

MODERN PRIMITIVES

Andrea Juno

Virtual Reality is an exciting and intoxicating new frontier as conceived by the mostly renegade scientists and cyberpunk writers. But as we enter this new world the long shadow of our rightbrain male-dominated scientific past is still with us. We must still grapple with the concept of the body especially as we reinvent that body through travels in our virtual body/mind. We have seen for the past centuries a dissociated scientific world create the schism of body vs. mind, Earth body vs. industry. It has been getting wider and more dangerously suicidal as the industrial, intellectual net gets ever more arrogant and greedy. The split between the mind and body creates ever more psychosis and denial-look at the response the scientific/industrial world has had with the ozone layer, cutting down of the rain forests, toxic nuclear dumping etc. What remains as the number one priority is coming to terms with our bodies and our Earth body. In order to leap into virtual bodies we have to know the source — our own bodies. My partner, V. Vale and I, edited a book called *Modern Primitives*, concerned with the manipulations of the body for ecstatic and illuminative states through piercing, tattooing and scarification. Its subject: a modern synthesis of older tribal customs with the modern urban set seeking a new integration within an extremely alienated world. Some of the practices reported in our book can also be looked upon as preparations for the body as one leaps into virtual states. I think we need an expansive view of the elasticity, flexibility and sexuality of the body before we encounter the potential dangers of the virtual world — dangers of addiction, even more dissociation and alienation than we have now. Think of the addictive numbing power of TV multiplied 20 fold by spending time in a virtual reality playground. The following is the introduction for our book *Modern Primitives* written in 1989 by Andrea Juno and V. Vale: MODERN PRIMITIVES examines a vivid contemporary enigma: the growing revival of highly visual (and sometimes shocking) "primitive" body modification practices -tattooing, multiple piercing, and scarification. Perhaps Nietzsche has an explanation: "One of the things that may drive thinkers to despair is the recognition of the fact that the illogical is necessary for man and that out of the illogical comes much that is good. It is so firmly rooted in the passions, in language, in art, in religion and generally in everything that gives value to life, that it cannot be withdrawn without thereby injuring all these beautiful things. It is only the all-too-naive person who can believe that the nature of man can be changed into a purely logical one." Civilization, with its emphasis on logic, may be stifling and life-thwarting, yet a cliché-ridden illusion as to what is "primitive" provides no solution to the problem: how do we achieve an integration of the poetic and scientific imagination in our lives? There are pitfalls on both sides, and what is absolutely not intended is any romanticization of "nature" or "primitive society". After all, advances in science and technology have eliminated much mind-numbing, repetitive labor, and inventions such as the inexpensive microcomputer have opened up unprecedented possibilities for individual creative expressions. Obviously, it is impossible to return to an authentic "primitive" society. Those such as the Tasaday in the Philippines and the Dayaks in Borneo are irrevocably contaminated. Besides having been dubiously idealized and only partially understood in the first place, under scrutiny many "primitive" societies reveal forms of repression and coercion (such as the Yanoamo, who ritually bash each other's heads in, and African groups who practice clitoridectomy — removal of the clitoris) which would be unbearable to emancipated individuals of today. What is implied by the revival of "modern primitive" activities is the desire for, and the dream of, a more ideal society. Amidst an almost universal feeling of powerlessness to "change the world", individuals are changing what they do have power over: their own bodies. That shadowy zone between the physical and the psychic is being probed for whatever insight and freedoms may be reclaimed. By giving visible bodily expression to unknown desires and latent obsessions welling up from within, individuals can provoke change — however inexplicable — in the external world of the social besides freeing up a creative part of themselves; some part of their essence. (However, generalized proselytization has no place here; some people should definitely not get tattoos.

Having a piercing is no infallible indication of advanced consciousness; as Anton LaVey remarked, "I've known plenty of people who have had tattooing and all kinds of modifications to their bodies — who are really screwed up!") Art has always mirrored the zeitgeist of the time. In this Postmodern epoch in which all the art of the past has been assimilated, consumerized, advertised and replicated, the last artistic territory resisting co-optation and commodification by Museum and Gallery remains the Human Body. For a tattoo is more than a painting on skin; its meaning and reverberations cannot be comprehended without a knowledge of the history and mythology of its bearer. Thus it is a true poetic creation, and is always more than meets the eye. As a tattoo is grounded on living skin, so its essence emotes a poignancy unique to the mortal human condition. Likewise, no two piercings can be identical, because no two faces, bodies or genitalia are alike. These body modifications perform a vital function identical with art: they "genuinely stimulate passion and spring directly from the original sources of emotion, and are not something tapped from the cultural reservoir". (Roger Cardinal) Here that neglected function of art: to stimulate the mind, is unmistakably alive. And all of these modifications bear witness to personal pain endured which cannot be simulated. Although ... society's machinery of co-operation gets faster and faster: a recent issue of New York Woman reported the marketing of non-piercing nipple rings ranging from 26.50 to 10.000 dollars! No doubt further attempts at commercialization lie just around the corner ...

