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**›A Skin Deep Creed‹.  
Tattooing as an Everlasting, Visual  
Language<sup>1</sup> in Relation to Spiritual  
and Ideological Beliefs**

**Abstract**

Dieser Artikel basiert auf den Forschungsergebnissen zu einer noch nicht abgeschlossenen und demzufolge unveröffentlichten Dissertation über die allgemeine Rezeption der Tätowierung in der Zeitgenössischen Kunst.

Er widmet sich dem augenscheinlichen Phänomen der Verknüpfung von Glaube<sup>2</sup> und Tätowierung in der Zeitgenössischen Kunst und versucht, u.a. mittels eines kurzen historischen Überblicks, der Auseinandersetzung mit dem aktuellen Tattookult und einer Analyse der allgemeinen sozialen Merkmale der Tätowierung, mögliche Gründe hierfür vorzuschlagen.

Während der Lektüre werden dem Leser Fragen begegnen, auf die er keine expliziten Antworten finden wird. Doch ist dies keine Unachtsamkeit der Autorin, sondern vielmehr eine unvermeidbare Notwendigkeit. Es gilt den Blick des Lesers für die ungewöhnliche Bildform der Tätowierung zu öffnen, mehr noch, es ihm zu ermöglichen, über die bloße Erscheinungsform selbiger hinaus zu blicken. Tätowierungen sind von zeichenhaftem Charakter, sie wollen ›gelesen‹ werden und so könnte man diesen Bildern zu Recht eine eigene Bildsprache einräumen.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that the term ›language‹ in the following is used in an art history context and not in a rhetorical way.

<sup>2</sup> Es ist darauf hinzuweisen, dass, im weiteren Verlauf, in dem Terminus ›Glaube‹ sowohl die spirituelle, als auch die ideologische Bedeutung dessen impliziert sind.

This paper is based on research findings of a not yet finished and thus unpublished dissertation on the general reception of Tattooing in Contemporary Art. It illustrates the phenomenon of linking the themes Faith<sup>3</sup> and Tattooing in Contemporary Art to each other and, in regard of this, proposes possible reasons by offering a short historical overview, a discussion on the current Tattoo Cult, and an analysis of its common social characteristics.

While reading this text the reader will encounter questions to which he will find no answers but it shall be mentioned that this is no negligence by the author but rather a necessary measure. The reader's view is to be opened up for the unusual form of image a Tattoo represents and furthermore is to be enabled to see beyond its mere superficial appearance.

Tattoos are of sign-like character, they want »to be read« and one may rightly recognize this type of images as an independent visual language.

## **1. The Conjunction of Faith and Tattooing—Historical Background**

Since man came into existence it is his nature to express himself pictorially to inform his environment and to site himself in it. Particularly to mark one's own body, either temporarily or, especially, permanently, has a tradition-rich history in many cultures and religions, e.g. as a part of initiation or protection rites. Prehistoric finds of pigments and needle-like instruments as well as tattooed mummies are documents for the early existence of this body marking process<sup>4</sup>.

So, to set the question of the authenticity of the images you cannot help but deal with Tattooing as an anachronistic, visual language.

In the Western World and Christianity Tattooing has an ambiguous intent. It is a balancing act between »Out-Group Stigmata« and »In-Group Identification« (vgl. OETTERMANN 1995: 14). The early Christians, obsessed and humiliated by the Romans, were permanently marked with the purpose of public punishment. But soon, the Christians began taking advantage of this and transformed the former stigma into a visual identification of their denomination:

Viele Christen ließen sich an Händen oder Armen das Kreuzzeichen, den Namen Christi, das Monogramm XP oder ein Tau (T) auf die Stirn einprägen. (FINKE 1996: 44)

»A lot of Christians let mark their hands or arms with a crucifix, the name of Jesus Christ, the monogram »XP« or their forehead with a »T«. (FINKE 1996: 44, Translation by J.D.)

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<sup>3</sup> In the course it shall be taken into account that the term »Faith« implies the spiritual as well as the ideological form of this expression.

<sup>4</sup> For example the tattooed mummy of one of the wives of Pharaoh Ramses II., probably Nefertatis (~1300-1237) (cf. GERDS 1996: 76), or the mummy of the Iceman »Ötzi«, found in 1991 who shows several inscriptions on his body (cf. FINKE 1996: 33).

Although there had always been several interdictions against Tattooing, e.g. the ban by Pope Hadrian I. in 787 A. D.<sup>5</sup>, the practice could keep an abiding and close reference to the Christian Church during the Middle Ages; the Crusaders marked their bodies with Christian symbolic emblems to ensure themselves a Christian burial in case of death and the Palmers wore Tattoos to keep their Pilgrimage in mind, e.g. to Jerusalem or Loretto (cf. OETTERMANN 1995: 15).

