



CREATIVITY BETWEEN NIHILISM AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING: ZEITGEIST AND CREATIVE INNOVATION IN BODY ART

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Abstract. A recent tattoo style, the sticker sleeve, brings with it some peculiarities: for example, unlike other styles, the focus seems to be less on originality or artistry. Further, the motifs integrated often imply almost incompatible messages, from spirituality and the search for meaning to the denial of meaning. Based on content analysis and interviews, the article explores what this style reveals about creativity and the *Zeitgeist*. One can interpret this in the tradition of nihilism as a denial of meaning or as a general instead of concrete concept of meaningfulness. Furthermore, it can be seen as a symbol for a creative way of dealing with cognitive dissonance. A complicated relationship to individuality is articulated, on the one hand the overcoming of the desire for unconditional individuality in favor of the recognition of shared human features, on the other hand the call to look behind the surface and recognize individual meanings behind shared looks.

Keywords: dissonance, meaningfulness, nihilism, tattoos, *Zeitgeist*.

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1. Introduction

A winking smiley adorns Maria lo Porto's arm, along with a date, a palm tree, an alien head, a stinky finger pointing smiley, and other small motifs. They resemble stickers, which is why this style is called *sticker* or *patchwork sleeve*. The term *sticker* also implies a special aspect of this style: these are not original, one-of-a-kind motifs, but motifs that are inked *en masse*, often varying only in size and positioning. The mix of motifs is also striking: immortalized are often dates or numbers, presumably of personal significance to their wearer, as well as concepts such as love or gratitude and religious/spiritual symbols, alongside self-reflexive motifs, and images that are similar to the ignorant style, the style that deliberately denies meaning.

This article explores why the sticker sleeve is enjoying growing popularity, guided by the hypothesis that the analysis of cultural phenomena can tell something about the *Zeitgeist*. This is based on a broad concept of culture, in the sense of the anthropological definition that culture is any form of shaping people's lives and that people create their culture like self-woven webs of meaning (Geertz, 1987, p. 9).

2. Tattoos in scientific literature

There are various ways to scientifically approach tattoos. For our topic, three typical and interconnected perspectives are particularly interesting: firstly, looking at the (individual) body designed through tattoos and what the notion of design implicates with regard to the individual's relationship to his or her body; secondly, considering creativity and art styles and their influence on tattoo styles; thirdly, the notion of originality and identity.

In our context, it is invariably about the *Zeitgeist*. The term "may be associated with certain aesthetic properties or a certain 'style'" (Krause, 2019) but also with practices and "produces a cultural coherence which [...] is epochal [...] and transient" (Oergel, 2019, p. 1). Unlike *fashion*, *Zeitgeist* "can be linked to patterns of meaning production in several distinct realms" (Krause, 2019). For tattoos, this is an inherent factor, because due to their permanence they define a person's style for a longer period of time and accordingly, the decision for tattoos also has a much larger impact than the decision for some fashion fad. Tattoos and *Zeitgeist* have occasionally been linked in literature, such as in Leader's (2017, p. 44) work that considers the popularity of tattoos at a time when our lives are actually becoming more virtual and thus more distant from the physical body.

2.1. Designing the body

"The body is no longer 'given' (meaning, traditionally, a gift of God); it is plastic, to be moulded and selected at need or whim" (Synnot, 1992, p. 101), even more, people may be even expected to change the body, e.g. with healthy food, fitness, yoga, or make-up, but depending on their peer group also with piercings or beauty surgery (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009, p. 17).

The phrase *having a body* points to a distinction made in phenomenology: experience happens in two ways, namely with regard to physical or material things and to soul reality (Husserl, 1999). The body initially falls into the category of the thing-like, but its soul cannot be understood as a thing, so that talk of a human subject refers to a "unity of body and soul" (Husserl, 1999). The German language offers an interesting distinction: "qua Leib, it experiences worldly things and qua Körper, it is experienced as a thing in the world" (Wehrle, 2020, p. 499). Heidegger (2002, p. 19) uses the example of gestures to explain how cognition and bodily expression are intertwined: thinking situates the body and creates the relationship to its being, or, as Lyotard (1989, p. 25) describes, thinking is not possible without a physical body. In the context of perception, it is particularly interesting to note that the body enables perception but prevents perception of itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1966, p. 91), just as it makes its own absence impossible. This implies that the experience of one's own body also happens in connection with other people by putting oneself in other people's shoes. Of course, a complex set of cultural contexts always plays a role in body-related issues (Mickūnas, 2004), especially when it comes to changing the body at will.

