

## A Phenomenological-Hermeneutical and Sufism Study of the Artistic Creative Process of Three Soul Travelers of the Qudusiyah Sufi Order

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### Abstract

This study is grounded in the growing concern over the separation between artistic creativity and spiritual experience in contemporary scholarship. While imagination is often treated as a cognitive or aesthetic function, its deeper existential and transcendent dimensions remain underexplored. The objective of this research is to examine how artistic creation is shaped by imaginal experiences within the spiritual journeys of three artists affiliated with the Qudusiyah Sufi Order. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological-hermeneutical approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of artistic works produced by three informants representing visual art, music, and poetry. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience in both artistic practice and Sufi spiritual training. Data validity was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and interpretative consistency, while data analysis was conducted using thematic interpretation supported by NVivo software. The findings revealed that artistic creation is not merely a technical or imaginative act but a lived experience shaped by spiritual discipline, self-effacement (*fanā*), and imaginal encounters. These experiences manifested differently across artistic forms but consistently reflected a transformation of inner consciousness that influenced creative expression. The discussion highlights how imaginal experiences serve as a bridge between spiritual practice and artistic production. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that artistic creativity within the Qudusiyah Sufi context is deeply rooted in transcendent experience, offering a more integrated understanding of art, spirituality, and human consciousness in contemporary creative practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

For Einstein, imagination is more important than knowledge because knowledge is limited, whereas imagination is not. Imagination also stimulates progress and contributes to scientific development, including theoretical innovation in scientific research. Imagination has more often been associated with art (and frequently misunderstood as mere fantasy) rather than with science, which relies on tested and verifiable facts as its foundation. The separation between reason and imagination is largely a product of modernity as a cultural framework. Furthermore, imagination has long been separated from intellect and placed in a domain that is difficult to measure or objectively verify. As a result, it is often considered lacking the authority to convey objective truth. The role of imagination in the development of science can be seen in the theoretical leaps of pioneering scientists who envisioned variables that were later confirmed through empirical research conducted years afterward. Many scientists, including

Einstein, reportedly received inspiration in unconscious or semi-conscious states rather than through fully deliberate cognitive processes.

On the other hand, Henry Corbin conceptualized the imaginal as a mystical and ontological dimension in which the physical world, perceivable through the senses, and the imaginal world (*mundus imaginalis*) mutually symbolize and reflect one another. In the Sufi tradition, this is referred to as the imaginal realm (*‘ālam al-mithāl*). Imagination resides in the human mental faculty as a repository of sensory experience actively used to interpret images and generate creative expression, whereas the imaginal refers to the manifestation of the *mundus imaginalis* through symbolic forms that can be understood and subsequently externalized in the form of thoughts, actions, or works of art (which constitute the focus of this research).

Through creativity, both imagination and the imaginal can be expressed in diverse ways. In art history, the imaginal can be associated with a creative process that adheres to established norms, religious law, and divine revelation, producing works through creation (*poiesis*) or imitation of existing forms (*eidos*). Imagination, on the other hand, is often associated with a creative process that positions the creator as a genius, producing something perceived as new and original. However, no creation of human imagination is entirely new; imaginative processes inevitably draw upon stored sensory experience and symbolic memory rather than *creatio ex nihilo*. Therefore, this study focuses on imaginal dimensions that align more closely with *poiesis* and their role in artistic creation.

A useful illustration of imaginal experience can be found in the film *Contact*, adapted from Carl Sagan’s novel. In the film, Dr. Ellie Arroway (portrayed by Jodie Foster), a SETI scientist, encounters an alien intelligence. Having lost her father during adolescence and previously established radio contact with Pensacola, the alien appears to her in the form of her father and the Pensacola beach—two deeply embedded and emotionally significant images from her lived experience.

This study was conducted by interviewing three artists from three artistic disciplines—painting, music, and poetry—exploring how they experienced a shift from imagination-based creation toward spiritual purification (*sulūk*) within the Qudusiyah Sufi Order, leading to imaginal experiences that subsequently informed their artistic works.

Previous research in phenomenology and philosophy of art has addressed imagination, consciousness, and aesthetic experience from various perspectives. Henry Corbin’s concept of the imaginal world has been widely cited as a bridge between metaphysical experience and symbolic representation in art. Similarly, phenomenological approaches derived from Husserl and Heidegger have been used to explore lived experience in artistic creation. However, most of these studies remain theoretical in nature and rarely engage deeply with empirical lived experiences of contemporary artists undergoing structured spiritual training within specific Sufi traditions.

The existing literature also shows limited integration between hermeneutic phenomenology and Islamic mystical frameworks in explaining artistic creativity. While some studies discuss spirituality and creativity in general terms, they often fail to distinguish between psychological spirituality and ontological-spiritual transformation as understood in Sufi epistemology. Consequently, the experiential dimension of artistic creation shaped by self-

effacement (*fanā'*), spiritual discipline (*riyāḍah*), and realization has not been sufficiently documented or systematically analyzed in relation to artistic practice.

This gap has become increasingly significant in light of growing global interest in spirituality, meaning-making, and psychological well-being within artistic and academic communities. In an era marked by existential uncertainty and psychological strain, many individuals turn to art as a medium for healing and self-understanding. However, without a deeper conceptual framework connecting lived spiritual experience and artistic production, the explanatory scope of existing theories remains limited. Therefore, research integrating spirituality, phenomenology, and artistic practice is increasingly relevant for both academic and societal contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of phenomenological-hermeneutical analysis with Sufi epistemology to examine the artistic creative process of individuals undergoing spiritual training within the Qudusiyah Sufi Order. Unlike previous studies that separate spirituality from artistic production, this research positions imaginal experience as a central mechanism through which artistic meaning emerges. It emphasizes how states of self-effacement and spiritual discipline generate lived imaginal experiences that directly shape artistic production across media such as painting, music, and poetry.