Especially the Christians, who were living in a diaspora, handed down the practice of Tattooing as a group-stabilizing element over centuries; the Coptic Christians in Egypt still mark the inside of their wrists with a crucifix to separate themselves distinctively from the Muslims (cf. OETTERMANN 1995: 14).

The intention of giving duration to a personal message or an individual experience by means of a Tattoo is also found in the Tattooing practice among Sailors in the Eighteenth Century which came along with the discovery of Polynesia. In renouncing from everything material and all persistency the permanent skin puncture was the only way to bring a constant to such an unsettled life and, at the same time, not to lose the dream of Paradise (cf. OETTERMANN 1995: 49). Especially the Christian values Faith, Hope and Charity were visualized in the symbolic pictorial language of the Sailors' Tattoos.

Looking at the history of European Tattoo it is striking that the practice of Tattooing preferably occurs when external living conditions offer no constant maintenance to an individual.

## 2. Today's Tattooing Cult

Today, the Tattoo has become a fad; it has experienced a social cross-layer Renaissance never seen before. Tattooing has become fashionable, a widely accepted form of embellishment of the body.

But how could such a widespread practice of Tattooing in a civilized world, a world in which tattooed individuals were recognized as criminals for a long time and being tattooed was, from the general public, perceived as defect and stigma, evolve<sup>6</sup>? To understand the process that led to the acceptance of tattooed skin in Western Culture one must go a step backwards first.

Starting in America, the change in the view of Tattoos finally came with the 1960s and spread over to Europe soon afterwards. At this time, a

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<sup>5</sup> Created and Consecrated by God, the Human Body applied as »minor mundus« and therefore it was not allowed to destroy its divine beauty (cf. THÉVOZ 1985: 67).

<sup>6</sup> »Die Tätowierten, die nicht in Haft sind, sind latente Verbrecher oder degenerierte Aristokraten. Wenn ein Tätowierter in Freiheit stirbt, so ist er eben einige Jahre bevor er einen Mord verübt hat, gestorben« (LOOS 1982: 78).

»tattooed people, who aren't arrested, are latent delinquents or degenerated aristocrats. When a tattooed person dies in freedom, then he just died a few years before he could commit a murder« (LOOS 1982: 78, Translation by J.D.).

cf. further OETTERMANN 1995: 64.

revival concerning the appearance of Tattooing can be noticed, as well as an improvement in its formal and stylistic elaboration (cf. LAHTZ/ WEISSHAAR 1986: 125).

A possible reason for these more elaborated forms of skin marking could be the spirit of the age then; an all-embracing anti posture on the part of the youth culture, which evoked a social rethinking in general. The needs and desires of the own individual became more and more focus of the broad public; along with that more attention was paid to the awareness of one's own body, one's own physicality and consequently the opportunity to shape the latter in order to express one's own individuality. And what would be more useful for a rebellious mind to efficiently visualize this new consciousness and awareness than a visual language that is notorious in our civilization because of its strangeness? — Attracting the public's attention was for sure.

The new idea of body awareness was also taken up by the Fine Arts. New Art forms that were dealing with the human body as a central theme, like Body-Art or Performance-Art, emerged. This was also the time when Tattooing first began to attract the attention of the Art Scene.

Artists recognized that the visual language of Tattooing was perfectly suitable to give their artistic statement a provocative or shocking permanence<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. Vivid Faith

There are two striking attributes of the human race: on one hand the expression of one's own individuality and on the other hand the belief in something bigger—no matter if this is of spiritual or ideological nature. Both attributes interact continuously with each other.

The human being shows a particular need to visualize its Faith via the use of images or symbols. Thus Faith becomes vivid and changes its meaning from abstract into something concrete.

Especially when external circumstances push the human being into an unsafe and unsteady life situation, Faith becomes a necessity. The longing for community and cohesion, for trust and reliability is vast then; the human being requires something that cannot be taken away and that reminds it in something personally important.

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<sup>7</sup> Please note Valie Export's Garter-Tattoo during the performance »Body Sign Action«, 1970. With this Tattoo she intended to direct the public's attention towards the social role of females being sexual objects in a paternalistic determined society.

Our current living situation is characterized by uniform anonymity, paralyzing societal speed and granted unsteadiness—by that it offers best circumstances for any sort of Faith to gain ground. The individual is on a search for something reliable, something that provides stability apart from external influences.

Faith may undergo changes and/or present itself in diverse forms, but one unifying and currently very trendy aspect of it is the way of its medial intermediation.

