified by the

¹⁰ As it is emphasized in another reply in the 'letters to the editor' section (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 10; my transl.), the magazine only shows and discusses tattoos in the column that were produced in "registered tattoo studios". The magazine wants to show that an official tattoo organization is not a guarantee for good tattoos. It also does not approve of "backyard tattooists" and unregistered organizations, because they are not controlled by the health department and do not pay business taxes (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 10; my transl.). Because of the latter, these tattooists are able to demand "affordable prices" (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 10; my transl.). They thereby obtain "unfair advantages" in regard to "honest tattooists" (*TätowierMagazin* 2003, 10/90: 10; my transl.). Here, it seems, the magazine not only rejects the perspective 'bad quality for high price' (a-/e+) but also the one of 'bad quality for low price' (a-/e-).

organization and their customers. That the affected persons or another organization sent in pictures of the tattoos (except those that were not intended for the column), signifies a change of the initial qualification and a request for a confirmed re-qualification by the magazine. The magazine looks at the tattoos from the perspective, which we could again call “good artistic quality justifies high prices”. Contrary to the tattoos usually shown in the magazine that correspond to this perspective, the tattoos in the column are re-qualified as the result of a perspective that demands comparatively high prices for insufficient or bad artistic quality. The discrepancy observed by the column leads to an unfavorable and ‘far from art’ semantics for the qualification of the tattoos (garbage, junk, botched, shit, ‘picture’ etc.).¹¹

From the magazine’s point of view, bad quality, as it is seen in the ‘cucumbers’, does not justify the high prices. The tattooist responsible for the artistically bad outcome, and because of this not worth the title (i.e., ‘tattooist’ or scratcher), earned too much money. That is why, in one example, the unjustified relation between cost and quality is described as “transforming shit into gold” (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/138: 9; my transl.). Then again, as soon the bad tattoo is covered or mended by another organization, the relation between quality and price seems satisfactory, justified and not worth mentioning.

A discrepancy between perspectives emerges also in the example of the letter and the reply. The writer of the letter re-qualifies the ‘cucumber’ tattoo in regard to the artistic side and defends the customer and the tattooist. The editor, however, re-emphasizes the column’s re-qualification, not only criticizing the artistic failures, but the cost to the customer. While the letter seems not to consider the price worth discussing, the reply explains that getting tattooed in a “studio” one should be able to expect more than mere distinguishability for the cost one is charged. The higher the artistic quality, the more justified is a high price. Correspondingly, a high price for a hardly identifiable tattoo is not acceptable from the magazine’s point of view. In the end, it is both the fault of the tattoo organization and the uninformed customer that bad tattoos, like the one discussed, result. For the customer does not need to accept the organization’s qualifications, but can look for one that creates tattoos of a quality that justifies the financial expenses.

While harmonious decisions of form usually become the sole focus in descriptions, failing artistic forms are observed differently. As the magazine’s column exemplifies, observations of artistically ‘bad’ tattoos more likely evoke a corresponding problemat-

11 Sailor Jerry Collins uses the term ‘garbage’ for qualifying tattoos as well (see Hardy 2005: 145).

ization of economic aspects, compared with the general absence of them in tattoo magazines. In such cases the relation between the artistic quality and prices of tattoos are re-qualified as asymmetrical in favor of the latter. Since the magazine advocates and takes for granted a 'good quality has its appropriate/high price', it disapproves of the perspective it observes being responsible for the bad tattoos. The disapproved perspective of 'bad quality for a high price' not only qualifies tattoos, but entails a characterization of the tattooed persons as 'uninformed' customers and the responsible creators barely as tattooist or else as 'scratchers'.

Shopping Around and Bargaining

The tattoo magazine's column deals with completed tattoos, criticizing their artistic and economic qualities, creators and 'wearers' retrospectively. It discusses the tattoos as bad examples to be avoided by all means. Magazines and especially tattoo organizations also discuss customers' qualifications of tattoos, which show how customers try to find organizations and tattooists. The point of view from which customers are observed, has the same perspective on the 'quality has its price' issue as the tattoo magazine's column (a+/e+). The perspectives of customers that 'shop around' and bargain prompt discussion and criticism because they diverge from the observers' perspective.

Shopping around and bargaining, as two search strategies, entail an economic focus. Customers are looking for the lowest price for a specific or any kind of tattoo (the already above mentioned "price checkers"; *Skin Deep* 2008, April/158: 50). While the tattoo design may be relevant, the search for the best price does not equally imply best quality. Tattoo organizations and magazines observe customers' pre-qualifications of tattoos that mainly consider the financial side while neglecting artistic aspects. Whereas this focus is seen to be illegitimate by the observing organizations and magazines, the opposite focus on artistic quality and the acceptance of the corresponding price would count as a legitimate strategy (similarly also if focusing on other aspects of organizations and tattooist such as hygiene and cleanliness, stylistic preferences, character of tattooist).

In an interview a tattooist complains about changes in regard to his clientele since his tattoo establishment was opened (Feige 2003: 156-157). For years he was the only tattooist in the city. In the meantime, however, there are around a dozen tattooists within a radius of several kilometers. Among them, he adds, there are both good and 'worse' tattooists. The people who want to get a tattoo, however, seem to have a hard

time distinguishing between them. A few years ago people entered the tattoo establishment and first asked questions about hygiene, sterilization, the use of gloves, and the like. Meanwhile, the tattooist claims, that customers take the hygienic condition in tattoo establishments for granted, but not every establishment actually fulfills such expectations. Instead of continuing to ask questions about hygiene issues, people enter the tattooist's establishment with a different orientation. As the tattooist explains, the people simply say: "How much is a tattoo? The tattooist around the corner does it for half the price!" (Feige 2003: 157; my transl.).¹² The tattooist, however, disagrees with such an economic orientation. He makes clear that he does not want to deal with these people, saying that in this case they can simply go to the place around the corner. "There the tattoo will probably look like a half-price" (Feige 2003: 157; my transl.). The tattooist concludes that such an economic orientation seems to be a general trend at the moment.

According to this account, the organization's visitors try to get the cheapest tattoo possible.¹³ What kind or exactly which tattoo they would get does not seem to play a role, as long as the price is right. The question "How much is a tattoo?" indicates the visitors' indifference towards the kind and quality of tattoos.¹⁴ This is also shown by the comparison of price levels and the implicit instigation of competition, between the visited organization and the one 'around the corner', with which the visitors try to get a bargain. The statement about the competitor seems to suggest that the tattooist should offer an even lower price in order to keep a customer. The account, thus, claims that the visitors shop around in search of the lowest price while ignoring what kind of tattoos the organization actually offers. They distinguish between tattooists on economic grounds, but seem unable to differentiate between the good and 'worse' ones.

The tattooist's perspective becomes visible in his reaction to these visitors. Not sharing their economic bias, he is more concerned with the quality of tattoos. Instead

12 Leonard "Stoney" St. Clair describes a slightly different version of a bargaining attempt: "All right, a customer walks into my shop or Little Dago's shop and says, 'H'mm, fifteen dollars for this. You'll do it for ten, won't you?' 'No'. 'H'mm, let's go back down the street and get it'" (Govenar 2003: 94-95; see also Atkinson 2003a: 112-113).