The main purpose of this research is to explore and interpret how three artists within the Qudusiyah Sufi Order experience and translate their spiritual journeys into artistic creation. It seeks to understand the relationship between imagination, imaginal experience, and artistic expression through a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach. By focusing on lived experience, the study aims to reveal the essential structures underlying the transformation from spiritual practice into creative output.

In terms of academic contribution, this study provides an interdisciplinary bridge between art theory, phenomenology, and Islamic mysticism. It contributes to a more holistic understanding of creativity that encompasses not only cognitive and aesthetic dimensions but also spiritual and existential aspects. Practically, it enriches discourse in art education, spiritual psychology, and qualitative methodology by demonstrating how subjective mystical experiences can be interpreted within scholarly frameworks.

Finally, the objectives of this research are to deepen scholarly understanding of the relationship between spirituality and artistic creativity, to develop a conceptual model of imaginal experience in art production, and to provide empirical insight into the lived experiences of artists undergoing spiritual transformation. The study is expected to benefit researchers in philosophy, art studies, and religious studies, as well as practitioners seeking to understand the role of inner transformation in creative processes. More broadly, it contributes to re-establishing dialogue between rational inquiry and spiritual experience within contemporary knowledge systems.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological–hermeneutical design to explore the lived experiences of artistic creation among three practitioners of the Qudusiyah Sufi Order. The participants consisted of artists actively engaged in structured spiritual training (*\*sulūk\**) within the Qudusiyah tradition. The sample was limited to three key informants representing three artistic disciplines: visual art (painting), music, and poetry.

A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure participants met the criteria of active artistic practice, participation in Qudusiyah spiritual training, and experience of imaginal or transcendent states during creative processes. This approach focused on information-rich cases aligned with the research objectives.

The researcher served as the primary research instrument, supported by semi-structured interview guidelines, observation notes, and documentation of participants' artistic works. Data credibility was ensured through triangulation across interview transcripts, artistic outputs, and field notes. Trustworthiness was established using credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies, including member checking, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing. Consistency in coding and iterative interpretation across data cycles was used to strengthen analytic reliability within the qualitative framework.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation during artistic and spiritual activities, and documentation of artworks and reflective notes. The research process began with participant selection, followed by rapport building, interviews, collection of artistic artifacts, and iterative clarification sessions. All data were organized and analyzed using NVivo 12 software to support coding, categorization, and thematic analysis. The analysis followed a hermeneutic phenomenological procedure, including data reduction, phenomenological bracketing (\*epoché\*), meaning unit extraction, thematic structuring, and interpretative synthesis to identify core patterns of imaginal experience and artistic transformation within the Qudusiyah tradition.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Phenomenology-Hermeneutics as a Framework for Modern Interpretation**

Phenomenology is a reaction against philosophy that leaned too heavily towards idealism, and Husserl sought to bring philosophy's attention back to the concrete real world and its relationship with human consciousness. Maurice Natanson termed phenomenology as 'a science of beginnings', which is a beginner's attitude, as if the phenomenon was seen for the very first time, then questioning whether that phenomenon is a construct of consciousness or truly exists outside of consciousness, as well as the structure of its appearance (Natanson, 1998). By performing phenomenological reduction (epoché), various pre-existing assumptions within or outside of consciousness are first suspended (bracketing). This allows the phenomenon to manifest as it truly is, enabling one to grasp it not as it is intellectually understood, but as it is directly experienced by those who live it (lebenswelt). Phenomenology seeks to uncover the original phenomenon before it is interpreted through a purely descriptive approach. In reality, humans have always interpreted the phenomena they observe, so phenomena do not always appear as they truly are. Consciousness is historical and filled with layers of interpretation, not pure consciousness, because everything is always already in the form of interpretation (Polt, 1999). It is no different from someone searching for pure motion, but ultimately discovering that pure motion does not exist, because motion is always attached to something that moves.

Laverty explains that phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology share several similar components, which endeavor to uncover the lifeworld or human experience as it is, in order to restore what has been lost due to the use of empirical scientific exploration within the human realm. Meanwhile, the difference is that Husserl focuses more on epistemological

questions regarding the relationship between the knowing subject and the object being studied, whereas Heidegger shifts to ontological questions concerning the nature of reality and 'Being' in the world. Phenomenology is descriptive and focuses on the structure of experience, as well as the organizing principles that give form and meaning to the lifeworld, and elucidates the essence of these structures as they appear in consciousness, thereby making the invisible visible. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, is interpretive and focuses on the historical meaning of experience, as well as the impact of its development and accumulation at both individual and social levels, and the pre-understanding that motivates individuals in their interpretation (Laverty, 2003).

The shift of hermeneutics from a tool for interpreting texts in philology to a way of thinking was initiated by Heidegger. Understanding is the foundation for all interpretation; understanding shares the same origin as human existence and is present in every act of interpretation (Palmer, 1980). Heidegger was influenced by Dilthey, who asserted that understanding is not universal and advocated for understanding life from within life itself, and also by Nietzsche, who expressed his suspicion towards the entire tradition of Western metaphysics and stated that facts do not exist, and there are only interpretations. Nevertheless, in this research, personal experiences and the interpretation of those experiences are key elements in hermeneutic phenomenology for uncovering the essence of meaning through in-depth interviews, official documents, and credibility, which will later be linked to data analysis (Ramsook, 2018).

### **Basic Assumptions of Interpretation Based on the Archeology of Human Concepts**

In the 21st century, there has been a resurgence of interest and enthusiasm for religion, but with a meaning that differs from the era when religions first emerged. This can be seen in movements such as New Age, perennial philosophy, Spiritual Quotient (SQ), and even the discourse on the convergence of science and religion. Among Indonesian Muslims, a movement for the Islamization of knowledge emerged, but it neglected the difference in understanding between the spirit (*ruh*) and the soul (*nafs*), as well as the difference in the understanding of spirituality in the West and the East (Adlin, 2007). Due to the confusion in understanding the difference between 'soul' (*nafs*) as an autonomous entity of the soul realm (*malakut*), separate from the body and representing the true human self, and spirit as part of the spirit realm (*jabarut*), representing the divine within the human self, then majority of Muslims accept the term 'spiritual experience'.

