

THE AESTHETICALLY MEANINGFUL TATTOO: A GADAMERIAN CASE STUDY

JHUREN VICSON C. SANTANDER

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1897-7699>

jsantander@feu.edu.ph

Institute of Arts and Science

Far Eastern University

Manila, Philippines

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on Gadamer's philosophical aesthetics, explaining the artistic meanings and experiences of contemporary tattoos and tattooing. The paper discusses further by looking specifically at the following sub-concepts concerning an aesthetically meaningful tattoo from the perspective of tattoo artists and enthusiasts. Contemporary tattooing is considered mainstream; it is also one of the fastest growing industries globally. This provided different perspective in the development of contemporary tattooing. It includes the understanding and interpretation of the aesthetic experience and meaning. The paper sees this opportunity of investigating under the philosophical aesthetic perspective contemporary tattooing through the accounts of the artists and enthusiasts in a community. The study with phenomenological approach under Gadamerian aesthetics interviewed different contemporary tattoo artists and enthusiasts under one community. The study used the qualitative methodology by doing key informant interviews. It provided the qualitative in-depth interviews with people who have the knowledge of what was going on in the community. The study focused on the aesthetic experience of the artists and enthusiasts while interpreting it on Gadamer's aesthetic and the concepts of pain and permanency. The study also discussed the aesthetically meaningful tattoo explained through the fulfillment and realization of the aesthetic concepts. Through this, the paper arrived in the signification of contemporary tattooing.

Keywords: Tattoo, Contemporary Tattoo, Aesthetics, Hermeneutics, Philosophy, Philosophy of Art, Gadamer

INTRODUCTION

"Hermeneutic involvement is required because the meaning transmitted can never be fully complete and unambiguous. It demands interpretive involvement. Hermeneutics is required wherever there is a restricted transposition of thought. The historical finitude of meaning and the fact that no meaning can be given completely necessitates hermeneutical involvement in our experience of an artwork. The task of interpretation is to probe the possible meanings held within the experience of a

work, and by drawing on them to bring that experience to greater completeness" (Davey, 2016).

Tattoos have gone mainstream. There is a certain drive that motivates people in getting tattoos, and this opens an opportunity in seeing through these experiences through an aesthetic discussion. According to Davey (2016), the aim of aesthetics, as Gadamer explained, is enhancing the experience of art and not to arrive at a concept of art, but to deepen the experience in art. The ink is important to the wearer and to the one who

made it. Contemporary tattooing provides a vast horizon of interpretation and signification, from a different community of artists and enthusiasts, to different inspirations and motivations, and these factors will lead to deeper explanation, understanding, and appreciation of it. One way of doing this is to focus on a community as a case and study their participation, conception, and experience; a phenomenological approach to grasp all the interpretations and significations to the understanding of tattooing in the contemporary.

Tattooing is within the Philippine culture prior to colonization and enculturation. The practice itself is within Filipino heritage which can be attributed to neighboring countries practicing partly the same signification for tattoos. In the Cordillera where it is also considered one of the tribal tattooing communities in the Philippines, "Batek" is one of the popular terms used for tattoo according to Demeterio III (2016). Traditional tattooing established a great importance in the culture, as it signifies ranking, honor, rituals, protection, and all the other significance related to the community. The traditional tattooing is considered a fading practice due to colonization and enculturation. Although, it was (Demeterio III, 2016) the fading culture of tribal tattooing, it is necessary to note that their signification is far different in the contemporary where everyone that has the intention of getting a tattoo may have it. The study wanted to account contemporary tattooing as emerging practice and subject it in the aesthetic discussion just as how traditional and tribal tattooing played an important role in the community in the earlier time.