13 Atkinson (2003a: 113) quotes a tattooed person who explicitly went for the lowest price regardless of the tattooist's name. Because the tattoo was not complicated, the person only wanted to pay a certain amount. That is why the person chose to shop around.

14 The *TätowierMagazin* (2006, 12/122: 13; my transl.) reports a comparable case in the form of a letter to the editor. The letter states: "Hello, what would you charge for a black triple-tattoo [sic] on the outside of the thigh, which has the approx. size of 40cm to 14cm. Greetings [...]". The editor replied: "Dear [...], only if you tell us how much a red car costs, will we disclose it to you...". The reply makes clear that the writers inquiry was too general for a concrete answer about the price of the tattoo – as general as the information 'red car' for the calculation of its price.

of complying with their demands, the visitors can go to those ‘around the corner’. There not only might the price be low but also the quality (“look like a half-price”). The tattooist’s perspective, thus, assumes a correspondence between price and quality that is not part of the visitors’ perspective.

A magazine’s supplement about “Your First Tattoo” emphasizes the same problem in terms of a warning advice. The similar constellation of diverging perspectives and qualifications, as in the previous case, clearly appears. The magazine gives the readers the following advice:

Although you may be able to meet the artist of your dreams at a convention, don’t be tempted to go to the bloke down the road just because he is cheaper and/or closer. Cheaper isn’t better, so if you have seen a tattooist’s work that really appeals to you, save up – you won’t be disappointed if you have done your homework properly. Remember this often-see quote, ‘Good tattoos aren’t cheap and cheap tattoos aren’t good!’ a top quality tattoo isn’t cheap. (*Skin Deep* 2008, July/161: 6, supplement; similarly *Skin&Ink* 2006, September/editor’s comment)¹⁵

Quoting the same dictum that Sailor Jerry Collins and others have stated, the newcomers are advised not to choose because of the price and neglect the consideration of quality. Shopping around exclusively for the best price and choosing “the bloke down the road” will disappoint them in terms of artistic quality. For getting “top quality” the newcomers will do well to save their money (for similar descriptions see *Prick Magazine* 2007, 7/12: 39; *Skin Deep* 2007, Christmas/154: 34; *Tattoo Energy* 2008, 10/52: 24; Reardon 2008: 88-89).

Customers that shop around and bargain for a low price may ignore the quality aspects of tattoos. Their qualifications of tattoos, as the two examples warn, might be nonetheless disappointing when they end up with bad quality. Shopping around and bargaining, including the ‘threat’ to go to a competitor, who does the same for less, seem to imply that the price is decoupled from the tattoo’s quality. Wherever the customers go and ask for a low price, they implicitly assume that the tattoo will be the same in the end – variable price but steady quality that can be ignored.¹⁶ From the per-

15 A tattooist stated in a discussion about copying tattoos that customers should get their tattoo from the originator of the design instead of someone else not specialized in the style. To assume that any tattooist can make a good quality copy of a tattoo, he argued, would be wrong (similarly *TätowierMagazin* 2006, 12/122: 90f.). This counts for both customers who want to commission a copy of a tattoo and tattoo organizations that do not consider this issue. His account was guided by the perspective of ‘good quality has its price’, when he said that one gets what one pays for (conversation held during an art exhibition in a tattoo studio, 2008).

16 In Sailor Jerry Collins’ terms, as noted above, these customers are “the bargain hunters and the cheap skates” (in Hardy 2005: 145), who are unable to differentiate between good and bad work.

spective that observes these strategies, of course, this does not apply.

‘Shopping around’ and bargaining are not restricted to the context of tattoo establishments. The strategies are even more viable at tattoo conventions. Conventions represent organized gatherings of a selection of tattoo organizations operating at the same time and in the same place. The spatial closeness and immediate visibility of several dozens of tattoo organizations, facilitates the comparison for convention visitors of the different offers and prices. The problem does not seem to lie in the opportunity to compare among tattoo organizations. Some descriptions identify the problem in the both obvious and more hidden ways, in which convention visitors shop around and try to bargain. Tattoo conventions generally allow and encourage people to compare tattoo organizations’ artistic outputs in terms of quality, style, and motifs. Critical descriptions, nevertheless, see the problem in the economic orientation of the comparison.¹⁷

A commentary in a column called “Nadelstiche” (‘pin-pricks’; *TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 105) offers an example. The column provides space for tattooists to write and complain about particular issues associated with tattooing. In this case, the column presents a tattooist’s opinion about contemporary tattoo conventions and their visitors.

In order to indicate the particulars of the current situation, the tattooist begins with a brief description of the beginnings of conventions and their original purpose. Tattoo conventions or gatherings of tattooists were meant as platforms for the exchange of experiences and for meeting other tattooists (also from other continents).¹⁸ The gatherings were rather small, since, as the tattooist writes, there were only a handful of tattooists around in Europe in the 1970s/80s. The gatherings became parties, to which valued customers were invited. Eventually, the tattooists also started to tattoo each other during the gatherings. At that time, though, the general public was not yet invited to conventions.

Contemporary tattoo conventions, the tattooist states, differ considerably from the past ones. Today, large conventions can be found all over the world. Among them are some traditional events that have celebrated their fifteenth anniversaries. There are also more conventions every year, adding to the number of existing ones. As the tattooist notes, contemporary conventions gather up to two hundred tattooists in one event, supplemented by a supporting program of various kinds of shows and entertainment. The tattooist emphasizes that the convention offers the opportunity to meet and get tattooed

¹⁷ Hofmann (2004: 71) gives the advice to use the opportunity at conventions for comparisons, emphasizing that not the price but the quality should be decisive.

¹⁸ The first conventions were held in the 1970s (see Gilbert 2000: 197).

by tattooists from distant places, including from overseas. Each tattoo organization promotes itself by means of the booth's outfit and arranged paraphernalia. Among them are a myriad of binders filled with pictures and tattoo designs of different styles and motifs. This allows one to compare between the "artists" present at the convention (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 105).

Lately, the tattooist claims, "a partly shameless bargaining about prices" increasingly occurs at conventions (*TätowierMagazin* 2007,13/137: 105; my transl.). This kind of bargaining manifests itself as follows: Convention visitors equipped with a tattoo design go from booth to booth until they find one offering the lowest price. The tattooist adds in a sarcastic tone that "today after all 'avarice is cool' applies" (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 105; my transl.), alluding to a well-known dictum of a German chain store for electronics. On the one hand, the tattooist has no doubt that a conversation about the "relevance of the price of a tattoo" has to take place between customer and tattooist (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 105; my transl.). On the other hand, a tattoo convention should not be a bazaar, as it is emphasized.¹⁹

In addition to this open bargaining, the tattooist is also concerned with "a new 'sport'" (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 105; my transl.). People stand in front of tattoo booths and browse through the tattoo designs in the binders while allegedly writing text messages on their mobile phones. These people, the tattooist notes, actually take photographs of the designs that they subsequently bring to their tattooist.²⁰ The tattooist mentions a case of two customers who raised the binders in order to take photographs more easily. For the tattooist it is clear that these customers did not realize that what they were doing was wrong.

