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# ETCHED IN FLESH: THE PHILOSOPHY OF TATTOOS AND TATTOOING

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## Abstract

Tattooing is an ancient art form, dating back to Neolithic times and is today widely practiced the world over.<sup>3</sup> Given tattooing's popularity and its wide acceptance in the modern world (a recent survey found that 30 percent of the adult American population has at least one tattoo), philosophers' continued silence with respect to tattooing is mystifying.<sup>4</sup> If philosophers have nothing to say about tattooing, what could be the reason for such a glaring omission? This disregard is telling: It may be that philosophers consider tattooing too "low brow", and hence, not worthy of their consideration. In what follows, we offer a few reasons why philosophers of art should take tattooing seriously as an art form. We will also expand on our contention that tattoos represent one of the most intimate forms of art known to humanity (indeed, perhaps *the* most intimate). Lastly, we will consider tattooing as a representational art form, and attempt to discern what can be gleaned of the tattoo artist's intentions from her work.

## Keywords

Tattooing, Philosophers, Art, Tattoo Artist

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In his infamous "Ornament and Crime" of 1908, Viennese architect Alfred Loos derides the venerable art of tattooing, subjecting those with tattoos to the following harangue, "The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons where eighty percent of the inmates bear tattoos. Those who are tattooed but are not imprisoned are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If a tattooed person dies at liberty, it is only that he died a few years before he committed a murder."<sup>5</sup> The present authors, whilst wondering how much longer they might keep their own bloodlust in check, also began to wonder why, in the tomes devoted to aesthetics, tattooing has been so routinely overlooked by philosophers. Further, we wondered what might be said of tattoos that has not already been said of myriad other forms of art. It strikes us that what is unique about tattoos is their singularly intimate nature; no other art form is more closely integrated with the human body, rendering its neglect at the hands of philosophers all the more baffling. In what follows, we offer a few reasons why philosophers of art should take tattooing seriously as an art form. We will also expand on our contention that tattoos represent one of the most intimate forms of art known to humanity (indeed, perhaps *the* most intimate). Lastly, we will consider tattooing as a representational art form, and attempt to discern what can be gleaned of the tattoo artist's intentions from her work.

## I.

Tattooing is an ancient art form, dating back to Neolithic times and is today widely practiced the world over.<sup>6</sup> Given tattooing's popularity and its wide acceptance in the modern world (a recent survey found that 30 percent of the adult American population has at least one tattoo), philosophers' continued silence with respect to tattooing is

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Deter-Wolf, "The Material Culture and Middle Stone Age Origins of Ancient Tattooing." *Tattoos and Body Modifications in Antiquity: Proceedings of the Sessions at the EAA Annual Meetings in the Hague and Oslo, 2010/2011*. Zurich Studies in Archaeology. Volume 9. Chronos Verlag pp. 15-26.

<sup>4</sup> Ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/more-americans-have-tattoos-today. Accessed 12/09/2021.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Loos, "Ornament and Crime" excerpted from *Programs and Manifestoes in Twentieth-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, pp. 19-24. MIT Press/Cambridge, MA. 1971.

<sup>6</sup> Aaron Deter-Wolf, "The Material Culture and Middle Stone Age Origins of Ancient Tattooing." *Tattoos and Body Modifications in Antiquity: Proceedings of the Sessions at the EAA Annual Meetings in the Hague and Oslo, 2010/2011*. Zurich Studies in Archaeology. Volume 9. Chronos Verlag pp. 15-26.

mystifying.<sup>7</sup> If philosophers have nothing to say about tattooing, what could be the reason for such a glaring omission? This disregard is telling: It may be that philosophers consider tattooing too “low brow”, and hence, not worthy of their consideration. This would be a strange attitude to adopt given philosophers’ passionate debates about modern art generally (witness the ongoing debate concerning the artistic status of such works as Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* and Tracy Emin’s *My Bed*), but surely tattooing’s antiquity alone makes it an art form worthy of philosophical study.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this strange reticence can be explained by the prevalence of certain tattoo styles, e.g., so-called “tribal” designs, the charge being that the most popular styles of tattoos betray the lack of depth that is part-and-parcel of tattooing. Such a charge does not, however, stand up to scrutiny: even if it were the case that the subject matter of the majority of tattoos were “shallow” or lacked serious emotional or personal significance, this would by no means undermine tattooing’s artistic status, certainly no more so than the popularity of shallow pop or electronica music undermines music’s status as an art form.