In the book, *"I Ink, Therefore I am"* by Fritz Alhof and Robert Arp (2012), it made critical evaluation of the philosophy of tattoos. It shifts the discussion of tattoos from a dangerous and deviant landscape, to enlightenment towards the nature of tattoos, the tattooing arts, and the collection of philosophical articles that gives different analysis towards them. According to Arp (2012), the fact that a tattoo is placed on a person adds a significant layer of context and

potential meaning that makes tattoos a fertile ground for aesthetic experience. From the foreword started the argument towards the idea of individualism brought about by fashion. In his foreword, Rocky (one of the prominent tattoo artists in North America) mentioned, "fundamentally, ink is fashion: you pick out, it's worn on you, and it tells people something about you." In this statement, picking it out pertains to the symbol, picture, or image of the tattoo usually picked by the individual, is the actuality of tattooing wherein the tattoo is already part of the individual and the last concept pertains to the signification of tattoo towards the bearer. He also pointed out the acceptance of tattoos through other body alterations as he argues the popularity of tattoos, which denies the idea of it being underground.

The study also acknowledges that there exists a debate in considering tattoo as art as part of the aesthetic discussion. It aims to look at the justifications that consider tattoo as art, which pertains to the image created, or the tattoo itself. Although the debate focuses on the image being created, the study also includes, in its discussion, the art of tattooing from time to time because Gadamerian aesthetics necessitates a strong connection between artwork and the artistic community that practices it. In the early 1990s tattoos were considered as art in the human canvas. It gradually shifted the attention in the acceptance of tattoos being authenticated and valued by some experts. It started different tattoo-related exhibitions. According to Kosut (2013), the linkage of tattoo and art worlds is clearly evident in the recognition of tattoo art by some galleries and museums. Hence, the acceptance of tattoo in the discussion of art and the aesthetic signification is gradual as many see the relevance and justifications about it. According to the Atlantic Times author Schwab (2015), for a long time, tattoos would only be experienced by the artist and those close to the person who wore them. However, slowly or messily, the art world is beginning to understand the special value tattoos have as aesthetic objects. The gradual acceptance from being considered a rebellious act and

practices, it comes to signifying importance and meaning subjects contemporary tattooing in the aesthetic relevance and deeper meaning.

The aforementioned are just some existing discussions on tattooing and aesthetics. From the significance of tribal tattooing in the earlier days to the discourse on art and aesthetics, the present study aims to see how contemporary tattooing is taken by artists and enthusiasts of today. Although the paper may not establish the acceptance of tattooing as an art and its play in the aesthetic discussion, the study may inspire the rethinking of taking it in consideration through the interpretation of Gadamerian concepts in contemporary tattoos. This offers first concept of aesthetic experience in contemporary tattoos that involves dialectical relation between the artist and enthusiast. Second, through this arrives with the concept of pain and permanency and eventually understanding the aesthetically meaningful tattoo.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to direct its attention on the experience of the artists and the enthusiasts and interpret it in the view of Gadamer's aesthetics. Furthermore, it focuses on the accounts of the enthusiasts and artists considering the questions that concern their experience in tattooing. The paper further discusses these experiences that make up the aesthetically meaningful tattoo. The paper argues that aesthetically meaningful tattoo is rooted in the presence of the aesthetic concepts of Gadamer. Contemporary tattooing is more than just the insertion of the ink to the skin. Contemporary tattooing, its meaning, aesthetic value and significance can be drawn to the experience of those who participate in it. This paper covered the aesthetic experience of each enthusiast and artists that lead them to the creation of the work of art that which makes it a meaningful contemporary tattoo. It also discussed that the aesthetically meaningful tattoo can only be realized in the

completeness of the aesthetic experience, aside from the presence of the aesthetic concepts. The paper further explained this through, 1) the dialectical creation and presentation of contemporary tattoo, 2) the concept of pain and permanency, and 3) the completeness of aesthetic experience. These were still drawn from the accounts of the contemporary artists and enthusiasts.

METHODOLOGY

The study with phenomenological approach specifically under Gadamerian aesthetics interviewed different contemporary tattoo artists and enthusiasts under one community. The study used the qualitative methodology by doing key informant interviews. It was the qualitative in-depth interviews with people who know what is going on in the community. The study focused primarily with the enthusiasts and tattoo artists extracting aesthetic experiences and aesthetic value from the concept of tattoo. The purpose was to understand and interpret the experience of these primary people that concerns tattooing from an aesthetic context and discussion.

