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Review by Leah Heilig

WAR ✯ INK
By Chris Brown and Jason Deitch | www.warink.org

War Ink (stylized WAR ✯ INK) is a virtual, multimedia exhibit focusing on the tattoos of post-9/11 veterans and the narratives that accompany them. The digital archive connects stories, service, and ink to promote community engagement between veterans and civilians. According to creators Chris Brown and Jason Deitch:

> War Ink emerged out of a need to recognize veterans' service and sacrifices and to bridge the divide between the veterans and civilian communities. This is both exhibit and forum, using tattoos as a springboard for California veterans to share their stories.

The interactive story begins with a prologue, titled "Honoring and Understanding Our Veterans." This section offers context for a non-veteran reader, informing them of how many United States military members have been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11 (25 million), and a current total of deaths in these military theaters (over 7,000). While providing figurative background about the deployed military populations and the purpose of War Ink, the literal background of the page offers somber, black-and-white footage of post-9/11 troops in action, juxtaposed with shots of veterans modeling and getting tattooed. The page creates an immersive experience, as there is no main navigation present (aside from a small hamburger menu in the top-right corner) until the viewer begins the exhibit by scrolling downwards.

Meant for a primary audience of civilians, and a secondary audience of servicepersons, War Ink is comprised of four main chapters or themes: "We Were You," "Changed Forever," "Living Scars," and "Living Not Surviving." Each chapter reflects the tattoos veterans received at various points of their life and military service, and integrates multimedia communication in the form of photographs, videos, audio files, and web text. Part visual showcase, part intimate storytelling, War Ink uses its communication design to make the archive feel less sterile than a traditional website. The mixed-media approach offers a humanistic, authentic, and at times vulnerable insight into how a viewer hears, sees, and interacts with these stories. Like tattoos, there is something inherently tactile and embodied about the project.

Chapter one, "We Were You," opens with a close-up shot of a Hello Kitty-themed bicep tattoo. The tattoo, owned by Victoria Lord (Navy), integrates the famous cartoon with nautical themes. Its cheerful, saturated color palette, is a jarring but captivating break from the somber scheme of the landing page. With this tattoo as the background, the chapter begins by revealing demographic text about those enlisted in the military:

3 million people are currently serving, with one-third of this population identifying as a minority. The chapter, tellingly by its title, centers on life for veterans before their deployment. Using the tattoos that veterans decided to get either before enlisting or during training as focal points, this chapter ties together audio clips, video interviews, and ink to introduce the viewer as to why these veterans enlist for military service, emphasizing the voluntary nature of such decisions. Common themes of duty, family, friendship, and found camaraderie in basic training are addressed throughout the narratives of these veterans. The chapter concludes with the discussion of transformation through military service in both physical and psychological senses.

Transformation acts as a thematic segue between chapters one and two. The second theme of the exhibit, "Changed Forever," addresses veterans' perceptions of war and how they shifted pre- and post-deployment. As the opening text for the section states, "They [veterans] are living records of this conflict." If veterans are living records, their tattoos serve as palimpsests, their ink an embodied site to document combat experiences and the relationships formed during them. Several veterans attribute getting tattooed to catharsis, such as Johnathan Snyder (Army), who directly compared his artist to a therapist in an audio clip.

As part of the central tenet of change, many stories in this chapter focus on expectations versus reality of deployment. By extension, several focus on loss. In his interview, Snyder discusses losing several of his squadmates in combat and how he chose to commemorate them with a full-back piece: "I felt like I owed them something. Because they gave everything. So I dedicated my back to them . . . I knew these people."

Russell Tow (Army), had several of his fallen squadmates' dog tags tattooed on his shoulder. The last image of ink features Joel Booth (Marines) holding his prosthetic leg—decorated by a Joker playing card decal—with a pull quote from an interview on sacrifice and brotherhood in the Corps. The exhibit closes chapter two with reflection on the bonds of combat and service experience, in a powerful rhetorical sequencing that leads to "Living with Scars."

In what is the most emotive and impactful section, chapter three focuses on the veteran experience post-deployment and assimilating back into civilian life. The heart of the exhibit, chapter three, explores "scars" in all their forms. Covering grief, trauma, and coping, the chapter breaks the established visual conventions of War Ink's previous sections to provide still-frame images of veterans after they tell their stories.