Perhaps tattooing is an art form that simply is not popular among philosophers, and their distaste for the art form explains their silence with respect to it. Admittedly, we have not conducted any scientific surveys to determine whether or not this is the case, but given tattooing’s popularity with the general public, and its widespread acceptance among members of Generation X and Millennials, we find it strange that philosophers would largely ignore this art form.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, it might be suggested that while tattooing is indeed a “legitimate” art form, it is nevertheless not as important as literature, music, or painting, and does not deserve the attention that these other art forms warrant. However, this is to suggest that there exists some uncontroversial method whereby the various arts can be assessed and sorted out with respect to which might pass muster as “legitimate” art forms and which would fail to make the cut. Such a suggestion might be unproblematic provided we had some uncontroversial definition of art to serve as a baseline for determining which activities and works merit the designation; given that we do not have any such definition, any purported ranking system would be relative in the extreme. Nor is it apparent to us that the tattoo artist lacks some skill or technique that the painter or sculptor readily possesses: if anything, it would seem that the tattoo artist’s medium admits of greater difficulties in rendering an art object, than does say, painting.<sup>10</sup>

A final preliminary objection to tattooing’s artistic status takes the form of Alfred Loos’ and Immanuel Kant’s trepidations concerning the moral psychology of both those who tattoo and those who are tattooed. It is tempting to dismiss such dated and unwarranted concerns out of hand, as these criticisms are steeped in class prejudice and/or racism. At any rate, the burden of proof clearly falls on the shoulders of those who would claim that merely possessing a tattoo is indicative of one’s ethical deficiencies. Even if it were the case historically that the tattooed were disproportionately represented in the ranks of career criminals, it would reveal nothing about the moral status of tattooing as an art form. For our part, we cannot conceive of a scenario in which rendering or receiving a tattoo satisfies any necessary or sufficient condition for criminal or antisocial behavior.

While a completely satisfactory definition of art may forever elude us, nevertheless we can offer more than mere family resemblances to aid us in identifying works of art. Berys Gaut’s “‘Art’ as a Cluster Concept” provides ten broad, yet not ambiguous, parameters which we may use to identify any purported work of art<sup>11</sup>:

1. possessing positive aesthetic properties, such as being beautiful, graceful, or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure);
2. being expressive of emotion;
3. being intellectually challenging (i.e., questioning received views and modes of thought);
4. being formally complex and coherent;
5. having a capacity to convey complex meanings;
6. exhibiting an individual point of view;
7. being the exercise of creative imagination (being original);
8. being an artifact or performance, which is the product of a high degree of skill;
9. belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, film, etc.); and
10. being the product of an intention to make a work of art.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/more-americans-have-tattoos-today. Accessed 12/09/2021.

<sup>8</sup> Before it is objected that a practice’s mere antiquity does not, in and of itself, render it worthy of study we would simply reply that if philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, et al., desire to understand human beings (as they surely do), then any practice that they have repeatedly engaged in over the course of several millennia is *necessarily* worthy of study.

<sup>9</sup> An informal poll of our San Jose State University department colleagues finds that no fewer than seven philosophy faculty (out of 35) have at least one tattoo.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, tattoo artists must address issues of hygiene, skin care, pain and discomfort, and potential buyer’s remorse.

<sup>11</sup> Our colleague Tom Leddy has recently pointed out that Laura Sizer’s “The Art of Tattoos” also makes reference to Gaut’s list. We thank him for alerting us to this.

<sup>12</sup> Berys Gaut, “‘Art’ as a Cluster Concept”, in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 25–44.

We contend that tattoos and tattooing not only satisfy these criteria, but moreover, the art form has always satisfied such criteria and it is largely class prejudice (and the related dubious association with criminal elements) that has prevented tattoos and tattooing from rightly being recognized as art and artistic activity respectively.<sup>13 14</sup>

Our chief contention is that tattoos are unique in that they afford us an art form that is more closely connected with the human body than any other i.e., tattoos are an *intimate* form of art. Indeed, they may well be the *most* intimate form of art. Very well then: why is intimacy of any importance to the philosopher of art? After all, artists have historically used a panoply of mediums to generate art, so why privilege the human body? We respond that the human body itself represents the artist's turning her artistic proclivities inward; having utilized almost everything as a vehicle for art, the artist now renders the human body a canvas, albeit a living one. We contend that both the tattoo artist and the tattooed contribute to the art: after all, if the tattoo artist's work is never seen, it can neither be appreciated nor pondered. The tattooed, then, become a proverbial living canvas, that is, a work of art that can be intimately interacted with. John Miller expands on this point in his *The Philosophy of Tattoos*:

In general, it may look as if tattooing has become more superficial in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Once tattoos were rare and powerful; now they're everywhere, to the point of seeming trivial. If you read or watch a lot of interviews with tattooed people, it won't be long before you come up against a question about what their tattoos mean. And it won't be long before you come across an answer that says they don't mean anything (even if there are also plenty of people whose tattoos have clear and explicit meanings for them). Today, tattooing's ancient mystique is edging towards banality. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the experience of getting and being tattooed can be profound. I may not claim any direct symbolic significance for the images on my skin, but I'm not sure it's for me to decide.<sup>15</sup>

