



*Wim Delvoe, Tim (2006), Tim Steiner sitting for Tim at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania. Photo: courtesy Studio Wim Delvoe.*

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## Whose Skin? Curating Tattooed *Tableaux Vivants* in Contemporary Art

**Abstract**

*This article discusses tattoo works by contemporary artists Wim Delvoeye and Santiago Sierra to raise questions about curating tattooed tableaux vivants. Showing tattoos on living persons in an exhibition context instigates an intriguing curatorial network. The relationship extends from the curator and the artist to the person carrying the artwork. Yet one cannot assume that the three parties act in agreement. Their connection may be social, art-focused or even market-driven. In a newly formed triangle of artistic and curatorial interests, the division of labour and distribution of profits have to be renegotiated.*

**Keywords**

curating  
contemporary art  
*tableau vivant*  
tattoos  
Wim Delvoeye  
Santiago Sierra  
living display

Roald Dahl's short story 'Skin' (1952) depicts an old man named Drioli walking around town, hungry and distractedly window-shopping. A painting in a gallery storefront catches his interest. It reminds him of the style of an artist who, thirty years earlier, tattooed a magnificent portrait of his wife on his back. Thrilled by the discovery, Drioli steps into the gallery where a posh crowd has gathered on the occasion of an opening. The old man claims he owns a picture by the very painter shown in the gallery, but is asked to leave. Judging him by his poor appearance, the artsy crowd deems him a liar. 'I'll show you. I'll show you,' Drioli cries out, ripping off his clothes. After a contemplative pause comes a rush of excitement. People scream: 'It is by him. It is even signed.' Everyone inspects the early work of the talented painter tattooed on the back of

the old man. The gallery owner exclaims: 'I'll buy it.' 'How can you buy it?' asks Drioli, unsure of how the work can be sold while attached to his skin. Another person offers Drioli the most luxurious life in his hotel, with the only requirement that he walk around in swimming trunks on his private beach every day for a couple of hours so that the masterpiece can be appreciated. The gallery owner, afraid to lose the precious art deal, proposes to have a surgeon replace the skin on his back. Others demand that Drioli kill himself on the spot to free the art. Finally, lured by the lucrative offer by the man with the hotel, Drioli follows him out of the exhibition space (Dahl 1952).

Every year since 2011, Tim Steiner flies from Europe to Tasmania to be shown at MONA, the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart. After having his back tattooed by the acclaimed Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, Steiner makes a living from displaying the artwork *Tim* (2006). Dahl's literary vision comes true as tattoos on living human beings are curated and presented in contemporary arts spaces. As in the short story, contemporary examples face similar challenges. The relationship between artist and curator is complicated by the addition of a third party: the tattooed *tableau vivant*. In this case a *tableau vivant* is not a 'living picture' composed of actors performing a scene; rather, the skin of a living person becomes the *tableau* or support for an artwork. *Tim* does not represent a scene – *Tim* is the living picture, a living artwork that cannot be duplicated or re-enacted.

Curators who *handle* persons as art harken back to the original definition of curating. The term can be traced back to the Latin *cura*, to 'take care'. In ancient Rome the term 'curator' was first used for caretakers who were responsible for land or animals; they were hired as advisers and later mayors of smaller entities (Cary et al. 1949: 245). The term also referred to guardians of other human beings, such as pupils or minors (Chisholm 1911: 636). With the beginning of museum culture in the eighteenth century, curating described a person in charge of objects in exhibition contexts. In 2018, the Milwaukee Art Museum expanded the term even more. Here curators were loosely defined as 'individuals with a passion for a content' (Kelly 2012). Combing through the different descriptions marks a curator as someone who is passionate about their charges, be they objects or individuals.

This article discusses an interesting mix of responsibilities that arises when tattoos are displayed on living beings in an art context. Curators return to the role of caretaker or guardian. Yet, in the cases below, they are not responsible for minors but enter into a multifaceted relationship with other adults – persons with artworks tattooed on their bodies. The situation gets even more complicated in a time of artist-driven exhibitions. Harald Szeemann regards the curator as someone who, above all of the other duties they perform, serves as the accomplice of the artist (Obirst 2008: 99). With the display of tattoos on living beings, the accomplice relationship extends from the curator and the artist to the artwork: the tattooed person. Yet one cannot assume that all three parties act in agreement. Their investment in the relationship may be social, aesthetic, research-oriented or market-driven. In this intricate triangle of artistic and curatorial interests, the division of labour and distribution of profits have to be negotiated.