The study identified Lipa City, Batangas as a case community with the local experts, artists, and enthusiasts. These community experts, with their knowledge and understanding, can provide insight on the nature of tattooing, culture, practice, meaning, value, experience and signification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Dialectical Creation and Presentation of Contemporary Tattoo

Gadamer, in his aesthetic, explains the importance of dialogue in the realization of art. Hence, meaning and interpretation can be fully realized when the players subject themselves in an aesthetic dialogue. It is considered aesthetic as the conversation is focused in the creation of the work of art and evaluation of the work of art. Gadamerian aesthetics is dialogical in character. It considers the artists

and theorists in discussing the subject of art to interpretation and understanding. Interpretation is a means to a work's realization. From this claim the study investigated the implication through the analysis of the dialectical creation and presentation of contemporary tattoos. The paper investigated contemporary tattoo creation. For the tattoo as work of art to be presentational, it necessitated the process of creation. The aesthetic appearance, in this case the tattoo, was made through aesthetic dialogue between the enthusiast and artist. The idea and motivation may come from either the enthusiast or artist, but both play a great part in the image's creation. The image when tattooed on a person became more fertile of aesthetic meaning.

One artist showed his process of creation that involved a dialectical process between him and the client and eventually arriving at a certain design before finally and permanently putting it into the skin. For contemporary tattooing, the concept of play included the participation in the work's creation of art, to satisfy the concept of symbol intended for an artwork to be presentational and to be fully realized in the concept of festival.

According to an artist: the ability to create a design and negotiate it with the client by following the ideas and the preference of the client is very important to the process, I also turn down some client insisting to copy an original design as for me it degrades my capability and as I believe those clients doesn't fully understand the art of tattooing and its value.

He insisted that in the creation process of a tattoo; it involves the originality and creativity of the artists not just merely copying an image, instead creating an image as a work of art. It was mentioned that if tattooing does not involve any of those processes, then it is not different to how the prison guards mark criminals and prisoners. This would then explain the differentiation of an aesthetically meaningful tattoo. In the same way, the enthusiasts have the same consideration. They mentioned if tattoos were just a mere

copy of the image presented, then it does not differ from the markings given to the criminals and prisoners before as it would not give relevant aesthetic meaning to the work of art. From the interview when the researcher entered the shop, the tattoo artist had a client with him trying to get a Polynesian design. When asked how Polynesian tattoo design were done and if they were all the same considering it follows specific elements, like the outline, the symbols and the certain placing and size to be considered a Polynesian tattoo. The artist argued that it does not mean one wants to get a Polynesian tattoo, it could be the same as how everybody got it or it has the same expectation when one views it. Although Gadamer in his aesthetic explained that the meaning of the work of art is not outside itself, the study argues that the presentation of the work of art meaning cannot be fully realized if the process is not evaluated or executed properly.

Such meanings derived from the tattoo were presented and expressed in an image that communicates to the artists and the enthusiasts who bears it. The symbolic concept in a way allows the meaning to present itself as a continuous interplay of showing and concealing. Gadamer also explained this. He mentioned that art is only encountered in a form that resists pure conceptualization. Great art shakes people because they were always unprepared and defenseless when exposed to the overpowering impact of an interesting work. Thus, the essence of the symbolic lies precisely because it is not related to an ultimate meaning that could be recuperated in intellectual terms. The symbol preserves its meaning within itself (Gadamer). An aesthetically meaningful tattoo also depends on the intention to be presented. Some tattoos were the presentation of a memory, person, and script that was significant either to the enthusiasts or the artists. It is exemplified by this enthusiast's account of his tattoo.

The interplay mentioned was the consideration of the enthusiast sharing his idea to the artist, while the artist evaluates and inspects the essential details from the

meaning given by the enthusiast and interpret it from his own understanding. The concealment of meaning followed this between what the artist created from the understanding of the idea of the enthusiast and in turn the enthusiast evaluates and unravels the creation done by this dialectical interplay.