Miller goes on to attribute the uniqueness of tattooing to its painfulness, arguing "the pain is intimately connected to the meaningfulness of the experience... It feels like it *ought* to mean something." For our part, we find this contention a bit baffling; while the experience of pain is profoundly intimate, and we have focused on the intimate nature of tattooing, we think it more insightful to focus on the personal significance of a tattoo, rather than the discomfort associated with acquiring it. If someone is willing to endure pain in order to acquire anything whatsoever, it may safely be assumed that that thing, whatever it may be, is presumably worthy of the agony.<sup>16</sup> But the agony in and of itself tells us little about the significance of the thing in general, only that it was a hurdle to overcome in its acquisition.<sup>17</sup>

In order to understand the significance of a tattoo, it may prove useful to note the palliative nature of art itself; art comforts, art reassures, and as Nietzsche so brilliantly pointed out, art can be a source of values. Significant events in the lives of individuals and nations tend to inspire artistic endeavor, and the artist's hope in immortalizing such events in song, marble, paint, etc. is to inspire others to persevere, achieve, and dream. We take such an insight to be the meaning of Nietzsche's proclamation that the artist is more important than the philosopher, and likewise, that a similar insight led Richard Rorty to conclude that imagination is more valuable than truth. The philosopher can discuss and analyze moral values, providing invaluable insight into which should be retained and which should be discarded, but the artist can generate those values by initially conveying them or by reinforcing them.

Acquiring a tattoo, then, would seem to be an enterprise not to be lightly entered into. While visual artistic images rarely move us in any profoundly emotional way (certainly nothing like the ways in which music can affect us emotionally), nevertheless it presumably is the case that an image must have some emotional or personal significance if one is prepared to place it under one's skin. This brings us to our second major point: given the highly intimate nature of tattooing, as well as a tattoo's relative permanency, the choice of what to have tattooed on one's person (and perhaps *where* the tattoo in question is to be placed) is no inconsequential matter. Given that the tattooed individual is the only one who has to live with the daily consequences of being tattooed, the choice thereof should never be made under the duress of peer pressure, nor the desire to please a significant other, and certainly not for purposes of following cultural trends. To do so may well result in the decision to ultimately have the tattoo removed.

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<sup>13</sup> For additional evidence of the increasing acceptance of tattoos as art, witness the proliferation of museum exhibitions of tattoo art throughout the art world. To name but one example: <https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/art-exhibits/sf-exhibitions-outline-the-history-of-tattoo-art>

<sup>14</sup> See also Matthew Lodder's *Body Art: Body Modification as Artistic Practice*. PhD thesis. University of Reading, Department of Art History.

<sup>15</sup> John Miller, *The Philosophy of Tattoos*. British Library: London. 2021. 5

<sup>16</sup> Or that it may be thought to be so by the acquirer before the acquiring. We are indebted to our colleague Noah Friedman-Biglin for this point.

<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, (and this is, admittedly, anecdotal) the present authors didn't find being tattooed to be a particularly painful experience; "annoying" more aptly describes the physical discomfort experienced while being tattooed.

The reasons for having a tattoo removed are many and varied, with buyer's remorse being the chief reason. Other considerations for tattoo removal include a bad or botched tattoo, a desire to change careers, a dislike of a tattoo by one's spouse, and the eventual fading of the tattoo. As noted above, the chief reason for tattoo removal, and the one that we wish to focus on, is buyer's remorse. If, as we contend, tattooing is the most intimate form of art, and further, if we have good reasons to be selective about whom and what we choose to be intimate with, then it stands to reason that the choice of a tattoo is highly significant (perhaps even morally so) and should not be entered into lightly.

Indeed, it may sound bizarre to argue that the choice of a tattoo is a normative matter, but we maintain that the choice of a tattoo speaks to two important axiological concerns: one, the importance of intimacy in human relations, and second, the matter of artistic sincerity. We will focus on the latter consideration first. Leo Tolstoy argues in his "What is Art?" that artistic sincerity might be the single most important condition to achieve in artistic creation:

But most of all is the degree of infectiousness of art increased by the degree of sincerity in the artist. As soon as the spectator, hearer, or reader feels that the artist is infected by his own production, and writes, sings, or plays for himself, and not merely to act on others, this mental condition of the artist infects the receiver; and contrariwise, as soon as the spectator, reader, or hearer feels that the author is not writing, singing, or playing for his own satisfaction—does not himself feel what he wishes to express—but is doing it for him, the receiver, a resistance immediately springs up, and the most individual and the newest feelings and the cleverest technique not only fail to produce any infection but actually repel.<sup>18</sup>