However, it is the soul that experiences this, and by no means the spirit. Therefore, the more appropriate term is "transcendent experience" and not "spiritual experience," whether referring to everyday religious experiences or those related to mysticism. In the West, "spirituality" is generally understood as an intensity, a form of profound experience that does not always occur constantly in daily life, and is not always connected to religious observance or to God. "Spirituality" is more of a psychic experience that leaves a deep impression and meaning, and transforms something in one's life (Adlin, 2007).

On the other hand, the understanding of the intricacies of Western psychology among some Muslim scholars is quite adequate. However, an understanding of Sufism without undertaking the path of soul purification (*suluk*) leads to the continuation of issues that Al-Ghazali identified a thousand years ago: specifically, the blurring of comprehension concerning the self (*nafs*), the spirit (*ruh*), the soul heart (*qalb*), and the intellect ('*aql*). Consequently, an

imbalance arises when attempts are made to draw parallels between Sufism and Western psychology.

Some aspects of Sufism tend to be awkwardly fitted with Western psychology, which has undergone a changing conception of the relationship between the body and the soul through four archaeological ruptures. Beginning with the body and soul as two separate entities in Plato's thought, then transitioning into the Christian tradition by Augustine. This then transformed again into *res cogitans* (the equivalent of the soul), often identified with consciousness, and *res extensa* (the equivalent of the body) in René Descartes' philosophy. Subsequently, the unconscious, conceptualized by Sigmund Freud, overturned that notion of consciousness. The soul thus changed from an entity separate from the body into the mind, then into the mental, until it was finally regarded as merely a psychosomatic unity, and even more recently, viewed as nothing more than the formation of various nerve impulses (Adlin, 2019).

This concept became increasingly unknown with the abolition of the Great Chain of Being in the West in the 18th century, a trend that spread globally from the era of colonization to the current dissemination of Western knowledge. Consequently, an anti-essentialist and a-teleological vision took hold, asserting that human beings possess no inherent essence that can be molded into anything. Therefore, a simulacrum of mysticism now emerges as a turning point, where “transcendence” merely becomes a form of therapy to restore and return individuals to hedonistic lifestyles and bodily desires. Within this simulacrum of mysticism, there exists a phenomenon resembling “ecstasy” but experienced in a non-religious way. Its experience and transformative quality are also vastly different when compared to the ecstasy of true mysticism (Adlin, 2007).

The concept of the Great Chain of Being was revived by Lovejoy, who explained the fundamental nature of the universe that greatly influenced Western thought, stretching from ancient Greek Neoplatonists to its derivative philosophies during the European Renaissance. The term Great Chain of Being denotes three general characteristics of the universe: plenitude, continuity, and gradation. In the 18th century, this conception was discarded (Lovejoy, 1936). Weber used the term *Entzauberung* (German), which is translated as “disenchantment” in English, literally meaning “de-magic-ation” with the connotation of breaking a magic spell or the loss of mystical allure and wonder. Taylor explained that “All these together—science, mechanism, the instrumental stance—contribute to disenchantment. The mechanization of the *Weltbild* is a high-level cousin of *Entzauberung* in the sense in which I’ve been using the term here: the decline and withering of beliefs and practices that call on spirits and moral forces (Taylor, 2007).” For Weber, the emergence of the scientific method and the use of enlightened reason signified that the world became transparent and demystified from past superstitions. This term alludes to another aspect of the old world that was alienated and unwanted by scientific progress (Taylor, 2007).

In his phenomenological study of the body, Maurice Merleau-Ponty found that the view of body and soul duality could no longer be maintained, because the body and soul are unified. He then referred to the case of Schneider, who suffered brain damage after being hit by grenade shrapnel while serving as a soldier in World War I. Schneider could not remember which part of his body he spontaneously scratched and was unable to perform abstract movements (for example, if instructed to raise his right hand with his eyes closed, he could only move it if he


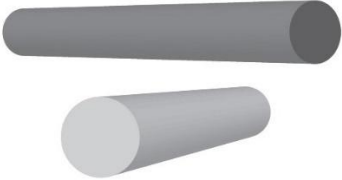
watched his right hand as it moved) (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). Thus, after the Great Chain of Being was abolished, there was no longer a conception of the soul as an eternal entity existing before the body and persisting after the body's death, as proposed by Plato. On the other hand, Heidegger proposed the concept of facticity, stating that humans are no different from Mr. Bean falling from the sky, without knowing where they came from or where they are going; simply falling and aimlessly causing commotion everywhere. Meanwhile, Sartre introduced the concept of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), which is humanity's misunderstanding in viewing life as having an ultimate purpose (*telos*). Then Lacan explained that human identity is the result of a misrecognition in the mirror image. As for Foucault, he viewed the self as akin to a work of art that can be shaped into anything (the aesthetics of existence). And Lifton put forth that humans possess a protean self, much like the figure of Proteus in Greek mythology who could change into anything. In essence, modern thought emphasizes an anti-essentialist and ateleological view, suggesting that humans lack a true, inherent self.

Whereas in the view of Plato and the Sufi tradition, when the self is mentioned, it refers to the soul (*nafs* or *psyche*), which is the true human being. This true self must indeed be recognized. But if the soul is merely an electrical signal from the brain and nerves, then does the dictum 'know thyself' (*gnothi seauton*) still hold meaning, other than just recognizing personality (from Latin 'persona,' meaning mask), which is an illusion formed by the nerves and brain throughout life? Thus, in this era, many philosophers advocate the concept of a 'self without self,' meaning a self that is anti-essential, ateleological, and capable of becoming anything. This is because the self formulated by them is no longer the soul as the true self, which is an entity separate from the body and eternal.

