

# TAKING OFFENSE

RELIGION, ART, AND VISUAL CULTURE IN PLURAL CONTEMPORARITIES

Christiane Kruse, Birgit Meyer, Anne-Marie Korte (eds.)

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Wilhelm Fink

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dynamis

a series on art, media and design

Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design

Editors: Christiane Kruse, Petra Maria Meyer,  
Norbert M. Schmitz and Arne Zerbst



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Religion, Art, and Visual Culture  
in Plural Configurations**

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This book is the outcome of an intensive collaboration involving scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds, all drawing from their specific areas of expertise. The idea for the symposium from which this volume is compiled arose in the context of a workshop hosted by Anne-Marie Korte in December 2012 at Utrecht University and attended by Christiane Kruse and Birgit Meyer. The workshop was inspired by Pussy Riot's punk prayer in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral earlier that year. We concluded the time was ripe for situating the hotly debated phenomenon of offensive images in a broader thematic, interdisciplinary and cross-regional context. This opportunity was offered by the Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design, Kiel, which invited artists, anthropologists, art historians, philosophers, scholars of religious studies and theologians to participate in the symposium *Offensive Pictures / Religion and Art in Global Cultures* from June 12 – 14, 2014. This event triggered lively debates among scholars, art school students and a broader audience.

During the symposium, performance artist Leonid Kharlamov offered food for thought with his »photo-cakes« — a display of film stills from Pasolini's *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* and other Jesus-themed movies, followed by the performance of a baptism of a dog, based on Christian rites. The cakes were cut and consumed, the baptism witnessed on stage. These artistic acts were the subject of a roundtable discussion about art, religion and blasphemy.

This volume consists of revised versions of the presentations given during the symposium. The photo gallery in the middle of the volume captures the gathering's animated atmosphere. The volume was designed by Louisa Kirchner and Belinda Ulrich, two master students in typography and book design. With the guidance of Prof. Annette Le Fort, they rendered the ensemble of texts and images into a compelling contribution to the ›dynamis‹ series by Fink Verlag. We would like to thank all the symposium participants for their willingness to rework their presentations into full-fledged essays. We are immensely grateful to Maike Schulken for organizing the symposium and supervising the publication, Andrea Scrima for the translation of several German texts into English, Mitch Cohen for overall language editing, Alexa Dvorson for editing and proofreading, and Louisa Kirchner and Belinda Ulrich for designing the volume. The symposium and publication would not have been possible without the support of the Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design, the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University and the *Religious Matters in an Entangled World Research Program* funded by the *Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research* (NWO) and the *Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences* (KNAW).

Kiel and Utrecht, September 2017

Christiane Kruse, Birgit Meyer and  
Anne-Marie Korte

## Introduction

BIRGIT MEYER, CHRISTIANE KRUSE, ANNE-MARIE KORTE

In this era of digital multiplicity, images are reproduced at dazzling speed and spread instantly across the globe, yet they trigger vastly different responses. Images are not simply depictions; they become visible to beholders in the context of embodied, habitual practices of looking, display, and figuration — a visual regime. In pluralistic settings characterized by cultural and religious diversity as well as the coexistence of religious and secular positions, various visual regimes compete, converge, and clash, giving rise to the phenomenon of offensive images. Recent tensions around purportedly offensive images and visual performances — from the commotion and violent conflicts around the Muhammad cartoons to the persecution of Pussy Riot — betray conflicting sensibilities, value systems, and visual regimes with their specific taboos and preferred modes of representation. Contemporary cultural settings are characterized by a diversity of participants and thus a concomitant coexistence of diverse visual regimes with their specific attitudes toward images that may easily clash. Unmistakable in these tensions is the presence of religion. On the one hand, recourse is taken to religious imagery that is recycled and remediated in, for instance, the spheres of art, advertising, and political protest. On the



other hand, religious leaders and followers vehemently criticize of the use and representation of their religious symbols by journalists, artists, and others. They frequently articulate their offense to the display of particular images or the use of images in ways they say are unauthorized. This evokes heated debates about the limits of cultural representation: how can the relation between the regimes of visibility in art, journalism, politics, and religion be negotiated in plural settings?

With increasing global entanglements and the rapid spread of digital material, conflicts over images and the political aesthetics of cultural representation in a broader sense are likely to increase and accelerate. People embedded in different visual regimes coexist, so to speak, just a click away from one another. This volume explores tensions and debates about offensive images and performative practices in various settings in and beyond Europe. Its basic premise is that a deeper understanding of what is at stake in these tensions and debates calls for a multidisciplinary conversation. Its contributors include scholars in anthropology, (art) history, film studies, religious studies, theology, and the study of visual culture (*Bildwissenschaft*). The authors focus on images that appear to trigger strongly negative reactions; images that are perceived as insulting or offensive; those subject to taboos and restrictions; or those that are condemned as blasphemous. In light of recurrent acts of violence leveled against images and symbols in the contem-

porary, globally entangled world, addressing instances of »iconoclash«<sup>1</sup> from a new post-secular, global perspective has become a matter of urgency.

What makes an image offensive? This is the central question addressed in this volume. Images are not offensive in and of themselves. Offense is a matter of attribution by people who feel disturbed or even disgusted and hurt by a visual form that others may overlook or cherish. Offensiveness, in other words, is in the eyes of certain beholders to whom, paradoxically, the image in question appears to be more powerful and sensitive than for those displaying it in the context of art or journalism. To understand how offensiveness is generated, we need a deeper understanding of the relation between an image considered offensive and its offended beholders, as well as those who see no problem with that image. Differing attitudes toward images embedded in religious and secular frameworks entail a coexistence of conflicting visual regimes. This coexistence ultimately challenges the dominant idea of modernity as entailing the decline of religion as a social and cultural force, raising questions about the relation between religion, art, and visual culture at large. Clashes over images offer an apt entry point into the challenges facing coexistent, diverse identities and struggles over dominant politics of cultural representation. Inspired by recent developments in the study of visual culture and German »Bildwissenschaft« as outlined by Christiane Kruse, this volume offers an explicit focus on religion, art,

and visual culture from a global perspective. To better grasp how a sense of an image being offensive arises and why an image is perceived as offensive, it is instructive to distinguish between two dimensions of visual forms, as pointed out by Hans Belting: the »internal image« seen in an »external picture«. The internal image is not visible as such, but requires a medium through which the image is embodied. A picture acts as a medium, with its own particular affordances, through which an internal image becomes visible.<sup>2</sup> Visibility is not given, but mediated through a picture that forms the body of an image. Whereas the German term »Bild« is employed to refer to both the internal image and the external picture, a distinction is sometimes made between picture and image in English.<sup>3</sup> In this volume, most contributors, ourselves included, use the English word »image« in a broad generic sense, not limited to the internal image, but in the encompassing sense of the German term »Bild.« This means the distinction between internal images and their external carriers is taken into account in the analysis, but not necessarily rendered in words. The translation of insights from German »Bildwissenschaft« to the study of visual culture calls for further reflection regarding adequate vocabulary. We feel that the distinction between picture and image, in the strict context of vocabulary, may come across as somewhat artificial. At the same time, this distinction is certainly revealing in regard to certain questions, as explored in



Christiane Kruse's theoretical reflection about what makes pictures strong and powerful (Chapter 1); and in Christoph Baumgartner's philosophical assessment of the questionable existence of offensive pictures (Chapter 11).

This volume is adapted from presentations during a symposium held in June 2014 at Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design, Kiel. In the process of preparing for the event and working on this volume, we considered a provocative image for the cover to evoke the notion of offense. It would have been easy, for instance, to use pictures condemned as »blasphemous« in current debates, such as the Danish Muhammad cartoons or numerous crucifixion scenes that substitute the body of Jesus with a horse, a frog, or the like. However, we realized that the use of such blatantly »offensive images« would be too facile because the decision to display them would presuppose a secular standpoint that infers such a choice would be entirely unproblematic. It is precisely this »so what?« approach that would gloss over the very issue of offensiveness this volume seeks to unpack. In other words, as scholars, we need to adopt a self-critical stance regarding the framework that informs our approach to images, rather than taking it for granted. It is much easier to represent images that are offensive to others than those that offend oneself. In the course of our search, we realized it would be impossible to find the one »offensive image« that would be recognized as such by all authors and the people about whom they write.

We ultimately decided on an empty frame that could serve as a kind of screen onto which diverse images that offend people could be projected. In this way, the designation of images as offensive from different standpoints can be analyzed from a comparative perspective so as to discern an »anatomy of offense,« as Jojada Verrips explains in his chapter.

The contributions to this volume project a broad set of images that generate a sense of offense in particular settings. In the first chapter, Christiane Kruse analyzes three examples of »powerful« images — Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* as well as photographic representations of Conchita Wurst and Angela Merkel — so as to explore the processes through which images become attractive and offensive. The next eight chapters investigate the provoking of offense and the ensuing debates and conflicts in particular settings. Nika Spalinger looks at contemporary performance art in Switzerland (Chapter 2). Norbert M. Schmitz explores the heresy enshrined in the work of Pasolini (Chapter 3). Anne-Marie Korte offers a feminist theological reading of Madonna's crucifixion scene in her *Confessions on a Dance Floor* performance (Chapter 4). Simon O'Meara discusses the role of the Kaaba as a world-organizing perspective and the ensuing consequences of its unauthorized visual reproduction for Muslims (Chapter 5). Monica Juneja unpacks the charges leveled by conservative Hindus against what they perceive as an illicit appropri-

tion of Hindu imagery by the Indian artist Maqbool Fida Husain (Chapter 6). Maruška Svašek investigates the offense taken by the same group against Wendy Doniger's book *Hindus: An Alternative History* for misappropriating Krishna imagery (Chapter 7). Tania Becker analyzes the offense created by highly transgressive Chinese performance art (Chapter 8). Jürgen Wasim Frembgen & Asif Jehangir investigate popular film posters considered »dirty« by devout Muslims in Pakistan (Chapter 9). The last three chapters address broader conceptual issues pertaining to »offensive images.« Jojada Verrips points to genres of imagery — regarding sex, the sacred, and death — that are liable to function as »existential neuralgic points« and proposes ways to analyze the genesis of offense from a sociological perspective (Chapter 10). Christoph Baumgartner asks whether it can be reasonably argued that offensive pictures exist (Chapter 11). Finally, Birgit Meyer offers some concluding thoughts about the volume as a whole, addressing the relation between art and religion, the emergence of a sense of offense, and the ethics and aesthetics of plural societal configurations.

<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour: What is an Iconoclasm? Or is there a World Beyond Image Wars? in Bruno Latour / Peter Weibel (eds.): *Iconoclasm*, vol. 1, ZKM Karlsruhe and MIT Cambridge/ Mass. 2002, pp. 14–37.

<sup>2</sup> »The picture is the image with a medium,« as Hans Belting states in *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton 2011, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> William J.T. Mitchell: Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science, in James Elkins (ed.): *Visual Literacy*, New York 2008, pp. 16–18; see also Baumgartner in this volume.



# Offending Pictures. What Makes Images Powerful

Christiane Kruse



[FIG. 1]

Chris Ofili: The Holy Virgin Mary, private collection, 1996



(Fig. 1) The painting depicts in linear, flat terms a woman of color wearing a blue garment and surrounded by leaf ornaments against a gold background. The schematic drawing of the woman's face enlarges and bloats the facial features of an African ethnicity. At the height of the figure's breast, a small cylindrical element ending in three concentric circles breaks through the surface. The golden ground with the starburst surrounding her face is reminiscent of icons or medieval paintings of saints. Small flesh-colored, bulbous visual components are scattered over the surface in irregular fashion. Some of them are shaped like flowers, while others recall beetles and caterpillars. A closer look reveals that the forms are in fact photographs of female genitals glued onto the painting. The work is propped on two clumps; on the left clump the word »Holy« can be read, on the right the word »Virgin.«

## Offending Images

In his book with the provocative title *What Do Pictures Want?*, William Thomas Mitchell dedicates a chapter to »the nature of offending images.«<sup>1</sup> Mitchell lists an entire set of criteria that suffice for a picture to qualify as offensive. Offensiveness is often effected by the specific objects that materialize an image, while representations of the sacred are especially suited to the purpose.<sup>2</sup> Mitchell demonstrates that pictures have the power to provoke and even insult their viewers. Not infrequently, this provocation ends in a picture's destruction. The reason for this, as Mitchell sees it, is that pictures are treated as pseudo-persons. A magical power is ascribed to them; they embody a pseudo-life or aliveness. According to Mitchell,

the magical power that pictures seem to have doesn't fit in with our enlightened world, but has its origins in superstition, in religious communities, and in »primitive cultures.« For this reason, pictorial magic belongs to an earlier stage of civilization. In his study, Mitchell seeks to demonstrate that seemingly archaic, superstitious notions that were long considered overcome survive in visual artifacts and induce viewers to treat pictures as living beings. People who remove pictures, who »punish« them through defacement, or who seek to destroy them in an act of violence are acting within this »primitive« stage of civilization.

According to Mitchell, offending pictures are often located on the »frontlines of social and political conflict.« From the Byzantine iconoclasm of the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the destruction of the Twin Towers or, more recently in 2015, the destruction of a temple in Palmyra at the hands of IS militants, politically or religiously motivated iconoclastic acts have always taken place and always will. Moreover, art has often unwittingly or, in the avant-garde movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, deliberately provoked offense with shocking pictures. Mitchell lists twelve examples from art and visual history ranging from the ancient portrait of the Emperor Nero to Damien Hirst's *This Little Piggy Went to Market*, and he distills from them four »obvious points« of the offending picture that are primarily intended to support his thesis of the living image.<sup>3</sup> First, the offending quality of images is contingent on complex social contexts that, when changed, can rehabilitate the incriminated image. Second, images can be considered offensive for very different »offenses:« these can be political, religious, or moral in nature. Third, offensive images can even be prohibited by law and can lead to court cases. Fourth, the degree of iconoclasm varies from injury to destruction, or can simply mean the concealment of an image.

### Pre-existing Attitude in the Viewer

To my mind, Mitchell's thesis that the offending nature of pictures derives from a primitive belief in their aliveness seems too one-sided, not consistently thought through to its conclusion, inasmuch as he remains uninterested in the complementary question that draws closer to the pictures and our dealings with them: why does a picture offend one viewer, to the point that he or she wishes to destroy it, while another viewer remains entirely indifferent to it? Let's take the example of the painting that I described above: *The Holy Virgin Mary* by the British artist Chris Ofili (Fig. 1). Mitchell presents the scandal the painting caused in the exhibition *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum (1997) as proof of his living image thesis.<sup>4</sup> A prominent and influential viewer of pictures, the New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, called it »sick stuff« and ordered the museum's funding to be cut. Dennis Heiner, a retired teacher, took advantage of an unguarded moment in the Brooklyn Museum to cover the painting in white latex paint in an effort to eliminate the image he found scandalous. (Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> Museum staff, arguing from the perspective of art's autonomy, were horrified by the iconoclastic act and hastened to restore the painting to its original condition. The exhibition had opened in the London Royal Academy, traveled to Berlin (Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart), and was subsequently shown at the Brooklyn Museum in New York — and it was only there that it caused a scandal. The catalyst, according to Mitchell, was the artistic material of elephant dung, considered inappropriate for the subject matter. The cylindrical naked »breast« of *The Holy Virgin Mary* is made from a lump of elephant dung, with a nipple stuck on top (Fig. 3). The entire painting rests on two more clumps of the same material



with the inscriptions described above — »Holy« on the left and »Virgin« on the right — engraved with a needle. According to the Manchester-born artist of Nigerian heritage, elephant dung is a fertility symbol in African cultures. Mitchell might not have observed the painting closely enough, because he fails to mention the photographs of female genitals collaged in the form of beetles and butterflies scattered over the entire surface, »flying around« the Madonna (Fig. 4).

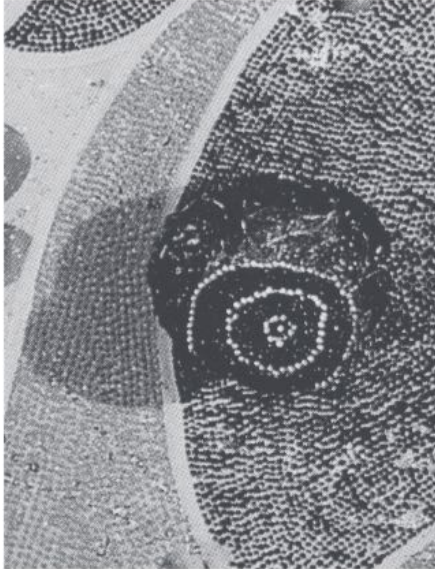
According to Mitchell, for a picture to be offensive, it is essential that the artist implement the visual material with provocative intent.<sup>6</sup> Also essential in this respect is the pre-existing attitude of the viewer, who, like Giuliani — the Catholic son of Italian immigrants to New York<sup>7</sup> — views pictures either as an art expert or from some other political, religious, or otherwise culturally influenced perspective. This is because the picture, with its visual subject, »behaves« in a passive manner: it can't anticipate the perspective from which a viewer will regard it. What's far more interesting is the dialectic »nature« of a picture, which can be both alive and dead, offensive, attractive, or uninteresting. From an art-historical point of view, it is likely that an aberration from the iconographic tradition is the first thing a viewer will notice: the Christ child that made Mary the Holy Virgin could be missed in the painting. Furthermore, the art historian is bound to respect the autonomy of art and to ascribe both the incriminating material and the butterfly-shaped genitals to the expansion of artistic materials and the provocations that appeared in 20<sup>th</sup> century art. For the expert in contemporary art, the wide range of discourses that the painting evokes is interesting and comes as no surprise. When these discourses are analyzed more closely, the conclusion is drawn that judging pictures in today's pluralistic societies is not an indication of their metaphoric »aliveness,« but rather a symptom of serious



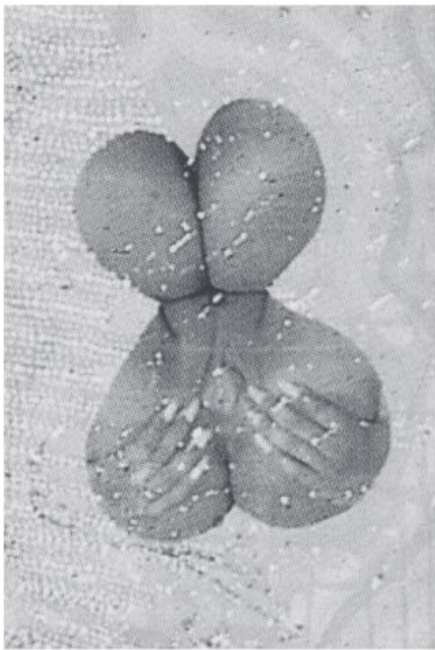
[FIG. 2]

Dennis Heiner smearing white paint over Chris Ofili's work  
during the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York,  
December 1999





[FIG. 3]  
Chris Ofili: The Holy Virgin Mary,  
the virgin's breast (detail Fig. 1)



[FIG. 4]  
Chris Ofili: The Holy Virgin Mary,  
flying vaginas (detail Fig. 1)

ideological differences, whether these be religiously, politically, gender-thematically, artistically, or otherwise motivated. These differences are acted out in front of a lifeless object that distinguishes itself from other objects by virtue of the fact that the societies' members have given it a function as symbol.<sup>8</sup> As material forms, pictures embody and communicate the diverse political, religious, and other cultural values (i.e., art) that individual members of society, groups within a society, or the society as a whole identify with.<sup>9</sup> This is what Mitchell is saying when he writes that »pictures, including world pictures, have been always with us, and there is no getting beyond pictures, much less word pictures, to a more authentic relationship with Being, with the Real, or the World.«<sup>10</sup> Thus, a material picture body is required in order to form a picture of the world in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

For this reason, offensiveness and attraction are accidental qualities of a picture and reside in the eye of the beholder, who turns a lifeless, mute object into a symbol of cultural value he or she can identify with. If a picture disrupts these values in any way or to any degree, it can cause shock, and if it confirms these values, joy. Mitchell's study does not address the interesting fact that the same picture can leave another viewer entirely indifferent, and that he or she can fail to perceive the affirmation or breach of values of the mute, lifeless object that makes no personal impression, and instead pass it by without taking any notice.

My second example shows the photograph of a slender man with a dark, closely trimmed beard and long, well-groomed hair wearing a close-fitting, elaborately embroidered golden dress (Fig. 5). The man is holding his arms out at his sides. His heavily made-up eyes and long hair emphasize his feminine features. He is holding a microphone in his right hand. The youthful figure,



[ FIG. 5 ]  
Conchita Wurst's appearance  
at the ESC, 2014



[ FIG. 6 ]  
Candy Darling, Cosmopolitan, Nov. 1972  
(photo by Francesco Scavullo)

the face, the frontal pose, and the golden dress make a festive impression. Thin golden discs as large as thalers are falling around him. The man is reminiscent of Jesus, and his pose resembles late medieval depictions of the Crucifixion.

### **Iconoclash**

In his essay on the Karlsruhe exhibition *Iconoclash* (2002), Bruno Latour listed the criteria at play when a viewer takes offense at a picture and formulated a typology of the iconoclast.<sup>12</sup> Here, too, the indifferent viewer of pictures is missing. Latour defines the idea of the »iconoclash as what happens when there is uncertainty about the exact role of the hand at work in the production of a mediator. Is it a hand with a hammer ready to expose, to denounce, to debunk, to show up, to disappoint, to disenchant [...]? Or is it, on the contrary, a cautious and careful hand, palm turned as if to catch, to elicit, to educe, to welcome, to generate, to entertain, to collect truth and sanctity?»<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the iconoclash is a tension, an ambivalence embedded in the picture that leads one viewer to see the painting as sacred and the other as sacrilege. In this vein, the destruction of a picture is a war by proxy: the real target is the one who destroys another person's »false idols« in order to erect his own, which are then to be regarded as »true.«<sup>14</sup> The acting agency is also dependent on the cultural identity, education, and outlook of the picture producer, who has his own reasons for his production. Art, as I sought to show with my first example, Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (Fig. 1), is one of many examples of Latour's iconoclash: an experiment with the viewer, who is called upon to ponder, in this case, the connections between sacredness



and art, Madonna and elephant dung, a light-skinned Mary and a Mary of African heritage, etc. The painting, on view in a museum, demonstrates another method of enlightened thinking concerning the way paintings like *The Holy Virgin Mary* can be approached: the predetermined art context highlights the historically contested and legally secured freedom of the artist, the autonomy of art since the modern era.<sup>15</sup> With this freedom, the work of art offers scope for reflection to all viewers interested in considering a possible connection between a Mary with African heritage, female genitals, and elephant dung and who for this reason find the painting fascinating — or are outraged by it. The destruction of art is subject to prosecution in the Western world. In times of globalization, the museum — a place of living democracy — becomes a symbolic space for tolerance in pluralistic societies. The arguments for or against a picture should be carried out with words and not, as in New York, punished with political sanctions.

But what about the second example (Fig.5)? The photograph shows Thomas Neuwirth, alias Conchita Wurst, the winner of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) in May 2014. Together with other photographs, it was widely disseminated through various mass media and soon unleashed an iconoclasm. Conchita's widely covered Copenhagen performance was characterized as a »cross between martyr and savior.«<sup>16</sup> Depending on people's pre-existing socio-political or religious attitudes, Conchita Wurst inspired either enthusiasm or hatred among astonished viewers. People immediately recognized the allusion to a Christ icon in the fictional persona and complained that nothing about Conchita Wurst's physical appearance fit together: the dress, a mixture of ball gown and penitential robe, didn't quite suit the performer's androgynous figure; the eyes, gazing heavenward through false eyelashes, didn't match the dark beard, which in turn clashed

with the dress and a Latino beauty's long hair. The visual impression that Conchita made on her critics clearly oscillated between a figure of salvation and a devil. »Euro-homos burn in hell,« cried the Russian right-wing nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Vienna's Archbishop, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, was pleased with the performer's success and attributed it to »God's multi-colored garden,« in which there are also people who feel they are members of the opposite sex and »of course deserve our complete respect.«<sup>18</sup> Tom Neuwirth's TV appearance as Conchita Wurst quickly transformed the performer into an icon. The image he presented as a bearded, long-haired lady in a ball gown sparked a widely covered public debate that strongly polemicized homosexuality and tranvestitism and legitimized each individual's freedom to assume a gender identity apart from the heterosexual mainstream. This photograph also shows how pictures, as symbols of cultural (and in this context, religious) values, respond to complex social contexts and not only transport our »relationship with Being, with the Real, or the World« (Mitchell, see above), but construct them in the first place.

Anyone who hadn't previously formed an opinion on transgenderism could, after seeing this picture and the surging flood of imagery it unleashed, feel called upon to take part in the debate — or simply to marvel at how a pop star dressed as a bearded woman could agitate high-ranking politicians and induce a high-ranking Catholic official to utter words of tolerance. What makes the phenomenon of the offensive picture so interesting is the »sensational form« that has resulted from different viewer standpoints and contexts produced discourses and iconoclashes, and generated ambivalence.<sup>19</sup> Three types of picture viewers can be identified here, each of which behaves in a certain way toward the picture:

the picture lover, the picture destroyer, and the viewer who is indifferent to the picture. The arguments a viewer might have for or against a picture, or not at all, promise more than just information on how pictures are dealt with. The opinion an individual person expresses about a picture reveals much about his or her salient ideological sensibilities. In most cases, the offensive picture is a cause for negative emotions, which the picture haters would like to try to justify by arguing with hard facts. On the other hand, the picture lovers will express positive emotions about the picture: the picture is able to inspire them, capture them, and fill them with joy or astonishment. It's not always clear what reasons lie behind this affection. On the other hand, the indifferent viewers feel nothing in response to the picture; either they will overlook it completely or feel neither pulled toward nor repulsed by the picture. It means nothing to them. Each of us brings different degrees of attention to bear in response to the mass of pictures in today's visual culture: most of them flit by in any case; they fail to interest us for a variety of reasons — only very few pictures have a strong enough effect to make us look at them. Let's try to understand how this happens.

### **Powerful Pictures**

A picture requires a certain power for it to have an offending or appealing effect. What, then, makes pictures so powerful? Offense and appeal are, as we have seen, effects that are part of the picture, but do not exist objectively to the extent that they reach every viewer: thus a picture can seem both strong and weak. My inquiry into the power of pictures is relevant particularly in light of



the sheer quantity of them circulating globally. Which pictures are seen amid this seemingly endless mass, and which ones attract attention? What are the visual attributes, material makeup, aesthetic quality, what content and cultural contexts do pictures have that — to make use of a current metaphor — emerge from this flood of imagery, that resist drowning in the whirlpool and can either rescue themselves on the banks of visibility or be pulled out of the current to be viewed, interpreted, and become, in whatever way, culturally effective in the broadest sense of the word?

And, regarding art in the age of mass-media imagery: what »power« do pictures from an art context possess? In many cultures, pictures have been collected for centuries and have been preserved from destruction by being stored or exhibited in museums. What role do the pictorial traditions of various cultures' art histories play in the flood of images? Are pictures that arise and are viewed today in an art context more powerful than pictures that exist in a non-art context?

In the following, the word »powerful« refers solely to the degree of effect a picture has in the various different debates; in this sense, even innocuous pictures can be powerful. In a general sense, powerful pictures attract attention: they are disseminated throughout the media, people talk about them, and they are quoted in other pictures or different media. Their effect can fade quickly, or it can remain visible, linger, and increase in power. Pictures, whether from the art context or not, that cause offense or appeal belong to the category of those powerful pictures that emerge from the flood of imagery. There are, however, very different reasons behind their respective power. Offensive and appealing pictures are fished out of the colorful flood of imagery and equipped with arguments that support the offense or attraction. In this way, they can also reach



those who would have passed them by without noticing them and who now stop to wonder why this picture in particular is able to offend or attract. As we've seen, Chris Ofili's painting is one of these cases. On the other hand, pictures that are produced in an art context are fished out of the flood because they require arguments to justify their preservation, for instance in a museum. This also applies to Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, which was shown in three internationally renowned art museums as Young British Art. Thus, Ofili's *Virgin* is a powerful picture for two reasons, with the scandal unleashed in the Brooklyn Museum increasing the painting's power.

»Conchita,« as her inventor's statement reads, »is a fictional figure, Tom Neuwirth's alter ego. And what we fictional figures make is art.«<sup>20</sup> The role-playing of a man glamorously dressed as a bearded woman in the context of mass-media entertainment culture has its origins in the drag queens of Warholian Pop Art provenance (Fig. 6). Whether or not she »makes it« into the museum to prove the art status she lays claim to remains to be seen. In the year 2014, Conchita Wurst represented an updated version of the pop transvestite; and as a fictional persona, Neuwirth has given her a clear political statement, namely that of »fighting for people who are discriminated against on a daily basis.«<sup>21</sup> Her image embodies a collision of two different moral values: the allusion to Jesus with his purity, innocence, and holiness is paired with a manifestation of bearded femininity, putting transgenderism and homosexuality on display, which are politically and morally shunned in many societies. This contradiction lent Neuwirth's Conchita Wurst persona a visual power and a resulting omnipresent visibility that stood out as an iconoclasm. The image was hotly debated for a short time and had a powerful effect in the sense described above.

## Visibility

Pictures with a strong offending/attracting effect are visible — and they can also come to the attention of those who don't really want to become involved with these pictures, but only notice them after other viewers who have found these pictures offensive or attractive have brought them into discussion. And we already have named two criteria of powerful pictures that are defined in formal aesthetic and phenomenological terms: visibility and effectiveness.

»Visibility is the possibility to be seen,« writes Lambert Wiesing in his study *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes* [*The visibility of the image*]. Yet how is the visibility of an image different from other visibilities? Following the art theoretician Konrad Fiedler (1841 – 1895), Wiesing defines the visibility of an image as a »special form sui generis,«<sup>22</sup> in that the visibility of a picture's surface is not identical to the visibility of the object present: »Each picture has to raise its surface to an autonomous phenomenon, which means to establish a difference between the picture's surface and the material of the picture.«<sup>23</sup> Each picture that depicts an object transforms it into visibility and in doing so accepts that the object can no longer be touched, smelled, heard, or used. The picture »disempowers reality;« it negates and destroys reality in order to set up a »visual effect sui generis« in its place. In phenomenological terms, the pure visibility of the picture is defined as an autonomous form of being — and not as a form of appearance contingent on being, as it is for Plato. Thus, a picture constitutes an autonomous reality through the secession and absolutization of visibility. From this, Fiedler developed the notion of the »pictorial creation of the world,« according to which the picture generates

its own world. The pure visibility of the picture depends on a material carrier. Visibility is produced by shaping the material in which the image is expressed. Paradoxically, producing the visibility of pictures requires rendering invisible the very material necessary for the image to become visible — it's only then that the world of images can arise, images characterized by pure visibility.

This can take us further regarding the problem of the offense/attraction of pictures. In the case of Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, for the viewer who, like Rudolph Giuliani, encounters the painting, the traditional pictorial form of the Catholic Madonna as it was developed and consolidated in Western art history collides with the pictorial form developed by Ofili, which deviates from this traditional visibility.<sup>24</sup> Added to this is the material used, which is unusual in the tradition of the Madonna paintings and which particularly disturbed Giuliani, as did the flying vaginas on the traditional gold ground. Anyone who compares Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* with the reality of church- and art-sanctioned cult images of saints can feel as though these have lost their power, because Ofili's painting creates its own world, one that deviates from the usual appearance of the picture of the saint. Thus, *The Holy Virgin Mary* has the potential to exert an effect on devout Catholics in New York or in other places around the world as an attack on matters of religious faith as they are traditionally depicted in paintings of saints. But it is also just as possible to interpret Ofili's Madonna as an artist's call to deconstruct the traditional Madonna canon with a dark-skinned African version. This new version can be regarded as a picture that visualizes the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception by adding little photographs of flying vaginas to symbolize fertility. That is, a dark-skinned *Holy Virgin Mary*



evokes arguments of post-colonial critique and non-traditional forms of showing virginity.<sup>25</sup>

Wiesing is further concerned with the question of »what a formal understanding of pictures considers to be artistic claims to truth.«<sup>26</sup> Let us follow his line of argument less in terms of art and truth, and more in terms of its potency, which is important for the criterion of a picture's offensive/attractive power. For this reason, let us replace Wiesing's term »art« with the more general term »picture« (cf. footnote 1) in the following statement: »The picture [art] appears as an attack on the state of the viewer in that he or she has to be altered to see the world as it is represented.«<sup>27</sup> Wiesing is concerned with a »rhetorical-pragmatic dimension« of the picture [of art], with the ways of seeing that the picture communicates: it induces »the beholder« to see the world with a changed perspective that is as closely related as possible to the change intended by the picture and its maker. »One could describe the way a world analysis functions with the phrase ›truth of the picture [of art],‹ in other words, the picture's [artwork's] ability to represent and to interpret reality in a way that can also apply to others.«<sup>28</sup> This statement seems to apply to our two examples (Fig. 1 and 5). In the eyes of the viewer who is either offended or attracted by them, they each have the ability to create a world of their own that can cause the viewer to see the world in the way the picture dictates: in the case of Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, a Catholic Madonna, and in the case of Conchita Wurst, a Christ figure. This applies to the picture's ability to generate a new and different world through visibility; but how does the powerful effect of the picture come about?



## Phenomena of Attention

Bernhard Waldenfels addressed this in his book *Sinne und Künste im Wechselspiel. Modi ästhetischer Erfahrung* [*The interplay of the senses and the arts. Modes of aesthetic experience*]. Before he lists the criteria for a picture's potency that are helpful in understanding powerful pictures, he more generally examines experiences of the surprising and new. These, according to Waldenfels, arise not from an act intentionally directed at a certain object, but rather result from an »event in which something becomes visible.« Becoming attentive, however, is neither a subjective nor an objective process, but rather a »dual event:« »Something comes to my attention; I take notice.«<sup>29</sup> Waldenfels defines attentiveness as an initial experience, a primal phenomenon. Attracting attention (experience or affection = pathos) bears features of the adverse, undesired, and injuring, and it stands out. As events, attracting attention (pathos) and paying attention (response) cannot be separated from one another. In this sense, offense is something that stands out negatively, while attraction is a positive stimulus. Hence, the effects of the offense/attraction are preceded by a cause: a surprise, an astonishment, a fright. »What we notice and what surprises us always comes too soon, while our response always comes too late.«<sup>30</sup> What matters here is the suddenness of this experience, a shift in time and space that splits the present, that points to an impossible coincidence in which the power of effect unfolds and emotions are unleashed.

In this regard, what is offensive/attractive employs a power that we cannot fend off, because the reasons behind its effect are not consciously understood at first. The rational mind does not grasp the reason behind the offense/attraction, which exerts its effects on the emotions first and activates either

resistance or attraction. Offense/attraction is experienced as an effect on the body and brings about a physical resistance or feeling of being attracted. In the initial experience of taking notice, the event that is evaluated in retrospect as offensive/attractive exerts its effect as an unconscious force that defies control. The offensive/attractive attribute disturbs the flow of habit and, in extreme cases of negative emotion, can be traumatizing or shocking.

Waldenfels distinguishes between two forms of attention: a primary, innovative, and creative form and a secondary one that proceeds in a repetitive and reproductive manner. An aspect of the second form is that »the events of attracting attention solidify into repeatable qualities, while the events of taking notice turn into bodily habit.«<sup>31</sup> In this way, it leads to what I termed above a »pre-existing attitude,« or, as Waldenfels formulates it, »to the formation of favored worlds of attention that mirror collective and individual interests.«<sup>32</sup> Strong forms of pathos are evidenced in the aberration from the habitual or traditional that transgresses the framework of existing meaning structures and systems of regulation and makes itself noticeable, for instance as something improbable or unharmonious.<sup>33</sup> The process of gaining attention is not at all similar to a peaceful river: there are currents and whirlpools of varying intensity, with the »suddenness of the shock« at one end of the scale, and the »slumber of habit« at the other.<sup>34</sup>

### **Phenomena of Visual Attention**

What, then, is the specific quality of visual experience, what allows a picture to become so strong in a phenomenological sense that it offends or attracts? In his

phenomenology of visual attention, Waldenfels makes a distinction between »an effect of images« from a form of media, and »an effect that emerges through the images.« The effect-producing image is to be differentiated from the effect it produces, just as a difference exists between a representation and the thing represented. It is a matter of the effect of an image as image, which does not follow the perception of the picture, but rather »rumbles within it, as an ongoing agitation.«<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the source of the effect is neither a visible nor a visual thing, but rather something without meaning or law, in a strict sense even non-visual. The strongest experiences render us speechless and go beyond our capacity to comprehend them: they defy classification and visual elaboration. Waldenfels detects in the commandment »Thou *shalt* not make unto thee any graven image,« which expresses the religiously motivated ban on pictures, a resistance that says: »Thou *canst* not make unto thee any graven image.«<sup>36</sup>

How, then, does an invisible pathos leap out, how does a non-visual effect enter the picture and stage itself? »We have always had images before us, those we see and those we create, framed and unframed. We only encounter the effects of the power of imagination in the images it generates in secret. The source of what so affects us would forever remain blind and dumb [...] if it weren't for what we respond to, which articulates itself in signs and images.«<sup>37</sup> In this vein, the offending picture reacts to the individual's inner store of images that is activated by the external image: I notice the picture because it looks similar to other images familiar to me, yet is different. While the similarity is a reaction to the pre-existing attitude, the aberration stands out as an impetus. The picture looks other than expected.

The difference between the visual effect that seeing sets in motion and the overall form of the image in which it develops and solidifies also enters into the



image. »[...] One must distinguish between the seeing image that looks back at us and the seen image that we, for our part, see.«<sup>38</sup> In accordance with the various forms that an image can adopt, Waldenfels distinguishes between varying forms of pathos and affect that give rise to different responses. The point of departure of a visual dynamic is the disquieted gaze, which requires a »disruptive stranger:« »It is the disquietude that keeps the gap between the seeing and seen image open [...], a mixture of attraction and repulsion that Kant ascribed to the sublime.«<sup>39</sup> Waldenfels locates this »disquietude« in the basic elements of art's »classic picture« and finds examples in the paintings of Malevich and Goya. It is these qualities of line, color, figure, and ground that »capture the viewer's gaze with a movement of the gaze that he has no control over.«<sup>40</sup> The pathos of the image, then, is greatest »when it is realized in a visual event that is physical, that generates space,« for instance in the greens and blues of Monet's *Water Lilies*.<sup>41</sup>

### Phenomena of Taking Notice

Let us leave behind the historical aesthetic of the classical art picture of the Monet variety and regard a painting by a contemporary artist who has titled his work *The Holy Virgin Mary* (Fig. 1). We are in the art museum now, in a special place for »creating attention:« art shifts the gaze from what the picture depicts to how it does this, thus shifting the viewer's focus to the act of attention and perception. Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* is a good example of this kind of attention. The painting shows what it shows not merely in a sur-





[FIG. 7]  
Unknown artist: Our  
Lady of Perpetual Help,  
Byzantine icon, 15<sup>th</sup> century,  
Rome, Esquiline Hill

prising, remarkable form — the Western history of pictures used a different form for the Holy Virgin Mary and the surrounding cherubs and anchored this pictorial form in tradition (Fig. 1 and 7).

The artist frames a reference to this iconic form by quoting the ornamental golden ground of Byzantine icons and medieval paintings of saints, which symbolizes an aura of holiness. At the same time, the dark skin and African features break with the traditionally Western canon of beauty, in which Mary's visage is portrayed as light-skinned and delicate. For those familiar with Madonna iconography, the dark skin of *The Holy Virgin Mary* refers back to the tradition

of the »Black Madonna« in the Song of Solomon (1.5): »Nigra sum sed Formosa.« *The Holy Virgin Mary's* nose and mouth do not, however, conform to the traditional topos of the »Black Madonna,« nor do they conform to other traditionally light-skinned Madonna pictures. The material of elephant dung, shaped into a cylinder and applied to the Madonna's breast, also shifts the viewer's gaze to the nature of this visual detail. By employing the irony of altering traditional pictorial forms, an irony that has strongly characterized avant-garde art since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ofili's Madonna confirms Waldenfels's remark that »the fine arts have also always been art forms of attention that lend space to the inconspicuous.«<sup>42</sup> The scandal, however, lies outside the painting, in the two bottom clumps inscribed with the painting's title *Holy Virgin*. The iconoclasm contained within Ofili's painting attracts attention because the subject of the painting collides with its composition, for instance the pictorial elements in butterfly form, which are photographs of female genitals. In the art picture, as we may conclude from Waldenfels's phenomenology of visual attention, the most effective visual forces are compressed — an »iconopathy that lends the official iconology an additional dimension of depth by always addressing images as event images or as excitation images as well.«<sup>43</sup> Waldenfels points out that »the history of viewing and fabricating pictures suffers from a self-made image oblivion. [...] The source of what affects us and what the responsive gaze reacts to becomes detached from what is seen in the image. [...] Seeing approaches recognition, for which everything is as clear as day and solidifies into a having seen.«<sup>44</sup> The result is that the picture is drained of its sensuousness, the origin of which process Waldenfels locates in Plato's picture theory. Plato sublimated the desire to see, the pathos and the visual magic that

occur in the act of seeing, into a seeing with the mind's eye: »Ideas are the true images.«

Waldenfels ascribes a potency *sui generis* to art, an ability to attract attention that does not stand in the service of non-art goals, for instance the creation of political consensus, the awakening of religious faith, advertising, or entertainment. Art pursues an »indirect mechanism of action« that derives from »a surplus in the extraordinary and aberrations from the orderly.«<sup>45</sup> By heightening the form of attention, it has the ability to distort natural experience by redirecting the gaze from what it depicts to how it presents itself, drawing the viewer's attention to the process of attention and perception.

Ofli's painting and Neuwirth's fictional Conchita Wurst persona are two very different attention-getting visual phenomena (Fig. 1 and 5). Both bear features of something contrary, undesired, and injurious in that they refer to the customary and traditional in a manner that goes against the rules; this is why they are able to elicit emotional reactions such as astonishment, fear, repulsion, and even shock. In the case of Conchita Wurst, the aspect of the picture that induces shock is quickly identified: a bearded woman in a glamorous costume, reminiscent of a Christ icon. The outstanding feature here, as Waldenfels would also find, is outdone by the all-too-outstanding, while the event of seeing the picture is elevated to its content, an image event [Bildereignis] that keeps the picture machinery going, in this case that of the television-broadcast ESC.<sup>46</sup> The figure's aim of attracting attention to a socio-political agenda, according to Waldenfels, also excludes the figure from the art context. In the case of Ofli's *Holy Virgin Mary*, the question as to the causes of the offensive effect is more complicated. The art context determines the pre-existing attitude



according to which, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a painting that depicts a deformed female figure could hardly cause shock anymore. Here, it is the golden ground painted after the medieval tradition of pictures of saints, together with the flesh-colored »bubbles,« that draw attention, disquiet the eye, and can be perceived as »disruptive strangers.« The painting's title, hidden on the two supporting dung clumps, abruptly reveals the intention of an iconoclasm directed particularly at Western viewers familiar with the tradition of Madonna portrayals. The painting's title pulls the work out of an art context and places it in a sacrosanct, religious tradition, which it breaks with in a provocative way through deformation. With its dogma of the greatest possible degree of freedom and autonomy, the contemporary art context is unable to protect the painting from the allegation of offensiveness. As a result, the iconoclasm takes place in an in-between space produced by the painting, in which similarity and difference, tradition and innovation, Church and art battle one another.

Let us examine a third example: a large-format billboard of a pair of hands poised in diamond formation (Fig. 8). A closer look reveals that the picture is comprised of countless small photographs pieced together in the form of a mosaic. The hands on the billboard belong to the current German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. The billboard was part of her Christian Democratic Party's campaign for Germany's parliamentary election on September 22, 2013. With its huge horizontal format of 70 × 20 meters, the ad surprised both Berliners and tourists who happened to be near the Hauptbahnhof, Berlin's main train station. Press reports revealed it was comprised of 2,150 photographs of Merkel supporters. The CDU's campaign slogan, printed on a second large-format billboard, read:



[ FIG. 8 ]

Blumberry GmbH: Germany's Future in Good Hands  
(Deutschlands Zukunft in guten Händen), CDU campaign ad,  
Berlin, 2013

»Germany's Future in Good Hands. CDU.« In the race for the chancellery, the billboard's impact was that of a visual bomb followed by a tidal wave of commentary in the daily papers. The Berlin Social Democratic party chair complained about the »monstrous, hollow personality cult. [...] The poised fingertips signalize just how secretively the people of the three-party coalition behave toward one another« (he was referring here to the grand coalition of the CDU, the SPD, and the FDP, the business-friendly Free Democratic Party).<sup>47</sup> Other commentators countered: »sacred allegations of this kind do not apply to the sober pastor's daughter.« Others considered it a highly symbolic gesture that signified the following: »The mother of the nation takes Germany by the hand and leads it out of the crisis.« The gesture, called the »Merkel rhombus« or »Merkelizer,«

had already inspired numerous interpretations in 2009, when the chancellor used it during her public speeches.<sup>48</sup> Soon there was talk of »Mommy's hands,« which were characterized either as »old-motherly pastoral« or as »magical/dangerous,« as the British magazine *The Economist* called them in an allusion to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: »One ring to rule them all.«<sup>49</sup> There was and is a broad consensus about the meditative nature of the hand gesture poised mid-body, refraining from action: it expresses concentration, prudence, and a search for points of connection.<sup>50</sup> In a formal sense, the billboard distills the meanings ascribed to the hand gesture into an icon. Together, the large format and close crop of the picture, which reduces the chancellor to her hands, intensify the gesture's effect. Apart from the religious connotations and mystifying semantics the Merkel hands were alleged to carry, the billboard provided an occasion to debate the acceptability of huge election billboards in public space. In public opinion, the billboard debate, which took place prior to the election, oscillated between disparagement (there was no political content conveyed in the ad) and an appreciation of the picture as a »courageous art installation« with a highly symbolic statement.<sup>51</sup> Someone even proposed that »the billboard should remain in place, and a cathedral be built around it.«<sup>52</sup>

The team of Lutz Meyer, head of the Berlin advertising agency *Blumberry* and a political scientist, succeeded in creating a »powerful« picture for two reasons. Initially, among the gestures of political power, which are primarily male, the Merkel rhombus is a novelty: men tend to make a fist, stick out their hands, or raise an index finger. In the magazine section of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the chancellor's contender, Peer Steinbrück, countered it with an equally powerful pic-





[FIG. 9]

Rogier van der Weyden:  
Bladelin Altarpiece,  
(Praying Hands of Our Lady),  
Berlin, Staatliche Museen,  
Gemäldegalerie

ture, the »finger.«<sup>53</sup> The iconization of the hand gesture Merkel chose is powerful because it carries meaning both in terms of iconography and the history of visual culture.<sup>54</sup> In many cultures, it is used as a gesture of meditation or of religious contemplation in prayer. Iconographically, the iconic distillation of the gesture in the billboard leads to the Christian tradition of devotional pictures. One critic's comment that the billboard resembled an »antique painting with a cracked surface« points in this direction.<sup>55</sup> A short distance from Berlin's main train station, the Gemäldegalerie of the Berlin Kulturforum has fitting iconographic models for the Merkel rhombus in its collection of Old Masters, for instance late medieval paintings of Mary's adoration of the newborn Jesus (Fig. 9).

The billboard icon, the debates over it, and the sacred interpretation of the Merkel rhombus compare Merkel's hands to the late medieval devotional picture, forming a connection between Mary and the »mother of the nation.« Whether or not the iconically distilled Merkel rhombus in the campaign billboard deliberately refers to late medieval painting is irrelevant. Using a prayer gesture in a political race, which the billboard both shows and conceals, makes the picture offensive to its critics. In a society based on a neutral worldview that nonetheless has to deal with religious fundamentalists who create political crises, the billboard, which subliminally communicates a confluence of politics and religion, holds a high potential for iconoclasm. Here, too, the picture generates an interstice in which a traditional form undergoes a change in interpretation. In response to the billboard, and for varying reasons, traditionalists, religious communities, politicians, and the lay public could accuse one another of abusing a traditional form.

### Powerful Pictures of Hermeneutics

Common to all three examples is that the more or less openly evidenced recourse to Christian pictorial tradition and a crossing over into a new functional space that stands in historical or current competition with this tradition becomes an occasion for offense. These pictures set themselves apart from the flood of imagery because they evoke this tradition in a place that is felt to be inappropriate. In the following case for a visual hermeneutics, this recourse to pictorial tradition is a reason behind the picture's strong effect, as well as for its »powerful being« and meaning. In his essay *Zuwachs an Sein. Hermeneutische Reflexion und bildende Kunst* (1996)

[*Increase in being. Hermeneutic reflection and the visual arts*], the art historian and philosopher Gottfried Boehm, in a reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer, determines that »the picture's own being, which only attains power and becomes a powerful picture when reality transfers itself over to it, becomes iconically compressed. Powerful pictures are those that metabolize reality. They do not depict reality, but also do not oppose it, producing instead a dense unity that cannot be pried apart.«<sup>56</sup> This is expanded by the following explanation, in which the phenomenological criteria quoted above are augmented by the hermeneutic argumentation:

»These kinds of pictures are powerful because they make a part of reality visible to us that we would never experience without them. The picture refers to itself (underscores itself, rather than cancels itself out), while at the same time it points to the subject represented. Thus, it is able to make a heightened truth visible, which raises it far above the mere presence that representations convey.«<sup>57</sup> Where does the power come from that the powerful picture wields, how does the truth arise that it makes visible? The picture, according to Boehm in a reference to Gadamer, »becomes a part of the being of the subject represented. This is why every powerful picture is an occurrence of being that helps determine the level of being of the subject represented.« Furthermore: »through the representation, the subject represented undergoes an increase in being.« (WM, p. 145).<sup>58</sup> Boehm calls this »iconic difference.«<sup>59</sup> In its representation of everyday things, the painted still life, for instance, creates an enchanting world and lends things a »heightened truth of being.«<sup>60</sup> The religious picture, however, succeeds even more in bestowing an increase in being on the subject represented: »One may generalize that religious works are never satis-



fied with merely depicting their powers.«<sup>61</sup> The pictorial form of the *vera icon* demonstrates this in a special way: with the imprint, considered genuine, of Christ's facial features on a linen cloth, his true image translates the theological notion of real presence into a legendary picture.

The »increase in being,« the picture's power and truth, can be explained by this conflation of original image and likeness. From a hermeneutic perspective, the picture derives its power from the participation of the subject represented. For this reason, it can happen that a contemporary artist's Madonna portrayal is not perceived as a work of modern art, but as a picture of a saint; in this way, the picture of a pop star can become a Christ icon and the billboard of a female hand gesture can be compared to devotional pictures. Boehm's visual hermeneutics, based on Gadamer, understand the pictorial artifact as an occurrence of being and grasps the picture as a »source of power,« a »process in the world.« According to Boehm, what is essential is the »spawning,« the »discovering,« the »sensuous power,« and the »spiritual energy of pictures« that connect to the »living reality.«<sup>62</sup> When these attributes exert their effect in the picture, visual hermeneutics refers to this as »powerful.«

### Splitting the Visual Order

Boehm leaves no doubt that he wants the description »powerful« to be ascribed exclusively to works of art and architecture. For this reason, he draws a clear boundary between powerful pictures of art history and the ones he characterizes as »weak,« the mass media pictures that are machine-made, generated through

technology. Their »aim and function consist in depiction, in disseminating information through the eye. [...] The logic of these pictures consists in self-abnegation, in the quest to [...] assume a posture of objectivity generally accepted to be the only source of appropriate and correct information.«<sup>63</sup> Like Waldenfels, Boehm spoke of the danger of decadence when he divided visual cultures into strong and weak in 1996, a decadence caused by the new media and technology of image transmission. The art historian located the »weakness« of an emergent visual culture of the masses in the intention of these pictures »to bring no will of their own into play, not to refer to themselves at all, but to approach the matter in an entirely transparent manner. [...] Consequently, these kinds of technical pictures are very weak pictures.«<sup>64</sup> Boehm calls these weak pictures »copies,« and in doing so he verbalizes what Waldenfels called a »desensualization of the picture« and, even more clearly and with reference to digital imagery, what Byung-Chul Han called an »affectum« that brings about an immediate satisfaction in response to a stimulus.<sup>65</sup>

According to Boehm, the mechanization of picture production that began with the invention of photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the key to its success, whereas the products of these picture machines are no more than »doublings, a double of reality.«<sup>66</sup> With the »rapid success of the weak everyday pictures,« the number of their authors also increases.<sup>67</sup> In the mid-1990s, however, it was difficult to predict how many picture producers would be in a position, with the help of digital technology, to produce inconceivable numbers of new pictures every day. Boehm considered the family photo album, which was still popular at the time, to be the pinnacle of trivial, mass-media-produced »weak« pictures, which he compared to the »old world« of art. The »readily comprehensible economy of

pictures [the reference here is to art, C.K.] that is cultivated in designated places, on chosen occasions, and in keeping with the legitimacy of its content, lies like a distant continent on the horizon of the past.«<sup>68</sup>

In this vein, the traditional, elitist visual orders of art history give way to the disorder of the non-art pictures that the new mass media produce without respite in order to »smuggle in« reality as a reservoir of information in »society's circulation of information.«<sup>69</sup> As stated above, Boehm was unable to predict in 1996 what elements of visual culture would undergo profound change in the coming years — but he already suspected how much potential the new picture machines had for the »old world, with its rich, but readily comprehensible economy of pictures.« The reference here is to art's »powerful« pictures, on which he bases a strong concept of modern art.<sup>70</sup>

### What Makes Pictures Powerful

Let us return to our very different examples and the question of what makes them so powerful that they are able to attract attention, emerge from the flood of pictures, and inspire offense or produce an iconoclasm (Fig. 1, 5, 9). I chose the examples from three contexts of contemporary visual culture, all of which are very different from one another, but have something in common. Each is connected to the pictorial forms, types, and traditions of the old world of Catholic Christianity: the Madonna icon, the Christ icon, and the devotional picture. In the examples, these old pictorial forms appear in contemporary form and as such prove to be effective pictures of young art, a pop star, and an election campaign billboard.



The Western world pays special attention to the pictures of saints preserved in churches and museums, one visited by devout Catholics and the other by art experts and lovers. In the »old [Christian] world,« for those who believed in them, they still possessed the »strong sense of the iconic« that induced the divine being »to meaningfully, visually appear« in that »the intrinsic iconic value has an effect on the original archetype.«<sup>71</sup> According to this, hermeneutic criteria for the »strongest« picture are to be found in the pictures of saints and rulers: God and rulers »essentially have their being in the act of showing themselves (WM, p. 147).«<sup>72</sup> In the »old world« of art, this hermeneutic pictorial quality was preserved in museums as a memento. In contemporary picture cultures, this old, culturally practiced participation of pictures in the sovereign and divine perpetuates their effect in a paradoxical way. We don't know whether Rudolph Giuliani prays before a painting of the Madonna in his parish church. In any case, however, he sees Mary's image desecrated in Ofili's painting. For anyone who, while not believing in the pictures of saints, still defends the Church institutions connected to them, the three contemporary examples embody the divine that appears as a pictorial tradition in their updated forms, just as much in the costumed Conchita Wurst as in Chancellor Merkel's election campaign ad. These visual effects are paradoxical because, for the faithful, the old, powerful Christian pictures are the triggers of an iconoclasm.

Removed from their sacred or museum context, these pictures of the old world exert their effect in the profane space of a Western world that presents itself as secularized, especially here. They transfer their former power to their updated artistic or mass-media versions through a contemporary guise. They are offensive to those who see their original models caricatured, defamed, or misused. On the other hand, they are welcomed by those who are reminded of the

meaning of the old devotional pictures and who lament their deformation through institutions and potentates. While some are outraged over the distortion, others attest to the traditional values of the Christian mission that they communicate. In both cases, they confirm the thesis of hermeneutics, which asserts that the object represented participates in the being of the representation; conversely, they refute the thesis of the »weak« mass-media pictures.

The visual qualities of Conchita Wurst that have nothing to do with art, such as the extreme degree of conspicuousness and the entertainment purpose, collide in the Christ-like transvestite look of a pop star with a hermeneutic pictorial meaning that never would have been unleashed without this picture. Conchita Wurst therefore uses the »powerful« Christian image form to attract attention and, through this, to set in motion a discourse, not about Christ icons, but about social issues of contention, for instance homosexuality and Christian values of tolerance.

The CDU's campaign ad aims for an iconization of an ambivalent gesture; indirectly and rich in allusion, it employs a gesture conveyed through previous imagery in order to communicate, together with its claim, trust in the values connected to the »C« in CDU. The power of this picture-text message provoked the iconoclasm its political opponents brought about, whose ironic and polemical rhetoric amounted to little more than a weakening of the Christian connotations in the meaning of picture and text.

The three examples have shown that the »old« hermeneutic quality of the »power of the image« regarding today's visual cultures allows for no division of the world into old, powerful (art) pictures and new, weak media pictures. The two worlds have long since merged: media pictures with art and traditional

imagery, and art with media pictures. And the phenomenological *Wirkmacht und Wirkkraft der Bilder* (*Power and Potency of Images*) shows a permeability in both directions in terms of a clear differentiation between the effects produced by art and by non-art. Or, as Gottfried Boehm remarked with an eye to the art of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: »The spectrum of modern art experience is broad and contains examples of subtle spirituality as well as instinctive vitality, inscrutable profundity, and blatant banality.«<sup>73</sup> Not least, the three examples serve as reminders that even in modern Western societies, which have tended to profile themselves as secular since the Enlightenment, pictures as vehicles of symbolic form have not stopped conveying the canon of Christian ethical values.

<sup>1</sup> \*I am grateful for intense discussions with Birgit Meyer, who accompanied the progress of this paper and encouraged me to study religious artworks in contemporary visual cultures. With Jojada Verrips I could discuss an earlier version of this paper. In this paper I am dealing with pictures, using the English term to stress the interplay of image and medium following Hans Belting: *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton 2011, p. 1-36, here p. 10-11: »The picture is the image with a medium. [...] The picture calls [...] for a new discussion with reference to its place within the history of pictorial media. But it also requires a spectator who is able to animate the media as though images were living things. Image perception, a form of animation, is a symbolic act that is guided by cultural patterns and pictorial technologies.«

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the chapter »Offending Images« in William J. T. Mitchell: *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago and London 2005, pp. 111-124, here p. 126. Mitchell

gives the following definitions: »By »image« I mean any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other. By »object« I mean the material support in or on which an image appears, or the material thing that an image refers to or brings into view. [...] By »medium« I mean the set of material practices that brings an image together with an object to produce a picture.« Ibid., pp. XIII.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 131-132.

<sup>4</sup> The exhibition *Sensation*, with works by Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection, opened in 1997 in the Royal Academy of Arts in London, made a stopover in Berlin, and finally traveled to New York's Brooklyn Museum, where Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* provoked prominent visitors, including New York's mayor at the time, Rudolph Giuliani, as well as the less prominent visitor Dennis Heiner, who »piously« covered the work in white paint.



- <sup>5</sup> Cf. David R. Roediger: *Colored White. Transcending the Racial Past*, University of California Press 2002, pp. 35–39. Roediger explains the political and racist context of the attack on Ofili's painting with Giuliani's origins in an Italian-American immigrant family.
- <sup>6</sup> Mitchell: *What Do Pictures Want?* (see note 2), pp. 135–136.
- <sup>7</sup> For more on Giuliani's religious and political predispositions, see Roediger: *Colored White* (see note 5), pp. 33–35.
- <sup>8</sup> »The interplay between image and technology, old and new, constitutes a symbolic act. The response, the audience's perception of the image, is also a symbolic act.« Hans Belting: *An Anthropology of Images* (see note 1), p. 15.
- <sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 9–12., in the introduction »Picture, Medium, Body.«
- <sup>10</sup> Mitchell: *What Do Pictures Want?* (see note 2), p. XIV.
- <sup>11</sup> Birgit Meyer uses the term »sensational form« to convey the complex interplay between producing, mediating, and receiving bodies during the genesis of an extraordinary presence, for instance the divine. »Playing a key role in implementing a particular religious aesthetics through a process of religious socialization that occurs over time, sensational forms include body techniques as well as sensibilities and emotions that become embodied dispositions in the habitus.« Birgit Meyer: *Picturing the Invisible*, in Aaron W. Hughes / Steven Ramey (eds.): *Visual Culture and the Study of Religion*, 27/4–5 (2015), pp. 333–360; see also Birgit Meyer: *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Towards a Material Approach to Religion*, Utrecht 2012, pp. 26–31.
- <sup>12</sup> Bruno Latour: *What is an Iconoclasm? Or is there a World Beyond Image Wars?*, in Bruno Latour / Peter Weibel (eds.): *Iconoclasm*, vol. 1, ZKM Karlsruhe and MIT Cambridge, Mass. 2002, pp. 14–37. Latour undertook a »basic classification of iconoclastic gestures,« which I will come back to.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- <sup>15</sup> Roediger: *Colored White* (see note 5), expounds upon the breach in art's autonomy in the case of *The Holy Virgin Mary*.
- <sup>16</sup> Gerrit Bartels, in *Der Tagesspiegel*, No. 22042, (May 12, 2014), p. 19.
- <sup>17</sup> *Der Tagesspiegel*, No. 22043, (May 13, 2014), p. 24.
- <sup>18</sup> Quote from the online issue of the *Kronenzeitung*, May 16, 2014, [http://www.krone.at/Oesterreich/Kardinal\\_Schoenborn\\_ueber\\_Conchita\\_Bete\\_fuer\\_ihn-Offene\\_Worte-Story-404601](http://www.krone.at/Oesterreich/Kardinal_Schoenborn_ueber_Conchita_Bete_fuer_ihn-Offene_Worte-Story-404601) (accessed on Sept. 8, 2015).
- <sup>19</sup> See note 11.
- <sup>20</sup> Quote from the online issue of <http://kurier.at/menschen/im-gespraech/conchita-wurst-ein-bart-alleine-reicht-nicht/27.066.462> (accessed on Sept. 11, 2015).
- <sup>21</sup> Neuwirth in an interview with *Die Welt* prior to the ESC on May 6, 2014. <http://www.welt.de/vermishtes/prominente/article127667355/Aussehen-und-Geschlecht-sind-voellig-WURST.html> (accessed on Oct. 9, 2015).
- <sup>22</sup> When not otherwise indicated, German quotes not available in English-language editions have been freely rendered into English (A.S.). »Sonderform sui generis.« See the following quotes in Lambert Wiesing: *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes. Geschichte und Perspektiven der formalen Ästhetik*, Reinbek near Hamburg 1997, pp. 160–164, here 161. The English translation by Nancy Ann Roth, published by Blooms-

- bury/London in September 2016, was not yet available to the author (C.K.).
- <sup>23</sup> »Jedes Bild muß seine Oberfläche zu einem eigenständigen Phänomen erheben, das heißt eine Differenz zwischen der Bildoberfläche und dem Bildmaterial aufbauen.« Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> This didn't seem to bother Giuliani; in any case, it is not mentioned here. See the discussion in Roediger: *Colored White* (see note 5), Chapter 2.
- <sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 35–36 for a tradition, not always welcomed by the Church, of black Madonnas in southern Italy.
- <sup>26</sup> »[...] was ein formales Bildverständnis unter künstlerischen Wahrheitsansprüchen versteht [...]« Wiesing: *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes* (see note 22), pp. 193–204, here p. 193.
- <sup>27</sup> »[Das Bild, C.K.] Die Kunst erscheint als ein Angriff auf den Zustand des Betrachters: denn dieser muß verändert werden, soll er die Welt so sehen, wie sie dargestellt ist.« Ibid., p. 203.
- <sup>28</sup> »Es reicht für Kunstwerke nicht aus, die Welt in einer Weise darzustellen, sondern darüberhinaus muß diese Sichtweise den Betrachter veranlassen, selbst die Welt in einer veränderten – möglichst mit der im geplanten Sinn veränderten – Sicht zu sehen. [...] Mit der Formulierung ›Wahrheit [des Bildes, C.K.] der Kunst‹ kann man das Funktionieren einer Welterschließung beschreiben, also die Fähigkeit des Bildes [Werkes], die Wirklichkeit in einer Weise darzustellen und zu interpretieren, die auch für andere eine Weise sein kann.« Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> »Wir haben es mit einem Doppelereignis zu tun: etwas fällt mir auf – ich merke auf.« For the following, see Bernhard Waldenfels: *Sinne und Künste im Wechselspiel. Modi ästhetischer Erfahrung*, Chapter 4: *Wirkmacht und Wirkkraft der Bilder*, Frankfurt on the Main 2010, pp. 105–132, here p. 110.
- <sup>30</sup> »Was uns auffällt und überrascht, kommt stets zu früh, während unsere Antwort stets zu spät kommt [...]« Ibid., p. 112.
- <sup>31</sup> »[...] die Ereignisse des Auffallens sich in wiederholbaren Qualitäten sedimentieren und die Ereignisse des Aufmerkens sich körperlich habitualisieren.« Ibid., p. 115.
- <sup>32</sup> »[...] zur Ausbildung bevorzugter Merkwelten, in denen sich kollektive und individuelle Interessen spiegeln.« Ibid., pp. 115–116.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 116.
- <sup>34</sup> »An dem einen Ende der Skala finden wir die Plötzlichkeit des Schocks, [...], an dem anderen Ende den Schlummer der Gewohnheit.« Ibid., p. 116.
- <sup>35</sup> »Die Bildwirkung tritt nicht neben die Bildwahrnehmung, [...], vielmehr rumort sie in ihr all seine permanente Beunruhigung.« Ibid., p. 120.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 120.
- <sup>37</sup> »Wir haben immer schon Bilder vor uns, geschene und geschaffene, offene und gerahmte. Das Wirken der Einbildungskraft begegnet uns einzig in jenen Bildern, die sie im verborgenen erzeugt. Das Wovon des Getroffenseins bliebe auf ewig stumm und blind [...], wenn es nicht das Worauf des Antwortens gäbe, das sich in Zeichen und Bilden artikuliert [...]« Ibid., p. 121.
- <sup>38</sup> »[...] zu unterscheiden [ist] zwischen dem sehenden Bild, das uns anblickt, und dem gesehenen Bild, das wir unsererseits sehen.« Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> »[...] es bedarf jener ›störenden Fremdlinge‹ [...]. Es ist die Unruhe, die den Spalt zwischen sehendem und gesehenen Bild offenhält. Dau gehört jene aus Attraktion und Repul-

- sion gemischte Bewegung, die Kant dem Erhabenen vorbe-  
hält [...]« Ibid., p. 123.
- <sup>40</sup> »Auf solche Weise wird der Betrachter von einer Blickbewe-  
gung erfasst, die er nicht beherrscht.« Ibid., p. 124.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 125.
- <sup>42</sup> »Bildende Künste stets auch Aufmerksamkeitskünste sind,  
die dem Unauffälligen Raum geben.« Ibid., p. 128.
- <sup>43</sup> »Doch eine Ikonopathie, die der eingebürgerten Ikonolo-  
gie eine zusätzliche Tiefendimension verleiht, [...], müßte  
noch elementarer ansetzen, indem sie Bilder stets auch als  
Ereignisbilder oder als Erregungsbilder thematisiert.« Ibid.,  
p. 123.
- <sup>44</sup> »Die Geschichte der Bildbetrachtung und Bildverfertigung  
leidet unter einer hauseigenen Bildvergessenheit. [...] Dies  
rührt daher, daß die Schwelle, die das Wovon des Getrof-  
fenseins und das Worauf unserer Blickantwort von dem  
abgesondert wird, was wir jeweils im Bilde sehen, abge-  
senkt wird. [...] Das Sehen nähert sich dem Wiedersehen,  
für das alles sonnenklar ist, es verfestigt sich zum Gesehen-  
haben.« Ibid., p. 125.
- <sup>45</sup> »Indirekte Wirkungen gehen zurück auf Überschüsse des  
Außerordentlichen und auf Abweichungen vom Ordent-  
lichen.« Ibid., p. 128.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 127; see also Byung-Chul Han: *Die Errettung des  
Schönen*, Frankfurt on the Main 2015, one of many apologists  
to lament the loss of sensuality, for instance in an aesthetic of  
slick surfaces in which the viewer merely encounters his or her  
own reflection.
- <sup>47</sup> [http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/die-merkel-raute-was-  
sagen-uns-diese-haende/8735882.html](http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/die-merkel-raute-was-sagen-uns-diese-haende/8735882.html) (accessed on Sept. 14,  
2015).
- <sup>48</sup> Helmut Kohl was the »father of the rhombus,« as a 1996  
photograph by Konrad R. Müller of the then-chancellor with  
President Bill Clinton in Milwaukee shows; see [http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/historische-aufnahme-helmut-kohl-  
der-vater-der-raute/13310712.html](http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/historische-aufnahme-helmut-kohl-der-vater-der-raute/13310712.html) (accessed on Mar. 18, 2016).
- <sup>49</sup> [http://www.welt.de/politik/wahl/bundestagswahl/arti-  
cle119966030/Britisches-Magazin-empfehl-Wiederwahl-  
Merkels.html](http://www.welt.de/politik/wahl/bundestagswahl/article119966030/Britisches-Magazin-empfehl-Wiederwahl-Merkels.html) (accessed on Sept. 14, 2015).
- <sup>50</sup> [http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/silke-burmester-  
ueber-die-merkel-raute-a-922088.html](http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/silke-burmester-ueber-die-merkel-raute-a-922088.html) (accessed on Sept. 14,  
2015).
- <sup>51</sup> [http://www.art-magazin.de/div/heftarchiv/2014/3/119184548  
63120397786/Was-die-Raute-bedeutet](http://www.art-magazin.de/div/heftarchiv/2014/3/11918454863120397786/Was-die-Raute-bedeutet) (accessed on Sept. 14,  
2015).
- <sup>52</sup> [http://www.dw.com/de/wahlkampf-mit-der-merkel-  
raute/a-17067023](http://www.dw.com/de/wahlkampf-mit-der-merkel-raute/a-17067023) (accessed on Sept. 14, 2015).
- <sup>53</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, Sept. 12, 2009.
- <sup>54</sup> Merkel's own motivation for her rhombus-shaped hand  
pose is that it serves as an ergotherapeutic »aid for upright  
posture« and offers an aesthetic »sense of symmetry.« [http://  
www.dw.com/de/die-kanzlerin-erkl%C3%A4rt-die-merkel-  
raute/av-16786696](http://www.dw.com/de/die-kanzlerin-erkl%C3%A4rt-die-merkel-raute/av-16786696) (accessed on Sept. 14, 2015).
- <sup>55</sup> Jens Thureau: *Wahlkampf mit der »Merkel Raute«*, [http://  
www.dw.com/de/wahlkampf-mit-der-merkel-raute/  
a-17067023](http://www.dw.com/de/wahlkampf-mit-der-merkel-raute/a-17067023) (accessed on Sept. 14, 2015).
- <sup>56</sup> »Aber auch eigene »Sein des Bildes« (WM, p. 144f.) gewinnt  
nur Macht, wird zu einem starken Bild, wenn sich in ihm  
»Realität« übereignet, ikonisch verdichtet. Stark sind solche



Bilder, die Stoffwechsel mit der Wirklichkeit betreiben. Sie bilden nicht ab, sie setzen aber auch nicht dagegen, sondern bringen eine dichte, »nicht unterscheidbare Einheit« zustande.« Reprinted in Gottfried Boehm: *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen. Die Macht des Zeigens*, Berlin 2007, pp. 243–267.