Looking at the (historical) framework of tattoos on display reveals parallels with the contemporary curatorial, artistic and economic interest in the tattooed body. The cultural technique of preserving and showcasing tattoos of the deceased has a long tradition. The Medical Science Museum at Tokyo University, for example, owns and shows a collection of 105 full-body tattooed skins from various centuries that were donated post-mortem (Angel 2012). The scientist and curator Masaichi Fukushi, who started the project in the 1920s, removed the tattooed skins for preservation. Originally only interested in full-body tattoos, the museum is now run by the founder's son, Katsunari Fukushi, who more recently offered to pay for costly full-body-tattooing sessions with the agreement that his business partners donate their skin after death. Nowadays there are services advertised on the Internet that offer, based on declarations of consent, to preserve the tattoos of the bodies of loved ones for surviving friends and family.<sup>1</sup> Tattoos done by famous contemporary artists might hold an even higher monetary value than their perceived emotional value. In 2002, the model Kate Moss received a back tattoo, consisting of two small sparrows, done by the painter Lucian Freud. She claimed that it must be worth a million pounds, after a full-length portrait of her by Freud sold for 3.9 million pounds: 'If it all goes horribly wrong I could get a skin graft and sell it! [...] I mean, it's an original Freud. I wonder how much a collector would pay for that? A few million?' (cited in Adams 2012).

Showing the tattooed skin of living human beings has also been a theme of curatorial practice in World's Fairs. Historically, tattoos have been labelled as 'uncivilized' in western culture. It was an orientalist and enslaving strategy of Europeans to showcase and exoticize tattooed persons from colonized countries by displaying them in exhibition contexts (Bolton 1897). Later, tattoos became more visible on the bodies of westerners, first on prison inmates, soldiers and sailors, then on members of music or punk subcultures. Western contemporary artists also became more interested in tattooing, often using tattoos as a cultural signifiers to criticize civilization and its inscription of power through tattoos. For the work *body sign action* (1970), VALIE EXPORT had a tattooist needle an image of a garter clip on her thigh during a performance. At the time, VALIE EXPORT's work articulated a bold feminist statement about culturally repressed sexuality. The *body sign action* tattoo also symbolized a lack of self-determined womanhood, irrevocably engraved upon the artist's body.<sup>2</sup>

VALIE EXPORT exemplifies a living person carrying a tattoo artwork on her body. Yet, it was the artist herself who decided to get tattooed as an art project. The situation changes somewhat when individuals allow themselves to be tattooed by an artist and then displayed in a fine arts context. Such a configuration posed by a living artwork, whereby the curatorial process has to be negotiated between artist, curator and the person with the tattooed body, is a new phenomenon. As the bearer of the artwork, the tattooed individual must actively partake in the curatorial decisions.

This article researches financial agreements and personal relationships between artwork, artist and curator. It will elaborate on and compare two case studies: *Tim* by Delvoye, and *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* (2000) by Santiago Sierra. Both artists chose to tattoo other humans in and for

1. The National Association for the Preservation of Skin Art (n.d.) is a non-profit tattoo group that works to preserve the skin art of the deceased.
2. I asked the artist how she would feel about selling the tattoo or having it shown as part of a curated exhibition. The artist responded that she was intrigued by questions about the curatorial impact and economic worth of her tattoo, and asked for more time to consider it (VALIE EXPORT 2018).

3. A formal aesthetic analysis of the tattoos will be part of a future study.

exhibition settings. The integration of persons with artworks inscribed onto their bodies leads to questions about the division of (curatorial) labour and (economic) profit.<sup>3</sup> The following will compare how both artists are interested in the display of their artworks and invested in creating so-called artist-driven exhibitions, and how they both articulate questions about inclusion and exclusion through the use of tattoos. Delvoye's curatorial strategy could be described as artistic interference in market-driven exhibition practice. His interest in showcasing and selling a tattoo on a living being can be seen as an attempt to push the boundaries of capitalist possibilities even further. In contrast, the curatorial strategy of Sierra is to negotiate the sense of belonging and marginalization in the art scene. With his tattoo works he raises questions of dependency and class in a capitalist society.

Delvoye has reached a significant level of success in the art market during the past two decades, and the Belgian artist's selling index still shows an upward trend (A&F Art Markets n.d.). His mostly sculptural work typically plays with the cultures of the art market through utilizing unusual scales and materials. One of his notable works is *Cloaca* (since 2000), which involves a monumental machine that replicates the human digestive system. Feeding the machine with high-end (or low-quality) food leads to the production of faeces that the artist then sells. *Cloaca* reveals the artist's interest in mixing high and low culture and exposing the questionable value of the art world's markets.