Tattoos nowadays usually belong to these willful changes of the body that are encountered very frequently: in Europe, around 40% of the population has at least one tattoo (see Read, 2024). Due to the recent change in the frequency of and the associations with tattoos, an ironic or counterintuitive field of meaning becomes apparent: "while some individuals invoke tattooing as a critique of consumer society, tattoos have themselves become a popular

commodity" (Kang & Jones, 2007, p. 45). Yet, the semiotic registers of tattoos that can be regarded as locale-specific models of communication (Agha, 2007, p. 14) vary significantly – not just with regard to the motifs themselves, but also to the dispositifs (Foucault, 1980, p. 194) in which they arise: a prison tattoo tells a different story by its look and by the situation in which it was created than a tattoo made by a well-known artist in an established tattoo studio. These two aspects of aesthetics and mode of origin also become relevant when considering the sticker sleeve in this article.

When looking at tattoos in general, there have been various interpretations from seeing them as a "psychic crutch aimed to repair a crippled self-image" (Grumet, 1983, p. 491) to an expression of reclaiming and creating the body for oneself (Santos, 2009, p. 93). In general, reasons for getting tattoos concern, e.g. "beauty, art, and fashion", "personal narrative", "group affiliations", "resistance", and "spirituality and cultural tradition" according to a meta-analysis by Wohlrab et al. (2007). Here, cultural patterns can be identified as well: "the tattooed body is a distinctively communicative body. It has a great deal to say, not only about the identity of the wearer, but also about the times in which she lives" (Kosut, 2000, p. 79), so that there is an obvious relationship to the *Zeitgeist*.

2.2. Creativity and art

In the context of tattoos, the notion *creativity* often comes into play: creativity should be understood as an ability (Schuster, 2015, p. 14), a process (Walia, 2019), and a result in connection with the imagination or creation of something innovative. Creativity in tattooing, as in many other fields, finds its limits with regard to reality – a fact that makes creativity actually relevant for everyday life: the creative product has to be made, the idea has to be transformed into reality. This is referred to as the problem-solving ability of creativity compared to an unlimited number of ideas that cannot relate to everyday life (Krause, 1972, p. 42). In tattooing, as in other fields, expertise is preceding creativity (Reilly, 2008, p. 59), because the tattooist must know the basic techniques and should be familiar with various styles. Then, the client's body, his or her wishes, his or her pain tolerance, the colors available, the interaction of the color with the skin, etc. can be considered as factors that have to guide the tattooist's creativity.

In recent times, creativity has often been understood as closely connected to art (Grierson, 2011). Art is seen as a cultural universal (Dissanayake, 1988, p. 35). An important aspect in the complicated definition of art is the status of the artist and his or her relationship to the work: "the fact that we refer to works of art [...] emphasizes a concern for and interest in the work, both perceptual and conceptual" (Muelder Eaton, 2004, p. 74). Art styles of particular interest in our context, such as Dada and deconstructivism, point in precisely this direction (Carroll, 2001, p. 93): the movement of Dada, whose beginning is given as 1916, was based on the rejection of conventional art, which it often parodied. Deconstructivist architecture and art emphasized fragmentation and contradiction, and challenged notions of harmony. Another movement worth mentioning is punk and the art associated with it: "Punk intentionally violates widely held aesthetic norms, thus raising questions about the plasticity of taste" (Prinz, 2014, p. 583). Furthermore, punk and avant-garde art "create an artist's world – a social strata specifically oriented towards the arts" (Henry, 1984, p. 30), a separate sphere in

which insiders appreciate such new tendencies. This leads to the next aspect of identity, but also foreshadows nihilism, as Friedrich Nietzsche referred to it as the destruction of the “real world” (Magnus, 1970).

As the term *art* has already been introduced, it should be mentioned that tattooists usually consider or market themselves as artists, so that in November, 2022, one can find almost twenty times as many posts under *tattoo artist* in *Google* as under *tattooist*. The perception of tattoos as art began around the 1990s, when the first tattoo-related exhibitions appeared in New York, United States (Kosut, 2014). Today, as tattooing and being tattooed is no longer seen as something deviant (Kierstein & Kjelskau, 2015, p. 37), it is probably even easier for tattooists to consider themselves as artists and occupy their own niches: many have clearly established themselves with particular *foci* such as “realistic”, “old school”, or “new school” styles and stress their creativity and skills, even if their art is difficult to trade and exhibit (Bryan, 2017). Several tattoo television shows such as *Ink Master* or *Horror Tattoos* contribute to the myth of the tattoo artist. For the tattooee, on the other hand, “getting a tattoo is like purchasing art” (Kierstein & Kjelskau, 2015, p. 37).

However, the style discussed here may not fit into this context: similar to many commercial stickers, sticker sleeves often consist of rather simple and unoriginal motifs that hardly require special expertise or talent from the tattooist – at first glance, it seems as if not much creativity and artistry is needed.