<sup>57</sup> »Stark sind solche Bilder, weil sie uns an der Wirklichkeit etwas sichtbar machen, das wir ohne sie nie erfahren. Das Bild verweist auf sich selbst (betont sich, anstelle sich aufzuheben), weist damit aber zugleich und in einem auf das Dargestellte. So vermag es eine gesteigerte Wahrheit sichtbar zu machen, die es über die bloße Vorhandenheit, welchen Abbildung vermitteln, weit hinaushebt.« Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> »Das Bild, [...], gehört zum Sein des Dargestellten hinzu. Deshalb ist jedes starke Bild ein Seinsvorgang, der den Seinsrang des Dargestellten mitbestimmt. Mehr noch: »Durch die Darstellung erfährt es gleichsam einen Zuwachs an Sein.« (WM, p. 145).« Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>59</sup> Gottfried Boehm: *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder*, in G. Boehm (ed.): *Was ist ein Bild?*, Munich 1994, pp. 11–38, here p. 29–36.

<sup>60</sup> »gesteigerte Wahrheit ihres Seins«; quote by Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (WM), pp. 142, 156, in Boehm: *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen* (see note 56), p. 255.

<sup>61</sup> »Religiöse Werke, so darf man verallgemeinern, begnügen sich niemals damit, ihre Mächte lediglich abzubilden.« Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>62</sup> Boehm formulates these criteria of the powerful image in light of abstract art. He stresses its »hervorbringende,« »entdeckende,« »sinnliche Kraft,« »geistige Energie der Bilder« that connect with »Lebenswirklichkeit,« Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>63</sup> Its »Ziel und Funktion besteh[t] darin, abzuschildern, Informationen via Auge zu verbreiten. [...] Die Logik dieser Bilder besteht in einer Selbstverleugnung, im Bestreben [...], die Haltung einer Sachhaltigkeit einzunehmen, der man allein angemessene und richtige Information zutraut.« Ibid., pp. 246–247.

<sup>64</sup> »Es vollendet seine Intention dann am besten, wenn es keinerlei Eigenwillen ins Spiel bringt, gar nicht auf sich verweist, sondern sich ganz transparent macht auf die Sache. [...] Die so gearteten technischen Bilder sind mithin ganz schwache Bilder.« Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>65</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels: *Wirkmacht und Wirkkraft der Bilder*, p. 125; Buyung-Chul Han: *Die Errettung des Schönen*, Frankfurt on the Main 2015, pp. 5–51.

<sup>66</sup> »Verdoppelungen, ein Double der Realität«; Boehm: *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen* (see note 56), p. 248.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>68</sup> »Die alte Welt mit ihrer reichen, aber doch überschaubaren Ökonomie der Bilder, die an ausgezeichneten Orten, bei ausgewählten Gelegenheiten und nach der Legitimität ihrer Inhalte kultiviert wurde, liegt wie ein ferngerückter Kontinent am Horizont der Vergangenheit.« Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>69</sup> »Wer Abbilder macht, der möchte sie mobilisieren, in den Informationskreislauf der Gesellschaft einschleusen.« Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>70</sup> For this reason, *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen* is solely concerned with the old world and the powerful images of art.

<sup>71</sup> »In der Repräsentation wirkt der ikonische Eigenwert auf das Urbild zurück. [...] »Das Bild ist ein Seinsvorgang – in ihm kommt Sein zur sinnvoll-sichtbaren Erscheinung [...]« (WM,

S. 194)« Ibid., p. 256-257.

<sup>72</sup> »Der Herrscher hat sein Sein ›wesenhaft im Sich-Zeigen‹  
(WM, S. 147).« Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>73</sup> »Das Spektrum moderner Kunsterfahrung ist jedenfalls weit,  
enthält Exempel subtiler Spiritualität wie triebhafter Vitalität,  
abgründigen Tiefsinns und unverhohlener Banalität.« Here,  
however, the passage reads »Kunsterfahrung;« ibid., p. 263.

# Art and Religion in a Post-Secular, Multi-Religious Society

Nika Spalinger

This volume addresses the power of images, their potential to offend: the power that can make us think of images as acting subjects rather than as passive objects. My essay explores this power by analyzing and discussing how offense is at work in five examples of contemporary artworks concerning religion.

As a premise it should be mentioned that, before 9/11, religion was seldom taken as a theme in the European contemporary art world,<sup>1</sup> and then mostly from a distanced, critical, ironic, or cynical perspective. Artworks that embraced religious elements in a more positive manner were prone to be dismissed as unsuitable to be shown in contemporary art institutions,<sup>2</sup> as if religion were something offensive to the art world. Maybe one of the reasons for this attitude was that the battle for freedom of expression in the (Western) arts in the wake of the Enlightenment, with its emancipation from the moral and institutional power of (Christian) religious institutions, does not yet lie very far behind us. Silvia Henke and I still felt repercussions of this attitude when we decided to conduct a research project on *Art and Religion* in 2008.<sup>3</sup> Many colleagues seemed rather disconcerted by our choice of subject. However, the relative lack of interest in religion in contemporary art changed rapidly after 9/11;<sup>4</sup> and after the attack on the editors of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine on January 14, 2015, religion has become an inevitable topic.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the contemporary cultural sector has arrived in the post-secular era. Despite its rather secular orientation, it has to acknowledge that in our increasingly multicultural society, culture can no longer be considered without taking religion into account. Not doing so would come at the cost of excluding cultural players from non-Western cultures, as well as those who have not ceased to be religious despite ongoing processes of »unchurching.«



Focusing on five artworks in Switzerland — most of them placed in public spaces — that explicitly address religion as a theme, this essay explores the interplay of religion, the artworks themselves, the artists, the context, and the public media. I chose these artworks because of the different ways they provoke and offend. Placed in various types of public space and represented in different public media (e.g. TV, radio, newspapers, etc.), they reached a large and diverse audience.

The first two works focus on the minaret as a prime symbol of Islam<sup>6</sup> (*salat* by Johannes Gees, various churches in Switzerland, 2007; and *Minarett* by Gianni Motti, Kunsthau Langenthal 2008). The other three focus on Christian symbols (*Ecce Homo* by Marc Wallinger, Trafalgar Square, London 1999; *Cross* by Valentin Carron, Art Basel 2009; and *Meeting* by Barbara Mühlefluh, Reformierte Kirche Stäfa, 2009).

## Salat

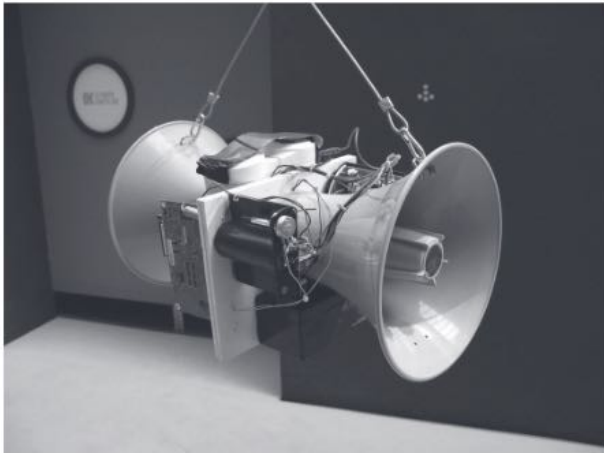
On July 10, 2007, to the great surprise of many pedestrians, the Muslim call to prayer resounded simultaneously from five important church towers in Switzerland: the Grossmünster in Zurich, the Münster in Bern, the St. Leonhardskirche in St. Gallen, the Wildkirchli in Appenzell, and the Kloster Einsiedeln.

The well-prepared guerrilla action *salat*,<sup>7</sup> which used clandestinely placed, automated loudspeakers, was commissioned by the action-art platform *agent provocateur* (Fig. 1). The action provoked many different reactions among the public, from amusement to outrage, as shown in one of the videos<sup>8</sup> documenting the event. After a short time, the police removed the loudspeakers. However,

for the media<sup>9</sup> it was a welcome story that was intriguing and generated speculation about the initiators of the action: the Swiss installation and performance artist Johannes Gees.<sup>10</sup> Against the background of the current international controversy about disturbances by church bells, which questions ideas of freedom of religion and the equality of different religions in a multi-religious society, the sound of the Muslim call to prayer from a Christian church created a great ambiguity: was it to be interpreted as a disrespectful attack on Christians' integrity or as a sign of solidarity of the Christian church with the Muslim community, contesting the ban on the construction<sup>11</sup> of minarets in Switzerland? Or was it an attack on Christianity by Islamic jihadists?<sup>12</sup>

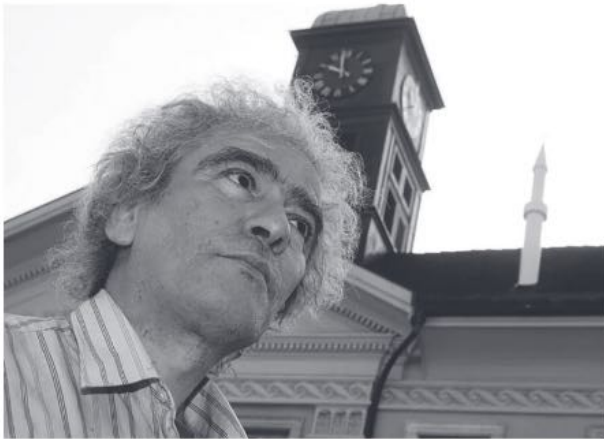
The ambiguity dissolved after twenty-four hours, as soon as Johannes Gees released following statement:

Ever since 9/11, I have been thoroughly annoyed by the abuse of religion as a battleground in international relations and national political conflicts. In 2007, a group of nationalist politicians initiated a referendum to ban the construction of minarets in Switzerland (of which only three existed). One of the planned new minarets was supposed to be built in a small city called Langenthal. Its height was 5 meters 25 centimeters. I feel that spreading fear among people can only be understood as a lack of trust in the liberal values that matter to me. So I decided to make a statement against those who abuse religion to fight against some of the most important values of our society, such as generosity, tolerance and freedom of religion. Being an artist, I chose the classic artist's strategy: provocation.<sup>13</sup>



[ FIG. 1 ]

Johannes Gees: *salat*, Bern,  
Zurich, St. Gallen, 2007



[ FIG. 2 ]

Gianni Motti: *Minarett*, Kunsthau  
Langenthal, 2008

Later in 2008, Gees was invited to present a new version of *salat*, which combined the muezzin prayer call with an *Appenzeller Alpsegen* (Appenzell alpine blessing) at various art venues.<sup>14</sup> The juxtaposition of these two phonetically, amazingly similar religious songs raised questions such as: Why is one experi-



enced as a provocation, while the other is classified as nostalgic, touristic, or nationalistic residue?

Because the first version of *salat* did not take place in an official institutional art framework, as was the case with the other versions, it evoked a conflict between two rights safeguarded by Swiss law: protection of the right of freedom of artistic expression<sup>15</sup> and protection against attacks on the freedom of faith and the freedom of worship and cult and against racial discrimination (see the last part of this essay). As long as the action was not recognizable as an artwork — until the artist confirmed his authorship — it could be interpreted as an attack on the freedom of worship and cult. Had it been shown in the context of an art institution, the generally well-instructed public (culturally speaking) would have immediately interpreted the action as an artistic performance; in this case the provocative or offensive character would almost be something to be expected and hence not to be taken personally or too seriously.

### Minarett

For Gianni Motti,<sup>16</sup> a Swiss artist of Italian origin who lives in Geneva, religion was a topic in several works. In 1989, for example, he simulated his own funeral procession amid a popular religious festival in Spain; in 2011, he examined the Raelian sect in a video work (Fig. 2).<sup>17</sup>

*Minarett* was a small minaret tower 4.5 m high with a golden crescent moon on its top that the artist placed on the roof of the Kunsthau Langenthal in Switzerland. It was part of the 2008 group exhibition entitled *Average*,<sup>18</sup> which referred to

the town's privileged role in market studies and voting forecasts based on its embodiment of the Swiss average for its structure and size.<sup>19</sup>

In this exhibition, Motti presented his *Minarett* as a response to the political debate concerning the planning application for a minaret submitted by the Langenthal Islamic Community in 2006. Supporters of right-wing politics reacted to this application with 80 building objections, a demonstration, and a protest petition with more than 1,000 signatures from Langenthal residents.

According to the local newspaper *Berner Zeitung*, the artist aimed »to question the tolerance facing religious insignia of other faiths« and denied trying to provoke: »Artists have always used religious themes and symbols.«<sup>20</sup> He said that he had not expected any negative reception, since he had spoken with different people before installing his work and nobody had been against it. In fact, however, Motti's *Minarett* triggered numerous reactions in the media,<sup>21</sup> where images of the artwork were shown prominently together with texts that made a direct link to the political discussion. The town mayor asked the curator of the exhibition to remove the artwork, arguing that he had not been correctly informed about the submission for the installation of the tower on the roof. Nevertheless, after public discussions on the freedom of art, the town council finally allowed *Minarett* to remain in place until the end of the exhibition.

In the following years, it took many discussions about the construction of the real minaret before the courts decided in 2012 that it could be built, as the planning application had been submitted before the adoption of the minaret ban in 2009. A reminder: the political controversy over the construction of new minarets had begun in Switzerland in 2007. In 2009, against all expect-

tations, the majority of the Swiss population voted in favor of the initiative to ban the construction of new minarets; since then, the ban has been anchored in the Swiss Federal Constitution.<sup>22</sup>

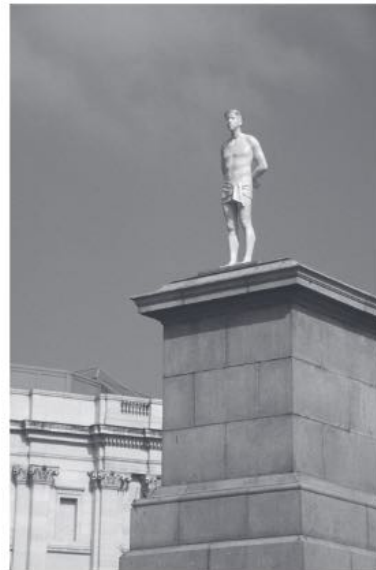
### Cross

The *Cross* is an 11-meter black wooden cross that Valentin Carron, represented by the Swiss Gallery Eva Presenhuber, placed in front of the main entrance to Art Basel, the international art fair, in 2009. The Swiss painter, sculptor, and installation artist lives in Canton Valais, a Catholic canton in the southwest of Switzerland. He represented Switzerland at the 2013 Venice Biennale, where he presented, among other objects, an 80-meter, two-headed iron snake throughout the space, which was meant to welcome and guide visitors through the show.<sup>23</sup> A series of flat-pressed brass instruments cast in bronze were reminiscent of a crushed brass band. The wall pieces named *Windows* were made of fiberglass and recalled stained glass windows of churches from the 1950s. Carron's work is based on appropriation strategies related to Pop Art, as introduced by the artists Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Elaine Sturtevant. In his work, he creates his own symbolic system, using images and forms from very different contexts: traditional and religious symbols, archeological artifacts, and sculptural works from art history and his own research in the field of sociology. At the same time, he plays with strong contrasts and ambiguity.





[FIG. 3]  
Valentin Carron: *Cross*,  
Art Basel, 2009



[FIG. 4]  
Mark Wallinger: *Ecce Homo*, fourth plinth,  
Trafalgar Square, London, 1999

In his work *Cross*, the artist referred to the many roadside crosses in the Catholic Canton Valais, as well as to Minimalism (Fig. 3). The work could also be understood as an ironic reference to contemporary art as a new religion for the super-rich. In an interview with a Protestant online review, Thomas Jarek,<sup>24</sup> an assistant at Carron's Gallery, said that the artist had produced a number of crosses that seemed to be made from a strong, hard material, but were in fact a very light polystyrene. The intention of the artist was thus to create a contrast to the weightiness of the Christian symbol. With the huge black wooden

cross at Art Basel, the artist questioned the symbolic impact of the cross by showing it as a minimalist, geometric sculpture, reduced to pure geometric forms. Although *Cross* was covered by several important public media channels,<sup>25</sup> the broadcast debates about it did not suggest that *Cross* was perceived as offensive. For some, it was not even clear whether it was a normal cross or an art work. The lack of provocation might be owed to the specific place and context of Art Basel, where it was immediately interpreted as an artwork. Most of the Swiss, like a large part of the international art world public, have a Christian background and a rather distanced relationship to religion in general, as a recent study shows.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding the monstrous size of the cross, they were not likely to be offended by the work of an artist who shared a similar attitude.

In his insightful text on Valentin Carron, the art critic Jasper Adams quotes Eric Hobsbawm's famous *The Invention of Tradition* (1992), in which the latter suggests that if Europeans celebrate their important symbols and rituals with increasing vigor, this could be read as an indication of the impending loss of importance rather than as an expression of their unbroken belief in their cultural impact and continuity. I share Adams' view concerning the ambiguity of artist's position:

Is Carron a cynic? The question cannot be answered outright. His work blocks the possibility of catharsis at every turn, and radiates a contagious disenchantment. At the same time, there is a sense that the frustration he induces in his audience is not different to the frustration he experiences: a genuine exasperation at the emptiness at the heart of contemporary culture.<sup>27</sup>

## Ecce Homo

For London's Millennium Festival in 1999, the well-known artist Marc Wallinger placed a life-sized marble statue of Jesus wearing a crown of barbed wire, his hands bound behind his back, on an otherwise empty plinth at Trafalgar Square (Fig. 4). Positioned at the edge of the massive plinth, the statue looked very small and vulnerable. With the title »*Ecce Homo*,« Wallinger quoted the words of Pontius Pilate at the crucifixion. The statue was quite popular with the public and was later shown at the 2001 Venice Biennale, where Wallinger represented Britain. In this artwork, Wallinger, who has produced several other artworks on religious topics,<sup>28</sup> reflected on the role of religion at the Millennium celebration and said in an interview:

The Millennium dome was this big empty space without an idea of what it was celebrating. In a way, Christianity or Christ was the elephant in the room and no one was addressing this, and that is how I came up with the figure of Christ.<sup>29</sup>

This work did not use any obviously offensive image or strategy. Nevertheless, it seemed to have had a stronger critical impact than the other works described. Considering the large number of important publications mentioning the work to this day, I think this is due to its subtle demonstration of the shrinking of Christian belief in Western Christian society.<sup>30</sup>





[FIG. 5]  
Barbara Mühlefluh: *Meeting*,  
Kirche Stäfa, 2010

## Meeting

The artwork *Meeting* by the Swiss artist Barbara Mühlefluh consists of three parking places reserved for Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. It was commissioned in 2009 by the Protestant Church of Stäfa<sup>31</sup> near Zurich to link the church with public space (Fig. 5). The artist mixed banal, everyday signs with a highly complex religious construction. By creating a parking place reserved — in English words — for the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, *Meeting* asks in a pragmatic and laconic way: What is the place of religion in our shared public urban life and how can we translate religious concepts into a multicultural society?

At first, people were irritated by the artwork. It led to vibrant discussions in the church parish;<sup>32</sup> while some questioned its artistic value, one person even thought it was blasphemous. The artist replied to this reproach, »I did not want to hurt the feelings of anyone, but to do something for God. The parking places are like a chapel, a place for God, who is everywhere.«<sup>33</sup> Despite the strong criticisms, the artwork is still there.

## Conclusion

Based on the examination of the five contemporary artworks, I conclude that their offensiveness is rooted in different interdependent factors and very complex interactions in a highly diverse society. A basic factor is that contemporary art in its multiple forms is not easy to recognize as art if not presented in its usual institutional context (e.g., museums, exhibitions, art galleries).

Another factor is the open and ambiguous character of certain forms of contemporary art. This type of work, defined by Umberto Eco as »open artwork,«<sup>34</sup> allows the audience to participate in the process of the construction of the artwork and its multiplicity of possible meanings.

The open artwork assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it; it is it. It takes on a mediating role between the abstract categories of science and the living matter of our sensibility; it almost becomes a sort of transcendental scheme that allows us to comprehend new aspects of the world.

Sharing this openness with religion,<sup>35</sup> such artworks have the potential to be instrumentalized for very different purposes. The openness and ambiguity of artworks may offer new views, but may also be instrumentalized by different interests, just as aspects of religion may also be instrumentalized. By virtue of their openness and ambiguity, the presented artworks contain more or less subtle strategies of provocation, which emerge in the particular combinations of commonly known symbols and specific contexts: with the cross in front of the Kunst-Messe Basel, a German-language play on words (Messe = Catholic mass) evokes the idea of art as religion.

A third factor is the multiplicatory effect that stems from visual, oral, or written public media. Artworks unfold their offensive power only when they are reported in the context of a provocative public discourse, thereby making them accessible to a larger audience.

Another factor is the conflicts between the laws concerning the freedom of artistic expression, the freedom of expression and information,<sup>36</sup> and the law concerning the protection against attacks on the freedom of faith and the freedom of worship and cult and against racial discrimination<sup>37</sup> in Swiss society.

According to Jürgen Habermas,<sup>38</sup> a key characteristic of these highly diverse societies in the post-secular era is that religious and secular values appear together in various forms, yielding conflicts as described above. This characteristic was not seriously taken into consideration in the art world before 9/11, when art mainly addressed a rather small, well-educated, mostly white, (male) Western public, and thus excluded a large part of the population. The growing importance of art mediation<sup>39</sup> in the art world, which helps a larger audience



to access contemporary art, as well as the enormous number of shows, conferences, books, and articles whose theme is religion in Switzerland and in Europe since 9/11 testify to a changing attitude.

I conclude that interdisciplinary shared knowledge is essential to understand and deal with the complexity of inter- and transcultural religious relations in our societies — also in the art world — and I am positive that the growing number of inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations<sup>40</sup> among artists, art institutions, and schools with players of different cultural and religious backgrounds promotes an informed, open, respectful, and self-critical discourse in our society on contemporary forms of (visual/artistic) representation and dialogue, a discourse that takes into consideration the given variety of religious and secular values and perspectives both in art institutions and in the public sphere. This discourse also inspires artists to continue creating interesting, critical, and stimulating works that address a larger, multifaceted society, rather than merely a small, privileged part of it.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Alastair Sooke: Does modern art hate religion? For centuries, the church was a powerful force that shaped art – but this has changed, BBC Culture, Oct. 21, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140602-does-modern-art-hate-religion> (accessed on June 5, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> One of the artists we interviewed in the context of the research project told us that his work had been rejected from a contemporary art space because it seemed religious – this was in the 1980s.

<sup>3</sup> The research project *Holyspace, Holyways* investigated in the relations between contemporary art and religion in the context of the public spheres. See Silvia Henke / Nika Spalinger / Isabel Zürcher (eds.): *Kunst und Religion im Zeitalter des Postsäkularen. Ein kritischer Reader*, Bielefeld, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> In our investigation, we noted more than 40 exhibitions concerning religion & art in the period between 2000 and 2008 in important art venues such as ZKM Karls-

ruhe (in 2002, Iconoclash. Jenseits der Bilderkriege in Wissenschaft, Religion und Kunst, and in 2008 Medium Religion); Hygienemuseum Dresden (in 2004, Die Zehn Gebote); and Centre Pompidou Paris (in 2008 Traces du Sacré).

<sup>5</sup> As we could see, for example, at the 2015 Venice Biennale, where the Swiss artist Christoph Büchel, who was hosted by the Icelandic Pavilion, presented as his artwork an empty Catholic church that had, on his initiative, been transformed into a mosque. Cf. (dpa) Biennale in Venedig. Polizei schliesst Kunstprojekt, in NZZ May 22, 2015, [http://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/kunst\\_architektur/polizei-schliesst-umstrittenes-kunstprojekt-1.18547754](http://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/kunst_architektur/polizei-schliesst-umstrittenes-kunstprojekt-1.18547754) (accessed on June 9, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Symbol = something (object, sign, image) used to represent something else, usually something immaterial. In this case, the symbol for Islam.

<sup>7</sup> The word salat, also spelled salah, Arabic ṣalāt, the daily ritual prayer enjoined upon all Muslims as one of the five Pillars of Islam (arkān al-Islām), <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/518979/salat>, accessed June 9, 2015; and cf. Prix Ars Electronica 2008: Hybrid Art: Honorary Mention, <http://www.ok-centrum.at/?q=en/content/presse/701> (accessed on June 9, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. video from July 11, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX38lecektM> (accessed on March 25, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> For example the culture channel of the Swiss TV SFi, cf. <http://www.srf.ch/play/tv/kulturplatz/video/muezzinruf-fuer-christen-satanische-verse-fuer-muslim-%E2%80%94-zuendstoff-im-dialog-der-religio> (accessed on March, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. website Johannes Gees, [www.johannesgees.com](http://www.johannesgees.com) (accessed on March 18, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Some church congregations were against the ban; others opted for the ban. The posters for the plebiscite in 2009 show the ambiguity of Swiss society concerning freedom of religion. Cf. [www.swissinfo.ch/ger/minirettverbot/590418](http://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/minirettverbot/590418) (accessed on June 3, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Gees told me in 2015 that he had received a number of e-mails from members of the Islamic community who had seen his work on the Internet and congratulated him on his work in this sense.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. website Johannes Gees, [www.johannesgees.com](http://www.johannesgees.com) (accessed on March 18, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> E.g., in Linz at the Ars Electronica 2008, where Gees work received a Honorary Mention for Hybrid Art; in the exhibition *Shifting Identities – Swiss Art Today* at the Kunsthau Zurich; as part of the exhibition *Moral Imaginations* at the Art Museum Thurgau, a former hermitage.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Swiss Constitution, [http://www.gesetze.ch/st/311.0/311.0\\_027.htm](http://www.gesetze.ch/st/311.0/311.0_027.htm), and a text concerning *salat* on the website of the Kunstmuseum Thurgau, [http://www.kunstmuseum.ch/xml\\_1/internet/de/application/d12/f113.cfm?action=werk.show&id=116](http://www.kunstmuseum.ch/xml_1/internet/de/application/d12/f113.cfm?action=werk.show&id=116) (both accessed on June 9, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Gianni Motti, [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gianni\\_Motti](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gianni_Motti); Gianni Motti, Migros Museum Zürich, Frieze. Published on April 5, 2004 by Tirdad Zolghadr, [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/gianni\\_motti/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/gianni_motti/), March 29, 2015 (all accessed on June 9, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> The Raelian sect is an UFO religion founded in 1974 by Claude Vorilho. Motti had been observing the Rael-

- liens with interest for several years, as described on the site of the Space Place, cf. <http://www.orbit.zkm.de/?q=node/368> (accessed on June 9, 2015). See Carly Machado: Prophecy on stage: fame and celebrities in the context of the Raelian movement, in B. Meyer (ed.): *Aesthetic Formations. Media, Religion and The Senses*, New York 2009, pp. 207-224.
- <sup>18</sup> Average = Durchschnitt. Cf. <http://www.kunsthau-langenthal.ch/index.php/average.en.htm>. (accessed on March 30, 2015).
- <sup>19</sup> Kathrin Hofte-Fankhauser / Hans F. Wälty: *Marktforschung*, 3rd edition, Zurich 2011, p. 92.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. <http://www.bernerzeitung.ch/region/emmental/Provokativer-Durchschnitt/30668615/print.html> (accessed on March 30, 2015).
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/kunst/Allahu-akbar-MinarettKunst-erhitzt-die-Gemueter/story/12568996>; <http://www.srf.ch/play/tv/kulturplatz/video/der-minarett-streit-in-langenthal-%C2%96-der-kuenstler-gianni-motti-nimmt-stellung?id=ec8f397d-84bb-440d-ae0-93bcebf449ba>; <https://www.woz.ch/135c> (all accessed on March 30, 2015).
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schweizer\\_Minarett-streit](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schweizer_Minarett-streit) (accessed on March 29, 2015).
- <sup>23</sup> According to the artist in an interview given in the context of the Venice Biennale 2013, cf. <http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2013/may/15/swiss-artist-brings-scooter-to-venice/> (accessed on May 30, 2015).
- <sup>24</sup> Kirchenbote <http://www.kirchenbote-online.ch/dedi/projekto1/index.php?idcatside=50&nid=975&archiv=1> (accessed on June 12, 2014).
- <sup>25</sup> Alain Bieber / Ute Thon / Heinrich Schmid: *Bling Bling* in Basel, in *Art Magazin*, Oct. 6, 2009 [http://www.art-magazin.de/kunstmarkt/19273/art\\_basel\\_2009\\_kunstmesse](http://www.art-magazin.de/kunstmarkt/19273/art_basel_2009_kunstmesse) (accessed on March 29, 2015).
- <sup>26</sup> Cf. Jörg Stolz: *Religions, the State and Society*. National Research Programme NRP 58, Final report, [http://www.nfp58.ch/e\\_projekte\\_formen.cfm](http://www.nfp58.ch/e_projekte_formen.cfm) (accessed on March 29, 2015).
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. Adam Jasper, Valentin Carron: *Alpine aesthetics and Modernism. Imitation and a boar's head*, in *Frieze*, issue 107 (2007), p.136, <http://davidkordanskygallery.com/artist/valentin-carron/#press> (accessed on March 29, 2015).
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. Madleine Schuppli: *Marc Wallinger und die Religion*, in Madleine Schuppli (ed.): *Marc Wallinger. Ecce Homo*, Aargauer Kunsthaus Aarau, 2008, pp. 49-63.
- <sup>29</sup> *Fourth plinth: Marc Wallinger: Anthony Reynolds Gallery London 1999*, <http://www.recreativeuk.com/resource/fourth-plinth-mark-wallinger> (accessed on June 9, 2015).
- <sup>30</sup> Cf. Michail Bulgakow: *Pontius Pilatus*, in *Mark Wallinger. Ecce Homo*, exhibition catalog Secession Wien, 2003, pp. 5-6; Charlotte Higgins: *Bear man walks away with Turner Prize*, in *The Guardian*, December 3, 2007, pp. 10-12.
- <sup>31</sup> Cf. Irene Müller: *Gott und die Welt. Zu Barbara Mühlefluhs Projekt Meeting*, in: Henke / Spalinger / Zürcher (eds.): *Kunst und Religion im Zeitalter des Postsäkularen* (see note 3), pp. 83-90.
- <sup>32</sup> Heinz Wilhelm: *Parkplätze*, in *reformiert. stäfa*, 11/2009, <http://www.kirchestaefa.ch/parkplaetze> (ac-



cessed on June 9, 2015); Markus Kumpert: Der liebe Herrgott hat seinen eigenen Parkplatz, in Tages-Anzeiger, September 18, 2009, <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/schweiz/gemeinde/Der-liebe-Herrgott-hat-seinen-eigenen-Parkplatz/story/20125307> (accessed on June 29, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Quotation from Daniela Schwegler: Drei Parkplätze sind für Gott reserviert, in reformiert. Kirchenbote Kanton Zürich, Nr. 11, 29. October 2010, p. 2, [www.reformiert.info/sites/default/files/pdf/e.../091030\\_REFORMZH.pdf](http://www.reformiert.info/sites/default/files/pdf/e.../091030_REFORMZH.pdf) (accessed on June 29, 2015), trans. by Nika Spalinger.

<sup>34</sup> Umberto Eco: *The Open Work*, trans. from Italian by Anna Concoghi, Cambridge/ Mass. 1989, p. 90.

<sup>35</sup> Here I refer to an open and ambiguous character of religion, as described from a functional perspective following Clifford Geertz. Many aspects of religion are ambivalent; they can have positive or negative effects. Religion can, for example, give believers an orientation, but at the same time, it can lead them into isolation and dependency. The interpretation of religious writings and rules is also very open; they can be interpreted in many different ways. Willi Bühler / Benno Bühlmann / Andreas Kessler (eds.): *Sachbuch Religion*, Lucerne 2009, pp. 20-22.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19995395/index.html> (accessed on June 1, 2016). »Art. 16 Freedom of expression and of information:  
1 Freedom of expression and of information is guaranteed.  
2 Every person has the right freely to form, express, and impart their opinions.  
3 Every person has the right freely to receive informa-

tion, to gather it from generally accessible sources, and to disseminate it. Art. 21 Freedom of artistic expression: Freedom of artistic expression is guaranteed.«

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Swiss Criminal Code (Book Two, Title Twelve – Felonies and Misdemeanors against Public Order, on <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19370083/201501010000/311.0.pdf> (accessed on June 1, 2016). »Art. 261 Attack on the freedom of faith and the freedom to worship: Any person who publicly and maliciously insults or mocks the religious convictions of others, and in particularly their belief in God, or maliciously desecrates objects of religious veneration, any person who maliciously prevents, disrupts, or publicly mocks an act of worship, the conduct of which is guaranteed by the Constitution, or any person who maliciously desecrates a place or object that is intended for a religious ceremony or an act of worship, the conduct of which is guaranteed by the Constitution, is liable to a monetary penalty not exceeding 180 daily penalty units.

Art. 261-218 Racial discrimination: Any person who publicly incites hatred or discrimination against a person or a group of persons on the grounds of their race, ethnic origin, or religion, any person who publicly disseminates ideologies that have as their object the systematic denigration or defamation of the members of a race, ethnic group, or religion, any person who with the same objective organizes, encourages, or participates in propaganda campaigns, any person who publicly denigrates or discriminates against another or a group of persons on the grounds of their race, ethnic origin, or religion in a manner that violates human dignity, whether verbally, in writing, or pictorially, by using gestures, through acts of aggression, or by other means, or any person who on any of these grounds denies, trivializes, or seeks justification for genocide or other crimes against humanity, any person who refuses to provide a

service to another on the grounds of that person's race, ethnic origin, or religion when that service is intended to be provided to the general public is liable to a custodial sentence not exceeding three years or to a monetary penalty.«

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas: *Glauben und Wissen. Rede zum Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels*, Frankfurt on the Main 2001, p. 12ff.

<sup>39</sup> »Art Mediation« is an established term in German-speaking countries: »Mediation« is in fact an ancient form of conflict resolution, which consists of the mediator positioning his or herself between two parties without taking sides, or passing judgment on either of them. An art-mediator thus facilitates dialogue and the exchange of knowledge by stimulating opinions through what the viewer sees and the associations they make with the work directly in front of them.« Cf. <http://mio-manifesta.org/en/education/art-mediation/> (accessed on June 8, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the interdisciplinary project »Global Prayers – Redemption and Liberation in the City«, an academic and artistic research project that aimed to investigate the renaissance of religion in the world's metropolises, is an interesting example, cf. <http://globalprayers.info/research/> (accessed on June 1, 2016).

# The Downfall of the Utopias. Pier Paolo Pasolini's Modernist Heresies

Norbert M. Schmitz

## Preface

At the end of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *L'Âge d'Or* of 1930, we see, one after the other, the four main characters of the Marquis de Sade's incomplete episodic novel *Les 120 Journées de Sodome ou L'École du Libertinage* leave the site of the »most terrible of all orgies«<sup>1</sup> in the Chateau de Sellinay through the gate to the outside on their way back to Paris. At the head is the lord of the game, so sensual and »criminal,«<sup>2</sup> the Duc de Blangis. Much as the novel, which remains controversial to this day, became the epitome of obscenity and blasphemy, the young taboo-breaking surrealists Buñuel and Dalí carry this further by staging the leader of the crimes as Jesus of Nazareth. After the masters of the »sadistic« game have crossed the castle drawbridge, a young blood-spattered girl appears and immediately falls to the ground. Jesus turns around with a gentle gaze, helps the ravished woman to her feet, and guides her back into the palace. When the door closes again, one can hear a brief, indefinable cry, a cross between lust and pain, after which Jesus emerges again, alone, with a mournful expression on his face. The scene and the film end with a close-up of a tilted cross.

While the two surrealists' first film, made the year before, *Un Chien Andalou*, failed to cause a scandal, much to the chagrin of Breton's circle, this film, rich in anti-Catholic heresy, began attracting attention soon after its premiere in Studio 28 in Paris. On December 3, 1930, right-wing extremists of the »Action française« interrupted a performance of the film and demolished the cinema, along with some of the Surrealist paintings exhibited there. The ban on the film wasn't lifted until 1981.



From the Church's point of view, this avant-garde film certainly embodied one of the most extreme forms of blasphemy through art, namely the presentation of the Lord Himself in the throes of lust. The work of Buñuel, a Spaniard who repeatedly »processed« his own Catholic upbringing in films such as *Nazarin*, *Viridiana*, and *La Voie Lactée* (in English *The Milky Way*), highlights the pleasure that the aesthetics of the avant-garde movements in 20<sup>th</sup>-century art took in the heretical act.<sup>3</sup> By systematically breaking the taboos of the traditions of church and state as well as the idealistic ideologies of the bourgeoisie, art attained its freedom and in the process became the catalyst of social emancipation. Today, provocations of this kind tend to be more amusing and can quickly seem out of date, in other words, unmodern in a literal sense. The heretical gesture — for Buñuel, closely tied to the Church, which still had the greatest say in his native country — is beside the point, now that the culture has long since separated itself from its religious background and heresy has become a gesture of modernity as such, one that is often heroically idealized. At any rate, the traditional clerical institutions lost their power to unite people as the target of protest long ago. Subsequently, radical modernism in art recognized no boundaries to its freedom, from the child pornography of a Hans Balthus to the excesses of the Viennese Actionist Otto Mühl.<sup>4</sup> The Church, at any rate, is no longer the »mother of the arts,« not even ex negativo. Hence, when we talk about heresy and blasphemy, and about obscenity in art at the beginning of the new millennium, it's generally in metaphoric terms only, in other words, in the context of expectations on the part of general humanity concerning questions of gender and sexuality. The canon of potential dogmatism that can still be slandered is better described by the term »political cor-

rectness« than by the Church's teachings. All other cases, for instance the potential censorship in post-Communist Poland under the aegis of Pope Saint John Paul II, seem at best like the rearguard action of long-since faded claims to power.<sup>5</sup>

In this situation, the pathos with which the public intellectual and avant-gardist Pier Paolo Pasolini investigated, over a period spanning decades, questions of religious traditions that were apparently no longer part of contemporary life, must seem odd, although blasphemy was placed side by side with the invocation of the holy.<sup>6</sup> His ambivalences regarding mythology, religious faith, and enlightenment were already confusing to his contemporaries, given the dominant discourse of enlightenment in the arts and the spurts in the modernization of cultural life from Europe to America. Despite all the public attention and artistic success, the poet, essayist, and filmmaker provoked the very front of the left-wing enlightenment project that he himself felt a part of.

### True-Life Heresy

*Empirismo Eretico*,<sup>7</sup> (*Heretical Empiricism*),<sup>8</sup> is the title of one of the collections of texts by the writer and filmmaker Pasolini. The subject here is heresy, a »heresy taken from life,«<sup>9</sup> in other words, one that obviously arises out of the concrete empirical world and not the dogmas of divine and earthly theology or philosophy. What prompted the avant-gardist and, in the sense of his role model Arthur Rimbaud, so »utterly modern« a poet to use such a metaphor, one that is possibly pre-modern?<sup>10</sup> Why was and is Pasolini's earthly materialism so disgraceful to the Church, and what Church is being slandered here?<sup>11</sup>

At the very least, Pasolini's cinematic works — and this is the author's thesis — can be described as heresy nearly across the board. This essay, however, limits itself to four films as examples that provide an ideal overview of his work and the many winding, if not paradoxical movements that occupied the artist's political and aesthetic thinking. This selection comprises his adaptation of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, his interpretation of the folktales of the *Fioretti di San Francesco*, *Uccellacci/Uccellini*, his staging of the erotic tales in *One Thousand and One Nights*, and finally another screen adaptation of literature, this one quite free, of the *120 Days of Sodom* by the Marquis de Sade, known by his devotees as »the Divine Marquis.« The titles, which could easily be augmented by other films by Pasolini, already indicate a progression from the sacred to the profane, from myth to modernism<sup>12</sup> — the winding path of a »hérésie moderne.«

### Holiness and Myth

In 1964, when Pasolini, the left-wing agent provocateur of the Italian art establishment, who was already widely known for his poetic, political, and publishing output, presented a nearly verbatim film version of the first gospel, *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*, he dedicated this film to the »benevolent, cheerful, affable figure of Johannes XIII« (Fig. 1).<sup>13</sup> And yet: no other film of Pasolini's — except, perhaps, his last, *Salò*, the discussion of which came to an abrupt end due to a performance ban — has provoked as many controversial opinions as *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*. At the premiere at the Mostra in Venice, even before the film was screened, Italian fascists rioted against the anticipated »defilement of a



source of the Christian Occident« at the hands of an atheist Marxist; French critics considered the film to be an »irresponsible betrayal and aestheticism,« a »dubious analogy between Lenin and Christ;« and while liberal critics and left-wing theologians in the Federal Republic of Germany praised the film, some as »the best of all failed Jesus films« and some as »a piece [...] for the absolution of us all« and defended it, critics presenting themselves as left-wing or Marxist accused *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* of being a »conformist film« that didn't »break radically enough with the Bible exegesis,« thus »trivializing Christian ideology« and resulting in a »questionable interpretation of Christianity« and a film that »is not Marxist.«<sup>14</sup> Later (1968), Pasolini conceded that some of the criticism was correct: »It is a violently contradictory film, profoundly ambiguous and disconcerting, particularly the figure of Christ — at times he is almost embarrassing, as well as being enigmatic. There are some horrible moments I'm ashamed of, which are almost Counter-Reformation Baroque, repellent — the miracles. The miracles of the loaves and the fishes and Christ walking on the water are disgusting pietism. The jump from this kind of holy picture scenes to the passionate violence of his politics and his preaching is so great that the Christ figure in the film is bound to produce a strong sense of unease in an audience. Catholics come out of the film a bit shaken up feeling that I have made Christ bad. He is not bad in fact, he is just full of contradictions. But while the contradictions in the text are contradictions of content, of meaning, passion, faith, religion, the contradictions in my film are more existential and therefore more disquieting.«<sup>15</sup>

What is remarkable, however, is that it's only Pasolini who thinks in religious categories, in other words, who takes Jesus' holiness seriously, while his



[FIG. 1]  
Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.):  
Crucifixion scene with  
Pasolini's mother, in *Il vangelo  
secondo matteo*, 1964



[FIG. 2]  
Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): Image  
of an ancient city geography,  
Entry into Jerusalem, in *Il vangelo  
secondo matteo*, 1964

various critics tend to address either the social status of the institution of the Church, the question of plausibility in the sense of an enlightened, liberal Christianity or a Marxist interpretation of history — anything but the appropriateness of using this sacred material. For even though he was an atheist, Pasolini wasn't interested in slandering God:<sup>16</sup> »I would have produced a positivist or a Marxist reconstruction at most, and thus at best a life which could have been the life of any one of the five or six thousand saints that were preaching at that time in Palestine. But I did not want to do this, because I am not interested in de-consecrating: this is a fashion I hate, it is petit bourgeois. I want to re-consecrate things as much as possible, I want to re-mythicize them.«<sup>17</sup>

The film, which was highly successful and which predominated in Catholic media efforts and Easter TV programming for many years, also in (West) Germany, is characterized by an almost naïvely direct approach to the biblical story, particularly the miracles, a view Pasolini intended to portray the savior's story from the eyes of simple peasants. It is both a passion play with few cinematographic attributes and a literal filming of literature; its precision is based less on a historical reconstruction than on the veracity of the religious tradition. It's recorded that during the filming, the free-spirited Pasolini consulted a church advisor, who saw to it that no transgressions against traditional conventions of representation entered into the work and that the rules of decorum in the Catholic pictorial tradition were followed to the letter.<sup>18</sup> And yet, the film portrayed a revolutionary Jesus far from the image of the sweet blond figure of Nazarene, presenting the Galilean evangelist as a revolutionary with all the ruthlessness of his moral appeal. Pasolini had originally planned to shoot the film in the »Holy Land,« but a visit to Palestine showed him that in today's



Israel, the type of archaic peasant culture in which he wished to set his gospel had long since given way to modernization.<sup>19</sup> Instead, he found the imagined archaic culture in his own country, intact and hence empirical, in Basilicata, deep in the Mezzogiorno, a region still steeped in the time before the history of modern Italy, in which the legends of Christianity still possessed a »peasant reality.« The topographical location, even at that time a utopos, became a spiritual one that allowed the artist, marked as he was by modernist subjectivism, an immediacy from a much older time: »The gospel presented me with the following problem: I couldn't narrate it like a classical story, because I don't believe I'm an atheist. [...] For this reason, in order to narrate the gospel, I had to immerse myself in the soul of a believer. That is indirect free speech (<le discours indirect libre>):<sup>20</sup> on the one hand, the plot is seen through my own eyes, and on the other through the eyes of a believer.«<sup>21</sup> The ostensibly »plain« perspective is, however, brought to expression through an exposed artistic form. The veristic camera of the early sixties, its rough cut occasionally reminiscent of the »direct cinema« of a Richard Leacock, seems to bring this »pre-historic« culture to life in the authentic medium of film.<sup>22</sup> The film embodies a stylistic paradox in that, in contrast to the »arte povera« of its mise-en-scène, it is elevated through the music and the many visual compositions and abundance of Christian music and iconography. The entire spectrum of Western culture is present, ranging from a mournful blues song to Bach's St. Matthew Passion, from the garments of the early Renaissance to realistic painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> Although the painstaking, largely verbatim adaptation from literature comes across as documentary, Pasolini does without historical accuracy in the architecture, the scientific reconstruction of the Temple, and the



[FIG. 3]  
 Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.):  
 Piero della Francesca's  
 Sadducees and Pharisees, in  
*Il vangelo secondo Matteo*, 1964

like, and replaces these with the »aura« of the medieval village of Matera. At the same time, in the faces of the Sadducees and Pharisees, we recognize the figures in Piero della Francesca's paintings. His film is anything but a cinematic exploration of the life of Jesus (Fig. 3). Why, then, does Pasolini, a well-known, self-described communist and homosexual, paint this portrait so piously, instead of presenting the key myth of Christianity against the grain of clerical interpretation, at least to a degree? Beyond this, the film has none of that neo-religious idealization that we know from many works of modern art ranging from the neo-Catholicism of the Pont-Aven School to the neo-mysticism of an esoteric avant-garde à la Kandinsky.<sup>24</sup> Pasolini's Jesus is earthly, as concrete and materialistic as peasant folk. And it's not the director's first Passion narrative. His pimp tales in *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma* could be understood as such, for instance when the liturgical music typologically ascribes the

miserable life of the protagonists to the Lord's suffering, and Franco Citti finally lies on his deathbed in the radical foreshortening of Mantegna's *Cristo Morto*. The film remains ambivalent, because on the one hand equating the brutal pimp with suffering Jesus can be considered heretical, in an attitude Pasolini found to be bourgeois, while at the same time it conjures up the mystique of the divine in day-to-day life in opposition to the rational mindset of the Enlightenment.

Appropriating historical forms and narrations into clerical art, especially in the industry of mass communication, is not rare, of course. But it is, entirely in the tradition of »propaganda fide«,<sup>25</sup> almost exclusively functional, with the original claim to meaning no longer playing a role. This becomes particularly evident when the biblical narratives themselves become the stuff of entertainment and are spiced with all the ingredients of sex and crime, as in films like Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* of 1956, William Wyler's *Ben Hur* of 1959, and, in 2014, in Darren Aronofsky's *Noah*.<sup>26</sup> It's their success, however, that's a sign of loss, for the market laws of industrial image production prohibit linking the product to concrete religious experience. Pasolini, however, distances himself from this type of »industrial blasphemy« when he takes the Christian legend as a *factum brutum* of the divine truly seriously in content and form.

In complete contrast to this, at the same time that the Catholic religion began to soften its distance to modernism, in a concrete sense — and this is crucial to the »scandal« Pasolini represented — it was no longer a matter of provoking the categorical orthodoxy in the sense of a tradition overcome, but the truce that these overcome religious powers had long since reached with the industrial bourgeois culture now prevailing. This can be demonstrated particular-



ly clearly in art, for the scandals of the Secessionists did not aim to provoke a rigid, premodern, and completely orthodox, literal religious art that asserted its claim to legitimacy in its hallowed traditions. The only thing left was a compromise, now commonplace, between traditionalist systems of value such as the Catholic faith and the everyday utopia of the industrial functional society of the bourgeoisie, as described by Luhmann. From historical painting with its photographic and ideal-realistic convention to the Hollywood kitsch mentioned above, the religious work of art triumphed »in the age of mechanical reproduction.« All substantialistic justification in faith was now replaced by pure functionality in the consumerist society. Heresy, then, does not consist in deviation, but in affirmation, in taking orthodoxy and its myths seriously. That is the real heresy of the heretic.

### »The Dream of a Cause:« Politics <sup>27</sup>

The stylization of the divine that characterizes Pasolini's *St. Matthew* film can also be found in his invocation of another one of his religious myths, communism. On the other hand, in *Uccellacci/Uccellini* (*The Hawks and the Sparrows*, 1965), literally »ugly birds, little birds,« he picks up on a classic Christian legend, that of the »Little Flowers of St. Francis,« roughly the folkloric counterpart to Buenaventura's official hagiography in which he quotes a classic of Catholic Italian postwar cinema, Roberto Rossellini's *Francesco, Giullare di Dio* (*The Flowers of St. Francis*) of 1949, the hopeful year of neo-Realism. Following a short introduction of the protagonists, Pasolini has the vagabond duo, played



[FIG. 4]

Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): Totò and Ninetto as vagabonds with the raven as the author, in *Uccellacci/Uccellini*, 1965



[FIG. 5]

Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): The 'holy ceremony' of Togliatti's funeral, in *Uccellacci/Uccellini*, 1965

by the famous comedian Totò and Pasolini's intimate friend Ninetto Davoli, appear as Franciscan monks of the earliest days. At first, however, the order's founder forgets the two simple monks when he sends his followers out into the world to preach the new teachings. When the two, much to their surprise, are left behind, the great saint has no better idea than to instruct them to preach the good news to the birds, too. Using their childlike, naïve intuition, they initially succeed with their difficult task and actually talk to the birds, until they realize that the falcons, despite their happiness at the Lord's words, continue to hunt sparrows. Even in the realm of the birds, class relations override Christian morals. Pasolini translates this constellation into the present day when the protagonists, two Chaplin-like vagabonds, go through all kinds of adventures in which, far from any leftist glorification of the oppressed class, they become perpetrators as often as victims (Fig. 4). And right in the middle of this modern picaresque novel, Pasolini inserts documentary material from the funeral of Togliatti, the head of the Italian Communist Party, and the two heroes become its essentially inattentive onlookers. The selected images of collective grief are characterized by the religious emphasis of a ritual of veneration, performed with Mediterranean fervor that is normally reserved for saints (Fig. 5). Togliatti becomes a religious symbol and a part of the Passion iconography, with which the director, who was expelled from this same party, becomes united in what comes close to a cinematographic ritual as a kind of *unio mystica*. Most of all, according to Hans Ulrich Reck, the found footage of this »perhaps last authentic communist manifestation«<sup>28</sup> sacralizes the occurrence and lends it the authenticity of an encounter with a mythical *ur-communism* much closer to Christianity than any enlightened Marxist reflection. In the film, however, Pasolini counters the sa-



crality reminiscent of his *Gospel According to St. Matthew* in several ways: through confrontations between the lofty Francis and the vagabonds' profanity, between the evocation of a truth-producing communist utopia and the minor and often amusing crimes of the hero Totò, and between the pair's comic nature and the intellectualism of the talking raven accompanying the two heroes. It's precisely this raven that is Pasolini's mouthpiece in the film when he repeatedly inundates Ninetto and Totò with his intellectual commentaries derived entirely from the new-leftist theory of the time. In the end, the intellectual is eaten by the very sub-proletariat in which the young Pasolini once placed all his hopes.

Thus Pasolini simultaneously invokes and deconstructs his own »communist myth.« To his mind, what destroyed this myth was the model of progress that the modern capitalist, consumerist society represented. Reason alone is not enough to break apart the compulsive character of this new totalitarianism; at the very least, since the days reason identified the »anthropological shift,« in other words, the conflation of repression and instrumentally rational order in the modern mass societies, it has become perverted into an instrument of the hegemony.<sup>29</sup> »Such a ›qualitative jump‹ therefore concerns both fascists and anti-fascists: it is, in fact, the passage of a culture made up of illiterates (the people) and of ragged humanists (the middle class) from an archaic cultural organization to a modern organization of ›mass culture.‹ It's precisely in this ›unification‹ that cultural identity and the possibility of resistance are irrevocably lost in favor of a general hedonism.«<sup>30</sup> This hegemony is a total one to the extent that it not only encompasses intellectual consciousness, but also eats into the body's language itself. For this reason, Pasolini cannot compromise on the prevailing conditions either with the established powers or the

leftist opposition, because it would always require admitting to the banality of the real. To Pasolini's mind, communism, similarly to the Church, has also become bourgeois, so bourgeois that it can only be revered in mythical garb and as an image of mourning. Communism, here, is indeed a religion — albeit a dying one — a people's legend that stands no less in opposition to the status quo than its Christian counterpart.<sup>31</sup> The two are preserved only in the films' »aesthetic shrine.« Yet in Italy, too, with the »historic compromise« between Berlinguer's PCI and the Democrazia Cristiana, the left had found its place in bourgeois life. The »dream of a cause« as a social utopia could only be conserved by artistic means.

Disappointment transforms into a new form of heresy that can be increased if not one, but several orthodoxies are worshipped in opposition to facts and »celebrated« at the same time. The »bourgeois« question of mediation between these is not even posed. Pasolini is Catholic, communist, decadent, homosexual — and all with equal enthusiasm. He demands global emancipation and the preservation of archaic cultures at the same time.<sup>32</sup> The leftist and communist can seem conservative, against enlightenment. He invokes the motherland, and wants all motherlands simultaneously. Yet all of these »faiths,« as purely and »innocently« as they might have been articulated, provided no way out for him. While he always provoked a clear, enlightened discourse by »celebrating« its opposite — all the sacralities of a pre-rational myth — he was never at home in any one of these myths, especially when the idealized sites of resistance disappear. Thus, for Pasolini there was only one last sensuous means of maintaining his hopes. It was only in the mutual desire between bodies that Pasolini, who as a homosexual had personally experienced the rejection of the Other, believed he could find resistance to the omnipotence of

an instrumental rationality he found to be nightmarish.<sup>33</sup> And this »evidence of the bodily« is also the core of his film aesthetics of a »cinema of poetry.«<sup>34</sup>

### **The Innocence of Bodies**

Just how futile this project was can be seen in the constant flight in which Pasolini sought to conjure one cultural ideal after the next as a place of refuge from the postwar mass consumerist culture and then, disappointed, abandoned just as quickly. During these years, however, the relationship between erotic discourse and society had changed fundamentally.<sup>35</sup> While in the art of the *fin de siècle*, for instance the French *Décadence* that Pasolini so revered, the demand for free sexuality in opposition to the prevailing bourgeois morals was still a provocative act, at the latest in the postwar era; even in backward Italy, the system combined forces with the libertinage of the postwar era. When compared with the euphoric expectations placed on sexual emancipation, it became an ordinary ware in the real-life everyday pornography of modern Italy. To Pasolini's mind, contemporary libertinage wasn't an indication of revolt, but proof of a general agreement with the status quo. Its hymn of sexuality balked against its actual fulfillment, while its concrete realization was subordinated to the purity of a poetic idea. For this reason, desperate and notwithstanding all contradictions, he always continued his search wherever, in one way or another, the system of cultural values, which was always an artistic one, had not yet become entirely subjected to the forces of uniform mass culture. He was no less »cruel« than the poets of the *Décadence* when, in spite



of his communist obligation to enlightenment, he was ready to pay homage to even the most repressive of cultures as vestiges of a more original state, only to turn away once again in disappointment when the process of globalization absorbed such places of refuge. It was similar with the poverty of southern Italy, the worker's culture assumed by the clearly Stalinist communist party, and the young male prostitutes of the subborgios. The race finally came to a halt in the »Orient.« In other words, he reenacted the flight of a Gauguin or a Murnau, but connected it to an explicit political agenda when he looked at these exotic places of paradise and saw a concrete potential for resistance against the dominance of the international culture of consumerism. While the aforementioned early Romantic and late Romantic artists depicted their exotic paradises from the start in non-naturalistic and purely painterly terms, Pasolini tried to retain the authenticity of the world as something quasi-»holy« through the pre-rational and unconventional »authenticity« of cinematic images. At the same time, if the myth of the innocent body was the only thing that promised resistance to the anthropological revolution he'd identified, then the political utopia of sexuality joins the concreteness of the film medium.

In the reality of his actual life, of course, he was able to obtain no more than vestiges of these primeval, resistant sites of his utopia, but they were enough for him to weave a blend of erotic stories from the »Orient« that are both oddly dreamlike and very real. While he still maintained the political assertion that this world resisted the grasp of expansive capitalism, in reality the artist fled not only into the exotic distance, but also into the realm of the fairytale.

All the same, in 1974, in *Il Fiore delle Mille e Una Notte* (*Arabian Nights*), literally »The Flower of One Thousand and One Nights,« he can still present the elabo-

rate material in documentary form; in other words, he does not need to create it synthetically, like the fallen Renaissance cultures in Boccaccio's *Il Decamerone* (1970 and '71) or Chaucer's *I racconti di Canterbury*. The artfully symmetrical structure of the whole, comprised of numerous interlocking episodes, stands in strong contrast to the director's «cinéma vérité» in other films of his, which he shot on original sites with carefully selected individuals on extensive journeys to Ethiopia, Yemen, Iran, and Nepal.<sup>36</sup> A unique reinterpretation of realistic stylistic means ensues when these more or less record an earlier aestheticism of a magnificent «Orient,» which, as the director himself discovers, is indebted more to «oriental» miniatures than the reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 6.). Although it is only a selection of classical stories from the extensive collection of fairytales, the film takes the work's structure seriously. In contrast to the many Hollywood adaptations, all of which use the «oriental» decor as a mere backdrop for their very American stories, Pasolini addresses the intricate structure of the original to the point of the illegibility of its individual levels in order to be similarly interrupted by poems, recited in verse, that transform even the most direct description of sexual intercourse into pure poetry. In the weave of this tapestry, the staged parts merge easily with the architectures and landscapes of the various countries of Africa and Asia. It's about a reality of a myth that aims not at the representation of actual conditions, but at the authenticity of concrete objects, people, and buildings, whose authenticity alone can promise a successful resistance to the totalitarianism of a consumerist world that is becoming international (Fig.7).

Despite the considerable contrast between the austerity and severity of the *Passion* film and the colorful opulence and abundant sensuousness of the

tales of Scheherazade, the worlds in each of these films are connected by the very »holy integrity« that capitalism ruthlessly destroys. To find this sacrality, to preserve it — as Kracauer says, to »save it« — is the film's loftiest possibility and political task.

This occurs against the backdrop of an awareness of the reality of the same »Orient« that has long since become part of a globalized dynamic that robs it of its own past. To reiterate, Pasolini is not a naïve romantic, but rather a passionate seeker of a reality that is contradictory and often cruel and ugly. It's a search he prepares for in another »notes film« about a journey to India he undertook with Alberto Moravia, a film in which the »old India of the gods and saints« is juxtaposed with Nehru's new nation and the struggles of the communist party.<sup>37</sup> These are layers that can barely be brought together. As a result, we recognize the theme of the ultimately Eurocentric gaze of the aestheticist to which Pasolini already alluded in his 1969 cinematic »notes« on *Edipo Re*, a film that documents the search for the authentic protagonists of an African *Oresteia* in contemporary Africa.<sup>38</sup> The »notes« show Pasolini in a cinema questioning African students of the University of Rome on excerpts of the material as well as sections already staged that were set to appear in the finished film. Along with their statements, some of which were critical, it's chiefly the ambivalence of the situation, presented on film, that demonstrates the asymmetry of perspectives, for the people invited to take part in the discussion, members of a new post-colonial elite, must have recognized themselves, if not as persons, then certainly as part of a mythical categorization, a constellation in which it's only the artist-author Pasolini who is afforded real sovereignty. Here, too, the mode of aesthetic argumen-





[FIG. 6]  
Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): Fiori  
or erotic miniatures from the  
«Orient» in *Il Fiore delle Mille e  
Una Notte*, 1974



[FIG. 7]  
Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): The  
romantic reality of Persian  
architecture in *Il Fiore delle Mille  
e Una Notte*, 1974

tation is more a break or a juxtaposition of contradictions than a case of Pasolini opening up a rigorous historical perspective.

Thus, his deep rooting in the art of aestheticism becomes visible. In this regard, the only element connecting the ascetic invocation of a holy pimp in *Accattone* and the celebration of »oriental« love in *Il Fiore delle Mille e Una Notte* is the unifying factor of extreme artistic stylization, an aestheticism that seems to ridicule Pasolini's aesthetic of a direct »authentic« realism of a »cinematographic language of life.«<sup>39</sup> While Pasolini was often enough discussed only in terms of the contradictions between his political allegiance to communism and the conservative cultural criticism of his mythical anthropology, critics frequently forget that Rimbaud served as a role model at the beginning of the young poet's career; the poet's phonetic experiments sharpened Pasolini's awareness of the physical impression made by his native Friulian tongue. With the fascist-led dictum of high Italian, the dialect was repressed, along with the special culture it represented. To Pasolini's mind, this dialect was similar to his efforts to retain the sensuousness of the body, which was no less threatened by consumerism. Beyond all claims to the contrary, beauty was the only political utopia that remained to the artist, who had also lost his home in the left. The film's formal mastery consists in the extreme aestheticization of reality itself. Similar to his literary preferences for French aestheticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this is an unmistakable sign that any original trust in the »state of reality,« any utopian hope in it has been lost, because it now justifies itself solely through its aesthetic appearance. What remains is a radical aestheticism whose »holy site« is represented by the work of art alone.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, Pasolini — whose homelessness is evident in all the native habitats he invokes, and whose person has been practically spit out by them, when one

recalls the circumstances of his exclusion from the communist party — is above all a poet. The only elements that form a continuity in this discontinuous life are his verse, words, critiques, films, and images. This perspective also explains the stylistic height with which the young poet already sought to raise the subcultural dialect of his native region of Friuli to the same literary level as the verses of his revered master Rimbaud or the »oriental« poetry of the fairytales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. It is the pure beauty capable of reconciling more or less all contradictions and making them bearable.

### The Orthodoxy of the Avant-Garde

Yet this utopia of the myth of the body also collapsed under the realities of the consumerist present, upon which Pasolini also slandered this »last sanctuary.« In the end, he was forced to admit the failure of potential utopias crafted from the happiness of other cultures, only to admit — disgusted by the slickness and uniformity of Italian bodies — to the failure of his own films.<sup>41</sup> Two years after the *Trilogy of Life*, he renounced his own »celebration of life,« because »the reality of the innocent bodies was (now also) injured, manipulated, and destroyed through the power of consumerism.«<sup>42</sup> Thus his monumental last work, *Salò o le 120 Giornate di Sodoma* of 1975, is chiefly a discourse on the relationship between body, beauty, art, and fascism in which the brutality of the beautiful appearance vs. the aims of the humane is carried to the extreme.<sup>43</sup>

Hans Ulrich Reck described the film as a reaction to the disappointments over the *Trilogy of Life*: »Now, Eros is nothing more than trauma, bound to Thanatos,



the death instinct that devours all. Eros occupies nothing more than the in-between states.<sup>44</sup> The film ends with cruel scenes of torture. People are skinned alive and quartered. The disturbing vivisection is particularly unbearable because Pasolini mercilessly draws the viewer, as the center of obscenity and a media-established lie, into the cinematographic apparatus and integrates him in his overriding critique of the murderous logic of all capitalist apparatuses. The viewer assumes the perspective of the eyes of the young men perversely enjoying the torture scenes in tango tempo, looking through the window into the courtyard of death.