Enthusiasts explained that in getting their design and deciding the styles, one should understand the meaning and motivation of the purpose of presentation. The study from the accounts of the enthusiasts and artists, found out that a tattoo was likely to undergo a cover up if it was not decided and processed carefully for it does not fulfil what it supposed to present. The meaning of the image was not separated from itself, which is why tattoos were acquired with specific intention. The aesthetically meaningful tattoo can only be realized through these concepts. This was explained through an account of one enthusiast explaining his intention in getting his tattoo and presentation of it.

The dialectical creation and presentation of the contemporary tattoo also explains how an aesthetically meaningful tattoo is considered. First, in the process of creation it involves both the participation of the artists and enthusiasts in the work's creation of art. Second, subjecting the creation of the work of art through this process would create a contemporary tattoo independent of subjective representation; instead it is presentational as it is created to stand on its own. Third, the meaning is derived from the created work of art fully realized through the dialectical creation of the artist and enthusiasts which is then considered as presentational. Artwork as presentational specifically like tattoos could bring things to mind and hint meanings as it presents itself. This explains that contemporary tattoos can only be aesthetically meaningful if 1) they are subjected in the participation between the artists and enthusiasts in the creation process, and 2) the presentational element of the finished work of art. The presentational element can only be realized through proper creation.

2. The Concept of Pain and Permanency

According to Gadamer (1986), the task of interpretation is to probe the possible meanings held within the experience of a work, and by drawing on them to bring that experience to greater completeness. Hence, the aesthetic experience plays greatly in producing an aesthetically meaningful work of art. It is heavily explained in the task of creating a contemporary tattoo. The study then asked the enthusiasts and artists concerning the concept of pain and permanency. The study considered these concepts constant in the realization of contemporary tattooing. Sometimes according to the artists and enthusiasts, it plays a great factor in acquiring and getting a tattoo. These concepts involve the aesthetic concept of play and symbol relating to the fact that one cannot participate without accepting and understanding these concepts. These concepts also play the unexpected fold of meaningfulness. It embodies the claim that the experience of art is the experience of meaning. The experience of art does not only understand a recognizable meaning, as historical hermeneutics does in its handling of texts. The work of art that says something confronts people itself. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed. The element of surprise is based on this: 'so true, so filled with being' is not something one knows in any other way.

One enthusiast mentioned: "*One thing that completes my tattoo is the pain that I felt during the process, it reminds me of the deeper meaning why I embrace the pain in getting the image and also give me a sense of earning my tattoo.*" Tattooing is already understood as the painful process of puncturing the skin and there is no other way in getting one but through this.

Another enthusiast discussed, "*The pain that I get in getting the tattoo is what gives meaning to my tattoo. Knowing that the tattoo can be permanent) means embracing the full demand of being a tattooed person and being a tattooed individual.*" The artists also shared

that sometimes, being engulfed in creating a tattoo also takes time in creating it. This can be likened to the concept of pain; the enthusiasts being drawn to the work of art forgets time and focus on seeing the product. Although pain is an important concept, it is not given attention in the play of art in the creation of an artwork. The idea of pain and permanency can be considered the response that a player in the role gives with an artwork. Hence, tattooing isn't just about the image that is being presented but more importantly the experience and meaning in the process between the enthusiast and his/her tattoo. This accounts to the realization of aesthetically meaningful tattoo. Pain and permanency are part of the desire that an enthusiast sets in deciding from getting a tattoo. There are specific painful places to get a tattoo, but getting a tattoo means getting pain. It is the unusual relationship between pain, beauty and art. This is the process of participation and response in the work of art. The enthusiasts with full appreciation anticipate the image or the work of art rather than the pain. They consider pain part of earning the work of art.