In contrast, Spanish artist Sierra, who has included people in his artworks since the mid-1990s, lays bare the global economic inequality and division of First and Third Worlds. By integrating the urban poor, homeless people, prostitutes, addicts, illegal immigrants and asylum seekers in his works, Sierra emphasizes the exploitation of human labour for questionable economic exchange. This theme is accomplished through the hiring of participants to perform pointless and degrading tasks. One example is *8 people paid to remain inside cardboard boxes* (1999), in which eight people were paid to sit in cardboard boxes in the G&T Building in Guatemala City. Other artworks by Sierra involved people getting their hair dyed for money or lying inside the trunk of a car (Margolles 2004).

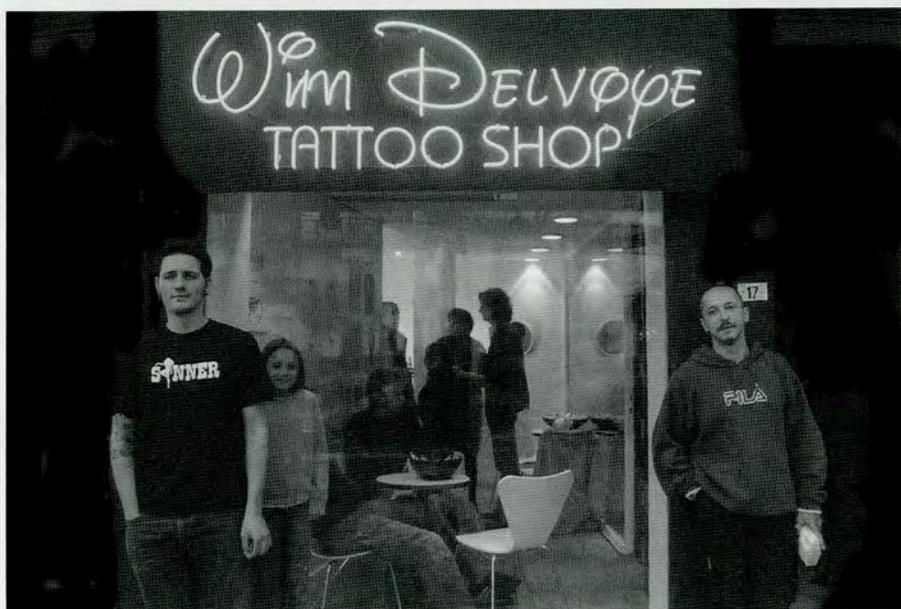
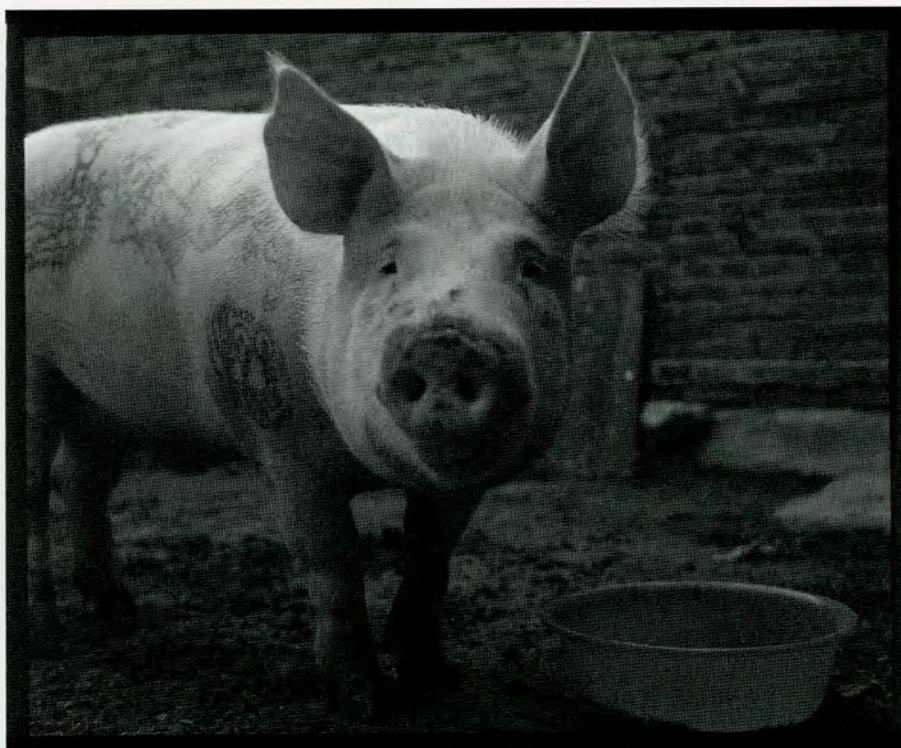
Delvoye became interested in tattooing at the age of 9 (Delvoye 2018). The practice was foreign to his family and community, but he was fascinated by tattooing as a form of self-modification. The artist taught himself how to tattoo, avoiding the otherwise common learning scenario of a tattoo apprenticeship. He practised on fruit and pigskin, and finally tattooed himself on the wrist (under his watch) at the age of 14, so that his parents would not be able to see it. Jokingly, he thought, 'When I am in jail, I'll have an occupation' (Delvoye 2018). Delvoye's fascination with tattoos concerns 'becoming part' of a community. He sees in an ongoing tattooing trend in the West a revived interest in ethnic belonging and a form of tribalism. With his well-known ironic undertone, Delvoye brings tattoos into museums and art galleries. By doing so he intends to discuss the distinction between high and low art; the contrast between the variations and repetitions seen in tattoos and the ever-ongoing pursuit of the new and original seen in the art world; the differentiation between tattooing as a craft skill and art making as an aesthetic skill; and the distinction between imaginary and real status in society. Delvoye is also commenting on value: people spend fortunes on