The film culminates in a narrow pan to the viewer's own eye, which is reduced to the monocular eye of the camera and thus becomes an accomplice in a passive participation in the terror, basically the enabler of the murderous scenes. The violent ethos of voyeurism has never been more painfully, cuttingly staged. In his *Abiura dalla Trilogia della Vita*, written during the shooting of *Salò*, Pasolini said he was making a cruel film, so deathly cruel that he himself didn't yet know how to maintain or regain distance to it. From this point on, the story of this film entered into a fatal connection with the story of the end of his own life. He couldn't say what he was trying to express with *Salò*. He didn't know yet. The only thing clear to him was that it was about the »renunciation of sexual language altogether as such, in an absolute sense.«<sup>45</sup> The victims, completely at the mercy of the sadists' gazes set in scene by the whores in daily meetings, no longer have a language (even of the body) and, as beautiful bodies, are no more than objects of pure lust.

The failure of the utopia of the body signified the end of Pasolini's political and artistic utopias. He now vilified the consensus of the avant-garde itself.

His aestheticism, based on the artistic concepts of a radical modernism that was at all times ready to subject real life happiness to art's demands, had lost its innocence once and for all. The aestheticist made his radical break with his absolute belief in form, which meant disappointment in his own (modern) artistic activity. Pure beauty, the aesthetics of *Décadence* far from the morals that he'd once celebrated in the novel *Ragazzi di Vita*, had long since become the most terrible of truths for him. Now, the real orthodoxy emerges that his »heresies« are aimed at, namely modernism itself. He places the libertines, nihilism, and existentialism, in short, all the positions that broke completely with tradition, on the same level as fascism when he transfers the fantasies of the Marquis de Sade in the *120 Days of Sodom* into the reality of the »Republic of Salò.« It's a total, absolute break with all morality through the powers of the old order, the judge, bishop, banker, and duke who are also representatives of the new, which is fascism.

And these gentlemen like to interrupt their »games« with scholarly discussions bolstered with quotes from the pertinent modernist de Sade literature on the total abolition of morality, i.e., with sentences by Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Klossowski, and Philippe Sollers. The avant-garde had subordinated itself to a totalitarian system more than once, one that now found its latest and most subtle form in the consumerist society of the postwar era.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the Marquis' stories are played not only in the context of the historical fascism of northern Italy, but also in an abstract realm of modernist thought. While Visconti's *German Trilogy* connected the aestheticizing lust for total beauty with the disappearance of the gaze, this now switches to the brutal pornography of the torture scenes observed through the binoculars (Fig. 8). And if the barings in *Il Fiore*, which seem so permissive on the surface,



[FIG. 8]

Salò: A Gentleman with  
binoculars and modern art  
in *Salò o le 120 Giornate di  
Sodoma*, 1975

are ultimately brought to a head through the film's contextualization in the austere beauty of traditional »oriental« patterns of imagery and narration, the defenseless bodies in the hellish circles of blood and excrement are completely at the mercy of the perspective of voyeurism not only on the part of the film's protagonists, but also the viewers themselves. All the orthodoxies of religion, myth, and body that Pasolini had previously worshipped appeared here once again in an all-devouring inferno. More than anything, it is the aesthetic — and thus the aestheticist Pasolini himself — whose discourses are brought to their end: hence, it is modernism's most radical self-enlightenment.

Particularly in Germany, Pasolini was reproached again and again for hanging modernist paintings by Léger, Duchamp, and Severini et al. among the art deco work on the walls of the »ruling lords,« because this was the art of the vic-



tims. Yet this art is also the expression of a cult of totalitarian form, an abstract exaggeration of concrete life that is literally perverted, in other words inverted, as a sign of complete negativity.<sup>47</sup> The libertines are, then, the dogmatists of the church of consumerist society, which Pasolini counters with his heresies. Pasolini's desperate self-reckoning also requires the self-denunciation of the heretic. At any rate, the film was a classic scandal, as Wolfram Schütte described it in 1977, right from the fray of left-leaning liberal self-assuredness: »It's said that Pasolini worked on the film until shortly before he was murdered, that he undertook some cuts himself and declared that he was afraid of *Salò*. The film premiered at the 1st Paris Film Festival after ample publicity. Various Italian directors made the trip (such as Bernardo Bertolucci and Liliana Cavani); others (such as Antonioni, Rosi, and Visconti) sent telegrams to protest the film's complete censorship that had meanwhile been imposed in Italy. When at the end of January 1976 [...] *Salò* had its widespread debut in West German cinemas in an FSK<sup>48</sup>-approved edit — the distribution company had anticipated a commercial sequel in the style of *Ultimo Tango a Parigi* (Bertolucci) — it was confiscated here and there by state prosecutors but re-released in Frankfurt until the district attorney's office of Saarbrücken confiscated it across the country following an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* by Karl Korn, which could not be understood as anything but an unveiled call to censor the film across the board.«<sup>49</sup> From the 1980s on, however, it reached audiences initially through important Pasolini events and subsequently on video and DVD. Today it is available without restriction.<sup>50</sup>

Schütte quoted some of the conservative critics, for example in an article in the FAZ on June 2, 1976 titled *The Limits of Representation*: »This is where the

reporter seems to have reached a boundary, where to this day and for every society the protective taboo demands its rights. It is held in contempt here, it does not exist.< Or: >It must be said that Pasolini has in many ways gone beyond what society deems acceptable. The film infringes on the rights of society and the individual to be protected. What it offers with its third circle of Hell [...] in the way of excesses of cruelty can be taken for a temptation to brutality. [...] If the so-called voluntary self-control of the film industry, nearly forgotten in the public consciousness, had not degenerated to a farce [!] following the withdrawal of Church authority, one might ask the gentlemen if they've deleted from their minds the paragraphs calling upon them not to allow the glorification of violence in film. [...] Anyone who puts a so-called work of art on the public market that uncontestedly breaks with the most serious of taboos has to respect boundaries that the general understanding of norms sets [...]. Who protects the many thousands who see such a film without having been informed about its background and context? Who protects them from the psychological damage it can do? An explanation is essential.< The only thing that needs to be added to the margins of this flawless censorship prose in the way of information is that we also know of a critique of the film *Jud Süß* by the very same author, published in the noble Nazi newspaper *Das Reich*.«<sup>51</sup>

As justified as Schütte's indignation was, in 2016 such accusations seem more touching than anything else, given the predominance of sex and violence in both private and public broadcasting, video stores, and the Internet in the face of a contemporary neoliberal conservatism that has become reflexive. Pasolini's cultural pessimism predicted the dissolution of the traditional culturally conservative right into a hedonist consensus for which

bodies and violence would become consumable, a culture to which any Tarantino film or first-person shooter video game can easily testify. In the final analysis, *Fifty Shades of Grey* offers a variation for the most general level of cultural acceptance. The libertinism as provocation of a Buñuel or a Dalí has long since been overtaken by everyday media; at the most, it can provide catchwords for media stimuli. The avantgarde as court jester has long become part of a system that reproduces itself through the production of its aberrations. In *Salò o le 120 Giornate di Sodoma*, this very modernist discourse becomes itself a theme, while the popes of the new dogmas have been left mercilessly to the unacknowledged consequences of their teachings. The real heresy of Pasolini, then, does not consist in provoking within the system of modernism and thereby assuming a position that in the end only leads to more and more integrations into modernism. Instead, Pasolini maligns the orthodoxy of modernism itself, in other words, heresy as an ultra-modern art program.

Pasolini was thus the heretic of an unarticulated consensus of modernism whose failure he had nothing more to counter with than his last heresy in *Salò*, a heresy of the human that has lost every utopian appearance. What is lost is the naïve certainty with which, four decades earlier, the young Surrealists Buñuel and Dalí believed they could serve an undetermined progress by breaking all taboos. It is almost an irony of fate that the severe conservative criticism that prevailed in the form of a long-term ban might have felt closer to the provocateur Pasolini than the praise of his admirers from the liberal art scene, whose modernist certainties he repeatedly shattered, as much as he himself was their product. There is, indeed, hardly any other film that questions its own preconditions to such a degree, to the point that see-



ing, the cinematic gaze itself, is denounced. It is the same Pasolini whose camera once »sanctified« the material concrete world for which the cinematic signs were the »language of reality« who now allows us, as the movie-going public, to gaze through the binoculars with the perpetrators to watch the last execution of the victims at the end of *Salò*. He slanders the church most his own, that of cinematography.

As an aside, it should be said that one should beware of the film's stylization as the final statement prior to what then became the »necessary« death of the artist, for the utopias invoked by the works do not form a logical chain of models laid out one after the next, but always stand both for and against one another.<sup>72</sup> This also applies to their total negation, because *Salò* does not depict a historical event, but the *conditio humana*. In an aesthetic sense, this position was only credibly possible as a process-based invocation and escape

<sup>1</sup> Quote from an intertitle of the film, freely translated to English (translator's note). Salvador Dalí: *L'Âge d'Or*, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: Quote from an intertitle of the film. Freely translated to English (TN).

<sup>3</sup> This motif continues throughout nearly the entire biography of the director. Luis Buñuel and Jean-Claude Carrière: *Mon dernier soupir*, Paris 1982 (*My Last Sigh*, Minnesota 2003).

<sup>4</sup> The type of legal verdict imposed on the Viennese ac-

tionist confirms this, in that the reason for the conviction was not the art, but the actual criminal offense, in other words, the principle of »art's freedom« was not applied here.

<sup>5</sup> Thus the 1999 work by Maurizio Cattelan presenting a true-to-life figure of Pope Saint John Paul II, struck by a meteor and lying on the floor of an exhibition in the Kunsthalle Basel.

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction, see Hans Ulrich Reck: *Pier Paolo Pasolini – Poetisch-Philosophisches Portrait*, Audio CD (Audiobook-Verlag), 2012.

- <sup>7</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini: *Empirismo eretico è una raccolta di saggi* scritta da Pier Paolo Pasolini, Milan 1972.
- <sup>8</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini: *Heretical Empiricism*, Washington, DC 2005. I quote the publication because of its title. In terms of this text, the collected essays of Pasolini published under the title *Corsair Writings* play a more prominent role. Pier Paolo Pasolini: *Corsair Writings*, (*Scritti Corsari*), Milan 1975.
- <sup>9</sup> Freely translated to English (TN).
- <sup>10</sup> Enzo Siciliano in particular explored Rimbaud's importance for Pasolini. Enzo Siciliano: *Vita di Pasolini*, Milan 2005 (New York 1982).
- <sup>11</sup> Terms such as heresy and slander are deliberately used as synonyms because a theological-philological explanation of their usage in Pasolini's heterogeneous writings would be inappropriate.
- <sup>12</sup> The distinction is used in the sense of Eliade's classic and aesthetically influential differentiation, and not in terms of modern cultural anthropology. Mircea Eliade: *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, New York 1959.
- <sup>13</sup> In Wolfram Schütte: *Kommentierte Filmografie*, in Pier Paolo Pasolini, ed. by Peter W. Jansen and Wolfram Schütte, Film Hanser series, vol. 12, Munich and Vienna 1977, p. 122.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. texts by Hans W. Ohly: Herbert Reich, and the French press, in Atlas Film's press sheet of 1965; as well as Uwe Nettelbeck in *Die Zeit*, (May 21, 1965); Herbert Linder in *Filmkritik*, 6 (1965), pp. 329ff. Freely translated into English (TN).
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted from Oswald Stack: *Pasolini on Pasolini*, London 1969, pp. 87ff.
- <sup>16</sup> Particularly significant here is Pasolini's employment of his friends (some of them sexual), e.g. Ninetto Davoli and Giorgio Agamben, and particularly his casting of his mother, Susanna Pasolini, as the old Maria. We know the problems of the early modern donor figures, but here it is more a matter of the old motif of then *Imitatio Christi* by atheists.
- <sup>17</sup> Stack: *Pasolini on Pasolini* (see note 15), p. 83.
- <sup>18</sup> Schütte: *Kommentierte Filmografie* (see note 13), p. 124f.
- <sup>19</sup> Pasolini also documented this cinematographically in a kind of 52-minute-long »Note film« – a format typical of the time: *Sopralluoghi* [literally »on-site visit«] in Israel/Palestine for *il Vangelo secondo Matteo*, Italy 1963–64, director and commentary: Pier Paolo Pasolini, music selected by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Film sites included the Sea of Galilee, Mount Tabor, Nazareth, Capernaum, Jordan, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Sinai, and Damascus.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Pasolini in Schütte: *Kommentierte Filmografie* (see note 13), p. 60f.
- <sup>21</sup> Pasolini: *Das 1. Evangelium – Matthäus*. Arthaus DVD, Kinowelt Home Entertainment 2004 (Production Notes under Extras). Freely translated to English (TN).
- <sup>22</sup> More on »authenticity as an aesthetic strategy« in Norbert M. Schmitz: *Der Diskurs über Performance und der Mythos des Authentischen. Eine Kunstform als Übung zivilisatorischer Alltagsästhetik*, in Petra Maria Meyer (ed.): *Performance im medialen Wandel*, Munich 2006, pp. 441–462.

- <sup>23</sup> Pasolini studied with Roberto Longhi in Bologna. CA 2002.
- <sup>24</sup> For an overview, see Maurice Tuchman / Judi Freeman (eds.): *Das Geistige in der Kunst – Abstrakte Malerei 1895–1985*, Stuttgart 1988; more critical: Beat Wyss: *Die Kunst auf der Suche nach ihrem Text*, in Maurice Tuchman / Judi Freeman (eds.): *Mythologie der Aufklärung – Geheimlehren der Moderne*, Munich 1993; Norbert M. Schmitz: *Kunst und Wissenschaft im Zeichen der Moderne*, Alfter bei Bonn 1993, pp. 325–418.
- <sup>25</sup> On the relationship between film and Catholic pictorial rhetoric, see Norbert M. Schmitz: *Eisensteins Bildrhetorik. Die Konstruktion der Tradition*, in Michael Neumann (ed.): *Anblick/Augenblick*, Würzburg 2005, pp. 173–189.
- <sup>26</sup> Pasolini himself addressed the particular cynicism of such biblical films in Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): *La Ricotta*, 1963.
- <sup>27</sup> In a certain sense, Pasolini's novel *Il sogno di una cosa* of 1962 inverts the original intention of Marxist thinking. While Marx was interested in exposing the progressive political content behind the myths, Pasolini believed he would finally find the real utopia in them. Cf. Peter Kammerer: *Der Traum vom Volk*, in Schütte: *Kommentierte Filmografie* (see note 13), pp. 13–34.
- <sup>28</sup> Hans Ulrich Reck: *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Munich 2010, p. 47. Freely translated to English (TN).
- <sup>29</sup> As romantic as this cultural criticism might sound, it also includes topoi of the scientific discourses of the time; Pasolini's historical model, for instance, can easily be interpreted as a »dialectic of enlightenment.« Max Horkheimer / Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford/
- <sup>30</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini: *A Study on the Anthropological Revolution in Italy*, trans. Juliana Schiesari, in Beverly Allen (ed.): *The Poetics of Heresy*, Saratoga, CA 1982, pp. 113–114.
- <sup>31</sup> Cf. Peter Kammerer, in Schütte: *Kommentierte Filmografie* (see note 13), pp. 13–34.
- <sup>32</sup> Were it not for space restrictions, this argument could be further expanded through films such as *Edipo Re*, *Medea*, and the project of an »African Oresteia.« Cf. Reck: *Pasolini* (see note 28), p. 51–52.
- <sup>33</sup> In this respect, Pasolini remains contradictory, also in terms of his own homosexual desire, because he disregards the libertinage in his own life to which he unconditionally submits.
- <sup>34</sup> In more detail cf. Hans-Edwin Friedrich / Hans J. Wulff (eds.): *Pasolinis Filmanthropologie – Die Schrift des Lebens*, in *Scriptura cinematographica: Texttheorie der Schrift in audiovisuellen Medien* (Filmgeschichte International. Schriftenreihe der Cinémathèque de la Ville de Luxembourg, 21) Trier 2013, pp. 203–224. The following chapter on »bodies« is closely based on this text.
- <sup>35</sup> In 1963, Pasolini addresses this cultural shift as a cinematographic essay in the interview and discussion documentation *Comizi d'amore*.
- <sup>36</sup> There is a gap between the native characteristics of the many faces from a broad cross-section of peoples and cultures and the naked bodies of the main actors, almost all of whom were Italian. Pasolini, who otherwise tended to emphasize multiplicity, was unable to fully



break with the conventions of international cinema.

<sup>37</sup> Pasolini's *Appunti per un film sull'India* of 1968 can easily be seen as a »notes film« for the later *Il Fiore*.

<sup>38</sup> *Appunti per un'Orestide africana* of 1970.

<sup>39</sup> On the distinction between realistic stylistics (also in cinema), cf. Stephan Kohl: *Realismus – Theorie und Geschichte*, Munich 1977.

<sup>40</sup> Similarly, concerning the difference of language and image in Pasolini's work, Reck remarked that »particularly for Pasolini, one may assume an overarching unity of the poetic that can be termed lyrical or cinematopoetic.« Freely translated to English (TN). Hans Ulrich Reck: *Film, Kunst, Kino. Die ›Kunst des Films‹ aus der Sicht und als Chance der Kunstgeschichte*, in Thomas Hensel / Klaus Krüger / Tanja Michalski (eds.): *Das bewegte Bild. Film als Kunst*, Munich 2006, p. 121.

<sup>41</sup> This notwithstanding the fact that it was in any case only the third film of the trilogy, *Il Fiore*, that Pasolini completed and that did not remain unfinished. Cf. Schütte: *Kommentierte Filmografie* (see note 13), pp. 170 and 173.

<sup>42</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, in *Corriere della Sera* (Nov. 9, 1975). Freely translated to English (TN).

<sup>43</sup> While Visconti, in his German Trilogy, still speaks of fascism's affinity for the beautiful, to Pasolini's mind, its true core is pure aestheticism beyond morality.

<sup>44</sup> The reference here is to a text presented as a monologue – an »autointervista« titled *Abiura dalla Trilogia della vita*, in Laura Betti / Michele Gulinucci (eds.): *Le regole di un'illusione. I film, il cinema*, Rome 1991, pp. 315 ff.

<sup>45</sup> Reck: Pasolini (see note 28), p. 54.

<sup>46</sup> More than the polemics in question might lead one to assume, this clearly connects him to the discourses of the '68 revolutionaries and hippies. Cf. Herbert Marcuse: *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston 1964.

<sup>47</sup> Pasolini, however, says that the castle should resemble an »Italian Bauhaus« that was »confiscated from a wealthy deported Jew.« It's precisely here, though, that the short circuit between perpetrator and victim becomes visible, in a modern era that became an expression of a post-ideological, post-moral consumerist reality independent of the »superficiality of style.«

<sup>48</sup> German organization for the voluntary rating system of the film industry.

<sup>49</sup> Schütte: *Kommentierte Filmografie* (see note 13), p. 178.

<sup>50</sup> Reck: Pasolini (see note 28), p. 55.

<sup>51</sup> Schütte: *Kommentierte Filmografie* (see note 13), p. 195.

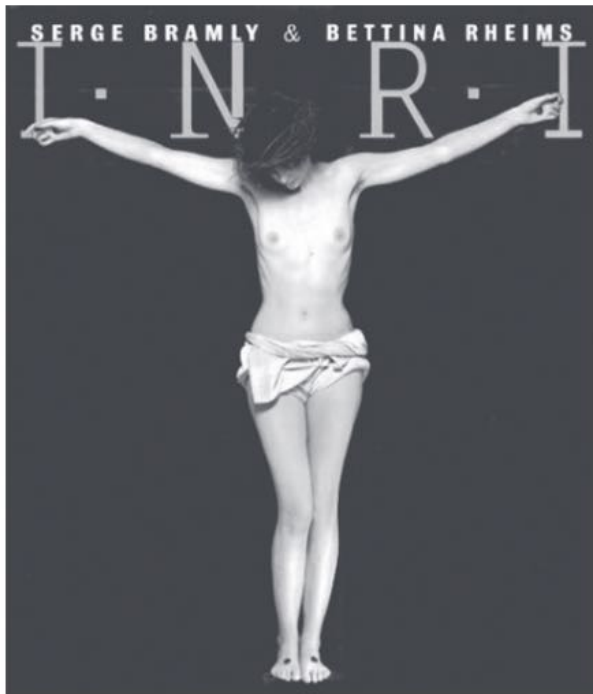
<sup>52</sup> On speculations concerning Pasolini's death, some of which are abstrusely esoteric, see Bernhart Schwenk / Michael Semff (eds.): *P.P.P. Pier Paolo Pasolini*, cat. on the exhib. at Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Nov. 17, /2005 – Feb. 5, 2006, Ostfildern-Ruit 2005. On the other hand, Reck confidently lists the many projects Pasolini still strove to accomplish at the time. Reck: Pasolini (see note 28), p. 55-56.

# Blasphemous Feminist Art. Incarnate Politics of Identity from a Post-Secular Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Anne-Marie Korte

## Introduction: »Blasphemous« Feminist Art

Among the increasing number of publicly exhibited works of art that have been accused of blasphemy or sacrilege in the context of cultural identity politics in Western societies, religiously connoted feminist art works and performances seem to stand out and fulfill a particularly provocative role. The works of art in question have remarkable common traits in their disputed imagery. They connect almost life-sized and often naked human bodies to iconic sacred scenes of Western Christian culture and art, such as the suffering Jesus on the Cross, the Last Supper, the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus, or the Pieta (Mater Dolorosa). Well known examples are works such as *Ecce Homo* by Elisabeth Ohlson (Sweden), *I.N.R.I.* by Serge Bramly & Bettina Rheims (France) (Fig.1), *Yo Mama's Last Supper* by Renee Cox (USA), *Our Lady* by Alma López (USA), *Blood Ties* by Katarzyna Kozyra (Poland), and *Passion* by Dorota Nieznalska (Poland). More recently, songs and acts consisting of social, political, and religious criticism, performed »provocatively« by pop artists such as Madonna, Lady Gaga, or the Russian feminist punk rock group, Pussy Riot, have become publicly contested for comparable reasons. All these works of visual or performative art have been accused — more or less formally — of blasphemy or sacrilege, which contributed to both their notoriety and their controversiality, by attracting huge media attention. Not only have conservative religious interest groups and religious leaders and representatives targeted these works of art and performances; secular politicians and civil authorities have also declared them offensive, and both parties have tried or even succeeded in stopping, prohibiting, or banning their public exhibition or performance.<sup>2</sup>



[FIG. 1]  
Cover of Serge Bramly and  
Bettina Rheims, *I.N.R.I.*,  
New York, 1999

The works of art and performances involved are created predominantly by female artists, performers, and activists who explicate their aim to contribute to the emancipation of women and ethnic or sexual minorities. They explain that, to this end, they address — and in some aspects re-enact or rework — the faith traditions in which they have been raised. (In all these cases, this pertains to particular forms of Christianity, as will be discussed later). In their work, they consciously bring together emancipatory issues and core religious imagery from their own upbringing. They focus in particular on the pre-



sensation and staging of human bodies (including their own) in their most sensitive aspects (i.e., as naked, delicate, sensuous, vulnerable, wounded, tortured). They explain that this is the material or medium by which they envision both their most hurtful and their most hopeful and joyous experiences; at the same time, it offers them ammunition for political, cultural, and religious criticism. They often use the controversy that their work evokes as an enlarged public podium to state their political and artistic views.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I aim to clarify why these »religiously embodied« feminist works of art are so prone to current controversy, public upheaval, and legal action, in particular to accusations of blasphemy and sacrilege. The case of Madonna's crucifixion scene in her *Confessions on a Dance Floor* show (2006) will be my core example, and the disciplinary fields that inform my analysis are religious studies, theology, and gender studies. I will argue that the controversy that these feminist works of art and performances evoke is related to the identity politics of ethnic and sexual minorities and of religious communities, interest groups, and lobbyists involved in a tug-of-war over shifting positions of privilege and marginalization in modern, neo-liberal societies. The deliberate and ostentatious interplay of gendered corporeality and (homo) sexuality with religious themes forms the symbolic arena of this culture battle. The clashes that these works of art engender are positioned on the fault line of religion and secularity, and their controversiality is deeply embedded in the ideological debates over this demarcation.

It is my contention that the many instances of alleged blasphemous imagery featuring gendered corporeality and non-heteronormative sexuality that are part of the so-called culture wars of the past two decades are related to a par-

ticular social and cultural shift in modern and predominantly secularizing societies regarding the public meaning of both religion and sexuality. This shift concerns the position and public perception of both religion and sexuality as identity markers in their mutual interrelatedness. At stake is an oscillating relationship of religion and sexuality as modern individual and collective markers of identity. Significant for this instability is the emergence of a dichotomous public discourse in which a secular position is equated with acceptance of sexualities in the plural and a religious position with rejection thereof. The cultural shift this implies could be seen as a reshuffling of prominence, power, and visibility in relation to the former established social and personal meaning of both religion and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Until the late 20th century, religious identity in Western countries counted as a primary marker of one's social position, while sexual preference and behavior were matters of privacy to the point of invisibility. Most recently, the affirmation of sexuality in the plural, in all its (public) manifestations, has come to count for many as a core value of modern Western life, while religious identity has been deemed increasingly private, or is supposed to be.<sup>5</sup> The many current cultural conflicts gravitating around religion, gender roles, and sexual diversity are thus not only indicators of changing views of sexuality and its role in the formation of individual and collective identity, but also of the fundamentally changing role of religion in modern society.<sup>6</sup> This is why I think that an attentive investigation of these interrelated changes, from both a post-secular and a gender-critical perspective, should be at the forefront of the analysis of contemporary accusations of »blasphemous« works of art. Before discussing my thesis, I will first elaborate these analytical perspectives.

## Blasphemous Art in Post-Secular and Gender-Critical Perspective

From October 23-26, 2012, the World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression was held in Oslo, Norway under the heading *All that is banned is desired*. It included a brief appearance of a member of the besieged Pussy Riot punk rock group. A central cause of concern expressed was that censorship by religious organizations and the phenomenon of religiously argued bans on artistic freedom of expression are on the rise, against the expectations of »many in the West.«<sup>7</sup> However, since the fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1989, Western attention has centered predominantly on censorship and attacks originating from militant, fundamentalist Islam. This tendency tendency of interest was also visible at the Oslo conference. The fact that there is also an increase of Christian groups and institutions in the US and Europe that raise objections to, or try to ban, works of art is less publicly discussed. But as early as 1987, the exhibition of Andres Serrano's controversial photograph *Piss Christ*, winner of the South-eastern Center for Contemporary Art's *Awards in the Visual Arts* competition and partly sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, opened a national and recurrent debate in the US, fueled by Christian organizations, on the conditions and restrictions of the creation and exposition of publicly funded art. The subsequent exhibition of Serrano's *Piss Christ* in museums in Australia, the UK, and France led to similar debates and confrontations at local and national levels, including physical attacks on the displayed photograph.<sup>8</sup> When, in September 2012, *Piss Christ* was on display at the Andres Serrano overview *Body and Spirit* in the Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery in New York,



religious groups and politicians called for President Barack Obama to denounce this work of art, comparing it to the anti-Islamic film *Innocence of Muslims* (2012), which had been condemned by the White House earlier that month.<sup>9</sup>

In these and similar instances, a resurging and pugnacious discourse on blasphemy and sacrilege can be found in which both religious and non-religious parties have a particular stake. At first sight, the manifestation and spread of this discourse during the past two decades seems to belie the fact that, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the legal prohibition of blasphemy and sacrilege in most European countries (as well as in the US, Canada, and Australia) has gradually been waived or diluted, or become obsolete. This paradoxical state of affairs has given rise to discussion, initiated by philosophers, historians, theologians, and scholars of religion, on the reappearance and meaning of (accusations of) blasphemy and sacrilege in contemporary public discourse.<sup>10</sup>

The cultural historian David Nash, who specializes in the history of blasphemy in Europe, argues that blasphemy's history unsettles both the historiography of Christian religion and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century secularization theory engrafted in this history. Blasphemy's present manifestations in Europe disturb the idea of a progressive rationalization and privatization of religion. »Blasphemy's illumination of conflict models and incidents showed that belief was capable of ebbing and flowing and appearing at pressure points in the interaction of individuals and societies.«<sup>11</sup> I subscribe to the general observation that the increased recourse to (the discourse of) blasphemy and sacrilege to oppose or ban culture-critical statements and performances reflects power struggles and cultural identity politics — also addressed as »culture wars« — in post-secular, neo-liberal, and multi-religious societies. However, I do not consider the accusa-

tions of blasphemy and sacrilege to be merely rearguard actions, relics of old times, or simply category mistakes. Following the scholar of religion Brent Plate, author of the fascinating book *Blasphemy: Art that Offends*, I want to emphasize the (co)incidental and composed character of blasphemy accusations in their relation to political and religious power struggles. The discourse of blasphemy emerges between the production and reception of artworks or performances and needs to be studied by »taking into account the proleptic and analeptic dimension of blasphemous events.« As a scholar of religion, Plate defines blasphemy as fundamentally consisting of acts of transgression, »crossing the lines between the sacred and the profane in seemingly improper ways.«<sup>12</sup> He proceeds that while there are no specific, formal qualities common to proclaimed blasphemous images and acts, sexuality, nudity and bodily fluids seem to register in a great many of them. They collectively point toward modern society's disease with the human body itself, »that most intimate and yet most foreign of entities.«<sup>13</sup> Concurring with Mary Douglas' symbolic anthropological interpretation in *Purity and Danger*, Plate observes that »impure mixings« with these ingredients abound in contemporary contentious imagery. But these observations, while highly relevant for understanding the staging and impact of current public discourse on blasphemous art, do not yet touch upon the pressing question of why gendered corporeality and non-heteronormative sexuality are the very target of accusations of blasphemy and sacrilege in so many contemporary cases. They do not clarify why precisely the interplay of iconic religious imagery with female corporeality and (homo)sexuality is perceived as endangering the distinction between the sacred and the profane. The theologian Sarah Maitland has pointed to the

famous accusations against Jesus, Paul, Dante, Galileo, and Darwin, showing that, in consecutive periods of Western cultural history, blasphemy and sacrilege have often been located in areas other than those of gendered corporeality and sexuality, as indicated by the arguments over the operation of salvation, the shape of the cosmos, or the definition of the civic state that have been at stake in these accusations.<sup>14</sup> Contentious imagery has its own history and genealogy, which means that the question of the prominence of instances of »blasphemous« imagery featuring gendered corporeality and sexual diversity in the culture wars of the past two decades should be addressed in their particular details, imagery, and resonance. Over and against art critics and other scholars who claim that allusions to gendered corporeality and (homo)sexuality will per definition work provocatively in the context of iconic religious imagery because of the strong and potentially conflicting affective registers that are involved,<sup>15</sup> I prefer to explore these contested works of art in relation to historical processes of shifting gender positions and changing stances toward sexual diversity in Western modernity. For instance, as the theologian Margaret Miles has shown, in the Renaissance period, period, which saw women's first collective shift from the private to the public sphere in Europe, female nudity and sexuality became the focus of a newly explicit public and controversial figuration in the arts.<sup>16</sup> Feminist historians and art critics have suggested that the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century movements of women's emancipation and the strong political and cultural opposition that these movements have met created a similar impulse to explore gendered corporeality and sexuality in artistic imagination and cultural expressions.

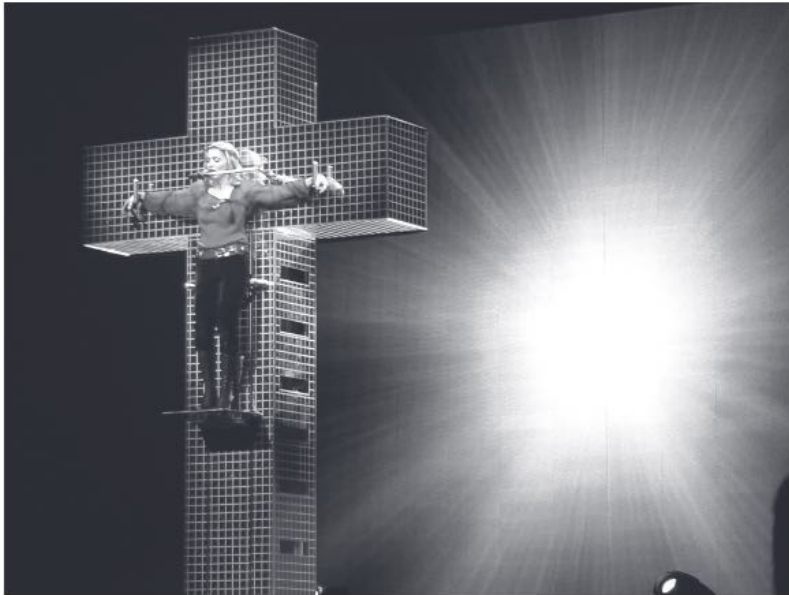


The modern transformations of religion with regard to the distinction between public and private spheres should also be incorporated into this analysis. In her seminal lecture *Sexualism*, Joan Scott points to the points to the increasing sexualization of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century — the reduction of women to their bodies and their sexuality — as an inherent part of the upcoming modern ideal of secularity in which the political and the religious, and the public and the private, became opposed in patterns of strengthened gender dichotomy, conceived as a natural distinction rooted in physical bodies. According to Scott, it must be acknowledged that the »domestication« of women, or their increasing relegation to the private sphere, as well as the simultaneous »feminization of religion,« took place in the context of the rapid expansion of the modern Western political and cultural ideal of secularity.<sup>17</sup> »The public-private demarcation so crucial to the secular/religious divide rests on a vision of sexual difference that legitimizes the political and social inequality of women and men.«<sup>18</sup> In modernity's secular ambitions and in its struggle with the hegemony of religious institutions and worldviews for liberal ends, »feminized« religion, women's religiosity, and female sexuality have become intertwined in their position as »the other« of secular reason and modern citizenship, when in the processes of secularization in the West, women became more and more exclusively associated with both religion and the private sphere. As Scott argues, »[t]he assignment of women and religion to the private sphere was not — in the first articulations of the secular ideal — about the regulation by religion of female sexuality. Rather feminine religiosity was seen as a force that threatened to disrupt or undermine the rational pursuits that constitute politics; like feminine sexuality it was excessive, transgressive and dangerous.«<sup>19</sup>

As I see it, the analytical perspectives developed above help clarify why contemporary works of art and performances that openly combine »feminized« religion, women's religiosity, and female sexuality while intending to make critical feminist statements — works such as the ones I introduced at the beginning of this paper — are potentially transgressive in multifaceted ways and run the risk of being accused of offense, insult, and defamation, not only by conservative religious groups and leaders, but also by secular politicians and civil authorities. I will now turn to a more detailed analysis of Madonna's crucifixion act to further elaborate my position.

### **Madonna's Controversial Crucifixion Scene<sup>20</sup>**

In her 2006 *Confessions Tour*, America's greatest female pop star ever, Madonna, managed to upset many people around the world by staging a crucifixion scene. Although she had frequently toyed with Christian symbols such as crosses and crucifixes in her œuvre, here she launched a new incorporation of this symbol by staging herself as the one who is crucified. Suspended on a huge shining silver disco cross and wearing a crown of thorns, Madonna sang one of her famous songs, *Live to Tell*, supported by an organ-laden, »churchy«-sounding orchestration. Pictures of African AIDS orphans and passages from the New Testament were projected on a big screen behind her. At the end, she stepped down from the cross, put down her crown, and knelt on stage in a gesture of prayer, while Biblical passages such as, »For I was hungry and you gave me food«<sup>21</sup> and »Whatever you did for one of these least ones, you did for me«<sup>22</sup> shone in large letters above Madonna's head (Fig. 2).



[FIG. 2]

From her *Confessions Tour*,  
Madonna on a mirrored  
cross, July 6, 2006 (photo  
by Oscar Rohena)

In most countries where Madonna performed on her *Confessions Tour*, the crucifixion scene was severely criticized. It was condemned as outrageous and blasphemous, in particular by Christian groups and organizations that often sought to prohibit the show. Catholic church leaders confronted with Madonna's performance in Rome decried her crucifixion act as disrespectful, provocative, and a publicity stunt in bad taste: »Being raised on a cross with a crown of thorns like a modern Christ is absurd. Doing it in the cradle of Christianity comes close to blasphemy.«<sup>23</sup> Margot Käßmann, the first woman ever to hold the position of Lutheran bishop of Hannover, Germany, commented that »to put oneself in the place of Jesus is an extraordinary form of overestimation of oneself.«

In response to these accusations of hubris and of insulting God as well as Christians by identifying herself with Jesus on the cross, Madonna remarkably »affirmed« that she wanted to imitate Jesus by staging this act. Taking up one's cross



and pleading pleading for attention to Africa's AIDS orphans is, as she claimed, fully in the spirit of Jesus' teachings. »I believe in my heart that if Jesus were alive today he would be doing the same thing,« she said (2006). The fact that, in the wake of her Confessions Tour, Madonna adopted an AIDS orphan from Malawi — who, it was later revealed, was not a full orphan — also contributed to the controversial and paradoxical aspects of her performance. For Madonna's act could be seen as a glamorous rendition of the leading role of the crucified Christ from the script of the gospels, passion plays, and folk devotion, but also as a quite personal appropriation — almost even an incarnation — of the suffering Christ. Her act could be seen as a cheap, moralistic call to »do as Jesus would,« but also as an engaged popularization of contemporary theological readings of the crucifixion, followed by a highly visible exemplary act of charity. It could be perceived as a sincere attempt to revitalize the Christian symbol of crucifixion, but also as a shameless exploitation of this symbol by making a spectacle of it. And, of course, it could be considered sheer provocation, for it is obvious that religion plays a major role in Madonna's taunts and provocations. To quote the French literary critic Georges-Claude Guilbert, who wrote a book titled *Madonna as »Postmodern Myth«*: »Madonna, star, queen and divinity, but also sometimes scapegoat, is a privileged source of scandal and mythology. [...] Goddess and priestess of her own cult, she (continuously) upsets the adepts of the more traditional cults: Christians, Muslims and Jews.«<sup>24</sup>

Although I agree that Madonna constantly and deliberately shocks and provokes to attract attention, I do not want to reduce her ingeniously designed shows and compositions to this description. Nor do I consider her repertoire of religious themes a sheer manipulative toolbox. I regard provocation as part of her

profession as an artist and performer. I am not interested in these provocations as such, but in the themes, forms, and media Madonna actually uses to provoke and in the comments and reactions they evoke.<sup>25</sup> I consider addressing Madonna's crucifixion performance in its controversiality an important element of a post-secular analysis. To approach this act from this perspective does not take away its fundamental ambiguity or its controversiality, but rather opens a perspective of analysis that acknowledges this ambiguity and controversiality and reflects on this complexity without repeating and reinstalling the modern opposition of secularism versus religion and the ways this opposition is interwoven with secular feminist as well as contemporary theological claims.<sup>26</sup> In particular, this reading aims to explain how critical appropriations of core religious images and practices partake in emancipatory identity politics in post-secular conditions.

### **Female Crucifixion as Iconoclash**

The actual transgression that determines the controversiality of religiously embodied feminist works of art such as Madonna's crucifixion scene can be located on various levels of tension, depending on whom or what is held most sacred and what is seen as most threatening to violate this. From an intra-religious perspective, this transgression consists of violating the interdiction of representation of the divine and trespassing against God as giver of this rule. Andreas Häger, a scholar of religion who has studied the use of the image of the Christian cross in Madonna's earlier oeuvre, argues that judging this use as blasphemous does not depend on whether the cross is understood as a religious symbol or not. Instead, the judgment

of blasphemy is founded upon the idea that the (religious) symbol of crucifixion is confined and closed in its actual form, content, and meaning (because of its transcendent or God-given nature).<sup>27</sup> The offense of blasphemy involved here concerns the violation of the established, authorized, and familiar representation of the crucified Christ.

On a more general level of mythic conception and cultic practice, the disputed status of these works of art is related to the problematic role and meaning of gendered corporeality in the religious imagination of the great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). As Christian feminist theology argues, whereas in these religions God is seen as transcendent, sovereign, male, and not bound to material existence, women are conceived to be totally »other« than this God.<sup>28</sup> So to connect female corporeality to the established symbols of divine reality, in particular to the figure of Jesus as God incarnate, easily generates the judgment of blasphemy or sacrilege. From this perspective, it is not individual acts of hubris or mockery, but more general perceptions and demarcations of what counts as sacred that determine the perceived offensiveness.

Third, these accusations of blasphemy and sacrilege can be considered core disputes about religious identity and meaning in multicultural and multi-religious societies, as clashes between various understandings and imaginations of what is found to be sacred. The cultural philosopher Bruno Latour has coined the term »iconoclash« to address these situations, using a neologism that combines the aspects of clash and iconoclasm. Iconoclash names an object, image, or situation that embodies or creates an unsettled — and unsettling — clash between different scientific, religious, and artistic worldviews. Characteristic of these iconoclashes is that they create ambiguity and hesitation to



interpret, because they counter images with images and combine aspects of image-breaking with those of image-making.<sup>29</sup> This concept of iconoclasm acknowledges the multi-directional transgressions taking place in contemporary accusations of blasphemy and sacrilege and considers them manifestations and collisions of different, but not necessarily opposing or exclusive world-views. Against this background, Madonna's crucifixion act becomes a very interesting case to reflect on: what exactly effects transgression(s) here? What is so problematic in Madonna's staging of herself in the role of the crucified Jesus? By which aspects of her act does a symbol that counts as sacred become ridiculed, affected, or obscured? Is it the central presence of female corporeality, or the high-handed personal identification with Jesus? Or is it that the person who identifies with Jesus is Madonna, the pop star and extremely successful businesswoman whom we, willingly or unwillingly, associate with the provocative, sensualized, and eroticized exhibition of her own body? To answer these questions in terms of the specificity of Madonna's performance, I will first discuss two other examples of disputed female crucifixion in their own distinct contexts.

### **Female Crucifixion in Medieval Devotional Practices**

As I have argued elsewhere in more detail, the visualization or staging of female crucifixion has not per definition been judged blasphemous in Christian cultural history.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, the display of female crucifixion has been incorporated into devotional practices over a long period. The commemoration of crucified female saints and martyrs, such as Blandina, Julia,



[FIG. 3]

St. Wilgefortis, 1513, Egidienkirche,  
Erlangen-Eltersdorf, Germany

and Eulalia, has been cultic practice since early Christianity. However, indicative of the social and religious tensions that female crucifixion harbors, there has been a continuous reservation against portraying these female saints as actually hanging on the cross; the cross is mostly shown only as one of their attributes.<sup>31</sup> A remarkable exception to this iconographic tradition is the popular devotion concerning a female crucified saint, depicted as such, that existed all over in Europe from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fig. 3).<sup>32</sup>

A long-standing explanation of the existence of these extraordinary visualizations speaks of a misunderstanding: the crucified saint portrayed could not have been a woman, because it was Jesus, depicted in the majestic style of Eastern Christianity. This tradition perceived Jesus on the cross in the role of the divinely ordained High Priest, fully and richly dressed. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century on, this image of the royally dressed, crucified Christ was venerated in Western Christianity, alongside the upcoming Gothic depiction of the nearly naked suffering Christ.<sup>33</sup> The adoration of what was called the »robed Christ« existed in particular in connection to the famous sculpture of the *Volto Santo* (Holy Face) or *Sante Croce* (Holy Cross) in the Cathedral of Lucca in Tuscany, which became a famous place of pilgrimage.<sup>34</sup> According to the misunderstanding thesis, the many copies of this image that were produced and spread over the centuries were no longer interpreted as signifying Jesus with his symbols of sacred kingship and royal priesthood. The particular details of this image, such as the precious robe, ornaments, crown, and shoes contributed to the growing idea that that statue was, in fact, that of a woman rather than of Jesus.<sup>35</sup>

But more interesting than this misunderstanding thesis is the question: why and how did the practice of veneration of a crucified female saint become so important and accepted that even an established and popular image of the crucified Christ could be taken to be representative of her? This interpretive shift took place in the context of the cultural and religious transition to a lower Christology and a more personal devotion to Jesus and the saints in the later Middle Ages, following the radical religious reform movements of the mendicant orders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, the triumphal



nature of the earlier crucifixes, which had reflected the conviction that the crucifixion necessarily implied Jesus' resurrection, increasingly gave way to a more pessimistic vision of human nature and existence, and this changed the religious interpretation of suffering and death considerably. Jesus became preferably depicted as suffering, bleeding, and dying on the cross, which rendered him more human and more connected to ordinary human existence. As Church historian Caroline Walker Bynum has shown, this implied that women in the later Middle Ages could identify more directly with the suffering Christ and, vice versa, that Jesus could be perceived as being closer to women, in particular in his human aspects of suffering, bleeding, and dying to further new, eternal life.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that the visual presence of female crucifixion was widely accepted in late medieval Europe — until it was swept away in the broad iconoclastic gesture of the Reformation — was probably related to the profound gender ambiguity and the gender-bending that characterized its depictions. They point to the redemptive significance of female crucifixion and the gender inclusiveness of divine incarnation in Jesus — not overtly or provocatively, but in a rather subtle and ambiguous way. The agony and cruel death of the female saint are implied but not overtly shown, which offers an affective and imaginative space to call up the suffering of the saint, of Jesus, and of the believers. The richly dressed and adorned crucified body refers simultaneously to femaleness and to maleness, to the suffering Christ as well as to the risen Christ. This gendered ambiguity apparently did not diminish, but rather emphasized and reinforced the sacred dimensions of the crucified Christ (Fig. 4).

## Female Crucifixion as 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Feminist Iconoclasm

The last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of what are called »Christa« sculptures and paintings, made in the context of women's political, cultural, and religious emancipation in Western countries. These works, created individually by female artists, each aim to present the crucified Christ in a female form. Famous examples are the bronze statue *Christa* by the British artist and sculptor Edwina Sandys (1974), the bronze *Crucified Woman* by the German-born Canadian Almuth Lutkenhaus-Lackey (1976), and the three-dimensional panel *Bosnian Christa* by the British artist Margaret Argyle (1993).<sup>37</sup> These works were not made as, or intended to be, religious works of art in the sense of objects of devotion or meditation, nor were they meant to be installed or handled in religious settings. According to the artists, they reflect a creative reworking of the central sacred symbol of Christianity, the crucifixion of Jesus.

Margaret Argyle has stated that she sees this female Christ as a symbol that addresses the situation of Bosnian women who suffered during the ethnic cleansing of former Yugoslavia's civil war in the early 1990s: »A Christa which would speak about the obscenity of rape clearly and graphically.«<sup>38</sup> The suffering woman on the cross Argyle created reawakened for her the symbolic meaning of the cross of Jesus and of the faith in God who is in the world and present wherever human beings are suffering. Her panel refers to the specific suffering of women during the conflicts and massacres in the former Yugoslavia, while at the same time suggesting the idea of the Christian cross guarding the vulva and prohibiting the violation of women's bodies.



[FIG. 4]  
St. Wilgefortis, Museum of  
the Diocese Graz-Seckau, Graz,  
Austria, late 18<sup>th</sup> century



[FIG. 5]  
Edwina Sandys, *Christa*,  
St. John the Divine,  
New York City, 1975



These Christas all gave rise to similar reactions of indignation, illustrated here by considering the vicissitudes of Sandys' *Christa* in more detail (Fig. 5).<sup>39</sup> This sculpture, created in 1974 by an artist known for her monumental works, is rather small and reserved. It shows a slender female nude with arms outstretched in cruciform and with a crown of thorns on her bowed head. It was the first of the works of art mentioned here that was publicly displayed. But it only became perceived and disputed as controversial when it was exhibited, ten years after its creation, in a Christian ecclesiastical and liturgical setting. In 1984, it was placed near the main altar in the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City during Holy Week. The display of the sculpture in this context evoked highly emotional stances, expressed by church leaders and publicists on both sides of the debate. The opponents declared that the sculpture of a naked, suffering woman on the cross, was »symbolically reprehensible« and »theologically and historically indefensible,«<sup>40</sup> while defending parties argued that the sculpture revealed the inclusiveness and depth of the theological meaning of God's incarnation in Jesus in a confrontational way.<sup>41</sup> After eleven days, the sculpture had to be removed from the cathedral due to ongoing protests. Six months later, a display of the sculpture at Stanford University's memorial chapel triggered the same mixed reactions.

In the reactions to the public exhibition of these Christas, two aspects are worthy of mention. First, these three works of art became contested only when they were put in ecclesiastical and liturgical settings, as has happened several times with all these works of art. They were not disputed when displayed in other public spaces such as museums or galleries. Only in religious settings, when the Christas were placed in the hallowed spaces of collective Christian

remembrance and imagination, did they become forms of iconoclasm. Second, in this context, these contested works of art proved capable of bringing about theological debate on the meaning of one of the central tenets of Christian faith: God becoming human and fully participating in humanity's existence and suffering. By suggesting similarity and comparability between the suffering of women and the crucifixion of Jesus, the Christas more or less deliberately put a gender-critical strain on the familiar meanings of this symbol. This strain can be interpreted as a threat of erasure and destruction, but also as an invitation to reconsider and re-appropriate the meaning of this central symbol of Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

I suggest that one of the reasons why these works of art not only brought about shock and aversion, but also generated incentives to theological debate and reflection, is the particular gender aspects of these visualizations of female crucifixion. Each Christa figure is that of an unclothed woman, but in all cases, their bodies appear restrained and tenuously stylized in the characteristic pose of a crucifixion. The difference between these thin female bodies and that of the commonly depicted naked and suffering Christ on the cross is minimal. Pictured this way, the crucified female body has a great figural likeness to the suffering body of Jesus, and in this fusion of images, the naked crucified bodies of women seem to transcend their primarily sexual connotation. The sacred, solemn, and non-sexual associations summoned by the suffering body of Jesus can counter or absorb the ambivalent reactions that are commonly evoked by the display of the naked bodies of women. Here the maleness of the traditional crucifixion symbol is contested by an act of feminist iconoclasm that does not replace the male figure with the female figure, but that blurs the established distinction between them. This specific

constellation of images has supported the acceptance of these Christas and generated the rise of the Christa as a theme in works of art all over the world during the past two decades.

### **Madonna's Crucifixion Act Reconsidered**

Madonna's 2006 crucifixion scene was staged as part of a show in theatrical form, and as an artistic expression. Worthy of evaluation is the way she staged and enacted the theme of female crucifixion and the impacts of her artistic choices. I have developed one possible proceeding of such an evaluation in the foregoing parts of this essay. That is why I will conclude by looking at the gender strategy of Madonna's crucifixion scene and its effects compared with those found in the two other contested cases of female crucifixion discussed above. At first sight, regarding Madonna's crucifixion scene as actually performed on stage, we can note a striking resemblance to the staging of gendered corporeality in medieval devotional practices regarding female crucifixion. Madonna, surprisingly, has left out all her usual provocations while taking on the role of the crucified Christ: she does not take off her clothes in this scene; nor is she provocatively dressed. Rather, she appears on the cross in a very modest, androgynous style, fully dressed in a blouse, trousers and boots. The modesty and serenity Madonna displays resemble the gender ambiguity and the gender-bending of the medieval devotional paintings of St. Uncumber. In discreetly embodying the crucified Christ in an energetic show composed of passionate confessions from her



dancers and herself, Madonna comes closer to »the spiritual transmutation of the life of the body« that Luce Irigaray ascribes to Jesus as a »human totem:« »a bridge between totemic cultures and patriarchal cultures, the cultures of life and the cultures of the mind, confused by the patriarchy with the Word.«<sup>43</sup>

But looking at Madonna's crucifixion scene while taking into account her openly stated intentions in performing this act, it seems that the staging of it more strongly resembles the restrained feminist criticism of the Christa artists (Fig. 6). Like them, Madonna strives for a critical appropriation of the symbol of crucifixion as a protest against injustice, violence, and suffering, in particular the suffering caused by HIV/AIDS that is often unnoticed or forgotten. Like the Christa artists, Madonna fuses the symbol of the suffering Christ with the figure of a not-too-corporal woman to put a gender-critical strain on the familiar meanings of this symbol. And, like these artists, Madonna has reinterpreted the crucifixion scene with references to contemporary situations of suffering and injustice. In Madonna's crucifixion act, we see below and behind the cross not abandoned, mourning women — Jesus' mother and his female friends — as in classical Christian iconography, but the faces of abandoned, mournful children who are orphans and sufferers of HIV/AIDS.

It is possible, considering Madonna's staging of the crucifixion scene and in view of her intentions, to interpret this performance theologically as a contemporary, gender-inclusive representation of Jesus' suffering. In doing so, we may value this act as an affirmation of the agenda of feminist and liberation theology, as has been suggested by some theologians.<sup>44</sup> However, although the Christas indeed evoked such a theological impetus, it is doubtful whether Madonna's act could ever bring about a similar effect. In the singer's case,



[FIG. 6]  
Madonna performing *Live to Tell*  
at London's Wembley Arena  
on her *Confessions Tour*, August 12, 2006



[FIG. 7]  
Madonna performing in Paris, France,  
on her *Confessions Tour*, August 31, 2006  
(photos by Pascal Mannaerts)

provocation dominates the scene: Madonna's objective is clearly to advance the iconoclasm itself, not to contribute to its effacement. But leaving aside her more or less explicit intentions, I maintain that the form and style of her act's »qua gender« strategy enhances the controversiality of female crucifixion. Finally, I think Madonna's staging of the crucifixion scene most resembles the works of the female artists and performers who explicitly pose as Jesus or Mary in their works of art: Renee Cox, Alma López, and Katarzyna Kozyra, whose works gave rise to huge controversies and insurmountable conflicts. The *presentia realis*, the real, ineluctable presence of women of flesh and blood in these works of art, intensifies the iconoclasm between sacred symbol and female corporeality and sexuality.<sup>45</sup>

The most challenging tension of Madonna's crucifixion act can probably be identified here, which also clarifies why this act has come to play a crucial role in contemporary identity-political clashes (Fig. 7). On the one hand, Madonna's performance is highly susceptible to accusations of hubris and blasphemy, not because of the presence of female corporeality *per se*, or because a female crucifixion as such is staged, but because Madonna poses as a recognizable individual and a woman of stature and fame who intentionally stands for and in the place of Jesus. On the other hand, Madonna's act is also, in an unexpected way, intriguing because of her personal, »lived,« and confessed identification with the crucified, suffering Jesus. This demonstrates an uncanny admixture of secular and religious values. By depicting a fragile, broken body, Madonna seems to have acknowledged that the visceral and vulnerable body is both a potent signifier of lived experience and a medium of formal and aesthetic inquiry — which brings her on speaking terms with old traditions of »spiritual exercise« in Chris-



tian devotional practices and imagination. More generally, her act attests to the increasing role of the individual body as a challenge to constricting social codes in post-secular conditions, while the gendered and sexuate body has simultaneously become profiled as the principal arena for the politics of identity, as well as a facilitator and marker of belonging.

<sup>1</sup> This article is a slightly reworked version of Anne-Marie Korte: *Blasphemous Feminist Art. Incarnate Politics of Identity in Postsecular Perspective*, in Rosi Braidotti / Bolette Blaagaard / Tobijn de Graauw / Eva Midden (eds.): *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere*, Palgrave Politics of Identity & Citizenship Series, Basingstoke 2014, pp. 228-248. For related publications, see: Anne-Marie Korte: *Madonna's Crucifixion and the Female Body in Feminist Theology*, in Rosemarie Buikema / Iris van der Tuin (eds.): *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*, New York 2009, pp. 117-133; Anne-Marie Korte: *Madonna's Kruisigingscène. Blasfemie of Theologische Uitdaging?*, in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 49/2 (2009), pp. 125-140. I would like to thank Marco Derks for his assistance in the writing of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> For comprehensive and critical overviews of contemporary art accused of blasphemy, see S. Brent Plate: *Blasphemy. Art that Offends*, London 2006; Elizabeth Burns Coleman / Kevin White: *Negotiating the Sacred. Blasphemy and Sacrilege in a Multicultural Society*, Canberra 2006; Elizabeth Burns Coleman / Maria Suzette Fernandes-Dias (eds.): *Negotiating the Sacred II. Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, Canberra 2008; Elizabeth Burns Coleman: *The Offenses of Blasphemy. Messages in and*

*through Art*, in *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 45 (2011), pp. 67-84; Jojada Verrips: *Offending Art and the Sense of Touch*, in *Material Religion* 4/2 (2008), pp. 204-225; Eleanor Heartney: *The Global Culture War*, in *Art in America*, 99/9 (2011), pp. 119-123.

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Heartney: *Thinking through the Body. Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination*, in *Hypatia* 18/4 (2003), pp. 3-22; Eleanor Heartney: *Postmodern Heretics: Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, New York 2004; Eleanor Heartney: *Kiki Smith. A View from the Inside Out*, in Eleanor Heartney / Helaine Posner / Nancy Princenthal / Sue Scott (eds.): *After the Revolution. Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art*, Munich 2007, pp. 189-207; Bettina Papenburg / Marta Zarzycka (eds.): *Carnal Aesthetics. Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, London and New York 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Janet Jakobsen / Ann Pellegrini: *Love the Sin. Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, Boston 2004; Mark D. Jordan: *The Return of Religion during the Reign of Sexuality*, in Linda Martín Alcoff / John D. Caputo (eds.): *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*, Bloomington 2011, pp. 39-54.

- <sup>5</sup> Stefan Dudink: Homosexuality, Race, and the Rhetoric of Nationalism, in *History of the Present*, 1/2 (2011), pp. 259-264; Fatima El-Tayeb: »Gays Who Cannot Properly Be Gay.« *Queer Muslims in the Neoliberal European City*, in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 19/1 (2012), pp. 79-95; Adi Kuntsman: Figurations of Violence and Belonging. *Queerness, Migranhood and Nationalism in Cyberspace and Beyond*, Oxford etc. 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> R. Ruard Ganzevoort / Mark van der Laan / Erik Olsman: Growing up Gay and Religious. Conflict, Dialogue, and Religious Identity Strategies, in *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*, 14/3 (2011), pp. 209-222; Mariecke van den Berg / David J. Bos / Marco Derks / R. Ruard Ganzevoort / Miloš Jovanović / Anne-Marie Korte / Srdjan Sremac: Religion, Homosexuality, and Contested Social Orders in the Netherlands, the Western Balkans, and Sweden, in Gladys Ganiel / Heidemarie Winkel / Christophe Monnot (eds.): *Religion in Times of Crisis, Religion and the Social Order*, Leiden and Boston 2014, pp. 116-134; see also Korte: Madonna's Kruisigingscène (see note 1); id. em: Madonna's Crucifixion (see note 1); id. em: Dying to Tell. Madonna's kruisigingscène als icoon van heiligheid en zonde, in Didier Pollefeyt / Ellen de Boek (eds.): *Wil er iemand mijn Messias zijn?*, Leuven 2010, pp. 29-57; id. em: Madonna's kruisiging. Van theatraal passiespel tot publiek steekspel, in *Religie & Samenleving*, 6/1 (2011), pp. 81-101.
- <sup>7</sup> Robin Denselow: All That Is Banned Is Desired. Report of the World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression, Copenhagen 2013.
- <sup>8</sup> Verrips: Offending Art (see note 2).
- <sup>9</sup> Kathleen Massara: PISS CHRIST. Andres Serrano's Iconic Work On View At Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery, in *The Huffington Post*, September 25, 2012 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/25/piss-christ-andres-serrano\\_n\\_1909911.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/25/piss-christ-andres-serrano_n_1909911.html) (accessed on Feb. 10, 2017); Robert Spencer: White House won't denounce »Piss Christ« after repeatedly denouncing Muhammad movie, in *Jihad Watch*, September 21, 2012 <https://www.jihadwatch.org/2012/09/white-house-wont-denounce-piss-christ-after-repeatedly-denouncing-muhammad-movie> (accessed on Feb. 10, 2017).
- <sup>10</sup> For discussions of blasphemy and sacrilege in their contemporary forms, see e.g. David Lawton: *Blasphemy*, London and Philadelphia 1993; Anthony Fisher / Hayden Ramsay: Of Art and Blasphemy, in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 3/2 (2000), pp. 137-167; David Nash: Analyzing the History of Religious Crime. Models of »Passive« and »Active« Blasphemy since the Medieval Period, in *Journal of Social History*, 41/1 (2007), pp. 5-29; Jean-Pierre Wils: *Gotteslästerung*, Frankfurt on the Main 2007; Elizabeth Burns Coleman: The Offenses of Blasphemy. Messages in and through Art, in *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 45/1 (2011), pp. 67-84.
- <sup>11</sup> David Nash: Blasphemy and Sacrilege. A Challenge to Secularization and Theories of the Modern?, in Elizabeth Burns Coleman / Maria Suzette Fernandes-Dias (eds.): *Negotiating the Sacred II. Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, Canberra 2008, pp. 11-22, here p. 16.
- <sup>12</sup> Plate, *Blasphemy* (see note 2), p. 43.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>14</sup> Sara Maitland: Blasphemy and Creativity, in Dan Cohn-Sherbok (ed.): *The Salman Rushdie Controversy in Inter-Religious Perspective*, Queenston 1997, pp. 115-130.
- <sup>15</sup> David Freedberg: *The Power of Images. Studies in the*

- History and Theory of Response, Chicago and London 1989; Verrips: *Offending Art* (see note 2).
- <sup>16</sup> Margaret Miles: *Carnal Knowing. Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, Boston 1989.
- <sup>17</sup> Joan W. Scott: *Sexualism: Ursula Hirschman Annual Lecture on Gender and Europe*, RSCAS Distinguished Lecture 2009/01, April 23, 2009, pp. 12-13.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>20</sup> To analyze Madonna's crucifixion scene, I have followed the threefold approach to cultural phenomena in the context of theological evaluation as proposed by Gordon Lynch: *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Malden 2005, an author-focused approach (researching the scene in relation to Madonna's life, œuvre, and published intentions), an object-focused approach (research into the visual and symbolic specificity of this scene), and a reception-oriented approach (investigation of the reactions and comments the scene has evoked). See also Korte: *Madonna's Kruisigingscène* (see note 1); *id. em: Madonna's Crucifixion* (see note 1); *id. em: Dying to Tell* (see note 6); *id. em: Madonna's Kruisiging* (see note 6).
- <sup>21</sup> Matthew 25, 35-36.
- <sup>22</sup> Matthew 25, 40.
- <sup>23</sup> Media reactions to Madonna's performance as described and commented on in this section have been gathered from national and international newspapers and the Internet from the period of June–December 2006.
- <sup>24</sup> George-Claude Guilbert: *Madonna as Postmodern Myth. How One Star's Self-Construction Rewrites Sex, Gender, Hollywood, and the American Dream*, Jefferson 2002, p. 160.
- <sup>25</sup> For critical analyses of Madonna's life and work, see e.g. Cathy Schwichtenberg: *The Madonna Connection. Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*, Boulder 1993; Nicolăa Grigat: *Madonna-bilder. Dekonstruktive Ästhetik in den Videobildern Madonnas*, Frankfurt am Main 1995; Grietje Dresen: *Is dit mijn lichaam? Visioenen van het volmaakte lichaam in katholieke moraal en mystiek*, Nijmegen 1998; Santiago Fouz-Hernández / Freya Jarman-Ivens: *Madonna's Drowned Worlds. New Approaches to Her Cultural Transformations, 1983-2003*, Aldershot 2004.
- <sup>26</sup> Talal Asad: *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford 2003; Rosi Braidotti: *In Spite of the Times. The Postsecular Turn in Feminism*, in *Theory Culture and Society*, 25/6 (2008), pp. 1-24; José Casanova: *Nativism and the Politics of Gender in Catholicism and Islam*, in Hanna Herzog / Ann Braude (eds.): *Gendering Religion and Politics. Untangling Modernities*, New York 2009, pp. 21-50; Nilüfer Göle: *The Civilizational, Spatial, and Sexual Powers of the Secular*, in Michael Warner / Jonathan Van Antwerpen / Craig Calhoun (eds.): *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Cambridge/Mass. 2010, pp. 243-264; Jürgen Habermas: *Notes on Post-Secular Society*, in *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25/4 (2008), pp. 17-29; Charles Taylor: *A Secular Age*, Cambridge/Mass. 2007.
- <sup>27</sup> Andreas Häger: *The Interpretation of Religious Symbols in Popular Music*, in *Temenos*, 33 (1997), pp. 57-61.
- <sup>28</sup> Rachel Adler: *Engendering Judaism. An Inclusive Theol-*



- ogy and Ethics, Boston 1999; Marcella Althaus-Reid: *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, Aldershot 2006; Carol P. Christ: *Laughter of Aphrodite. Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess*, San Francisco 1987; Judith Plaskow: *Standing again at Sinai. Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, San Francisco 1991; Rosemary Radford Ruether: *Sexism and God-Talk. Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston 1983.
- <sup>29</sup> Bruno Latour: What is Iconoclasm? Or is there a World Beyond the Image Wars?, in Bruno Latour / Peter Weibel (eds.): *Iconoclasm Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, Karlsruhe 2002.
- <sup>30</sup> See my publications in notes 1 and 6.
- <sup>31</sup> See for instance the portrayal of Margaret of Antioch (died in 305 C.E.) in Fernando Lanzi/Gioia Lanzi: *Saints and their Symbols. Recognizing Saints in Art and in Popular Images*, Collegeville 2004, p. 92.
- <sup>32</sup> Ilse E. Friesen: *The Female Crucifix. Images of St. Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages*, Waterloo 2001; idem: *Virgo Fortis. Images of the Crucified Virgin Saint in Medieval Art*, in Bonnie MacLachlan / Judith Fletcher (eds.): *Virginité Revisited. Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, Toronto 2007, pp. 116-127; Elizabeth Nightlinger: *The Female Imitatio Christi and Medieval Popular Religion. The Case of St. Wilgefortis*, in Wheeler, Bonnie (ed.): *Feminae Medievalia: Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Ages*, Dallas 1993, pp. 291-328; Regine Schweizer-Vüllers: *Die Heilige am Kreuz. Studien zum Weiblichen Gottesbild im späten Mittelalter und in der Barockzeit*, Bern 1997; Jürgen Zänker: *Crucifixae. Frauen am Kreuz*, Berlin 1998.
- <sup>33</sup> Hans Belting: *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter. Form und Funktion früher. Bildtafeln der Passion*, Berlin 1981.
- <sup>34</sup> Pietro Lazzarini: *Il Volto Santo Di Lucca. Origine, memorie e culto del taumaturgo Crocifisso*, Lucca 1982.
- <sup>35</sup> Friesen: *The Female Crucifix* (see note 32).
- <sup>36</sup> Joan Gibson: Could Christ Have Been Born a Woman? A Medieval Debate, in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8/1 (1992), pp. 65-82; Sarah Beckwith: *Christ's Body. Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings*, London 1993; Barbara Newman: *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist. Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, Philadelphia 1995; cf. Friesen: *The Female Crucifix* (see note 32).
- <sup>37</sup> Edwina Sandys: *Christa*, bronze sculpture (54 x 40 x 8 inch), 1974; Almuth Lutkenhaus-Lackey: *Crucified Woman*, bronze sculpture (8 feet tall), 1976; Margaret Argyle: *Bosnian Christa*, mixed textile panel (48 x 29 inch), 1993.
- <sup>38</sup> Julie Clague: Interview with Margaret Argyle, in *Feminist Theology*, 10/1 (1995), p. 58.
- <sup>39</sup> For detailed information on this case see Julie Clague: *The Christa. Symbolizing My Humanity and My Pain*, *Feminist Theology*, 14/1 (2005), pp. 83-108; id. cm: *Divine Transgressions. The Female Christ-Form in Art*, in *Critical Quarterly*, 47/3 (2005), pp. 47-17.
- <sup>40</sup> Kenneth A. Briggs: *Cathedral Removing Statue of Crucified Woman*, in *New York Times*, April 28, 1984.
- <sup>41</sup> See also *Journal of Women and Religion*, 4/2 (1985) (special issue on »Reflections on the Christa«); M.J. Farrell: *Christa. Woman Climbs on the Cross to Challenge Chris-*

tianity's Male Dominance, in *National Catholic Reporter*, April 5, 1985, pp. 11-12.