In modern thought, essentialism is a recognized concept, defining the view that everything possesses an inherent, fundamental character that makes it what it is. The task of science and philosophy, therefore, is to discover this essence, or, put differently, that essence precedes existence. Another term for this is teleology. Conversely, its opposite is anti-essentialism, which is synonymous with anti-foundationalism or non-essentialism. This view expresses a disbelief in the inherent essence of any given object, idea, or metaphysical entity. In this particular regard, it applies especially to human beings, who are perceived as possessing no true self and therefore capable of becoming anything. Another term for this is ateleology. This perspective became a fundamental assumption in 20th-century interpretations, particularly in hermeneutics, concerning the conception of humanity and its various mental activities. It posits that to think is to interpret, and that transcendent experiences are linked to nerve impulses and the brain, consciousness and unconsciousness, and so forth.

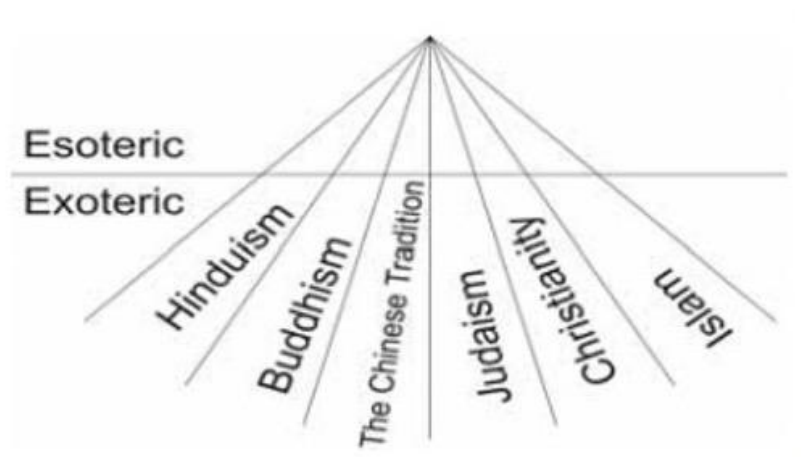
### **Gnosis (Ma'rifat) and the Structure of the Human Being**

Besides exegesis (*tafsir*), within the tradition of Sufism, allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) is also recognized as something that God directly teaches to those of His servants whom He wills. Furthermore, within the tradition of Sufism, knowledge is divided into two types: (1) knowledge acquired through self-study, from a teacher, or by reading books and observing the universe, and (2) knowledge granted directly by Allah. These two type of knowledge represent one of the distinctions between hermeneutic phenomenology and the esoteric treasury within mysticism that must be carefully observed, so that they are not simply equated with one another. Zamzam illustrates the difference between *tafsir* and *ta'wil* as being like seeing a two-dimensional form compared to a three-dimensional one (Tanuwijaya, 1992–2025).

	
<p>A form that, when viewed in two dimensions, appears to intersect and overlap.</p>	<p>A form that, when viewed in three dimensions, appears to intersect but actually does not touch.</p>

In Qudusiyah, it is emphasized that every human being has a life's mission achieved through self-knowledge, which occurs simultaneously with the knowledge of God. This understanding has actually been widely articulated in Islam and in various pre-Islamic religions, even in Platonic thought. In the Sufi tradition, this principle is known as "a common principle" (kalimat in sawa'in, as stated in Surah Ali 'Imran [3]: 64). Another more popular term is "the meeting point of religions," as Huston Smith affirmed that there are always similarities and differences for all such principles. At the very least, the similarity lies in the existence of these principles, while the difference lies in the diversity that makes them comparable. The same applies to religions. If there were no similarities among religions, they would not be called by the same name: 'religion.' If there were no differences among them, they would not be referred to by the plural word, 'religions,' and thus a singular noun would be more appropriate. The similarity lies in the esoteric realm (the mystical perspective), not in the exoteric realm, which includes scientific understanding with its flat vision of reality or the conventional, usually literal, religious perspective.

Summarizing Schuon's thought, Smith further explains that there is a dividing line between the esoteric and the exoteric. The fundamental difference is not between one religion and another. It can be said that this dividing line does not vertically separate the great historical manifestations of religions; Hinduism from Buddhism, from Christianity, from Islam, and so on. Instead, this dividing line is horizontal and is drawn only once, dividing the various religions encountered throughout history such that above the line is esotericism, while below it is exotericism. Furthermore, Smith explains that the meeting point that unites various religions lies at the esoteric level, thus hidden and secret, not because those who know it are unwilling to explain it, but because the truth, which is the secret, is buried beneath layers of human elements. This is why they do not explain it convincingly to the masses (Smith, 1987).



The meeting point of religions (Source: Schuon, 1987)

Zamzam (murshid of Qudusiyah) explains the wellspring of religions that in the heavenly scriptures brought by the messengers, whoever they were, whenever and wherever, they are proven to possess the same concept, indicating their descent from a single source. The wellspring (unity) of religions, in both concept and practical aspects concerning the divine decrees of the heavens, the inherent nature of the self, and the mission of vicegerency, are four matters closely intertwined and inseparable from one another. A correct understanding of these four states is fundamental to one's comprehension of the meaning of true witness to God, of true devotion, of true life, and of ultimate happiness (Tanuwijaya, 1995).

Furthermore, Zamzam & Hermawan explain that the wellspring of these religions lies in each person's unique life mission and their true or authentic self. Some religions (especially Hinduism and Buddhism) sometimes strongly emphasize this process of transformation. Christianity focuses more on its spiritual agent (Holy Spirit), and Islam excels in the implementation of righteous conduct. In short, there is no religion (as long as it originates from the Creator) that does not carry the most important teaching: the divine command of "know yourself." These religions are interconnected, and in these transcendence states, through their scriptures (Tanuwijaya & Hermawan, 2019).