2.3. Identity

Literature on tattoos often refers to identity (Leader, 2017, p. 44) and individuality. Identity is defined by alterity, *i.e.* by demarcation from others, but at the same time it can only be experienced through an intersubjective space (Wulf, 2006, p. 43). This experience is shaped by bodily expression (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 337), which in turn can be consciously created by tattoos. This is conceivable in terms of group membership or cultural identity, as well as personal identity or individuality. The latter term refers to the objectively ascertainable uniqueness of each human being, and the human being’s awareness of his or her uniqueness, but also the need to articulate this (Abels, 2010, p. 44). The term is distinguished from identity by a different focus; it is less about the unity of a person than about his or her particularity.

The notion of identity or individuality respectively the work on it (Abels, 2017, p. 4) is often connected to creativity, and people for whom creativity plays a greater role are also more invested in exploring identity and individuality (Dollinger & Clancy Dollinger, 2017, p. 49; Dey & Das, 2017), which in turn is linked to the *Zeitgeist*, as “in a culture that values individuality, these coordinates of the tattoo offer a clear opportunity to (re)story the self” (Patterson, 2018, p. 582). In sticker sleeves, however, frequent repetitions of almost or completely identical tattoo motifs are typical, but are usually, as confirmed by tattooees, not meant as (sub)cultural signifiers. So there seems to be little individuality – at least with regard to the individual motifs.

These aspects show that the young trend of sticker sleeves clearly stands out from other tattoos and may allow different conclusions to be drawn about the *Zeitgeist* articulated by it.

3. Methodological approach

Looking at tattoos, the “bodylore” approach is interesting: the body is seen here as a narrative text, a space that can summarize different narratives, discourses, and identities (Young, 1994, p. 5). Typical bodylore methods include auto-ethnography and “quite literally viewing the bodies of others” (Milligan, 2019, p. 455), that is, the typical methods of anthropology, observation and participant observation, as well as working with existing material. This paper combines these methods. The focus is on observation, more specifically, observation on the social medium *Instagram*. In addition, I conducted interviews with people who have sticker sleeves. I myself also have tattoos and, intrigued by its ambiguity, could also imagine starting a sticker sleeve. Yet, due to auto-ethnography’s difficulties, this method should only be in the background.

Let us briefly consider observation on social media: visual-based social media allow tattooees and tattoo artists to showcase their sleeves or sleeve ideas. Tattooees can use the images to convey something about themselves, their lives and their identity. For tattooists, social media is a way to connect with potential clients and shape their own status, identity and individuality. The link between social media and identity respectively individuality, described as a discursive process (Jakaza, 2022, p. 3) is currently being addressed frequently in social science research (Dyer, 2020, p. 28; Gündüz, 2017; Vincent & Lannegrand, 2022). For our context, the medium *Instagram*, which relates more to photographs than, for example, *Facebook* or *X*, is of particular interest.

The terms *sticker sleeve* or *patchwork sleeve* have only recently emerged to describe this new style. At the same time, *sticker tattoo* also refers to a style of tattoos, which look like sewn-on patches. The term *#stickersleeve* on the other hand stands next to *#patchworksleeve* almost exclusively for the style treated here which covers now (as of November, 2022) a total of several thousand posts, most of which are very recent.

A new *Instagram* account was created for the sample to prevent possible influence by algorithms based on previous views, likes, or subscriptions. The first 100 posts to *#stickersleeve* and *#patchworksleeve* were included in the sample. The sample was collected on 7 January, 2022. The algorithm finds photos under “top” that date back as far as about 2 years in the past (2 March, 2019), but the clear focus is on current images. Thereby, one sees not only photos of actual sleeves, but also *wannados*¹ or *flash sheets* of tattooists, which were taken into account, since one may assume that these artists want to orient themselves to the *Zeitgeist* for economic and popularity reasons. Basically, images that came from the same account were not excluded: often these were photos of tattoo artists who had tattooed different sticker sleeves. However, there were also two accounts of tattooed individuals who chose *#stickersleeve* as their default hashtag. These were then only included once in the sample. Some photos did not show an actual sticker sleeve, but only a single tattoo. From the text it was clear that this single tattoo should represent the beginning of a sleeve. An ethnographic

¹ In English-speaking countries, the term *flash* is usually used ambiguously and refers to both motifs that the tattoo artist would like to tattoo, as well as images from tattoo motif books, which are then of course sold more often. In German, a distinction is made here between the *wannados*, unique motifs that the tattoo artist has pre-drawn, and multiplied flash designs (Feelfarbig, 2019).

content analysis then organized the different motifs into groups that emerged in reflexive work with the material (Altheide, 1987, p. 68).