<sup>42</sup> For more in-depth feminist-theological discussion of these works of art, see also: Julie Clague: *Divine Transgressions. The Female Christ-Form in Art*, in *Critical Quarterly*, 47/3 (2005), pp. 47-63; Silvia Strahm Bernet: *Jesa Christa*, in Doris Strahm / Regula Strobil (eds.): *Vom Verlangen nach Heilwerden. Christologie in feministisch-theologischer Sicht*, Fribourg 1991, pp. 172-181; Jerry D. Meyer: *Profane and Sacred. Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Postmodern Art*, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65/1 (1997), pp. 19-46; Kelley Ann Raab: *Christology Crossing Boundaries. The Threat of Imaging Christ as Other than a White Male*, in *Pastoral Psychology*, 45/5 (1997), pp. 389-400.

<sup>43</sup> Luce Irigaray: *Beyond Totem and Idol, the Sexuate Other*, in *Continental Philosophical Review*, 40/4 (2007), pp. 353-364, here p. 362.

<sup>44</sup> Andreas Häger: *The Interpretation* (see note 27); Jos van Thienen: *Madonna's Kruis. De vrouwelijke verbeelding van Christus*, in *Lover*, 34/1 (2007), pp. 8-10.

<sup>45</sup> For extended discussions of these works of art in this context, see my earlier publications in notes 1 and 6.

# The Kaaba of New York<sup>1</sup>

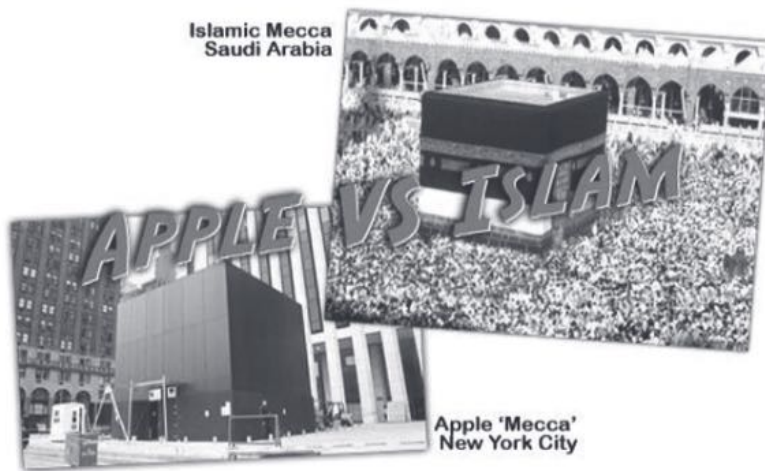
Simon O'Meara

This essay concerns the Internet-based outcry that occurred on October 11, 2006, when the U.S.-based Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) reported that an Islamist website had, the day before, alleged that Apple Inc.'s under-construction flagship storefront in New York resembled the Kaaba of Mecca and was thus intended to provoke Muslims. The report read as follows:

On October 10, 2006, an Islamist website posted a message alerting Muslims to what it claims is a new insult to Islam. According to the message, the cube-shaped building which is being constructed in New York City, on Fifth Avenue between 58<sup>th</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> Streets in midtown Manhattan, is clearly meant to provoke Muslims. The fact that the building resembles the Ka'ba [...], is called »Apple Mecca,« is intended to be open 24 hours a day like the Ka'ba, and moreover, contains bars selling alcoholic beverages, constitutes a blatant insult to Islam. The message urges Muslims to spread this alert, in hope that »Muslims will be able to stop the project.«<sup>2</sup>

This report triggered the virtual storm in a teacup. The details of this surprisingly long-lived but, as will be explained later, mostly muted outcry, are not of interest in this essay. What matters is that, for some people, the Apple storefront constituted an offense, or worse, an insult to Islam, despite the fact that Apple Inc. was reported in newspapers to have issued a statement saying, »[The storefront] is not an attempt to resemble the Kaaba.«<sup>3</sup> The question that follows from this reaction is: how exactly did the storefront achieve this offense or insult? The fact that it was allegedly intended to be used as a bar, as related in the MEMRI report, is obviously one reason; but this reason would have had no purchase with





[FIG. 1]

Internet meme, 'Apple vs. Islam'

readers of the report were it not for the fact that, as also related in the report, the under-construction and therefore black-clad structure bore a passing resemblance the Kaaba of Mecca. This resemblance was sufficiently evident for all to see, giving rise to the Internet meme associated with the outcry (Fig. 1).

The supposition that the underlying reason for the outcry was the perceived visual resemblance between the storefront and the Kaaba must, however, be suspect; for during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad a number of cultic buildings in Arabia are said to have existed that either somehow resembled or precisely imitated, and thus rivaled, the Kaaba. At least four such buildings are known from the early Islamic historiography, all of them referred to as »kaabas,« but by no means did all of them incite the early followers of the Prophet to retaliatory action.<sup>4</sup> Rather, only one was ordered by the Prophet to be attacked and destroyed;<sup>5</sup>

although the destruction of one other, not included among these four because destroyed immediately prior to the Prophet's time, is additionally alleged to have met with his approval.<sup>6</sup> After the lifetime of the Prophet, in the medieval Islamic period, Muslim geographers and historians report the existence of additional copies of the Kaaba.<sup>7</sup> For example, in the ninth century, the Abbasid Caliph, al-Mutaṣim (r. 833-42), allegedly built a replica of the Kaaba in the palatine city of Samarra, Iraq, adding to it a pavement for its ritual circumambulation, similar to the pavement (maṭāf) around the Kaaba in Mecca.<sup>8</sup> In the tenth century, a mosque with the same dimensions as the Kaaba is said to have been built in Cairo (Fusṭāt).<sup>9</sup> Later, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, another similarly proportioned mosque is reported as standing opposite the church in Erzurum, in present-day Turkey; it was allegedly known as the Kaaba Model.<sup>10</sup> Lastly in this brief overview, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Iraqi luminary al-Harawī (d. 1215) is said to have been buried in a mausoleum that was shaped like the Kaaba.<sup>11</sup>

Given that the Prophet is alleged to have suffered the existence of three of the four aforementioned rival kaabas, and that Kaaba copies continued to be built after his death, the offense to Islam that the Kaaba of New York represented for some people cannot be satisfactorily attributed to the perception that it was a Kaaba copy. Indeed, Kaaba copies have continued to be built without issue long after the medieval period, including, specifically, during the last fifty years.<sup>12</sup> The most notable of these recent copies is perhaps the artist Gregor Schneider's *Cube Hamburg 2007* that was intended first for the 2005 Venice Biennale and later for the 2006 Berlin Biennale. On both occasions, the Cube's display was banned not by self-identifying Muslims, but by officials of the two exhibitions, fearing it might cause offense to Islam.<sup>13</sup>

In this last instance, in contrast to the »Kaaba of New York,« the fact that the Cube bore an intentional, albeit reductive resemblance to the Kaaba, and originally had even been planned to be an exact copy of the Kaaba, was indeed the underlying reason for the censorship.<sup>14</sup> However, the difference between this instance and that of the »Kaaba of New York« is that the individuals who censored the Cube were the over-cautious but ignorant exhibition officials; not self-identifying Muslims. These officials correctly perceived the Cube as a Kaaba copy, but incorrectly supposed this perception might prove offensive to others. No Muslim is on record as offended.<sup>15</sup>

With regard to the »Kaaba of New York,« the example of Schneider's Cube proves the necessity of a perception in the minds of the offended individuals of a visual resemblance between the under-construction storefront and the Kaaba. The offended must see the storefront as a Kaaba copy. Additionally, the example proves the volatile power and near-inevitability of such a perception. Simultaneously, the example exposes the inability of this perception to account for the resulting offense.

If the perception of Apple's storefront as a Kaaba copy does not account for the outcry the building provoked, what does? As will be argued below, one explanation is that the storefront was seen as out of place.<sup>16</sup>

### Out of place

In the dictum made famous by the social anthropologist, Mary Douglas, dirt is matter out of place. As Douglas exemplifies this dictum:

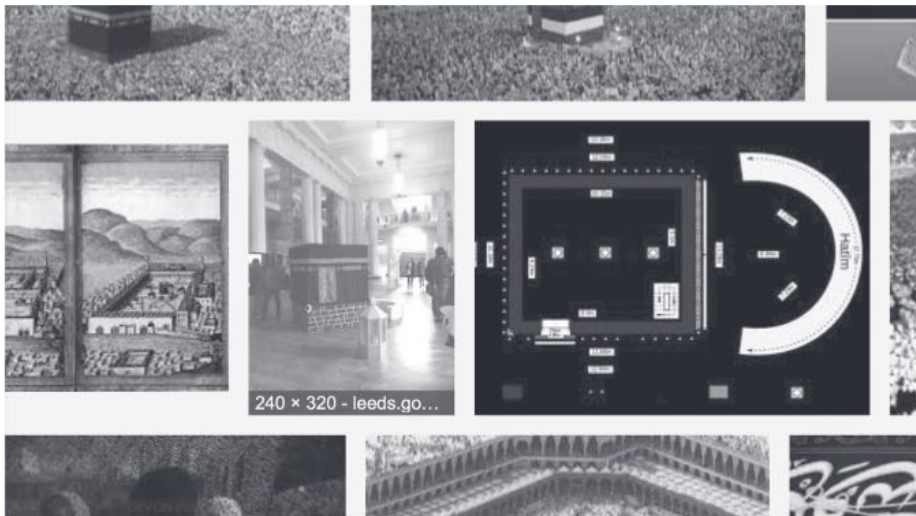


Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

As Douglas glosses this dictum:

Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism [...] [P]ollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.<sup>18</sup>

If we see in Douglas's discussion of matter versus dirt an analogy with the foregoing discussion of the »Kaaba of New York«, whereby there is nothing inherently wrong with a building resembling or imitating the Kaaba of Mecca (»matter«), but there is offense and even insult to be had when this resemblance falls foul (»dirt«) of the Muslim beholders' symbolic system — their inherited system of ordering and classifying the world — then we begin to grasp the relevance of the dictum for this essay. To grasp its relevance fully, however, the term »place« must not be understood in some local, site-specific way; for then the dictum would imply that the offense or insult arising from the »Kaaba of New York« was due to the building's location, downtown Manhattan, and that if it were



[FIG. 2]

Screenshot of the Google search window following a search of the combined words »Kaaba« and »copy«

relocated to an open space, a desert say, the offense or insult would disappear. Such a conclusion would be wrong; and the proof of that lies in a discussion of the »Kaaba of Leeds.«

In a Google image-based search of the combined words »Kaaba« and »copy,« one of the sites that results is a photograph of Leeds University's main hall, the Parkinson Court, in the middle of which sits a three-dimensional, reduced-scale copy of the Kaaba of Mecca. A screenshot of the Google search window showing this photograph amid other Kaaba images found by the search engine is reproduced below (Fig. 2).

In this photograph, people can be seen milling past the Kaaba replica with no evidence of unease or outcry; in fact they barely seem to notice it, even though it is there for educational purposes, as the website linked to the photograph explains.<sup>19</sup> But this disregard is not what is important for present purposes.<sup>20</sup> What matters is the setting of this replica, the place in which it is located, namely, the art deco grandeur of the Parkinson Court, part of the Grade II listed Parkinson Building, built between 1936 and 1951. This setting is not too different from that of the »Kaaba of New York.« Both settings are, after all, expressive of ideologies and economies that have no obvious basis in Islam and its omphalos, the Kaaba of Mecca. One might refer to both as modern Western and non-Islamic. This similarity between the two settings notwithstanding, only the »Kaaba of New York« prompted outcry.<sup>21</sup> The geographic location — the location's specific architectural setting and space — cannot, therefore, be what is meant by the term »place« in the dictum that dirt is matter out of place. How, then, should the term be understood? The following answer to this question invokes the thought of the historian of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith, the philosopher, Martin Heidegger, and the architectural theorist, Mark Wigley.

According to Smith, the process by which an incipient society develops a competing, reproducible, and expandable symbolic order depends on its vision of its place. He does not say »founding place,« but the context implies that. He writes:

The question of the character of the place on which one stands is the fundamental symbolic and social question. Once an individual or culture



has expressed its vision of its place, a whole language of symbols and social structures will follow.<sup>22</sup>

Smith's words can be made to resonate further when paired with Wigley's reading of Heidegger's well-known discussion of »a Greek temple« in the essay, *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Of this temple, Heidegger writes:

The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it.<sup>23</sup>

Punning on the words sight and site, Wigley reads Heidegger to mean:

[The temple] is not simply looked at by an eye, aesthetic or otherwise. Rather, it constructs the eye. [The temple] produces its site.<sup>24</sup>

On the basis of Wigley's reading of Heidegger, Jonathan Z. Smith's observation about the generative function of (founding) places leads to the conclusion that the term »place,« in the dictum made famous by Mary Douglas, means outlook, one informed by and tied to a specific symbolic order. The symbolic order generated by the place of the Kaaba of Mecca means that Muslims have an outlook on the world different from that, say, of the ancient Greeks. This outlook of theirs is always present, regardless of their current, individual, particular geographical coordinates; for example, their place of work, their city of study, and so forth.

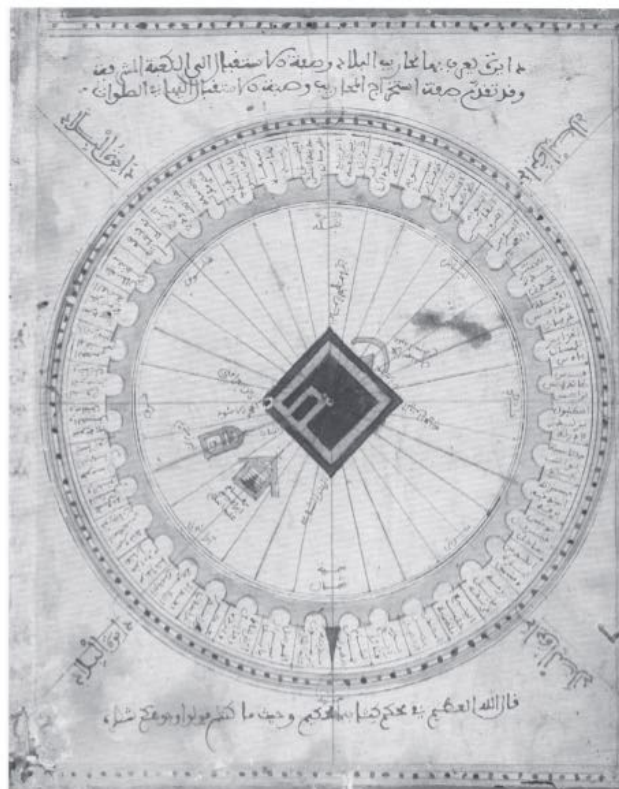
To substantiate this last assertion requires showing the basic contours of the outlook on the world that the foregoing paragraph claims is generated by the place of the Kaaba. One cannot, of course, scientifically prove an assertion that claims validity for a numberless group of people; but one can produce evidence to show empirically that such an outlook exists, and has done so for centuries.

To do this, it is insufficient to tie the alleged outlook on the world to Islamic narratives relating the creation of the world; for example, early historiographic traditions relating how the world unfolded from the Kaaba. Instances of such traditions include: »Forty years before Allah created the heavens and earth the Kaaba was a dry spot floating on the water, and from it the world has been spread out;«<sup>25</sup> and »The [Kaaba] was created two thousand years before the earth, and from it the earth was spread forth.«<sup>26</sup> Important though these world-founding narratives are, they do not speak of an outlook, a view, generated by the Kaaba; rather, they speak of a world generated from the Kaaba, which is not quite the same thing. Additionally, a question remains regarding these narratives' reach in the societies where they were recorded, as well as their subsequent longevity in these societies: to what extent are they representative of more than the literary elites? Islamic material culture evidence has a better claim to being representative of more than just the literate minority, if only because material culture commonly involves the marshaling of more forces, more people, including artisans, for its production. It more obviously bespeaks a collectivity. Accordingly, Islamic material culture evidence will be referred to in the following attempt to draw the basic contours of the outlook on the world I submit is generated by the place of the Kaaba.



[FIG. 3]

Mappamundi with a representation of the Kaaba at the center, pasted into a copy of an anonymous 16<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman work, *History of the West Indies*, dated 1650. Gouache, gold, and ink on paper, 13.6 x 23.2cm, Leiden University Library. MS Leiden, Or. 12.365, fol. 90b



[FIG. 4]

'Ali al-Sharafi al-Safaqusi's nautical diagram of 1572, showing a 40-sector division of the Kaaba for determining the qibla direction, superimposed upon a 32-division wind rose. Gouache and ink on paper, 20.7 x 26.8cm, The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford. MS. Marsh 294, fol. 4v



## The outlook from the Kaaba

As is well known, the Islamic world is oriented toward the Kaaba, with mosques and even some cities in their entirety directed toward it (Fig. 3).

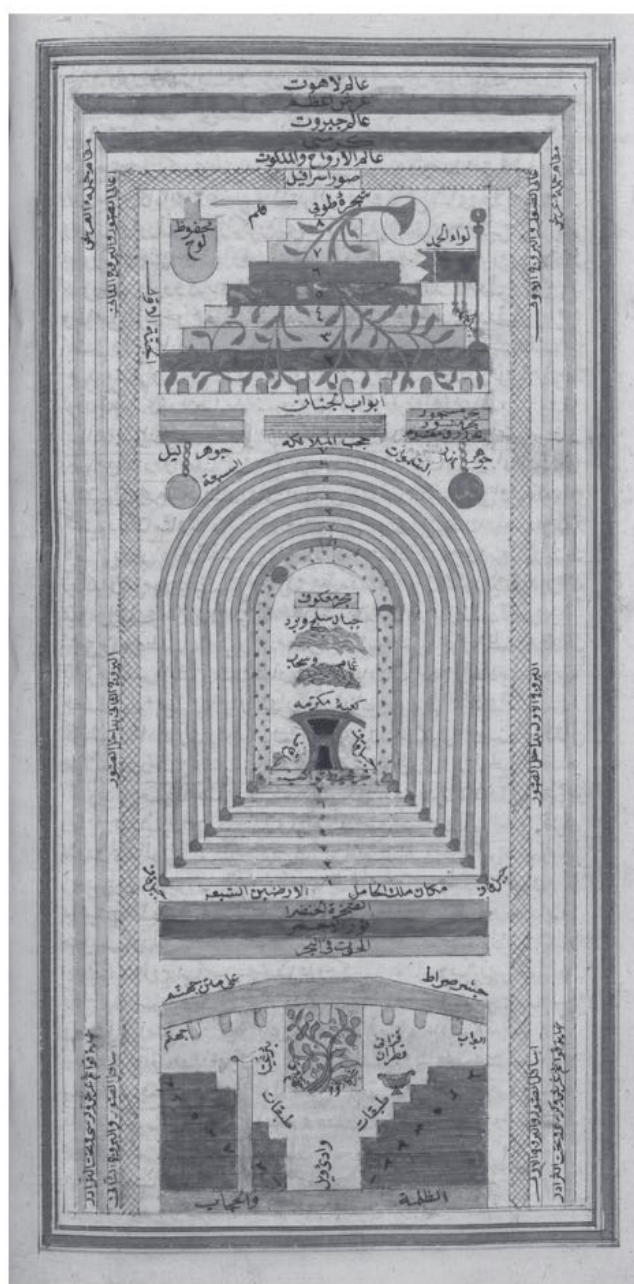
This direction is known as the qibla, and Muslim scientists, cartographers, and others have for centuries conventionally mapped cities and other localities in the Islamic oikumene in accordance with this qibla direction: the direction from the locality toward the Kaaba.<sup>27</sup> In a reversal of this convention, however, the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Tunisian nautical cartographer, 'Ali al-Sharafi al-Safaqusi, plotted the locations using the counter-qibla direction: the direction from the Kaaba toward the cities and localities (Fig. 4). In this scheme, it is as if the Kaaba were looking out toward these locations, assigning their bearings; which is to say, the outlook from the Kaaba is generative. It organizes the world.

Although a quick glance at al-Sharafi al-Safaqusi's scheme might not readily reveal the use of the counter-qibla for its construction, that is what has been used for it; and as Petra Schmidl and Mónica Herrera-Casais have shown, this scheme is not the first instance of it, for it can be dated to at least the late ninth century.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as these two academics go on to say:

The scheme [...] based on counter-qibla directions from the perspective of the Ka'ba looking out to other regions [...] surely derives from the earliest geographical divisions of the world around the Ka'ba that were implied in the naming of the corners of the building.<sup>29</sup>

With the phrase, »the naming of the corners of the building,« Schmidl and Herrera-Casais are referring to the fact that some scholars think the corners of the Kaaba took their names from the geographic regions that the corners abut;<sup>30</sup> hence, for example, the »Yamani« corner is the name of the corner abutting Yemen, and the »Shami« corner is the name of the corner abutting Syria (al-Sham). In a traditional account of the corners' names, however, these same two corners, »Yamani« and »Shami,« are said to have given their names to the geographical regions that they abut; not to have taken them from these regions.<sup>31</sup> In this historiographic tradition of the corners' names, the outlook from the Kaaba is once again generative, once again organizational of the world. Islamic mappaemundi such as the 17<sup>th</sup> century terrestrial one reproduced above in Fig. 3 and the cosmographic one reproduced below (Fig. 5), show the result of this organization.

Should this argument seem too abstract for some, too dependent on seemingly rarefied products of the creative imagination, in spite of the fact that mappaemundi are now largely understood as societally representative documents, then<sup>32</sup> in its stead one can adduce an argument based on the geographically and historically widespread conceptualization of the Kaaba as the heart of humankind. Evidence for this conceptualization includes the popular, albeit disputed, prophetic saying (ḥadīth): »The heart is God's House.«<sup>33</sup> The poet Rumi (d. 1273) is likely alluding to this saying when he rhetorically addresses pilgrims heading for Mecca with the verse: »The heart is the intended Kaaba. Why do you bother with [the one of] clay?«<sup>34</sup> Examples like this can be multiplied.<sup>35</sup> From this conceptualization, the conclusion follows that, just as the corporeal, »intended« Kaaba gives life to the body, so the Kaaba of Mecca gives life to the world.



[FIG. 5]

Diagram of the Islamic cosmos with the Kaaba at the centre, from a copy of *The Book of Gnosis* by the Ottoman Sufi and scholar, İbrahim Hakki (d. 1780), dated 1820. Gold, gouache, and ink on paper, 26 x 14 cm, The British Library. MS Or. 12964, fol. 23v



In a fusion of these two conceptualizations of the Kaaba as world-generating and as the heart of humankind, a surveyed group of illiterate Moroccans drew maps of the world wherein Mecca was represented immediately adjacent to the villages or towns of their birth and/or work. The Moroccans explained that, »[Mecca] is closest to the heart of Muslims.«<sup>36</sup>

### **Dirt, and a distinction between offense and insult**

Returning once more to the dictum made famous by Douglas, dirt is matter that has no location in a world-organizing outlook. Dirt in this dictum does not have to do with its place of occurrence, its locale or point of manifestation; the shoe on the dining table, for example. Dirt, rather, has to do with the generative, founding place whence this or that member of society says: »From here where I stand, this is how things are; this is how the world is.«<sup>37</sup> In the foregoing analogy between dirt and offense, offense arises when something does not fit within such an outlook; the Kaaba perceived as being taken as a shop, for example. In contrast to insult, offense is also often unintentionally caused, which explains why the outcry over the »Kaaba of New York« was such a muted affair; it was mostly understood as an unintentional offense.

Without wishing to become mired in the academic literature regarding the two terms »offense« and »insult,« one can substantiate this distinction with the following banal, domestic scenario. The boss is invited for dinner at the employee's family home, but once seated at the table the host neglects to serve her, so accustomed is he to serving just his wife and children at this

midweek dinner hour. Realizing his error, the employee quickly apologizes and passes the boss a plate of food. The offense that had begun to show on the boss's face disappears; it is clear to her that the momentary offense was unintentional. Suppose, however, that the employee had not subsequently proffered his boss a plate of food, but had instead handed her an empty plate along with a mocking smile, the meaning would be clear to all. He was insulting the boss. The offense was intentional.<sup>38</sup>

If one now applies this trivial tableau to two recent world affairs considerably less trivial, namely, the Danish Muhammad cartoons affair of 2005 and the Charlie Hebdo affair of 2015, one can see the fit of the distinction the tableau draws between unintentional and intentional offense, or insult. In the earlier of these two affairs, the cartoonists were, according to an editor of the newspaper in which they appeared, aiming to test the boundaries of journalistic self-censorship with regard to Islamic topics.<sup>39</sup> This test necessarily required them to make their cartoons as provocative as possible to Muslims; and in thus provoking Muslims, the cartoonists were effectively offending them intentionally. In the later, Charlie Hebdo affair, although the stated intentions of the cartoonists have not, to my knowledge, been authoritatively reported, I would argue that a cartoon such as the one of the Prophet Muhammad, naked and bent on his knees, his anus and pudenda exposed and swinging in the air, is unambiguous in intent: it is the boss's empty plate, one-thousandfold.

If the foregoing distinction between offense and insult holds, then it leads to the encouraging and surely unsurprising conclusion that Muslims are well able to discern the difference between what is an accidental offense and what is not, even if that judgment is not immediately reached but takes a little

time, as in the Kaaba of New York affair. This ability will certainly be tried and tested in the future as more and more offensive and potentially insulting images inevitably circulate on the Internet.

The other unsurprising conclusion that follows is that Muslims distinguish between the various frames about the reproduction of what have, over time, become symbols of their religion, most especially between media- and religion-based frames.<sup>40</sup> Regarding the latter, a photograph of the Kaaba on the sitting room wall of a Muslim's home in Cairo, say, is almost expected; for it helps to mark the home's sacrality (*hurma*).<sup>41</sup> As such, its placement there prompts no second glance. However, the same photograph mounted in a Copt's home in Cairo would likely elicit such a glance, for there it would be out of place. Additionally, until it was clear no offense or insult was meant by its placement there, the photograph would likely grate against the symbol of the Kaaba that is carried in the viewing Muslim's heart or soul. Momentarily or otherwise, the image would strike right at this heart or soul.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

The opportunity that the theme of this edited volume provides to reflect on a relatively low-key and thus little-known outcry concerning Apple Inc.'s perceived slight against the Kaaba has occasioned a number of findings, all of which have been drawn out in the preceding pages. Perhaps chief among these findings is the realization that the concept of place, at least as invoked by Mary Douglas, is not synonymous with space, but precedes it. Place opens up a world, making



room for space, which can then be symbolized or represented (be it textually, artistically, legally, etc.) and thereby replicated, thus extending and preserving the world opened up. The specific, historical, complex nature of this space is little apparent to the eye; a copy of the Kaaba can, for example, be unproblematically set in Leeds or Hamburg, as we have seen. As such, many an urban setting — a medieval European city, say — can become incorporated into a Muslim's world as well as it can become incorporated into a non-Muslim's world, because nothing visible about its space renders it offensive. To misquote Archimedes: »Give me a place to stand and I shall see the world.« Europe can continue to share its cities even more.

<sup>1</sup> The support of the European Research Council (Project no. 263308: »The here and the hereafter in Islamic traditions«) enabled the completion of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/1901.htm> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> As cited, for example, in the anonymously authored article, »Muslim Radicals Take Bite Out of Apple,« in *Metro*, October 16 (2006), available online at: <http://metro.co.uk/2006/10/16/radicals-take-bite-out-of-apple-280221/> (accessed on April 28, 2015). With thanks to Dr. Moya Carey for bringing this article to my attention.

<sup>4</sup> On these four kaabas, see both Ibn al-Kalbī: *The Book of Idols. Being a Translation from the Arabic of the Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, trans. by Nabih Amin Faris, Princeton 1952, pp. 39-40; and Michael Kister: *Mecca*

and the Tribes of Arabia. Some Notes on Their Relations, in Moshe Sharon (ed.): *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*, Leiden 1986, pp. 33-57, here p. 44. Regarding one of these kaabas, the one said to have been at Najran, see, additionally, Aziz al-Azmeh: *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and his People*, Cambridge 2014, p. 222. As indicated in the main text, not all of these kaabas were necessarily imitations of the form of the Kaaba of Mecca.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Bukhārī: *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. cAbd al-cAzīz b. cAbd Allāh b. Bāz, 8 vols., Beirut 1994, vol. 4, p. 280 (k. manāqib al-Anṣār, bāb dhikr Jarīr b. 'Abd Allāh al-Bajallī, #3822); trans. Aisha Bewley: *The Sahih Collection of al-Bukhari, Chapter 66. Book of the Virtues of the Companions*, #3611 (<http://bewley.virtualave.net/bukhari28.html#companions>) (accessed on Dec. 16, 2014).

- <sup>6</sup> Kister: Mecca and the Tribes of Arabia (see note 4), pp. 43-44.
- <sup>7</sup> Pace Nasser Rabbat, who considers that the Kaaba »has rarely been copied in Islamic architectural history [...].« Idem: In the Beginning Was the House: On the Image of the Two Noble Sanctuaries of Islam, in *Thresholds* 25 (2002), pp. 56-59, here p. 58.
- <sup>8</sup> Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī: *Kitāb aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, 2nd ed., Leiden 1906, p. 122 (line 18); trans., idem: *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions. A Translation of Aḥsan al-Taḳāsīm fī Ma'rifat al-Aqālīm*, trans. by Basil Anthony Collins, Reading 2001, p. 102. One might be right to see in this report an ideologically motivated attempt to discredit a caliph who had so unsparingly forced upon his people the theological tenets of the Mu'tazilites.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 199 (line 10); trans., p. 168.
- <sup>10</sup> Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī Qazwīnī: *The Geographical Part of the Nuzhat al-qulub*, composed by Ḥamd-Allāh Mustawfī of Qazwīn, in 740 (1340 AD), ed. and trans. by Guy Le Strange, 2 vols., Leiden 1915-1919, vol. 2, p. 96.
- <sup>11</sup> Zayn al-Dīn 'Umar b. al-Muẓaffar b. al-Wardī: *Ta'rīkh Ibn al-Wardī*, 2 vols., Najaf 1969, vol. 2, p. 132, as cited in 'Alī b. Abī Bakr al-Harawī: *A Lonely Wayfarer's Guide to Pilgrimage. 'Alī b. Abī Bakr al-Harawī's Kitāb al-Ishāra ilā ma'rifat al-ziyārāt*, trans. by Josef W. Meri, New Jersey 2004, p. xxiv.
- <sup>12</sup> Copies of the Kaaba made during the last fifty years include one of the largest mosques in the world, the Baitul Mukarram mosque in Dhaka, Bangladesh, completed in 1968, whose prayer hall is modeled on the Kaaba. Possibly the most recent copy of the Kaaba is the one that was put on display by a religiously conservative municipality of Istanbul for the week of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday celebrations of 2015. This copy was part of a temporary, commemorative installation, whose nearest equivalent might be said to be a Christmas nativity installation. See, e.g., the anonymously authored article, Turkey: »Model Mecca« Opens in Istanbul District, BBC News website, April 22, 2015 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-32412530>) (accessed on April 29, 2015). This copy, it is true, did provoke an outcry and had to be removed, but that was due to a self-proclaimed performance artist in pilgrimage garb (iḥrām) trying to circumambulate the model as if it were the real thing. With thanks to Dr. Moya Carey for bringing this entire story to my attention and to Professor Scott Redford for discussing it with me.
- <sup>13</sup> Gregor Schneider et al.: *Cubes: Art in the Age of Global Terrorism*, Milan 2006, pp. 39-42; and R. Jay Magill Jr.: *A Cube, Like Mecca's, Becomes a Pilgrim*, in *The New York Times*, April 15, 2007, available online at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/arts/design/15magi.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/arts/design/15magi.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (accessed on April 17, 2015).
- <sup>14</sup> Schneider: *Cubes* (see note 13), pp. 24-29.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 18, 27-28. For at least the Berlin Biennale, this ban was upheld in spite of a statement from the Central Council of Muslims in Germany supporting the exhibition of the Cube. In Hamburg, where the Cube was finally exhibited, Muslims have apparently welcomed its display. Magill: *A Cube* (see note 13).

- <sup>16</sup> Other explanations certainly exist, including economic ones and political, post-9/11 ones; what follows is not intended to be exclusive.
- <sup>17</sup> Mary Douglas: *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1966, p. 36.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.
- <sup>19</sup> Ameena Mughal: Hajj items. Souvenirs from Mecca pilgrims, in *Secret Lives of Objects. Go Behind the Scenes at Leeds Museum and Galleries* weblog, 17.05.2012 <http://tinyurl.com/z7693mq> (accessed on Dec. 14, 2016).
- <sup>20</sup> Strictly speaking – in order to ensure the comparison is between like and like – because the outcry over the »Kaaba of New York« resulted mostly from individuals seeing on the Internet uploaded photographs of this building, one should be asking whether the uploaded photograph of the »Kaaba of Leeds« provoked outcry. To the best of my knowledge, the answer to that is: no.
- <sup>21</sup> One might additionally refer to the Saudi government's ongoing, monumental building campaign just beyond Mecca's Sacred Mosque. The Kaaba, which the walls of this mosque surround, is utterly dwarfed by the new buildings and skyscrapers there. To all intents and purposes, this new architectural setting also falls under the classification of modern Western; but relatively speaking, only a few Muslims appear to have been offended by the view of the Kaaba within it. For a prominent example of such an offended Muslim, see Ziauddin Sardur: *The Destruction of Mecca*, in *The New York Times*, September 14, 2014, available online at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/01/opinion/the-destruction-of-mecca.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/01/opinion/the-destruction-of-mecca.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share&_r=0) (accessed on April 21, 2015). With thanks to Dr. John Gibson for bringing this point to my attention.
- <sup>22</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith: *The Influence of Symbols Upon Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand*, in *Worship* 44/8 (1970), pp. 457-74, here p. 469; italics as marked in the original.
- <sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger: *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in *idem: Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter, New York 1971, p. 43.
- <sup>24</sup> Mark Wigley: *The Architecture of Deconstruction. Derrida's Haunt*, Cambridge/Mass. 1993, p. 61.
- <sup>25</sup> As cited in translation in Arent Jan Wensinck: *The Ideas of the Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth*, in *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, Afdeling Letterkunde*, n.s., 17/1 (1916), pp. 1-65, here p. 18.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* For a discussion of these reports as they pertain to the Kaaba, see Simon O'Meara: *Orientations in Space and Vision*, Edinburgh 2017, Chapter 2.
- <sup>27</sup> See e.g. David A. King: *World-Maps for Finding the Direction and Distance of Mecca. Innovation and Tradition in Islamic Science*, Leiden 1999.
- <sup>28</sup> Petra Schmidl / Mónica Herrera-Casais: *The Earliest Known Schemes of Islamic Sacred Geography*, in Anna Akasoy / Wim Raven (eds.): *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages. Studies in Text, Transmission and Translation*, in Honour of Hans Daiber, Leiden 2008, pp. 275-99, here p. 277.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.



<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Yossef Rapoport / Emilie Savage-Smith (eds.): *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe. The Book of Curiosities*, Leiden 2014, p. 436 (Arabic text: p. 156).

<sup>32</sup> For example, with reference to *mappaemundi* of medieval Christianity, it is said that they »provide a glimpse into the socially-constructed symbolic world of medieval persons, their mental map, their spatial reality, their universe of discourse.« Jon R. Stone: *The Medieval Mappaemundi. Toward an Archaeology of Sacred Cartography*, in *Religion* 23 (1993), pp. 197-216, here p. 200. More recently Maria Kupfer has written: »[Mappamundi]-making involved more than the selective appropriation and collation of geographic information. Both the task of inscription on a particular support and the circumstances of display in a given context made demands on the cartographic figure itself, conceived and manipulated in relation to codicological structures, architectural spaces, or quasi-stationary installations. The image of the world, conditioned by the material constraints of the *mappaemundi*, never stood alone.« Idem: *Mappaemundi: Image, Artefact, Social Practice*, in P.D.A. Harvey (ed.): *The Hereford World Map: Medieval World Maps and their Context*, London 2006, pp. 253-67, here p. 254.

<sup>33</sup> »Al-qalb Bayt Allāh.« On its dismissal as inauthentic, see e.g. Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya: *Majmū'at al-fatāwā li-shaykh al-Islām Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya al-Ḥarrānī*, ed. 'Amir al-Jazzār and Anwār al-Bāz, 37 vols., Alexandria 1997, vol. 18, p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> »Dil-ast Ka'ba-yi ma'nī, tu gil che pindārī.« Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Kullīyāt-i Shams yā Dīwān-i kabīr*, mushtamil bar qaṣā'id wa ghazaliyāt wa muqaṭṭa'āt-i fārsī wa 'arabī

wa tarjī'āt wa mulamma'āt, az guftār-i mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad mashhūr bi-Mawlawī, Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar (ed.), 7 vols., Tehran 1958, vol. 6, p. 298 (line 33, 104).

<sup>35</sup> See O'Meara: *Kaaba* (see note 26), Ch. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Mohamed Boughali: *La représentation de l'espace chez le marocain illettré: mythes et tradition orale*, Paris 1974, p. 189.

<sup>37</sup> In the confessional parlance typical of contemporary celebrity culture, today one might say, »I was in a bad place at the time,« where place is not a burning building but the emotional state generating the confessor's outlook.

<sup>38</sup> Another, less labored example is as follows. A 12-year-old schoolgirl draws a naked figure and then drops it on the classroom floor; the teacher later finds it and is momentarily offended by the displayed pudenda. Another schoolgirl draws the same figure but adds the teacher's name below it; the teacher finds it and feels insulted.

<sup>39</sup> Flemming Rose: *Muhammeds ansigt*, in *Jyllands-Posten*, September 29, 2005, available online at: <http://jyllands-posten.dk/indland/ECE4769352/muhammeds-ansigt/> (accessed on April 16, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> On the notion of the Kaaba as a symbol, see Jan Hjärpe: *The Symbol of the Centre and its Religious Function in Islam*, in Haralds Biezais (ed.): *Religious Symbols and Their Functions. Based on Papers read at the Symposium on Religious Symbols and their Functions held at Abo on the 28th-30th of August 1978, Stockholm 1979*, pp. 30-40, esp. p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Juan Eduardo Campo: *The Other Sides of Para-*

dise: Explorations into the Religious Meanings of Domestic Space in Islam, Columbia 1991, p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> I owe the notion of the power of images to be able to strike in this way to Jojada Verrips.

# From the »Religious« to the »Aesthetic« Image, or the Struggle over Art that Offends

Monica Juneja

Our quotidian encounter with images today might tend to breed a certain indifference to their power, and yet we are constantly reminded of their potential to act, to move, and to hurt, by the vehemence with which conflagrations over images have regularly erupted across the globe and become media issues. The recent, gruesome killings of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists are still fresh in our minds, though they are not the first instance in which objects of arthistorical investigation — images, buildings, statues, objects — have become the center of violent conflicts. The destruction of the magnificent Buddha statues at Bamiyan, the controversy over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*, and the outrage provoked by Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani castigated as obscene and sacrilegious and which a devout Catholic smeared with white paint, are further examples of images said to offend.<sup>1</sup> A recent instance in which a potentially offending work of art was censored can be cited from the 2005 Venice Biennale, when the city administration denied the artist Gregor Schneider permission to exhibit his work *Cube Venice* at the Piazza San Marco. The work was composed of scaffolding draped with black cloth to evoke a black cube. The particular form gave rise to apprehensions that the resemblance to the Kaaba could offend Muslim sensibilities. Fearing terrorist reprisals borne of post-9/11 anxieties, the city government disallowed the exhibition of a work that could potentially be conflated with a cult object.<sup>2</sup> Such examples have multiplied of late. A replay of preemptive censorship occurred at the 2015 Venice Biennale, when Christoph Büchel's art project that transformed the Baroque Church of Santa Maria della Misericordia into a mosque was officially forced to close and withdraw from the high-profile art fair.<sup>3</sup>



The debates surrounding these and similar instances pose questions about the ethics, politics, and polemics of the visual; they bring forth conflicting opinions about artistic intent and problematize the ethical limits of freedom and the autonomy of art. They are in a sense about the definition of art itself and the boundaries that separate an »aesthetic« from a »religious« image. And yet, the outrage generated by the image — the offense it is held to have caused — did not happen in the same way in each of these cases. In the case of Ofili's *Virgin*, it was, to use W.J.T. Mitchell's words, the particular »specimen« (this particular work) rather than the »species« itself (representations of the Virgin Mary) that offended.<sup>4</sup> In other cases, such as the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, both the subject and the particular form (caricature) were perceived as hurtful. Schneider's *Cube* is yet another instance: here, location was considered crucial to the creation of meaning. The planned location on the Piazza San Marco could be read as a juxtaposition, or even an act of confrontation, with a Christian sanctuary. Anxieties over the object's potential to generate offensive meaning in a particular location then translated into censorship. This became evident when, after having given in to similar denials of permission to exhibit in a public space, such as in Berlin, the work was finally exhibited two years later, in 2007, at the Kunsthalle of Hamburg as part of a show on Malevich. Schneider's *Cube* was the subject of an article in the German newspaper *Die Welt* in which the journalist congratulated the director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle Hubertus Gaßner, who, in the eyes of the media, succeeded in dispelling all associations with the Kaaba by integrating the work into the Malevich show: »[...] and finally pulls it out of political discussions and mystical Kaaba mutterings into the world of art.«<sup>5</sup>

Here we become aware of a fault line in a globalized art world that has emerged between different spaces and accounts for the divergent meanings the same object can generate.

Taking its impulse from the questions raised by the editors of this volume, this essay will address the question: What makes a work of art offensive? The examples cited above suggest that this is not an attribute inherent to the work; indeed, it has been frequently claimed, also by the editors of this collection, that there is no such thing as an »offensive image.« Why, then, are we forced to engage seriously with attributions that brand images as obscene, blasphemous and as having the power to violate sentiments and sensibilities?

### **Embattled images**

My engagement with this set of questions, which haunts our present historical conjuncture formed by the global circulation of images, is through the work of the Indian artist, Maqbool Fida Husain, a founding figure of artistic modernism in India, who became an embattled figure since the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The attacks on Husain that began with vandalizing his works and his studio, followed by a host of criminal charges invoking the law against blasphemy, as well as threats to his life, date back to 1996. They were triggered by a drawing entitled *Saraswati* that the artist created some 20 years earlier (Fig. 1). Rendered as linear form in the nude, *Saraswati*, the Hindu goddess of learning and the arts, is identifiable through her attributes that cite elements of traditional iconography: the lotus, the »vina« (her musical instrument), and the peacock. Though she appears faceless,

she is not nameless, as the artist has inscribed her name in Devanagari at the bottom of the drawing. Together with this, another of Husain's works, a lithograph of Draupadi (Fig. 2), the mythological figure from the epic *Mahabharata*, also portrayed nearly naked, was drawn into the storm, as were images of other figures from the Hindu pantheon. There was widespread public castigation of these works, which were said to have hurt the sensibilities of the community of Hindus by portraying their sacred figures in the nude, read as an act of obscenity and thereby of desecration. The uproar of 1996–97 erupted a second time in 2007 when an exhibition of Husain's works at the Asia Gallery in London was forced to close and a court case was filed against the artist, this time for his anthropomorphic figuration of the map of India as an unclothed female. (Fig. 3)

The tide of attacks spearheaded by right-wing Hindu groups continued to relentlessly target more and more of the artist's images, moving from local to national and global arenas and on to cyberspace, which became a main forum for the proliferation of anti-Husain propaganda. However, the primary thrust of the campaign came to be legal prosecution in Indian courts: according to figures cited by a recent work on Husain, some 1,250 cases were lodged under three sections of the Indian Penal Code, charging the artist with obscenity, injuring religious sentiments, and inflammatory speech.<sup>7</sup> Only seven of these were fought in court. And although an important judgment in 2008 was enunciated in the artist's favor, the hate campaign and vandalism at the artist's exhibitions continued. At the age of 90, Husain left India to live in self-imposed exile in Qatar. He later accepted the citizenship of that country, continued to paint, and sought to make »the world his home.« He died at the age of 95 in a London hospital on June 9, 2011.





[FIG. 1]  
M. F. Husain: Saraswati, pen  
and ink on paper, c. 1976



[FIG. 2]  
M. F. Husain: Draupadi in  
the Game of Dice (from the  
*Mahabharata series*), Litho-  
graph, 1983



[FIG. 3]  
M. F. Husain: Untitled  
(later captioned *Bharat Mata*,  
Mother India),  
Acrylic on canvas, 2005

The heated public discussion on the works of Husain and the ire of those who spearheaded the attacks on the artist were about issues of propriety, the feelings of religious communities, and the (limits to the) freedom of the artist.

The debate soon polarized two camps: a small, articulate community of artists and left-wing intellectuals who mobilized sections of the English-language media in an orchestrated defense of Husain against a growing body of Hindu right-wing organizations. The exchange revolved around a series of oppositions: the »freedom of the artist« versus the »sentiments of the community;« the opposition between »virtue« and »obscenity,« between an »elite« of intellectuals that subscribes to the notions of the autonomy of the art work and the »common man« who does not enjoy access to art education; and between a »work of art« and a »religious icon.«<sup>8</sup> In other words, one side put forward a plea for the values of secular modernity, i.e., the autonomy of the artistic image and the contingent nature of the relationship between signifier and signified. The other persisted in eliding the distinction between the two, giving an almost magical potency to the image. The arguments worked to constitute hardened positions, publics, and counter-publics.

And yet between these two poles was a larger, less vocal majority of the middle classes, whose position was ambivalent. These included those who held liberal views, invoked the ideal of free artistic expression, and condemned the vandalization of Husain's works, yet were disturbed and angered by the artist's overt highlighting of sexuality in his images drawn from the Hindu pantheon. Many claimed to »understand« the hurt and anger of the campaign against the artist, while disapproving of its violent methods.<sup>9</sup> Discussions about the artist's intentions brought forth another set of arguments: these were



[FIG. 4]

Young woman painting her eyes, detail from temple frieze, Parshvanath temple, Khajuraho, ca. 970 C.E.

unanimous in the observation that in fact an explicit representation of sexuality was intrinsic to Hindu sacral iconography, citing the world-famous temple friezes at Khajuraho and Konark with their range of erotic sculptures (Fig. 4). Husain himself publicly deployed this argument to make a plea for placing his art within »Indian tradition:« this »essential Indianness« has been a consistent dimension of his self-image as an artist.<sup>10</sup>



Many of the questions raised by this discussion have absorbed scholars of South Asia for the last decade or so — and have today become global issues that can be plotted on a map of similar conflicts and acts of censorship across the world, as the handful of examples cited at the beginning of this article show. In my analysis of the struggle over art that offends, I wish to adapt Bruno Latour's notion of the »iconoclash« to this specific case study and explore the following questions: If the nudity of divine figures from the Hindu pantheon is offensive or blasphemous, why is it so prevalent? Conversely, if the images of nude goddesses are celebratory, then why do certain works trigger so much anger and hatred?<sup>11</sup> As an analytical tool, iconoclash, as Latour defines it, helps us focus our attention on investigating, not an act or event of destruction — iconoclasm — rather it enables us to embed the act of destruction in a pattern created by what he terms the »interference [...] of belief, rage, enthusiasm, admiration, diffidence, fascination and suspicion.«<sup>12</sup>

My analysis interprets the Latourian »pattern« and »interference« as not only forming the broader context of image production and spectatorship in India, but also as comprising structures and meanings of the notion of art — today a globally migrant concept. I attempt to outline the trajectories wherein the latter emerged as a cultural resource, initially in an anti-colonial context to be followed by nation-building, a phase that coincided with the emergence of artistic modernism of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Husain's life, spanning three generations, allows us to plot important shifts: the period saw the transformation of the meanings of art and the field in which it operated from a resource generated by the nation's past to its present unlimited possibilities that have come in the wake of the global circulation of images in contempo-

rary times. Looking at this context and the patterns it produces engenders an awareness that processes of modernization that we describe by drawing upon a certain shared analytical vocabulary, while entangled with global currents, on local and regional levels might find unexpected forms of articulation, and thereby produce fissures within localities.

This article is organized around three questions. The first addresses the paradox of how certain images that show explicit nudity have come to be recognized as »Indian tradition,« itself a term that has a chameleon-like quality, while others are castigated as obscene. In other words, I explore how this distinction is historically formed, a distinction that separates certain languages of representation in which sexuality is canonized as Indian heritage from other idioms in which it becomes illegitimate or obscene. This historical formation is intimately tied up with the emergence of art history and its institutions; it partakes of a dynamic between the formation of art history as a modern discipline in the West and its implantation as part of a colonial civilizing mission in the Indian subcontinent. How did this process translate, first in the colony and then in the young nation? This history is related to the second aspect of the essay, which involves zooming into the locality and examining its specific textures: in particular I look at the nature of viewing in Hindu tradition, whose affective qualities produce a form of intimacy, especially in relation to the religious image. In an age of technical perfection and the proliferation of images, I argue, this has also enhanced the capacity all images have acquired to cause hurt. And finally, the third aspect relates to the present, which has seen a shift in art practices engendered by the globalization of contemporary art. This change has, on the one hand, secured unprecedented visibility for Asian art in the West; on the other, it has led to the

emergence of fissured public spheres across the globe through the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that are an equally central aspect of the globalization of contemporary art. The result is a dissonance that causes firestorms of controversy to erupt in fractured localities, and then — thanks to instant media connectivity — to become global issues.

### Modernist dilemmas

The first question involves going back to the historical emergence of modernist art in South Asia. This was synchronous with the birth of an independent nation, which at the same time was a breaking up of the subcontinent into different nation-states, a trauma of birth to which I will return later. Each of these newborn nations sought to create its own institutions of »art« and »heritage:« its museums were conceived of as sites where objects that were earlier labeled »idol,« »cult object,« or »fetish« were accorded the status of »art« and where elites sought to ensure the canonization of these objects as the »ancient heritage« of a young nation. In standard narratives of modernity, such institutional processes involving significant taxonomic shifts — what Walter Benjamin described as the transformation of »cult value« to »exhibition value«<sup>13</sup> — are read as germane to the formation of a secular sphere to which the nation's art now belonged. Both colonial and nationalist Indian accounts echoed this understanding.

More recent historiography, though considerably more nuanced and replete with important critical insights, argues on similar premises. Geeta Kapur designates modernist nationalism as »secular« nationalism; in her view, mod-



ernist artists appropriated myths and icons from the body of tradition to empty them of religious content in a transformatory act that cast them as heritage available to all, irrespective of religious affiliations.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Tapati Guha-Thakurta has persuasively demonstrated that colonial practices of collecting and conserving were the beginnings of secular institutional practices that were subsequently taken over by national institutions: the Archaeological Survey of India and national museums in New Delhi and Calcutta.<sup>15</sup> All built structures — religious or otherwise — were transformed into »monuments;« deities and icons now entered the rarefied museum space as »sculptures.« In Guha-Thakurta's words, the battle to secularize the religious image was »fought and won« in the wake of the formation of a post-colonial nation — while the more recent emergence of xenophobic religious nationalism represents the emergence of »new fault lines in the national edifice.«<sup>16</sup>

It might be helpful, however, to take a closer look at the terms in which the »struggle to secularize« and transform the »religious« into the »aesthetic« was conducted. My argument is that the terms articulating such a transition were far too slippery to be able to stabilize the demarcation between the sacral and secular attributes of objects now designated as art. Here, »tradition« was a key category through which heritage and art history were constituted. However, the term itself proved to be extraordinarily elastic. It could be expanded to cover an entire national past, or a spiritual aesthetic, as in the numerous writings of E. B. Havell and A.K. Coomaraswamy; it could also be used to introduce specific stylistic conventions drawn from treatises on architecture, sculpture, or painting, which in the process of colonial knowledge production had been combed to extract knowledge of artistic norms; »tradition« was also

(and continues to be) used to designate areas that were not included in classical canons but recuperated as »subaltern« traditions — what official jargon designates as »folk,« »tribal,« or »ritual« arts.

At the historical moment of transition from colony to nation, the definition of an »Indian art,« as it came to be ensconced within the embryonic nation's heritage, was premised, it would appear, on a divide between a tradition canonized as »classical« and modernist experiments often marginalized for being derivative of »Western modernity.«<sup>17</sup> In a sense, the dichotomy continues to be fostered by contemporary global art markets and exhibition practices that overwhelmingly privilege the display of works that come to be read as embodying the »true heritage of India.« While contemporary Indian art today is highly visible in global circuits and participates in a booming art market, earlier modernist experiments of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century have suffered from a double marginalization: they found no place in a nationalist iconography that fell back on imagined/invented tradition, while on the global level, non-Western modernisms were judged by yardsticks of originality, of modernity as a European preserve, and found wanting.<sup>18</sup>

The time when Indian tradition was being invented saw the emergence of different currents of modernism; the latter were not easily accommodated within the domain of »heritage,« now reserved for the distant past to form a source of civilizational greatness. The collections of the main »national museums« — in Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta — stopped with works from around the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Yet modernist artists too, while experimenting dialogically with global currents, put forward their own claims to »Indianness.« The field of artistic production was one marked by pulls in different directions.

At the heart of the enterprise of reinventing Indian tradition and constituting heritage was the mode of translating the human body — particularly the female body — into an image. This crystallized in several projects that participated in the act of defining heritage; owing to constraints of space, here I will confine my account to the canons drawn up by art historians.<sup>20</sup> Artistic formulae to delineate the ideal human body were distilled from classical texts such as the *Silpasastras*, which, for both colonial and nationalist art historians like A. K. Coomaraswamy, embodied a transcendental essence of Indian culture.<sup>21</sup> According to this invented canon, the form and proportions of the female torso derived from two sacred objects, the thunderbolt of Indra and the drum of Siva, which is shaped like an hourglass; a woman's arms were visualized as pliant green bamboo; and a fish or lotus petal was the formula for beautiful, elongated eyes.<sup>22</sup> In short, discourses of different kinds converged on ascribing to this iconography and its visual vocabulary an essence that came to be canonized as heritage. The crux of nationalist modernity, for Coomaraswamy, was the rediscovery of heritage as living tradition, governed by an ideology that emphasized its difference from the West. Art, then, could be defined as participating in an aesthetic ideal that looked to the past for its religious underpinnings and that could become a space of resistance to colonial culture.<sup>23</sup> The selection of objects — canonized as art — was overwhelmingly governed by this particular understanding of tradition. These then carried with them labels that affirmed their sacral attributes and sectarian identities — even as they made their way into the rarefied spaces of the museum.

This context of transition from colony to nation in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century provided the historical conjuncture for Husain's formation as a modernist artist. He was a member of the Progressive Artists' Group started in Bombay in the



late 1940s, which, though as a group it did not produce a unified visual aesthetic, nonetheless worked together to move away from imitation and to create a space for Indian art in global modernist currents. As Husain entered the nation-space in the first decade after independence, he self-consciously marked himself as a modernist and an artist of and for modern India.<sup>24</sup>

During the phase of nation-building, both during the anti-colonial struggle and the euphoric years following decolonization, the identity claimed by and for the artist on the Indian subcontinent needed in theory to be both modern and secular, in tandem with other institutions such as the museum, the departments of antiquities, the university, and art journalism. The nation provided an ancient past, a body of myths and iconic anchors that could be invoked as civilizational ethos, as a cultural resource which, however, had to be successfully translated into modernist idioms to occupy a secular aesthetic space: the moot question is how this was negotiated.

Husain's artistic repertoire is also nurtured by these expressions of »Indianness:« his works are populated by figures of Hindu mythology — gods, goddesses, characters from the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata — and their spirited horses; he brings rural life — its bullock carts and rustic figures — together with the burlesque of the small-town bazaar. Further, the faces and persona of contemporary history — its saints, politicians, and tinsel goddesses — all shaped his vision of being an artist of and for modern India (Figs. 5, 6). Husain's painted work, though it plays around with tropes such as primitivism, involves typologizing Indianness: here he uses modernist language to create his own types to stand for the feminine or the rural (Fig. 7). Such choices possibly account for Husain's relatively early international recognition at a time when



[FIG. 5]  
M. F. Husain: Installation,  
Husain ki Sarai, Faridabad,  
2005



[FIG. 6]  
M. F. Husain: Between the  
Spider and the Lamp, oil on  
board, 1956



[FIG. 7]

M. F. Husain: From Mother  
Theresa Series, oil on canvas,  
2005



non-Western modernisms were invisible globally; here, Husain fared better than most artists from India. He has been a significant presence in a transnational art world for many years, primarily because, as in his *Mahabharata* project that shot him to fame at the São Paulo Biennale in 1973,<sup>25</sup> he mastered the use of a Western modernist language for those quintessentially »Indian subjects« constituted as heritage, so that his work could undergird its reception abroad as authentically »Indian.«

It was Husain's predilection for the female nude that became a site of modernist experimentation, a space where he could inscribe his signature as a modernist artist. The translation of three-dimensional sculpture into the two-dimensional aesthetic of the line drawing was his favorite form of modernist »transfiguration« — his own word — of tradition.<sup>26</sup> It was a way of exposing bare form, denuding it of naturalism and ornament, and emptying it of historical or devotional context: making the sketch on paper meant leaving a material trace of the artist's hand, his signature, as Karin Zitzewitz puts it.<sup>27</sup>

We see this in the sketch of the goddess Saraswati, in which he names the modernist nude figure a goddess and overlays it with a familiar religious iconography that makes up the core of art sanctified as heritage. Husain could be playing with a vision that celebrates the composite life-world of Indian traditions: while the lotus and »vina« stand for the more classical symbols associated with Saraswati, the peacock that replaces her traditional vehicle, the swan, is a symbol of love and perfect beauty. The faceless demeanor of Saraswati may not be a purely rhetorical touch; it evokes an unmistakable suggestion of the blank face of the Prophet as depicted in early Arab and Iranian miniatures. Saraswati is seated underwater holding up the lotus in her hand.

Her position suggests a visualization of the traditional symbolism of the lotus in Hindu art: an expression of creation, as its stalk connects it to the womb of the earth like an umbilical cord. It is at the creative source, the center of the earth, that the artist places the icon of Saraswati.

Yet, all these strivings in the direction of traditional sources — this genuflection in the direction of art as sacred image — are cast in the modernist language of autonomy and irony. By choosing to render the female nude in a summary sketch rather than a painted surface, as had proliferated with the coming of oil painting,<sup>28</sup> Husain distances himself from art practices that privilege the rendering of volume or choose to foreground the painting of femaleness through facture, that is, the handling of paint *per se*. While the body is frontally displayed, its lines are stretched to transform rounded curves into bony angles and awkward joints, as revealed in the handling of an uncomfortably twisted foot, the emaciated breasts, the clumsily turned wrist and kneecap, and lengths of hair that evoke coarse rope. Yet, for all its suggestive erotic power, Husain's drawing resists the gaze — there is no gaze to meet or half-meet or not meet, as in the myriad images of the female nude. Visual access to the figure is mediated through traditional attributes, only to be then denied, for the rendering conforms neither to the *habitus* of Western modernism nor to local Hindu practices of the sacred gaze.

Husain's attempts to construct a vision of Indianness, one that does not reject outright the foundational definitions of the modern, enter into a tangled domain around the question of the human body, as his sketch of Saraswati seeks to straddle the two domains, the realm of modernist art and that of the sacral image. His prolific oeuvre moves in two directions — toward articulating a conception of the »true heritage of India,« composed of multiple strands and composite traditions,



[FIG. 8]  
Yashoda Nursing Krishna:  
copper alloy, early 14<sup>th</sup> century,  
Vijayanagara, Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, New York

and at the same time setting out to reconfigure these using the visual vocabulary of modernism, implicitly seeking to make space for this vocabulary within the notion of the »Indian.« Such attempts become a source of instability and tension that are produced and harnessed in the name of guaranteeing the purity of the very traditions that his work celebrates. The hooked, jabbing line used to form Saraswati's breasts reappears some three decades later in another work that provoked the series of events that ended in a court case and Husain's self-imposed exile: his



rendering of »Mother India« as an anthropomorphic map featuring a youthful woman with the names of important cities and places inscribed across her unclad body. Gujarat and Bhopal were two particular sites whose names are written across Mother India's breasts. Both refer to traumatic moments in the nation's recent history: Bhopal, where in 1984 a toxic gas leak occurred in the Union Carbide factory, and Gujarat, the site of a riotous massacre in 2002. In neither this nor the Saraswati image are breasts endowed with the natural and safe nurturing power ascribed to them in traditional and patriotic imagery in South Asia and across cultures (Fig. 8).<sup>29</sup> In the anthropomorphic map of India, breasts are made to function as the site of killing. This makes them, and the image, an object of fury: Husain's detractors castigated this as an act of errant filial behavior tantamount to defilement and betrayal of a Mother who comes above one's own mother — in other words the motherland »who has borne us all.«<sup>30</sup>

### Seeing as feeling

The art-historical reading of Husain's painterly strategies that I have just presented is overlaid by a play of iconophilia that marks his art and a larger history of images and visual production in South Asia. This brings me to the second section of this paper. While there is still no numerical record of Husain's pictorial production to date, the total total number of his paintings is estimated at between 30,000 and 40,000 — while his drawings and sketches remain uncounted. He can be described as the quintessential iconophile in the Latourian sense of the term: as one who does not revere the image *per se*, but instead loves

the never-ending play and movement of images themselves. Following the path of iconophilia, according to Latour, would mean paying attention to the »series of transformations for which each image is only a provisional frame.«<sup>31</sup> Iconophilia can in this sense become a lens to view the long history of pictorial production in South Asia, formed and transformed by continuous processes of transculturation, the transformations and play between Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian images over centuries.

A continuous traffic of images was accompanied by a kind of seeing, marked by forms of intimacy and bodily experience. The exchange of vision between a deity and the worshipper at the heart of Hindu worship — called »darsan« — privileges the act of seeing as a form of contact, so that »seeing is a kind of touching« and vice-versa.<sup>32</sup> This becomes a way to cement seeing the sacred as an affective relationship. The visual anthropologist Christopher Pinney has used this concept to explicate, for example, a more »sensory, corporeal aesthetics« in South Asia, a »corpothetics,« in which seeing and touching are embodied and interrelated.<sup>33</sup> Ashish Rajadhyasksha has shown how modern technology is deployed in mythological films to harness these cultural codes — i.e., the formal device of frontal viewing enters the cinematic medium — where deities are shown looking straight into the camera to foster an exchange of glances with the viewers.<sup>34</sup> Ritual practices of bathing, clothing, feeding, feeling the image of a deity, or taking leave of it by drowning it in the river or the sea all make up the structures of intimacy that marked the relationship with images,<sup>35</sup> gave them their power, and fueled the imagination of many an artist.

Even the colonial museum was a site of affective viewing. Records of colonial museum administrators are replete with expressions of anxiety and

disappointment about the »lack of proper decorum« on the part of the large numbers of visitors who crowded the first museums established under colonial rule. They went through the galleries without adhering to the hushed decorum of a space that is supposed to instill awe and aesthetic wonder, but expressing instead another kind of awe through exclamations of joy, surprise, and thrill toward objects that could be caressed and worshipped; »No touching, no praying« were the most frequent forms of signage to be found in the early museums.<sup>36</sup>

A culture animated by the play of images that produces intimacy gradually becomes fraught and contested, taking the form of what the anthropologist Veena Das describes as »agonistic« intimacy.<sup>37</sup> The power given to images cannot then rule out their power to hurt, when the relationships between the actors involved are marked by hostility and suspicion. The overwhelming iconophilia in a visual culture like that of India can foster a peculiar complicity with a retaliatory iconoclasm conducted against the body of the »other« — which in the Indian context today is so volatile a category that it can include the Muslim, the Christian, a Dalit (»untouchable,« outcaste — etym. »broken to pieces«), or a woman. Husain's status as a Muslim in India following the partition of the subcontinent placed several burdens on him. In the eyes of right-wing Hindus, he represented the »enemy other,« not entirely to be trusted. In the eyes of secular Indians, on the other hand, he bore the onus of being the object of secular laws, of multiculturalism, and of the democratic state's policies of tolerance — of being a demonstration of the nation's or a society's capacity to tolerate the other<sup>38</sup> — so much so that he can be elevated to the status of a national icon. Both expressions of otherness make his image-play particularly vulnerable.



## Divided publics

This brings me to the third dimension of this paper — the formation of fractured public spheres within which offensive images erupt into firestorms of controversy that often assume global proportions. The recognition that a »work of art« by definition enjoys autonomy and a transgressive power and has a right to express irreverence and break taboos presupposes the existence of a stable, liberal public sphere in which certain images occupy a space clearly demarcated from that of religion. The contemporary art world across the globe can be said to be caught in a new paradox: on the one hand, art today enjoys an unbounded space in ways that are unprecedented. The notion of art itself has undergone an explosion of sorts. Today the list of artifacts and media that have entered the domain of art appears to be infinitely elastic: it includes everyday consumer goods, wrapped monuments, digital images, synthesized sounds, animal performances, human embryos, and acts of self-mutilation — and in the process blurs the distinction between a »religious« and an »artistic« or any other kind of image. This expansive usage is shared by communities of viewers across the globe and sustained by contemporary practices of collecting, curating, displaying, and writing that proliferate through biennials, art journalism, and the art market and that work to facilitate this ubiquitous understanding of the concept of art.

On the other hand, the constant flux and unboundedness of the contemporary art world goes hand in hand with the reaffirmation of other kinds of difference. The consensus about what makes a piece of fisherman's rope, a starving stray dog kept captive in exhibition space, or an installation that evokes the Kaaba a work of art is dependent on certain shared knowledge and values, all of

which rest on the authority of particular institutions, individuals, theories, and expertise, which then mediate to ratify objects as »art.« The boundary that exists today is not between the ways individual nations or cultures view contemporary art; it cuts across national and geographical divisions. Today we encounter a new divide between those who enjoy access to authoritative knowledge about art and share the values of autonomy and transgression ascribed to it, on the one hand, and those who do not, on the other.

Though contemporary art today seeks its spaces of address outside of the museum and espouses participatory formats, it also strives to distinguish itself from mass culture. Above all, it continues to pointedly exclude those who do not share the values ascribed to a »work of art.« While the notion of art itself has expanded, the prerogative of deciding whom and what to include and on what terms access to exhibition circuits is to be possible still rests with the curatorial establishment and the art market: new boundaries are drawn up as the older ones dissolve. Today's boundaries cut through a transnational and connected art world: they are often produced by fissured constellations within the locality and can generate conflict, controversy, and censorship, which in turn become global issues.