The conception of structure of the human being and the vision of its creation are fundamental matters for understanding the mission of life. However, the problem is that very few can rigorously and systematically elucidate this conception of the structure of the human being, as stated by Jane Idelman Smith & Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad that some of the more popular eschatological teachings, in which matters, the writers—traditionalist theologians—have failed to distinguish between the terms *nafs* and *ruh*, (i.e., soul and spirit), either by interchanging the two terms or using one to replace the other (Smith & Haddad, 2004). This tendency also characterizes most contemporary analyses. The issue of how to name and understand human innate disposition is indeed quite intricate, so many contemporary writers assert that they are very reluctant to discuss these matters. This phenomenon, its cause was actually explained by Al-Ghazali ten centuries ago, and apparently, it continues to this day. This is due to the understanding of the terms *nafs* (soul), *ruh* (spirit), *qalb* (heart), and *'aql* (intellect), about which few among the prominent scholars possess deep knowledge of these names, their differing meanings, their boundaries, and what is designated by these names. Most of these errors occur

due to ignorance of the meanings of these names and the ambiguities arising from their various designations (Al-Ghazali, 1983).

As explained in the above archaeology of human concepts, and the disappearance of The Great Chain of Being in the 18th century, it is evident that humans are often regarded solely as bodies possessing a mind composed of nerve impulses and the brain. There is almost no longer a view that the soul is autonomous from the body and represents the true human self. In Qudusiyah, a concise and profound metaphorical explanation of the structure of human being can be found in Sura An-Nuur [24]: 35, where the niche in the wall (mishkat) symbolizes the body, the glass sphere (zujajah) represents the soul, and the lamp within the glass sphere (misbah) signifies the spirit (ruh al-quds). Another analogy can also be found in Javanese shadow puppetry (wayang kulit). The beautifully adorned, colorful wayang kulit, which represents the soul, is actually only played for its shadow, which symbolizes the human body. Then the fire, symbolizing the holy spirit (ruh al-quds), the inner messenger within every human, is the torch flame shining from behind, forming the shadow on the screen—the image perceived by the audience. Meanwhile, the puppeteer, hidden and unseen by the audience, symbolizes Allah, Who orchestrates everything. Furthermore, in the Qur'an, the body is also symbolized as the earth, the soul as the sky, and spirit as the sun. In the Qudusiyah teachings, the manifestation of holy spirit (ruh al-quds) at the moment a person attains gnosi (ma'rifat) can be observed, for instance, in the event of Pentecost (as documented in the book of Acts, chapter 2, in the New Testament Bible). This event is also immortalized in various paintings, which distinctly depict how the fire of holy spirit (ruh al-quds) ignites above their heads, as exemplified by Jean Restout's 1732 masterpiece, "Pentecost."

### **Various Interpretations of Art**

Those involved in the world of art can feel a reflective atmosphere in artworks. Its practitioners tend to be philosophical even without formally studying philosophy. Literature, music, paintings, or various high-quality artworks often contain philosophical and reflective themes because they hold a sense of mystery; thus, the deeper the reflection, the more difficult it is to grasp. Furthermore, art also enables humans to see things that are often overlooked in daily life.

In the past, art was often identified with decoration, ornamentation, and satisfaction. Although now considered archaic, these three aspects can still be found, for example, among designers in the form of a sense of beauty to enhance the comfort of functional objects and room ambiance, provide satisfaction, and attract attention while increasing sales value. Pure art, on the other hand, is an expression of form manipulation that not only sparks imagination but also stimulates reflection on the reality of human life and the values one holds. However, in recent developments, art often no longer displays beauty (in its conventional sense). Art has become more a matter of existential truth or reality (das Sein). Existential truth in contemporary art is not a moral truth or a matter of ideality (das Sollen), nor is it a scientific truth like a formula or pattern. That is why Bell defined art as 'significant form' (Bell, 1958), and artists as 'tinkerers of form' to give meaning to experience as a form of reflectivity. This statement is further strengthened by Danto that works of art are embodied meanings (Danto, 2013). Indeed, the meaning derived from a created work, or a composed arrangement, or a finished product placed in a new context, and so on, is what subsequently forms the basis for the development of contemporary visual art. And the aesthetic it champions is an apprehension of existential

truth, as well as a new awareness of something that is usually overlooked, forgotten, and not reflected upon in everyday life.

In the perspective of semiotics, Jan Mukařovský emphasized that a work of art is a sign that ought to mediate a number of suprapersonal meanings. He distinguished between linguistic signs (i.e., words in normal or non-poetic use) and artistic signs. Linguistic signs serve communication and possess an external purpose that transcends the word itself (for example, telling stories, explaining, expressing certain emotions, stimulating the listener's behavior, and so on), even existing outside of the linguistic expression itself. Artistic signs, particularly visual ones, can also function for communication as instrument-signs, but the significance of a work of art as a work of art per se does not lie in communication or its external purpose (Mukařovský, 1978).

Whereas Pablo Picasso stated that “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies (Picasso, as cited in Barr, 1946).” Regarding “art is a lie” as an existential truth, it is conveyed through the manipulation of form, such that the value of the artwork lies in the new awareness it evokes. This kind of perspective represents an interpretation of Plato’s thought on art as simulacra, which is laid out in *Sophistes* 236b concerning *eikastikēn* or the making of something similar: “Now then, what shall we call that which appears, because it is seen from an unfavourable position, to be like the beautiful, but which would not even be likely to resemble that which it claims to be like, if a person were able to see such large works adequately? Shall we call it, since it appears, but is not like, an appearance (Plato, 1928)?” As for *Sophistes* 264c-d, Plato provides two divisions in the modes of image-making, namely *eikastikēn* and *phantastikēn* (the creation of an appearance), that: “And in the midst of our perplexity about that, we were overwhelmed by a still greater dizziness when the doctrine appeared which challenges everybody and asserts that neither likeness nor image nor appearance exists at all, because falsehood never exists anywhere in any way. [...] But now, since the existence of false speech and false opinion has been proved, it is possible for imitations of realities to exist and for an art of deception to arise from this condition of mind (Plato, 1928).”