Looking at Contemporary Tattooing it is remarkable that, after a reduction of the formal aesthetic values, intention gains more and more importance: religious motives are hip and oftentimes the Tattoo has an inherent notion of capacious personal meaning for its bearer.

#### **4. ›What do you believe in?‹ —Contemporary Art Samples**

It is not surprising that the social phenomenon of the Tattooing practice is also being picked out as a central theme in Contemporary Art. Art in general is, finally, a mirror of the events of the day. When dealing with the connection of Faith and Tattooing within this genre, following questions should be kept in mind: ›Do we still believe in something and, if so, what is it? What does the term *purpose of life* actually mean? Is it just to follow an ideology, or is it coming up with one's own ideals?‹

In the following, six artists who deal in different thematic and media ways with these issues will be exemplarily presented with some of their works. It should be emphasized that here the focus is more on showing a range of different display options quite plainly than to set out for an extensive interpretation of single works. Interpretations are too subjective oftentimes, and for this discussion they are rather subordinate. The reader will be given the opportunity to develop possible interpretations on his own. The artworks shall ›talk‹ for themselves.

##### **4.1 Sample One: Eastside and Hells Angels of Ali Kepenek**

As the titles of the works already imply, the artist Ali Kepenek shows in his photo series *Eastside* and *Hells Angels* relevant gang members. The portraits are on the one hand surely of documenting character, but on the other hand their significance extends far beyond such a simplistic explanation.

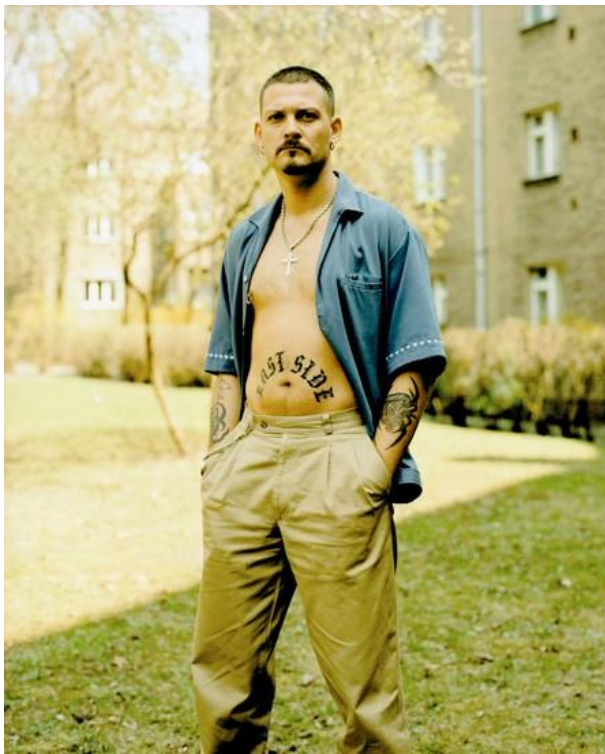


Fig. 1:  
*Eastside No.01* by Ali Kepenek (cf. [http:// www.alikepenek.com/index.html](http://www.alikepenek.com/index.html))



Fig. 2:  
*Eastside No.02* by Ali Kepenek (cf. [http:// www.alikepenek.com/index.html](http://www.alikepenek.com/index.html))

The series depicts people who have put their own lives in the service of a higher ideology. Here, the community does count, not the individual. The Tattoos, and even their positioning (e.g. a facial Tattoos), might be seen as symbols for the ambition and resoluteness of their bearer's decisions. Their ›Skin Deep Creed‹ is carried proudly into the public.



Fig. 3:  
*Hells Angels (81)* by Ali Kepenek (cf. <http://www.alikepenek.com/index.html>)



Fig. 4:  
*Hells Angels (Facetattoo)* by Ali Kepenek (cf. <http://www.alikepenek.com/index.html>)

## 4.2 Sample Two: The ›Ja-Tattoos<sup>8</sup>‹ of Simone Westwinter

Contrasting counterparts to Kepenek's works are the ›Ja-Tattoos‹ of conceptual artist Simone Westwinter: They broach the issue of following one's own convictions. Within the scope of various shows and exhibitions this so called ›Work-in-Progress‹ was realized for several times<sup>9</sup>.

The visitors of Westwinter's shows have the opportunity to get a free ›Ja-Tattoo‹ by a professional Tattoo-Artist on an undetermined part of their body.

Westwinter assumes at this performance-like work the visitors will- ingness to immerse, permanently and consequently, into the artwork, and to connect a personal message with it. A positive, optimistic message is ever- lastingly engraved on the body of the bearer. For this kind of art it is crucial to believe in something wholeheartedly and out of deepest inner conviction. Simone Westwinter names this attitude ›Optimism-Optimizer‹ (cf. WINKELMANN 1999).