In the remainder of the column the tattooist gives an explanation why such behavior from convention visitors is wrong. The tattooist writes: "The templates of a tattooist have been collected during several years, they cost money – and not a little! Because it is art, and the tattooist respects that" (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 105; my transl.). It is annoying for tattooists when flash designs they bought or drew themselves are "stolen" by people who take photographs of them without permission (*Tätowier-*

19 Similarly, the following advice is made in a magazine's supplement for those who get their first tattoo. After explaining the two basic types of tattoos (flash/custom) and the mode of price-setting (fixed/per hour), the text advises and warns: "Have a chat to the artist and for God's sake, don't try to haggle. You probably won't like the reply!" (*Skin Deep* 2008, July/161: supplement, 6).

20 In another magazine the editor mentions a similar development, but in this case it is mixed with the bargaining strategy: "How does it feel to have some rubbernecker snap a digital photo from your flash book, then go booth to booth asking, 'How much to do this one?'" (*Skin&Ink* 2006, February/editor's comment).

Magazin 2007, 13/137: 105; my transl.). In order to clarify his argument, the tattooist draws a comparison between visitors' behavior at tattoo conventions and in a record store. He states that nobody would go to a record store and download the newest records to a laptop computer (finishing the sentence with an exclamation and question mark). Concluding the column, the tattooist expresses the wish for more respect for the art in "our business", because "a tattoo is and should also be art, after all, not a special offer, which one can get everywhere as a hot deal, right!?" (*TätowierMagazin* 2007, 13/137: 105; my transl.).

The tattooist criticizes the two forms of 'shopping around' and bargaining²¹ because they do not conform to the perspective attributed generally to tattooists. The convention visitors' behavior is seen to qualify tattoos economically while ignoring their art side or assuming that it is the same, regardless of the commissioned organization. Shopping around with a design in order to find the lowest price means to assume a downward variability of a tattoo's price, simultaneously neglecting the variability of its artistic quality. Bargaining, thus, is seen as a disrespectful and economically biased behavior.

The recently emerging use of mobile phones adds to the disrespect that visitors show by shopping around and bargaining. Taking pictures of tattoos, in order to give them to another tattooist, is seen as equivalent to stealing. It shows that visitors do not respect that a design belongs to the organization or, alternatively, the customer who got it in the first place, nor that the price the tattooist might charge is justified. Visitors using these strategies for (allegedly) getting the same tattoo for a lower price thus ignore and circumvent the qualifications the tattooists make from their perspective.²²

The tattooist's qualification of tattoo designs and tattoos proposes a positive relation between costs and artistic quality, as we have seen in previously discussed examples. By bargaining, shopping around and using designs without permission, the visitors undermine both the economic and artistic value, the tattooist collecting the designs attributes to them. Whether trying to get a lower price from the tattooist displaying a design, shopping around with one or even 'stealing' one and taking it to another tattooist, who

21 Both forms also took place at different tattoo conventions I visited for this study, including the photographing with mobile phones.

22 The column does not mention those tattoo organizations that accept these visitors' inquiries and requests for cheap tattoos. It assumes that every organization or the entire 'business' share the defended perspective. One can assume, though, that there must be organizations that allow bargaining and the making of 'stolen' tattoos, otherwise it would not be a matter of concern. As an interviewed tattoo apprentice told me, for example, some of the tattooists in the organization where she works, are willing to bargain about prices (personal interview, tattoo convention 2008).

would do it for less money, the person does not take into account the original qualification of the design and the resulting tattoo. As the tattooist highlights, tattoo designs should not become the subject of these economically biased search strategies because they re-qualify them in a way that supersedes the justified qualification. Tattoo designs and, accordingly, tattoos have their price (“cost money – and not a little!”) because they constitute art. To treat them like “a special offer” or “a hot deal”, as the tattooist’s perspective suggests, means to have a diverging and disrespectful point of view (see also Sanders 1989a: 106).

*

As the last example suggests, it is the visitors that have a different and biased perspective than tattoo organizations have in general (a+/e+). That organizations may qualify tattoos or are seen to do so from a different perspective (e.g. a+/e-, a-/e+ or a-/e-), however, has been shown above as well.

It is rather seldom that one finds descriptions of customers that would pay more for better quality but facing an organization that does not share this perspective. A case in point offers, once again, the organization of the New York City tattooist Charlie Wagner who was known for his comparatively low prices (Govenar 2003: 23, 25, 84, 104). In a situation in which the customer does the opposite of bargaining, the organization justifies its refusal of the request according to a diverging perspective. Bert Grimm, a tattooist and contemporary of Wagner, describes just such a situation:

One night a customer came in and asked Charley Wagner the price of a big Indian head. Charley told him 75¢. The guy said, ‘I don’t care if you charge me a little more, I want a real good job’. Charley told him that if he wanted a real good tattoo, he’d better go see Lou Alberts, and Charley said that he didn’t do good tattooing, just cheap tattooing. (quoted in Morse 1977: 38)

In contrast to the cases discussed above, it is the tattooist that provides a qualification comparable to those often attributed to certain customers. The customer was willing to pay more than the price requested by Wagner, because he wanted “a real good job” to be done. The customer’s request implies a perspective that sees a higher price corresponding to better artistic quality (a+/e+). Although Wagner shared a direct correspondence between price and artistic quality, it turns out to be a reversed version. Wagner charged a low price because he did not provide “good tattooing”. The phrase “cheap tattooing” may be read as both economically and artistically cheap (i.e., a-/e-). In order to get what the customers wanted, Wagner referred to another well-known tattooist who seemed to share the customer’s perspective and would be able to comply with the request for “a real good tattoo”.

Although this might be a rare case, it indicates that the ways of qualifying tattoos described are not fixed attributes of certain roles or social addresses. Both customers and tattoo organizations may qualify tattoos with an economic bias while neglecting artistic qualities or, alternatively, take the perspective that high artistic quality merits corresponding or high prices. The different versions of qualifications constitute their observers accordingly (e.g. uninformed/unappreciative or informed/appreciative customers).

The variety and divergence of ways of qualifying tattoos, in regard to their artistic and economic aspects, gives rise to critical descriptions and discussions. Not only tattoo organizations but also tattoo magazines and customers are concerned with how tattoos are (re-)qualified by different observers. The confrontation of diverging qualifications may lead to both concessions from observers (e.g. the customer who adopts temporarily the organization's perspective) or a defense of their perspectives (as in the magazine's column). Ultimately, this shows the contingency of qualifications and the continued (re-)stabilization they are subject to.