In addition, interviews were conducted with eight people who wear a sticker sleeve or have started with the first tattoos of a sticker sleeve. There were six women and two men aged 23–41 from Germany and the Netherlands. Their respective sleeves – started or (largely) completed – contained similar and/or identical motifs to those in the sample. During the semi-structured interviews, I was mainly interested in the intention for the sticker sleeve and the selection and composition of the motifs.

4. Motifs

As mentioned, there are smooth transitions between pictorial and text motifs: text is also inevitably designed visually, for example, by selecting font, color, placement, and size according to aesthetic considerations. Runes, for example, can be perceived by both the tattooee and the recipient more as images that stand for something exotic and meaningful than as their literal meaning. Furthermore, text and image motifs can of course also be connected, such as when a name is written in a band above a heart. Yet, for the sake of clarity, however, image and text motifs are listed separately below.

4.1. Image motifs

The number of picture motifs in sticker sleeves clearly predominates, the ratio is about 1:4. There are also sleeves that manage without any text elements at all, but in most cases, both are combined.

The counting of the tattooed elements sometimes revealed duplications within a sleeve: there were some sticker sleeves that contained several stars, butterflies, flowers or numbers, in addition to other motifs. This explains the particularly high number of corresponding motifs.

It should also be noted that not all image motifs can be clearly assigned. As there were hardly any colorful tattoos, color is not taken into account.

4.1.1. Symbols

With 29%, symbols form the largest category. Of course, every tattoo motif can ultimately be understood as a symbol, as something that stands for something else and whose definition is conventionally characterized. In this largest of all categories are motifs that are particularly obvious to be understood as a symbol, for example, hearts, which represent a frequent motif with almost 8% of the total. Other examples from this category are small mandalas, yin and yang or peace signs, zodiac signs, or crosses. There are several overlaps with other categories, e.g. angels fall into “symbols”, but also into “anthropomorphic”, stars may be meant to form a zodiac sign, yet also belong to “nature”, and flames can be understood as symbol for sexiness, but also fall under “nature”.

4.1.2. Nature

Almost 21% of the motifs are associated with natural elements, besides the sun, moon and stars, one can find flames, flowers and waves, for example.

4.1.3. Animals

19% of the sample pictures show animals. Especially popular are butterflies with more than 5% and snakes with almost 5%. However, in this category are also fantastic animal-like creatures like dragons.

4.1.4. Anthropomorphic

This category, which includes about 10% of the motifs, includes angels, as well as cartoon characters, faces in line art, alien faces in emoji style and skulls.

4.1.5. Food

With 7%, food is a rather small category. Pieces of fruit such as cherries and lemon slices can be found here. Peaches are probably especially popular because of their double meaning – as a fruit and a signifier of the buttocks. But the category also includes images of fast food like French fries or pieces of pizza.

4.1.6. Body parts

Body parts also represent a small category with almost 7%. Typical here are eyes, mouths, teeth, and stylized hands, which often hold something, for example, a moon or a sun, and thus form duplications with other categories.

4.1.7. Self-referential

At 5%, self-referential motifs form a small category, including stamps, postage stamps and band-aids. Again, there is significant overlap with other categories, as postage stamps often feature flowers, for example.

4.1.8. Surreal

Another small category with a good 3% are surreal motifs, including, for example, a frog with a cowboy hat and tattoos, a vase in the shape of a butt or an alien head with mushrooms growing out of it.

4.1.9. Other

Another very small part with about 2% includes motifs with man-made objects that did not fit into one of the other categories and each appeared only once in the sample, including, for example, an anchor, a camera or a cigarette butt.

4.2. Text motifs

As already mentioned, text motifs can also be considered with regard to their visual dimension. Yet, the font used was in more than 70% the same or very similar, a simple sans-serif font in capital letters, which adds to the unoriginality. Further, it is striking that almost all text elements in the sample were written in English. Since the sample was collected in a German-speaking area close to the French border, it could have been anticipated that German or French terms would also appear due to *Instagram*'s recognition of the location – however, with the exception of the word *karma* and *l'amour*, only English words were found in the sample.

Here, too, it must be mentioned that not all terms can be clearly assigned to a category.

4.2.1. Self-designations

Nouns like *angel*, *baby*, or *honey*, as well as adjectives like *self-made*, *divine*, or *wild* can be understood as self-designations, as three interviewees, who had one of these words tattooed, confirmed. This category, comprising nearly one third of the text elements, also includes phrases such as *not for you* or *not yours*. Not all terms have primarily positive connotations, so some also read *sad*, *trouble*, or *bad*.

4.2.2. Positive emotions and values

Around 15% of the words denote positive emotions or values, including, for example, *love* or *amour*, *heart*, *patience*, *balance*, *loyalty*, but also phrases like *why not* or *no rain no flowers*. Some text elements in this category can also be understood as prompts to self or others, such as *breathe* or *create*.