Her concept provides two different levels of meaning: Firstly, the indi- vidual, personal meaning and secondly, the meaning level of being part of a certain group.



Fig. 5:  
*Hidden Circle*, Newburgh, New York by Steed Taylor (cf. [http:// www.fadingad.com/taylor.html](http://www.fadingad.com/taylor.html))

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<sup>8</sup> (transl.: ›Yes-Tattoos‹), in the following the German term will be used.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately the work has not been documented photographically.





Fig. 6:

*Invasive*, Raleigh, North Carolina by Steed Taylor (cf. [http:// www.fadingad.com/taylor.html](http://www.fadingad.com/taylor.html))

#### **4.3 Sample Three: The »Road-Tattoos« of Steed Taylor**

With his »Road-Tattoos« the artist Steed Taylor picks up the primordial meaning of Tattooing, the meaning of being a special form of communication. But Taylor transfers the communication from the private to the »social body«.

»Roads are the skin of a community«, he says, and »a road is to the public body what skin is to the private body. If people mark their skin as a means of commemoration, communication and ritual; then a road can be marked for the same reasons«.

The tribal-style of the artwork reminds us in the nativeness of Tattooing, in times when it was used to transform the human body and lift it by means of marking to a higher level of meaning. Steed Taylor wants the beholder to remember his own simplicity, his personal emotional significance and he wants him to reflect on himself.

However, it's the nature of Art to speak not solely in a poetic way but also to provoke, especially in regard to a sensitive subject as it is dealt with here; Art's purpose is to indicate the barriers in our own heads to us. It tries to concuss our Faith in its core.

Within this context the artists Alex Majewski and Lee Wagstaff shall be mentioned in the following.

#### 4.4 Sample Four: *Madonna mit Kreuz*<sup>10</sup> by Alex Majewski

With the photography *Madonna mit Kreuz* the artist Alex Majewski abolishes the conventional image of the Virgin Mother and shows the spectator a larger-than-life, almost naked, blood crying, smoking and tattooed Madonna. Her whole body language seems to convey a certain »I don't care«-attitude; does she symbolize the incarnate antonym of the innocent figure of holy Mary per se? Or is she just a new and modern version of the Mother of God? Is she desperate because of the slowly but steady disappearance of Faith in our society and will resign finally? Equally important is the question if this causes an indisposition within the beholder because he realizes all hope is gone.



Fig. 7:  
*Madonna mit Kreuz* by Alex Majewski (cf. <http://www.galerie-reitz.com/?alexmajewski> [accessed June 01, 2011])

#### 4.5 Sample Five: *Apostles* by Lee Wagstaff

The artwork *Apostles* provokes in a similar manner than the last mentioned example; it shows thirteen large-sized, head-on photographs of heavily tattooed men. The headlines of the single parts are alluding to the sujet; the beholder stands in front of Jesus<sup>11</sup> and his twelve Apostles. Without the supporting headlines it would be impossible to guess the iconography of the artwork right. As soon as the beholder becomes aware of what he's being

<sup>10</sup> *Madonna mit Kreuz* (transl.: »Madonna with crucifix«) is a piece of Majewski's multipart *Madonna-Cycle*.

<sup>11</sup> The work *Jesus* actually is a self-portrait of the artist.

faced with though, its apparentness is shocking. Tattooed Apostles and a tattooed Jesus are definitely non-conforming to our imagination of the visual procurement of Christianity, which follows an old pictorial tradition.

JAMES



JOHN



MATTHEW



THADDAEUS



Fig.8 -12:  
>Apost/es by Lee WaJstaff (cf. <http://www.leewajstaff.com/home.htm>)

So scrutinizing this visual language also means to scrutinize all Christian Faith. But what does this fact reveal about the durability of Christian Faith? Shouldn't Faith be unperturbed from visual transcendence? Is it precarious if there is no visual procurement?

#### 4.6 Sample Six: Teiji Hayama's Paintings

Another important angle of our living-conditions today is the ›melting pot–like‹ society we are living in and, along with that, the diverse cultures we must deal with.

The artist Teiji Hayama takes up this subject in his works. In his paintings, he mixes Western and Japanese influences: he combines the styles of different art historical periods with contemporary Japanese Pop Culture (cf. HAYAMA). The figures in his paintings are of fragile, shy and introverted nature; they are unapproachable but still attract the beholder's sight. They are sacred and mythological figures, but not of traditional known body image; they are juvenile, thin and lanky, wearing attributes of both secular and contemporary origin and their skin is marked with Japanese-style Tattoos as well as with motives based on the Sailors Tattooing Tradition. These figures do not fit to the Western imagination of Christian Saints.