This book presents a wide range of rationales, ranging from the functional ("The ampallang makes sex much better!") to the extravagantly poetic and metaphysical. The archetypes have been investigated; nevertheless, numerous practitioners are absent — it was simply not possible to interview everyone of relevance. Many of the subjects started their experiments as children: before he was 12, Ed Hardy had begun coloring "tattoos" on his peers; Fakir Musafar was enacting various primitive rituals borrowed from National Geographic by the age of 14. All share in common a creative imperative to which they have yielded in a kind of ultimate commitment: they have granted their own bodies as the artistic medium of expression. Increasingly, the necessity to prove to the self the authenticity of unique, thoroughly private sensation becomes a threshold more difficult to surmount. Today, something as basic as sex itself is inextricably intertwined with a flood of alien images and cues implanted from media programming and advertising. But one thing remains fairly certain: pain is a uniquely personal experience; it remains loaded with tangible shock value. The most extreme practitioners of SM probe the psychic territory of pain in search of an "ultimate", mystical proof that in their relationship (between the "S" and the "M"), the meaning of "trust" has been explored to its final limits, stopping just short of the infliction/experiencing of death itself.

The central, pivotal change in the world of the twentieth century — the wholesale de-individualization of man and society — has been accomplished by an inundation of millions of mass-produced images which, acting on humans, bypass any "logical" barriers of resistance, colonizing the memory cells of any receptive viewer within range. Almost unnoticed, first-hand "experience" and un-selfconscious creative activities (hobbies such as whittling or quilting) have been shunted aside in favor of a passive intake of images which the brain finds "pleasurable" and "relaxing": watching TV. The result: people all over the world share a common imagebank of spurious memories and experiences, gestures, role models -even nuances of various linguistic styles, ranging from that of Pee-wee Herman to JFK to the latest commercial. Our minds are colonized by images. Images are a virus. How does a virus work? "Viruses are not cells; they are made up merely of genetic material DNA or RNA. But once inside a hostcell, the virus insinuates itself into the cell's replicative processes by attaching to its DNA or RNA, and tricks the cell into producing more viruses through the same mechanisms the cell uses to copy its own genes. Thus sabotaged, the cell not only fails to perform its intended function, but also is forced to help the enemy multiply." (Robin M. Ficino, *Vogue*, March, 1988) In the absence of truly unique, first-person

experience in one's own RNA-coded memory cells, how can one feel confident about one's basic "identity"? And by extension, how can one, lacking unique experiences, create something truly eccentric? Virtually every experience possible in the world today -from touring Disneyland to trucking on photo safaris in Africa has already been registered in the brain through images from a movie or TVprogram — an apt word indeed. (We are programmed, but for what? Where does the image end and reality begin?) It is cynically appropriate that the word faux (a pop correlative of the academic signifier, "simulation") has comfortably settled into the working vocabulary of the '80s. All the "modern primitive" practices being revived — so-called "permanent" tattooing, piercing, and scarification - underscore the realization that death itself, the Grim Reaper, must be stared straight in the face, unflinchingly, as part of the continuing struggle to free ourselves from our complexes, to get to know our hidden instincts, to work out unaccountable aggressions and satisfy devious urges. Death remains the standard whereby the authenticity and depth of all activities may be judged. And [complex] eroticism has always been the one implacable enemy of death. It is necessary to uncover the mass of repressed desires lying within the unconscious so that a New Eroticism embracing the common identity of pain and pleasure, delirium and reason, and founded on a full knowledge of evil and perversion, may arise to inspire radically improved social relations. All sensual experience functions to free us from "normal" social restraints, to awaken our deadened bodies to life. All such activity points toward a goal: the creation of the "complete" or "integrated" man and woman, and in this we are yet prisoners digging an imaginary tunnel to freedom. Our most inestimable resource, the unfettered imagination, continues to be grounded in the only truly precious possession we can ever have and know, and which is ours to do with what we will: the human body.