Artists of the present generation have broken taboos in the face of which Husain's work appears childlike, belonging to a past era (see the article by Tania Becker in this volume). Husain's art, meant to celebrate the rich diversity of Indian traditions and viewed through a modernist idiom, was created in a mood of patriotic fervor; it was addressed not to an exclusive audience but to the nation, where it floundered on the slippery ground of the aesthetic and sacred. Today's global vocabularies about autonomous, interventionist art do not find a uniform

resonance — as this and other controversies that have erupted around images show. The world of proliferating and circulating images today has to straddle many of these fault lines built into the very structures of global multiculturalism. The idea of art's autonomy is in a sense also about its isolation. Attempting to overcome this by intervening in the public sphere or addressing the »nation« can also make art and artists more vulnerable.

- <sup>1</sup> Chris Ofili's use of elephant dung as one of the materials for this work of 1999 was taken as an insult, though the artist argued that in African religious traditions this is considered a sacred substance. See William J. T. Mitchell: *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago 2005, p. 130, 135; Terry Barrett: *Interpreting Art. Reflecting, wondering and responding*, Boston/Mass. 2003, pp. 57-63.
- <sup>2</sup> Gregor Schneider: *Cubes: Art in an Age of Global Terrorism*, Milan 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> See Biennale in Venedig. Polizei schließt Kunstprojekt, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, May 22 2015. [https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/kunst\\_architektur/polizei-schliesst-umstrittenen-kunstprojekt-1.18547754](https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/kunst_architektur/polizei-schliesst-umstrittenen-kunstprojekt-1.18547754), (accessed on Jan. 28, 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> Mitchell: *What do Pictures Want?* (see note 1).
- <sup>5</sup> »[...] und holt ihn endlich aus den politischen Diskussionen und mystischem Kaaba Geraune hinein in die Welt der Kunst«. *Hamburg ist jetzt das Mekka der Kunst*, *Die Welt*, March 23, 2007. <http://www.welt.de/kultur/article774978/Hamburg-ist-jetzt-das-Mekka-der-Kunst.html> (accessed on March 30, 2015).
- <sup>6</sup> On Maqbool Fida Husain see Geeta Kapur: *Contemporary India Artists*, New Delhi 1978; *Where art thou. M.F. Husain. An autobiography with Khalid Mohamed*, Mumbai 2002; Yashodhara Dalmia: *The Making of Modern Indian Art. The Progressives*, New Delhi 2001; Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.): *Barefoot across the Nation: M.F. Husain and the Idea of India (Series Visual and Media Histories)*, ed. Monica Juneja, London 2010; Karin Zitzewitz: *The Art of Secularism. The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India*, London 2014, chapter 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Zitzewitz: *The Art of Secularism* (see note 6), p. 18.
- <sup>8</sup> Monica Juneja: *Reclaiming the Public Sphere: Husain's Portrayals of Saraswati and Draupadi*, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32/4 (1997), pp. 155-57.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with M. F. Husain: *In Defence of Freedom*, in



Frontline (17 October 1996). Also Tapati Guha-Thakurta: *Monuments, Objects, Histories. Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, New Delhi 2004, chap. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Latour: What is Iconoclasm? Or is there a World beyond Image Wars? In Bruno Latour / Peter Weibel (eds.): *Iconoclasm. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Karlsruhe 2002, pp. 14-37.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, New York 1968, p. 224.

<sup>14</sup> Geeta Kapur: When was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India, New Delhi 2000, pp. 365-68.

<sup>15</sup> Guha-Thakurta: *Monuments, Objects, Histories* (see note 10).

<sup>16</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta: Fault-Lines in a National Edifice: On the Rights and Offences of Contemporary Indian Art, in Ramaswamy (ed.): *Barefoot Across the Nation* (see note 6), pp. 172-197.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Brown: *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980*, Durham 2009; Monica Juneja / Franziska Koch (eds.): *Multi-Centred Modernisms. Reconfiguring Asian Art of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, Themed Section Transcultural Studies, 1 (2010), pp. 38-41. quoted from the online journal *Transcultural Studies*, No. 1, 2010, <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/transcultural/article/view/6181/1764> (accessed on March 15, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> This exclusion continues in current writings, for in-

stance in the exhibition catalogue Hans Belting / Andrea Buddensieg / Peter Weibel (eds.): *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Artworlds*, Karlsruhe 2013, in which Hans Belting rather astonishingly refers to art from beyond the North Atlantic West as having been catapulted into global art circuits without having gone through a phase of modernism, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> This observation applies equally to foreign museums featuring South Asian collections: in museums and galleries of Europe and the United States, modern South Asian art continues to be absent from displays on mainstream Modernism, see Susan Bean: Viewed from across the Globe. The Art of M.F. Husain, in Ramaswamy (ed.): *Barefoot across the Nation* (see note 6), p. 249.

<sup>20</sup> A fuller account can be found in Monica Juneja: Preface, in Ramaswamy (ed.): *ibid*, pp. xix ff.

<sup>21</sup> Among the most frequently cited texts, which were then taken to represent art theory, was the *Citrasutra* of the *Visnudharmottarapurana*, a prescriptive text compiled in written form in the 12th century by Brahmin priests. This was, however, not a manual for artists in the strict sense, as the profuse art production over centuries reveals. Its content relating to images was rather drawn upon with the intent of extracting a canon during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>22</sup> Vidya Dehejia: *Indian Art*, London 1997, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: *Art and Swadeshi*, 2nd ed., New Delhi 1994 (1911).

<sup>24</sup> Karin Zitzewitz: »I am an Indian and a painter, that is all.« Intention and Secular Subject in Contemporary India, in Ramaswamy (ed.): *Barefoot across the Nation* (see note 6), pp. 130-48.

- <sup>25</sup> Bean: Viewed from across the Globe (see note 19), pp. 247-48.
- <sup>26</sup> Ila Pal: Beyond the Canvas: An Unfinished Portrait of M. F. Husain, New Delhi 1994, p. 84.
- <sup>27</sup> Zitzewitz: The Art of Secularism (see note 6), p. 24.
- <sup>28</sup> An ostensible contrast is with the art of Raja Ravi Varma, who deployed oil as a medium to impart to religious and mythical subjects a new tactility, see Geeta Kapur: Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth-Century Painter. Raja Ravi Varma, in Idem: When was Modernism. Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India, New Delhi 2000, pp. 145-78.
- <sup>29</sup> See Monica Juneja: The Breast-Feeding Mother as Icon and Source of Affect in Visual Practice – a Transcultural Journey, in Axel Michaels / Christoph Wulf (eds.): Emotions in Rituals and Performances, New Delhi 2012, pp. 407-43.
- <sup>30</sup> Cited in Ramaswamy (ed.): Barefoot across the Nation (see note 6), p. 90.
- <sup>31</sup> Bruno Latour: How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion? in Caroline A. Jones / Peter Galison (eds.): Picturing Science, Producing Art, London 1998, p. 421.
- <sup>32</sup> Diana L. Eck: Darsan. Seeing the Divine Image in India, New York 1998.
- <sup>33</sup> Christopher Pinney: Piercing the Skin of the Idol, in Christopher Pinney / Nicholas Thomas (eds.): Beyond Aesthetics: Art and the Technologies of Enchantment, Oxford 2001, pp. 157-180.
- <sup>34</sup> Ashish Rajadhyaksha: The Phalke Era. Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology, in Journal of Arts and Ideas, XIV-XV (1987), pp. 47-48.
- <sup>35</sup> Richard H. Davis: Lives of Indian Images, Princeton 1999.
- <sup>36</sup> Saloni Mathur/Kavita Singh (eds.): No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying. The Museum in South Asia (Series Visual and Media Histories, ed. Monica Juneja), New Delhi 2015, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>37</sup> Veena Das: Of M. F. Husain and an Impossible Love, in Ramaswamy (ed.): Barefoot across the Nation (see note 6), pp. 118-19.
- <sup>38</sup> Srirupa Roy: Beyond Belief. India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism, Durham 2007, p. 193.





## **HEALTH WARNING**

The contents of this exhibition may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety. If you suffer from high blood pressure, a nervous disorder, or palpitations, you should consult your doctor before viewing this exhibition.

Thank you very much

[ 1 ] Drei Heilige Kuchen / Three Holy Cakes (Leonid Kharlamov initiated a photo-cake meal; the cakes were eaten during the symposium *Offensive Pictures*, Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design, June 15, 2014)









[ 2 ] Taufe einer Hündin / Baptism  
of a Bitch (Leonid Kharlamov  
baptizes a female dog according  
to orthodox Rite; performance  
during the symposium *Offensive  
Pictures*, Muthesius University  
of Fine Arts and Design, June 15,  
2014)













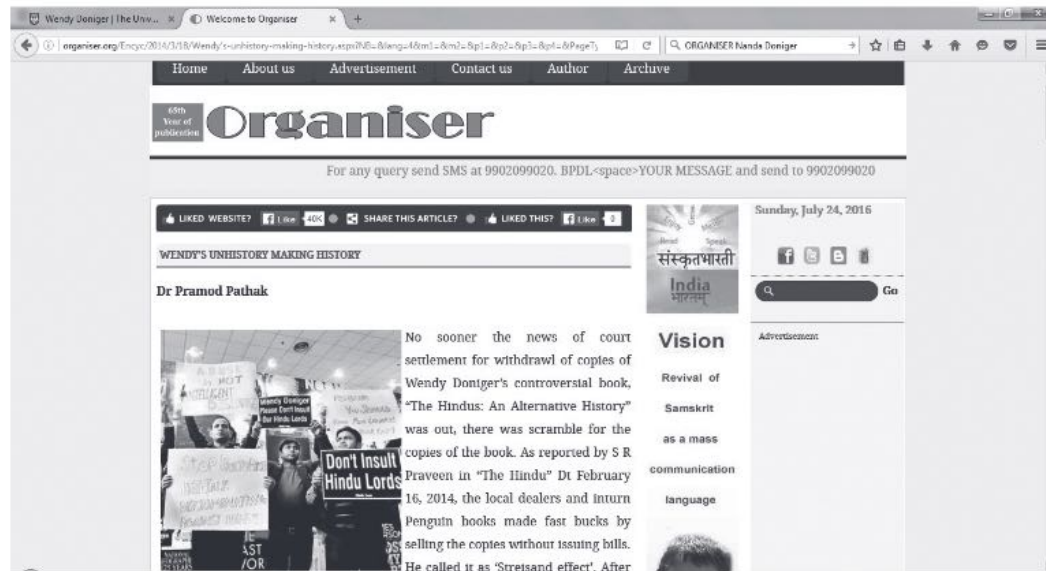






## Destroying Krishna Imagery. What are the Limits of Academic and Artistic Freedom?

Maruška Svašek

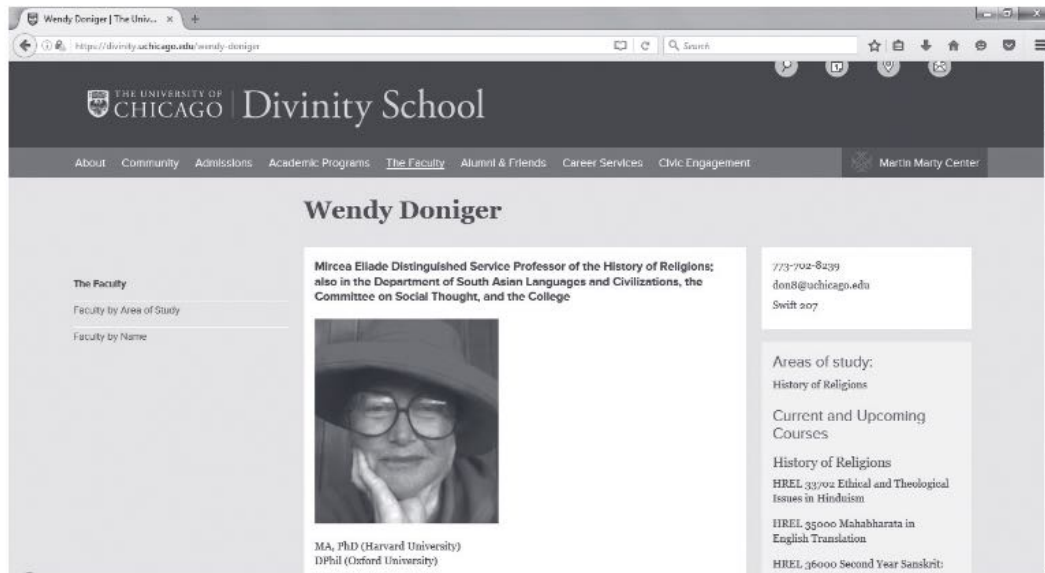


[FIG. 1]

Pramod Pathak: Wendy's  
Unhistory making  
History, screenshot

A photograph published in 2014 by *Organiser*, a weekly magazine based in New Delhi, shows a group of Indian demonstrators holding up various placards. »Don't insult Hindu Lords« is printed on one of them; »Stop Prejudice Hate Talk Discriminating against Hindus« and »Abuse is not intelligent discourse« are written on others. Another placard addresses the target of the demonstration: »Wendy Doniger Please don't insult our Hindu Lords.« (Fig. 1).

An Internet search for »Wendy Doniger« leads to the other side of the globe, to the prestigious University of Chicago Divinity School. The University website states that Professor Doniger specializes in Hinduism and



[ FIG. 2 ]

Wendy Doniger's home page  
on the University of Chicago's  
website, screenshot

mythology, has published over forty books on related topics in these fields, and received her postgraduate degrees from Harvard University and the University of Oxford. In Chicago, Doniger holds the position of Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions and is associated with the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations and to the Committee on Social Thought (Fig. 2). Clearly, she is a highly successful, internationally renowned scholar who is considered an expert in her field. So why the accusations of blasphemy and prejudice? What compelled a group of Hindus to gather and protest against her?

In *Organiser*, this photograph was used to illustrate an article by Pramod Pathak, a Vedic scholar based in Goa, entitled »Wendy's unhistory making history.« The piece was highly critical of Doniger's latest book, *The Hindus. An Alternative History*, and accused her of misinterpretation and cultural bias.<sup>1</sup> Pathak makes his own sympathy with the protesters amply clear:

In this book Wendy has lost her bearing. She appears to have done away with the precision in her scholarship she had shown in her earlier works. It is a pity that the western scholars have not yet come out of their colonial mindset and the Indian secularists have not come out of the slavish mentality. They write false histories of Asia and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter explores the furore around Doniger's publication, analyzing the uproar in the context of many other controversies around Hindu textual and visual imagery. To understand the dynamics of such image wars,<sup>3</sup> the analysis takes a multidimensional approach, exploring geographic, social, material, discursive, and affective dimensions of cultural production and destruction. It also takes into consideration the wider issues of Hindu identity politics in colonial and postcolonial India and discusses the campaign against Doniger in light of the current political climate in which supporters of Hindutva ideology have frequently mustered other protest campaigns, not only against certain books but also against other artifacts deemed »unacceptable,« such as contemporary art works, photographs, popular consumer goods, and works of architecture. The chapter will also address global aspects of image circulation in a world where some Hindus in India and diasporic settings have used the Internet to demand the



withdrawal and destruction of particular academic and artistic works, while others have employed the same digital media to argue their support for such works.

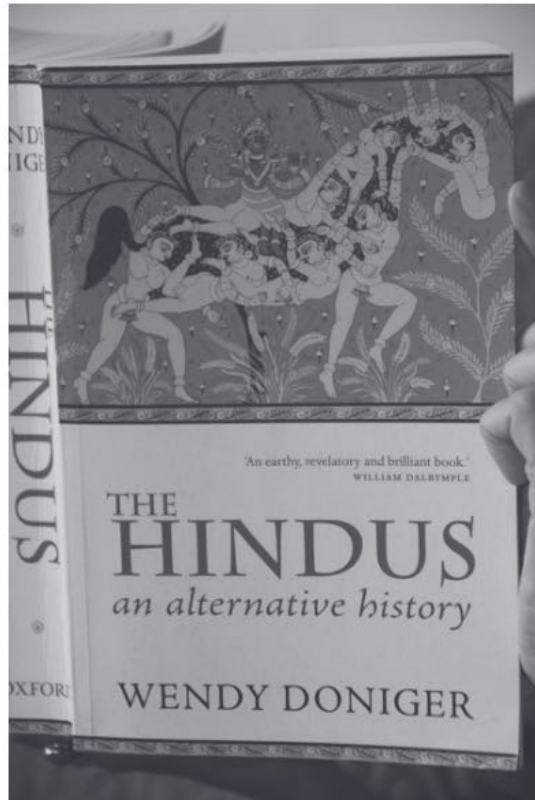
### **Whose history? Which truth?**

Accusing Doniger of writing »unhistory,« Pathak argued that Doniger and her supporters were stuck in the colonial past, a time when Western scholars had ridiculed and exoticized Hinduism and when Indian secularists had turned their backs on local traditions, copying the lifestyles of their oppressors. The result, Pathak claimed, was a distorted picture of Indian history and culture: an »unhistory« that needed to be erased. It was not only necessary to do this in order to assure the production of good scholarship; it was also a moral obligation, as non-Hindu scholars needed to be taught respect for sacred Hindu values.

Before taking a closer look at colonial perceptions of Hindu cultural forms, Doniger's own intentions need to be scrutinized. Why did she choose to shed light on alternative historical discourses of Hinduism? How did she react to her critics? As the book title suggests, Doniger aimed to present a different historical perspective on Hinduism. This, however, was not meant to be an ethnocentric, patronizing colonial perspective, as her critics suggested. Instead, she sought to reveal compassionate and tolerant dimensions in the history of Hinduism that, she claimed, were absent in the very dominant accounts provided by male, high-caste Brahmins. In an interview on May 17, 2013 with PhD student Sonam Kachru that was freely available on her university

website,<sup>4</sup> she explained that when she had studied Sanskrit many years earlier, she had been not so interested in »respectable things« such as the *Dharmaśāstras* and the *Laws of Manu*, widely regarded as key texts by Sanskrit scholars, but had been attracted rather by mythological narratives (»I love stories«) that reflected the under-represented voices of women, animals, and the suppressed castes. Doniger explained that her fascination with the oppressed stemmed from her own family background and the historical period that had shaped political debate during her early adulthood. »The world in which I grew up sensitized me,« she said. Born in the US at the end of World War II to a left-leaning, Jewish family and influenced by the civil rights movement, she had been struck by colorful Hindu texts such as the *Kamasutra* and the *Mahabharata*. The »alternative« voices of the oppressed, she said, »sang out at [her].« She was also attracted to Hindu philosophy and art and, though not a practicing Hindu, the Hindu paradigm made sense to her as she tried to deal with the difficulties of life. In addition, her own ideas »resonate[d] with [the more colorful and abundant] Hindu aesthetics.«

In her controversial book, the alternative history was partly presented through references to texts from the Vedas, ritual artifacts, and temple sculptures that had erotic themes. In her interview with Kachru, however, Doniger disagreed that she had written an overly sexualized account: »There is hardly sex in it anywhere, it is madness!« Her opponents accused her of misinterpreting and ridiculing Hindu symbolism, for example by describing the Shiva linga as Shiva's phallus and by choosing a picture depicting Krishna mounted on a horse composed from the shapes of naked women. This image was in fact displayed on the book's cover (Fig. 3).



[ FIG. 3 ]  
 Wendy Doniger: *The Hindus. An Alternative History*, Oxford  
 2009, cover, photograph

One of her Mumbai-based critics was Devdutt Pattanaik, who describes himself on his website as »a renowned author, mythologist, and leadership consultant, whose work focuses on deriving management insights from mythology to provide a very Indian approach to modern business.«<sup>5</sup> Having written over thirty popular books about Hinduism for a wide, mostly non-academic readership, he emailed the American scholar to ask her some questions about her new book.<sup>6</sup> He explained that some of his relatives, in particular his mother



and his aunts, disagreed with her stance on the Shiva linga, and so he wanted to know, »Whose truth is the truth – that of the believers or that of the research scholar?« Doniger responded as follows:

There is no one correct truth here. Historically, the Shiva-linga was indeed understood as a representation of the phallus of Shiva; you can see this from visual representations like the Gudimallam linga and from stories in the Puranas about the origin of the linga from the body of Shiva. But since the 19<sup>th</sup> century reforms of Hinduism, many Hindus have entirely lost these historical associations and see the Shiva-linga as a purely abstract symbol. So your mother and aunts are right, but the scholars of the history of Hinduism are also right.<sup>7</sup>

Her reply was clearly intended to demonstrate that no singular interpretation could hold a monopoly on truth.

### **Aestheticizing the »erotic«**

For many of Doniger's detractors, the book's cover was itself highly inflammatory. In their eyes, it depicted »Lord Krishna [...] sitting on buttocks of a naked woman surrounded by other naked women,« and the use of this image was »tantamount to »invading the sacredness attached to Sri Krishna.«<sup>8</sup> Pattanaik made the following comment about the contentious image.

This is a popular theme in Patta Paintings of Orissa; more often, the women collectively give shape to an elephant or a temple-shaped Kandarpa Ratha, chariot of the love-god. Such images have been around for a long time. The erotic content is often overlooked, or may occasionally evoke mild amusement. As the book discusses women and horses and patriarchy in the Hindu context, the image even seems appropriate. But when a Jewish American scholar puts it on her book about the Hindus, it can – in a time of political opportunism, religious intolerance, and scholastic puritanism be construed as provocative and insensitive.<sup>9</sup>

He alluded to the changing and conflicting symbolism and emotional impact of religious images that reflect struggles for cultural ownership and authority in the often connected fields of religion, politics, and academia. Across the globe, disputes over the right to reproduce or ban imagery are instrumental in struggles for influence.<sup>10</sup> Representations referring to fertility, sexuality, and reproduction are frequently regulated by both unspoken taboos and strict, explicit regulations. In the case of Hinduism, erotic imagery has evoked different emotional reactions throughout history, as is also outlined by Monica Juneja in her contribution to this volume. Different producers, users, and commentators have interpreted, experienced, and judged sexually explicit depictions of gods in distinct ways.<sup>11</sup> In some contexts, such images have been perceived and discursively constructed as manifestations of the sacred. In others, they have been experienced as visually appealing objects of transcendental beauty or, in sharp contrast, as shocking, shameful representations, deplorable on moral grounds. This transitional

process is tied up with the ability of material objects to evoke a wide variety of feelings, from awe and devotion to anger and outrage.<sup>12</sup>

As Richard Davis pointed out in an exploration of the social lives of Indian artifacts, object-oriented affective causalities and interactions are influenced by the ways people engage sensorially with images: »different ways of seeing animate the object seen in new ways.«<sup>13</sup> This implies that when the same or similar artifacts speak differently to the senses, they are instrumental in the production of different subjectivities. A statue depicting Shiva, for example, will encourage a practicing Hindu to experience a proximity to the divine when interacting with it, not only through vision, but also in ritual practice that includes touch, smell, and sound. By contrast, when framed as »art« or »culture« in a museum or gallery, the same statue will appeal most of all to the eye, whereby the »museum effect«<sup>14</sup> produces a specific kind of experience, encouraging visitors to animate the object on display »through visual and interpretative attentiveness.«<sup>15</sup> Distinct modes of engagement can also spill over into other contexts, transgressing boundaries between different socio-spatial settings. During research in Tamil Nadu in 2010 and 2011, I saw museum visitors putting their hands together in a ritual sign of respect for statues displayed in the art historical section of the Government Museum in Chennai, thus redefining the objects of heritage as active religious agents. By contrast, in the ancient Hindu temples in Kumbakonam, fine art students made pencil sketches of Hindu reliefs that embellished the temple walls.<sup>16</sup> This act of artistic appropriation was, however, limited to the outer temple space, and could not take place in the inner, most sacred sanctum sanctorum.<sup>17</sup>

Highly significant for the focus of this chapter are those occasions when religious practitioners object to these types of boundary fluidity, particularly



when they deem specific appropriations of religious imagery in non-religious fields to be contextually apocryphal or blasphemous and may therefore demand the destruction of the object in question.<sup>18</sup> As we shall see, this is exactly what happened in the case of Doniger's publication, where both the artistic rendering of Krishna on the book's cover and the academic text became targets of an iconoclastic campaign.

### **Censorship, destruction, and calls for freedom**

The Hindu Group Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti, an education reform movement headed by Dina Nath Batra, led many of the protests against the book and filed the charges against Penguin, its publisher. The group claimed that Doniger's take on Hinduism had hurt »the religious feelings of millions of Hindus« and accused her of violating sections of the Indian Penal Code that criminalize causing enmity between religious communities and that restrict free speech in cases where it might cause unacceptable offense. Central to the lawsuit were the violations of section 295A, which stipulates:

Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of citizens of India, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both.<sup>19</sup>

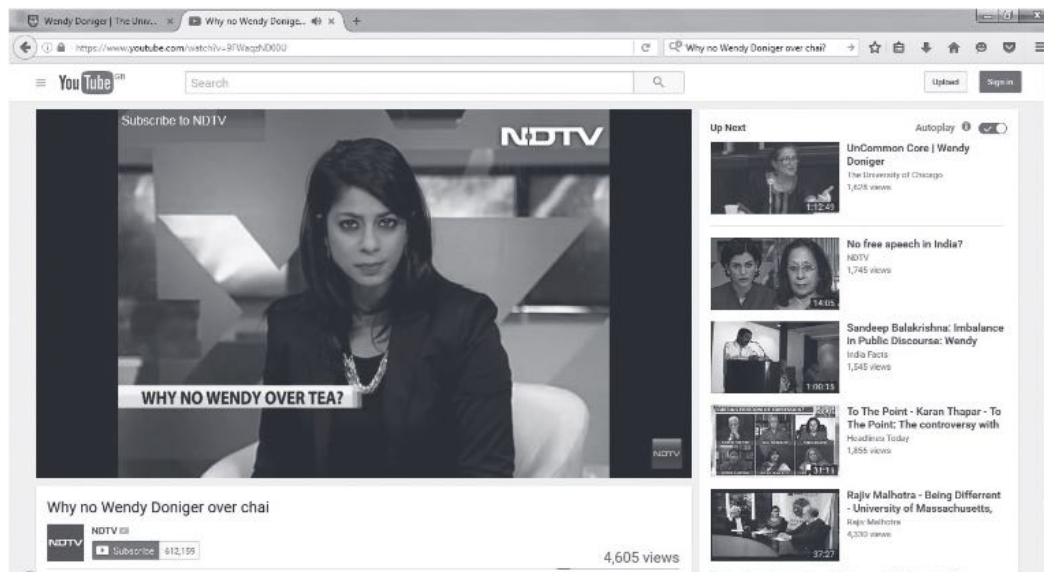
Batra's group accused Doniger, for example, of »pure and total blasphemy,« arguing that her book insinuated that in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a Sanskrit epic poem that depicts the duties of relationships, Sita had sexual intercourse with her husband Rama's brother.<sup>20</sup> To them, this was a highly insulting claim that had to be properly dealt with by the law. The existence of section 295A gave them that opportunity.

Their call for the destruction of Doniger's publication highlighted the fact that protesters not only decried the arguments presented in the work, but also the book itself. In other words, the material existence of both the book and the visual reproduction on its cover were as much a part of the problem as the abstract theories they articulated. As an artifact, the book could be interpreted in many ways, but undeniably the texts and reproductions involved some sexual themes, which allowed the detractors to denounce the »lewdness« of the work and argue that any religious symbolism involved in the reproductions was of secondary importance to the author and publishers. Underlying their anger were specific ideas about Hindu identity and morality, central to the ideology of »Hindutva«, a concept formulated in 1923 by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the pamphlet *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* It was published at a time when nationalists who resisted British colonial rule had »little agreement on which mix of industrialization, westernization, ›traditionalism,‹ egalitarianism and individualism was most desirable« in a future independent Indian state.<sup>21</sup> Different schools of thought were developed, »from a fascist-style Hindu Right, to a communist-inspired Left.«<sup>22</sup> Savarkar claimed that the whole »Hindu-race« shared one specific history and identity that could be conceptualized as Hindutva (Hindu-ness). The discourse on Hindu cultural unity was further

propagated by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (the national volunteer corps or RSS), an organization established in 1925. In the 1930s, one of its leaders, Golwalkar, even referred to Nazi Germany as a potential political model for the future Indian state. While accusing Islam and Christianity of being religions alien to authentic India, Savarkar admired their »fierce unity of faith, social cohesion and valorous fervour« and called for »theocratic patriotism« and »a state powerful enough to weld [Hindus] into an organic whole.«<sup>23</sup> Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti argued that Doniger's account of Hinduism disagreed with the true understanding of Hinduism as promoted by Hindutva.

As the protests against the book continued for a number of years, Penguin, by now merged with another publisher and named Penguin Random House, eventually decided on an out-of-court settlement that stipulated withdrawing the book from circulation in India and announcing the destruction of the remaining copies in February 2014.<sup>24</sup> This decision provoked a counter-wave of protests by Indian writers, filmmakers, artists, and intellectuals based in India and abroad.<sup>25</sup> The issue was widely discussed in the Indian media, on social media platforms, and at several universities. Some of the recorded debates were uploaded to YouTube. One of these broadcasts was the 20-minute feature *Why no Wendy Doniger over chai?*, produced by the India-based NDTV program The Social Network in February 2014 (Fig. 4). In an act of defiance, the program invited a number of Indian critics to express their opinion about the withdrawal of the book.<sup>26</sup> At the start, several public figures read out excerpts of various forbidden or contentious texts, and this was followed by a panel discussion. The panel included Akila Ramalingam, a Delhi-based lawyer who argued that it





[ FIG. 4 ]  
 NDTV program's website  
 showing The Social Network  
 in February 2014, screenshot

was of crucial importance to fight not only for free speech, but also for the rights of readers. She argued that the publisher's decision was »not conducive to democracy,« as it set a dangerous precedent, opening »the floodgates to censorship.« Certain »professional offense takers,« she warned, would initiate litigation after litigation and, if successful, would stifle opposition.

In an open letter to the *Times of India*, the writer and Man Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy indicated that she was shocked most of all by the publisher's decision to pulp remaining copies of the book. Speaking to BBC Radio

on February 14, 2014, she explained that during her own book launches, it was not unusual for protesters to come in to »smash things.«<sup>27</sup> This made the support of one's publisher all the more important. She considered surrendering to »fanatics who are connected to a very big network of righteous fundamentalists« as »a shift in submitting to a growing atmosphere of intolerance« and claimed that even BJP leader Narendra Modi<sup>28</sup> would find protesters' interpretations of Doniger's book »insane.« Addressing Penguin, she appealed to the moral responsibility of the publisher:

You have published some of the greatest writers in history [...]. You have stood by them as publishers should, you have fought for free speech against the most violent and terrifying odds. And now, even though there was no fatwa, no ban, not even a court order, you have not only caved in, you have humiliated yourself abjectly before a fly-by-night outfit by signing settlement. Why? You have all the resources anybody could possibly need to fight a legal battle. Had you stood your ground, you would have had the weight of enlightened public opinion behind you, and the support of most – if not all – of your writers.<sup>29</sup>

Her reference to »fatwas,« rulings issued by Muslim religious leaders, which are sometimes death sentences against proclaimed blasphemers, has not infrequently been used against others, most infamously Salman Rushdie after the publication of his book, *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>30</sup> By contrast with these more violent cases, the demand for the destruction of Doniger's book appeared relatively moderate in the wider context of religious fundamentalism that threatened

freedom of speech in the region.<sup>31</sup> Most Indian politicians refrained from public comment. Government minister Jairam Ramesh, a member of the Congress Party and a self-proclaimed Hind-Budh,<sup>32</sup> was one of the exceptions, and he also compared the case to non-Hindu acts of religious extremism. He contended, »The book is not blasphemous. [Doniger] is a scholar without any political agenda. The organisation that demanded Penguin take such action is clearly »some Taliban-type outfit.« It is distorting and destroying our liberal traditions«<sup>33</sup> (emphasis M.S.). Some organizations outside India also joined the discussion. In the US, the National Book Critics Circle<sup>34</sup> urged Penguin to reverse its »deplorable decision to remove *The Hindus* from circulation in the country, a de facto act of self-censorship that will only contribute to a further rolling back of free speech in India.«<sup>35</sup>

Ironically, the planned destruction led to a great increase in sales, and by the time Penguin Random House had organized the logistics to carry out the destruction of the offending text, all copies were sold out. As Doniger commented in 2016,

Penguin Random House did agree to pulp all remaining copies, but — as it turned out — not a single book was destroyed; all extant copies were quickly bought up from the bookstores. The words »banned« and »pulped,« however, continued to be used to fan the flames of media indignation.<sup>36</sup>



### Section 295A: Legal mechanisms and the politics of religious sentiments

The case, however, put a spotlight on the ways the Indian Penal Code had been used to limit freedom of speech. In its defense of the out-of-court settlement, Penguin Random House argued that, while international editions of the book would still be available, »the Indian Penal Code, and in particular section 295A of that code, will make it increasingly difficult for any Indian publisher to uphold international standards of free expression,« as publishers had »a moral responsibility to protect [their] employees against threats and harassment.«<sup>37</sup> In comments published in numerous papers around the world, including Britain's *The Guardian*, Doniger herself also criticized section 295A, stating that she was »deeply troubled by what [the out-of-court settlement] foretells for free speech in India in the present, and steadily worsening, political climate.«<sup>38</sup> In her view, the »true villain [was] the Indian law that makes it a criminal rather than civil offense to publish a book that offends any Hindu, a law that jeopardizes the physical safety of any publisher, no matter how ludicrous the accusation brought against a book.«<sup>39</sup>

In 2016, the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* published the outcomes of a 2014 discussion forum that critically investigated the implications of section 295A for academics and other cultural producers in India, entitled »Roundtable on Outrage, Scholarship, and the Law in India.« Four scholars contributed, including C.S. Adcock (Department of History, Washington University, St. Louis), Brian Pennington (Center for the Study of Religion, Culture, & Society, Elon University), Anantanand Rambachan (Department of Religion, St. Olaf College, Northfield), Rupa Viswanath (Centre for Modern Indian

Studies, University of Göttingen), and Doniger herself. The articles examined the historical reasons leading to the introduction of Section 295A in 1927 and explored its workings in colonial and postcolonial India. The legislation had been conceived by the British in a reaction to religious unrest caused by the Arya Samaj, a reformist Hindu organization established by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1875. The organization employed a »mocking, derisive tone of religious polemics« in its conversion campaign and ridiculed people of other religious persuasions, especially Muslims.<sup>40</sup> While the new legislation was thus »enacted as a legal tool to restrain the religious criticism associated with proselytizing,« it seemed to be highly ineffective. During the 1930s, »the tone of polemics was arguably worse.«<sup>41</sup> In Adcock's words,

The purpose was to curb religious violence by curbing provocative speech. But the strategic field the law put into place worked differently: it extended the strategic value of demonstrating that passions had been aroused that threatened the public peace, in order to induce the government to take legal action against one's opponents. Section 295A thus gave a fillip to the politics of religious sentiment.<sup>42</sup>

Viswanath added that the legislation tended to serve the interests of powerful elites who strategically used the language of »hurt sentiments« to increase their influence. »The Doniger affair,« she argued, demonstrated »how those sentiments are deployed to preserve high-caste, Hindu majoritarian prerogatives by means of the implicit threat of violence.« She emphasized, however, that rallies for »free speech« also often concealed differences in power, as those in more

powerful positions were better connected to successfully defend their opinions.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, it seems clear that section 295A did not restrain, but rather fired up religious and political tensions. Pennington concluded,

The resulting politics of religious sentiment has resulted in repeated attacks on the scholarly study of religion in India and the Indian diaspora. The legal and religious culture that produces such a problematic politics of religious sentiment poses an ongoing and serious threat to the shared foundational values of the international academy.<sup>44</sup>

### **Representing a colonial mindset?**

To return to the protest against Doniger's book, her opponents not only filed charges, but also produced visual images to express their contempt and challenge the American scholar. Some anti-Doniger posters were reproduced on the website of Hindu Existence, a digital forum that asks »Hindus from everywhere« to »please send reports and pictures about our status,« with the aim to »create a solidarity in Global Hindus.«<sup>45</sup> One of the posters showed a photograph of the author's head, with the addition of a crown of thorns, a cross, the Star of David, an exaggerated nose, and the words »STOP NUISANCE You Missionary!!!« printed over her mouth. On the right, it said »Right to Express? Right to Research?? Right to Attack Hindu Dharma??? HOW FEELING?????« A text at the bottom proclaimed: »Wendy Doniger, the writer of THE HINDU is a definite Christian Agent.«



The poster accused Doniger of an ethnocentric colonialist Christian missionary mindset and a Jewish-Marxist bias.

There is no denying that, particularly during the colonial period, many Christian Europeans derided Hindu sacred depictions. Art historian Partha Mitter explored such reactions from European travellers and Victorian scholars between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, providing many examples of highly negative responses to ancient Indian temple art, artifacts, murals, and pictures.<sup>46</sup> J.H. van Lindschoten, who spent some years in India in the 1580s, spoke for example of »fearefull, horrible and devilish forms,« and temples »with so evill favored and uglie shapes, that to enter there in it would make a mans hayre stand upright.«<sup>47</sup> In the Victorian period, Indian depictions of nudity and erotic scenes were either regarded as proof of the primitive sexual drives of an uncivilized race or alternatively were exoticized as a characteristic of a free and unrestrained people, unspoiled by the constraints of Western modernity. As Doniger herself noted, »the puritanical Protestant ministers who evangelized India after 1813 loathed the eroticism of the temples, the temple dancers, and the amatory excesses of the god Krishna.«<sup>48</sup> By contrast, the »fraction of Hinduism that appealed to Protestant, evangelical tastes was firmly grounded in the other path of Hinduism, the philosophical, renunciant path.«<sup>49</sup> The colonial framing of acceptable forms of Hinduism influenced local sensitivities toward erotic themes in Hindu art. Many highly-placed Hindus so admired their colonizers that, in a kind of colonial and religious Stockholm syndrome, they swallowed the Protestant line themselves and not only gained a new appreciation of those aspects of Hinduism that the British approved of (the *Gita*, the Upanishads), but also became ashamed of those

aspects that the British scorned (erotic sculptures on temples, temple dancers). Following the British lead, these Hindus largely wrote off the dominant strain of Hinduism that celebrated the passions of the gods.<sup>50</sup>

While tensions between different orientations in Hinduism predated colonial rule, the new 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century sensitivities toward nudity clearly arose in a context in which European ideas about morality, development, and civilization influenced discussions among Hindus about religious and political identity. New notions of »Indian tradition« and »progressive development« informed the reconceptualization of Hinduism as a single uniting cultural and political force. The sociologist Dev Pathak identified three main factors leading to the rise of unified Hindu politics in colonial and postcolonial India (personal conversation, 2013). First, the British denigration of certain Hindu practices created a sense of collective victimhood. Second, impressed by the political force of the more centralized religious structures of Christian and Islamic organizations, numerous Hindus supported the transformation of the diverse Hindu Dharma into a united religion. A centrally organized Hindu body would not only be valued by the British as a more »civilized« religion, but could also become a political force in independent India. Third, a united Hindu political power could project the image of India as the »Hindu nation« and protect what was perceived to be an ancient and sacred civilization. The politics of Hindurastra (all Hindus in India unite), in other words, was based on a complexity of feelings: hurt pride, wanting to be like the oppressor, and a wish for power and independence. In Pathak's view, Doniger's book was perceived as a threat because she maintained that Hindus are not one and that hierarchical Hinduist structures tend to suppress certain voices.<sup>51</sup>

### **Debating the Indian constitution: Secularism or pseudo-secularism?**

The controversies over Doniger's interpretations of Hindu texts and images have to be set against the background of struggles for political influence and the control of public space in India. The struggles reflect not only disagreements about the character of the »Indian nation,« but also differences of opinion about the legal foundations of the Indian state. When the British Raj was dismantled in 1947 and two independent states, Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, were established after partition, the Pakistani constitution defined Pakistan as a Muslim state, adopting Sharia law and allowing only Muslims to become heads of state. By contrast, the Indian constitution was founded on the basis that the state would be »equidistant from all religions – refusing to take sides and having a neutral attitude towards them.«<sup>52</sup> In this secularist system, heads of states could have any religious background, or none at all, and the state promoted the right to religious freedom. Working together with different religious communities, the government would ensure the rights to specific forms of worship and social organization and adopt laws if necessary. As noted earlier, the legal system also meant to protect citizens of all religious backgrounds against activities the court deemed to be offensive.

As the economist Amartya Sen has argued, this system was radically different from the one in Pakistan, where the legal system was directly informed by a singular religious framework and blasphemy laws were applicable only to Islam. In the Indian system, by contrast, the state responded to the social and religious requirements and the religious sensitivities of all religious groups.



Not surprisingly, legal rulings and court decisions based on the requirements of specific religions were closely scrutinized by the other religious groups. And the historical foundation of the secular system was criticized. Sen has distinguished various »lines of argument« that characterize critical evaluations of Indian secularism by different groups, some of them relating to demands for the withdrawal or destruction of particular material objects.<sup>53</sup> Most relevant to the case that is central to this chapter are four arguments made by specific Hindu groups: first, that throughout history, Muslims have failed to identify with India and, whenever possible, have destroyed Hindu cultural heritage; second, that the Indian constitution has established a system that favors Muslims, giving them certain rights and privileges; third, that, as the most widespread religion, Hinduism must be accepted as a force of political unity; and fourth, that India is culturally a Hindu country, implying that Hindu religious traditions should have special status and that blasphemy laws should primarily protect Hindu communities.<sup>54</sup>

The term »pseudo-secularism« was specifically used to criticize the government for having instigated special religion-based policies and laws<sup>55</sup> and to attack the National Congress for failing to support Hindu victims of Muslim violence in Kashmir. As Leela Fernandes<sup>56</sup> argued, this critique became increasingly widespread and forceful with the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s and the 1990s<sup>57</sup> as the »rhetoric of rescuing secularism from pseudo-secularism« resonated with a strong wish among the broader middle class to: »[...] rescue Indian democracy from the corruption, patronage, and »special interests« of rising politically assertive subaltern groups that diverged from middleclass models of citizenship and civic and political life.«<sup>58</sup> As already noted, accusations of pseudo-secularism were also made against Indian supporters of

Doniger's publications, focusing on their supposed disrespect for sacred »Hindu« culture and religion. The following quote refers to her book *On Hinduism* (2013),<sup>59</sup> published after *The Hindus. An Alternative History*, a second publication that was withdrawn from sales in India, this time by the Aleph Book Company. Dina Nath Batra, who had led the attack on Doniger's alternative history of Hinduism, publically stated that *On Hinduism* was »malicious and offending« and that the author had »used derogatory terms for Hindu deities, which hurts the sentiments of devotees.« He added that the book was

[...] part of a conspiracy hatched by »pseudo secularists« to tarnish the image of Hindu culture and India [...]. It is part of a conspiracy hatched by the children of (Karl) Marx and (Thomas) Macaulay to tarnish the image of Hindu culture. There are certain pseudo secularists who are behind this conspiracy.<sup>60</sup>

The reference to Thomas Macaulay (1800 – 1859) was intended to paint Doniger's Indian supporters as uncritical, unpatriotic beings, prejudiced in their judgments by a colonial mindset. Macaulay had played a major role in the introduction of English as a compulsory language in the Indian educational system in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>61</sup> The aim had been to create an Anglicized elite whose members would support British rule and act as middlemen between the colonial rulers and the uneducated Indian masses. Hindu nationalists have argued that Hindu cultural heritage has been under threat from the devastating effects of colonial brainwashing through pseudo-secular policies,<sup>62</sup> in other words, that the drive for secularism is in fact a false cover for sections of the dominant elite to

undermine the »true« Hindu foundations of Indian society by »wrongly« diluting its importance to just one religion among many. Ironically, however, the legal system on which the secularist state was founded included section 295A that, as Viswanath claimed earlier, generally worked in favor of Hindu elites.

### **Public space, religion, and art: Sites of political struggle**

The Indian sociologist P. Radhakrishnan has argued that cultural heritage battles in India have often been caused by power-hungry politicians and religious leaders from all major religious groups who aim to control the public space, thereby creating division and social strife. Addressing the need for a properly functioning Indian secularist system, he has argued that politicians, academics, and journalists should do more to discourage faith-based politics and »reconcile to the needs of modernity.«<sup>63</sup> Commenting on spatial aspects of anti-secular politics, he warned: »The politics of religion has resulted in the mushrooming of religious structures – not so much out of devotion or for worship as for competitive communalism in the public sphere. This is true among Hindus, Muslims and Christians.«<sup>64</sup>

Focusing on Hindu spatial politics, Jaffrelot was equally critical of the politicization of public sensitivities around religious sites, stating that disputes about the fate of sacred artifacts and sites have been deployed as political weaponry during elections.<sup>65</sup> A telling example of the interplay of politics and religion in Indian public space is the destruction in 1992 of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by hardline Hindu groups, who claimed that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Moghul



mosque had been built on the site of an earlier Hindu temple that marked the birthplace of Shri Ram, a major Hindu god.<sup>66</sup> Another example is the furore generated by plans to build a bridge between India and Sri Lanka on the under-sea ridge between Rameswaram and Sri Lanka, at a location claimed to be a sacred Hindu site.<sup>67</sup>

Other complaints against offensive objects in public space have occurred in contemporary art settings. A well-known example is the outrage caused by a painting by the artist M.F. Hussain that depicted the map of India in the shape of a nude Hindu goddess. As discussed by Monica Juneja in this volume, the Muslim painter received death threats from Hindu groups and was subsequently forced into exile. Like Doniger, he was accused of an inappropriate, sexualizing approach, and his work was deemed sacrilegious. Another case of outrage caused by images of sacred nudity occurred in 2007, when an art exhibition hosted by graduating art students at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda displayed works by Chandramohan Srilamantula leading to the artist's arrest. The website of the Indian Rationalist Association condemned the attack, reporting, »Though the exhibition was not public, but meant for internal assessment of the art students only, Hindu fundamentalists barged into the Fine Arts faculty and vandalised art exhibits of gods and goddesses. The artist was personally attacked and beaten up.«<sup>68</sup> On this occasion, both Hindus and Christians raised objections. One of the works depicted a nude goddess Durga holding a trident and using it to attack a baby emerging from her womb. A second work by the same artist showed a naked Jesus crucified above a toilet. In an angry report, university authorities objected to the works, describing the latter as:

[...] a huge Christian Cross where Lord Jesus Christ was shown with his penis out on the Cross, his palms and feet hanging from the two sides and the bottom of the Cross, respectively. Semen was shown as dropping out of his penis into a real toilet commode placed beneath the Cross. The toilet contained fishes.<sup>69</sup>

The staff of the Fine Arts faculty replied with contempt, stating that the writers of the report were clearly »visually illiterate« and that it was »appalling that [they] would indulge in such paraphrasing of works of art and would offer such crude and obscene readings of the images concerned.«<sup>70</sup> Referring to the painting of Durga, they explained that it had to be read symbolically and that the art student had meant to raise awareness of the crime of feticide. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Chandramohan Srilamantula defended himself, saying that his aims had been »to show the purity, truth and reality in human beings using the images of god and goddesses. I did not mean to hurt anybody's sentiments.«<sup>71</sup> In defense of the image of Jesus on the Cross, his teachers argued,

The work is not figurative but symbolic. It can be interpreted to mean several things: one among them could be that the suffering of Christ on the cross has led his body to a condition of utter dissolution, turning Him into a fleshless state symbolized by water (fluids of the body). As his body drains into a receptacle (a modern commode) it takes its form as new life of elementary creatures [...]. In fact, the theme of water flowing out from the body of Christ after his crucifixion by those who disapproved of his ideas is mentioned in the Bible and is a revered part of the story

that is read out in churches all over the world at the remembrance of his death that takes place each year on Good Friday. Also the themes of suffering, sacrifice and regeneration are key themes in most world philosophies and religions.<sup>72</sup>

The justification suggested that image producers must be held accountable for the emotional effect of their products only when their work is purposely meant to trigger ill feelings. In other words, the assumption was that the intended use of symbolic imagery took the sting out of any immediate visual affront the artifacts might cause before more abstract reflection. As is already clear from the discussion about the reactions to Doniger's book, such semiotic approaches to art deny the fact that objects not only have changing meanings, but also changing appeal and emotional impact as they are appropriated by different groups and redisplayed in different times and socio-spatial settings.<sup>73</sup>

### **Digital connections: Interlinked affective spaces**

As the analysis has already illustrated, in an era of globalization, geographic spaces are connected by the movement of people, objects, and ideas. Translocal connectivity is intensified in a digital age in which texts, photographs, and other pictures can be disseminated across the globe in an instant, granting geographically dispersed individuals access to the same materials. This allows virtual communities to unify around them. For example, the bloggers behind *hindu-existence.org*, who uploaded and circulated the anti-Doniger poster reproduced



in figure 5, called on other Hindus to share their thoughts and feelings through textual and visual materials: »Let us join hands to empower this blog as a new dimension to create a solidarity in Global Hindus. Hindus from everywhere please send reports and pictures about our status. This blog is yours.«<sup>74</sup>

The distribution through the Internet of photographs of anti-Doniger demonstrators also exemplified this process (Fig. 1). One of the organizations that reproduced the pictures was again the weekly publication *Organiser*, which often stresses its global readership in places »all over India and Overseas.«<sup>75</sup> On its website, *Organiser* describes itself as:

[...] one of the oldest and most widely circulated weeklies from the capital, [that] first hit the stands in 1947, a few weeks before Partition. Edited and enriched by eminent personalities like A.R. Nair, K.R. Malkani, L.K. Advani, V.P. Bhatia, Seshadri Chari, R. Balashanker and now Prafulla Ketkar [...] to name but a few, ORGANISER has come to believe that resistance to tyranny is obeisance to God.<sup>76</sup>

The reference to God and the need to resist »tyranny« alluded to Hindutva ideology, defined as »SERVICE to the Motherland and a sense of dedication to the nation coupled with true secularism.«<sup>77</sup> As opposed to the »pseudo-secularism« discussed earlier, »true secularism« aimed to promote a unified Hindu-centric conceptualization of Indian history and identity. Using capitalized script to add a sense of urgency, the weekly laid claim to being a powerful voice that had never given up fighting against injustice faced by Hindus.<sup>78</sup> The controversies around Doniger's works were also reported in its online edition. In an interview

with Nanda, Batra claimed »the intention of Wendy Doniger [was] to mollify Hinduism by bringing out exaggerated sex prevailing in Hinduism.«<sup>79</sup>

The Internet was not only a powerful tool for India-based Hindutva supporters to reach Hindus around the world, but was also used by Hindu immigrants in the US to discuss the academic interpretation of Hinduism in their country of residence. On February 17, 2014, Arthur J. Pais, editor of the online publication *Rediff.com* and the *India Abroad* newspaper, published an interview with Rajiv Malhotra, entitled *When Westerners make fun of our gods, they're instigating trouble*.<sup>80</sup> Malhotra argued that books by Wendy Doniger, Jeffrey Kripal, Paul Courtwright, and like-minded scholars were problematic because they expressed a »vulgar kind of view« that dominated the academic debate in America.<sup>81</sup> Defending the destruction of Doniger's book in India, he said:

In theory [...] Hindus are very open. I'm one of them. I've coined the phrase »open architecture.« But I think the Wendy Doniger group is not allowing open architecture. They are closing this architecture. They are bringing a point of view in such a heavy-handed way that it tends to dominate and it tends to suppress the alternative points of view. So some kind of counter-action is necessary and using the law is a decent thing to do.<sup>82</sup>

He argued that the outrage had »nothing to do with Christianity versus Hinduism, because most of these people are Jewish, anyway. They are using a Marxist lens, a Leftist lens, a Freudian lens. The kind of theories they are using are completely inapplicable to the Indian way of life.«<sup>83</sup> Criticizing Doniger in online statements, interviews, and forums, he claimed that his views »created

a huge awareness and awakening among the Diaspora and among people in India.« Distributed through printed and digital media, his words inspired audiences in many different locations to join the revolt that eventually led to the withdrawal of her two books.<sup>84</sup>

Malhotra also penetrated the academic realm, being the driving force behind the publication of *Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America*, a volume edited by Krishnan Ramaswamy, Antonio de Nicolas, and Aditi Banerjee and published in 2007. It included chapters by contributors based in Europe, the US, and India, mostly Hindu academics who identified factual mistakes in works by non-Hindu American scholars and fiercely attacked psychoanalytical approaches in Hindu Studies.<sup>85</sup> The 545-page volume was published by Malhotra's Infinity Foundation and, aiming for a wide readership, was (and still is) freely downloadable from its website.<sup>86</sup> In the foreword, S.N. Balagangadhara, Director of the Comparative Science of Cultures Research Centre at Ghent University, stated that »for the first time, [Indian intellectuals, M.S.] will test the Western knowledge of India.«<sup>87</sup> In the preface, Arvind Sharma, Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University in Montreal, noted that Hindu »insiders [had now started to] claim the right to tell the [non-Hindu, M.S.] outsiders about their faith, thus reversing the flow of information.«<sup>88</sup> The withdrawal of Doniger's books must also be understood in this wider context of re-appropriation.<sup>89</sup>

Doniger did not, however, give up so easily. After failed attempts by John Makinson, Chair of Penguin Random House, to republish the book in India, former Penguin India publisher and editor-in-chief Ravi Singh decided to do so through his new company, Speaking Tiger. Singh was the person who had originally





[ FIG. 5 ]

Wendy Doniger: The  
Hindus. An Alternative  
History, weblink, screenshot

agreed in 2010 to publish Doniger's book and was very supportive of her work. As Doniger triumphantly declared in 2016:

[*The Hindus. An Alternative History*] is now widely available in India, and translations into Tamil and Telugu are also forthcoming. Ravi Singh sets a great example of courage and determination for other publishers. It is possible to publish controversial books in India. Ultimately, the law is made by individuals, and individuals can resist it.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps it is significant, however, that a less provocative image was chosen as cover for the book (Fig. 5).

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the study of concrete acts of blasphemy and blasphemy accusations can throw light on complex social, religious, and political processes that are often linked. It showed that the public expression of love or hatred for a particular image can be an important element in the performance of identity, demonstrating loyalty to a specific religious group and/or political faction. Only an approach that is both historical and spatial, and that focuses on the affective and sensorial aspects of image perception, can demonstrate how fights over the ownership and appropriation of specific representations have political relevance within and across local, national, and transnational social settings.

In the case of Wendy Doniger's books, two opposing views on representational practice defined the debate. On the one hand, Doniger pleaded for an open-ended approach to knowledge production, according to which images, whether visual or textual, could be interpreted in different ways, depending on the aims, outlooks, and experiences of the interpreter. This approach opens up to new critical scrutiny of previously unchallenged or otherwise authoritative interpretations and produces alternative views that may trigger all sorts of emotional reactions, from joy and admiration to anger and moral outrage.

By contrast, her fiercest critics appealed to their religious birthright and their own experiential sense of truth, ideologically framed as faithful Hindu

practice. To them, there was only one acceptable interpretation of Hinduism, encoded in the ideology of Hindutva. Alternatives were perceived as hurtful, disrespectful, and polluting the sacred realm. Exposure to such sacrilege evoked strong feelings of anger that were given public airings as displays of moral and political outrage. As part of this ideological drive, Hindutva adherents expressed the belief that any object considered sacrilegious or offensive could itself be appropriated as a misused religious object that required destruction. In other words, rather than discounting offensive artifacts or texts as ill-informed nonsense not worthy of discussion, the fact that they contained illustrations of sacred Hindu texts or deities inspired Hindutvans to take possession of them, in order to safely dispose of them. Section 295A, a piece of legislation that reinforced the discourse of »hurt religious feelings,« framed their actions.

Ironically, while the opponents of Doniger based part of their arguments on the idea of Hindu exceptionalism within Indian society, they sought to extend their reach and political influence beyond India by means of virtual communities that united the Hindu diaspora around the globe, seeking in particular to enlist the aid of Indian scholars in Western institutions. Their arguments against Doniger were based not only on alleged misinterpretation or alleged historical error, but also on the idea that the correct interpretation of the religious sphere required an a priori knowledge of what it is to be one of the faithful. When the publishers agreed to destroy the book and to not sell other Doniger works in India, secularists feared that this would set a dangerous precedent that could intimidate other publishers, artists, or critics into submitting to the vociferous attacks of Hindu religious groups and the threat of legal action. With the rise of Hindu nationalist politics, supported and encouraged by the groundswell of



Hindutva support, secularists also feared that, should such »victories« ever be upheld in court, decisions on what is deemed offensive enough to warrant a ban under the Indian penal code protecting religious harmony might henceforth be decided not by scholars, politicians, or academics, but by the aggrieved religious groups themselves. If the law officially acknowledged that such groups enjoyed the authoritative understanding of Hinduism and its texts and symbols, then it would effectively be granting them a monopoly on how texts, symbols, or artifacts containing any Hindu religious reference should be used or exhibited in much wider cultural contexts, whether that be in art exhibitions, festivals, or even advertisements.

Given the extremes to which such a precedent could be taken, the Doniger case became a much wider topic of debate among both scholarly and non-scholarly sections of society. This debate, however, is not new. Both before and after partition, Hindutvans sought to further entrench their version of Hinduism as the cultural bedrock of Indian society and felt that blasphemy laws could be used as a way of ennobling Hindus and raising Hinduism above the ranks of other competing religions. The reappearance of *The Hindus. An Alternative History* on the Indian market showed, however, that such laws are not always effective.

<sup>1</sup> Wendy Doniger: *The Hindus. An Alternative History*, Oxford 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Pramod Pathak: Wendy's unhistory making history; Quote

from the online publication site Organiser, <http://organiser.org/Encyc/2014/3/18/Wendy%E2%80%99s-unhistory-making-history.aspx?NB=&lang=4&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=&PageType=N> (accessed Feb. 10, 2015).

- <sup>3</sup> In this context, »image« refers to both image types, for example, the mental image of »Ganesh«, and to artifactual and digital appearances – a statue, picture, photograph, or digital representation of Ganesh, or a textual description printed on paper.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/wendy-doniger>, linking to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=how-wl-Gxj4>, (accessed on April 1, 2016).
- <sup>5</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik: Interviewing Wendy Doniger, <http://devdutt.com/articles/myth-theory/my-interview-with-wendy-doniger.html> (accessed May 2, 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> In India, Pattanaik is widely known for writing contemporary mythological bestsellers that are available in English, which makes them highly accessible to Hindus living abroad. I remember seeing his best-selling books on Hindu iconography in 2011 in the Chennai airport bookshop. He writes for both children and adults, publishing titles such as *Pasbu: Animal Tales from Hindu Mythology* and *The Success Sutra*, the latter being advertised as a book »packed with unique and profound insights into how individuals can create wealth and achieve success in life by following Indian principles of strategic thinking and decision-making« (<http://devdutt.com/category/books>). These popular genres represent Hindu ideas in quite different ways and to quite different audiences from Doniger's *Hinduism: An Alternative History*.
- <sup>7</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik: Interviewing Wendy Doniger, (see note 5). Malhotra, one of Doniger's fervent critics, quoted a passage from Harvard-based Diana Eck's 2001 book on »new religious America« to accuse Doniger of promoting cross-religion misunderstanding. »Christians look at the Hindu worship of the linga and see it as phallic worship, while Hindus look at the Christian sacrament of communion and are repulsed by its symbolic cannibalism.« (Eck, quoted in *Invading the Sacred Year*: 71, see further discussion below).
- <sup>8</sup> Brian K. Pennington: The Unseen Hand of an Underappreciated Law. The Doniger Affair and Its Aftermath, in Cynthia Eller, Tammi J. Schneider (eds.): *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 84/2 (2016), pp. 322-336, here p. 326.
- <sup>9</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik: Interviewing Wendy Doniger, (see note 5).
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, the contributions to Øivind Fuglerud / Leon Wainwright (eds.): *Objects and Imagination. Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning*, Oxford 2015, and contributions to Maruška Svašek / Birgit Meyer: *Creativity in Transition. Politics and Aesthetics of Cultural Production Across the Globe*, in Brian K. Pennington: *The Unseen Hand* (see note 8). Pattanaik identified practices of political opportunism, religious intolerance, and scholastic puritanism as factors shaping questions of property and propriety with regard to Hindu imagery.
- <sup>11</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of my conceptualization of »aestheticization« and to explore this process, see Maruška Svašek: *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, London 2007 and Maruška Svašek: *Aestheticisation and the Production of Religious Space in Chennai*, in Alexandra Grieser / Jay Johnston, (eds.): *Aesthetics of Religion. A Connective Concept*. Amsterdam: DeGruyter (forthcoming in 2017).
- <sup>12</sup> Svašek / Meyer: *Creativity in Transition* (see note 8); See also Patricia Spyer / Mary Margaret Steedly: *Images that Move*, Santa Fe and New Mexico 2013.
- <sup>13</sup> Richard H. Davis: *Lives of Indian Images*, Princeton/N.J.

1997, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Svetlana Alpers: *The Museum as a Way of Seeing*, in Ivan Karp / Steven D. Lavín (eds.): *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington D.C. 1991, pp. 25–32.

<sup>15</sup> Davis: *Lives of Indian Images* (see note 13), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> See also Amit Desai / Maruška Svašek: *Transvisionary Imaginations. Artistic Subjectivity and Creativity in Tamil Nadu*, in Fuglerud / Wainwright (eds.): *Objects and Imagination* (see note 10), pp. 207–229.

<sup>17</sup> When I asked their teacher whether he sometimes looked with a similar studious, artistic eye at the sacred statues of Hindu gods and goddesses inside the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, he did not speak, but stared back at me, first puzzled, then with a slightly amused expression. Worship through ritual engagement with the divine within the temple walls through darshan required a very different perceptual and affective engagement. »Darshan, translated literally from Sanskrit as »seeing and being seen by God,« is that moment when the worshipper is receptive to recognition by the God or Goddess»; Stephen P. Huyler: *Meeting God. Elements of Hindu Devotion*. New Haven 1999, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Numerous authors have explored these dynamics and investigated the often-uneasy relations among art, religion, politics and heritage. See, for example, Bruce M. Sullivan: *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces. Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*, London 2015; John Henry Merryman: *Thinking about the Elgin Marbles. Critical Essays of Cultural Property, Art and Law*, Alphen aan den Rijn 2009; John A. Walker: *Art and Outrage. Provocation, Controversy and the Visual Arts*, London 1999; James Noyes: *Politics of Iconoclasm. Religion, Violence*

and the Culture of Image-Breaking in Christianity and Islam, London 2013. Spyer / Steedly: *Images that Move* (see note 12), 2013.

<sup>19</sup> <http://cis-india.org/internet-governance/resources/section-295a-indian-penal-code> (accessed on May 20, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> As Pennington noted, »The suit charged Doniger and Penguin with two violations of sections 153 and 153A, which criminalize causing enmity between religious communities (most cogently for the book's alleged claims that organizations on the Hindu right, such as the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, are »against« Muslims and Christians); and it also accuses them in a general way of violating sections 298 and 505, which outlaw statements intended to offend religious persons or promote enmity between religious communities [...]. The weight of the legal case, however, was borne by section 295A. Batra cited violations of section 295A three times in a general and summary fashion in the lawsuit's concluding sections, building there on his prior charges that Doniger and Penguin contravened the law on five specific counts. First, he argued that Doniger violated the code by calling the epic *The Rāmāyaṇa* a »work of fiction« (claim 21 in the legal filing). Second, he condemned Doniger's insinuation that the epic's heroine, Sita, had sex with the brother of Rama (her husband and the paradigmatic righteous king for Hindus) as »pure and total blasphemy« (claim 23). Third, he noted that in the 1981 Penguin edition of the *Rig Veda* Doniger had translated verse 10.85.13 to call for the sacrifice of »cattle,« but translated the same word »cow« in *The Hindus*, displaying a »deliberate, malicious and conscious intention to outrage religious feelings of millions of Hindus« because, the suit alleges, »cattle« can include goat, buffalo, or deer (claim 29). Fourth, he charged that in characterizing the sun god Surya's impregnation of Kunti—the mother of the five Pandava brothers who are the heroes and kings of India's other great epic, the *Mahābhārata*—as a »rape,« Doniger deliberately and



maliciously misconstrued ›divine blessings for birth of children‹ (claims 33–34). Finally, he alleged that the selection of the artwork for the book cover, which depicted, in the suit's language, ›Lord Krishna... sitting on buttocks of a naked woman surrounded by other naked women,‹ was tantamount to ›invading the sacredness attached to Sri Krishna‹ (claim 35) (Arora 2010).« Brian K. Pennington: *The Unseen Hand* (see note 8), pp. 326–327. Emphasis added. See also Monika Arora: ›Sh. Dina Nath Batra Send Legal Notice to Wendy Doniger.‹, <http://www.bharatiya-shiksha.com/2010/04/14/sh-dina-nath-batra-send-legal-notice-to-wendy-doniger> (accessed on Feb. 6, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Maria Misra: *Vishnu's Crowded Temple. India Since the Great Rebellion*, New Haven 2007, p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>24</sup> Wendy Doniger: A Response, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 84/2 (2016), pp. 364–366, here p. 365.

<sup>25</sup> Pennington pointed out, ›Whereas reactions in the United States tended to place the controversy in the context of recent clashes between the Hindu right and western academic books by American authors Kripal, Courtright, and Laine, responses by both Indian media and the Hindu diaspora in the United States framed it in reference to the 1988 ban on the import of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* by the government of India and the 2011 removal of A. K. Ramanujan's essay, ›300 Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translations‹ from the Delhi University syllabus for the History B.A.‹ At the same time, ›Indian reactions, that is, tended to see the episode as one moment in an ongoing battle within India itself, but reactions from within the United States tended to lay blame on the Indian social and intellectual environment as such.‹

Pennington: *The Unseen Hand* (see note 8), p. 328.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.ndtv.com/videnews/the-social-network/why-no-wendy-doniger-over-chai-309311> (accessed on May 20, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAg7woLJGs> (accessed on June 2, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> She spoke at a time when the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) was rapidly gaining support and alluded to the increasing influence of Hindu nationalist groups in the realm of Indian politics. Led by Narendra Modi, the BJP (›Indian People's Party‹) secured a majority of 282 seats during the general election in 2014. The BJP was founded in 1980 and is widely regarded as a ring-wing party that has organizational and ideological links to the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

<sup>29</sup> The Guardian, 13 February 2014. Penguin's withdrawal of *The Hindus* causes international outcry <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/13/penguin-withdrawal-hindus-arundhati-roy-neil-gaiman> (accessed on June 1, 2016). See also Andrew Buncombe: Arundhati Roy criticises Penguin for pulping *The Hindus*: An Alternative History, in *The Independent* Feb 13, 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/arundhati-roy-criticises-penguin-for-pulping-the-hindus-an-alternative-history-9126247.html> (accessed on June 1, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Rushdie was accused of blasphemy when his novel was published in 1988 in the UK, and a year later, the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran ordered Muslims to kill the writer. Rushdie had to go into hiding, and a moral ›war‹ ensued between supporters of freedom of speech and defenders of the right to take revenge on people committing sacrilege.