Qualifications prominently attribute economic and artistic characteristics to tattoos and relate them to one another. The observation guiding these qualifications, but not appearing as such, has been called 'quality has its price'. The examples show that the observation has various appearances that differ from and conflict with one another. Each perspective or way of qualifying defines the relation between artistic quality and price in its particular way, thereby qualifying its observer and other perspectives. As we saw, qualifications of an observer do not have to be shared by another observing them, but may become the subject of re-qualifications from different angles. The spectrum of perspectives of 'quality has its price' and the qualifications they entail does not solely consist of the four extreme positions but has nuances (see again figure 10). The qualifications linked to customers' search strategies, for example, gave an idea of this, as artistic quality is neglected or thought to be neutral. The examples, however, show recurring positions of and differentiations between observers and their qualifications.

Economic and artistic aspects of tattoos are observed and qualified in close relation with each other – not by chance, as I suggest. As shown, the parallax form of tattooing gives the tattoo both an artistic and economic meaning. Observations and qualifications deal with this ambiguity in the discussed ways, temporarily stabilizing the double meaning of tattoos. Time and again, however, they are confronted with other perspectives and their particular ways to stabilize and define the meaning of tattoos in regard to

price and artistic quality. The meaning of tattoos given by the form of tattooing, thus, does not necessarily determine that or how tattoos are qualified. It nevertheless perturbs the qualification of tattoos and allows for a variety of diverging observations.

Far from being a one-way relationship, however, tattooing is equally affected by qualifications. Qualifications of tattoos do not only have effects on other qualifying observations. Rather, they condition the possibility and likelihood that tattooing takes place. A tattoo organization with a perspective diverging from the one implied in customers' search strategies, for example, will refuse to deal with their requests. Correspondingly, tattooing does not take place. Its occurrence is made possible or more likely, however, if the organization succeeds in changing the customers' perspectives, even if only temporarily (as in Collins' case).

Although magazines and other observers' critical accounts of tattoos and their creators do not affect tattooing in such a direct way, they point to divergences between qualifications and how customers can prevent to become the victims of misleading qualifications (e.g. the advice to look at the tattoos made by an organization instead of solely trusting its descriptions). Such retrospective re-qualifications may thus equally condition the possibility of the emergence of tattooing, albeit in a more general way (no work for 'bad' tattoo organizations).

The qualifications analyzed in this chapter come about because of the tattoo's double meaning. The various and diverging ways these qualifications establish a close connection between the economic and artistic aspects, show that the tattoo's ambiguous meaning and, ultimately, the parallaxic form of tattooing have perturbing effects. The parallax of art and economy leads to an ongoing stabilization of meaning that, nonetheless, remains transient and contingent.

Interlude Three: Qualifying Relations Between Economy and Art

For a variety of phenomena, qualifications that relate artistic and economic aspects play an important role. Qualifications have been studied for ‘traditional’ arts such as paintings as well as in the context of art galleries (see e.g. Fitz Gibbon 1987; Velthuis 2007; Hutter 2007b). They are also discussed in regard to popular music, fashion photography or classical music (e.g. Hirsch 1970; Aspers 2001; Glynn/Lounsbury 2005). In each case, qualifications of economy, art, and their relationship assume a different form and are made by a variety of observers.

Popular music, as described by Hirsch (1970), is one example (see also Hirsch 1972; Stratton 1982). Hirsch concentrates on the roles or organizations that filter and pre-select music as a commodity. He distinguishes between artists, agents, producers, promoters, gatekeepers (mass media), and the public (Hirsch 1970: 7). Except for the public, the others are responsible for the pre-selection. Each stage in this organized ‘filter’-system (re-)qualifies the music, according to its particular criteria. Thus, from the creation of music by artists to its final sale to the public, different organizations deal with the commodity. Although they qualify the music according to their criteria, the different qualifications are still linked with each other and constitute a system of pre-selection (see Hirsch 1970: 4). While Hirsch concentrates on organizational aspects and the entire system of ‘filters’, one could investigate the role which artistic and economic qualifications play in each stage of the (pre-)selection process and whether and how they relate to one another. Despite the connections between the different qualifications, one can assume that the process of pre-selection does not always run smoothly, i.e., that qualifications meet diverging (re-)qualifications (see e.g. Becker 1951; Stratton 1982).

The market for fashion photography, analyzed by Aspers (2001; 2006b), offers another case, in which artistic and economic qualifications play a crucial role (but also for photography in general, see Christopherson 1974a). Although Aspers (2001: 18) argues that “the notion of quality is not particularly useful for a market with aesthetic values”, I assert that a consideration of qualifications provides insights. Focusing on interaction, individuals, and their role in the constitution of identities and status in the market, Aspers considers the ‘objects’ or commodities dealt with in the market only marginally (see also Aspers 2006b: 28). He admits, however, “that the identities of agents (individuals and companies) are largely defined in relation to what they pro-

duce” (Aspers 2001: 18). As suggested in the previous chapter, qualifications not only characterize objects but also the positions from which the qualifications are made. Despite, or precisely because of, the fact that there is no standard for measuring quality (Aspers 2006b: 100), the importance of diverse qualifications should not be underestimated. In this case, for example, one could investigate the positions from which different and diverging qualifications are issued; how different organizations qualify the various types of photographs; on which grounds clients and providers of fashion photography produce diverging qualifications when they deal with one another; and, ultimately, in which cases qualifications support or obstruct the occurrence of the form of communication resulting in photographs.

Economic and artistic qualifications and their relations may also be quite different to those of tattoos. Qualifications made by art galleries are an example of such a difference. In order to avoid unfavorable qualifications of paintings, art galleries try to dissociate the economic from the artistic aspects. Velthuis (2007: 165) describes this as the refusal “to price according to quality”. In reference to the “symbolic meanings of prices” (2007: chap. 7), Velthuis argues that galleries price works of art according to their size. Works of the same size have the same price because otherwise “dealers would convey implicit messages about differences in quality of the works exhibited” (2007: 161). That is, they try to avoid the fact that prices also qualify artworks in artistic terms (Velthuis 2007: 165 speaks of a “signaling effect of prices”). Among other things, this decision implies that galleries offer as few artistic qualifications as possible, in order to allow for qualifications of art collectors and buyers (2007: 161). Galleries thereby constitute themselves as “gatekeepers of the art market”, both in terms of “a selection mechanism for new artists entering the market” (2007: 165) and one for individual works of art (of course they have to deal with artists’ qualifications as well, 2007: 166). Thus, by exhibiting artworks, the galleries qualify them as high quality without having to qualify them further in regard to their artistic quality, by pricing “differences in works of the same size” (2007: 166).

While art galleries and dealers have their own particular qualification strategies, it becomes clear that they are involved in an ongoing process of artistic and economic qualifications. As Velthuis rightly points out, the relation between artistic quality (or value) and price is an intricate issue because they are “entangled in an ongoing dialectic” (2007: 178; similarly also Fitz Gibbon 1987: 114). Ultimately, this case once again shows that qualifications are contested from various perspectives and social positions (mainly artists, dealers, collectors/buyers, and museums) and that different ob-

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servers follow different strategies of qualifying (including different types of galleries, see Fitz Gibbon 1987).