*Santiago Sierra, Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person. 51 Regina Street. México City, Mexico (1998). Photo: courtesy of Estudio Santiago Sierra S.L., Madrid.*

their tattoos as a symbolic investment in themselves with hopes of personal growth instead of monetary gain, whereas collectors spend fortunes on art to increase their wealth as impersonal rational investments.

Sierra's interest in tattoos as an artistic medium is not based on a long-term childhood fascination. He did not learn how to tattoo. The artist collaborates with professional tattoo artists for his tattoo-based art projects. Like Delvoye, Sierra's investment in tattooing is also a way to show economic disparities. Yet in his work he does not intend to upgrade tattoo arts for the art market. Sierra aims to explore how desperation dictates what people are willing to do for money. He pays small sums for his projects, just enough to entice those experiencing hardship to participate (Margolles 2004). With tattoos, Sierra unveils the tragedy of people in need who willingly accept irreversible alterations of their bodies. The participants are not part of the art scene, and do not seek profit or fame.



*Wim Delvoeye, Art Farm (2003–10), bred and tattooed live pigs in a farm studio in Beijing, China (above); Wim Delvoeye, Tattoo Shop (2006), installation with live tattooing, performed in Knokke, Belgium and Zürich, Switzerland (below). Photos: courtesy Studio Wim Delvoeye.*

Even though voluntarily agreeing to partake in the artist's performance, they will not be subsumed by art market irony, but will continue to live their lives in precarious conditions after their encounter with the artist. Collaborating with the marginalized and indigent, Sierra's works, as Elizabeth Manchester (2006) articulates, 'emphasise the tension between the choice of the participants to undertake the tasks for a wage, and their lack of choice owing to their economic situation'. Being tattooed is an almost irreversible modification of one's body. In Sierra's work, the type of tattoo is not selected by the participant. The lines have no specific meaning or content, and were chosen by the artist years before simple geometric tattoos became fashionable. The individuals of Sierra's tattoo works participate not because of their artistic interest; they participate because they are in distressed circumstances and urgently need the little money they will receive for selling their skin.

Delvoye began to produce tattoo art in 1992. First, he tattooed pigskin from slaughterhouses, then he worked with live pigs bred and tattooed in a farm studio in China (*Art Farm*, Beijing, 2003–10). The pigs were well-fed and grew robustly, just like Japanese black cattle for Kobe beef. With the tattoo designs on the pigs' backs – Louis Vuitton logos and Walt Disney characters – the artist critically commented on the amalgamation of the global luxury, fashion, entertainment and art industries. The pigs were displayed live (*Art Farm*, Bruges, 1998) or sold as framed skin wall hangings, or three-dimensional taxidermies. *Art Farm* generated a complex artist–artwork relationship, where the working process was not only based on the artist's will: the pigs, sometimes fighting aggressively with each other on the farm, apparently often destroyed the artworks.