- <sup>31</sup> In response to the withdrawal of Doniger's book, the Indian branch of the writers' organization PEN agreed that »the removal of books from our bookshops, bookshelves, and libraries, whether through state-sanctioned censorship, private vigilante action, or publisher capitulation are all egregious violations of free speech that we shall oppose in all forms at all times« in *The Guardian* (Feb 13, 2014).
- <sup>32</sup> A practicing Hindu who is also influenced by Buddhism.
- <sup>33</sup> Andrew Buncombe: Arundhati Roy criticises Penguin (see note 29).
- <sup>34</sup> This organization had shortlisted Doniger's book for an award in 2009.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Guardian*, Feb. 13, 2014: Penguin's withdrawal of *The Hindus* causes international outcry.
- <sup>36</sup> Wendy Doniger: A Response (see note 24), p. 364.
- <sup>37</sup> Pennington: *The Unseen Hand* (see note 8), p. 237, quoting (anonymous) »Penguin India's Statement on 'The Hindus' by Wendy Doniger«, February. Penguin Books, India. Available at <http://www.penguinbooksindia.com/en/node/4090.html> (accessed on Feb. 7, 2016).
- <sup>38</sup> *The Guardian*, Feb. 13, 2014: Penguin's withdrawal of *The Hindus* causes international outcry, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/13/penguin-withdrawal-hindus-arundhati-roy-neil-gaiman> (accessed on Jan. 10, 2016).
- <sup>39</sup> *The Guardian* further reported, »The historian [William] Dalrymple agreed, saying the »real villains are the laws in this country, which were old colonial laws drawn up in the 1890s, and which make insulting religion a criminal offence« [...]. (see my question at the end) »They give the general impression we are in 1936 in Germany, with freedoms being curtailed on a daily basis,« said Dalrymple, author of *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India, The Last Mughal, and White Mughals*. »The reality is that it is very difficult to defend yourself because the law is stacked very heavily on the side of any lunatic. It's shocking, appalling, dreadful and entirely negative, but I can understand why Penguin did what it did. They should have defended it, but I can understand why, with the law as it is, they decided they couldn't win the case.« »The Guardian, Penguin's withdrawal of *The Hindus* causes international outcry. See also Nalin Mehta: Great Indian tradition of debate alive and well: Wendy Doniger, in *The Times of India*, Nov. 25, 2015, [http://article.wn.com/view/2015/11/25/Great\\_Indian\\_tradition\\_of\\_debate\\_alive\\_and\\_well\\_Wendy\\_Donige/](http://article.wn.com/view/2015/11/25/Great_Indian_tradition_of_debate_alive_and_well_Wendy_Donige/) (accessed on June 1, 2016).
- <sup>40</sup> C. S. Adcock: Violence, Passion, and the Law: A Brief History of Section 295A and Its Antecedents, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 2016 (82)2: 340.
- <sup>41</sup> C. S. Adcock: Violence, Passion, and the Law 2016, 341. See also N. Gerald Barrier: *Banned: Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India, 1907–1947*, 1974, Columbia, MO: 1907–1947, Columbia, MO 1974; G. R. Thursby: *Hindu-Muslim Relations in British India: A Study of Controversy, Conflict, and Communal Movements in Northern India 1923–1928*, Leiden 1975; Beyond the »Communal« 1920s: The Problem of Intention, Legislative Pragmatism, and the Making of Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code. *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50/3 (2013), pp. 317–340.
- <sup>42</sup> C. S. Adcock: Violence, Passion, and the Law (see note 41), p. 345.
- <sup>43</sup> He pointed out, »When and how laws regulating speech are actually enforced depends crucially not only on the

formal apparatus of the state and its laws, but on complex relations of mutual dependence between official and non-official actors, what I have called elsewhere the caste-state nexus (Viswanath 2014). The economy of offense in modern India that I have described reveals that not only the language of hurt sentiments but also the defense of free speech raised against it are misleading. The idea of hurt religious sentiments establishes a false equivalence between the many types of speech that offend members of Indian society; the expressions »hurt sentiments« and »free speech« conceal what in fact determines the limitation of speech in modern India. Social and political dominance, and not an abstract right to have one's religion, caste, or other ascriptive status protected from insult, together impose violent »peace« on India's most vulnerable citizens. »Rupa Viswanath: Economics of Offense. Hatred, Speech, and Violence in India, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84/2 (2016), p. 360.

<sup>44</sup> Pennington: *The Unseen Hand* (see note 8), p. 331.

<sup>45</sup> <https://hinduexistence.org/2014/02/12/success-penguin-to-destroy-copies-of-wendy-donigers-hackneyed-the-hindus-an-alternative-history/> (accessed on June 8, 2016). It declared: »We have to procure and establish our traditional Hindu land in India at any cost and have to ensure dignity and rights of Hindus in every corner in this World. Yes, We have to have Hindusthan in India in its true sense. And do not tolerate persecution upon Hindus in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Fiji, Muslim majority part in India including J&K, Afghanistan, Various Muslim Countries or anywhere in this World.«

<sup>46</sup> Partha Mitter: *Much Maligned Monsters. History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Oxford 1977.

<sup>47</sup> A.C. Burnell: *The Voyage of J.H. van Linschoten*, London 1885, p. 289, quoted by Partha Mitter: *Much Maligned*

*Monsters* (see note 46), p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> Wendy Doniger: *From Karma to Karma*, in *Social Research. An International Quarterly*, 78/1 (2011), pp. 49-74, here p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. In the Protestant moral framework, it was deemed wrong to worship through engagement with any outer reality; real contact with the divine was perceived as an inner, unmediated direct link to God through prayer. Birgit Meyer: *How Pictures Matter. Religious Objects and the Imagination in Ghana*, in Øivind Fuglerud / Leon Wainwright (eds.): *Material Mediations* (see note 10), pp. 160-182.

<sup>50</sup> Wendy Doniger: *From Karma to Karma* (see note 48), p. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Dev Pathak argued, however, that the idea of a varied, diverse Hindu Dharma including various sects and folk ideas can also be idealized. This glorification of folk Hinduism as a dialogical, flexible field of religious ideas and practices is problematic. The problem is the bifurcation, the opposition of »good« (folk) religion to »bad« (canonical, priestly) religion or vice versa. Ongoing intolerance is partly based on oppositional thinking; instead, it should be acknowledged that there is always a negotiation between the priests and the folk worshippers. Priests do not always follow the canon; ritual-canonical performances have space for folk renditions. The opposition of Great Tradition versus little traditions does not reflect reality. It may be used as a heuristic device, but cannot fully explain reality. In reality, there are always influences. The whole intolerance is sustained by the bifurcation.

<sup>52</sup> Amartya Sen: *The Argumentative Indian*, London 2005, pp. 295-96.

<sup>53</sup> Sen, *ibid.*, pp. 297-300, argued that some (especially West-



ern) journalists reporting on Hindu-Muslim clashes have claimed that Indian secularism is essentially non-existent. Second, some intellectuals in the West and in India have equated »secularism« with »modernism«, arguing that ideologies of progress and modernity have created an intolerant society that has discouraged traditional forms of peaceful coexistence. Third, certain Hindu groups have argued that the Indian constitution has established a system of pseudo-secularism that favors Muslims, giving them certain rights and privileges. A fourth criticism is based on the idea that while there may be a diversity of religious groups in India, Hinduism must be accepted as a force of political unity. The fifth critical argument is that throughout history, Muslims have failed to identify with India and, whenever possible, have destroyed Hindu cultural heritage. The last line of criticism is based on the view that India is culturally a Hindu country, which means that Hindu religious traditions should have special status, and that blasphemy laws should most of all protect Hindu communities.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 297-300.

<sup>55</sup> These were mainly laws addressing familial matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, maintenance, and adoption.

<sup>56</sup> Leela Fernandes: *India's New Middle Class. Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*, Minneapolis 2006, p. 179.

<sup>57</sup> At this time, »the urban middle classes [...] began to turn to the BJP as a party that could represent a strong middle-class oriented nationalist party – one that could provide an alternative to a Congress party that the middle classes viewed as corrupt and captured by subordinate groups.« Fernandes: *India's New Middle Class* (see note 56), p. 178. See also Ashutosh Varshney: *Contested Meanings: Indian*

*National Unity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety*, in *Daedalus* 122 (1993) and Ashutosh Varshney: *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven 2002. A court ruling in the Shah Bano case sparked a public debate about the nature of democratic politics, and the BJP accused the ruling Congress party of »pander[ing] to conservative Muslim leaders;« see Fernandes: *India's New Middle Class* (see note 56), p. 178.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>59</sup> The publishing company Aleph decided to withdraw the book. Anmol Vellani, the founder and former executive director of the India Foundation for the Arts, commented, »When a big publisher like Penguin withdraws, the smaller ones feel they have no chance at all. Also, the problem is the law and the way in which the lower courts interpret it. Publishers are not even willing to try it in a court of law because the lower courts tend to interpret malicious intent« very loosely. It needs to be reframed so that such a wide interpretation isn't possible.« Anjali Muthanna: *Is Wendy Doniger being targeted by Indian publishing houses?* Mar 6, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/features/Is-Wendy-Doniger-being-targetted-by-Indian-publishing-houses/articleshow/31476544.cms> (accessed on June, 2 2016).

<sup>60</sup> (my emphasis, M.S.) <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/wendy-doniger-is-now-under-attack-for-on-hinduism/20140301.htm> (accessed on June, 2 2016).

<sup>61</sup> He was a Cambridge-trained historian and politician who had become a member of the Supreme Council in colonial India in 1834. The idea was that the English language would replace Persian and Sanskrit. Various spokesmen of Hindutva organizations, such as the leader of the RSS, H.V. Sheshadri, protested against the »white man's burden,« the ongoing influence of a colonial thinking on the

self-perception of Indian citizens. Macaulay also drafted the Indian Penal Code that was adopted in all the British colonies and is still used in India today.

<sup>62</sup> They have called for a major change in the Indian Constitution, instigating a Uniform Civil Code that will put an end to special provisions for specific religious groups and reconstruct India as a Hindu nation. During the election campaigns, the BJP party leader Narendra Modi its manifesto to draft the code, arguing that it would end gender inequality. In an open letter to the *Guardian* (April 10, 2014), various UK- and US-based writers, artists, and intellectuals, including Anish Kapoor, Salman Rushdie, and Homi K Bhabha, questioned Modi's »moral character and political ethics« and his support for Muslim women. They argued that his failure to take responsibility for anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002, which »led to the deaths of more than 2,000 men, women and children,« was »incompatible with India's secular constitution, which, in advance of many constitutions across the world, is founded on pluralist principles and seeks fair and full representation for minorities. Were he to be elected prime minister, it would bode ill for India's future as a country that cherishes the ideals of inclusion and protection for all its peoples and communities.« Since the election victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, the introduction of a Uniform Civil Code has been high on the political agenda. For a fascinating analysis of Modi's campaign strategies and links to Hindutva ideology, see Lance Price: *The Modi Effect. Inside Narendra Modi's Campaign to Transform India*, London 2015, especially pp. 28-31.

<sup>63</sup> »In a country where democracy and secularism are still nascent in the minds of its unwashed millions and pale before faith, what the pillars of democracy – legislature, executive and judiciary – the intelligentsia as class, and the media at large should do is to wean people away from peripheral and superficial aspects of faith, and faith-based politics

through systematic inculcation of and pragmatic approach to diversity and development.« P. Radhakrishnan: *Crossing the Sethu Rubicon*, in *The New Indian Express*, 2007, p. 1, cited in Prasant Kumar Trivedi (ed.): *The Globalization Turbulence. Emerging Tensions in Indian Society*, New Delhi 2011, p. 185.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> »Hindu nationalists cultivate the art of being outraged when elements of their religion are affected. They promptly denounce »attacks« against sacred symbols of Hinduism: any disrespect can be portrayed as blasphemy and lay itself open to popular mobilizations – which may translate into votes.« Christophe Jaffrelot: *Hindu Nationalism and the (Not So Easy) Art of Being Outraged. The Ram Setu Controversy*, in *Samaj. South Asia Multidisciplinary Journal* 2 (2008), <https://samaj.revues.org/1372> (accessed on June 13, 2016). See also Christophe Jaffrelot: *Religion, Caste and Politics in India*, Chennai 2010.

<sup>66</sup> In 2010, the Allahabad High Court ruled that the disputed site should be divided into three parts, controlled by two Hindu groups and one Muslim group. See also Peter van der Veer: *Religious Nationalism Hindus and Muslims in India*, Chicago 1997.

<sup>67</sup> Radhakrishnan has strongly criticized such activities, arguing that religious concerns should make way for the need to economically develop. »We cannot afford anymore to live in the past and the present simultaneously, and if there are roadblocks on our paths to development which are not of vital concern to the nation, we ought to remove them and keep going. It is from this perspective that the Rama-Sethu row should be understood. The issue is not one of faith but of development. Those who genuinely believe Rama as real, as divine, as an avatar, and who should continue to be revered and worshipped, already have

a surfeit of sites and structures in different parts of the country.« Radhakrishnan: Globalization, Faith and Development Politics (see note 63), p. 186.

<sup>68</sup> [http://www.rationalistinternational.net/article/2007/20070518/en\\_4.html](http://www.rationalistinternational.net/article/2007/20070518/en_4.html) (accessed on July 10, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Shubhajit Roy: MSU Faculty sends lesson to V-C on art: your reading »obscene, illiterate,« in *The Indian Express*, May 30, 2007, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/msu-faculty-sends-lesson-to-vc-on-art-your-reading--obscene-illiterate-/32351/> (accessed on Feb. 2, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Gollapudi Srinivasa Rao: My aim is to show purity, reality in human beings, in *The Hindu*, May 24, 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Roy: MSU Faculty sends (see note 69).

<sup>73</sup> Maruška Svašek: *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, London 2007. Maruška Svašek: *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects*, Oxford and New York 2012.

<sup>74</sup> <https://hinduexistence.org/2014/02/12/success-penguin-to-destroy-copies-of-wendy-donigers-hackneyed-the-hindu-an-alternative-history/> (accessed on June 8, 2016).

<sup>75</sup> The weekly claims to have widespread national and international readership, including »thinkers, writers, opinion-makers, legislators, members of both the Houses of Parliament, editors of dailies and other periodicals,« as well as readers in »UK, USA, Canada, and 54 other countries of the world,« <http://www.organiser.org/static/about.aspx> (accessed on Feb. 10, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> This ideology was also expressed by the inclusion of a quote from Gowalkar, an influential activist, who once said, »For clear, straightforward, impartial views on subjects of national and international importance and for imbibing unadulterated patriotism, it is useful to read organiser. It will fulfill the expectations for correct guidance in all current affairs.« Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> »Repeated attempts to muffle its voice and the motivated opposition to it by some powers did not succeed.« Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.rediff.com/news/slide-show/slide-show-1-when-westerners-make-fun-of-our-gods-theyre-instigating-trouble/20140217.htm> (accessed on Dec. 20, 2015).

<sup>81</sup> He complained that in the US, hardly any practicing Hindus were invited to academic conferences on Hinduism. Most speakers were non-Hindus who had learned Sanskrit and presented their own interpretations of Hindu practices and belief. In his view, »Many of the Hindu leaders in this country (America) maybe were too arrogant, too cocky, or too embarrassed or too scared to talk about it. They did not think it was important to take any action.«

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.rediff.com> (see note 80).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> He claimed, »So many other groups started getting immersed and started taking up my cause and they are the ones who started litigating on Doniger and her book and so on in India.« He noted, »It was entirely non-Hindus who felt that they have understood the text, learnt Sanskrit and they were able to interpret it. So, I felt that this is a huge untold story. I started writing articles. These articles created a huge stir. And, this is the situation with these



people. We compiled these arguments in a book called *Invading the Sacred* that came out in 2007, and since then I have come out with three more books that are not on Wendy but other issues related to Indian civilisation and Indian philosophy and thought and so on. I personally moved on beyond Wendy Doniger. But I have created a huge awareness and awakening among the Diaspora and among people in India. So many other groups started getting immersed and started taking up my cause and they are the ones who started litigating on Doniger and her book and so on in India.« Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> The book also incorporated quotes from scholars of Hinduism from across the globe, for example citing the cultural historian and Indologist Hans Bakker who had objected to »[f]ast-food-like publications designed to attract attention, readership and sales« that are »devoid of meticulous scholarship or authenticity«. Hans T. Bakker: *The Skanda Purana*, Volume 1, Groningen, 1998, quoted by Pandita Indrani Rampersad: *Exposing Academic Hinduphobia*, in Krishnan Ramaswamy / Antonio de Nicolas / Aditi Banerjee (eds.): *Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America*, 2007, p. 71.

<sup>86</sup> See <http://rajivmalhotra.com/books/invading-sacred/> (accessed on Feb. 6, 2017).

<sup>87</sup> He added, »This has not happened before; it will happen for the first time. Generations of Indian intellectuals have accepted these descriptions as more or less true. The future generations will not be so accommodating though: they will test these answers for their truth. I say this with confidence because I find that more and more people in India are gravitating towards this kind of research. These are not of mere academic interest to such people, whose numbers steadily increase. Many of them realize that Western explanations of their religions and culture trivialize their lived experiences; by distorting, such explanations transform these,

and this denies Indians access to their own experiences. It can thus be said to rob them of their inner lives. But that is not all. More than most, they realize that answers to these and allied questions about the nature of Indian culture have the potential to ignite an intellectual revolution on a world scale.« S. N. Balagangadhara: foreword, in Krishnan Ramaswamy / Antonio de Nicolas / Aditi Banerjee (eds.): *Invading the Sacred* (see note 85), p. vii.

<sup>88</sup> He wrote, »[T]he prevailing knowledge of India among the English-educated elite was generated primarily when India was colonized. Subsequent to the Indian independence, India suffered from poverty and backwardness. In tomorrow's world, the Indian intellectuals will be able to speak back with a newly found confidence and they will challenge European and American descriptions of India. That is, for the first time, they will test the Western knowledge of India and not just accept it as God's own truth.« He also argued that, while in the pre-modern period, most communication about specific religious traditions was »from insider to insider,« and during the onset of the modern era, the discussions were among outsiders, this situation changed with Western domination in the colonial period, when »the West began to control the intellectual discourse in its colonies« and the outsider perspectives began to influence the insiders' perspective on their own religions. In the post-colonial world, the flow of communication had now moved »from outsider to insider, to insider to outsider.« Arvind Sharma: Preface, in Krishnan Ramaswamy / Antonio de Nicolas / Aditi Banerjee (eds.): *Invading the Sacred. An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America*, New Dehli 2007, xiii.

<sup>89</sup> See also Rambachan Anantanand: *Academy and Community: Overcoming Suspicion and Building Trust*, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 84/2 (2016), pp. 367-372, who, in the Roundtable on Outrage, Scholarship, and the Law in India argued, »The majority of those who

research, teach, and speak about the tradition in the western academy are not Hindus. Hindus are appreciative of interest in their tradition, but they are concerned about the consequences of non-Hindu academic scholarship for the tradition. Scholarly work in the academy, despite what some may claim, is never merely descriptive; the predominant kinds of research that are done and the methodologies employed also define a tradition. Therefore, although I understand and appreciate the well-known distinction between teaching religion and teaching about religion, I am not sure that the line of separation is as sharp as some in the academy might represent it to be.« Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>90</sup> Doniger: *A Response* (see note 24), p. 366.

# Blood, Sweat and Tears. The Martyred Body in Chinese Performance Art

Tania Becker

When we speak of offending images in the context of contemporary Chinese art, some of us may remember articles that were published in 2001, voices of outrage in reaction to Zhu Yu's performance *Eating People*:

## Is it art when a man eats a dead baby?

LONDON — My God, what kind of society do we live in? A Chinese man eats a dead baby on TV and actually claims it's art! The announcement alone unleashed one of Great Britain's hottest debates on the freedom of the media, the press, and art: the British TV Channel 4 wanted to broadcast the documentary *Beijing Swings*, which includes photographs of Chinese artist Zhu Yu apparently eating a dead baby. According to Zhu, the corpse is from a miscarriage. In one of the photographs, he's washing the body in a sink. Another photo shows him biting into a dismembered body part. Zhu has said that the pictures were taken during a performance titled »Eating Humans« in his house in Beijing. Yesterday, Zhu Yu claimed that as an artist, it's his job to initiate debates over morality and art. His work involves exploring whether boundaries still exist. It does not, however, seem to bother anyone when this »artist« transgresses these boundaries. Not even the guardians of the law — because despite the fact that artists using human body parts for their art can be sentenced to ten years in prison, nothing happened [...].<sup>1</sup>



After the images made the rounds in the Internet, the shocking act of consuming a fetus met with reactions worldwide. A BBC documentary on the artist Zhu Yu from 2003 also provoked a powerful reaction and unleashed a series of stormy debates. To be sure, violating the taboo against cannibalism, as was documented in the aesthetically reduced images of the performance *Eating People*, is deeply disturbing effect because its brutality exceeds all we have experienced in art. Other performances and installations by Chinese artists that were realized during this time at the turn of the millennium also feature bodily excesses and a shocking, taboo-violating approach to corporeality. Subtle allusions are seldom used; instead, Chinese performance artists often use animal cadavers or human corpses as well as their own bodies to probe habits, moral attitudes, and the boundaries of the socially acceptable. These performances are often understood as reflections of the country's economic and socio-political changes. Yet, despite their clear, radical, and uncompromising criticism of political circumstances and the shocking social provocations, the most successful of these works remain ambivalent and resist a one-dimensional, glib interpretation.

This paper introduces two of the leading and most radical Chinese performance artists, Zhu Yu 朱昱 (born in 1970) and Yang Zhichao 杨志超 (born in 1963), together with their artistic activities in the context of the political situation and social transformation in China. To better understand these artists' work, the following offers a brief overview of the most important historical events generally regarded as seminal in the development of contemporary Chinese art.

## Past History

Over the past three-and-a-half decades, contemporary Chinese art has accompanied a number of important political-historical events, reflected upon them, and arrived at its own conclusions. Beginning in 1979, these political occurrences have taken place with an almost regular rhythm of decade-long intervals.

### 1979

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, and more pronouncedly immediately after Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904 – 1997) opened up the country, the situation of the Chinese art scene changed. In the late 1970s, some artists were granted permission to travel to Europe and the USA for study purposes. At the same time, exhibitions, art publications, and art magazines featuring contemporary »Western« art and art theory were tolerated for the first time. Two artists' associations were formed that would be influential in the subsequent development of contemporary Chinese art: Stars (*Xingxing huahui* 星星画会) and Scar Painting (*Shanghen huibua* 伤痕绘画). While the first group borrowed from the traditions of European Classical Modernism, was influenced by Post-Impressionist and Abstract Expressionist techniques, and consequently produced experimental works in a modernist style, the artists of *Scar Painting* oriented themselves toward more well-known forms of realism and Socialist Realism. They introduced an entirely new set of themes that embodied a critical examination of the Cultural Revolution.

In their political leanings, both groups existed in the context of the »Beijing Spring« of the late 1970s. This citizens' movement became known through one of its main figures, Wei Jingsheng 魏京生 (born in 1950), who was sen-

tenced to 15 years in prison and labor camp as a result of his call for democracy at the »Xidan Wall of Democracy« (*Xidan minzhu qiang* 西单民主墙). The »Wall of Democracy« provided an opportunity for artists and political activists to articulate their demands for freedom of expression and artistic freedom.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, numerous debates over art's role and function took place in art magazines, where makers of culture expressed their longing for artistic freedom. Later, however, these efforts would prove detrimental to their further activities. Officials soon prohibited the artists' protests at the »Wall of Democracy.« Nonetheless, these protests, in the form of exhibitions organized ad hoc, can be considered the first cautious beginnings of what would later develop into a new Chinese art.<sup>3</sup>

In the first half of the 1980s, state repressions intensified. During the »Campaign Against Spiritual Pollution« (*Qingchu jingshen wuran* 清除精神污染, 1983 – 84), contemporary art was defamed as »bourgeois,« several exhibitions shut down, and the editorial offices of renowned art magazines, such as *Meishu* 美术 (*Fine Arts*), were re-staffed with cadres true to party principles. Planned exhibitions were cancelled and prohibited, and consequently many artists left the country.<sup>4</sup>

## 1989

Through the activities of the artists' group Stars, experimental forms that had not yet been officially accepted in the art academies became more or less recognized. As a result, a »new wave« of artistic expression began to establish itself, especially among art students and graduates, which culminated in a network of new movements, groups, exhibitions, and individual efforts and became known as the 85 New Wave Movement (*85 xinchao yundong* 85 新潮运动).



This consisted of approximately 80 groups from various regions across China whose members were young artists who came together between 1984 and 1986.<sup>5</sup> This artists' movement had no particular program; nor did it have a coherent artistic direction. It invoked primarily Dadaism, and Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968) in particular, as well as American Pop Art of the 1960s and contemporary action art.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the artists from the late 1970s, the artists of the 85 *New Wave Movement* were better informed about current developments in Western art and saw themselves as reformers of Chinese art.

The group succeeded in organizing several important exhibitions, including a controversial show in 1989 known by the name *China / Avant-Garde*.<sup>7</sup> Following numerous discussions and bitter battles, it opened in the halls of the state-run National Art Museum in Beijing. Following an incident, however, it had to be temporarily closed after only a few hours.<sup>8</sup> With their commitment, the vehemence of their artistic expression, and their geographical proximity, the 85 New Wave Movement group also made an active contribution to the protests at Tiananmen Square in June 1989, which took place only a few months after the exhibition opened. It was no accident that the most important events in Chinese avant-garde art and the democracy movement at Tiananmen Square in Beijing coincided in time and space. Both had been made possible by an influx of information from abroad, and both were driven by a desire to loosen calcified political structures and a common zeal to put an end to authoritarianism and conformism in society and to establish new forms of behavior.<sup>9</sup>

In the years following the suppression of the protest movement at Tiananmen Square, the regime redoubled its efforts to prohibit all artistic activities that diverged from traditional panel painting, sculpture, and calligraphy – in

other words installations and video, action, and multimedia art. Because of its immediacy and emotional charge, the regime regarded performance, in particular, as suspicious and socially dangerous. When artists nonetheless engaged in this type of artistic expression, their actions had to be carried out quickly and in secret. The consequences of the official restrictions were a marginalization of their work and a constant threat and danger of incarceration. Throughout these years, many withdrew into private life or emigrated abroad. Nearly no exhibitions took place in public space.<sup>10</sup>

Hou Hanru 侯瀚如 (born in 1963), one of the organizers of the exhibition *China / Avant-Garde*, commented on the events of the post-1989 era:

Chinese society of the 1990s is marked by an interesting contradiction: despite the far-reaching economic liberalization, official control in the area of ideology was never loosened. The possibilities for experimental artists to express themselves within institutions hardly improved.<sup>11</sup>

Another art genre that arose in the early 1990s is known as »Political Pop« (Zhengzhi bopu 政治波谱). Coined in 1992, this term stood for the art movement that was oriented toward the colors and forms of American Pop Art of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> In thematic terms, Chinese Political Pop brought together elements of Socialist Realism and the lightness of motifs from Western Pop Art; at the same time, however, it criticized the similarities between the ideological power of advertising and that of political propaganda, particularly that of the Cultural Revolution. The artists of Political Pop distorted their motifs using irony, cynicism, parody, and playfulness, and they suggestively

conveyed the feeling of the chaotic political and economic conditions in Chinese society that followed the repression of the protest movement at Tiananmen Square. At first, the works of this art movement were hindered by officials, but since the 1993 exhibitions *China Avantgarde* in Berlin and *Passaggio da Oriente* in Venice, the first major exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art in Europe, as well as *Mao Goes Pop* in Sydney, the works of Political Pop also found gradual acceptance in China. Demand grew, and they now command high prices on both the national and the international art markets.<sup>13</sup>

### An Uncooperative Approach

#### 2000

A clear shift from previous exhibition practice occurred with *Fuck off* or *An Uncooperative Approach* (*Bu bezuo de fangshi* 不合作的方式). As part of the Third Shanghai Biennale in 2000, this exhibition, curated by Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (born in 1957) and Feng Boyi 馮博一 (born in 1960), featured works by a total of 47 artists. Although *An Uncooperative Approach* was one of the many satellite exhibitions of the Shanghai Biennale, it received an enormous amount of publicity, not least due to its provocative agenda, expressed in a series of extremely controversial and, for the time, shocking works of art, performances, and installations and turned ostentatiously against the commercialization of art and the authoritarian discourse of the system.<sup>14</sup> I do not care to speculate on the origins of this era of shock or the violence in the respective works, which were often directed at the artist's own body. I can, however, see certain ref-



erences to recent Chinese history and to a kind of compensatory physical pain directed against the restrictions imposed by the ever-present political and thematic domination. Evidently, the ambivalence between a rapidly growing Chinese art industry and an authoritarian domination exerted by a cultural bureaucracy loyal to the Party leads to periodic phases of freedom in expression, followed by phases of repression. In an interview, Ai Weiwei explained the concept behind *An Uncooperative Approach*:

We were very clear about what we wanted to say towards Chinese institutions as well as Western curators and institutions and dealers; their functions are very similar in one way or another. It's all about the deal, about labor, about how to trademark different interests. We had to say something as individual artists to the outside world, and what we said was »fuck off.«<sup>15</sup>

Although the exhibition was shut down after only a few days due to several disturbing performance photos of the artists Zhu Yu and Yang Zhichao,<sup>16</sup> it nonetheless left an indelible mark in the history of contemporary Chinese art. From this point on, inspired in its expressive forms by Western art movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (such as performance, conceptual art, happening, video, and multimedia installation), the progressive »unofficial«<sup>17</sup> Chinese art scene turned away from both its own traditional antecedents and the classical Western modernist paragons. Instead, artists explored new, experimental, individual forms and themes, always in relation to the current political-social reality in the country. Deconstruction, parody, and criticism of the

current social and political problems counted among the challenges of these independent artistic positions that had freed themselves from the old patterns, as curators Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi assert in the foreword to the exhibition:

*Fuck off* emphasizes the independent and critical stance that is basic to the existence of art. Within a state of countless contradictions and conflicts, it maintains its status of independence, freedom, and plurality. It tries to provoke an artist's responsibility and self-discipline, searches for a way in which art lives as »wildlife,« and raises questions about some issues of contemporary Chinese art.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of the works' vehemence, dynamics, and direct nature, the exhibition led the way to lasting change. It helped bring about an increase in exhibition activity in China, after which contemporary art soon began attracting greater public attention. The official reactions to these testimonies to an increasing intellectual independence in individual artistic approaches, which clearly positioned themselves against marketing and political dominion over the field of art, ranged from controlled tolerance to open repression — attesting to the importance of this cultural sector for assisting state organs of control in interpreting social consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

### **Blood, Sweat and Tears: Chinese Performance**

Yang Zhichao's and Zhu Yu's performances, which were put on exclusively for the *Fuck off* exhibition, were the main cause of the show's premature closure.

After the two artists' performative acts were presented and then documented and exhibited in the form of two photo series, the arrangements, which aimed to shock, cause pain, and violate taboos, gave rise to numerous polemics and protests, also in international art criticism.<sup>20</sup> Before I discuss these works more closely, I'd like to examine the special nature of performance as a form of art situated between ritual, spectacle, and show.

## Performance

A performance is an artistic event, an open process that occurs in a place and time that belongs to it alone, and because it can never be repeated in exactly the same way, both performer and viewers experience it exclusively at the moment it takes place. In most cases, performance requires the physical presence of the artist, who functions as a medium by carrying out a calculated activity in a direct manner. Thus, the artist goes beyond mere physical presence and, in the moment of occurrence, on a physical level, forges an intense relationship with his or her viewers. Due to its inherently contradictory nature, the experience that ensues between artist and audience becomes the most important component of a performance, which in certain cases can resemble a social experiment in whose course the conscious states of everyone present undergo change.<sup>21</sup> While happenings involve viewers directly in the event by provoking a variety of reactions, which become a component of the artistic statement, a performance is an act carried out without the direct involvement of the audience. The fundamental elements of both of these forms of expression, happening and



performance, are the merging of time and space and the uniqueness and immediacy of the acts performed, which draw on the body and language of the artist.<sup>22</sup> The beginnings of Chinese performance art (xingwei yishu 行为艺术) date back to 1985 and the early actions of Chinese artists, for example the group Xiamen Dada 厦门达达 and Zhang Huans 张洹 (born in 1965). Following the suppression of the protest movement on Tiananmen Square, many artists withdrew and created experimental works and carried out art actions that met with recognition in small groups outside the academies.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in an authoritarian post-1989 environment, performance developed into a critical new voice of the younger generation that possessed social and political potential. Unfit for the academies and rejected by official cultural policies, these artists withdrew from the wider public eye to a private context and carried out their actions and concepts for small groups of viewers and often without any audience at all.<sup>24</sup> A short time later, that is to say in the 1990s, some Chinese performers became known abroad through their own travels and actions and thus became a recognized part of a small international art scene involved in avant-garde performance art.<sup>25</sup> Western reactions to later Chinese performance actions vacillated between disgust and irritation; this helped Zhu Yu in particular, whose performance *Eating People* attained a degree of notoriety, despite the fact that performance art from China still interested a relatively small number of people and experts at the time, around 2000.

A wider public for performance did not yet exist. When Western interest in the beginnings of contemporary Chinese art grew some years later, it was particularly the actions from around 2000 that met with great interest; by this time, however, this intense period of Chinese performance art had already come to an end. Performance art in China is not an imported product or an imitation

of Western art.<sup>26</sup> Closely tied to the current realities in the country, Chinese performance developed its own independent vocabulary: in its criticism of current social and political conditions, it seeks an open confrontation with traditions, norms, history, and human and civil rights. Subtle allusions are rare; instead, Chinese performance artists often use shock effects, for instance the aforementioned artist Xiao Lu, who fired two shots into her own installation with a revolver during the opening of the 1989 exhibition *Cbina / Avant-Garde* in Beijing.<sup>27</sup> Radical and uncompromising in their actions, Chinese artists often stage animal cadavers or human corpses and their own bodies to explore the boundaries of habit, morality, and the socially acceptable.<sup>28</sup> Yet, despite their cogent criticism of political conditions and grievous social provocations, the most successful works remain ambivalent and resist any glib, one-dimensional interpretation.

Yang Zhichao and Zhu Yu are probably the two most prominent figures in this tendency in Chinese performance art. Both artists work with and through their bodies and deliberately and actively subject themselves to considerable emotional and physical pain, whereby their controversial actions are exclusively directed at a concrete and intensified corporeality.

### Yang Zhichao

»At 10:00 A.M. on November 5, 2000, on the second floor of No. 1133 Suzhou Road in Shanghai where ›Fuck off‹ was on show, I made an operation platform 200 × 80 × 78 cm in size, on which a surgeon used a scalpel to make an incision in my left scapula. Without any anesthesia, the scalpel made two cuts one centimeter deep and one centimeter wide. Afterwards, grass picked at the

banks of the Suzhou River was planted into the two cuts.«<sup>29</sup> Yang Zhichao's short, precise description of his performance *Planting Grass*, *Zhong cao* 种草, sounds like a scientific report of a surgical procedure; it allows no space for emotional or personal interpretation (Fig. 1).



[ FIG. 1 ]  
Yang Zhichao: *Planting Grass* (performance documentation),  
Nov. 5, 2000, Suzhou Road, Shanghai

Nonetheless, this act of public injury to the artist's own body offers enough potential for a reading that goes beyond the disintegration of the physical and finds its true meaning in a political demonstration. By artificially connecting two life forms — human and plant — Yang investigates how different species behave toward one another in such a changed state. In this altered context, the



human body and the blades of grass take on a new referentiality, just as in the socio-political realm the penetration of new elements into existing political structures inevitably transforms the latter. In employing this drastic metaphoric structure, Yang makes a case for changing his country's political system, which has the potential to develop in a positive direction through a newly gained freshness and vitality, symbolized here by grass. In this respect, Yang's concept of the body goes beyond biology into the realm of the political. By interpreting the body as an extension of society and the state, the artist addresses numerous questions from the border zone between biology and politics: what is the body? Whom does it belong to? To what extent is it possible to retain control over what happens to one's body? Taken to its provocative conclusions, the performer poses the question of our understanding of human freedom beyond a view of the world that is reduced to scientific categories.<sup>30</sup> In this way, Yang's performance carries on a dialogue about the body and his country, and beyond this, about China's position in the world.

The blades of grass were inserted into the performer's body through precise surgical incisions, which were carried out professionally, but not in sterile conditions. The artist accepted the risk that he might fall prey to a dangerous infection; he regarded it as part of the project. Body and grass entered into a symbiosis and formed an astonishing new biotope that gave rise to a palpable experience of earth, grass roots, and blades of grass on and beneath the skin. The growth of the grass and the time this requires transform the momentary into duration and the performance itself into a work in progress. The deviance of the bodily state (body modification) that the action is based on resides in a bio-physical dialogue between the body and grass taken from a nearby river bank.<sup>31</sup>

In this sense, the artist takes a position against the increasing change in the natural environment and the expulsion of natural biotopes, as well as the negative effects of rapid economic growth: the performance highlights the fragility of human existence in an altered living environment.

While the artist does not express it in his behavior, but nonetheless feels it, the obvious presence of pain is an essential, if not the most essential part of the performance. In general, in the various ways they are mentally dealt with, experiences of pain often lead to questions of meaning that must, however, be understood as culturally determined in a very specific way.<sup>32</sup> Yang's performance goes against this cultural anthropological interpretation, however, because his additional message consists in attaining a sensory knowledge that is not learned through theory, but can only be understood through direct existential experience, which in this case is the experience of pain. Yang Zhichao is not merely interested in an unequivocal demonstration, but rather in the actual, unavoidable phenomenon of bodily pain, which goes beyond specific cultural boundaries:

Only the personal experience of pain lets me achieve insights which cannot be reached on the level of abstraction. Pain is a way to reach another feeling of life. By removing the taboo from the theme »pain« and by presenting pain to the public, I hope for an international dialogue. The basic experience of mental and physical anguish knows no national borders.<sup>33</sup>

## **Zhu Yu**

One month before the exhibition opening in Shanghai, a series of photographs was taken in the home of the artist Zhu Yu that documented his action *Eating*

*People* (Shi ren, 食人). The invitation to take part in the exhibition provided the occasion for the artist's action. Because the curator Ai Weiwei surmised that Zhu Yu's work would provide the authorities with one of their most convincing reasons to shut down the exhibition ahead of time, the photographs were not shown openly, but were put in a black box. It was only after the images were introduced to the public via the catalogue that the provocative nature of the action gained instant notoriety. Within a very short time, the visual documentation made the rounds in the Internet and attracted a wave of global attention.<sup>34</sup>

The short title already hints at the performance's scope and demonstrates the artistic act's transgressive implication: Zhu Yu is photographed cooking a human fetus, serving it on a plate, and finally consuming it (Fig. 2). Cannibalism is recorded in cool, reduced images entirely without commentary. For the photograph's viewers, the visual impact of this distanced visual documentation, paired with the intense, taboo-violating, brutal cannibalistic act performed in real life immediately evokes feelings of disgust, revulsion, and an unwillingness to understand. At the same time, other feelings are also evoked, such as fascination and curiosity. Through a combination of two contradictory impressions, confronted by a documented violation of a basic taboo and oscillating between aversion and attraction, the viewer winds up in a paradoxical position.

In this performative act of infantiphagia, the artist manipulates the body of another person robbed of free will and all human interaction. The situation created is one of hopelessness and arbitrariness. The unborn child becomes a victim of events and the recipient of empathy. Zhu Yu's performance is also a self-experiment; not only does he exploit the fetus manipulatively, he manipulates and explores his own body on a psychosomatic level, as well.





[ FIG. 2 ]  
Zhu Yu: Eating  
People (performance  
documentation), Sept.  
2000, Shanghai

According to his own statements, he had to vomit twice while carrying out the performance, and upon its completion, he was so emotionally depleted by the act that he was unable to work in his studio for a long time.<sup>35</sup> Evidently, with this defensive response, his body reacted more powerfully to the violation of taboo than the artist himself had intended.<sup>36</sup>

In this disturbing and brutal violation of taboo, evident as such from all cultura and anthropological perspectives, the artist undoubtedly transgresses

ethical boundaries. His action, however, recalls the radicalism and brutality of the bio-political family planning policies enforced with unparalleled ruthlessness and severity in the People's Republic of China from 1979 on, as well as earlier epochs in China's history, which saw drastic periods of famine, cannibalism, and the consumption of babies' corpses.<sup>37</sup>

The transgression of ethical norms with the aim of questioning them; highlighting violence and fear; a clear criticism of the socio-political situation in the People's Republic of China: these are some of the possible ways to interpret Zhu Yu's performance. The artist cites additional aspects when he describes the motivating forces behind the action:

One question that always stymies us — that is, why cannot people eat people? Is there a commandment in man's religion in which it is written that we cannot eat people? In what country is there a law against eating people? It's simply morality. But, what is morality? Isn't morality simply something that man whimsically changes from time to time based on his/her own so-called needs of human being in the course of human progress? From this we might thus conclude: so long as it can be done in a way that does not commit a crime, eating people is not forbidden by any of man or society's laws or religions; I herewith announce my intention and my aim to eat people as a protest against mankind's moral idea that one cannot eat people.<sup>38</sup>

In his performance, Zhu Yu inquires into the foundations of morals, laws, and norms. If there is no law against cannibalism, does this mean that it's legal,

rather than a crime? In precisely this trenchantly inhumane act of cannibalism, he makes a plea for a humanity that should be intrinsic to legal norms and develop in tandem with ethical, cultural, and historical conditions. Thus, the naked ingesting of a fetus transforms into an epistemological study of existing social and normative structures. Zhu Yu's performance *Eating People*, in addition to its provocation of general notions of morality, is also an appeal to fundamentally question the existence or nonexistence of social taboos; against norms lacking in substance; and for a free and public discourse that can also be interpreted on a political level. A problem emerges here, that of a misguided biopolitics all too quick to serve pragmatic and specific interests without first securing the foundation of a universal humanity.

Yang Zhichao's and Zhu Yu's performative actions allow us to consider whether the increase in cruelty in Chinese art presentations has perhaps goaded itself on and resulted in radical outgrowths, culminating in the violation of the cannibalism taboo in Zhu Yu's work.<sup>39</sup> Even if actions such as these are extreme examples, when one considers the developments in contemporary Chinese art, the impression arises that dynamic exists that are both creative and destructive. And it's these heterogeneous artistic approaches that reflect the evident sensibilities of a society torn between the competing gravitational centers of a fast-moving socio-economic dynamic and a traditionally dogmatic, power-obsessed state apparatus: the revolutionary political force that nationalists and communists once unleashed continues to this day, accelerated by the economy and refuting yesterday's certainties on a daily basis.



- <sup>1</sup> Quote from the online issue of *Berliner Kurier*, January 4, 2003, <http://www.berliner-kurier.de/archiv-ist-das-noch-kunst-wenn-ein-mann-eine-baby-leiche-ist-8259702,4245234.html> (accessed on June 13, 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> The Stars also wrote critical commentaries on the »Wall of Democracy« and organized a spontaneous open-air exhibition on September 27, 1979 that was immediately prohibited. During a demonstration on October 1, 1979, slogans such as »demand political democracy, demand artistic freedom« were chanted. The protest met with unexpected consequences: the authorities granted them a ten-day exhibition in a hall belonging to one of Beijing's art associations at Beihai Park. The show drew 40,000 visitors; due to its great success, the artists were allowed to show 149 of their works the following year. This time, 80,000 visitors saw the exhibition. Thomas J. Berghuis: *Performance Art in China, Hong Kong 2006*, pp. 43–46; Richard Vine: *New China, New Art*, Munich, New York 2008, p. 13.
- <sup>3</sup> Maria Esposito: *Inside Out. Neue chinesische Kunst*, <http://www.wsws.org/de/2001/jun2001/chin-j01.shtml> (accessed on June 13, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. Among the artists who emigrated are Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (born in 1957) and Wang Keping 王克平 (born in 1949), as well as Huang Rui 黄锐 (born in 1952) of the Stars. Berghuis: *Performance Art in China* (see note 2), p. 47.
- <sup>5</sup> Wu Hung / Peggy Wang: 85 Art New Wave, in Hung/Wang (eds.): *Contemporary Chinese Art. Primary Documents*, New York and Durham 2010, pp. 51–52.
- <sup>6</sup> Vine: *New China, New Art* (see note 2), p. 14.
- <sup>7</sup> Officially, the name of the exhibition was *Exhibition of Modern Chinese Art* (Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan 中国现代艺术展).
- <sup>8</sup> The exhibition was cancelled due to the action of Xiao Lu 肖鲁, an action artist who fired two shots at her installation *Dialogue* (Duihua 对话), a collaboration with Tang Song 唐宋 that was classified as subversive. See Hang Jian / Cao Xiao'ou: *A Brief Account of China/Avant-Garde*, 1989; Hung / Wang (eds.): *Contemporary Chinese Art. Primary Documents* (see note 5), pp. 121–126; Uta Grosenick / Caspar H. Schübbe: *China Art Book*, Cologne 2007, p. 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Vine: *New China, New Art* (see note 2), p. 14.
- <sup>10</sup> Yilmaz Dzewior: Zhang Huan, Ostfildern-Ruit, London 2002, p. 8.
- <sup>11</sup> Hou Hanru: Die Leere der Großstadt anfüllen – urbane Explosion und künstlerische Intervention in chinesischen Städten, in Kai Vöckler (ed.): *Peking, Shanghai, Shenzhen. Städte des 21. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 189.
- <sup>12</sup> Berghuis: *Performance Art in China* (see note 2), p. 93, note 176.
- <sup>13</sup> Artists such as Yu Youhan 余友涵, Wang Guangyi 王广义, Li Shan 李山, Zhang Xiaogang 张晓刚, Yue Mingjun 岳敏君, Zhou Tichai 周铁海, and Fang Lijun 方力均 i.a. can be regarded as representatives of this direction; see *Political Pop: Zhengzhi popu 政治波谱*, in *Art Speak China*, Tan yishu 谈艺术, [http://www.artspeakchina.org/mediawiki/index.php/Political\\_Pop\\_政治波谱](http://www.artspeakchina.org/mediawiki/index.php/Political_Pop_政治波谱) (accessed on June 13, 2016). See Wu Hung / Peggy Wang: *Chronicle 1976–2006*, in Hung / Wang (eds.): *Contemporary Chinese Art. Primary Documents* (see note 5), p. 420; Episode 38/1993: *China Avantgarde! An exhibition, power, and the market*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, <http://www.hkw.de/de/hkw/gebauede/50/1993.php> (accessed on June 13, 2016).
- <sup>14</sup> Ai Weiwei / Feng Boyi: Preface to *Fuck off*, 2000, in Hung / Wang (eds.): *Contemporary Chinese Art. Primary Documents* (see note 5), pp. 354–355.

- <sup>15</sup> Chin-Chin Yap: *Conversations*. Interview with Ai Weiwei, in *Ai Weiwei / Charles Merewether* (eds.): *Ai Weiwei. Works*, Beijing 1993–2003, Hong Kong 2003, p. 51.
- <sup>16</sup> Berghuis, *Performance: Art in China* (see note 2), p. 152; Vine: *New China, New Art* (see note 2), pp. 104–105.
- <sup>17</sup> According to John Clark's analysis of conditions in the Chinese art scene at the beginning of the 21st century, the main difference between »official« and »unofficial« contemporary Chinese art does not lie in the difference between the avant-garde and established art, but rather in the varying acceptance of different forms of artistic expression within the political system. John Clark: *System and Style in the Practice of Chinese Contemporary Art. The Disappearing Exterior*, *Yishu 艺术*, in *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 1/2 (2002), pp. 13–33.
- <sup>18</sup> Ai / Boyi: Preface to *Fuck off* (see note 14), p. 355.
- <sup>19</sup> Berghuis: *Performance Art in China* (see note 2), pp. 151–152; Vine: *New China, New Art* (see note 2), p. 14.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- <sup>21</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt on the Main 2004, pp. 31–42.
- <sup>22</sup> Helge Meyer: *Schmerz als Bild. Leiden und Selbstverletzung in der Performance Art*, Bielefeld 2008, pp. 28–29.
- <sup>23</sup> Berghuis: *Performance Art in China* (see note 2), pp. 25–27.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181–183. One of the most consistent works of this kind that took place in a non-public space and without an audience was *Jiayuguan* 嘉峪关 (December 3, 1999–January 30, 2000) by Yang Zhichao. The artist had himself committed to a psychiatric hospital in the city of Jiayuguan, Gansu for one month, to live as a healthy person among the other patients. This long-term performance was partially filmed with a hidden camera by relatives who visited him on a regular basis and offers an extremely rare glimpse into the state of the psychiatric health of Chinese society. Meyer: *Schmerz als Bild* (see note 22), p. 259.
- <sup>25</sup> Kristine Stiles: Afterword: *Quicksilver and Revelations: Performance Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, in Linda Montano (ed.): *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, Berkeley 2000, p. 479.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 479.
- <sup>27</sup> Berghuis: *Performance Art in China* (see note 2), pp. 90–91.
- <sup>28</sup> Carlos Rojas: *Cannibalism and the Chinese Body Politic. Hermeneutics and Violence in Cross-Cultural Perception*, in *Postmodern Culture* 12/3 (2002) <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.502/12.3rojas.html> (accessed on June 13, 2016).
- <sup>29</sup> Yang Zhichao quoted by Meyer: *Schmerz als Bild* (see note 22), p. 256, footnote 20.
- <sup>30</sup> Meyer: *Schmerz als Bild* (see note 22), p. 258.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- <sup>32</sup> David B. Morris: *Geschichte des Schmerzes*, Frankfurt on the Main 1996, p. 43.
- <sup>33</sup> *Three Artists*, in *transgressivechineseart*, <http://transgressivechineseart.wordpress.com/tewlt4/> (accessed on June 13, 2016).
- <sup>34</sup> Meiling Cheng: *Violent Capital*. Zhu Yu on File, in *The Drama Review*, 49/3 (2005), pp. 58–77, here pp. 61–62.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> Meyer: *Schmerz als Bild* (see note 22), pp. 246–247.

<sup>37</sup> Excesses of this kind continued to take place, for instance during the Great Leap Forward, a campaign that ran from 1958 to 1961 during whose course one of the greatest famines in modern history took place. Caused by bad political decisions and grave natural catastrophes, the number of people who starved to death is estimated at 45 million. See Frank Dikötter: *Mao's Great Famine. The history of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958–62*, London 2011, pp. 320–323; Jasper Becker: *Hungry ghosts. Mao's secret famine*, New York 1998, pp. 211–213.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Rojas: »Cannibalism and the Chinese Body Politic« (see note 28).

<sup>39</sup> Meyer: *Schmerz als Bild* (see note 22), p. 249.



# Dirty Pictures. Vulgar Street Art in Lahore, Pakistan

Jürgen Wasim Frembgen & Asif Jehangir



[FIG. 1]  
Billboard advertising the  
Bollywood movie *Dirty  
Picture*, Metropole Cinema,  
Abbot Road, Lahore

### The dirty picture: spicy movies and offensive placards

The title of this essay on a series of vulgarly designed film placards from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is inspired by Milan Luthria's award-winning Bollywood movie *The Dirty Picture* (2011), an erotic biopic based on the tragic life of the South Indian actress Silk Smitha (Fig. 1). Dubbed as the sex symbol of South Indian cinema, she struggled for money and fame, but had to count the costs through unrequited love, loneliness, and failed ambitions – not unlike Marilyn Monroe. Smitha ultimately committed suicide in 1996 at the age of 35. In 2013, *Silk – Sakthi Hot Maga*, a Kannada version of *The Dirty Picture* with a similar plot, was released starring the Pakistani actress Veena Malik. Such »spicy,« »masala« style movies focusing on romantic love, steamy, erotic dance numbers, lewd songs, rape scenes, crime, and violence are regularly shown in the traditional single-screen cinemas Lahore, Pakistan's cultural metropolis, on McLeod Road and Abbott Road. Stills and posters from *The Dirty Picture* and other commercial Hindi films, as well as from Punjabi and Urdu B-movies locally produced in Lollywood, Lahore's film industry, served as templates for the freehand-drawn placards that appeared in public spaces over the last one-and-a-half decades. They show »dirty scenes« with lascivious women engaged in sex and enticing poses with plenty of bosom exposed.

Such colorful images, considered »vulgar« (fahhashi) and »dirty« (ganda) not only in Pakistan, but also in other parts of South Asia and the Middle East, are depicted mainly on large billboards mounted on the facades of cinemas.<sup>1</sup> From the 1930s, when the first cinema halls were built in Lahore, until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, these billboards were hand-painted by well-known masters.

Ali Khan gives an overview of the development of this art from the heyday of the Pakistani film industry until today.<sup>2</sup> These hand-painted billboards were gradually replaced by new digitally printed ones. In addition to these garish paintings and prints in huge format, large film posters and film stills in smaller format are commonly displayed in the anterooms and entrance halls of cinemas, which constitute an exclusively male environment. Frembgen saw the most obscene ones, advertising crudely produced films, at a small, old cinema called »Pakistan Talkies« situated in the middle of Lahore's red-light district in Sheikhpura Bazaar inside Taksali Gate. Film posters are also displayed on the rear side of horse carriages and motor rickshaws and in this way are exposed around the city. The freehand-drawn images, however, which are the focus of this article, were found pasted boundary walls and facades across the city, often in the vicinity of cinema halls around Lakshmi Chowk, but also on Circular Road, Lahore's most congested and polluted ring road, close to the Walled City. Like most street art, they were temporary and torn or pasted over once their immediate usefulness in publicizing the film was expended.

Most of these bicolored images in smaller format are rather skillfully drawn and, albeit crude in content, appear charming in their own right. Hardly ever signed, they are apparently the work of streets artists commissioned by film distributors. As part of the rich, popular visual culture in public space, the film posters compete with other placards and banners, such as portraits of politicians during election campaigns, announcements of political rallies, and invitations to religious gatherings, pilgrimages, wrestling tournaments, and other sports events, etc., as well as the omnipresent, huge commercial billboards. Thus far, they have remained unnoticed by researchers.<sup>3</sup> Below, we



first look at their taboo iconography and then into the moral discourse related to their undoubted efficacy in attracting the male gaze.

### **The lure: fleshy female bodies**

Unlike the cinema billboards with their characteristic mix of male and female bodies, featuring bearded macho villains wielding weapons juxtaposed with tender heroines or vamps, our images in freehand drawing show a clear focus on the female, whereby the male figure recedes into the background or is completely absent. The painter thus accentuates female body contours with voluptuous forms, swelling breasts and hips, emphasizing their buttocks; the women's figures are rarely slender and barely clothed in filmy garments, often with plunging necklines or bras. Their hair is uncovered and flowing; their full lips are at times open in a sensuous expression. The poses in which the actresses are depicted are either vulnerable to male brutality, longing (for instance with arms crossed behind the head), sexually arousing, or proud, forceful, and menacing. Thus, the range of body forms and poses is rather wide, whereby the female body is always displayed as a spectacle. Below we take a closer look at the images.

Fig. 2 shows a scene from *Guddu Badshah*, a typical vengeance-themed Punjabi film released in 2004 in which male brutality is glorified and women are humiliated. The actress Saima, wearing jingling ankle bells, the sign of a professional dancer, lies fearfully on the ground awaiting a violent attack, her buttocks sensuously exposed; the actor Shaan menacingly holds a dagger. In

fact, Saima Noor was the leading heroine of many Punjabi and Urdu films produced in Lahore throughout the 1990s and 2000s. This drawing, with its well-accentuated body proportions, almost conveys the effect of a woodcut.

The placard from the film *Khuni Mishan* (Bloody Mission) is a naturalistic drawing in which space is divided by a diagonal accentuated by a Kalashnikov: the busts of two young women are shown in the larger upper triangle, whereas the smaller lower triangle is filled with Urdu text (Fig. 3). A translation of the latter reads: »To end the reign of the lords of crime and terror, the world's loveliest, most subtle and cunning beauties have been chosen who, with their amazing coquetry and the fire of the ammo in their breasts, destroyed the empire of crime!« This explains well the drawing's emphasis on the ladies' cleavages and their provocative looks. In this way, female bodies complement the archetype of the male hero, who indulges in extreme violence.

Fig. 4 is a placard from the Punjabi movie *Bhola Sajan* (Simpleton Beloved!, 2004) with a loving couple in the upper part, showing a fleshy female fondly leaning over a mustachioed male, and two younger, buxom women in the lower part. The one on the right shown in profile exposes her armpit in a challenging pose. Here it should be pointed out that, according to conservative Islamic morality, sleeveless shirts are generally considered indecent and the exposure of the armpit particularly shameful. Thus, in Pakistani body topography, the armpit, with its dark, hairy cavity, is considered such an intimate part of the body that it is homologically related to the female genitals. Moreover, this can be associated with memories of body odor, especially foul-smelling ones, which is again symbolically associated with animalistic sexual appetite.<sup>4</sup> The figure on the left shows another well-known actress with her uncovered



[ FIG. 2 ]

[ FIG. 2 ]

Scene from the violence-ridden film *Guddu Badshah*, placard, Lahore



[ FIG. 3 ]

[ FIG. 3 ]

Women with gun from the film *Bloody Mission*, placard, Lahore



[ FIG. 4 ]

[ FIG. 4 ]

Three females with a simpleton from the film *Bhola Sajan*, placard, Lahore



wild tresses and her breasts almost spilling out of her low-cut dress, with plenty of cleavage on display.

Apart from their forms and postures, the figures on this placard are surrounded by texts that refer to vulgar, richly double-entendre Punjabi lyrics from songs in the movie itself. These songs are described on the poster as being »bombastic« and feature suggestive lyrics such as, »bad men, in secret from their wives, chase after girls left and right!«<sup>5</sup> In comparison with the previously discussed placards, Fig. 5 is simpler, but charmingly and delicately drawn. In the upper part, it shows a loving couple reclining on a bench, the woman fleshy, corresponding to Punjabi ideals of beauty, and the man in typical rural Punjabi dress with a loin-cloth. In the lower part, the couple is lying on the floor ready to make love, the woman already semi-nude with a suggestively raised leg, the man on top of her. This placard is a cinema advertisement for the Punjabi action movie *Bala Badmash* (2007). »*Badmash*« means scoundrel, and »Bala« is a shortened form of »Iqbal«; such shortening of personal names into nicknames is common in Punjab.

Fig. 6 shows a single female dancer with her bare arms raised above her head. The placard's tag lines for the Urdu film *Raqasa* (The Dancer), released in 2002, say: »A film that teaches a lesson« and »a priceless gift for women.« Apparently, in terms of content, the film intends to teach women a moral lesson. The drawing is rather well executed. In addition, the inscriptions take up the rhythm of the dance movements, because the film title is repeated four times and accompanied by the exclamations »dhoom machane-wali filum« (a film that created an uproar!)<sup>6</sup> and »super-hit filum« (which is self-explanatory).

Placards for other movies in the same melodramatic and/or action genre, like *Jism* (Body, 2006), *Anaconda 2* (dubbed in Hindi in 2004), and *Murder* (2006)



[FIG. 5]  
Placard advertising a typical  
Punjabi action movie, Lahore



[FIG. 6]  
Female dancer, placard,  
Lahore

likewise show women in bikinis, with »thunder thighs«, in enticing and inviting poses, trayed as avenging angels or as vamps steeped in sin and flaunting their bodies. In general, images of scantily clad women are presented as overpowering, sexualized figures meant to appeal to the basic instincts of male on-lookers. As such, they »galvanize« the collective fantasies, especially those of provincial males. This imagery of »spicy« movies, common since the 1980s and 1990s, shows a stereotype of femaleness crudely reduced to its sexuality, which is considered dangerous and disruptive.

## The response: from toleration to mutilation and disappearance

The eye-catching images of fleshy and lascivious women discussed above are meant to stimulate male desire and to entice them to watch the crime and action movies in cinemas. Taking into account that public space in Lahore and other cities of Pakistan is a male sphere under Islamic gender segregation and that film screenings are well attended, these images prove to be very efficient. As could be observed in Lahore, men sometimes contemplate the depicted female bodies on billboards, posters, and placards for a long time, or at least they notice them with a sidelong glance while walking on the road. Farida Batool has pointed out that »scopophilia«, using Freud's term for the sexual pleasure of looking at naked bodies, is a basic characteristic of the general male psyche, especially in urban Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> While men often take visual delight in gazing at these images, conservative Muslims consider them indecent, vulgar, and obscene; see, for instance, the still of the film *Gunah ki basti* (Quarter of Sin) (Fig. 7).



[ FIG. 7 ]

Poster advertising the film *Quarter of Sin*, (*Gunahon Ki Basti*, while the Urdu script gives the film title *Gunah Ki Raatein* which means Nights of Sin). Pakistan Talkies Cinema, Lahore



Remarkably, at least until the late 2000s, there has been a certain sense of toleration of the presence of these images in public. Despite growing Islamic orthodoxy and the rise of radical Islamist movements that emphasize strict morals, there were hardly any calls to remove these »inappropriate« representations of the female form. This is all the more surprising, considering how the attempt was made to enforce »Islamic society« during the military rule of General Zia ul-Haq (1977 – 1988); and it shows a certain persistence of secular visual culture in Pakistan. The Pakistani Film Censorship Code from 1979 section IV deals with »immorality and obscenity« and clearly states that a movie will be deemed unsuitable for screening if it »contains dialogues, songs, speeches, dances, jokes, or gestures which are obviously vulgar, obscene or indecent.«<sup>8</sup> The same holds true if it »displays dances showing indecent or vulgar movements or passions« (section VI) or »glorifies vice, crime, violence [...]« (section VII). If the strict rules of this code were to be implemented in its full spirit and letter, then such »spicy« movies could hardly be shown. However, as the chairman of the Lahore censorship board commented about the screening of these soft-porn films by distributors: »They show unauthorized scenes in the cinema halls, which had been deleted by the board, in connivance with cinema owners and sometimes even our own functionaries at some level.«<sup>9</sup> In her discussion of works of Pakistani popular art and elite »high art,« Batool explains that whereas some of the latter became the target of zealots who considered them offensive and threatening to Islamic ideology, popular representations remained untouched.<sup>10</sup> She argues that these images that invigorate sexual desires among larger male audiences remained out of the reach of zealots because the status of their painters was much lower than that of contemporary artists belonging to the elite. Thus, Batool wrote:

Hence, cinema board painters are allowed to keep on producing cinema paintings, as they do not contradict the underlying assumptions and political agenda that the »designed« cultural identity of Pakistan is expected to serve [...]. On the other hand, allowance of cinema paintings further enforces the image of women as the embodiment of sexual desires that need to be tempered and controlled in order to »reform« society.<sup>11</sup>

Here it should be emphasized that cinema billboard painting was almost extinct in 2006 when Frembgen documented the work of the last painters in Lahore, Karachi, and Rawalpindi.<sup>12</sup> As mentioned above, such paintings were replaced by digital prints, which are aesthetically less charming than the hand-painted ones.

In addition, Batool points to the gender discourse as another important aspect that may explain the degree of tolerance shown toward cinema billboards. She notes:

The motivation behind these fleshy and sensuous images is the belief that these film actresses belonged to the red light area of the city and, thus, are available and subject to male desires. The presentation of women belonging to the »public« sphere is common property and the need to codify women as safeguards for the national culture is only limited to respectable women. It is strange that no significant protest has been recorded on the representation of these women even by fundamentalist groups, since it does not seem to equate to a disfiguring of women's dignity.<sup>13</sup>

The seducing actress, the »bad woman« so to speak, is thus portrayed as the exact antithesis of the »wife,« the »good woman,« meaning the moral touchstone of the family as obedient daughter or caring mother.<sup>14</sup> This is corroborated by the statement of a film director from Lahore who said: »prostitute ko sharif bibi to nahin dekha-sakte.« (We can't portray a prostitute as a woman of virtue).<sup>15</sup> While we agree with the analysis Batool presented in 2004, we also need to emphasize our observation that in recent years in Lahore a number of cinema billboards as well as juicy film posters and placards were either scribbled or painted over or destroyed. The same transition from relative toleration to mutilation and destruction happened in Karachi and particularly in Peshawar, the stronghold of Taliban and other Islamist activists. Likewise, international publications distributed in Pakistan, especially fashion magazines, are regularly censored; and »sexually explicit« and »offensive« images are »defaced« using black markers.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, access to certain websites is sometimes blocked.

Thus the wind changed after 9/11 and since the mid-2000s as far as the display of crude, sexually loaded pictures in public is concerned. They unleashed the passions of radical Islamists, who burned down cinemas in their zeal to eradicate all that they considered »un-Islamic.« Shoaib Mansoor's film *Khuda ke liye*,<sup>17</sup> for example, vividly depicts this in an early scene that shows religious fanatics burning down and destroying cinema billboards. In conservative scriptural Islam, the human body is considered »[...] a source of shame and therefore it should be concealed and covered,«<sup>18</sup> and painting or drawing the body is frowned upon. Incited by hate preachers, activists were encouraged to take action against what they considered sinful and prohibited according to Islamic law. Muslim moralists see it as their duty to command »right« and forbid »wrong.«





[ FIG. 8 ]

Blackened female bodies on a poster advertising the Punjabi film *Taksi 420*, Lahore

In modern times, going to the cinema, »posters advertising dirty films, cafés, playing-cards, and music on the radio and television«<sup>19</sup> have been added to the slew of wrongs condemned by conservative religious scholars. Without entering deeper into the internal debate among zealous Muslims over the duty to stop wrongdoing, a key issue of normative Islam, we note that, in the context of Pakistani media of film promotion, these activists imposed their own standards of virtue on their co-religionists by blackening, disfiguring, or tearing down images of the faces and bodies of women on cinema billboards to create what they consider an »Islamic« moral aura. This response can be aptly described as an »affective raptus,« to use Horst Bredekamp's expression.<sup>20</sup> Vivid examples are the movie stills on display at the cinema »Pakistan Talkies« in Lahore's red-light district, in which naked parts of the female body are crosshatched and thereby blackened (Fig. 8). Alongside these iconoclastic actions, there is a new conser-

vative religious trend to exhibit piety in public through Islamic dress, especially veiling, and to attend prayers in the mosque. Actresses like Saima Noor emphasize that they say their five daily prayers.

Today, Photoshop-generated, digitally printed cinema billboards are no longer as prominently displayed in public spaces as the banners seen in the photographs in Batool's book; as far as their attractiveness is concerned, these new large rectangular billboards lack the vividness and exuberant imagery of their hand-painted predecessors, which often also stood out because of their irregular formats following body contours. Unlike cinema billboards and film posters,<sup>21</sup> the charming placards drawn freehand that we depict in our essay, which constituted a veritable street art, have disappeared; at least we could not find them any more since 2011.