These are a few examples of studies that deal explicitly or implicitly with qualifications that address economic and artistic aspects of phenomena. Unlike these studies, however, I do not only suggest investigating qualifications as such, but also their relations to the forms of communication they address. One can ask, for example, how the form of communication that results in paintings creates perturbations and how they are dealt with by qualifications. In addition, one can inquire how different qualifications feed back and condition the workings of a form of communication. Furthermore, one could investigate the different observers and perspectives involved and whether and how certain organizational forms exclusively link to particular qualifications.

The study of forms of communication, organizational forms and qualifications, as suggested in the three 'Interludes', could provide fresh insights into the intricate relations and interplays between these different kinds of communication. The basic assumption is, that the form of communication of a phenomenon (like tattooing) creates perturbations that need to be dealt with by organizations and qualifications. Depending on the concrete form of communication, there will be various ways this can develop. The second assumption is, that these ways of dealing with the form of communication feed back to the form and the possibility of its occurrence. The potential for disturbance, thus, does not belong exclusively to only one kind of communication. Rather, it always depends on how communication addresses other communication and whether it conceives of it as a source of disturbance. The ways tattoo organizations and qualifications deal with tattooing, show the latter's perturbing potential. Conversely, tattooing does not take place regardless of its social context, but may be disturbed by organizational and qualifying communication, which conditions its emergence. Whether, and in which ways, these relations and mutual perturbations can also be identified for comparable phenomena remains a question, which can only be answered with a close empirical investigation.

I could only provide an idea of the similarities and differences of various phenomena, for which art and economy seems to be constitutive. But I hope to have indicated that the analysis of different forms of communication may give us a more differentiated picture of phenomena. It might prevent us from prematurely seeing them as more or less the same, as economy and art are involved, and therefore may be (semantically) included into the 'creative industries' or 'aesthetic economies' (see e.g. Caves 2000;

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Aspers 2006a). As in the study of tattooing, we may take common designations and conceptualizations as signposts. However, it seems more fruitful to look concretely at how phenomena emerge under conditions that may be both particular to them and comparable to those of others.

9 Conclusion

How does tattooing emerge as a social phenomenon? Through which communication and in which form does it come about? Which effects does this form of communication have on other kinds of communication? What role do economy and art play for tattooing and the related communications? This thesis set out to answer these questions from a systems theoretical perspective and on the basis of a variety of empirical material. The particular constellation of artistic and economic communication of tattooing, the thesis argues, affects the way tattoo organizations and qualifications of tattoos work. The study thereby sheds light on the workings of different kinds of related communications as well as the relationship between economy and art as two distinct societal domains.

Unlike the definitions offered in the academic literature, this study suggests defining tattooing in terms of communication. This implies not taking the material world or individuals as the main defining features, but conceiving of tattooing as a particular form of communication, through which it becomes a social phenomenon. An empirically close look shows that tattooing is not a simple form of communication. Rather, tattooing emerges from an intricate constellation of economic and artistic communication. This special form, which combines two distinct and incommensurable forms of communication, adopting and adapting a concept from Slavoj Žižek, has been called a parallax or parallaxic form. While artistic and economic communication operate through their specific media of communication, the parallax makes the tattoo a special medium. Although the tattoo may function as a medium of communication in a variety of societal contexts, the parallax of tattooing forms it as both an economic and artistic medium alike. Compared with other social phenomena, which are often described as tattooing, tattooing defined as the parallax of economy and art differs from them in terms of its particular form and the media through which it communicates.

Building on the claim about the special form of tattooing, the study argues that the equal involvement of artistic and economic communication has effects on and challenges communication that relates to tattooing as well as tattoos. Tattoo organizations and qualifications prominently deal with the intricate constellation of art and economy. The various ways of drawing on and observing tattooing and tattoos show, that to es-

tablish structures related to the parallax of tattooing, proves challenging. Its 'domestication' implies an ongoing (re-)stabilization of economic and artistic meanings and the confrontation with challenges, thereby generated.

In the case of tattoo organizations, this 'domestication' or continued stabilization of tattooing shows in their different sets of decisions. Operating in the form of 'flash' or 'custom', which are constituted by a specific set of decisions, expectations and semantics, organizations deal with the peculiar involvement of economy and art in tattooing by emphasizing one of them. Their continual decision-making and creation of expectations takes on an economic or artistic orientation, by which they stabilize their dealing with tattooing. Precisely because they 'take sides', they cannot prevent facing challenging requests and expectations, that perturb them. A third variant of organizing tattooing succeeds in being more flexible in this regard. Organizations that operate with both 'flash' and 'custom' may have advantages when dealing with challenges. Whether they switch between or run the two forms in parallel, they operate with both sets of economically and artistically oriented decisions and expectations. Despite the possibility of drawing on both organizational forms and orientations, 'double-form' organizations may nevertheless face challenges, which again originate from their particular mode of operating and dealing with economy and art.

Qualifications of tattoos are prominently concerned with artistic and economic qualities. More important, however, is how they link these qualities to each other in various and contrasting ways. The observation common to all of them is what I called 'quality has its price'. While not exclusively pertaining to the qualification of tattoos, but observable for other phenomena as well, the focus was on how tattoos are qualified in these terms. The analysis of descriptions showed that there is a spectrum of how economic and artistic qualities can be related. It showed how qualifications delimit themselves from others, while at the same time co-constructing differing points of observation. Thus, qualifications relate to the double meaning of tattoos, in terms of economic commodities with a price and as works of art with certain artistic qualities established through the form of tattooing.

Far from being a one-sided relationship, in which only tattooing perturbs other communication, the communication of tattoo organizations and qualifications may affect the occurrence of tattooing as well. Tattooing may not occur because an organization faces expectations and requests beyond its operation's normal scope. This may include dealing with requests typically dealt with by the other organizational form or with a diverging way of qualifying tattoos than the one of the organization. Qualifications in

general, not necessarily those linked to tattoo organizations, may as well determine, in which cases tattooing takes place and whether it will or should happen (e.g. in regard to 'bad' tattooists). The communication of tattoo organizations and qualifications, thus, feeds back to tattooing. While tattooing affects the ways organizations and qualifications work, the latter condition the possibility and likelihood that tattooing takes place. In other words, the special form of tattooing leads to different but recurrent ways of stabilizing its economic and artistic meanings. The stabilizations, in turn, figure as possible (and not absolutely determining) conditions of whether tattooing occurs in an organizational context or in more general terms (not excluding the possibility that it may also take place in a different context, e.g. an interaction among friends).

In regard to the study of tattooing as a social phenomenon, this thesis shows that a more abstract and yet still empirically sensitive approach may contribute to a higher 'resolution' of the phenomenon. The theoretical perspectives and conceptual tools hitherto used for the study of tattooing are primarily concerned with material aspects, the results of the modifying process or the persons involved and what they do. With an analysis of the specific form of communication constitutive for tattooing and similar phenomena, however, one gains analytical resolution, insofar as it becomes possible to see that not everything that is called tattooing or results in tattoos necessarily works in the form of tattooing. This approach enables us to identify tattooing and distinguish it from other phenomena. Only then, equipped with a clear idea about its constitutive features, may one be sure to actually observe the phenomenon one is claiming to study. What we may gain, thus, is a different as well as a more differentiated picture of tattooing as a social phenomenon.