In 2006, Delvoye began to tattoo humans in the gallery context. *Tattoo Shop* (2006) involved the live tattooing of about a dozen people with small-scale tattoos. For the Zürich version, he brought the equipment of a regular tattoo shop into the high-end gallery of De Pury & Luxembourg. The intent was to mix the vibe of a low-class tattoo parlour with the atmosphere of a neighbourhood that had never seen a tattoo machine. With the Zürich tattoo shop, Delvoye commented on the diverging economic circumstances and investment practices of the art and tattoo business environments. Two art-savvy participants in *Tattoo Shop* tried to convert their skin into a curatorial deal after the exhibition. *Le Langue* journalist Harry Bellet intended to sell his Delvoye tattoo to the Centre Pompidou in Paris in his will, but the museum refused for legal reasons (Dacey 2008). Similarly, the British comedian and filmmaker Ben Lewis, famous for his BBC series *Art Safari*, wanted to collaborate with Sotheby's to market his tattoo, without success (Dacey 2008). *Tim* is the artist's first and, so far, only tattoo work displayed as a new form of a *tableau vivant*. *Tim* was created expressly to be sold and curated as a living being. The work on Tim Steiner's skin has since been showcased in numerous international exhibitions. As a tattooed *tableau vivant*, Steiner sits in exhibition spaces for hours displaying his exposed back so that audiences can admire the work by Delvoye.

So far, Sierra has realized three tattoo-based projects. The artist chooses to tattoo other human beings, and uses tattoos to raise awareness of the gap between the rich and the poor. Tattoos literally mark the power of the wealthy over the indigent. Deliberately choosing places and



*Santiago Sierra, 160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People (2000), live tattooing, El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo, Salamanca, Spain. Photos: courtesy Estudio Santiago Sierra S.L., Madrid.*

communities marked by poverty and social injustice, he displays the vast contrast between the western art economy and the desperation of the deprived. In his first tattoo project, *Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person. 51 Regina Street. México City, Mexico* (1998), the artist searched for participants who did not have any tattoos and who were also not planning to have tattoos done in the near future. They would have to be so desperate for money that they would agree to be marked for the rest of their lives. The chosen person received \$50 for getting a 30cm-long vertical line tattooed on their back. Sierra presented the tattooing as an intimate performative, yet exhibited, act. Apparently, one participant, according to Luis Navarro, staff member in Sierra's studio, is still happy to have the tattoo on his back and has not shown any intention to sell, display or otherwise profit from the work on his skin (Navarro 2018). Even though he probably could benefit from showing it, he may be remote from the art world and so unaware of how valuable his skin might be today. This participant is the only one still in touch with the artist; the studio has no information on what happened to the others.

Sierra's second project, *250 cm line tattooed on six paid people* (1999), resembled the first, yet it included more participants. One continuous line is tattooed horizontally on the backs of six people. The work involved six unemployed young men from Old Havana who received only \$30 each, despite bearing a longer tattoo line, approximately 40cm, than their Mexico City counterparts. Sierra's interest in working with ever more marginalized communities and commenting on the miniscule value of payment continued in 2000, when he recruited heroin addicts, thereby showcasing those in one of the most hopeless of life circumstances. The salary for the addicted participants equalled the price of a shot of heroin.<sup>4</sup> His third and, so far, last tattoo work was *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, a live performative act that took place at El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo in Salamanca, Spain. Here the artist also hired heroin addicts who happened to be prostitutes. For the price of a shot of heroin they gave consent to be tattooed with a 40cm horizontal line on their backs.

In 2006, Delvoye began to tattoo Tim Steiner for the eponymous work *Tim* during the installation of *Tattoo Shop* at the De Pury & Luxembourg Gallery. The tattoos were completed by the artist and collaborators in 2008, after around 40 hours of tattooing. The design of the approximately 50 × 70 cm coloured tattoo includes a haloed Madonna surrounded by Asian and African symbols; a Mexican-style skull; swooping swallows; red and blue roses; two Chinese-style koi fish ridden by children; and lotus flowers. The artist signed the work with a tattoo of his signature. The tattoo has no relation to Steiner, his life or personal preferences, and was originally applied on one of the pigs from Delvoye's *Art Farm*. Its mix of random and completely nonsensical global tattoo imagery (Shield 2017) comments ironically on tattoo stereotypes and the lack of creativity in personal tattoos. *Tim* was not intended to be a performance done in the moment and displayed while the tattooing occurred, but was supposed to function as an independent artwork. *Tim* was made to be curated, shown and sold – with Steiner as the carrier of the artwork.