Plato viewed the simulacrum as a copy even far inferior to the *eidos* or *forma*. Regarding these circumstances, Benjamin held a perspective whose foundation differed from Plato’s, asserting that fundamentally, a work of art certainly can and always will be reproduced by other individuals, such as students who practice making replicas, by masters to diffuse their works, as well as by third parties seeking to gain profit. Benjamin also emphasized that the mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. Nevertheless, the problem arising from this reproduction is the phenomenon of aura reduction, as occurs in photography (Benjamin, 1968). However, by inverting Plato’s logic, Gilles Deleuze held the view that even though a simulacrum is a falsehood, a copy of a copy, that is precisely what makes it strong in distancing itself and distinguishing itself from unproductive similarity, which is merely reproductive (Deleuze, 1983).

A range of perspectives on art reveals various differing basic assumptions, leading to diverse interpretations of art. However, Plato's understanding of *techne*, often translated as ‘art’, is more suitable for this research. It can also be more broadly rendered as ‘state of the art’, which relates to self-knowledge and the highest proficiency one possesses, as it constitutes

their life's mission. In research conducted by Vatsal Manot, the term "state of the art" has apparently been in use since 1789, longer than the 1910 date recorded by the Merriam-Webster dictionary. The word was first used by Charles Burney in his dissertation on music. Initially, it was employed as an adjective, referring to the peak proficiency an individual possessed in the expressions of musical art (Burney, 1789). However, currently, the word has transformed into a noun, denoting a level of development (whether it be a device, procedure, process, technique, or science) achieved at a particular time, and typically as a result of modern methods.

Although this idiom was initially used in the realm of art, even ending with the word "art," it was later also applied to various other fields. In *Politeia* 341c-342e, Socrates explains that *techne* is meant to serve the interests of others, just as a physician serves the interests of their patients through their expertise in the healing practice, or a ship captain serves the interests of their crew through their expertise in navigating the ship, and a true ruler will serve their own people. A person who possesses *techne* to wield power must surely do so not for their own interest, but for the interest of others. In *Politeia* 345c, Socrates uses the analogy of a shepherd to show that the shepherd's concern in caring for their sheep is different from their concern for making money; that no *techne* prioritizes self-interest. Socrates explains that a shepherd's *techne* is to nurture and herd their sheep until they become healthy and plump (Adlin, 2019).

According to Plato, justice (*dike*) is when an individual performs the specific task or function of their soul (*ergon*), and does not undertake or usurp the task or specific function of another soul, because they indeed possess a skill (*techne*) in the matters specifically designated for their soul. Furthermore, the primary *techne* is always intended for the benefit of others, and not for oneself. Meanwhile, a secondary *techne*, which is not one's primary skill, is then for oneself. Based on the explanation above, let us try to imagine and reinterpret the meaning of 'state of the art', where the idiom refers to *techne*. A person possesses prime skill or 'state of the art' because they are akin to an eye that functions to see, or an ear that functions to hear, or pruning shears specifically designed to trim climbing plant branches. The work they undertake and produce is nothing short of a work of art, for in Ancient Greece, what was beautiful was certainly true, and what was true was certainly beautiful (Adlin, 2019).

## **Artistic Creation Process of Three Soul Travelers from the Qudusiyah Sufi Order**

### **1. The Visual Art Creative Process of Dadang Sudrajat (DS)**

DS pursued his education in Painting at FSRD ITB in 1990 and felt he had found his *techne*. Later, DS became a lecturer and continued his studies up to the doctoral level. DS teaches fine art practice courses, so his responsibilities include creating artworks and holding exhibitions. Since his undergraduate studies, DS had developed an interest in 'something transcendent'. During his doctoral studies, following an art-based research path, DS focused on the theme of transcendent art. Within the 15-year period between his undergraduate and doctoral studies, DS had become drawn to Sufism and became a soul traveler in 2012. In this Sufi order, DS rigorously studied various intricacies of Sufism. He then created a triangular diagram connecting Sufism, philosophy, and art, then realizing that the closest connection for him was between Sufism and art.

After DS join Qudusiyah, he understood that the heart (*qalb*) is like a glass sphere. If the outside of that glass sphere is dirty, it must be cleaned. The dirtiness of the heart is due to its love for or attachment to the world. However, it doesn't stop there. If the inside of the glass sphere (or the heart) is also dirty, it needs to be cleaned by first breaking it, then cleaning the inside of the

glass sphere, and then reheating the shattered pieces to form a new glass sphere. Not by using new material, but by using the material from the previous glass sphere. The soul journey is a process of purifying the heart, not a process of replacing it with a new one.

From that understanding, DS asserted that in the process of creating art, he is bound by a “negative form.” What he means is, a “positive form” is an addition, while a “negative form” is a subtraction, and this is the result of DS’s reading of two books by Muhammad Al-Fayyadl: “Derrida” and “Teologia Negativa.” As for the keyword ‘*décollage*, for DS, it aligns with the process of purifying the self (*tazkiyyatun nafs*), which primarily involves cleansing *qalb* as the “heart” of the soul (*nafs*). DS emphasized that art is a manifestation of thought, feeling, and experience, actualized in artistic practice. The keyword, then, is “something negative, in the sense of a process of subtraction,” or as DS terms it, “creating art in a ‘negative’ way.”

Thus, DS’s process in creating his artwork involves everything that has been attached to it being detached and pulled off, starting from paper medium that was glued on and then pulled off after drying, or paint applied onto a canvas and then peeled off after drying. DS emphasized that the interaction between artistic reality and the reality of feeling is connected through the title ‘*décollage*,’ which serves as the key concept of his work. All these peeling experiments are also understood by DS as reflecting the reality of human life that he himself experiences. However, DS continued to search for a suitable method of peeling (as a representation of the process of heart purification) within his artistic and creative process. Furthermore, DS refers to this process and the resulting works as Neo *Décollage*, which is a form of “negative treatment of the artwork in artistic creation,” meaning “not adding something to the work already made,” but rather “removing by peeling as a process of purification.” DS found the suitable treatment for Neo *Décollage* works to be by striking them with rattan.