While this provides insights into tattooing, regardless of its wider context, the thesis also contributes to the understanding of the interrelations between tattooing and other forms of communication, such as organizations and qualifications. The presented approach, on the one hand, allows us to draw a distinction between the form of communication of tattooing and other forms of communication, which operate on the basis of different communications and media. We gain insights into the constellations and relations of differently working communication. If we observe a situation, thus, we do not simply see people doing things or talking about something. Rather, systems theory gives us the tools to dissect the situation into its constitutive elements. That means, we may see that tattooing takes place either only in the context of an interaction between persons or in the context of an interaction that is closely related to an organization.¹

1 Although I did not analyze this, one could find further situations in which the organization operates in the context of a tattoo convention, which may be seen as an organization of its own.

Whereas tattooing may run parallel, and in close connection to, both interaction and organization, on the other hand, the approach allows us to discern how the two types of systems (can) deal with it differently. Interaction approaches tattooing as a topic that can be addressed, as is the case for the preparation of a tattoo design and in some cases when it comes to qualifications of tattoos (qualifications may also appear independent of interactions, e.g. in written form). In contrast, as I have shown at length, tattooing affects organizations in the ways they make their central decisions about the provision of tattooing and tattoos. Here, then, the suggested perspective enables us to see not only that organizations closely relate to the form of tattooing, but also in which ways they do so and what kind of challenges they thereby face. This applies likewise and in its own manner to the qualifications of tattoos. Thus, instead of only stating that there are different kinds of tattoo organizations or qualifications, respectively, we come closer to understand the interrelations between tattooing and the modes of how it is organized and observed. Again, we gain a more differentiated picture of phenomena, their relations and mutual perturbations.

In more general terms, the suggested approach contributes to a differentiated understanding of the social and its complexities. It offers a perspective and tools, which allow for a picture with higher ‘resolution’ and of a more differentiated character than other approaches. It strives to do justice to the intricacies of the social. This is why the systems theoretical approach explicitly and deliberately breaks with perspectives that are close to everyday understandings of phenomena, without neglecting them as empirical material.

Of course, even though systems theory has much to offer when it comes to an analysis of the multiple facets of phenomena, choices must nonetheless be made. In this study, I chose to look primarily at three different but related kinds of communication. As I repeatedly indicated, there are other ways by which one could study tattooing and its contexts. A look into either the academic literature on the subject, or the empirical material, shows that tattoo conventions, including the staged tattoo contests, tattooists’ associations, legal regulations and political debates, mass media reports, broader societal developments such as social movements or processes of community building and other phenomena could be studied in one way or another. While they no doubt would be worth studying in their own right, they would require different analytical strategies and conceptualizations than I have suggested and used here. The complexity of the different communication processes and their relations with one another would be, both

Even further contexts and ‘nestings’ could be possible.

conceptually and empirically, too overwhelming to consider and analyze all at once. A study that included all kinds of phenomena related to tattooing would inevitably remain on a superficial level of analysis. This is one reason why the present study selected only a few of the related phenomena. It does not, however, deal with an arbitrary selection, but chooses to focus on tattooing and two closely related and mutually perturbing forms of communication. To which extent and how the other phenomena mentioned relate to, are affected by and affect tattooing and tattoos cannot be answered here. Despite this limited focus, this study points to the constitution of particular phenomena in a manner that may advance our understanding of interrelations in specific communication contexts.

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The concept of parallax does not merely suggest how we can understand the functioning of tattooing as a form of communication. It also allows us to conceive of a particular relationship between two distinct and incommensurable forms of communication. While Luhmann's different concepts of how systems relate to one another may be fruitful for understanding the relations between art and economy, they are still too general for grasping how they do so in the case of tattooing. With the concept of parallax, in contrast, one can look at how, in particular, two distinctly operating forms of communication may be related. The 'meeting' of art and economy in one form, the parallax of tattooing, means that the two functional systems are coupled with their forms of communication or operations. That is why I call this a form of operational coupling. Through this form coupling a new social phenomenon may emerge. Tattooing, this study thus argues, cannot be understood in its own right or in sufficient empirical detail with general concepts of systems' relations such as structural coupling. The closely linked concepts of form coupling and parallax provide more empirically sensitive tools to do so.

Aside from these specific concepts, this study suggests systems theory as a way to conceive of society in general and economy and art as particular forms of communication. Understanding society as a social system that consists of communication, systems theory allows us to see how various forms of communication constitute distinct systems of different types. In regard to economy and art, it enables us to see what they have in common as functional systems of society and in which respects they differ. Economy and art, or for that matter any other functional system, operate in their own particular ways, establishing closed and self-reproducing systems. Their ways of operating constitutes them as separate systems or societal domains. Only by means of ob-

ervation and the couplings discussed above do they relate with each other, while maintaining their distinctiveness. With systems theory, thus, we can distinguish between different forms how communication unfolds and, at the same time, investigate how they enter relations with one another. The theory does not, therefore, assume a priori that art and economy relate to one another or that one is even reducible to the other, as has been shown for the approaches of Bourdieu and Cultural Economics. It leaves open the question of whether and how such relations are established, which can only be answered with empirical research.

The use of this particular theoretical perspective, its concepts and the corresponding analytical strategies, however, is not limited to the study of tattooing. As argued in the 'Interludes', this approach may be fruitfully used for the analysis of other phenomena as well. Phenomena such as fashion, photography, painting, dance, theater, music and others seem to have in common with tattooing that they are constituted by economic and artistic communication in one way or another. Indications of the involvement and relation of the two forms of communication are abundant in the literature. A thorough investigation of these phenomena, of course, would have to show in which ways art and economy play a constitutive role and how they relate. As in the case of tattooing, this remains an empirical rather than a theoretical question. It would therefore be premature to assume that these phenomena operate in the same way as tattooing. Although it seems very likely that tattooing is not the only phenomenon in society that is constituted by a parallaxic form of communication, it nevertheless requires a closer and empirically grounded look, to investigate other phenomena. The study of such phenomena could therefore be theoretically and conceptually open to a variety of ways of how the relation and formation of different communication actually turns out. Moreover, as this study proposes, the investigation of the forms of communication of phenomena can be supplemented by an analysis of the ways, by which these forms perturb and challenge other kinds of communication. Again, the question to be answered in each particular case is, how organizations, qualifications or other communication address the form of a phenomenon, which is constituted in a more intricate manner.