Sierra's *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* was created in a gallery space, but no audience was present or invited. A video documentary of

4. Not a tattoo work, but similar in the idea of participation in exchange for heroin, is Sierra's *20 Inch Line Shaved on the Heads of Two Junkies Who Received a Shot of Heroin as Payment* (2000).

the performance shows the four women agreeing to have their backs tattooed. Arriving in the space, torsos naked, they take positions with their backs towards the camera. During the recording, the women move, chat, laugh, smoke and look back, curiously watching and commenting on the female tattooist working on their backs. The video ends with the tattooist cleaning the wounds and applying bandages. During the act of the tattooing, two men walk in and out of the scene taking photographs and holding a measuring tape over the backs of the participants. The work itself consists of the 160cm horizontal black line tattooed on the four women's backs, and is not signed by the artist. When displayed in an exhibition context, *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* is not shown live on the participating women, but rather presented as a video, or as black-and-white photographs.

*Tim* by Delvoye was sold in 2006, coordinated by De Pury & Luxembourg. The work fetched €150,000, paid by the German art collector Rik Reinking. The gallery, the artist and Steiner received an equal share of the money. Since then, *Tim* has been the property of the art collector. Steiner is required to exhibit the work three times a year in public and private shows for Reinking, or according to prior agreement (Reinking 2018). There are no conditions regarding Steiner's physical state, no special insurance policies. The work might change through the physical alterations of Steiner's body. The contract of sale states that after Steiner's death the tattoo shall be preserved and revert to Reinking. David Walsh, director of the MONA Museum, attempted to buy the work from Reinking in 2011, but the owner refused (Steiner 2018). It is unclear if other parties have tried to buy *Tim* since.

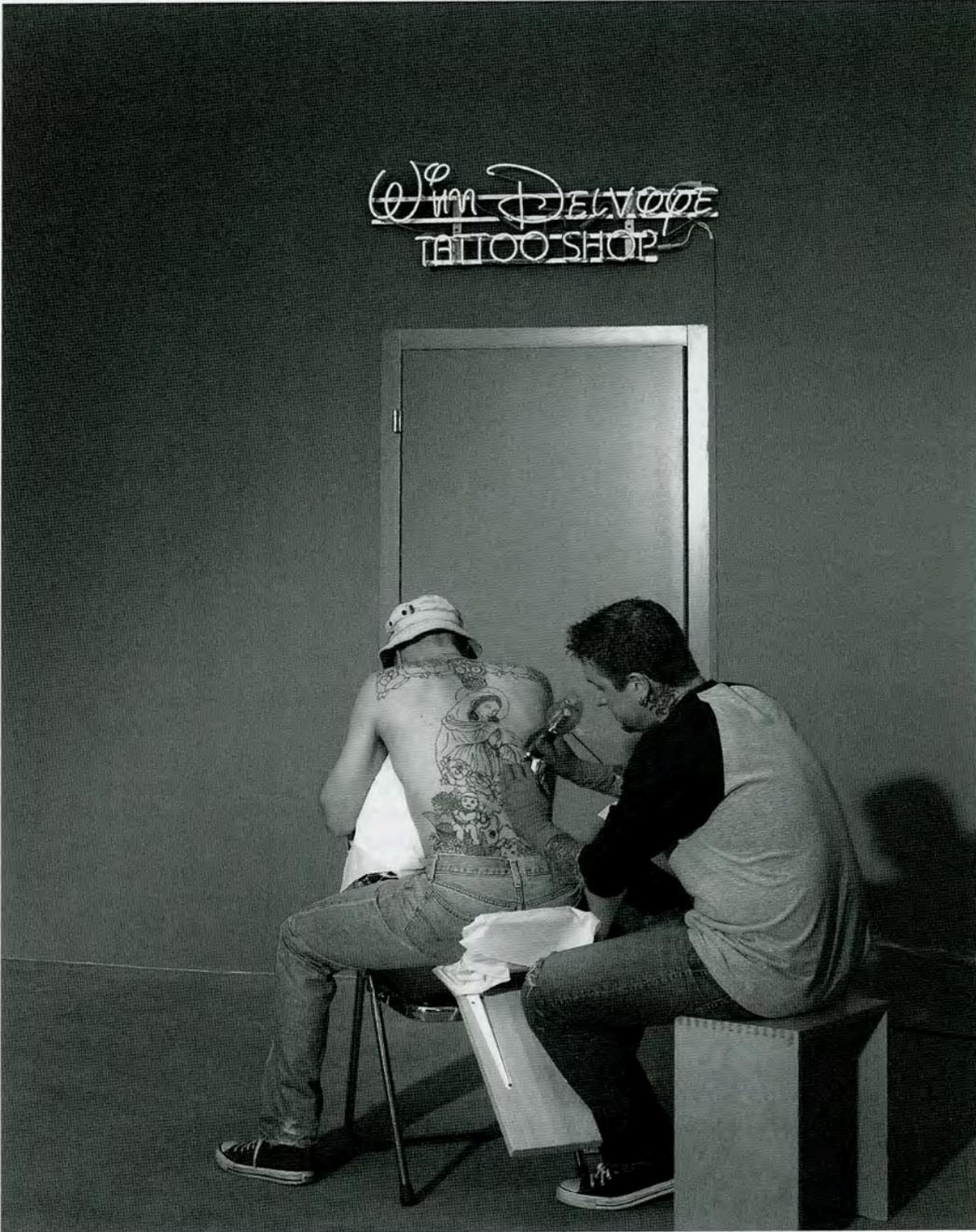
The 'provenance' of Sierra's *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* is explained by the artist in the video:

Four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be tattooed. Normally they charge 2,000 or 3,000 pesetas, between 15 and 17 dollars, for fellatio, while the price of a shot of heroin is around 12,000 pesetas, about 67 dollars.

(Tate Modern 2018)

No legal contract was signed at the time of the performance and no transaction document was issued. All agreements were oral. As far as the studio of the artist knows, the bearers of the tattoos have not tried to sell the work on their backs. And Sierra himself considers the work to be the situation at the very moment of the performance and the documentation generated from that moment. The studio of Sierra and the collectors, who bought documentary videos and photographs of the work, have rights over documentation, whereas the people carrying the tattoo inscribed on their bodies own the tattoos.

Displaying tattooed persons in exhibitions extends the definition of the term *tableau vivant*. Traditionally, in a *tableau vivant*, actors would perform a scene from a painting or a photograph. Tattooed participants, however, do not act or contribute to a scene but present the tattoos on their bodies. Showing the tattoos seems to give the individual more power than the



*Wim Delvoeye, Tim (2006), Tim Steiner being tattooed for Tim. Photo: courtesy of Studio Wim Delvoeye.*

artist. The tattooed participant's interest in the curating process stands in strong contrast to actors who might be paid to perform in a scene staged by an artist. The curation of *Tim* revealed some of the complexity of exhibiting living beings: Steiner, for instance, expressed that he himself, as the tattooed *tableau vivant*, is mostly in charge of the curatorial bookings. In the first few years after the tattoo work was done, the curatorial decisions were made collectively by Delvoye, the owner Reinking, and Steiner, such as at the Louvre (2012), Delvoye's retrospective at MONA (2011–12), and a show about the history of tattooing at the Gewerbemuseum in Winterthur, Switzerland (2013). Later on, Steiner began to make decisions about exhibiting himself, and he also became more involved with longer shows at MONA. Reinking seems relaxed about the curatorial circumstances of displaying *Tim*. Even though there exists a legal contract to show the piece three times a year, he prefers verbal agreements (Reinking 2018). The openness of Reinking in regard to the curatorial development of *Tim* takes on a new sense when one reads the programme of the Reinking collection, which states, 'The art collection is a space where humans and artworks meet' (Sammlung Reinking 2009, author's translation). Apparently, Reinking is interested in artwork relationships that go beyond handling, storing, selling and exhibiting objects. He is fascinated by the process of constructing a relationship with the person comprising the artwork *Tim*.

Being a tattooed *tableau vivant* influences Steiner's life outside the exhibition space. Delvoye is aware that becoming an artwork changed Steiner. The tattoo on his back has changed the work and lifestyle of the former gas-station attendant and tattoo-shop manager. The artwork impacted not only his bank account, but also his private life. Because of the exhibitions in Tasmania, Steiner decided to live there for over half of the year. This curatorial decision made by the artwork, the tattooed *tableau vivant*, might not be welcomed by the artist. Delvoye mentioned that he is not happy with Steiner's decisions about the extensive showing of the work at MONA. Also, the artist feels offended that Steiner fails to inform him about all the shows (Delvoye 2018). At the same time, it seems that Steiner is disappointed with Delvoye, as the artist is not focusing on tattoos in his current work. The emotional level of the artist-owner-artwork relationship reveals an enhanced complexity of responsibilities in curatorial endeavours. Moreover, Steiner admitted in a radio interview that he was like a child of Delvoye when he first entered the art world but that he has since made his way through art world puberty to a stage in which he is free and no longer obeys any rules (Steiner 2018). The ongoing engagement with MONA (sitting for five hours in the gallery space for over six months a year and giving one-hour talks about his experience in the museum every Saturday and Sunday while the show is running), provides Steiner with a salary that he is not sharing with the artist or the owner of the artwork he bears (Steiner 2018). Showing *Tim* in the first Delvoye retrospective at MONA (2011–12) was a decision made by the artist and Reinking. All the following shows at MONA have been based on agreements between 'the artwork' and the museum. The artwork thus negotiated his own curatorial arrangements. During his stays in Tasmania, Steiner has sat at MONA for over four thousand hours so far. He tells stories about his good relationships with the curators of MONA and the other staff. He



*Wim Delvoeye, Tim (2006), Tim Steiner sitting for Tim at the Louvre, Paris. Photo: courtesy of Studio Wim Delvoeye.*

appreciates the fact that there he is not treated like a piece of art, but as a human being (Shield 2017). Yet Steiner still insists that showing the tattoo on his back is not about him but about the artwork made by Delvoeye, and that he goes where the artwork takes him (Shield 2017).