4.2.3. Numbers and data

In 25% of the cases, numbers are tattooed. This category can be further subdivided into dates, which are occasionally also represented in Roman numerals, into coordinates and into single numbers. Among the single numbers, there are often numbers that are culturally charged with certain meanings, such as 666 as the number of the devil, 777 as the number of divine perfection and justice, or 13 as an unlucky number.

4.2.4. Single letters

Single letters make up 12% of the text elements. Sometimes they are represented in more special fonts, e.g. oblique or antique. In sticker sleeves, the single letter leaves more possibilities for decoration, as whole words in especially detailed fonts could take up too much space in the sleeve, making it difficult to combine numerous elements.

4.2.5. Self-referential and wordplay

Over 10% of the text elements are self-referential or can be understood as wordplays. Among them are, for example, the words *forever* or *always*, which may also allude to the permanence of the tattoo, whereas others, like the term *ephemeral*, may refer to the finiteness of all being. Of course, these time-related terms could also be interpreted differently, for instance that a feeling should be experienced as permanent or temporary – or as ambiguous, as one interviewee said. Also popular is the text element *art*, which may rather refer to the person, the tattooee, than to the tattoo with its three letters, which usually appears in the same simple font or could question the entire concept of art. Other text elements in this category include *cool tattoo*, *handle with care*, or *this is my decision*.

4.2.6. Funny

A small category with (4%) includes text elements that may be understood as humorous, playful, or simply weird like *beer* or *error* in a font that reminds on a technical error. Some of the tattoos in this category remind clearly on party tattoos.

5. Explaining the sticker sleeve

In the following, explanations for the sticker sleeve style will be in focus. They derive both from the interpretation of the content analysis data and from the evaluation of the interviews. Furthermore, a critical interpretation with regard to *Zeitgeist* can be considered as foundation.

5.1. Collecting

A rather obvious explanation for this style may lie in the desire to collect. A sticker sleeve, like a sticker collection, can be easily expanded over time. “Most collector’s core motive is an emotional one: the joy of collecting” (AXA ART, 2014) has been stated with regard to art collectors. Such a curatorial practice can be linked to creativity (Vachhani, 2013, p. 92). Heavily tattooed people sometimes see their tattoo collection as diaries – which also explains that not every tattoo has to be beautiful or reflect a positive meaning, nor even add to a coherent whole (Jerrentrup, 2022, p. 9).

When getting a tattoo, a joyful tension plays a role in each case, as all interviewees confirmed. With a sticker sleeve, one can enable this feeling more often. In addition, the tattooee thus has the chance to perpetuate various experiences, wishes or values that will be added in the course of his life. The principle of unfinishedness thus also seems to fit the project of “identity work”, which is considered typical of the postmodern *Zeitgeist* (Elliott, 2015, p. 70).

However, practice shows that many sticker sleeves are created in one or few appointments in quick succession. In the *Instagram* sample, there were also three advertisements with *wan-nados*, in which tattoo artists advertised to ink several tattoos of a sticker sleeve in just one appointment at a special offer. Kimmytatt writes:

“When starting a [...] sticker sleeve the first 2–3 tattoos are the most awkward to place so by offering this special [referring to a special price for several tiny tattoos] I hope to alleviate some of that pressure and get you started on that sticker sleeve the right way”.

Another post by *error444_tattoo* carried the description *8 tattoos en un día (8 tattoos in one day)*.

Also, among the interviewees, while the concept of the collection seemed to play a role, the activity of collecting was less important. Only two persons said they intended to have new elements tattooed over a longer period of time, while the others stated that they had received the entire sticker sleeve or larger parts of it in just one appointment.

As mentioned, however, the collection certainly seems to be interesting, namely the possibility of being able to place very many elements in one sleeve that appeal to the tattooee in terms of their look and/or meaning – and eventually in the multitude of both.

5.2. Nihilism

A frog with a cowboy hat and tattoos, a lettering *cool tattoo*, or even a collection of very ordinary, as some interviewees put it, “hackneyed” tattoo motifs such as flames, hearts and snakes – all this could be understood as an expression of a denial of meaning. Statements in the interviews such as *I just like it, otherwise it doesn’t have to make sense, funny how everyone always thinks tattoos have to have deep meanings, or it’s just a look fit this*, as do some opinions expressed in journalistic sources (Ableman, 2018).

This basic attitude is also fundamental for another, quite similar tattoo style: the term *ignorant* refers to tattoos that usually show banal, whimsical, or comical, mostly smaller motifs in often poor craftsmanship – as if they were created by ignorant tattooists. Their origin either actually goes back to unprofessional settings – for example, when a friend tried out a tattoo machine at a party – or they are deliberately executed in this style by a professional, thus only pretend to come from an unprofessional background.