The most valuable insight DS gained from discovering this creative process was how various questions about himself, concerning his life from childhood until the present, were answered through art. This was enabled by the knowledge of Sufism he acquired in Qudusiyah regarding self-knowledge and the knowledge of God. In addition, DS also discovered a “universal law” from the medium he used: the thinner the application of the medium on his paintings, the more difficult it was to peel off. However, the thicker the application of the medium on his paintings, the easier it was to peel off, even with various negative experimental treatments he applied. Furthermore, the thin white base color on the canvas surface was extremely difficult to bring back. For DS, these states represented human life, how major mistakes are always remembered and desired to be quickly cleansed. However, various subtle mistakes that humans make almost constantly in their daily lives often go unnoticed and are frequently forgotten to be repented for.

In the creative process, DS approaches it as a journey of self-discovery and self-knowledge, striving to become completely absorbed during the act of creation. DS even perceives light emanating from the work he is producing. This is understood as a deceneration within the experience of self-effacement (*fana*), a dissolving into the creative act, and a conditioning process before creation that involves listening to Quranic lectures and the sounds of the *kecapi suling* (traditional Indonesian stringed instrument and flute). These elements are manifested in abstract *décollage* paintings, which are a part of Western art, rather than, for instance, in calligraphic works that would be immediately associated with Islamic art (and DS is not skilled in calligraphy). Furthermore, DS’s artistic education, even since his undergraduate studies, has

been conducted within the framework of Western-oriented art education. However, these Neo-Décollage works were created while DS was in the status of a salik (soul traveler) who had experienced mystical insights, yet still employing the styles, techniques, and negative treatments prevalent in Western art, which DS formally pursued at FSRD ITB.

Another point that also differs in DS's creative process after becoming a soul traveler is self-control, rather than the unrestrained freedom of an artist to do anything in the name of art, as in the adage 'art for art's sake'. Regular soul training (riyadhah) twice a week and weekly Qur'anic wisdom studies make DS reflect deeply on each stage of his art-making process. DS's purpose in continuing on the path of art is as a process of self-knowledge. Although DS is still a soul traveler and has not yet attained gnosis (ma'rifat), when creating art, DS enters a momentary self-effacement to "strive to be like a puppet moved by someone's hand" (meaning "the Hand of God"). In this state, DS surrenders himself as Allah's "puppet" when creating art and only follows what is His will. Therefore, when creating art, DS does not merely actively imagine but also empties himself, "like a flute that only plays the notes that He plays," then there is a momentary experience of DS entering self-effacement, which is then manifested in an imaginal form of abstract art that he terms Neo-Décollage.



(Left to right) DS's Neo-Décollage painting (front view), the ritual of creating Neo-Décollage artwork by DS, and the use of rattan in DS's Neo-Décollage work.

## 2. The Process of Musical Creation by Panji Siswanto (PS)

Since the 4th grade of elementary school, PS (stage name Panji Sakti) had already started composing short songs just for fun. During junior high school, PS began to learn to play the guitar and sing Franky & Jane's ballads. In high school, he became a band member and played bass. During that period, PS also joined an acappella group and always got the tenor part. In 1995, PS attended university at IKIP Fine Arts (now UPI) and withdrew from the group. In his first year at IKIP Fine Arts, PS always performed on stage, presenting his own

compositions. In the 4th semester, PS dropped out of IKIP Fine Arts, then continued at STSI (now ISBI) for 2 semesters, and dropped out again.

Subsequently, PS knew about Garputala Music Studio and wanted to more seriously document his songs. PS began writing new songs and also completing songs he had written previously. The principle PS has held onto until today is: “not fearing his work being stolen by others, and even if the person who steals the work profits from it.” As a result, PS distributed recordings of these songs to his friends on CDs. In 2005, a friend of PS was studying in Malaysia. He had PS’s song files and lived near the office of KRU Music, a record label in Malaysia. Subsequently, PS was contacted by the label, who contracted him to record an album, and thus the band Syuga was formed. After 8 songs were selected, PS was asked to write 2 new songs which later became booming hits in Malaysia: “Delapan Hari Seminggu” and “Dialah Aku” (the soundtrack for the film “Cicak-Man”). Due to various obstacles, the band Syuga terminated their contract with KRU Music and disbanded. In 2009, Sony Music contracted PS as a songwriter because he had previously written a song for Aliff Aziz titled “Sayang Sayang”, which sold one million copies. From 2009 to 2014, one or two songs composed by PS became hits in Malaysia.

In 2014, PS joined the Serambi Suluk (SS), an introduction class to Sufism, and surprisingly, he could no longer be productive in songwriting. Previously, PS would write at least one new song per week to send to Sony Music. However, that songwriting productivity simply ceased when PS joined the SS. PS even wondered inwardly, “Why can’t I write new songs anymore?” In 2015, PS finally created one new song titled “Jiwaku Sekuntum Bunga Kemboja”, which was used as a soundtrack for a soap opera in Malaysia. After creating one new song during the period of attending the SS, PS again created a new song, “Gelap Yang Terang”, which became the soundtrack for a TV film in Malaysia. PS drew inspiration for the song from the material presented in the SS regarding Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. PS became productive in songwriting again after becoming a soul traveler in Qudusiyah. PS continued to write ballads, and when writing songs, PS’s way of thinking and creating was very visual, like scene by scene from a film visually imagined in his mind. However, after becoming a soul traveler, the visual forms PS experienced were not merely imagination, but also imaginal that appeared in a state of self-effacement (fana) and were directly experienced.

As for the first song born from an imaginal experience, it was titled “Dia Danau” in 2018. That song was written while PS was seclusion (i’tikaf) and soul training (riyadhah) during the last 10 days of Ramadan. The song “descended” or “came into being” complete with its melody and lyrics when PS was in a state of self-effacement. As he hummed and sang it repeatedly, PS saw someone sitting before him. At that time, the room was quite dark, and PS could not clearly see who was in front of him. However, after a long while, PS finally realized that what he was seeing was none other than himself. PS admitted that in that song, there was still a slight degree of conscious involvement in the selection of some words.