## Conclusion

»Dirty Pictures,« such as our film placards that are obsessed with women's bodies, are emotionally charged and instigate responses. Both the sensuous indulgence in them and their mutilation, destruction and finally disappearance come across as an expression of Pakistani hyper-masculinity. In the imagery of these placards, either the testosterone-driven male uses and castigates the female or the woman is portrayed as seductress or avenging angel. Finally, man remains the conquering hero – like the passionate zealot enthralled by the Islamist agenda who feels »offended« by these images and eradicates the »wrong« and »sinful.«<sup>22</sup> Be it the pleasure-seeker and cinema-goer or the Islamist iconoclast,

we agree with Durre Ahmed's statement about the current social context in Pakistan: »Secular or religious, the brutalizing and obliteration of the feminine is all-pervasive.«<sup>23</sup>

The sexually loaded images discussed in this paper are generally considered »obscene,« »vulgar,« and »dirty.« Whereas male aggression and violence are tolerated, nudity, especially of women, is held in abhorrence, considered dishonorable, immodest, and representing the dissolution of the normatively high-anchored bonds of shame.<sup>24</sup> At least since the Islamist regime of Zia ul-Haq (1977 – 1988) with its repressive wave against »un-Islamic« behavior, times have changed; there is public demand for stricter morality.<sup>25</sup> Many people are now hypersensitive to such images and feel offended by being exposed to them. The placards called »dirty pictures« are increasingly perceived as »offensive« not only by the self-proclaimed custodians of morality, but also by the wider public as insulting the religious feelings of the majority of mainstream conservative Muslims in Pakistan, who say they should be erased from public view. This attitude toward these images reflects the increasing influence of a distinctly conservative and rigid interpretation of Islam with a puritanical outlook. Although in recent years these freehand-drawn placards, which were typical features of Lahore's street culture, have vanished as media of film publicity, much like old hand-painted billboards with their peculiar aesthetic, their offensive character persists to some extent in the new »realistic« film banners and especially in the movie stills on display in cinemas situated in the city's redlight districts. Vulgarly displayed images of the female body thus remain the projections of popular male sexual fantasies and desires.<sup>26</sup>



- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Jürgen Wasim Frembgen: *The Sacred and the Vulgar. Sufi Posters and Cinema Billboards from Pakistan*, in Norbert M. Schmitz (ed.): *Ästhetik der Globalisierung*, Nuremberg (in press).
- <sup>2</sup> Ali Khan: *Pakistani Film Poster Art*, in *Bioscope. South Asian Screen Studies* 5/2 (2014), pp. 183-190.
- <sup>3</sup> We know of only one such picture in Farida Batool: *Figure. The Popular and the Political in Pakistan*, Lahore 2004, plate 33, which shows multiple layers of multicolored and bicolored placards pasted on a wall in Lahore.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Harward Malchow: *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth Century Britain*, Stanford 1996, p. 141.
- <sup>5</sup> The literal meaning of the song is, »Bad men, in secret from their wives, shove their mouths in, left and right.« This evokes not only animals feeding at a trough, but, obviously, also cunnilingus.
- <sup>6</sup> Due to its success (in this context).
- <sup>7</sup> Batool: *Figure* (see note 3), p. 55.
- <sup>8</sup> Amber Rahim Shamsi: *Much Rain and Mangoes*, in *The Herald* (Karachi) 32/9 (2001), pp. 119-120.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- <sup>10</sup> Batool: *Figure* (see note 3), pp. 56-57.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- <sup>12</sup> Frembgen: *The Sacred and the Vulgar* (see note 1).
- <sup>13</sup> Batool: *Figure* (see note 3), pp. 57-58.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Afiya Shehrbano Zia: *Sex Crime in the Islamic Context. Rape, Class and Gender in Pakistan*, Lahore 1994, p. 43.
- <sup>15</sup> Amber Rahim Shamsi (see note 8), p. 121.
- <sup>16</sup> Sanam Maher: *Making a Mark*, in *The Herald* (Karachi), December issue (2011), pp. 56-58.
- <sup>17</sup> Pascal Zinck: *Blind Faith. Women at War in Khuda kay liye and Escape from Taliban*, in *Pakistaniaat. A Journal of Pakistan Studies* 4/2 (2012), pp. 123-140.
- <sup>18</sup> Fuad I. Khuri: *The Body in Islamic Culture*, London 2001, p. 35.
- <sup>19</sup> Michael Cook: *Forbidding Wrong in Islam*, Cambridge 2003, p. 116.
- <sup>20</sup> Horst Bredekamp: *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. Rajesh Devraj / Paul Duncan (eds.): *The Art of Bollywood*, Cologne 2010.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. Durre S. Ahmed: *Heroes and Zeroes*, in Saima Zaidi (ed.): *Mazaar, Bazaar. Design and Visual Culture in Pakistan*, Karachi 2009, pp. 97-103, here p. 98.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- <sup>24</sup> Cf. Jürgen Wasim Frembgen: *Tying and Untying the Trouser-Cord: Dimensions of Normativity, Morality, and Emotion in Pakistani Body Behaviour*, in *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 5/1 (2004), pp. 49-70, here pp. 58, 62, 64.
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. Khawar Mumtaz / Farida Shaheed: *Women of Pakistan. Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?*, Lahore 1987. Thus, in a chapter on »obscenity« the authors emphasize: »In May 1982 the government launched a campaign against

obscenity and pornography. While there is no doubt that the problem of obscenity is valid in itself, the issue as defined by the government seemed to equate women per se with obscenity;« (p. 81). In consequence, women were eliminated from product advertising, newspapers reduced the number of photographs showing women, and film editions were stopped altogether. Female visibility became equated with obscenity (p. 8).

<sup>26</sup> Batool: Figure (see note 3), p. 78.

# A Brief Anatomy of Offensive Imagery<sup>1</sup>

Jojada Verrips

Blasphemy and Obscenity are,  
just like Beauty,  
in the Eye of the Beholder.

Warburg was aware that the self, always to be newly formed and protected, can receive support, but also injuries, from pictures. That the vitality of the picture, with its possibility to ›do something to someone or something‹, also possesses the potency for injury [...].<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

We live in an era in which we are confronted with a mega-flood of images as an immediate consequence of the rapid development of highly advanced technological means to produce, reproduce, and globally distribute them. This is certainly not an original observation; it has been made by numerous scholars.<sup>3</sup> In general, people react in three ways to the images they confront in books (normal or e-books), cinemas, computers, iPads and iPhones, journals, newspapers and TV, and museums and public space, to mention just a few of the media and places in which they pop up: in a neutral, a positive, or a negative way. That is, they remain indifferent toward the images, they like them, or they dislike them. This essay does not give center stage to the images that leave people undisturbed or the ones that move them in a positive sense, but to those that appall, disrupt, hurt, shake, shock, and unsettle beholders, images that call forth disgust, anger, aggression, and in their wake often the wish to make them immediately disappear from our view and that of others, if need be by cutting them into pieces and/or burning them.<sup>4</sup> The desire to get rid of disgusting and loathsome images, as if they were pernicious and polluting »individuals«, and to purify the world



does not greatly differ from the wish, as often crops up in wars, to let certain individuals, perceived as despicable and therefore unwanted »objects,« disappear from the surface of the earth. This is a reaction that shows a strong family resemblance to making a religious sacrifice to get rid of polluting elements (both objects and subjects) as described and analyzed by Hubert and Mauss.<sup>5</sup> In this connection, the following remark by Bruno Latour on what the exhibition *Iconoclash* in 2002 was all about is striking: »It attempts to suspend the urge to destroy images, requires us to pause for a moment; to leave the hammer to rest. It prays for an angel to come and arrest our sarificial arm holding the sacrificial knife ready to cut the sacrificial lamb's throat.«<sup>6</sup>

Against this background, it is in fact rather surprising that the insight that images »want« something from us and/or »do« something with us, as if they were a particular kind of living beings, is presented time and again as a new discovery or insight, for instance by sociologists and art historians. In this connection, book titles like *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*<sup>7</sup> and *How Images Think*,<sup>8</sup> as well as the popularity of theories in which things or objects play a crucial role (see Kruse in this volume), such as Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Bredekamp's *Theorie des Bildakts*,<sup>9</sup> are revealing. Yes, images »do« something with people, generate something in them, for instance, emotions that move between the poles of positive and negative.<sup>10</sup> What I deem more important than to establish this once more is to take a different road by paying attention to the burning question of what kind of images pre-eminently do so in a negative way and why? Or, phrased differently, what sort of pictures possess the power to generate bewilderment, disgust, and disruption over and over again and to stimulate people to undertake action directed

toward their disappearance through censorship or, worse, destruction? If one casts a glance at, for instance, the great and seemingly increasing number of scandals triggered by images in the Western world since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, one can easily get the impression that the variation in imagery capable of shocking and hurting people is endless.

The main goals of this article are as follows: First, I want to make it clear that there seems to be a system in the »madness« or chaos, by showing that one can distinguish a limited number of genres (and subgenres) of imagery that repeatedly function as neuralgic points and sources of hot-headed, impetuous, and sometimes violent and iconoclastic reactions on the part of certain groups and categories of people who feel offended and attacked by the producers of these genres, the artists.<sup>11</sup> Second, I will examine the nature and dynamic of the sociological figuration one has to take into consideration to develop a better understanding of the ways allegedly disgusting images can trigger all kinds of negative, even destructive developments in the social realm on a micro- as well as on a macro-level. Third, I will succinctly present a tentative perspective (or hypothesis) on the background of or underlying reasons for the often aggressive reactions to the imagery created by a broad range of artists.

Some authors are of the opinion that the genesis or rise of so-called shock art and imagery is a rather recent one. Renée Steenbergen, for instance, wrote in the journal *CHIQ* in 1999: »Rape and mutilation, porno and murder, pop up strikingly often in contemporary painting and sculpture. Shock art is the latest hype in the world of the arts.«<sup>12</sup> She illustrated her article with a provocative photograph titled *Happiness is here to stay* by the Dutch photographer Cornelie Tollens that shows a mouth with a penis instead of a tongue. Steenbergen appar-

ently did not seriously study the fabrication of shocking (artistic) imagery that, long before the 1990s, triggered controversies and that particular categories of people deemed scandalous and censurable, or she would not have written »the latest hype.« As a matter of fact, scandals and upheaval over works of art and other imagery have a much longer history in the Western world and can be traced back far before the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Though it might be interesting and relevant to deal with scandals in the distant past, in this essay I will put the spotlight on (artistic) imagery deemed scandalous and therefore fit for censorship or worse from 1850 until the present.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were a number of scandals and controversies, three of which I want to briefly sketch here because in my view they represent prototypical cases of what has been considered scandalous imagery ever since, not only in the so-called Western world,<sup>14</sup> but also and to an increasing degree in the world as a whole; this is a direct consequence of the rapid globalization of the production, circulation, distribution, and consumption of art and other imagery. In spite of this development, the emphasis in this essay will be on scandals about controversial imagery produced in the West, which in some cases (take that of the Muhammad cartoons) also caused as much (or even more) upheaval on a global scale. In recent decades, across our ever more entangled world, we hear more and more about scandals triggered by (artistic) imagery deemed to be disgusting and therefore worthy of being banned or destroyed (see Monica Juneja in this volume).



## Prototypical cases

The first scandal I want to put on center stage here occurred in 1859, when the French zoologist and sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet wanted the Salon in Paris to exhibit a very realistic sculpture of a gorilla carrying off a woman (see caption Fig. 1). At first, the members of the jury did not want to accept this provocative piece of art because they found it too shocking for several reasons, including the possibility to interpret it pornographically; but finally they agreed to its exposition in a specific room and behind a green curtain. »The terrifying representation got a pornographic place and at the same time stood at the center of attention,«<sup>15</sup> though not for long, for angry Belgian laborers knocked it to pieces. Maybe they disliked it for the same reason as Baudelaire, who wrote extensively about Frémiet's creation. The poet, like many critics, interpreted the sculpture as a prelude to the rape of a woman by an appalling animal, although Frémiet explicitly carved »Gorille femelle« on it! Baudelaire rejected it with the following words: »Such themes truly are not fit for such a mature talent, and the jury was right to refuse this ugly and dramatic group of figures.«<sup>16</sup> Be that as it may, the sculpture caused a great scandal. And that happened again in 1888, when Frémiet exhibited a new version (Fig. 1), this time not in plaster but in bronze, at the (Third) International Art Exhibition in Munich, where it »elicited fascination and repulsion from the crowds as they entered the main exhibition hall.«<sup>17</sup> Whereas the artist in 1859 apparently wanted to prevent the public from thinking about a »mésalliance« between an ape and a woman by specifying the sex of the ape in the statue, he did not do this in the second version, which gave ample room for fantasies about such a liaison.



[FIG. 1]

Emmanuel Frémiet: Gorilla  
Carrying off a Woman, 1888,  
National Gallery of Victoria,  
Melbourne

It is possible that the popularity of Darwin's theory of evolution published in the same year and the fact that this theory stimulated certain scholars to explicitly speculate about the possibility of cross-species sex formed part of the background of Frémiet's decision not to mention the sex of the gorilla.<sup>18</sup>

The second scandal in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that I want to mention was triggered by Max Liebermann's painting *Der zwölfjährige Jesus im Tempel*, exhibited eleven years earlier at the International Art Exhibition in Munich. Several, mostly Roman Catholic anti-Semitic critics, regarded this work as blasphemous, because Liebermann, who was Jewish, »had dared to publicly throw in the teeth of his fellow Christian citizens such a derision of their Savior« by having painted him as »the ugliest, cheekiest Jewish boy one can imagine.«<sup>19</sup> The uproar was so great that Liebermann decided to repaint Jesus and refrain from producing biblical scenes for at least thirty years. The case was even discussed in the Bavarian Parliament, where a delegate proposed to cancel the promised financial support for the exposition. The threat by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in 1999 to withdraw a seven million-dollar subsidy from the Brooklyn Museum of Modern Art if it did not remove Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* was thus not very original, just an example of »l'histoire se repète.« Liebermann was not the only artist to alter a painting; in 1891, after his work *The Crucifixion* had triggered a scandal because it showed Jesus' private parts too realistically, Max Klinger also accommodated his critics.

The third and last scandal in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century I want to refer to arose over Hermione von Preuschen's allegorical painting *Mors Imperator*. In 1887, it was rejected by the jury of the Berlin Academy exhibition, probably because »it made disturbing allusions to the deteriorating condition



of William I, who died six months later, as well as to the crown prince, who was suffering from cancer.«<sup>20</sup> Von Preuschen decided thereupon to exhibit the painting herself in an exposition hall in Berlin and invited the public through newspaper ads to come and see her »scandalous« work.

### **A brief anatomy, or the first triangle**

I will now try to elaborate my assertion that the three briefly sketched scandals are prototypical cases par excellence of what is perceived to be scandalous art until now. The imagery presented by Frémiet, Liebermann, and Von Preuschen triggered so much negative response because particular (groups of) persons perceived it as transgressing what they deemed acceptable in the following three crucial, sociocultural realms: 1) sexuality (Eros, reproduction, or the womb), 2) the sacred, and 3) death (Thanatos, destruction, or tomb), realms that have always been potential battlefields. I am inclined to call this constellation the eternal triangle of existential neuralgic points, able to trigger very negative sentiments, thoughts, and behavior toward imagery that people experience as transgressive, as well as toward its producers and their potential supporters.

As far as I can see, the most serious and intense controversies about art in the Western world in the last 150 years have been caused by transgressions (or the violation of more or less explicit taboos) in these three spheres. And it is my expectation that this will continue to be so in our ever more connected global world and its increasing religious and socio-cultural and -economic differentiation. Instead of presenting a long list of cases of »scandalous imagery« produced

(on purpose or not) by a wide range of artists since 1850, a detailing of the reactions to which would result in a boring *déjà-vu*,<sup>21</sup> I prefer to specify the three neuralgic points – the fields of sex, the sacred, and death – as the fields that artists time and again use to produce imagery that not only disgusts members of particular groups and categories, but also spurs them to undertake something against it (from censorship to destruction).

The field of sex, Eros, and reproduction relates to human beings as well as animals and encompasses the following topics that have long inspired the fabrication of images that might easily lead to indignation: bestiality (Fig. 2), exhibitionism, nakedness, pedophilia, (child) pornography, prostitution, rape (Fig. 3), and sodomy. It is important to realize that the relevance of these subfields for creating imagery that might offend has not always been the same in time and place, but has fluctuated considerably, certainly in the Western world. Sieghart Ott formulated this nicely: »Added to this is that societal views of the proper and the offensive in the field of art constantly change, as history teaches. Even at the same time and in the same place, moral judgments and views are not unanimous. Namely, moral sensibility, as it normally and on the average dominates in broader swaths of the populace, is naturally shaped by various factors like disposition, descent, religion, upbringing, education, occupation, and personal experience.«<sup>22</sup>

Take, for instance, naked children. Before 1975, the depiction of nude minors found few active objections in the US and Western Europe, but that changed rapidly thereafter »when moral crusaders [...] stormed the country to ›save the children‹ from alleged widespread sexual exploitation by perverts and pornographers.«<sup>23</sup> Ever since, there has been an increase in the number of scandals over the distribution and exhibition of paintings and photographs of naked youth.



[ FIG. 2 ]  
Inez Doujak: Haute Couture 4.  
Transport, Barcelona Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Exhibition:  
La Bestia y el Soberano,  
March 19-August 30, 2015



[ FIG. 3 ]  
Dolce & Gabbana, 2007



A very spectacular case involving the imagery of young naked girls deemed to be indecent occurred in Great Britain in October 2015. A London judge ruled that a great number of paintings and photographs of naked or partially naked children by the artist Graham Ovenden, who had been convicted of pedophilia a few years earlier, were not suitable for public or private view and therefore had to be destroyed.<sup>24</sup> This is a remarkable example of an iconoclastic verdict by a judge that, however, is not without precedents. In 1912, for example, a similar sentence was passed on a (supposedly) obscene drawing by Egon Schiele. In this case, the judge himself carried out the destruction! Evers described this rather grotesque event: »The judge considers himself legitimated to burn a drawing by Schiele, and he does it in his judge's robe as if carrying out an act of justice, as if this act of vandalism were proof that the artist Schiele were in the wrong and that ›morality‹ were on the side of the judge.«<sup>25</sup>

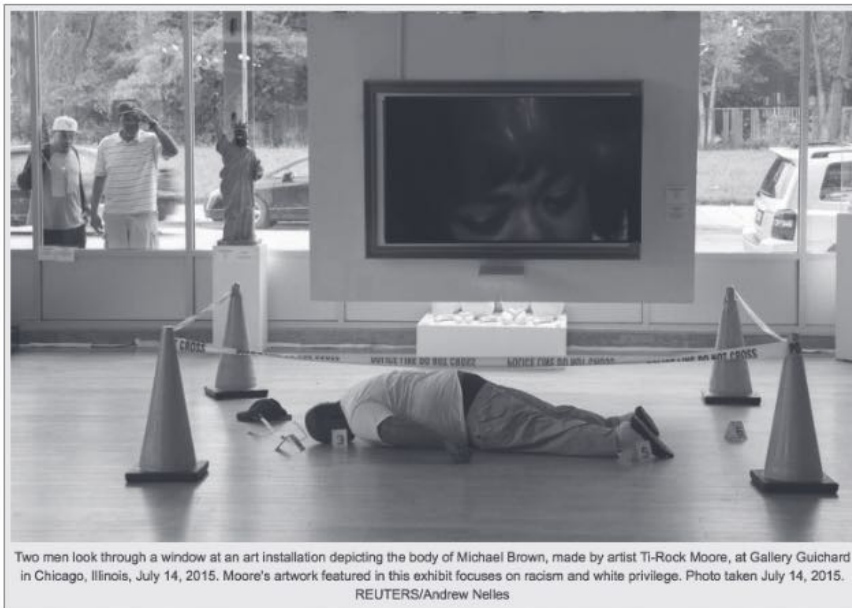
The field of death, Thanatos, and destruction relates, like the first field, to both human beings and animals and encompasses the following phenomena that inspire artists to produce imagery with the potential to seriously hurt people's feelings: abortion, beheadings, body parts (Fig. 4), butchering (of animals), cadavers, cannibalism, corpses, dying or dead persons (Fig. 5), executions, genocide, laughter (in combination with the perpetration of physical violence), lynching, murder, mutilation, necrophilia, and torture. The potential of images pertaining to these and related subfields to cause upheaval and scandals also varies in time and place. What I find striking is that almost all scandals about imagery in these subfields, data about which I have collected since 1985, were connected with sculptures, photographs, posters, films, and artistic installations, such as the ones created by the British artist Damien Hirst, and not so

much with other types of imagery, such as paintings, drawings, watercolors, etc. A special artistic genre containing imagery pertaining to several or even all these subfields is the horror movie, which is why certain groups (especially religious ones) have campaigned against the supposedly harmful content of this kind of film and for the introduction of regulations to prevent their uncensored showing as long as the medium itself has existed.<sup>26</sup>



[FIG. 4]

Atelier Van Lieshout: BikiniBar,  
2006 (photo by Raymond  
Rutting © 2014)



[ FIG. 5 ]

Ti-Rock Moore: Angelitos  
Negros, Gallery Guichard,  
Chicago, 2015

Chicago, IL - It was an image that shocked and angered many: a dead, black 18-year-old left face-down for hours in the middle of a street after being shot multiple times by a white police officer, his red Cardinals baseball cap knocked from his head by the fall.

Since the field of the sacred, divine, and transcendental is crucial for all religions, it would be fair to at least briefly consider which subfields lend themselves to artists' production of blasphemous imagery, as perceived by the major world religions. Still, I will limit myself here to Christianity, in particular to specific subfields within this religion that are what one might call blasphemy-prone. Though Christianity, just like Judaism and Islam, has rather strict interdictions against making images,<sup>27</sup> it has a long history of depicting God the Father, the Holy Ghost, Jesus Christ, Mary,<sup>28</sup> Joseph, the patriarchs, the prophets, and the disciples, as well as the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and the Ascension.

In the last 150 years, it has been deviating depictions of God, (the birth and life of) Jesus Christ,<sup>29</sup> his crucifixion (Fig. 6), and the Last Supper that have been perceived as transgressive or blasphemous by certain categories of Christians



and that have caused scandals in the Western world.<sup>30</sup> Next in line were deviant representations of the rest of what I mentioned. I will pay no attention here to other forms of blasphemy or sacrilege that every now and then crop up with regard to specific Christian fields, themes, and topics.<sup>31</sup> Though the temptation to present a series of notorious cases of blasphemy that have occurred since the end of World War II is great, I will merely mention that, in the postwar period, there has been a remarkable increase in what disgusted Christians regard as sacrilegious imagery of the crucifixion. Examples of offending art include Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), Martin Kippenberger's *Der gekreuzigte Frosch* (1990), the poster for the film *The People vs. Larry Flint* (1996) Bettina Rheims' cycle on the life of Jesus (1998),<sup>32</sup> Cornelius Kolig's *Crucifixion* in the Parliament of Carinthia (1998), Dorota Niezkalska's *Passion* (2003), Vagritsch Bachtchanjan's *Sowjetischer Gekreuzigter* (2007), Cosimo Cavallaro's chocolate sculpture *My Sweet Lord* (2007), and Paul Fryer's *The Privilege of Dominion* showing a gorilla on a cross (2009), as well as his *Pietà* showing Jesus sitting in an electric chair (2007) (Fig. 7).<sup>33</sup>



[FIG. 6]

David Wojnarowicz:  
*A Fire in My Belly* (film still),  
 1986-1987, 2010



[ FIG. 7 ]  
 Paul Fryer: *Pietà (The Empire Never Ended,*  
 2007), Collection François  
 Pinault, exposed in the  
 Cathédrale Notre-Dame-  
 et-Saint-Arnoux, Gap,  
 France, April 2009

What strikes me is the fact that the number of similar transgressive images produced after World War II that remained unnoticed and/or did not trigger a scandal is considerably greater than the number of depictions that led to turmoil. The same holds true for similar imagery of the Last Supper.<sup>34</sup> I have the impression that the chance that a deviant and therefore potentially controversial depiction of this sacrament, as well as of the crucifixion, actually leads to a scandal is increased when it contains (an) erotic component(s). In general, deviant imagery that relates to not only one of the three fields mentioned, but to two or even to all three at the same time increases the possibility that it will generate disgust and the wish to get rid of it by a ban or even outright destruction.<sup>35</sup>

This ends my brief elaboration of specific manifestations of what specific categories of consumers might experience as »aesthetic terrorism« by artists within the realms of Eros, Thanatos, and the sacred, together forming the eternal triangle of neuralgic points.<sup>36</sup> In this connection, it is important to notice that there are more fields that artists might use as a source of inspiration for the fabrication of imagery that is contested and might lead to scandals, but I consider these to be less crucial. Think, for instance, of racist or discriminatory imagery, imagery of bodily matter out of place (such as blood, feces, vomit, saliva, sperm, urine, etc.), of disabled bodies, of taboo symbols or gestures (such as the swastika or Nazi salute), of permitted symbols in the wrong context, and of highly critical imagery of political or religious leaders (which they and their supporters sometimes experience as a sort of »lèse-majesté.«) The kind of strategies people who feel hurt and upset by taboo-violating imagery will adopt to get rid of it depends, of course, on the socio-political context they were raised in and are part of. In the Western world, they often approach the police and local magistrates with complaints and sometimes even go to court to make what they take as offensive imagery disappear from museums or the public sphere and/or try to persuade politicians to draft censorship laws.<sup>37</sup> In extreme cases, they take their refuge in iconoclasm or worse. It is important to recognize that the kind of scandals treated in this essay almost always imply a dynamic sociological constellation of parties that shows a great family resemblance to the triadic figuration (of perpetrators, victims, and witnesses) that Riches described to better understand violence.<sup>38</sup>



## **The parties involved, or the second triangle**

Scandals over images are human-made phenomena that, from a sociological perspective, involve at least three parties: the producer(s) of the imagery, the consumers who like it or take a neutral stand towards it, and the consumers who detest it. The producers sometimes, but not always, have the explicit intention to produce transgressive imagery that triggers negative reactions in consumers. Often the former do not have such intentions at all, and the latter feel offended, insulted, or hurt when confronted with artworks experienced as disgusting, obscene, and/or blasphemous. That is, if they are confronted with it at all; for a lot of what can be considered transgressive art remains fully unnoticed by the larger public, because it circulates only in specific museums and galleries, the so-called underground, and/or the crevices of the Internet. In this connection, it is important to realize that the context (for instance, a museum or the public sphere) in which imagery is shown can make a huge difference in response, negative, neutral, or positive. When certain consumers are moved by it in a positive way, then those who reject it almost always perceive them negatively as being just as corrupt, decadent, and depraved as its producers and their work. Doing research on scandals triggered by imagery thus always implies studying the classification and evaluation of this imagery by at least three categories: 1) the producer(s) and their supporters who more or less like it, 2) the consumers who feel hurt by it in one way or another (the victims), and 3) the witnesses of their struggles (who might change sides over time). This sounds simple, but a study along these lines is not always easy to realize, especially when consumers who feel hurt themselves turn into makers of transgressive

imagery, as happened, for instance, after the publication of the contested Muhammad cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005. In this case, these cartoons triggered a real iconomachia<sup>39</sup> or »Bilderkrieg« between the »Christian« Western and the Muslim world,<sup>40</sup> leading to violent demonstrations ending in death and destruction in several places.<sup>41</sup> As a matter of fact, this image war had a predecessor in 2003, for after 9/11 the Internet was intensively used to show a flood of anti- and pro-Bin Laden imagery, about which Birgit Richard wrote:

Unambiguous are [...] the hate pictures in the Internet with which the opponents combat each other. On both sides, there are a vast number of hate pages that Neumann-Braun [...] characterizes as follows: lacking all moderation and any limit in regard to the humiliation and annihilation of the other. But the »de-normalization« he notes takes place on the [...] websites not on the linguistic, but explicitly on the pictorial level.<sup>42</sup>

This history repeated itself in January 2015 after a couple of angry young men murdered several editors of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, because the editors had ignored several serious warnings to stop insulting the Prophet and his followers with words and images, and continued publishing cartoons of Muhammad that many Muslims all over the world deemed debunking and blasphemous. What's remarkable is that the sometimes utterly negative ways in which the Prophet is represented nowadays in imagery and otherwise in the Western world show a great family resemblance to representations of him in particular and Muslims in general as they already circulated among Christians

in medieval times. For example, according to White, Muhammad figured in several medieval sources as a Christian heretic who was »thrown on a dung heap to be devoured by dogs and pigs«<sup>43</sup> and, according to Arjana, as a »demonic force, a human-animal hybrid,« in short, as a »Homo totus lubricus, a sexual monster.«<sup>44</sup> We are confronted here with apparently age-old and stereotypical characterizations and representations used to disgust Muslim others.<sup>45</sup>

### **Touching imagery, disgust, and rebounding violence**

Why is it that images can move people to become aggressive toward fellow human beings and things? Many scholars have already tried to answer this question. I do not believe that we will ever be able to adequately understand what viewers of taboo-violating art experience if we keep trying to make sense of it without taking the body seriously. The first thing we should realize is that our perception and experience of the world we live in cannot be understood if we continue to neglect the grounding of our knowledge-cum-affective-experience in the human body or more particularly the brain. If, moreover, we can accept that all our sensory experiences are ultimately tactile, then, I think, we might end up with a less spiritualistic and rational and more materialistic and therefore realistic interpretation of the »re-actions« of viewers to what they experience as disgusting and unsettling art. Elsewhere I have dealt extensively with the idea that we should reconsider the five-fold, hierarchical, Cartesian classification of our sensory experiences, for it blinds us to the fact that we relate to the world through the touch of the cornea of our eyes, of the tympanum



in our ears, of the receptors in the mucous membrane in our nose, of the papillae on our tongue, of the sensors in our skin and/or our whole body, in short through at least five tactile sensations.<sup>46</sup> The most important consequence of such a reconsideration of the old classification is that sight and seeing no longer are perceived as something mental and therefore distinct from touch and touching, but as specific forms of them. In this connection, it might be useful to pay more attention to what has lately been brought forward by cognitive scientists, who try to develop better insights into the role of embodiment in obtaining and using knowledge.<sup>47</sup> For these scholars, humans are involved in a continuous process of storing, retrieving, and re-combining sensations, emotions, and knowledge in the body. Their approach can help to better understand why transgressive artistic imagery – that is, imagery characterized by an unconventional representation of, for instance, Eros, Thanatos, and the sacred as learned in specific socio-cultural settings – can generate an impressive multi-sensorial (aesthetic) positive, neutral, or negative experience.<sup>48</sup> The latter experience occurs mostly when people are faced with a formidable mismatch between the kind of imagery that they learned to incorporate in their bodies as acceptable and imagery in the outside world that is at loggerheads with this embodied imagery and by which they are touched.<sup>49</sup> That this is an unsettling collision on a deep corporeal level, a disturbing process in the body, comes to the fore in the kind of language they use to express this experience. When they use expressions like »it hurts me« or »it is so disgusting that it makes me vomit,« this is not just metaphorical language, but language that hints at concrete, disrupting, fleshly experiences as a consequence of being touched by imagery outside the body that is entirely in opposition to imagery

stored inside the body. One might speak here of a wound on a deep corporeal level or a physiological and/or neurological trauma. It seems that works of art that are experienced as offending and disgusting trigger a fundamental physical disturbance or – in other words – are felt as a violation of the physical integrity of a person or persons.<sup>50</sup>

I am trying to formulate a materialistic answer to the question of why imagery of a certain type has the power to move and motivate people in such a way that they want to get rid of this disgusting and sick-making material in one way or another to regain their physical (physiological and neurological) balance again. A remarkable thing in this connection is that curators of controversial exhibitions sometimes warn the visitors at the entrance with signs indicating that some works on display might generate unwelcome physical reactions. However, in the literature on scandalous art and disgusting imagery, this bodily dimension is generally not seriously addressed, whereas it seems to play a crucial role in triggering the kind of fierce and even violent reactions of specific viewers. But there are exceptions.<sup>51</sup> In her article on the uproar about the exhibition in 1997 of the artworks *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano and *Myra* by Marcus Harvey, Alison Young<sup>52</sup> comes close to the kind of perspective whose contours I have sketched in the foregoing section. For Young, as in my vision, disgust plays a crucial role,<sup>53</sup> but she makes a wrong distinction between viscerally felt disgust, originating in skin contact with loathsome matter, on the one hand, and metaphorical disgust, i.e., disgust that only resembles physically felt disgust, triggered solely by seeing and not by actually touching a transgressive artwork, on the other. In my view, it is exactly the maintenance of this kind of distinction that stands

in the way of developing a deeper understanding of the aggression of people after they are confronted with imagery that conflicts with the cherished imagery they learned to store in their bodies. It is a distinction immediately going back to our age-old classification of sensory modes that alienated the so-called higher ones – seeing and hearing – from their basically tactile grounding.

Though I disagree with Young's distinction between physical and metaphorical disgust, I like her concept »aesthetic vertigo«, a phenomenon that she says pops up as the consequence of both the shrinking of the distance between a viewer and a controversial art work, so that real touching threatens to happen, and the growing consciousness that the artwork is but an image. However, I would »tactilize« the concept and connect it with the notion of »sensational« or »aesthetic form« as developed by Birgit Meyer.<sup>54</sup> To eliminate this »aesthetic vertigo« triggered by exposure to imagery that is incongruous with the imagery they have learned to respect and idolize, people will do anything and as soon as possible, either through censorship or iconoclasm. Such radical reactions, in other words, are a direct consequence of people's constant use of specific corporeally internalized imaginative and normative formats as yardsticks to classify and evaluate all imagery that touches them through their senses and, especially, of mismatches between these formats and this imagery. Trying to persuade them with words and arguments to be tolerant, that is, to suppress their disgust or aversion, will seldom work, because they feel humiliated, insulted, and, more important in my view, hurt, injured, and wounded – in short, physically attacked. Instead of taking the peaceful road of tolerance, the offended react with what the anthropologist Maurice Bloch once called »rebounding violence,« that is, violence that is immediately triggered by violence done



earlier to them.<sup>55</sup> In this connection, I find Sherwood's comparison between the shocking texts and performances of prophets of the Old Testament and the shock art of the so-called Britart artists (for example, Damien Hirst, Chris Ofili, and Marc Quinn) and the reactions they trigger, such as »[...] censure, the cries of disapproval, separating the dignified, critical self from the degeneracy of the prophet/artist,«<sup>56</sup> interesting. But I deem even more important her observation that both the prophets and specific contemporary artists seem to court the sensation of »revulsion, even vomiting« and that the reflex of revulsion »[...] has to do with an instinctive reflex of self-preservation against sensations that act on the nervous system, that provoke a ›violent, dark revolt of being,‹ and turn the subject ›inside out.‹«<sup>57</sup> Sherwood here refers to Kristeva's description of the horrific or the abject: »an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside.«<sup>58</sup>

It is this revolt against a menace that people want to keep at a distance to stay not only physically, but also morally healthy that I find very relevant. However, one should never forget that the disgusting and the abject are ambivalent phenomena that not only trigger the wish to eliminate and chase them away, but that also exert a particular fascination on people, a strange desire to know more about them, as Carolyn Korsmeyer has extensively and convincingly shown in her fascinating study *Savoring Disgust*.<sup>59</sup> Imagery that upsets people in public spaces might be something they look for in the crevices of the Internet. In these pages, I have succinctly considered why confrontations with taboo-

violating imagery in the fields of Eros, Thanatos, and the divine might so often lead to vehement reactions, especially negative ones. My tentative answer is that a deeper understanding depends on taking seriously the disrupting effects of the mismatch or iconoclasm between external and internalized imagery in these fields on the level of individual bodies. This comes to the fore in the use of a specific corporeal language, or what I would like to call a »discourse of disgust,« to describe this particular tactile experience.

## Epilogue

Instead of summarizing my findings and line of argumentation about so-called offending images, I prefer to conclude this essay by briefly dealing with two issues I did not touch upon so far, but which I deem relevant for broadening our understanding of the crucial role such images play in our world. First, I want to broach a dimension of transgressive imagery that leads us on to the field of the normative or the ethical and, second, I want to inquire whether we are heading for a future with fewer or more conflicts about controversial artworks and imagery.

During their socialization, human beings learn to store an immense amount of knowledge, rules, and regulations about adequate and proper behavior in their societies. Part of this cultural baggage consists of artistic and other imagery pertaining to the three fields of focus in this essay. Of course, there are differences in the character and size of this iconic reservoir, depending on such factors as education, class, gender, profession, and religion. But in general, the

coming into existence, the growth, and the transformation of such a reservoir in individuals everywhere is based on an internalization of specific values or standards that are used to make distinctions in regard to, for example, aesthetic appreciation and normative or ethical acceptability. In other words, the incorporation of such values and standards involves people in a constant process of classification and evaluation of all kinds of imagery, and in its wake their rejection or more or less indifferent acceptance. In this context, it is important to remember the simple fact that the building up of iconic reservoirs cannot take place without the existence of imagery that is deemed unacceptable and therefore rejectable. Thus the accumulation of a specific corpus of images, for example religious ones, always implies, at least to a certain degree, the existence of unacceptable counterparts that one should avoid and exclude from incorporation, or even eradicate. The importance of antithetical imagery – often of an outspoken, transgressive nature – for the development of such a corpus or reservoir is proved by the existence of a wide range of genres in which it pops up, from films (especially horror-films) to fairy tales, myths, and stories in holy books (for example, the Bible and the Quran). In this regard, myths are very interesting because they often sketch deviant and disgusting ways in which gods and other supernatural beings behave toward each other and toward human beings, animals, and the world (and vice versa). Lévi-Strauss pointed out that the extreme behaviors and positions depicted in these stories »[...] are only imagined in order to show that they are untenable«<sup>60</sup> or – in the words of Bloch – »that mythology is often a speculation on practice, exploring all imaginable possibilities in what must remain an intellectual search.«<sup>61</sup> The extreme positions and behaviors that myths show with regard to sex, violence, and even the sacred imply an invitation to their



audiences to reflect on their ethical (un)tenability in the social context to which they belong. The same holds true for the other genres mentioned. One could even maintain that such genres, wherein all kinds of antithetic imagery figure, are part and parcel of all (sub-) cultures and that they are crucial for the more or less orderly and peaceful continuation of social life. Thus, the use of words or other means of depicting transgressions is not always experienced as offensive, but often more or less automatically related to its counterpart, that is, the aesthetically and ethically acceptable. What is striking here is that people can endorse and use antithetical imagery that they incorporated during their socialization to become and remain decent and at the same time be shocked by imagery created by others that clashes in a disgusting and unsettling way with the imagery they learned to accept in order to stay on specific moral and ethical tracks endorsed by their socialization. It is precisely physical imagery made by others that they want to eliminate as soon as possible in one way or another, because they are sensorially and intellectually attuned to different formats and feel hurt (and often also humiliated). What they often emphasize is the outrageous corrupting and depraving force this kind of transgressive imagery might trigger; it might lead to a dangerous, decadent, and distorted sort of society, so it should be removed, censored, or even destroyed immediately.<sup>62</sup> Kieran Cashell says that the visceral, first reaction of the type »THIS IS WRONG: the artist was wrong to have done this« and »the artist's foul and loathsome work should immediately disappear« is often followed by an »ethical aftershock,« implying a kind of positive acceptance. Though this may happen in certain cases, I think that more often the contrary can be observed, that is, a stubborn clinging to the kind of imagery one has learned to cherish.<sup>63</sup> This brings me to the second issue of this epilogue:

whether we face a future with more or with fewer wars over artworks and imagery experienced as offensive.

I am pessimistic. The reason for my gloom is that, with the increasing social and cultural differentiation of societies all over the globe as a consequence of the increasing mobility and migration of people with different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds, on the one hand, and the increased speed with which technologically advanced media spread imagery around the globe, on the other, the chances will only increase that iconoclashes crop up time and again. An Islamophobic cartoon in an Icelandic newspaper might within hours spark a violent outburst in Pakistan, just as a deviant representation of Jesus by a German artist exhibited in New York might trigger anger and aggression among conservative Roman Catholics in the US. The rapid dissemination of all kinds of imagery and people with different cultural backgrounds across the globe is and will be a very important source of global image wars now and in the near future. The call for freedom of speech and representation of, for instance, Eros, Thanatos, and the sacred asks for a kind of somatic tolerance, that is, a continuous repression or anesthesia of culturally bred and corporeally internalized aversions and appreciations that will not be easy to muster.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Birgit Meyer and Christiane Kruse for their patience and critical, but always constructive, comments on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> »Warburg war sich bewußt, daß dem immer neu zu formenden und schützenden Ich durch Bilder Unterstützungen,

aber auch Verletzungen widerfahren können. Daß die Lebendigkeit des Bildes, mit der Möglichkeit des »Antuns« auch die Potenz zur Verwundung besitzt [...]«. Horst Bredekamp: *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin 2010, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*

- <sup>4</sup> See Alison Young: Aesthetic Vertigo and the Jurisprudence of Disgust, in *Law and Critique*, 11 (2000), pp. 241-265 and Bruno Latour: What is Iconoclasm? Or is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?, in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.): *Iconoclasm. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, Karlsruhe and Cambridge/Mass. 2002.
- <sup>5</sup> See Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss: *Sacrifice. Its Nature and Function*, trans. by W.D. Walls, London (1898) 1964.
- <sup>6</sup> Latour: *Iconoclasm*, (see note 4), p. 15 (emphasis JV). Though Latour without any doubt draws a parallel here between an iconoclastic act and bringing a sacrifice with the purpose emphasized by Hubert and Mauss, he refrains from working it out along the lines they sketch. More attention should be paid to their point that one cannot come close to the sacred, on the one hand, or reach a purified world, on the other, without committing a criminal act, that is, bringing a sacrifice.
- <sup>7</sup> See William J. T. Mitchell: *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> See Ron Burnett: *How Images Think*, Cambridge/Mass., 2005.
- <sup>9</sup> See Bredekamp: *Theorie des Bildakts* (see note 2).
- <sup>10</sup> See Jojada Verrips: The Thing Didn't »Do« What I Wanted. Some Notes on Modern Forms of Animism in Western Societies, in Jojada Verrips (ed.): *Transactions. Essays in honor of Jeremy F. Boissevain*, Amsterdam 1994, pp. 35-53.
- <sup>11</sup> Thus, my focus is not on idiosyncratic and/or highly individual acts of vandalism or iconoclasm against art. For this kind of reaction, see Marijke van Eeckhout: Het moderne iconoclasm en andere verhalen. Een zicht op het onbekende, in Claire Vandamme and Francisca Vandepitte (eds.): *Hedendaagse Kunst en Vandalisme*, Ghent 1998, pp. 41-53.
- <sup>12</sup> Renée Steenbergen: Schock-Art. Zinloos geweld of zinvolle kunst, in *CHIQ* 4 (1999), pp. 50-56.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, Eduard Fuchs: *Geschichte der erotischen Kunst. Erweiterung und Neubearbeitung des Werkes »Das erotische Element in der Karikatur« mit Einschluß der ersten Kunst*, Berlin 1908; Sieghart Ott: *Kunst und Staat. Der Künstler zwischen Freiheit und Zensur*, Munich 1968; and Jean-Claude Bologne: *Nacktheit und Pruderie. Eine Geschichte des Schamgefühls*, trans. from the French by Rainer von Savigny and Thorsten Schmidt, Weimar 2001, pp. 229-272.
- <sup>14</sup> They came to my notice through Beth Irwin Lewis, who deals with the first and the third of these cases in the prologue of her book and with the second in Chapter 1. See Beth Irwin Lewis: *Art for All? The Collision of Modern Art and the Public in Late-Nineteenth Century Germany*, Princeton and Oxford 2003, pp. 8-13, 48-52.
- <sup>15</sup> »Die furchterregende Darstellung erhielt einen pornographischen Ort und stand gleichzeitig im Zentrum der Aufmerksamkeit«. Liliane Weissberg: *Monkey Business*, in *Kunstforum*, 114 (1991), p. 239.
- <sup>16</sup> »In Wahrheit sind derartige Themen eines so reifen Talents nicht würdig, und die Jury hat recht daran, diese häßliche und dramatische Figurengruppe abzulehnen«. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 237.
- <sup>17</sup> See Irwin Lewis: *Art for All?* (see note 14), p. 8.
- <sup>18</sup> Though I could have chosen other scandals triggered by art works (for example, Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or Thomas Eakins's *The Swimming Hole*) in the second half of the 19th century as prototypical, I preferred the scandal over



Frémiet's sculpture, because it touched upon an issue that was in the air: the interrelation among species. For the scandals over Manet and Eakin, see, respectively, Jan Dunlop: *Kunst die de Wereld Schokte*, Bussum 1972 and Jennifer Doyle: *Sex Objects Art and the Dialectics of Desire*, Minneapolis 2006.

<sup>19</sup> »[...] es gewagt hat, seinen christlichen Mitbürgern solche Verhöhnung ihres Heilands öffentlich ins Gesicht zu schleudern« by having painted him as »den häßlichsten, naseweisen Juden-Jungen, den man sich denken kann«. Martin Faass and Henrike Mund: *Sturm der Entrüstung. Kunstkritik, Presse und öffentliche Diskussion*, in Martin Faass (ed.): *Der Jesus-Skandal. Ein Liebermann-Bild im Kreuzfeuer der Kritik*. Berlin 2009, pp. 67-68.

<sup>20</sup> See Irwin Lewis: *Art for All?* (see note 14), Princeton and Oxford 2003, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> To get an impression of imagery that has been experienced as scandalous see, for instance, Walter Böckmann (ed.): *Kunst vor dem Richter. Was ist Kunst – und wann ist Kunst obszön?* in *Littera Dokumente – Berichte – Kommentare*, 4 (1964); Sieghart Ott: *Kunst und Staat. Der Künstler zwischen Freiheit und Zensur*, Munich 1968; Siegfried Salzmann: *Im Namen des Volkes. Das »gesunde Volksempfinden« als Kunstmaßstab*, Duisburg 1979; Steven C. Dubin: *Arresting Images. Impolite Art and Uncivil Actions*, London and New York 1992; Sabine Fellner: *Kunstskandal! Die besten Nestbeschmutzer der letzten 159 Jahre*, Vienna 1997; Heinz Peter Schwerfel: *Kunst-Skandale. Über Tabu und Skandal, Verdammung und Verehrung zeitgenössischer Kunst*, Cologne 2000; Peter Zimmermann/Sabine Schaschl: *Skandal. Kunst*, Vienna 2000; Anja Zimmermann: *Skandalöse Bilder-Skandalöse Körper. Abject Art vom Surrealismus bis zu den Culture Wars*, Berlin 2001; Anthony Julius: *Transgressions. The Offenses of Art*, London 2002; Jürgen Raap: *Abendmahl*, in *Kunstforum*, 160 (2002a), pp.

90-96; Jürgen Raap: *Kannibalismus*, in *Kunstforum*, 160 (2002b), pp. 204-209; Jürgen Raap: *Tabus*, in *Kunstforum*, 160 (2002c), pp. 267-272; K. Vandenabeele / K. Vermeir (ed.): *Transgressie in de kunst*, in *Jaarboek voor Esthetica*, 2004; S. Brent Plate: *Blasphemy. Art That Offends*, London 2006; Kerstin Mey: *Art & Obscenity*, London and New York 2006; George Petros: *Art that Kills. A Panoramic Portrait of Aesthetic Terrorism 1984-2001*, n.p. 2007; Demetrio Paparoni: *ERETICA. The Transcendent and the Profane in Contemporary Art*, Milan 2007; Ute Schüler / Rita E. Täuber: *Skandal: Kunst! Schockierend – packend – visionary*, Stuttgart 2008; Kieran Cashell: *Aftershock. The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art*, London and New York 2009; Kathrin Linder: *Kunstskandale Heute: zwischen Trivialität und Relevanz, Lizentiatsarbeit at the University of Zurich* 2010; Thomas Schlessler: *L'art face à la censure. Cinq siècles d'interdits et de résistances*, Paris 2011; Elea Baucheron / Diane Routex: *Skandalkunst. Zensiert. Verboten. Geächtet*, Munich 2013; Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (eds.): *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, London and New York 2013; Dagmar Fenner: *Was kann und darf Kunst? Ein ethischer Grundriss*, Frankfurt on the Main and New York 2013. Also interesting in this connection are the websites of the Virtual Museum of Offending Arts and Censorship: <http://www.kwetsendekunst.nl/> and <http://www.zensurarchiv.de/index.php?title=Kunst> (accessed on Feb. 2, 2017), for both sites offer neat overviews of controversial art.

<sup>22</sup> »Hinzu kommt, daß die gesellschaftlichen Anschauungen über das auf dem Gebiete der Kunst Schickliche und Anstößige sich – wie die Geschichte lehrt – ständig wandeln. Selbst zur gleichen Zeit und Ort sind moralische Wertungen und Anschauungen nicht einhellig. Das sittliche Empfinden, wie es normal und durchschnittlich breitere Volkskreise beherrscht, wird nämlich naturgemäß bestimmt durch verschiedene Faktoren wie Anlage, Herkunft, Religion, Erziehung, Bildung, Beruf oder persönliches Erleben.»

See Ott: *Kunst und Staat* (see note 13), p. 130; cf. Fuchs: *Geschichte der erotischen Kunst* (see note 13), p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> See Lawrence A. Stanley: *Art and »Perversion« – Censoring Images of Nude Children, in Perspektief (Quarterly Photography) Magazine*, 40 (1991), p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. <https://news.artnet.com/graham-ovenden-photos-destroyed-339976> (accessed on Feb. 2, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> »Der Richter hält sich für berechtigt, eine Zeichnung von Schiele zu verbrennen, und er tut es im Talar, als vollziehe er einen Akt der Gerechtigkeit, als sei durch diesen Akt des Vandalismus erwiesen, daß der Künstler Schiele Unrecht habe und »die Moral« auf Seiten des Richters sei«. See Hans Gerhard Evers: *Kunstverbote durch Sittengerichte*, in Walter Böckmann: *Kunst vor dem Richter* (see note 21), p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> See Jojada Verrips: *The State and the Empire of Evil*, in Paul Clough / Jon P. Mitchell (eds.): *Powers of Good and Evil. Social Transformation and Popular Belief*, New York and Oxford 2001, pp. 185–210.

<sup>27</sup> See Ex. 34:13, 17 and Deut. 12:2. For Islam and images, see Richard Ettinghausen: *Arabische Malerei*, Geneva 1962, pp. 11–17, and for Judaism and images, see Anthony Julius: *Idolizing Pictures: Idolatry, Iconoclasm and Jewish Art*, New York 2001.

<sup>28</sup> A very interesting case of a deviant or transgressive representation of Our Lady or la Virgen de Guadalupe that triggered protest rallies and even death threats addressed to its maker (the artist Alma López, a Mexican-born Chicana) occurred in Mexico in 2001. See Alicia Gaspar de Alba / Alma López (eds.): *Our Lady of Controversy. Alma López's »Irreverent Apparition«*, Austin 2011.

<sup>29</sup> An example of imagery regarding the life of Jesus that caus-

ed much turmoil was the photographs of the Savior »among homosexuals, trans people, leather people and people with AIDS« by the Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin, shown in the exhibition *Ecce Homo*, which toured in Europe between 1998 and 2004. See Gabriella Ahlström: *Ecce Homo. Berättelsen om en utställning*, Stockholm 1999 and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecce\\_Homo\\_\(exhibition\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecce_Homo_(exhibition)) (accessed on Feb. 2, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> In this connection, see Nissan N. Perez: *Corpus Christi. Christusbildungen in der Fotografie*, Heidelberg 2003.

<sup>31</sup> For an enlightening overview of sacrilege and blasphemy, see Martin Scharfe: *Über die Religion. Glaube und Zweifel in der Volkskultur*, Cologne 2004, pp. 157–207. See Yvonne Sherwood: *Biblical Blaspheming. Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age*, Cambridge 2012, p. 74, for the ways in which not only the God of the Old Testament, but also His prophets often engaged in blasphemy toward other gods (since they were »regularly reduced to mere material, blocks of wood, or submerged in an acid bath of satire« and »parodied in distortions of their names [...] or reduced to »nothings«, »abominations« or pieces of dung or shit.«)

<sup>32</sup> The female crucifixion is not unknown in the Roman Catholic Church, for Saint Wilgefortis, a bearded woman, was nailed to a cross. Whereas her image became part of its saintly tradition, this cannot be said of the many, often highly eroticized and therefore controversial images of crucified women made by artists from 1850 on. See Jürgen Zänker: *Crucifixae. Frauen am Kreuz*, Berlin 1998. See also Anne-Marie Korte in this volume.

<sup>33</sup> It is important to realize that the image of Jesus on the cross is increasingly used to demand attention for other forms of human (and even animal) suffering, for example at the exhibition *Cross Purposes: Shock and Contemplation in Images of the Crucifixion in London*, 2010. For uncontested images of

Christ in modern art, see Richard Harries: *The Image of Christ in Modern Art*, Farnham 2013.

<sup>34</sup> See Jürgen Raap: *Abendmahl* (see note 21).

<sup>35</sup> Along with the three neuralgic points a, b, and c, the triangle also implies the following combinations: a and b, a and c, b and c, and, finally, a, b, and c. My data gave me the strong impression that imagery in which both Eros and the sacred are connected in a deviant way (for example, in the work of the Belgian artist Felicien Rops and recently in a series of scabrous cartoons of the Prophet by a host of cartoonists) is considered extremely disgusting and therefore ripe for censorship or iconoclasm.

<sup>36</sup> In 2000, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam organized an exhibition with the title *Exorcism / Aesthetic Terrorism* that showed work by such artists as Louise Bourgeois and Bruce Naumann, who, according to Sütö, tried to take seriously the expression: »To strangle the devil, one has to look him in the face.« See Wilma Sütö: *Exorcism/Aesthetic Terrorism*, in Wilma Sütö and Bas Heijne: *Exorcism Aesthetic Terrorism. Fiery temperaments in contemporary art*, Rotterdam 2000, p. 27. See also Petros: *Art that Kills* (see note 21), p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Marjorie Heins: *Sex, Sin, and Blasphemy. A Guide to America's Censorship Wars*, New York 1993 and Young: *Aesthetic Vertigo* (see note 4).

<sup>38</sup> See David Riches: *The Phenomenon of Violence*, in David Riches (ed.): *The Anthropology of Violence*, Oxford 1986, pp. 1-28.

<sup>39</sup> For the term *iconomachia*, see Costas Douzinas / Lynda Nead (eds.): *Law and the Image. The Authority of Art and the Aesthetics of Law*, Chicago 1999.

<sup>40</sup> See Ursula Baatz et al.: *Bilderstreit: Pressefreiheit? Blasphemie? Globale Politik?*, Vienna 2006.

<sup>41</sup> In September 2015, exactly ten years after the Muhammad cartoons appeared in the *Jyllands-Posten*, there was again a lot of discussion in Denmark about these controversial images that led to many deaths and injuries in the world, because the Conservative People's Party pleaded for their insertion in schoolbooks, so that the schoolchildren might become acquainted with them.

<sup>42</sup> »Eindeutig sind [...] die Hassbilder im Internet mit denen sich die Gegner bekämpfen. Auf beiden Seiten gibt es eine Unzahl von Hatepages, die Neumann-Braun [...] folgendermaßen charakterisiert: ohne jedes Maß und Grenze, was die Erniedrigung und die Vernichtung des Anderen angeht. Die vom ihm konstatierte »Ent-Normierung« findet bei den [...] Websites aber nicht auf sprachlichen, sondern explizit auf der bildlichen Ebene statt.« See Birgit Richard: 9-11. World Trade Center Image Complex + »shifting image,« in *Kunstforum*, 164 (2003), pp. 37-74.

<sup>43</sup> See David Gordon White: *Myths of the Dog-Man*, Chicago and London 1991, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> See Sophia Rose Arjana: *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, Oxford 2015, p. 32. For »survivals« of the representation of the Prophet and Muslims as horny and lecherous beings, see, for example, several of the cartoons by Luz (Rénald Luzier) published in the controversial journal *Charlie Hebdo*, <https://www.les-crises.fr/charlie-a-manipule-la-france/> (accessed on Feb. 2, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Muslims in medieval times used the same kind of negative stereotypes to characterize Christians. Cf. White: *Myths* (see note 43), p. 67.

<sup>46</sup> See Jojada Verrips: *Aisthesis & An-Aesthesia*, in Orvar



- Löfgren / Richard Wilk (eds.): *Off the Edge. Experiments in Cultural Analysis*, Copenhagen 2006, pp. 29-37.
- <sup>47</sup> See Cyril Pennartz: *Athenes ademticht. De neurale codering van emotie, herinnering en bewustzijn*, Amsterdam 2003.
- <sup>48</sup> A fine example of a thought-provoking approach in art appreciation that takes the body, more particularly the cognitive unconscious (perceived as all multisensory and neural processing), seriously is the one developed by Joy and Sherry. See Annamma Joy / John F. Sherry Jr.: *Speaking of Art as Embodied Imagination. A Multisensory Approach to Understanding Aesthetic Experience*, in *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30 (2003), pp. 259-283.
- <sup>49</sup> The incorporated imagery is reminiscent of Adolf Göller's concept of the »Gedächtnisbild« or »memory image«, by which he meant »the image of something that we slowly build up in our memory after repeated viewings.« See John Onians: *Neuroarthistory. From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki*, New Haven and London 2003, p. 110.
- <sup>50</sup> See Jojada Verrips: *Offending Art and the Sense of Touch*, in *Material Religion*, 4(2) (2008), pp. 204-225.
- <sup>51</sup> Plohman, for example, wrote an interesting thesis on how, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists, such as Thorneycroft, began to stir the emotion of disgust in museums – formerly quiet, clean places that emphasized just watching and having an aesthetic experience – by exhibiting disturbing imagery of deviant nudity, sex, and death. »The fact that disgust is tied into many bodily sensations and emotional responses or memories,« she writes, »promises that art works that purposefully employ the disgust tactic will transform the body in the museum space.« See Angela Plohman: *Re-Thinking Contemporary Aesthetic Spaces*. Diana Thorneycroft and the Unacceptable Sublime, unpublished thesis in the Department of Art History, Montreal 2000, p. 27-28.
- <sup>52</sup> See Young: *Aesthetic Vertigo* (see note 4).
- <sup>53</sup> Miller calls disgust an emotion, that is, a feeling »connected to ideas, perceptions, and cognitions and to the social and cultural contexts in which it makes sense to have those feelings and ideas« and often a motive for action. See William Ian Miller: *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge/Mass. 1997, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>54</sup> See Birgit Meyer: *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Towards a Material Approach to Religion*, Utrecht 2012.
- <sup>55</sup> See Maurice Bloch: *Prey into Hunter. The Politics of Religious Experience*, Cambridge 1992. Bloch claims that this process in which the victim of violence turns into a perpetrator is often the outcome of (religious) rituals in which the participants are put through acts of symbolic violence, such as bodily mutilations. The »prey,« so to speak, is transformed into a »hunter.« David Pope's cartoon »He Drew First,« showing a masked man who just shot a cartoonist, which Australia's Foreign Minister presented to the Paris office of Charlie Hebdo in April 2015, illustrates this radical reversal perfectly; see <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-21/australian-cartoonist-makes-a-mark-on-charlie-hebdo/6409180> (accessed on Feb. 2, 2017).
- <sup>56</sup> See Sherwood: *Biblical Blaspheming* (see note 31), p. 165-66.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 170.
- <sup>58</sup> Kristeva cited in Plohman: *Re-Thinking Contemporary Aesthetic Spaces* (see note 51), p. 40.
- <sup>59</sup> See Carolyn Korsmeyer: *Savoring Disgust. The Foul & the Fair in Aesthetics*, Oxford 2011. See also Miller: *The Anatomy of Disgust* (see note 53), p. 22. Schiller already dealt extensively with the ambivalent character of what disgusts, for example, in his texts *Gedanken über den Gebrauch des Gemeinen und Niedrigen in der Kunst und Zerstreute Betrachtungen*

*über verschiedene ästhetische Gegenstände.* See Wolfgang Riedel (ed.): Friedrich Schiller. Sämtliche Werke. Vol. V. Munich and Vienna 2004, pp. 537-570.

<sup>60</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Story of Asdiwal, in Edmund Leach (ed.): The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism, London 1967, p. 30.

<sup>61</sup> See Bloch: Prey into Hunter (see note 55), p. 99.

<sup>62</sup> Compare this with what Winfried Menninghaus maintained in an announcement of a lecture in the IFK on 3 December 2012 titled Was heisst es, sich von einem Kunstwerk »bewegt« zu fühlen?, namely that »die Bewertung eines Kunstwerks als bewegend tendenziell durchweg eine positive genuin ästhetische Bewertung impliziert.« As if he, who published a fascinating study on disgust, had never heard of transgressive or taboo-violating art and the sort of unpleasant, negative emotions this kind of art might generate in many people. But he did, for the lecture contains a section on »Abject Art,« in which he is scornful about this sort of art, because in his view, it is true of the disgusting »daß es als maximaler Gegenwert des Schönen und stärkster anti-ästhetischer Reiz nicht ein für allemal den Sieg über die Idealisierung der Form davon tragen kann.« So, abject art concerns just beautifully designed provocations and nothing else! See Winfried Menninghaus: Ekel. Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung, Frankfurt on the Main 2002, p. 567.

<sup>63</sup> See Cashell: Aftershock (see note 21), p. 12.

# Is There such a Thing as an »Offensive Picture«?

Christoph Baumgartner

## Introduction

In our descriptions of pictures, we often ascribe particular qualities to paintings, photographs, drawings, and the like. Some of these qualities can be understood as »objective properties« in the sense that anyone who is familiar with the meaning of a specific concept can identify whether or not a particular picture actually has the property denoted by the respective concept. Michelangelo's fresco *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, for instance, is a colored and figurative picture, and Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* is monochrome and abstract. If someone were to claim that *The Last Judgment* was abstract and monochrome rather than figurative and colored, we could explain what we mean by »figurative« and »colored«, and we could try to convince that person that these concepts apply to *The Last Judgment*. If she insisted that Michelangelo's fresco was abstract and monochrome, she wouldn't merely describe the picture differently, she would describe at least some of the qualities of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* incorrectly. This is different in the case of characteristics such as »kitschy«, which we usually do not understand as matters of fact. Rather, the qualification of a picture as kitschy is dependent on personal taste or culturally dominant aesthetic norms and ideals. Accordingly, it is possible that people disagree about whether or not a picture qualifies as kitsch without making incorrect statements in the sense outlined above.

How then should we understand the notion of an offensive picture in light of the above? The notion of an offensive picture has been important in the context of public debates and ethical and legal analyses of, for instance, the exhibition or publication of images such as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a crucifix that is submerged in a glass of urine, Chris Ofili's *The Holy*



*Virgin Mary*, a painting of Mary as a black woman in a blue robe made of elephant dung and pornographic cutouts (among other materials), or the Danish so-called Muhammad cartoons that were first published by the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.<sup>1</sup> Can we reasonably argue that in specific instances offensiveness is an »objective property« of a picture? Or is the offensiveness that some people experience in view of some pictures something that exists merely in the eye or the heart of the beholder? The answers to such questions are relevant for our understanding of people's responses to particular pictures; they are also important for the ethical and legal assessment of the relevant cases. In this paper, however, my main interest is in the more fundamental question of how we should understand the notion of an offensive picture from a philosophical perspective, if it turns out in the course of analysis to be a meaningful concept at all.

I begin with a brief clarification of the notion of a picture and an exploration of the broader terminological field in which »offense« is situated in philosophical discourse. Here I make use of Joel Feinberg's distinction between various modes of offense and of Martha Nussbaum's work on disgust. I will then critically discuss two theoretical approaches that I treat as candidates that could possibly provide a framework within which the notion of an offensive picture could be understood and defended: Leon Kass's argument from the wisdom of repugnance, and cognitive-evaluative theories of emotions. Having identified the limitations of these approaches, I will conclude by suggesting that Harry Frankfurt's theory of caring can be used, in combination with insights from research on the use of pictures in religious practices, to improve the explanatory power of cognitive-evaluative theories of emotions for answering the question whether and to what extent the notion of an offensive picture is a meaningful concept.

### »Picture« and »offense« – conceptual clarifications

The concept »picture« as I use it in this paper denotes a material object that is meant to be seen by someone.<sup>2</sup> In other words, a picture is a visual medium that is used, and usually also produced, to let people see particular things. The thing that is seen, then, is the image that »appears in a picture.«<sup>3</sup> Images of visual things are dependent on pictures, since images never appear »except in some medium or another«, but unlike a picture, the image is not a material object; »you can hang a picture, but you can't hang an image.«<sup>4</sup> However, as W.J.T. Mitchell and Hans Belting point out, images can survive the pictures in which they first appear, and iconoclasm can destroy only a picture, not the image, since images can be memorized and re-materialized in new pictures or other media, such as stories or songs.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, an image can migrate through different media, and it can be conserved or transformed in this process. Unlike an image, a picture is constituted and defined by its materiality, and, as I use the concept here, by its artificiality and its purpose to show something. This means that, for instance, Niagara Falls is not a picture, whereas an artificial depiction of the falls, for instance in the form of a painting, a drawing, a photograph, or a digital file on a computer screen, is.

An analysis of the notion of »offensive picture« is complicated by the fact that the concept »offense« is relatively broad and includes various levels and dimensions. On the one hand, offense denotes an action, namely a transgression of a rule or norm; in the legal context, for example, offense refers to violating laws and committing crimes.<sup>6</sup> In the context of an analysis of offensive pictures, however, »offense« more often refers to the effect of a deed or an event: the offense

that someone takes at something. Joel Feinberg, who investigated this notion of offense from a philosophical perspective, understands such offense in a general sense as a variety of disliked mental states and emotions such as disgust, shame, hurt, repugnance or anxiety.<sup>7</sup> Within this broad conceptual field of emotional distress, Feinberg distinguishes three different modes of offense. First, there are »affronts to the senses;« here, the disliked emotions that constitute offense derive as it were directly and entirely from the sound, smell, or sight at which one takes offense – »and not at all from any symbolic representation, or recognized object.«<sup>8</sup> In other words, affronts to the senses are independent of specific beliefs about the source of the offense; at least this is how someone who takes offense in the sense of affronts to the senses experiences the offense. This is different in the case of the second mode of offense: offenses to sensibilities. These are, according to Feinberg, mediated by recognition or belief in the sense that the disliked emotions of which offense consists follow from a specific cognition of the source of offense. This cognition can be implicit and habituated, but unlike in the case of sensuous affronts, a person's emotional response to a particular object or event changes if the person's understanding of the respective object or event changes in a relevant way. Take as an example the emotional and visceral responses of many people to the sight of a public toilet smeared with human excrement and vomit: they feel disgust and revulsion. Often, we experience such emotional responses as immediate and purely visceral, but the same sight – that is the same forms and colors – provokes different emotions if we recognize the object as a clean and hygienic artifact, for example an art work, consisting of plastic or chocolate and butter cream. This demonstrates that it is the subject's conception of the object – what she »thinks« she sees in the partic-



ular situation – that is or is not offensive. Accordingly, Feinberg points out, disgust is not merely an affront to the senses, but an offense to sensibility that he defines as »the susceptibility to offense from witnessing objects or events which, because of the observer's recognition of them as objects of a certain kind, are painful for him to behold.«<sup>9</sup> In many cases, susceptibility to offense, and hence offenses to sensibilities, depend on customs and conventions that are embodied in the identity of the person who takes offense at something. Because of this deep rootedness of sensibilities, offenses to sensibilities are usually experienced as spontaneous, pre-rational or even quasi-natural. Various analyses of disgust as a specific form of offense show this clearly. Joel Feinberg, for instance, argues that, to induce disgust, it is sufficient that we recognize a situation as somebody eating something that violates our gastronomic sensibility.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Winfried Menninghaus characterizes disgust as a »spontaneous and especially energetic act of saying ›no‹ to a nearness that is not wanted.<sup>11</sup> This act of saying ›no‹ and of forcibly distancing oneself from the thing one finds disgusting is experienced as something that »overcomes us, unannounced and uncontrollable, taking sudden possession of us« and as a »compulsion to say no, an inability *not* to say no.«<sup>12</sup> The fact that disgust and other forms of offenses to sensibilities are, on the one hand, perceived as a »quasi-automatic (>instinctive<) form of nay-saying,«<sup>13</sup> while being dependent on beliefs and the recognition of specific (features of) objects, on the other hand, constitutes what one could call a »paradox of offenses to sensibilities.« How can we understand this paradox?