Fig. 12:  
*Juventas* by Teiji Hayama (cf. <http://teijihayama.wifeo.com/index.php>)



Fig. 13:  
*Magdala* by Teiji Hayama (cf. <http://teijihayama.wifeo.com/index.php>)

In fact, Hayama presents a cultural clash to the beholder and in the end this is nothing else but the calling of a new view on our present living situation remains.

## 5. Body and Image—an Inseparable Relation

In today's time of globalization, mass media and rising consumption the individual becomes less and less important, it even loses itself if it doesn't display significant personal characteristics—at least this is what the human being believes. Man tries to set himself free from his environment by ›designing‹ his own body with the intent to belong to a self-defined order, similar to what people did in pre-cultural times when they also were surrounded by chaotic conditions. Thus, the practice of Tattooing can be seen as a synonym for the instance of culture and social identification, a means to set oneself apart from the regressive and destructive condition of former and even today's indeterminateness. It might even be said Tattooing ›reculturalizes‹ the human body (cf. THÉVOZ 1985: 50).

When dealing with the origin of images we cannot avoid looking at the body as »Ort der Bilder«<sup>12</sup> (BELTING 2001: 34).

Regarding Tattooing, body and image coexist in mutual exchange with each other—the body creates the image and presents it via the medium skin; again, the picture lifts up the body to a higher level of meaning. In the course of cultural development this causality got lost in the Western World and body and image further on existed self-sufficiently; while great attention

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<sup>12</sup> For reference see for example the increasing beauty-mania.

was paid to the image and its development, the body decreased to the bare human form of appearance.

In this connection it is easy to understand the negative approach Tattoos can evoke; they belong to a visual language whose translation got lost in our civilization.

The image-body-relation however is of increasing importance in today's society; a development that is closely connected to the fact that more and more attention is awarded to the human body. It is necessary to treat this subject carefully and not lapse into extremes though. The body is the »image of the human being« or, in Hans Belting words, »der Repräsentant des Menschen<sup>13</sup>« (BELTING 2004: 357), not the human being itself.

The body might be seen as an instrument that lends figure to the human being and enables it to operate in his environment and to communicate by means of his corporality.

Therefore, the body fulfils its serving purpose of human's self-expression (cf. BELTING 2004: 357) that is subject to a strong dependency of the respective individual's surroundings:

Körper haben diese Repräsentation des Menschen niemals aus eigenen Kräften geleistet. Sie waren immer darauf angewiesen, mit außerhalb ihrer selbst befindlichen Bildern zu kooperieren oder innerhalb ihrer Umwelt selbst als Bilder zu agieren, zum Beispiel durch Maske, Kleidung und Gestik. (BELTING 2004: 357)

Bodies have never performed the representation of the human being from own forces. They were always dependent to cooperate with images, outside of their selves, or to operate image-like within their own environment, for example with masks, clothes and gesture. (BELTING 2004: 357, Translation by J.D.)

Thus the body always is in mutual exchange with its social environment; it collects impressions and images there, absorbs, appreciates and interprets them and finally transmits them back to initiate new images for their parts. Equally, the body itself is an image and is treated as such.

And if the circumstances ask for it, man may use an additive that in his opinion helps him to outwardly communicate his internal position. So why not use an everlasting visual language with sign-like character?

As noted above, the contemporary society has lost the ability to fully understand this certain visual language for several reasons; Tattooing disappeared out of the public but survived in the social underground until it became necessary for it to reappear.

No other visual language has the potential to express most internal images better than Tattooing does. Nevertheless, it's also one of the most difficult languages to understand and translate. To decipher it, one must have knowledge about its history, its symbolism and, of course, about the bearer's circumstances<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> »the representative of the human being« (Translation by J.D.).

<sup>14</sup> In this regard please note the term »Anachronism of the Images«:

»Er bezieht sich darauf, dass unser innerer Bildspeicher fast nur aus Bildern besteht, die zu anderen Zeiten in unserer eigenen Lebensgeschichte entstanden sind. Deshalb betrachten die verschiedenen Generationen die gleiche Welt mit verschiedenen Augen« (BELTING 2004: 354).

– We surely can't speak every language fluently, but we can try to at least to understand some ›words« of this visual language, called ›Tattooing«.

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»It refers to our internal image-memory, which mainly concludes images generated in other times but in our own story of life. Therefore, different generations perceive the same world, but from a different perspective« (BELTING 2004: 354, Translation by J.D.).