The motifs, together with the amateurish look, can be interpreted as signifiers for certain characteristics of their wearers, such as a sociable, adventurous, and spontaneous attitude, as well as one could assume an exciting or funny story behind the tattoo. In addition, such tattoos also signal that the wearer does not take his or her own existence, which is, as previously shown, closely connected with his or her physical appearance, too seriously and that he or she does not submit to the absoluteness of values.

This corresponds to nihilism, a philosophical movement that in its most extreme form assumes that there is no absolute truth and no values that can be derived from it (The Nietzsche Channel, 2025). This assumption, however, was also evaluated as liberation, because “truth is always ‘to be made’, and thus values are always to be invented anew” (Vattimo, 2009, p. 23), thus addressing the negotiation process of values. Heidegger stresses the connection to liberation even further:

“The fact that [...] the previous goals disappear and the previous values devalue themselves is no longer experienced as its mere annihilation and lamented as lack and loss, but is welcomed as liberation, promoted as final gain, and recognized as completion” (1967, p. 10).

Inspired by Nietzsche’s thoughts, Camus (2000) dealt with the absurd, which expresses man’s alienation from the world, his brokenness and the paradox of existence, condensed in the figure of Sisyphus, whose sovereign appropriation of his own fate ultimately makes him a hero. Like existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus denies the existence of an objective meaning, but concludes not a subjective search for or creation of meaning, but the acceptance of the meaningless world. Following this, it can also be argued that it is values from which desire and ultimately fear arise. Therefore, only those who overcome the need for meaning and values can accept the meaninglessness of human existence and ultimately attain the state of liberation, which can be linked to the Buddhist principle of detachment (Amaro, 2015).

The philosophical thoughts of nihilism and existentialism can also be related to art movements, whether they are seen as counterforce or incarnation of ideas (Weller, 2010, p. 77). The previously mentioned Dada, for example, which emerged during the World War I, saw artistic statements as obsolete, as a “fool’s game out of nothing”, as Hugo Ball is quoted (Winiger Østrup, 2020). Dada is considered a pioneer for surrealism, the idea of ready-made and artistic happenings, and, one could say, also the inclusion of the body or bodily experience in art. The sticker sleeve can be seen as a logical development in this context.

Besides art, tattoos can also be considered fashion. While Nietzsche himself did not engage with fashion, sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard was particularly interested in the phenomenon and

“blended neo-Marxist, psychoanalytic and post-semiotic linguistics insights to develop a theory of consumption based not on the fulfillment of needs or desires in objects, but on our relation to objects as a discursive system” (Rocamora & Smelik, 2015, p. 24).

From him stems the statement, fashion possesses “the force of the pure sign which signifies nothing” (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 95): the meaning people give to fashion depends on the cultural context, the time period, the peer group, *etc.* – there is no inherent meaning. Baudrillard traces the stages from dress as a way of creating ceremonial distance between bodies, fashion creating social distinction to post-fashion, which invents reality, so to speak (Tseëlon, 2015). Previously in this article, tattoos were associated with *Zeitgeist*, rather than fashion, as they go “deeper”, and it can also be added that they reach beyond the invention of one reality – as they invent multiple realities and transcend them at the same time. The wearer of a seemingly meaningless ignorant tattoos or sticker sleeves communicates thereby under certain circumstances a state of mind, which has left behind the search for meaning and consciously also refuses or at least confuses the interpretation by others.

5.3. Meaningfulness

It may seem counterintuitive to speak of meaningfulness right after the aspect of nihilism, although of course nihilism can also be considered as a value or a concept that implies meaning. Following some authors (Watzlawick et al., 2007, p. 53), it is impossible not to communicate, therefore, the sticker tattoos or the entire sleeve also implies meaning – even, if we leave the meta-level of nihilism as meaning.

A larger number of tattoos in sticker sleeves consist of symbols or words that carry conventionally more or less defined messages. An example is the very popular heart motif, but zodiac signs, the yin-yang sign, and runes also fall into this category. Some of these motifs have already been considered in scientific publications, such as the semicolon tattoo, which is, “ultimately, [...] a symbol of hope that the wearer is the author of his or her own life” (Wolfgang & Kwon, 2019). Furthermore, many text elements such as *love*, *patience*, or *karma* communicate abstract concepts that apparently matter to the tattooee.

Still, these motifs stay ambivalent: the recipient of such messages could be the tattooed person who wants to remind herself on something with these symbols or words – the tattoo as “a memory inscribed on the skin” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 96) but may also address other people. Yet,

“the message that a person intends to communicate through a tattoo is not always the message received by others. The complex motivations of people who get tattoos are filtered through historical and cultural lenses that often impose unintended and unwanted meanings on their tattooed bodies” (Kang & Jones, 2007, p. 46).