These images, distinct from previous sections, do not focus on the veterans' tattoos, but rather their expressions. The most striking is of John Hamling (Army) wiping his eyes underneath his glasses. The photograph follows a text version of Hamling's story about a friend who committed suicide during their time at the National Training Center. These stark images establish an ambiance of quiet reflection, offering the subtle invitation for a viewer to pause and simply sit with these narratives and the people who tell them.

Veteran suicide is further addressed through a side-by-side commentary with a tattoo on Heather Hayes' (Air Force) calf. The ink is a design attributed to graffiti artist Banksy and features a girl or woman shooting herself in the head—the blood transforming into butterflies. In the original graffiti, known commonly as *Government Property,* the image is accompanied by text: "Suicide is illegal because it's a crime to destroy government property" (Arte y Copas, 2017).

While Hayes' ink omits this language, the web text accompanying her tattoo is a grim, statistical reminder: veterans are 7% of the United States' population, but account for 22% of its suicides (Veterans Affairs, 2012). This frame extends into a discussion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with the creators' statement at the end of the chapter relating the condition to the physicality of memory.

This statement is particularly powerful: many of the tattoos displayed in the exhibit revolve around commemoration, memorial, or tribute. Returning to the idea of the tattoo as a palimpsest, the designs on veterans' bodies can "help reclaim and reinterpret memories"—making the process of getting a tattoo cathartic, restorative, and ultimately, transformative.

The final chapter, "Living Not Surviving," opens with the image of a red-gold phoenix on the back of Tracey Cooper-Harris (Army). The tattoo, which features an Arabic translation of "Still I Rise" from Maya Angelou's poem in its tail feathers, exemplifies the hopeful note the exhibit ends on. Veterans' expressions, along with ink, play an important role in this section as well: veterans are smiling, laughing, grinning; a picture of John Daniel depicts the veteran with both tattooed arms up

in the air ending with rock'n'roll—or devil's horns—hand gestures. If the previous section called for a reflective pause on pain, these images highlight moving forward.

"Living" takes on many forms. The closure of the exhibit moves from transformative hope ("Still I Rise") to reflection (a notable one being Christopher Markowski's text tattoo: "We are the unwanted, using the outdated, led by the unqualified, to do the unnecessary, for the ungrateful") to how relationships have changed for veterans post-deployment. Ending the series are features on veterans discussing how their military tattoos have often created difference between them and civilians (Ron "Doc" Riveira) and historical commentary on military tattoos and stigma ("Patrick Meagher"). The addressing of stigma ends with a final creator's statement, one that calls for the viewer to "Open the Dialogue" between veterans and civilian communities.

The clear themes and sequencing throughout the War Ink exhibit are its greatest strengths. The visual trends in communication, broken for chapter three, are particularly effective at eliciting a quiet participation from the audience. From a communication design perspective, the immersive quality of the project, as well as the mixed-media approach, did an excellent job promoting veterans' narratives.

The snapshot effect, or short features on individuals, allowed for a wide breadth of experiences and stories in a relatively condensed space. While the creators' content contributions are limited to a few presentations of statistics and closing statements at the end of each chapter, they do important work in grounding stories in their cultural contexts. Chapter three exemplifies this rhetorical effectiveness by using Meyers' Banksy tattoo for reporting statistics on veteran suicide. As an experience, this digital exhibit does well provoking thought and working against stigma/ stereotypes about tattooed veterans.

Regarding experience, it is important to point out that this digital project has notable accessibility failures. In using mixed media to convey important messages and stories, the lack of transcripts for audio files and closed captions on embedded video exclude members of the exhibit's audience. The lack of visual descriptions or alternative text for photos also contributes to discouraged participation from audience members wanting to access content with technologies like screen readers. The design of the exhibit, while aesthetically pleasing, also has compatibility issues regarding flexible grid design: it is not accessible by smartphone. This, too, limits viewership to the project. The storytelling of these veterans, and their ink, is rich and immersive. The digital exhibit should reflect these principles in its delivery for *all* potential readers.

References

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