The next song created through an imaginal experience is “Tanpa Aku”. One night, PS suddenly awoke in a state of self-effacement, took a pen, and wrote the lyrics of the song while murmuring, in less than 5 minutes. The result was a new song without a single mark of correction, indicating that PS had not made any errors or needed to change any words. Many wondered why the song’s title was “Tanpa Aku” and not “Hanya Engkau”. PS explained that if the title were “Hanya Engkau,” it would mean the soul traveler’s surrender to Allah was

already complete. However, as a soul traveler who had not yet attained gnosis, the appropriate title was indeed “Tanpa Aku”. PS admitted that the melody of the song was indeed typical of what he usually composed. However, the way the song was written and the words that were chosen were entirely beyond PS’s control.

### **3. The Creative Process of Nurlaelan Puji Jagad’s Poetry (NPJ)**

When NPJ was little, in Lombok there was an organization called Nahdatul Wathan (Awakening of the Homeland), which was founded by TGKH Muhammad Zainuddin Abdul Majid, and nicknamed Maulana Shaykh. NPJ’s father often studied Islamic texts at that organization, and from there NPJ began to read many collections of poems by Maulana Shaykh. After becoming a soul traveler in Qudusiyah, NPJ reread those collections of poems and found that their content was about the path of soul purification (suluk). NPJ’s first experience reading “modern poetry” was when he accidentally read a love letter from his older sister’s boyfriend, who was already in junior high school. He felt that the poetry in that love letter was incredibly beautiful. So, secretly, he copied the poetry from that love letter to his sister. It was from this habit of copying poetry that NPJ later began to be able to write, and was even included as a school representative in an elementary school level storytelling competition, although he only reached the district level.

NPJ’s primary interest was in poetry. When NPJ began writing poetry, she would read it aloud to both parents, who would listen and then offer comments. During junior and senior high school, NPJ’s short story and poetry writing skills became more refined, and she always achieved the highest grades in Indonesian Language subjects. Because NPJ consistently excelled from elementary to high school, NPJ received an invitation to study German Literature at UI. In 2015, NPJ became acquainted with Serambi Suluk (SS). After participating in SS, on April 2, 2015, NPJ wrote a poem titled “Kembalilah Jiwa” (Return, O Soul) which was infused with new understandings gained from SS. In this poem, it was evident that NPJ could already distinguish between soul (nafs) and spirit (ruh). This was a poem from a transitional period, written by utilizing the understanding gained from SS’s material, as well as imagination in selecting and arranging words in the poem. However, the process of writing poetry through imaginal truly came into its own when NPJ became a soul traveler, specifically the poem “sang Guru” (The Teacher, which was later adapted into a song by PS):

#### **Sang Guru I**

Bolehkah aku berteduh  
Dibawah phon jiwamu  
Menikmati semilir hakikat  
Di bawah rindangnya zikir  
Menikmati buah-buahmu

Yang segar, ranum, dan memabukkan (Jagad, 2022)

## Sang Guru II

Bolehkah kau menetap  
Di balik pejaman matamu  
Menikmati dinginnya mata airmu  
Yang tak pernah berhenti jatuh  
Lalu kubawa pulang dan kusimpan di kemaraunya matakmu (Jagad, 2022)

The imaginal experience in writing this poem occurred when NPJ was queuing to perform ablution in the campus prayer room. Through the air vent in that prayer room, NPJ saw a large tree. Based on the SS course, NPJ understood that this was an analogy for the spiritual guide (murshid) of the Sufi order: how the tree of piety (taqwa) with its ripe and abundant fruits of perfection in doing good deeds (ihsan) becomes a shelter for its soul travelers, who enjoy those fruits. If previously NPJ had to prepare and arrange words to write, but this poem of the Master descended fully structured and was written down after some time.

In 2016, the book “Curuk Bidadari” was published, an anthology of poems by NPJ from her high school days until she became a soul traveler. After that, NPJ experienced writer’s block for approximately three months. Until one night, while in her room, NPJ sat facing the window and thought to herself, “Why is it like this? What’s happening to me? Why can’t I write poetry anymore?” Suddenly, an inner dialogue occurred as if two people were talking, “Ela, those poems are not yours. Your works do not belong to you. They are only loaned to you.” NPJ was startled because she realized that all this time she had always claimed that all those poems were her own work and property. Then NPJ prayed repeatedly, “O God, I ask for forgiveness, I ask for forgiveness, I ask for forgiveness.” After that, NPJ was ‘taught’ that “You must first ask the One who loaned them to you. There must be a covenant.” Since then, the poems written by NPJ could only come forth if he prepared himself from morning until night, abstaining from all kinds of unrighteous deeds, and ordering his heart, speech, and and conduct. The poems would then typically flow after the self-effacement during her soul training.

## CONCLUSION

As stated by Bambang, this requires the ability to think at a paradigmatic level and the capacity for verbal-theoretical articulation to express views on art—especially when combined with mystical experience—into a systematic abstract discourse, such as the phenomenological-hermeneutical framework used in this study. The author has formal education in art at both undergraduate and doctoral levels, as well as formal education in philosophy at the master’s level, and has been a \*soul traveler\* since 1997. It is hoped that this study, supported by interviews, contributes to existing scholarship on the process of artistic creation and imagination.

The artists interviewed in this study are \*soul travelers\* of the Qudusiyah tradition who have not yet attained gnosis. Therefore, the imaginal experiences they gain during self-effacement in spiritual training, as well as during artistic creation, remain within the stage of practice and learning. Consequently, their works and states of self-effacement cannot be equated with those of Sufis who have already attained gnosis.

Finally, regarding phenomenological hermeneutics, grounded in the principle that “to think means to interpret, and interpretation is impossible without pre-understanding,” this study contributes insight into mystical experience and the emergence of the imaginal within states of self-effacement and decentering, as observed empirically through interviews with three artists. It demonstrates that the imaginal also manifests through the use of symbolic images drawn from the lived experience of \*soul travelers\*, making them readily recognizable. At minimum, this study fills a gap in scholarship concerning artworks that emerge from mystical and imaginal experiences.

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