This wider perspective should not simply suggest that tattooing shares features with similar phenomena, making it possible to include it in what is called 'creative industries' or 'aesthetic economies'. Such a unifying semantics obscures to what the suggested approach points: the (possibly) different modes of communication and relation to other social phenomena such as organizations, qualifications and the like. Although the semantics indicates the central involvement of art and economy, it remains too general

to do justice to the particularities of the described phenomena. In contrast, the presented approach to the study of tattooing and similar social phenomena suggests studying them closely and taking into account both their similarities and differences in terms of communication. Only empirical research may show what these phenomena, constituted by economy and art, have in common and what it is, as their various designations indicate at first glance, that distinguishes them. This study claims, thus, that instead of remaining with general semantics, it is worth looking in detail at the particularities of these phenomena. The analysis of their form of communication in distinction to organizations, descriptions, semantics and so on, may contribute to this endeavor.

With this study I want to suggest an approach that includes a coherent theory of the social, empirically sensitive concepts and analytical strategies, for the analysis of a concrete phenomenon of society. The abstractness of the theory and its concepts does not hinder us to do empirical research. On the contrary, the distance generated with the theory allows for a different point of view on what usually is taken for granted. With systems theory, one can “avoid common sense”, as Luhmann (in Sciulli 1994: 64) prompts in the quote taken as the epigraph for this thesis. Moreover, while being abstract and appearing counter-intuitive, the concepts gain in sensitivity for the workings of the social world.

With this set of theoretical and analytical tools, the study wants to contribute to the analysis of social phenomena, constituted by economy and art. This thesis suggests a way of how economy, art and their relationships can be conceptualized in a way that maintains an empirical openness. What I have proposed for the particular case of tattooing can, thus, be similarly investigated for other, comparable social phenomena. Communication may unfold in various and intricate manners. This approach should allow analysis and comprehension of how this happens.

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Appendix: List of Tattoo Magazines

It may well be the case that not all of the magazine issues listed below are referred to in the main text. For the sake of completeness, however, every issue I included into my sample and worked with in one way or another is listed.

Note: The numbers separated by a slash indicate volume and issue. Due to its unequal availability, the information is sometimes noted differently.

- *Inked – Culture. Style. Art*¹
 - 2007: Fall; Winter
 - 2008: February; March; April; May
- *International Tattoo Art*
 - 2008: April; 82 (special issue)
- *Prick Magazine: The World's First Free Tattoo & Piercing Lifestyle Magazine*²
 - 2007: 7/6 (March); 7/7 (April); 7/8 (May); 7/9 (June); 7/10 (July); 7/11 (August); 7/12 (September); 8/1 (October); 8/2 (November); 8/3 (December)
 - 2008: 8/4 (January); 8/5 (February); 8/6 (March)
- *Skin Deep. The UK's Best Selling Tattoo Magazine*
 - 2006: 131 (April)
 - 2007: 149 (August); 150 (September); 151 (October); 152 (November); 153 (December); 154 (Christmas)
 - 2008: 156 (February); 157 (March); 158 (April); 160 (June); 161 (July)
- *Skin&Ink Magazine*³
 - 1999: January; March; May; July; September; November
 - 2000: January; March; May; July; September; November
 - 2001: January; July; September
 - 2002: January; March; May; July; September; November
 - 2003: January; March; July; September; November
 - 2004: January; March; May; July; September; October; November
 - 2005: January; February; April; June; July; August; October; Novem-

1 Digital edition retrieved from: <http://inkedmag.com>.

2 Digital edition retrieved from: <http://www.prickmag.net>.

3 Retrieved from: www.skinink.com. Only the 'Editor's Comment' and a 'Feature Article' per issue are available in the website's archives. Information about volumes and issues were absent. Some of the issues were not retrievable.

References

- ber; December
- 2006: February; March; May; June; August; September; November; December
- 2007: February; March; April; June; July; August; September; October; November; December
- 2008: January; February; April
- *TätowierMagazin. Forum der deutschen Tattoo-Szene*
 - 2002: 9/77 (July); 9/78 (August)
 - 2003: 10/86 (April); 10/90 (August)
 - 2004: 10/95 (January); 10/99 (May)
 - 2006: 12/122 (April)
 - 2007: 13/137 (July); 13/138 (August); 13/139 (September); 13/140 (October); 13/141 (November); 13/142 (December)
 - 2008: 14/143 (January); 14/144 (February); 14/145 (March); 14/147 (May)
- *Tattoo. World's Largest-Selling Tattoo Magazine*
 - 2008: 224 (April); 226 (June)
- *Tattoo Energy: The Most Complete Tattoo Gallery*
 - 2007: 9/48 (August/September)
 - 2008: 10/52 (April/Mai)
- *Tattoo Life: The First Global Tattoo Magazine*
 - 2007: 9/47 (July/August); 9/49 (November/December)
 - 2008: 10/50 (January/February); 10/51 (March/April); 10/52 (May/June)
- *Tattoo Time: Das Magazin für die Schweizer Tattoo-Szene*⁴
 - 2007-2008: 5 (November-January)

4 Included in the magazine *Bike-Time*.

English Abstract

Tattooing

The Economic and Artistic Constitution of a Social Phenomenon

Drawing on systems theory developed by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, this thesis investigates tattooing as a social phenomenon. The study is based on a variety of empirical material, including interviews with tattooists and tattoo apprentices conducted by the author, texts and pictures from tattoo magazines and books and field observations at tattoo conventions and in tattoo establishments.

The focus of the thesis lies on how tattooing emerges as a phenomenon in society. In line with systems theory's assumption that society is constituted by nothing but communication, the study investigates the form of communication of tattooing. Although working with abstract concepts, it is argued that the theory is open for conceptual refinements in order to better grasp empirical phenomena. To understand how tattooing emerges and functions, the concepts of form and medium of communication are used. Because of the particular character of tattooing, however, it is suggested to draw on Slavoj Žižek's work on the "parallax view". The concept of parallax, adapted to the systems theoretical framework, makes it possible to grasp tattooing and its intricate form of communication.

The main claim of the thesis is that tattooing has a special form of communication. Unlike other forms of communication, tattooing constitutes a parallax form that brings together two distinct and incommensurable forms of communication. Through the parallax the two forms are closely related. Tattooing is constituted only if this parallax form emerges through communication. Economy and art are the two forms of communication that constitute tattooing. They are functional sub-systems of society, operating according to their own distinct codes and in their particular media of communication. Despite their differences in forming communication, they are both constitutive for the emergence of tattooing.

While suggesting a different approach to tattooing than that found in literature, the thesis likewise suggests a new perspective on the relationship between art and economy. The contribution to the discussion of the relationship between economy and art lies in a conceptualization of these two as distinct, but nonetheless related, societal domains. The thesis argues that it is possible to conceptualize economy and art in general social theoretical terms, while also being able to look, in more empirical detail, at spe-

cific phenomena for which they are constitutive. The thesis thereby focuses on the emergence of a phenomenon in its own right, i.e., the way a phenomenon communicates instead of looking exclusively at how a phenomenon is described.

In addition to the claim about its special form, the thesis argues that the intricate communication constellation of tattooing challenges those communications, which relate to it. The thesis analyzes tattoo organizations and qualifying descriptions of tattoos as two types of communication that deal with the parallax of tattooing.