The participants in Sierra's tattoo works do not plan further exhibitions with their backs. They do not partake in curatorial decisions. The women involved with *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* remain anonymous, and there is no information about their fate and whereabouts. Even though *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* happened in a gallery, the participants were only invited to be part of the art world during the time of the tattooing. Afterwards, no public exhibition was contracted with the women. Only the photographic and video documentation have appeared in shows. Even though Sierra turned the women into tattooed *tableaux vivants* for the rest of their lives, the artist is not involved in an ongoing artistic or curatorial relationship with them. They probably live in situations distant from the art world and lack the opportunity for fame or personal curatorial decision-making in dramatic contrast to Steiner. Their salary of around \$67 is not comparable to Tim Steiner's share of the sale price, over €50,000, along with his ongoing salaries from MONA. Ironically enough, the documentation of *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, black-and-white prints of photographs, are shown and sold in the London and New York branches of Lisson Gallery, and the video is on display at Tate Modern – yet the main actors are absent. Perpetuating the concept of the marginalized and

the division of labour and socio-economic differences, Sierra purposefully enters an ethically ambiguous situation in which the art world participates by purchasing his documentations. By twisting the moment of exploitation into a spectacle, he induces curators to show the documentation and thus become partners in perpetuating economic power disparities.

Analysing Delvoye's *Tim* and Sierra's *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, two very different works featuring living carriers of artworks, shows the curatorial, but also socio-economic and ethical complexities of presenting *tableaux vivants* in the context of contemporary exhibitions. *Tim* is showcased via Steiner sitting on a box in various exhibitions for months at a time. *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* was declared an exhibition, yet happened in a private environment with the artist, the tattooed participants, and the photographer as the only audience. While both works appear to be similar, the intricacies of the artist-artwork-curator relationship display numerous ethical complexities.

It makes a difference in the artist-artwork-curator relationship if the piece on display is inanimate or another human being. VALIE EXPORT stated in regards to the tattoo work *body sign action* that humans are a means of communication (VALIE EXPORT 1970). The above tattoo works prove her point to be true. The artist-curator-owner relationships with the tattooed *tableaux vivants* also raise questions concerning the ethics of the work agreements that must be arranged before the artwork is even completed. Immanuel Kant famously stipulated that one must not use another human being solely as a means, but always as an end in themselves – otherwise, one might fail to respect the humanity in that person (Kant 1900). No matter what the ends are (political commentary or profit gain) in tattooing other people for an artwork, even with the participants' consent the artists cannot help but objectify them.

Despite objectification, the participants are paid for their work. This applies even if audiences only see an object, as Steiner observed once at MONA, where one museumgoer thought he was a 'taxiderm[ied] man' (Shield 2017). The complexity of the state of being simultaneously an object and a subject is presciently explored in Dahl's story 'Skin', where Drioli is treated as a human, yet one who is objectified. Working with and raising the object-subject difficulty is probably one of the reasons artists and curators choose tattooing as a medium. That difficulty reverts the curator back to the role of caregiver and guardian. Even with the willingness of the tattooed participants, the relationship between the artist/curator and the tattooed *tableau vivant* maintains a hierarchical taint. It is a relationship built on trust (as Delvoye [2018] ironically phrased it: 'We have complete trust in our tattooist'), but also on monetary interests. Handling an artwork that talks back or manages their own bookings, most definitely 'demystifies' the aura of the curator as genius (Siegelau cited in Obrist 1999: 56). The decisions of Steiner to be shown in a range of circumstances highlight how the self-interest of the living artwork differs from that of the artist. As the tattooed individual, he must tend to practical considerations such as spending more time in Tasmania to enjoy a steady income. In the case of *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, the participants simply wanted to make it through another day. In negotiating with tattooed *tableaux vivants*, artists and curators open themselves

up to a new form of caring. Whereas curators might lose their sovereignty (Eley 2013: 113), they gain by becoming more collaborative and socially responsive.

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