This observation also applies to our case: the perceived meaning does not always correspond to the personal, eventually over his or her lifetime changing interpretation of the tattooee (Sastre Cifuentes, 2011, p. 188). A rune sign may not be familiar to most recipients, but it can communicate spirituality or an interest in the past, the word *karma* may denote something different to a Hindu or Buddhist than to a tattooee, who is not or only selectively interested in these ways of thought.

However, tattoos are not always intended to communicate specific meanings, but rather “meaningfulness” in general: five interviewees, for example, wore zodiac tattoos in their sleeves, one as an image (lion), the others as symbols or stars connected by lines. However, only one of them said she believed in astronomy. For the other four, this was not obvious: “I just wanted something personal, something that had a connection to me”, formulated one interviewee. Three more people who had either a heart or the letters *love* tattooed said, they just chose something that would be “meaningful in general” or “fits into the spot and somehow carries a meaning”. Apparently, there is a wish for meaning as such, for meaningfulness – but not necessarily for a specific meaning.

This also offers an approach to understanding the uniformity of many motifs: of course, there are only a limited number of forms that can be represented in the small space that each individual motif occupies. Furthermore, it is understandable that certain aspects play a role in the lives of many people, such as love or natural elements like the moon, the sun or plants, or the preoccupation with death expressed in skull motifs. Nevertheless, this alone does not explain the accumulation of many motifs and characters and the rather uniform representation. Here it becomes clear that individuality, at least with regard to the single motifs, is not particularly important to the wearers. Meaning (and if it consists in nihilism) does not have to be individual.

Consequently, *error444_tattoo* writes under a picture “[...] si te gustan esta composiciones pero no encuentras ideas, juntos podemos desarrollar la composición que mejor se adapte a ti” (English: “[...] if you like such compositions but don’t have any ideas, we can develop a composition that suits you together”): one does not have to have any specific meanings in mind.

5.4. Ownership

Under the aspect of “ownership” it is less about the content, but following “the medium is the message” – thought about the fact of being tattooed and thus having consciously modified the body, as Anthony Synnott’s (1992, p. 101) initial statement reads: “the body is no longer ‘given’ [...] it is plastic, to be molded and selected”. Tattoos create the possibility to quite easily ensure a permanent change of the body, which can be understood as a chance to reclaim the “canvas” for oneself (Santos, 2009, p. 93).

This is also expressed in a journalistic article by Gladwell (2019), although in the course of the article she refers to meanings that do carry meanings beyond the tattoo motif itself, such as to cover scars or to make one feel more confident. Similarly, in a journalistic source on tattoo artist Mars Hobrecker, he argues that he finds “way more meaning in taking a moment to sit with my body and think about my relationship with it” than in specific motifs and that his “first tattoo was a very permanent reminder of the ownership I had over my own body” (Ablemen, 2018). This “sitting down with my body” reminds on Heidegger’s (2002, p. 19) initially mentioned elaboration of gestures and the intricate, inseparable relationship between cognition and bodily expression.

In this context, however, Merleau-Ponty’s (1966, p. 91) remark that one’s own body cannot perceive itself as other people can perceive it is striking once again. Perception here should

be extended to interpretation. Consequently, control over one's own body and loss of control collide, so to speak: "Subjects have to face the conflict that although they can modify and (re)write their bodies they cannot control the meanings that other people give to their tattoos" (Oksanen & Turtiainen, 2005, p. 112). This loss of control or interpretative sovereignty, nevertheless, does not seem to be in the foreground for many tattooed individuals. Almost all interviewees expressed themselves in this way, and some added that they also regarded their tattoos as a conversation starter.

If we now consider sticker sleeves as a special type of tattoos, the aspect of ownership is sometimes communicated particularly clearly in the text elements, for example, in *not yours* or *this is my decision*. These text elements communicate a self-confident attitude towards one's own body and the self-chosen modifications. But even seemingly nonsensical motifs or incongruous combinations can be interpreted as an expression of ownership. For example, one interviewee said, "I don't care what others think of it – my body, my rules, my tattoos".

With their sometimes very simple or strange motifs, sticker sleeves can therefore articulate that the tattooed individual does not take into account the opinion of others, and this way, it can be understood as a self-confident critique of consumer society (Kang & Jones, 2007, p. 45). Yet, the style can of course also be seen as a trend, which can then in turn be deliberately used to communicate positive qualities, at least to the initiated.

5.5. Post-individuality

The way sticker sleeves can be created limits the selection of possible motifs and implementations – to an extent that the typical tattoo principle of *do not copy* fades into the background. Tattooees are well aware of this, not only because corresponding motifs circulate in social media, but because the designs are often selected from flash sheets. The composition – that is, the selection and arrangement of the sticker tattoos may always be different and require a creative handling of the elements, but looking at the individual motifs one can usually not speak of much individuality. In numerous articles about tattoos, however, it is precisely the expression of identity and individuality that has been mentioned as a main argument. According to them, it is often about "showing off sense of individuality" (Gbenga Adelowo & Adekunle Babalola, 2021, p. 139, also see Petrova et al., 2019, p. 111; Dey & Das, 2017), which is indeed reflected in the aforementioned ban on copying.