The choice of a tattoo *matters*; like any good or great work of art, a tattoo should both tell a story and have an interesting story behind it (presumably a story about the inspiration for said tattoo). Humans are paradoxical in so far as we decry banality and superficiality whilst simultaneously immersing ourselves in it on a daily basis (but perhaps this banality is merely a symptom of late capitalism). We are also befuddling in so far as we tend to absorb our most important moral lessons not through reason, but rather, through art. And while tattooing, like painting, is perhaps not as morally impactful as literature, film, music, or theatre, a tattoo, like any art object, is also an *ethical* object. This recognition serves to explain the widespread revulsion to Confederate flag and swastika tattoos: they denote more than mere "images" do. Hence, a tattoo which results from a spur of the moment decision is frequently the object of rather significant remorse, and often serves as a cautionary tale to those who would enter into this venerable art form lightly. So much then, for the tattooed: what of the tattooer?

## II.

Philosophers of art have long been concerned about the possibility and extent of discerning the artist's intention behind their work. This concern is as much epistemological as it is aesthetic; if we can discern an artist's intentions, then we can, it is hoped, gain a more profound understanding of, and appreciation for, the work in question. The extent to which an artist's intentions are made discernible in their work is known as *representation*. One of representation's most able proponents describes this aspect of art thusly:

[T]o understand a painting involves understanding thoughts. These thoughts are, in a sense, communicated by the painting. They underlie the painter's intention, and at the same time they inform our way of seeing the canvas. Such thoughts determine the perception of the man who sees with understanding, and it is at least partly in terms of our apprehension of thoughts that we must describe what we see in the picture [...]. And *what* we see is determined not by independent properties of the subject but by our understanding of the painting.<sup>19</sup>

Scruton goes on to argue "Portraiture is not an art of the momentary, and its aim is not merely to capture fleeting appearances. The aim of painting is to give insight, and the creation of an appearance is important mainly as the expression of thought. While a causal relation is a relation between events, there is no such narrow restriction on the subject matter of a thought."<sup>20</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, the same considerations seem, at first blush, to apply to tattooing. However, a closer look reveals problems for tattooing as a representational form of art.

The biggest worry with respect to tattooing as a representational form of art has to do with tattooing's *transactional* nature: tattoos are almost invariably *purchased*, and the recipient typically has rather strict demands with respect to what she will allow to be depicted upon her flesh. Tattoos are also not cheap, and their relative high cost is yet another factor that restricts the tattoo artist's ability to give free reign to her artistic creativeness. Few

<sup>18</sup> Leo Tolstoy, "What is Art?", in *What is Art and Essays on Art: Works of Leo Tolstoy vol. 18*, ed. Louise and Aylmer Maude. Oxford University Press: Oxford. 1899.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding*. St. Augustine's Press, South Bend, IN. 1982.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*.

people seemingly, would give an artist *carte blanche* to express themselves in the client's flesh. What then, if anything, can we discern about the tattoo artist's intentions from their work? Little it would seem. Indeed, some might be led to believe that tattoo artists are scarcely concerned with "art" so long as they can make a living. This is not the case however. A 2018 interview with English tattoo artist Josh Tanner reveals a common lament among tattoo artists, "Some customers are better than others. There's always gonna be those difficult customers, you can suggest anything to them... and they kind of make it difficult. I really like when people are open to a lot of things... if you can make some suggestion and they're completely down for it."<sup>21</sup>

If tattooing fails to meet the criterion for being a representational art it would not be the fault of the artists; there exists a desire for great self-expression within the tattooing community.<sup>22</sup> Sadly, in the case of tattooing, it is often the patrons of the art who stifle the self-expression of the artists they support.

Still, one may reject the representational/non-representational dichotomy in art altogether. The validity of the distinction is, at any rate, beyond the scope of this paper. That said, if we take the distinction seriously, it is clear that the hallmark of representational art i.e., self-expression, is almost invariably unavailable to the tattoo artist. Nor is it at all clear what could be done to change this lamentable situation; tattoos are, as I have endeavored to show, highly intimate in nature, and the quality that makes them intimate is also the quality that renders the artist's self-expression nigh impossible.

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<sup>21</sup> Tattoo Artist Interview—Josh Tanner. Tattoo Shop Talk. Accessed 12/28/2022. Youtube.com/watch?v=UqNplxqOVGo. 2018.

<sup>22</sup> For our part, we think the representational/non-representational art dichotomy to be much ado about nothing. If, as Scruton argues, a photograph is tantamount to a gesturing finger it is still the case that the photographer has had an aesthetic experience and wishes to share it with others.