3. The Completeness of the Aesthetic Experience

The study from the discussion above, claimed that an aesthetically meaningful tattoo as a work of art and presentational can only be realized through: 1) the exemplification of the aesthetic concept of play, festival and symbol; and 2) the completeness of the aesthetic experience. The difference of contemporary tattoo as an art form is that it necessitates the aesthetic experience with the strong connection of the artwork to the artistic community. The concept of play and symbol explains the aesthetic appearance of the tattoo as the work of art that can only fulfilled through a complete participation. The discussions explained as well that tattoo is presentational although it can only be fulfilled on how the image was created and appropriated through styles as different styles were limited to what they were supposed to present. This process involved showing and

concealing where the created tattoo as art was presented through the exemplification of the concept of festival. The study continued its corollary discussion of contemporary tattooing through inquiring about the aesthetic experience of the artists and enthusiasts. An aesthetically meaningful tattoo can also be drawn through the analysis of the dialectical creation and presentation between the artists and enthusiasts. From here, the study discussed the process of creating a work of art in order to fulfil what was intended to present. The meanings were derived primarily from the intention of the artists and enthusiasts in creating the work of art and how it should be presented. It was done through aesthetic dialogue between the artists and enthusiasts and a sharing of the aesthetic experience. The study continued in the concept of pain and permanency which the study identified as constant concepts considered by the artists and enthusiasts in the creation and presentation of the work of art, the contemporary tattoo. The completeness of the aesthetic experience what makes the aesthetically meaningful tattoo. The artists and enthusiasts together fulfilled the realization of the work of art which was the created aesthetically meaningful contemporary tattoo.

CONCLUSION

The significance is explained by the concept of what makes an aesthetically meaningful tattoo in contemporary tattooing in a community. The study identified from the artists and enthusiasts aesthetic experience that what makes an aesthetically meaningful tattoo is through 1) the concept of pain and permanency as it implies the full commitment, appreciation and realization of tattoo as art, and 2) the dialectical creation and presentation of design which shows how important aesthetic dialogue between the artists and enthusiasts of the creation of tattoo as a work of art and lastly the completeness of aesthetic experience through acquiring a contemporary tattoo as a work of art and able to show and present it to the ordinary spectators to be address by the tattoo. These

concepts and factors show the significance of contemporary tattooing in a community and the growing relevance of contemporary tattooing in the aesthetic discussions. It also gives importance to Gadamerian aesthetics and its role in the understanding and interpretation of a work of art exemplified by the community of contemporary tattooing. Furthermore, the contemporary tattooing can now be understood and considered in every aesthetic discussion relating to tattoo as art and Gadamer's aesthetics.

REFERENCES

- Arp, R., & Alhoff, F. (2012). *Tattoos — philosophy for everyone: I ink, therefore I am*. Rakovic, R. Foreword. Wiley Blackwell. <https://assets.thalia.media/doc/0e/48/0e48cba9-cb9e-4f6d-bb23-87a355dd0400.pdf>
- Davey, N. (2013). *Unfinished worlds: hermeneutics, aesthetics and gadamer*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Davey, N. (2016). Gadamer's aesthetics. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/gadamer-aesthetics/>
- DeMello, M. (2014). *Body studies: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Demeterio III, F. I. (2017). The fading batek: problematizing the decline of traditional tattoos in the Philippine Cordillera Region. *The Journal of the South East Asia Research Centre for Communication and Humanities*, 9, 55-82.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2013). *Truth and method*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC. London, United Kingdom
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2008). *Philosophical hermeneutics: 30th Anniversary Edition*. University of California Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1987). *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1992). *On education, poetry and history*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Garcia, L. (2015). The aesthetics of wabi-sabi: beautiful imperfection. *Φιλοσοφία: International Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1).
- Kidder, P. (2013). *Gadamer for architects*. Routledge.
- Kosut, M. (2013). The artification of tattoo: transformations within a cultural field. *Sage Journals*, 8(2), 142-158. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975513494877>
- Schwab, K (2015, December 3). *Highbrow ink*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/tattoos-high-art/416769/>

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Jhuren Vicson C. Santander is a full-time lecturer at Far Eastern University, Manila Philippines. He graduated Bachelor of Arts Major in Philosophy at the Oblates of St. Joseph College Seminary. He finished his graduate studies at De La Salle University, Manila, with a degree Master of Arts in Philosophy. He also passed the Licensure Exam for Teachers. His research interests focus in philosophy, critical thinking, critical theory, scholarly inquiry, aesthetics and hermeneutics.



COPYRIGHTS

Copyright of this article is retained by the author/s, with first publication rights granted to IIMRJ. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution – Noncommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4>).