Obviously, this principle is abandoned in the sticker sleeve. Here, it has been argued that in the sticker sleeve, often values and feelings are visualized that affect many people: the term *love* alone and its visualization as a heart probably plays a role in most lives. Similar to actual stickers, which are attractive and/or meaningful to a larger target group, the sticker sleeve often represents human emotions or phases. Here, sticker sleeves resemble traditional "old school" tattoos or tattoos from tribal societies, whose motif canon is quite fixed or where it is clearly defined who gets which tattoo in which phase of life. As mentioned, however, the combination is unique and to create it in accordance with the particular body and wishes of the customer; thus, it takes creativity on the part of the tattoo artist, for example, to select certain motifs with the customer and adjust them in size and positioning, as well as in interaction.

But perhaps the idea of an absolutely individual look has also been overcome at this point which would be in line with Baudrillard's (1994) claim throughout his work *Simulacra and Simulation* (French: *Simulacres et Simulation*, originally published in 1981) that there is no original, but only iterations of genetic and cultural evolution. One interviewee, for example, said that it did not matter to him whether others also had a very similar sticker sleeve: "For me personally, that's not important at all. Other people might wear the same clothes or hairstyle as me. Why should that bother me?". In this way, he expresses a pragmatic, if in a sense disenchanted view of the topic.

At the same time, however, several sticker tattoos in the sample display the word *art*, in almost the same, simple sans-serif font. Sizer (2020) explains in her essay that tattoos should be considered as works of art on living canvases, which themselves contribute to the artwork and change the classical relationship between artist, artwork, and viewer. In this case, *art* may not refer to the purposely rather unoriginal tattoo, but to its wearer or to his or her (certainly unique) way of coping with life. Thus, individuality can be added on the level of meaning: visually identical tattoos mean something different to their wearers or say something different about them. Therefore, the motifs can encourage to look behind the tattoo.

6. Conclusions: ambivalence, change and permanence

As shown, the sticker sleeve combines very different aspects, from the denial of to the longing for meaning, from the articulation of ownership and thus focus on the individual to the abandonment of the decided desire for visual individuality – and looking at the motifs, all this usually cannot only be found in different sticker sleeves, but all combined in a single one. Seen in this light, the sticker sleeve is an interesting example of a *Zeitgeist* that no longer strives to eliminate cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 2012), but rather integrates it. This goes very well with the image of the sticker collection typically found on posts or walls in urban areas. These stickers often do not match regarding their aesthetics and statements, but still form a creative whole, precisely because they do not fit together according to conventional (so-called "Western") standards of harmony and beauty.

However, with regard to tattoos, this would raise a difficulty: if the tattooee stands for different, possibly contrary statements – then who is he or she after all, what is his or her own identity? Identity has been understood as the "self-image as a coherent being with certain characteristics and a history" (Schönhuth, 2005, p. 91). Yet, it has also been stated that identity nowadays has to be seen as a never-ending project (Brandes, 2010, p. 15). Tattoos are relevant or symptomatic here in a special way, as they "may provide a way to ground a sense of self in a seemingly changing and insecure world" (Kang & Jones, 2007, p. 42). The basic idea of collecting stickers with cheap and mostly mass-produced decals, however, seems almost somewhat inappropriate here, not doing justice to the seriousness of the identity problem. Or else, it shows a particularly unexcited and thus virtuoso handling of identity, without the claim to uniqueness.

Looking at the temporal dimension of identity, it is striking that, unlike most sticker collections, the sticker sleeve often has a synchronous genesis: it is often designed as a patchwork style, thus, does not speak of various sequential facets of identity, but allows a

synchronous multiplicity, whose coherence, then, results from the unity of the body, from the background of the tattoo motifs, as well as from the overall look of the sticker sleeve, not from its messages. One could conclude: the message is multiplicity, or, if taken to extremes, meaninglessness, and the body is its vehicle.

Let us stick once more with the sticker metaphor: stickers wear off after a while and can usually be removed, even if unsightly remnants remain. Although tattoos can also be removed, this is definitely a lengthy process for a higher number of smaller motifs. However, tattoos can be covered with other tattoos and especially quite small images can be integrated into a new sleeve, for example, in realistic style. At least one interviewee also anticipated this possibility. Thus, the sticker sleeve also articulates a special relationship to change and durability and, if one likes, a creative and virtuoso play with transience and permanence.

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