The thesis shows that tattoo organizations face the challenge of the parallax by operating in three different ways. There are two organizational forms and a third way of organizing by drawing on the two organizational forms concurrently. The two organizational forms differ in regard to how they decide to provide tattooing and tattoos. They are called 'flash' and 'custom', named after the main decisions concerning the 'core business' of tattoo organizations. Each organizational form stabilizes itself by 'domesticating' the parallax of tattooing, that is by orienting the decisions either economically or artistically. The third type of tattoo organization operates with both organizational forms, in a variety of ways. Aside from the challenge tattooing poses, the forms with which tattoo organizations stabilize themselves produce additional challenges and disturbances with which they have to deal.

Similar to tattoo organizations, qualifying descriptions deal with the challenge of tattooing by observing tattoos. By evaluating tattoos with 'quality has its price' as their basic observation, qualifications stabilize the economic and artistic meaning of tattoos in different ways. The study shows four main ways by which qualifications deal with and relate artistic and economic qualities, pointing to the clashes that emerge, when they are confronted with each other.

On the basis of a new understanding of tattooing and the relationship between economy and art, the thesis eventually suggests a new approach to the study of phenomena constituted by art and economy. Three short 'Interludes' exemplify how the analytical and conceptual tools, used for the analysis of tattooing, may be useful for investigating comparable phenomena. With examples from the literature on phenomena such as fashion, photography or painting, it is shown how the forms of communication, organizations and qualifying descriptions could be studied.

Dansk Resumé

Tatovering

Den økonomiske og kunstneriske konstitution af et socialt fænomen

Ved at trække på systemteorien udviklet af sociologen Niklas Luhmann, undersøger denne afhandling tatovering som et socialt fænomen. Undersøgelsen bygger på forskelligt empirisk materiale, herunder interviews med tatovører og tatovørlærlinge lavet af forfatteren selv, tekster og billeder fra tatoveringsblade og -bøger samt feltobservationer på tatoveringsmesser og i tatoveringsforretninger.

Omdrejningspunktet for afhandlingen er, hvordan tatovering kommer til syne som et fænomen i samfundet. I overensstemmelse med systemteoriens antagelse om, at samfundet ikke består af andet end kommunikation, undersøger nærværende studie kommunikationsformen for tatovering. Selvom der i afhandlingen arbejdes med systemteoriens abstrakte begreber, hævdes det, at teorien er åben for begrebsmæssige forbedringer, der muliggør en bedre forståelse af empiriske fænomener. For at kunne forstå hvordan tatovering kommer til syne og fungerer, anvendes begreberne om kommunikationens form og medium. På grund af den særlige karakter tatovering har, foreslås det dog også at trække på Slavoj Žižeks arbejde med "parallakse-syn" (parallax view). Begrebet parallakse, tilpasset den systemteoretiske ramme, muliggør nemlig at forstå tatovering og dens komplicerede form for kommunikation.

Afhandlingens hovedpåstand er, at tatovering har en særlig form for kommunikation. I modsætning til andre former for kommunikation udgør tatovering en parallakseform, der forener to forskellige og uforenelige former for kommunikation. Gennem parallaksen bliver disse to former derved nært forbundet. Tatovering bliver kun konstitueret, hvis denne parallakseform kommer til syne gennem kommunikation. Det viser sig, at økonomi og kunst er de to former for kommunikation, som konstituerer tatovering. De er funktionelle subsystemer i samfundet, der opererer i overensstemmelse med deres egne distinkte koder og i hver deres særlige kommunikationsmedium. Trods forskellene i deres måde at forme kommunikationen på, er de begge konstituerende for tilsynkomsten af tatovering.

Ved at foreslå en anden tilgang til tatovering end der ellers findes i forskningslitteraturen, anlægger afhandlingen ligeledes et nyt perspektiv på forholdet mellem kunst og økonomi. Bidraget til diskussionen om forholdet mellem økonomi og kunst ligger i at begribe sådanne to samfundsmæssige domæner som distinkte men

alligevel beslægtede. Afhandlingen hævder, at det er muligt at begrebsliggøre økonomi og kunst i generelle socialteoretiske termer og samtidig være i stand til – mere empirisk detaljeret – at undersøge de specifikke fænomener, som økonomi og kunst er konstitutive for. Afhandlingen fokuserer således på tilsynekomsten af det enkelte fænomen selv, det vil sige på den måde, et fænomen selv kommunikerer i stedet for udelukkende at se på, hvordan et fænomen bliver beskrevet.

Foruden påstanden om tatoveringens særlige form, argumenterer afhandlingen for, at tatoveringens komplicerede kommunikationssammensætning udfordrer de kommunikationer, som er relateret til den. I afhandlingen analyseres derfor også tatoveringsorganisationer og kvalificerende beskrivelser af tatoveringer som to typer af kommunikation, der beskæftiger sig med tatoveringens parallakse.

Afhandlingen viser, at tatoveringsorganisationer står over for parallakseudfordringen ved at operere på tre forskellige måder. Der er to organisationsformer og en tredje måde at organisere sig på, som trækker på de to første organisationsformer samtidig. De to første organisationsformer adskiller sig med hensyn til, hvordan de beslutter at tilbyde tatovering. De to former kaldes for henholdsvis 'flash' og 'custom', navngivet efter de vigtigste beslutninger, der vedrører organisationen af tatoveringens 'kerneaktiviteter'. Hver af disse to organisationsformer stabiliserer sig selv ved at 'tæmme' tatoveringens parallakse ved at orientere beslutningerne enten økonomisk eller kunstnerisk. Den tredje type af tatoveringsorganisation opererer med begge organisationsformer på samme tid på en række forskellige måder. Udover den udfordring som tatovering stiller, producerer de former hvormed tatoveringsorganisationer stabiliserer sig selv yderligere udfordringer og forstyrrelser, som de må behandle.

På samme måde som tatoveringsorganisationer, beskæftiger kvalificerende beskrivelser sig med denne tatoveringsudfordring ved at observere tatoveringer. Ved at evaluere tatoveringer med formelen 'kvalitet har sin pris' som deres grundlæggende iagttagelse, stabiliserer kvalifikationerne den økonomiske og kunstneriske betydning af tatoveringer på forskellige måder. Undersøgelsen viser fire måder, hvorpå kvalifikationer beskæftiger sig med og forholder sig til kunstneriske og økonomiske kvaliteter, og den peger endvidere på sammenstød, der opstår, når kvalifikationerne konfronteres med hinanden.

På baggrund af en ny forståelse af tatoveringer og forholdet mellem økonomi og kunst foreslår afhandlingen slutteligt en ny tilgang til studiet af fænomener, som konstitueres af kunst og økonomi. Tre korte 'mellemspil' eksemplificerer hvordan de

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analytiske og konceptuelle redskaber, der anvendes til at analysere tatoveringer, kan være nyttige til at undersøge lignende fænomener. Med eksempler fra forskningslitteraturen om fænomener som mode, fotografi eller maleri vises der, hvordan de forskellige former for kommunikation, organisationer og kvalificerende beskrivelser kan undersøges.

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