Martha Nussbaum's theory of disgust provides a useful tool for answering such questions. Nussbaum conceptualizes disgust in line with Feinberg,

Menninghaus, and other authors as an aversive emotion that, on the one hand, is especially visceral (it involves, e.g., strong bodily reactions to the point of retching and vomiting), but that, on the other hand, has a complex cognitive content; a core that can be reconstructed in terms of beliefs and value judgments.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, Nussbaum explains disgust as emotional warnings against »contaminants,« objects that are »understood« (albeit implicitly) by the person who is disgusted as rendering unacceptable a substance that can enter our bodies.<sup>15</sup> Although there is a variety of possible objects of disgust, one can identify a group of »core objects of disgust,« all of which are in one way or the other related to animal (including human) matter, especially animal waste products, which we usually see as debasing.<sup>16</sup> Such objects are »ubiquitously objects of disgust,« Nussbaum argues, and »societies seem not to have latitude to make these primary objects non-disgusting.«<sup>17</sup> An average person feels disgust or similar forms of offenses to sensibilities when he or she sees such objects, especially in view of the prospect of touching, smelling, swallowing, or being penetrated by them or by things that have been in contact with such core objects of disgust, since in such situations the aspect of contamination and, resulting from this, debasement or dehumanization are especially palpable. This aspect of debasement and dehumanization is decisive, here, since the core idea of disgust is, according to Nussbaum,

the belief that if we take in the animalness of animal secretions we will ourselves be reduced to the status of animals. Similarly, if we absorb or are mingled with the decaying, we will ourselves be mortal and decaying. Disgust thus wards off both animality in general and the mortality that is so prominent in our loathing of our animality.<sup>18</sup>

Against this background, we can better understand the aforementioned »paradox of offenses to sensibilities.« Certain forms of offense, such as disgust in view of feces, vomit, etc., include a quasi-cognitive core: the recognition of the object of disgust as contaminant. The »knowledge« whether or not an object is contaminating (in the sense that is relevant for disgust) relates to and is part of the corporality and vulnerability that is common to all human beings, independent of particular cultural and social circumstances. Accordingly, disgust and other forms of offenses to sensibilities are experienced as »objective« and direct bodily sensations and as things that befall us and are completely out of our control; the object of disgust actually *is* disgusting, independent of somebody's specific character traits and personal identity. This is different in the case of the third mode of offense that Joel Feinberg identifies: offenses to higher-level sensibilities and profound offense.<sup>19</sup> Such offenses to higher-level sensibilities are intrinsically related to and determined by a person's morality or religion and the beliefs, values, and ideals that are part of this. One's higher-level sensibilities are offended if and only if she understands an act or event as a violation or denigration of her morality or religion. Take the example of burning, trampling on, or cutting into pieces a national flag. Such acts can offend the higher-level sensibilities of an individual whose morality includes a form of patriotism that requires people to treat the national flag with respect; people who don't hold such principles won't be offended by seeing, for instance, a burning flag. Similarly, people can take offense at the presence of a pig at certain places (or at pork on their dishes) if they consider pigs impure, for instance for religious reasons. In other words, the production of offenses to higher-level sensibilities involves principles, values, and norms that cannot



be traced back to a general human condition, and accordingly there cannot be any »ubiquitous objects of offenses to higher-level sensibilities.« This dependency on principles, values, and norms that are learned and influenced by culture and tradition does not mean, however, that offenses to higher-level sensibilities are experienced by the person who takes offense as being somehow »subjective« or »relative« – »Offense is no less real for its dependence upon values and tastes peculiar to a particular culture or system of belief.«<sup>20</sup> Rather, the opposite is true: If the relevant moral or religious principles, values, and norms are constitutive for the self-understanding of a person, she can be profoundly offended by violations of such principles, values, and so forth. Such profound offense is experienced as »shattering« and »serious,« and – importantly – »in the case of profound offense [...] something offends us and not merely our senses or lower order sensibilities.«<sup>21</sup>

Summing up these conceptual considerations, we can distinguish a picture as a material object that is meant to be seen by somebody from an image as the immaterial »thing« that appears in a picture and that can migrate through different media. Moreover, there are different modes of offense: affronts to the senses and offenses to sensibilities that can include offenses to higher-level sensibilities and profound offense, which are dependent on moral or religious beliefs, norms, values, and so forth that are deeply rooted in the identity of a person. The distinctions between various modes of offense are analytical in the sense that they can help us to better understand and explain the reasons and roots of offense in different cases. As will become clear in the following section, however, the different modes of offense actually merge in the concrete experiences of people who take offense at something.

So what do these distinctions yield for an analysis of the question whether there is such a thing as an offensive picture? Can they help us to understand and conceptualize the notion of an offensive picture, and if so, how?

### **Leon Kass's theory of »wisdom of repugnance« and a strong notion of offensive pictures**

If people take offense at pictures, all three modes of offense could possibly be involved. In the following, however, I will focus on the exploration of possible understandings of pictures that are offensive in the sense of offenses to sensibilities, since only these modes of offense are relevant for an analysis of pictures such as those mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

One could argue that especially vivid pictures of »core objects of disgust« as Nussbaum describes them are offensive in the sense that the sensibilities of virtually everyone are offended by the sight of such pictures, since the images that are evoked by such pictures almost necessarily cause people to feel, for example, disgust. To such pictures, a »strong notion of an offensive picture« could be applied; this concept would include pictures that evoke, as it were inevitably, images that are offensive to virtually all spectators. But even if we granted this, the use of such a strong notion of offensive pictures for our understanding of pictures such as *Piss Christ*, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, or the Danish Muhammad cartoons would be very limited. For the revulsion that is part of the responses of those who take offense at such pictures includes a moral component that is expressed by people's protest against the production, display, and sometimes

the sheer existence of such pictures. So the mode of the offense that people take at such pictures is obviously different from that of disgust as Martha Nussbaum and others describe it. Accordingly, the notion of offensive pictures could possibly be better understood within the framework of an approach that integrates a theory of specific disliked emotions and modes of offense with an analysis of instances of moral revolt. Leon Kass's argument from the wisdom of repugnance provides such a framework.<sup>22</sup>

Kass developed this argument in the context of the bioethical debate about the reproductive cloning of human beings; he starts with the observation (or assertion) that people usually respond to the prospect of cloning humans with specific, strong emotions.

»Offensive.« »Grotesque.« »Revolting.« »Repugnant.« »Repulsive.« These are the words most commonly heard regarding the prospect of human cloning. Such reactions come both from the man or woman in the street and from the intellectuals, from believers and atheists, from humanists and scientists.<sup>23</sup>

These emotional responses indicate, according to Kass, that people reject reproductive human cloning because of a number of phenomena that, he asserts, accompany it and that people intuitively and universally recognize a morally problematic, such as the »mass production of human beings, with large clones of look-alikes, compromised in their individuality; the idea of father-son or mother-daughter twins [...]«<sup>24</sup> Although, as Kass admits, the fact that people feel revulsion or similar emotions in view of an object or event does not show



that the respective object or event actually is morally problematic, he argues that »in crucial cases [...] repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it.«<sup>25</sup> The cloning of human beings is, according to Kass, such a crucial case, and actually »repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.«<sup>26</sup>

This argument from the wisdom of repugnance is based on the assumptions that there are objects and practices that have a status as »ubiquitous objects of repugnance« and that all people have a natural capacity to identify and be alerted to these objects or practices. People who are not offended by the sight or the prospect of such objects or practices experience them not only differently, but also wrongly, and their capacity to adequately respond to such objects is deficient, or, to put it in Leon Kass's words, their souls are »shallow« and they have »forgotten how to shudder.«

Anthony Fisher and Hayden Ramsay have used the argument from the wisdom of repugnance in their ethical analysis of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*; »popular repugnance at sacrilege and blasphemy,« they claim, is also an example of a »crucial case« in which the wisdom of repugnance informs us about certain features of particular practices or objects.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Fisher and Ramsay don't elaborate on this any further, but their claim that *Piss Christ* is a picture to which the appropriate response is repugnance seems to be based on a strong notion of an offensive picture as I delineated it above. Moreover, they have to assume in their argument that *Piss Christ* is an instance of such a picture. The latter assumption could possibly be supported by pointing out that urine was used

for the production of *Piss Christ* and that it is part of the title of the artwork. However, people who took offense at *Piss Christ* did not complain about the use of specific matter as such, but about the fact that a crucifix was brought into contact with urine. Immersing a crucifix in urine and taking a photo of it, as Serrano did, however, is more an instance of a transgression of a religious norm and hence of »matter out of place« (Mary Douglas) from the perspective of people whose religion prescribes that (particular) religious objects should (not) be treated in specific manner than it is an instance of a ubiquitous object of offense to sensibilities. This dependency of the offense that people take at pictures like *Piss Christ* on a particular religion that is not rooted in the universal human condition, but is highly contested in contexts of religious diversity, makes it impossible to speak about, for instance, *Piss Christ* as an offensive picture in the strong sense. Hence, the argument from the wisdom of repugnance fails to provide a framework within which we could adequately understand and defend the notion of offensive pictures.

At first sight, the problem of the dependency of offense to (higher-level) sensibilities on beliefs, norms, and so forth that are not part of the universal human condition seems to be fatal also for cognitive-evaluative theories of emotions, which are a second candidate for a theoretical framework for a philosophical understanding of a notion of an offensive picture.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, I would argue such theories provide insights that enable us to understand why and to what extent we can reasonably use the concept of offensive pictures in analyses of controversies about pictures like *Piss Christ*, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, or the Danish Muhammad cartoons.

### **Revising cognitive-evaluative theories of emotions in light of Harry Frankfurt's theory of caring**

Cognitive-evaluative theories conceptualize emotions such as anger, love, grief, or fear as forms of evaluative judgments that ascribe high value to things and persons. In these judgments, people appraise the elements they value highly as salient to their well-being.<sup>29</sup> Fear, for instance, embodies specific beliefs about an object, namely that the object is important to the person who feels fear, that it is at risk, and that the person cannot entirely control the impending bad event. As soon as the person learns that the situation actually is not dangerous, her emotion will change, and she will feel, for instance, relief.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, cognitive-evaluative theories of emotion understand the person who feels an emotion as an active participant in and contributor to the process of evoking an emotion: although she may experience an emotion as something that overwhelms her and that she cannot control, she actually produces the necessary conditions of an emotion, for instance by valuing highly things she cannot fully control. This is an important difference from the assumptions underlying Leon Kass's argument from the wisdom of repugnance; Kass assumes that virtually all people feel repugnance and other modes of offense toward practices like the cloning of human beings, as it were, »naturally« or quasi-automatically (like a technical measuring instrument). Advocates of cognitive-evaluative theories, by contrast, impute to persons (indirect) responsibility for their emotions. Generally, someone has indirect responsibility for something if the person is able to control and cultivate (some of) the circumstances that give rise to a particular deed, attitude, event, and so forth. In the case of emotions, people are, to a certain extent,



responsible for whether they maintain particular values (that were acquired earlier in the process of socialization) on which emotions depend, and hence »we can cultivate and habituate emotions by attaching more or less value to certain things.«<sup>31</sup> For offenses to higher-level sensibilities in Feinberg's sense, this means that a person is indirectly responsible for taking offense at, for example, Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, insofar as she is responsible for the susceptibility to offense from witnessing (or knowing about) transgressions of specific religious norms concerning the use of matter like elephant dung and pornographic cutouts in relation to the Virgin Mary. She will be susceptible to taking offense at this art work and similar pictures only if Mary is religiously or morally important for her (or if she highly values Mary for some other reasons) and if she judges the piece as defiling the Virgin Mary and Her holiness.<sup>32</sup>

At first sight, a strong notion of an offensive picture seems to be implausible within the framework of such cognitive-evaluative theories of emotions. Rather than supporting a strong notion of an offensive picture, such an understanding of emotions accords with W.J.T. Mitchell's claim that it is not the material picture that offends, but the image that is actively (albeit not necessarily knowingly and deliberately) evoked in the spectator. »A picture,« Mitchell writes,

is less like a statement or speech act [...] than like a speaker capable of an infinite number of utterances. An image is not a text to be read but a ventriloquist's dummy into which we project our own voice. When we are offended by what an image »says,« we are like the ventriloquist insulted by his own dummy.<sup>33</sup>

Mitchell's considerations seem to suggest that spectators who do or do not take offense at pictures like *The Holy Virgin Mary*, *Piss Christ*, or the Danish Muhammad cartoons always act as ventriloquists and that they simply make the dummy (i.e., the image that appears to them in the picture) say very different things because they value highly different things. In light of this, the production of a ubiquitously offensive picture (in the sense of offenses to higher-level sensibilities) would be impossible, since somebody's attempt to produce such a picture will always fail, if spectators don't contribute to the process as described above.

Analyses of recent public controversies about art works, cartoons, movies, and so forth at which many religious people took offense demonstrate that there is a strong predominance of the cognitive-evaluative approach on the part of secular and liberal critics of protests against such images. In the debate about the Danish Muhammad cartoons, for instance, believers who based their complaints about the cartoons on the claim that the cartoons offended their religious sensibilities were construed as being oversensitive, and protesting Muslims were told that they shouldn't take religion too seriously. Obviously, the predominant expectation was that citizens of democratic and pluralistic societies »ought to keep a critical distance to [their] commitments, particularly if these are religious commitments.«<sup>34</sup>

An important component of this argument is the claim that it is wrong to ascribe too much value to things that other people dislike or object to, if one isn't willing to put up with, for example, harsh criticism and ridicule of the things that one values. Such an argument, however, rests upon a misunderstanding of what valuing means in the context of emotions related to religion and of the status of the judgments that are related to it.

Valuing something (x) can be generally understood to involve various ele-

ments:<sup>35</sup> a belief that X is good or worthy, a susceptibility to experience context-dependent emotions concerning X, a disposition to experience these emotions as being merited or appropriate, and a disposition to treat considerations related to X as reasons for action in relevant contexts. A devout Catholic who values the Virgin Mary, for example, believes that Mary is »good« (deserves to be valued); the valuing person is susceptible to emotions such as joy or grief in relation to the Virgin Mary; she considers her emotions appropriate; and, finally, her valuing Mary will give her reasons for action, for instance to say the Hail Mary. It is also possible that her valuing the Virgin Mary extends to depictions of Mary – it will possibly provide reasons to contemplate icons of the Virgin Mary, and she will be vulnerable to emotions such as anger, grief, or hurt if she notices that somebody destroys such icons or uses matter such as feces and pornographic cutouts for pictures of the Virgin Mary. In light of this, it seems possible only to speak of offensive images, but not of offensive pictures, since exactly the same picture (the material object) will be offensive for some but not for others, depending on whether or not different people value the picture highly. In the context of offenses that are related to religion and religious objects such as pictures, however, the problem with this view of valuing is that it construes the relationship between the valuing person and the object that is valued as a relation between two entities that remain separate from each other. In so doing, it neglects an important aspect of profound offense: profound offense is related to things, beliefs, or practices that are not only valued as external objects, but that are part and parcel of the identity of the valuing person.<sup>36</sup> From a philosophical perspective, this can be reconstructed in terms of caring about something as Harry Frankfurt has conceptualized it.<sup>37</sup> People, he argues, have



certain »ideals,« things they care about. When a person cares about something, she regards it as important in the sense that her desires and wishes are structured by what she cares about, and certain wishes are deemed more important than others. Such caring is not primarily a matter of believing that something is or should be important, but it is »constituted by a complex set of cognitive, affective, and volitional dispositions and states.«<sup>38</sup> Moreover, what one actually and effectively cares about is often not under one's immediate control, and is also not only an individual affair, since people are brought up in particular cultural and social contexts and »grow into« traditions and cultures within which they share important objects of caring. They are members of various communities, and all of this is relevant to what they care about and to what extent they are able and willing to critically reflect upon and either reaffirm or possibly try to reshape what they care about, and hence their own identities.

Similar to valuing, caring about something implies that one considers something good, and both valuing and caring about something involve a specific susceptibility to emotions that are related to the object of valuing and caring. The characteristic feature of caring that is decisive in the context of my analysis of the notion of offensive pictures, however, is that caring »incorporates« the thing a person cares about into her identity. Of course, the object of one's caring is not dissolved in this process; rather,

a person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He identifies himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, caring about something is distinct from valuing something because, in the case of caring, the person and what she cares about are inextricably entangled. Somebody's object of caring is deeply incorporated in, and a defining part of, the identity of the person, and the person cannot be adequately understood without reference to what she cares about. For my question concerning the concept of an offensive picture, a further component of Frankfurt's theory of caring is especially important. In his discussion of questions related to freedom of will and autonomy, Frankfurt argues that a person can care about certain things so much and so wholeheartedly that it is impossible for her to act in a way that is inconsistent with what she cares about. In that case, according to Frankfurt, a person is subject to »volitional necessities« that make it »unthinkable« for the person to perform a certain action, since otherwise she would betray the object of her caring and hence herself.<sup>40</sup> Frankfurt illustrates the effect of volitional necessities with the famous declaration by (or rather attributed to) Martin Luther, who refused the demand to retract his writings at the Diet of Worms in 1521 by stating, »Here I stand, I can do no other.«<sup>41</sup> Such examples show that volitional necessities are rightly construed as limitations of a person's freedom (Luther cannot retract his writings). At the same time, however, volitional necessities are rightly experienced as expressions of the will and the autonomy of the respective person herself.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **How can we understand the notion of an offensive picture?**

To what extent is Harry Frankfurt's theory more applicable to the notion of an offensive picture than Leon Kass's considerations about the wisdom of repugnance and cognitive-evaluative theories of emotions that are based on an understanding of valuing such as the one sketched above?

In light of Frankfurt's theory, a pious Catholic can be understood as one who wholeheartedly cares about a religious tradition that, along with particular practices, includes certain images (not pictures) of Jesus, saints, and the Virgin Mary, among others. These images are shared by many Catholic people; not all of them find all of the images equally important, but for some, images of, for instance, the Virgin Mary occupy a central place in their personal religious subjectivity. For them, Mary is a constitutive part of their lives in the sense that they develop, maintain, and express who they are in relation to images of Mary, for instance as loving mother, source of solace, or ideal of moral and religious purity. Whatever else may be constitutive of what they wholeheartedly care about and of what they are invested in, from Frankfurt's perspective, images of the Virgin Mary are indispensable to who they are. These images, however, do not »come to them« in an immediate way, but are evoked and actualized in various media, such as songs, prayers, and pictures. Such »sensational forms,« as Birgit Meyer calls them, »invoke and perpetuate shared experiences, emotions, and affects that are anchored in a taken-for-granted sense of self and community,«<sup>42</sup> and they do so, I suggest, through the images that appear in them to people for whom the respective sensational forms »matter« in the sense of



Harry Frankfurt's theory of caring. Without such sensational forms, the images that are essential for one's identity cannot be made »real.« Accordingly, the role of pictures in the lives of many religious people cannot be adequately described in terms of objects that are valued highly, but remain external and separate from them. Rather, the relation between a person and certain pictures can be one of constructive entanglement in the sense that it is in pictures (among other things) that people »find,« incorporate, and emulate the images in which they are invested. If that is the case, people cannot (in the sense of a volitional necessity) respond to an image they recognize as depicting something they wholeheartedly care about, on the one hand, but that, on the other hand, evokes a degradation of what they are invested in, as an »external object« of which they calmly disapprove. Rather, they are bound to take profound offense at the image that appears (to them), as it were necessarily, in the picture in question. This means that a strong notion of an offensive picture does not apply to pictures like Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, Serrano's *Piss Christ*, or the Danish Muhammad cartoons; such pictures can be profoundly offensive, but only for particular people, namely those whose object of caring includes the sacred figures that are addressed by these pictures. With the possible exception of some pictures of »ubiquitous objects of disgust« (see above), the offensiveness of a picture exists always »merely« in the mode of potentiality and is not an »intrinsic« feature of the picture by itself. However, in certain cases and for particular people this potentiality will be necessarily realized. Here, the person in question »can do no other« than to let the ventriloquist's dummy and the material picture utter a specific message – a specific image – at which the person must take offense. In such cases, I suggest, the distinction between an image to which one takes

offense and the picture in which this image necessarily appears for the respective person is merely analytical, and because of this, and limited to such cases, the notion of an offensive picture is a meaningful concept.

These considerations are especially significant in the context of liberal and pluralistic societies. Such societies are characterized by the presence of a diversity of religious and non-religious traditions within which individuals acquire and grow into different »objects of caring« in the process of socialization. Moreover, people are free, and by educational, commercial, and other means actively stimulated »to make their own choices« and to express themselves in public. This, however, almost inevitably results in others' taking offense at someone's (verbal, material, pictorial, etc.) statements – just because people not only disagree about what is of value in their lives, including matters of religion; they also disagree about, and are imbued with, rivaling (»proper«) practices of engaging with what they do or do not care about. In light of this, we cannot be surprised by the fact that offensive pictures in the sense outlined above »exist« in liberal and pluralistic societies.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Elisabeth Burns Coleman: *The Offenses of Blasphemy. Messages in and through Art*, in *Journal of Value Inquiry* 45 (2011), pp. 67–84; Anthony Fisher / Hayden Ramsay: *Of Art and Blasphemy*, in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 3 (2000), p. 137–167; S. Brent Plate: *Blasphemy. Art that Offends*, London 2006; Saba Mahmood: *Religious Reason and Secular Affect. An Incommensurable Divide?*, in Talal Asad / Wendy Brown / Judith Butler / Saba Mahmood (eds.): *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury,*

*and Free Speech*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2009 pp. 64–100.

<sup>2</sup> For the following, see Hans Belting: *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. by Thomas Dunlap, Princeton and Oxford 2011; and W. J. T. Mitchell: *Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science*, in James Elkins (ed.): *Visual Literacy*, New York 2008, pp. 14–30.

- <sup>3</sup> Mitchell: *Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science* (see note 2), p. 16.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 16.
- <sup>5</sup> Belting: *Anthropology of Images* (see note 2), p. 5.
- <sup>6</sup> See Lorenz Langer: *Religious Offence and Human Rights. The Implications of Defamation of Religions*, Cambridge 2014, p. 8.
- <sup>7</sup> Joel Feinberg: *Offense to Others. The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, New York and Oxford 1985. Feinberg elaborates on offense extensively in this book, and he addresses important normative questions that I don't address, because in the context of this paper I'm not interested in possible moral or political questions related to offensive pictures.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 14.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 16.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 16.
- <sup>11</sup> Wilfried Menninghaus: *Disgust. The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Joel Golb, New York 2003, p. 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 2; (emphasis in original).
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 2.
- <sup>14</sup> See Martha Nussbaum: *Hiding from Humanity. Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton and Oxford 2004, pp. 87-98. Nussbaum builds her theory on insights from evolutionary theories and psychological research.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 87.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 89.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 91. This is part of Nussbaum's criticism of Mary Douglas's influential theory of purity and danger, according to which disgust and impurity are always socially contextual notions. What makes an object »disgusting« or »impure,« according to Douglas, is its »being out of place;« the same object may be pure and not disgusting in a different (social and/or spatial) context (see Mary Douglas: *Purity and Danger. An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, London 1966). Nussbaum considers Douglas' approach too contextual when it comes to the analysis of our emotional responses to core objects of disgust. I don't argue that there actually are such ubiquitous objects of disgust as Nussbaum postulates them. Rather, my argument in this section is that a strict notion of an offensive picture makes sense only on the basis of certain assumptions.
- <sup>18</sup> Nussbaum: *Hiding from Humanity* (see note 14), p. 89.
- <sup>19</sup> See Feinberg: *Offense to Others* (see note 7), pp. 16-18 and pp. 50-96.
- <sup>20</sup> Peter Jones: *Blasphemy, Offensiveness, and the Law*, in *British Journal of Political Science*, 10 (1980), pp. 129-148, here p. 137.
- <sup>21</sup> Feinberg: *Offense to Others* (see note 7), pp. 50-96, here p. 59.
- <sup>22</sup> Kass, Leon: *The Wisdom of Repugnance*, in *The New Republic*, 2 June 1997, pp. 17-26.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 19.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 20.



- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 20. Kass's argument has been criticized massively in bioethics, but I don't go into this here, because his specific critique of cloning human beings is not relevant for my analysis of the notion of offensive pictures.
- <sup>27</sup> Fisher / Ramsay: *Art that Offends* (see note 1), p. 143.
- <sup>28</sup> For the following, see Martha Nussbaum: *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, New York 2001 and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev: *The Subtlety of Emotions*, Cambridge/Mass. 2000.
- <sup>29</sup> Nussbaum: *Upheavals of Thought* (see note 28), p. 19.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.
- <sup>31</sup> Ben-Ze'ev: *Subtlety of Emotions* (see note 28), p. 246.
- <sup>32</sup> One could, for instance, also appreciate the symbolic value that elephant dung has in African culture, where it is a sign of fertility. See W. J. T. Mitchell: *What Do Pictures Want? The lives and loves of images*, Chicago and London 2005, p. 135.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 140.
- <sup>34</sup> Christian F. Rostbøll: *Autonomy, Respect and Arrogance in the Danish Cartoon Controversy*, in *Political Theory*, 37/5 (2009), pp. 623-648, here p. 626.
- <sup>35</sup> For the following, see Samuel Scheffler: *Equality and Tradition. Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory*, Oxford 2010, here pp. 15-40.
- <sup>36</sup> See Jojada Verrips in this volume.
- <sup>37</sup> For the following, see Harry G. Frankfurt: *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*, New York 1988 and Harry G. Frankfurt: *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, New York 1999.
- <sup>38</sup> Frankfurt: *Importance of What We Care About* (see note 37), p. 85.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 83.
- <sup>40</sup> See ibid., pp. 85-88 and Frankfurt: *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (see note 37), pp. 110-114.
- <sup>41</sup> Frankfurt: *Importance of What We Care About* (see note 37), p. 86.
- <sup>42</sup> Birgit Meyer: *Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion*, Amsterdam 2006, p. 20. See also David Morgan: *Visual Piety. A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1998 and Id.: *The Look of the Sacred*, in Orsi, Robert (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, New York 2012, pp. 296-318.

# The Dynamics of Taking Offense. Concluding Thoughts and Outlook<sup>1</sup>

Birgit Meyer



[FIG. 1]  
Message placed on stairs  
of Schöneberg train  
station, Berlin 2016  
(photo by Jojada Verrips)



[FIG. 2]  
Message placed on stairs  
of Schöneberg train  
station, Berlin 2016  
(photo by Jojada Verrips)

»Gibt ihnen mehr Mohamed-Karikaturen!« – »Give them more Muhammad cartoons!« – was the message printed on small pieces of paper casually distributed on the stairs to Berlin's Schöneberg train station in February 2016 (Fig. 1). They struck my eye in passing and evoked in my mind the so-called cartoon controversy and all that happened in its slipstream. Launched by a »proud infidel« of Arabic descent, as another piece of paper in the same style disclosed a bit later, the message takes a clear position in an ongoing, escalating, and at times violent struggle about the public presence and representation of Islam in Western societies in general and the use of cartoons mocking the prophet Muhammad in particular (Fig. 2). As a longstanding genre in northern European political culture, cartoons mock and ridicule people, groups and opinions – especially those with some power. Cartoons that violate taboos and desecralize what is held sacred for a religious tradition – Christianity as well as Islam – tend to generate heightened public attention.<sup>2</sup> What does the fact that many Muslims perceive representations of the Prophet in publications like *Jyllands-Posten* and the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine as offensive imply for freedom of expression in our ever more diverse European societies in which religion, against all expectations, is still remarkably present, albeit in new forms?

Notwithstanding two spelling mistakes,<sup>3</sup> the message of the »proud infidel« is as clear as it is crude. It calls upon cartoonists, journalists, and the general public to provide Muslims with more unsolicited gifts (with gift-giving understood here as an aggressive act, in the sense of »give it to them«). Those who cannot stand such cartoons and ask them to be banned do not belong to Germany and Europe at large – as an earlier paper message stated: »Islam is as German/European as the burning of widows ☺.«<sup>4</sup> The right to offend and the



ability to relativize feelings of being offended are featured as central values of secular society; those who do not take part in this consensus are out.

The set of written messages distributed in the middle of Berlin testifies to the salience and urgency of the issue of offensive pictures in public debate, which, to be sure, also involves more nuanced positions than the one taken by the »proud infidel« and hard-core secularists, on the one hand, and angry Muslims on the other, and takes place in various arenas. Though not presented directly, the Muhammad cartoons are evoked in the minds of the passersby.<sup>5</sup>

Given all the attention they've generated in numerous references, the cartoons certainly qualify as »strong images« in the sense outlined by Christiane Kruse. Standing out and attracting attention in a flood of visual items that are habitually overlooked, they are effective and affective, triggering sensations of pleasure and disgust and generating both attraction and offense. The cartoons are potentially offensive to pious Muslims and exactly for this reason pleasing to secularist protagonists, who see them as icons of freedom of expression that must be displayed by all means.<sup>6</sup> In turn, many Muslims take offense with this secularist stance and its eagerness to provoke – rather than with the cartoons per se. In June 2014, when we held the conference on which this volume is based, we thought about the Muhammad cartoons as one telling instance of offensive images among others. The commotion around them indicates widely different stances toward political culture and the use of cartoons, the valuation of religion, and the visual depiction of the sacred in our increasingly diverse, internally divided, and unequally heterogeneous societies. In the aftermath of the massacre at the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris in January 2015, the shootings in Copenhagen at an event called »Art,

Blasphemy and Freedom of Expression» and outside the city's Great Synagogue in Feb. 2015, these differences became ever more accentuated and the need to understand the stakes involved in the presence and representation of religion ever more pertinent.

Clearly, as asserted throughout this volume, offensiveness is not intrinsic to images as such, but becomes attached to them in complex configurations in which people are different and differ (but do not necessarily »agree to differ«). The concern of this volume is not an analysis of Muhammad cartoons and the debates and emotions generated by them in European societies per se. Set up more broadly, it explores the making and effects of »offensive images« at the interface of art, religion, and society from a global perspective. It is not confined to Muslim sensibilities, but also takes into account sensibilities about images on the part of protagonists of other religious traditions and of secular stances. Posing the question, »What makes images powerful?«, the first chapter by Christiane Kruse explores the migration of visual forms from their habitats in art and religion into a broader visual culture in which they generate charges of being offensive. Chapters 2–9 are detailed case studies of specific instances of visual forms that generate offense. The last two chapters, by Jojada Verrips and Christoph Baumgartner, offer broader reflections on the emergence of a sense of offense and the implications for coexistence in diverse societies with different sensibilities. Taken together, these essays speak to current politics and aesthetics of cultural representation across the globe. They indicate that our increasingly interconnected and at the same time highly diversifying world is prone to generate a lot of offense through pictorial media. In this concluding essay, I would like to reflect on two broader issues – first,

the relation between art and religion; and second, the emergence of a sense of offense – that cut across the chapters and are important for future research. I end with a short coda raising questions about the aesthetics and ethics of diversity. Since my main interest is in the nexus of religion and visual culture, my reading of the contributions will be partial and not do justice to the insights and materials offered by each of them.

### **Art and religion**

The rise of art in early modernity entailed the reframing of cult images embedded in medieval religiosity as aesthetic artworks.<sup>7</sup> Art and religion differentiated into relatively autonomous domains with independent institutions both safeguarded by the state and enjoying their own, at times conflicting, freedoms of expression.<sup>8</sup> This differentiation was also transmitted to non-Western societies in the framework of colonial governance and reiterated in independent nation-building (see Juneja on India).<sup>9</sup> The relation between art and religion as it unfolded since the Renaissance and the Reformation is complex. Certainly it cannot be captured by a modernist teleology according to which religion was bound to disappear in the course of modernization, while art emerged as its counterpoint and secular substitute. Art and religion have coexisted in various constellations, entailing more or less open synergies and tensions.

Norbert M. Schmitz conveys a good sense of artists' shifting stances toward religion in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Avant-garde surrealists such as Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí engaged in anti-Catholic heresy at a time when the Catholic



Church was still a dominant institution in Spain. Violating taboos through artworks that offended Christian sensibilities and bourgeois morals, these and other artists brought about the freedom and autonomy of art. Blasphemy and sacrilege were valued positively, as means to further emancipation and liberation. From an avant-garde perspective, artworks were expected to break the yoke of religion and tradition. However, with the waning grip of Christianity on society, heresy became a mere gesture with limited effects. This is the context in which Pasolini launched his provocations of the leftist secular mainstream with its inbuilt aversion to religion. Pasolini's heresy in his film *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*, Schmitz argues, was that he took Catholic orthodoxy and its sacred imagery seriously (without embracing orthodoxy or some kind of esoteric mysticism). Pasolini's use of Catholic forms offended the bourgeois secular establishment, not Catholics themselves. His heresy was not directed against religion, but against a saturated secular stance that predictably offends religion over and over again, without a social need to do so and with limited societal effects.

Nika Spalinger also invokes this habitual anti-religious stance at the beginning of her essay as characteristic of the art world before 9/11, in which artists engaged with Christian religion from a »distanced, critical, ironic, or cynical perspective« (p. 57). This transformed with the rise of conflicts over the presence and representation of Islam in Western societies. She is interested in artists engaging with religion from a post-secular perspective.<sup>10</sup> The point for them is not to embrace religion as believers, but to take it seriously as a factor in contemporary multicultural and diverse societies. Against this background, they seek to come up with new kinds of provocations. What I find particularly interesting about her examples of performance artists engaging with the man-

ifestation of Islam in Swiss society is that a sense of being provoked on the part of the public cooled down once the projects were identified as mere art, rather than actual expressions of Islamic faith. As seen in the responses to Johannes Gees' project *Salat*, which involved an amplified call to prayer from church towers and hilltops, and Gianni Motti's *Minarett* built on the roof of Kunsthaus Langenthal show, many witnesses were prepared to accept the freedom of art even though they felt irritated by the Islamic content. At the same time, they sought to limit the freedom of religious expression for Muslims in everyday life (culminating in the interdiction of the building of minarets in 2009).

The preparedness to grant the domain of art a certain freedom to experiment, provoke, and blaspheme is subject to individual beholders' dispositions and societal arrangements. The contributions to this volume show intriguing differences in the public acceptability of the freedom of artistic expression, ranging from the Swiss context described by Spalinger, through the prohibition of the display of Serrano's *Piss Christ* and Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* in the US (Kruse), to the refusal to accept the idea of the autonomy of art in the case of Hindu protesters' opposition to the art of Maqbool Fida Husain in India (Juneja) and the repressive stance toward performance artists who indulge in drastically transgressive acts in China (Becker). Juneja's statement about the relation between the autonomy of art and public protest highlights an important point: »The idea of art's autonomy is in a sense also about its isolation. Attempting to overcome this by intervening in the public sphere or addressing the ›nation‹ can also make art and artists more vulnerable« (p. 183). So it may well be that the more art becomes public and accessible, the more resistance and charges of blasphemy and sacrilege it provokes.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the

autonomy of art cannot be taken for granted in non-Western settings where the introduction of the category of art (in the Western, now universalized sense) is recent and its relation to local traditions of figuration and visual regimes is not yet fixed. Instead, as the papers by Juneja and Svašek show, the valuation of art as a category in society and the negotiation of the boundaries among religion, art, and heritage should be subjected to detailed research and comparison from a global perspective.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the cartoon controversies in Europe, the modernist teleology that predicted secularization and disenchantment as part and parcel of modernization was challenged.<sup>12</sup> This yielded strong affirmations of artistic freedom of expression in the face of Islamist criticisms,<sup>13</sup> but also induced more or less subtle forms of self-restraint and self-censorship on the part of artists, museums, and cultural entrepreneurs, especially with regard to issues related to Islam.<sup>14</sup> Long imagined to be a matter of past struggles between a repressive Christian morality and avant-gardist provocations, the manifestations of blasphemy and heresy disturbed »the idea of a progressive rationalization and privatization of religion« (Korte, p. 112). Religion became a big issue for the art world. A number of prominent exhibitions and catalogues emerged, including *Iconoclasm. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (2002), *100 Artists See God* (2004/05), *Seeing God* (2005/06), *Medium Religion* (2008), *The Problem of God* (2015/16), and *Gott und die Welt* (2016),<sup>15</sup> which explored synergies and animosities between art and religion outside of hackneyed frameworks.<sup>16</sup> David Morgan aptly states:



Art and religion are different cultural forms, but they are historically tied to each other and analogous in many, but not all respects. They differ in that they address different target groups that have very different goals. And we should not lose sight of how differently they view pictures. Both go to great efforts to place high value on visual artifacts and to direct them by attaching a comprehensive toolbox to pictures. But the one lends an aura to the singular and unique, while the others aim to spread holiness, so that a copy entails no loss of aura, but rather a superabundance of it. The artwork and the devotional picture belong to different, though also parallel and often overlapping pictorial cultures, since they both devote themselves to producing and maintaining holy objects.<sup>17</sup>

Of great relevance to the rethinking of the relation between art and religion is the pictorial or iconic turn, which expanded the study of images beyond the modern framework of »art« to include audiovisual forms situated at the heart of everyday life. In the study of visual culture (in German: *Bildwissenschaft*), scholars developed alternative approaches to images, asking about the »power« and »agency« of images and their affective impact on beholders (as Kruse points out). In this context, the cultic image embedded in a religious framework »before the era of art«<sup>18</sup> is approached as a resource for understanding the power of images in our time.<sup>19</sup>

Pondering the contributions to our volume in this light, I would like to draw out one aspect of the relation between religion and art, or more broadly audiovisual forms, that warrants further exploration. Examples like Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, the photograph of Conchita Wurst in his Jesus-look, the billboard with the »Merkel rhombus« discussed by Christiane Kruse,

Madonna's crucifixion scene analyzed by Anne-Marie Korte, and offensive imagery introduced by Jojada Verrips show that (especially Catholic or medieval) Christianity offers a rich repository of figures and themes that are taken up by artists and producers of popular culture. The iconoclasms in the aftermath of the Reformation and the Protestant rejection of cult images notwithstanding, enduring imagery from the archive of Christianity is still around;<sup>20</sup> it has an »afterlife« in the sense of Aby Warburg. As noted by Morgan in the quote above, artists usually take up Christian figures and themes for other purposes than religious devotion; they do not strive to enhance religious piety. Often the religious forms and motifs adopted by contemporary artists function independently from and undisturbed by institutionalized Christianity. A simple transposition of authorized religious imagery to art may easily be judged as an offense to good taste and found cheesy.<sup>21</sup>

In this context, it is interesting that representatives of Christian churches in Europe – especially Catholic churches – are embracing secular, contemporary art deliberately, emphasizing elective affinities between the ways artists and the religious faithful gesture toward the invisible or sublime, and opening their doors to art exhibitions.<sup>22</sup> Such assertions of compatibility of Christianity and the modern art world frame Christianity as a vital part – or even as the cradle – of secular culture, in sharp distinction to Islam.

But, as this volume also shows, the transposition of religious tropes into artworks may generate charges of blasphemy, even though the artists themselves do not intend their works as a critique of religion.<sup>23</sup> Artworks and performances that resemble conventional, authorized representations of the sacred and yet digress from them – e.g., by the use of unusual materials that are con-

sidered polluting (elephant dung in *The Holy Virgin Mary*, urine in Serrano's *Piss Christ*), or the substitution of one element for another (e.g. Madonna instead of Jesus in a loincloth) – are prone to trigger a sense of offense, depending on the dispositions of the beholders. Such works contain an intrinsic iconoclasm, understood by Kruse in the footsteps of Latour as »an ambivalence embedded in the picture that leads one viewer to see the painting [or any other artwork, BM] as sacred and the other as sacrilege« (Kruse, p. 24) or perhaps even the same viewer sensing attraction and repulsion at the same time.<sup>24</sup> They are in principle open to multiple interpretations and experiences. Korte's reading of Madonna's crucifixion scene is a case in point. While many Christians dismissed it as blasphemous and protested the show, Korte detects a resonance with so-called Christa sculptures and paintings that appropriate the crucifixion to take contemporary suffering and affliction as a theme – an instance of »iconoclasm between sacred symbol and female corporeality and sexuality« (p. 132). Offering »an uncanny admixture of secular and religious values« (p. 132), the scene is a typical instance of a post-secular blurring of religion and popular culture.

The creative appropriation of Christian tropes in art and popular culture betrays a longstanding affinity between religion and images that survived despite the disentanglement and differentiation of religion and art into separate domains. Sigrid Weigel hits the nail on the head:

The fact that, with the gaze back to the *picture before the era of art*, pictures in religious and cultic contexts, in particular, have become relevant again for current picture theory, is true also for a grammarology of the pictures. This applies not only to the aforementioned almost sacral auratization



of many pictorial worlds, it also includes acute upheavals in the public and political approach to pictures, which have in part taken on the form of a new iconoclastic controversy, if not a new war of pictures – for example in the dispute about the so-called Muhammad caricatures: a *clash of cultures* that is fought out as a struggle over pictures. Here, the understanding and assessment of pictures is still affected by traditional schisms whose culthistorical and picture-theological preconditions must be reflected upon.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, in the face of a remarkable recycling and reproduction, via ever newer media, of iconographic traditions, pictorial genres, and attitudes toward images from the medieval past, it is high time for a joint effort on the part of scholars in art history, visual studies, and religious studies to come to grips with the continued use and appeal of religious imagery. Of course, art historians working on periods up to the Renaissance have paid ample attention to Christian traditions of figuration. But with the rise of art as a secular category, art historians working on art in modern society could seemingly afford to disregard religion. A great number of art historians working on contemporary art have been somewhat reluctant to take religion seriously, while scholars of religion had little affinity with the study of images.<sup>26</sup> A systematic genealogy of the relation between religion and art – and their respective scholars – is still to be undertaken and would require detailed collaborative research on the part of scholars of religion and art history at the interdisciplinary interface of visual studies.<sup>27</sup> Here, much can be gained by taking as a starting point genealogical work that traces how Catholic traditions of figuration and visual regimes shaped the making of

images »before the era of art« and still inform how we look at images in our time.<sup>28</sup> In my view, a post-secularist perspective that does not take modernist expectations about art and religion for granted and that resists a simplistic view of secularization in terms of a gradual reduction or even disappearance of religion is a productive starting point for grasping the stakes of current image wars (see also Spalinger, Korte).

But there is more. Besides revisiting the relation between art and Christian religion in Western societies from a genealogical perspective, it is important to research the differences between divergent religious visual regimes that involve authorized modes of figuration that shape whether and how the sacred is represented and depicted and practices of looking at and relating to religious (and other) images. New synergies should be developed between comparative religious studies, anthropology, and the study of visual culture. Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and other religious traditions can be distinguished by their specific, often internally varied and contested visual regimes.<sup>29</sup> Secular outlooks on the world also rest on embodied visual regimes with their own possibilities and restrictions. Visual regimes inform attitudes toward art and visual culture on the part of religious practitioners as well as non-religious persons.<sup>30</sup> O'Meara argues that the Kaaba not only is regarded as the center and heart of the Islamic world, but also generates Muslims' outlook on the world (which is why the representation of the Kaaba is subject to certain restrictions). Juneja shows how »darsan« – »the exchange of vision between a deity and a worshipper at the heart of Hindu worship« (p. 179) – also informs ways of looking at art in a highly affective, iconophile manner (so much so that early colonial museums opted for signage stating »No touching, no praying« (p. 180)). In my recent book *Sensational*

*Movies*, which explores the interface between popular cinema and Christianity in Ghana, I also point to the spillover of Christian-Pentecostal modes of looking into the sphere of cinema, with movies being framed as audio-visualizations of the religious revelations offered in Pentecostal sermons.<sup>31</sup> Invoking these examples, my point is that religion matters to the way people value and look at art and manifestations of popular culture. As I argued extensively in recent work, it makes sense to approach religion as a corporeal and sensational phenomenon that involves multiple material media – words, sounds, images, sculptures – in accessing the divine and rendering it present.<sup>32</sup> Certainly as European societies become ever more diversified, it is of utmost importance to know about the differences between various religious and secular visual regimes as they come to the fore in tensions and incompatibilities with regard to representations of what is considered sacred, such as the cartoon controversy. For me, this volume shows the merits of an intensive conversation among scholars from multidisciplinary backgrounds and with differing expertise on regions and religious traditions, so as to unpack the perceived offensiveness of visual representations in our time.

### **Senses of offense**

There is a consensus among all contributors to this volume that images are not intrinsically offensive and that their offensiveness arises in the experience of certain beholders who attribute it to the image (while others may remain indifferent, like it and defend it, or take offense not with the image as such but



with the intention of its producer to offend). Moreover, many potentially offensive images do not provoke protests, as they are not in the limelight of public attention in mainstream media.<sup>33</sup> So why bother? Why, to invoke Monica Juneja, »are we forced to engage seriously with attributions that brand images as obscene, blasphemous, and as having the power to violate sentiments and sensibilities?« (p. 161) The point is that acknowledging human attribution does not make offense unreal. Posing the question »is there such a thing as an ›offensive picture‹?« Christoph Baumgartner introduces two helpful distinctions to trace how a sense of offense arises. One is the distinction between picture and image. Following William J.T. Mitchell and Hans Belting, he defines an image as the thing that is seen in the picture, while a picture is the material medium through which an image is made visible. Whether one decides to use these two words in this manner or not (most contributors in this volume do not, and more generally in the literature the term »image« is also often used in the broad sense of a visual form that includes the dimensions of picture and image, as pointed out in the introduction), the distinction between an immaterial image stored in the mind and its materialization in pictorial media helps provide a clearer idea about processes of the reception of visual representations and taking offense. For the offense experienced refers in the first place to the image seen in the picture; even if the picture is destroyed, the image lingers on. The second distinction concerns offense. Baumgartner identifies levels of offense, ranging from direct affronts to the senses that trigger immediate disgust, to higher-level sensibilities that are »intrinsically related to and determined by a person's morality or religion and the beliefs, values, and ideals that are part of this« (p. 321).

While offenses related to the former – e.g. disgust evoked by bodily fluids »out of place« – tend to be regarded as »natural« and therefore as common to humans irrespective of cultural differences, offenses related to higher-level sensibilities may be difficult to apprehend by people with other beliefs, values, and ideals.<sup>34</sup> This analytical distinction helps explain why certain pictorial representations are not experienced as generally disgusting. However, as Baumgartner points out, the distinction should not be taken too far, as in actual practice the two levels usually are not separated. The dependence on specific beliefs, values, and ideals does not make the offense less real for the person experiencing it. »Rather, the opposite is true,« Baumgartner states, for »if the relevant moral or religious principles, values, and norms are constitutive of the self-understanding of a person, she can be profoundly offended by violations of such principles, values, and so forth« (p. 322). Based on Harry Frankfurt's theory of caring, according to which »a person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it« (p. 331), Baumgartner argues that humans become so deeply entangled with what they hold dear that they may feel compelled to react when they experience it as being violated. In this phenomenological sense, offensive pictures do exist, albeit not for everyone.

The point is that a sense of offense sticks with the medium that conveys the image and bounces back, making people act. They may feel pain and disgust, look away or more closely, explain why they are offended, take legal action and call for a ban, or attack the image or even its producers and distributors, to mention just a few possible responses. Paradoxically, an item that beholders qualify as offensive *is* offensive to them: some kind of switch occurs through which an object of vision starts to act upon its beholders. How can

this switch be explained? I agree with Christiane Kruse that Mitchell's thesis »that the offending nature of images derives from a primitive belief in their aliveness seems too one-sided« (p. 18). The focus on the powers, wants, loves, and lives of pictures, as developed by Mitchell, certainly contributes to a better understanding of the way humans relate and respond to visual culture, but is of limited use to grasp the rise of a sense of offense. After all, different beholders may respond differently to images, with only a few feeling offended and many remaining indifferent (though possibly all the more touched by the qualification of a visual form as offensive, as is the case with non-Muslim, secular responses to the Muhammad cartoons). What exactly makes a visual form – both the image seen and its material carrier – offensive has to be explored in detail, inquiring into the specific ways in which religious and secular visual regimes govern stances toward the representation (and representability) of the sacred, as Baumgartner also argues. In contemporary plural societies, images become nodal points for the articulation of fundamental »ideological differences, whether these be religiously, politically, gender-thematically, artistically, or otherwise motivated« (Kruse, p. 22). In other words, images are productive starting points for exploring the malaise of diversity and analyzing clashes between values, ideas, and sensibilities. In such clashes, the attribution of life to an image may be one possibility among others that accounts for the fact that people experience it as powerful and offensive.

While offensiveness is a matter of attribution, offense is nonetheless more likely to arise in connection with certain themes than with others. This is the thesis put forward by Jojada Verrips, who discerns »a limited number of genres (and subgenres) of imagery that repeatedly function as neuralgic



points and sources of hot-headed, impetuous, and sometimes violent and iconoclastic reactions« (p. 284). The realms of sexuality, the sacred, and death form an »eternal triangle of existential neuralgic points« (p. 289); transgressive representations with regard to this triangle inform sensibilities and underpin the emergence of scandals about offensive, inappropriate images. This triangle is »eternal« inasmuch as it refers to an anatomy of offense that underpins many commotions involving offense. Of course, the actual rise of charges of offense depends on specific, historically situated circumstances. To study how such scandals around offensive imagery actually come about, he takes a sociological perspective and introduces a second triangle. This triangle distinguishes among the producers, victims, and witnesses of offensive imagery, all of whom partake in the creation of a scandal around a work charged with being offensive. His thesis and overview serve as a reminder that the prominence in this volume and in contemporary public debate of charges of offense made from a religious standpoint should not make us forget that sensibilities to images deemed offensive also exist in a secular context. Scandals arising from Frémiet's sculpture of a gorilla carrying off a woman to current artworks experienced as »aesthetic terrorism« betray the ability of art to shock and transgress secular values – which, along with norms and sensibilities, change over time, in addition to the actual works to which people take offense. As noted before, shock and scandal have become widely accepted elements of artistic production, and a broader Western public is prepared to accept the autonomy of the domain of art. Still, it is telling that nowadays, exhibitions containing potentially shocking material often address visitors with a cautionary advisory.

To understand the genesis of offense given by and objections to images charged with being offensive, it is a useful exercise to undertake some subjective introspection. Of all the »offensive images« presented and analyzed in this volume, the only ones I personally feel deeply uncomfortable about are the photographs in Tania Becker's chapter, especially the series on Zhu Yu's *Eating People*, which show the artist – whether this is real or staged does not matter – eating a fetus, which I find almost unbearable to look at. Like many spectators in China and elsewhere, I feel disgusted. I do not want to see these photographs, which offend my sense of human life as an essential value, even though I realize through Becker's perceptive analysis that the artist wants to convey a critical message about dehumanization. I also have little appreciation for the sexist representations of the female body – » a stereotype of femaleness crudely:« – presented in the essay by Jürgen Wasim Frembgen & Asif Jehangir, against which pious Muslims in Pakistan position themselves (or, not present in this volume, for racist representations, Nazi symbols, and the like). Pondering these sentiments evoked by the visuals in this volume, I will also mention my unease with what I perceive as imagery intensely blasphemous toward Christianity, even though I long ago left behind the Calvinist faith of my youth. So it seems that the higher-level sensibilities once acquired in a religious framework are quite resilient. By contrast, I feel neutral about many of the images that trigger objections and protests on religious grounds, such as Husain's *Saraswati*, Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, Madonna on the cross, or a black cube by Apple or Gregor Schneider that remotely resembles the Kaaba. Of course, my own sensibilities indicate a particular habitus, developed through a typical middle-class socialization in the 1960s and '70s in West Germany,

which I share with many people of my generation. While I take my own embodied dispositions almost for granted, as an anthropologist I am aware that people socialized in a different manner within other religious traditions and cultural contexts do the same. Incorporated dispositions tend to be naturalized and frame how we see the world. As the secular sensibilities that have become mainstream in northern European societies are not shared by everyone, they cannot simply be taken as the default disposition of modern citizens (nor, I would add, should they be imposed).<sup>35</sup> Scholars studying offensive images need to take as a starting point the fact that people sense and feel differently about images. This volume is intriguing and instructive because its contributions seek to unravel how and why people feel offended by images in various highly diverse settings in different parts of the world.

Of special importance in this endeavor is the idea of religion as not limited to doctrines and meanings, but as material and embodied.<sup>36</sup> In my earlier work, I launched the notion of sensational form, through which believers achieve a sense of the presence of the divine via authorized images, words, songs, rituals, and other religious forms that generate religious sensations.<sup>37</sup> From this perspective, religions can be distinguished by taking into account their distinct sensational profiles, through which believers learn to perceive, feel, and think about the divine. Jojada Verrips explains that negative responses to images, as is the case with *Piss Christ* and the *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which triggered strong reactions on the part of devout Christians,<sup>38</sup> betray »a formidable mismatch between the kind of imagery that they learned to incorporate in their bodies as acceptable and imagery in the outside world that is at loggerheads with this embodied imagery and by which they are touched,« yielding »an unsettling collision



at a deep corporeal level« (p. 301). Similarly, as Juneja explains, Hindu beholders of Husain's *Saraswati* experience their engagement with deities via »darsan« as frustrated, since the goddess in the painting does not have a face and hence cannot look back. As Catholicism and Hinduism offer rich religious imagery, charges of blasphemy often arise because of a mismatch between the religious imagery incorporated by believers and other partly similar and partly divergent representations, as explained in the previous section. In contrast to these iconophile traditions, Sunni Islam holds strong reservations about the figural representation of God and of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>39</sup> For many pious Muslims, the cartoons are doubly offensive in that they not only depict Muhammad; they also mock him. Those who feel offended speak from a different »practice of visuality«<sup>40</sup> enshrined in the Islamic tradition that is not limited to issues of images per se, but involves a broader sensorial regime that shapes perception and sensation; hence the response to such visual forms as the cartoons. To get at the stakes of current »image wars«, it is necessary to understand how religions shape an embodied habitus that engenders particular sensibilities that may be irritated by particular appearances. On this basis, differences between religious traditions, as well as non-religious secular dispositions, become visible.

It is important to note that not all offense arises from an experienced clash between outward pictorial representations and internalized religious sensational forms. Another trigger is unauthorized appropriations. Simon O'Meara makes a compelling argument that the emergent feelings of offense in Muslims, triggered by a black cube built by Apple in New York, are not due to the presumed attempt to reproduce the Kaaba as such. Numerous copies of the Kaaba have existed across time up to the present. The point is rather that

the unauthorized and decontextualized appropriation and replication of the form of the Kaaba is perceived as »matter out of place« in the sense of Mary Douglas. As pointed out above, the Kaaba generates »a world-organizing outlook« (p. 151). Positing an analogy between dirt and offense, O'Meara argues that »offense arises when something does not fit within such an outlook; the Kaaba perceived as being taken as a shop, for example« (p. 151).<sup>41</sup> Once it became clear that the similarity between the Kaaba and the Apple building was accidental and unintended, the initial irritation faded away. The case as such is instructive not only because it reveals the importance of the Kaaba in organizing a perspective on the world, but also because it shows that an emergent sensation of potential offense may easily fade away.

This is not so in the case of the Indian Muslim artist Husain, who was attacked for his allegedly blasphemous representation of the Hindu goddess Saraswati and the mythical figure Draupadi (Juneja) or in the case of the American religious studies scholar Wendy Doniger, who was charged with insulting Hindu gods in her book *The Hindus. An Alternative History* (Svašek). Members of right-wing groups in the Hindutva movement charged both Husain's paintings and Doniger's book with being blasphemous and called for the destruction of these works, taking particular offense at the emphasis placed on nudity and eroticism. Intriguing here is that the artist and the scholar took into account existing representations of nude deities and erotic postures in Hindu sculptures, paintings, and narratives. Trouble arose from their unauthorized appropriation by non-Hindu »outsiders«. In contrast to O'Meara's example of the presumably illicit reproduction of the Kaaba, these two cases did not die down, but were taken to court and led to severe societal polarizations

that fueled Hindutva's exclusivist identity politics. As Svašek points out in detail, the Indian Penal Code (section 295A) was mobilized to charge Doniger with violating the religious feelings of Hindus, even though she used existing Hindu imagery. Freedom of expression lost out to the primacy of religious sentiments that, ironically, appear to be inflected with 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionary sensibilities and a shameful stance toward eroticism that yielded a puritanized version of Hinduism. Hinduism is not simply featured as a religion, but as a cultural domain that informs citizens' sentiments – »pseudo-secularism« indeed. Doniger's case also raises questions about the role of scholars in the representation of religion and culture. It shows that scholarly research may easily become part of public debate and criticism. Just as the autonomy of the domain of art is not taken for granted, independent scholarship does not stand by itself, safely ensconced in the university. How can responsible scholarship on potentially sensitive issues be conducted? Which strategy should be developed with regard to the publication of the offensive images we study in our texts? How far can publishers go in accommodating public sensibilities and avoiding controversy? Can one write about offense without being offensive?

### **Coda: aesthetics and the ethics of diversity**

Exploring cases in which people are offended by artworks and other visual forms, this volume shows that the study of images is a perfect entry point into the clashes of different people's values, ideas, and sensibilities in pluralist settings. These values, ideas, and sensibilities are not merely individual and idiosyncratic –



though of course they are lived by individuals – but also tied to particular religious traditions as well as non-religious stances. Pluralist settings consist of the coexistence of divergent »communities of sense«<sup>42</sup> or »aesthetic formations.«<sup>43</sup> Coexistence amid difference does not imply an equality of difference, as diversity is »managed« through particular policies that echo the majority-minority configurations prevalent in a particular society. As we see in the case of India, there is a strong hegemony of a culturalized Hinduism from which Muslims are distinguished as Others who do not really belong to India. Similarly, Muslim migrants and post-migrants tend to be Othered in European societies, where the devoutly religious in particular are perceived as not fitting in with the secular prerogatives that underpin these societies (a sentiment that some of them also embrace). Of course, secularity does not imply the absence of religion, but rather a particular way of »managing« it – e.g., by safeguarding religious freedom. Still, the »return of religion« – or rather, if one looks more closely, the transformation and differentiation of religion into various manifestations – provokes secular sensibilities. It strikes a nerve especially among members of intellectual elites who pride themselves on having cast off the yoke of religion, with its repressive morals, in the aftermath of the 1968 student movements in Europe. This stance brings forth animosities toward both Islam and orthodox or evangelical Christianity that play into debates around offensive images, as this volume also shows. In my view, whatever one's personal stance toward religion, scholars must adopt a distanced, reflective attitude that analyzes clashes between religious and secular standpoints about images. In today's increasingly diversified societies with a strong presence of various religions, a secularist stance should not be taken as default, but subjected to detailed scrutiny.

Since the 1990s, and more intensely after 9/11, religion and visual culture have become central topics of research in the social and cultural sciences. Their study prompts us to revisit neat, modernist narratives that postulated a move toward increasing rationalization and disenchantment, and the disappearance of religion, as key characteristics of modernity. This new attitude is expressed poignantly in Latour's statement »We have never been modern«<sup>44</sup> and Mitchell's provocative question »What do pictures want?« The turn to the study of religion and images beyond the framework of art occurs in the context of a more general shift of focus from abstract concepts to practices, the body, and materiality as entry points for social-cultural analysis. In this context, the notion of aesthetics has been recaptured from its limitation to the sphere of the experience of art. Barely considered to have serious relevance for research and theory formation in the social and cultural sciences throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, aesthetics was recently rediscovered as relevant for understanding processes of identity formation in contemporary societies.<sup>45</sup>

Some years ago I coined the notion »aesthetic formation« to accommodate the role of the body, the senses, and objects in inducing in people a sense of being part of a real, lived community.<sup>46</sup> I used aesthetic in the broad Aristotelian sense of »aisthesis,« pointing to the sensory engagement with the world at large.<sup>47</sup> The notion of aesthetic formation, I argued, is well suited for grasping the genesis of a divine presence for believers and hence the intensity of religious world-making. In my view, this notion proves helpful in undertaking a detailed analysis of the politico-aesthetic regimes of specific religious groups and traditions. However, given the coexistence of people in increasingly diverse societies, I am now thinking about how to expand this approach to the analysis of pluralistic

settings constituted by coexisting groups with their respective realm of the senses and visual regimes. With its focus on clashes of different sensibilities to images, this volume is helpful for this intellectual endeavor, which will certainly preoccupy me for some years to come.<sup>48</sup> Clashes over images are also clashes between – and about – aesthetic formations, whether they are grounded in religious or non-religious outlooks or not. In this context, the issue of what Jacques Rancière aptly calls »the distribution of the sensible,«<sup>49</sup> that is, the way in which senses and sensibilities are subject to hegemonic power, is of central relevance. Which politico-aesthetic regime is dominant in organizing the appearance of images, in various frameworks from art to popular culture and religion, and stipulates what can be represented, and how? What kind of responses does a dominant »distribution of the sensible« and its visual regime and practices of visibility evoke, and how does it handle divergent minority aesthetic formations? How do aesthetics held by opponents and defenders of certain images clash? To what degree do people develop what Brian Larkin aptly calls »techniques of inattention« and strategies of avoidance – for instance, not looking at certain images deemed offensive, deciding not to watch a program or visit an exhibition – and when do they protest or take legal action?<sup>50</sup> Or do they become numbed by or anesthetized toward certain, from their perspective, threatening stimuli against which they want to protect themselves in a much less conscious manner?<sup>51</sup> And, on a more positive note, where can one discern overlaps and openings for an aesthetics shared across difference and welcoming otherness?<sup>52</sup> The chapters in this volume offer a wealth of material to ponder these questions.

Human relations to images and visual presentations are not only a question of aesthetics, but also of ethics. Images enshrine moral values, while moral



values also shape one's response to images. As we observed, a sense of offense often not only entails a sensation of disgust, but also mobilizes a rejection of the image(s) in question as dirty, obscene, and immoral (the case in the responses of devout Muslims toward popular movies in Pakistan, as analyzed by Frembgen). A closer investigation of the particular ethics enshrined in aesthetic formations and the ways these ethics clash or converge is an important topic for future research on images.

A serious consideration of the coexistence of different aesthetic formations that shape people's moral values and ways of looking at and being in the world gives rise to major questions about the overall configuration of the aesthetics and ethics of diverse societies. How can coexistence in these societies be organized? To what extent is mutual indifference a solution for coping with difference? How much acceptance of images experienced as offensive can reasonably be expected? How can we balance freedom of expression (in art, in journalism, on the Internet, in museums, in societal debate) and freedom of religion in today's highly sensitive – perhaps even hypersensitive – societies, in which feelings have become central to the performance of citizenship and people are prone to feel hurt or offended? How can we develop a fair and reasonable distribution of sensitivity that lives up to the ideals of an open, democratic society? These questions will certainly be on the agenda of public debate and scholarly research for years to come. In any case, finding adequate answers will require great sensitivity on the part of scholars to understand the different aesthetics and ethics that inform struggles over images and other matters in diverse societies.

- <sup>1</sup> I am deeply grateful to Christoph Baumgartner, Christiane Kruse, and Jojada Verrips for their perceptive and encouraging comments on an earlier version of this essay. Particular thanks to Christiane for introducing me to the complex world of art history and Bildwissenschaft.
- <sup>2</sup> Sigrid Weigel: *Grammatologie der Bilder*, Berlin 2015, p. 233.
- <sup>3</sup> The correct German spelling would be: »Gebt ihnen mehr Moham(m)ed Karikaturen.«
- <sup>4</sup> »Der Islam ist so europäisch/deutsch wie die Witwenverbrennung.« I regard the use of the smiley symbol as indicating the propensity of the author to use irony. This indicator may well signal a difference from those who cannot laugh about the cartoons.
- <sup>5</sup> Jyllands-Posten published twelve cartoons on September 30, 2005 as a demonstration of free speech directed against self-censorship regarding sensitive depictions Muslims might regard as offensive. See Weigel: *Grammatologie* (see note 2), p. 238-242, for an analysis of the pictorial traditions evoked by the Danish cartoonists. There is a clear link with satirical representations in the post-Reformation religious wars and these contemporary cartoons. See also Finbarr Barry Flood: *Inciting Modernity? Images, Alterities, and the Contexts of »Cartoon Wars«*, in Patricia Spyer / Mary Steedly (eds.): *Images That Move*, Santa Fe 2013, pp. 41-72.
- <sup>6</sup> For a critique of the understanding of the secular as rational and critical (positioned in sharp contrast to religious fundamentalists regarded as irrational and unable to reflect critically) par excellence, see Saba Mahmood: *Religious Reason and Secular Affect: an Incommensurable Divide?* in *Critical Inquiry* 35/4 (2009), pp. 836-862; see also Talal Asad / Wendy Brown / Judith Butler / Saba Mahmood: *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. The Townsend Papers in the Humanities No. 2, Berkeley 2009 <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/84q9c6ft#page-5> (accessed on Feb. 4, 2017).
- <sup>7</sup> See Hans Belting: *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, Chicago 1994.
- <sup>8</sup> For a thoughtful publication addressing the limited engagement with religion in contemporary discourses on art, see James Elkins / David Morgan (eds.): *Re-enchantment*, New York 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> See also Maruška Svašek / Birgit Meyer (eds.): *Creativity in Transition. Politics and Aesthetics of Cultural Production Across the Globe*, New York and Oxford 2016.
- <sup>10</sup> See also Silvia Henke / Nika Spalinger / Isabel Zürcher (eds.): *Kunst und Religion im Zeitalter des Postsäkularen. Ein kritischer Reader*, Bielefeld 2012.
- <sup>11</sup> These terms partly overlap, in that they denote an inappropriate treatment – in the view of those mobilizing these terms – of what they take as sacred. While blasphemy refers to words and depictions deemed inappropriate, sacrilege refers to acts of desecration. The reason for the overlap lies in the fact that those who take offense with a particular verbal or pictorial representation regard it as actually affecting and desecrating what they hold sacred.
- <sup>12</sup> Thinking through this challenge has been one of the key concerns of recent scholarship in the study of religion. For a compelling multidisciplinary and multi-level analysis, see Hent de Vries (ed.): *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, New York 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> By contrast, as Anne-Marie Korte notes in her contribution, Christian charges of blasphemy that arose prominently, especially in the United States, received less attention.

- <sup>14</sup> A famous example is the decision of the city administration of Venice not to grant Gregor Schneider permission to exhibit his work *Cube Venice* at the Piazza San Marco in 2005 because Muslims might take it as a copy of the Kaaba, though such concerns were not raised (see Simon O'Meara and Monica Juneja).
- <sup>15</sup> For a list, see Alena Alexandrova: *Nach Bildern*, in Isabelle Malz (ed.): *The Problem of God*, Dusseldorf 2015, p. 49.
- <sup>16</sup> In recent years, museums have paid more attention to »religious« objects in their collections. For a prominent example, see: *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, British Museum 2011 [http://www.british-museum.org/whats\\_on/exhibitions/treasures\\_of\\_heaven.aspx](http://www.british-museum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/treasures_of_heaven.aspx) (accessed on Feb. 4, 2017). See Crispin Paine: *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*, London and New York 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> »Kunst und Religion sind unterschiedliche kulturelle Formen, die aber historisch miteinander verbunden und in vieler, aber nicht in jeder Hinsicht analog sind. Sie unterscheiden sich insofern, als sie verschiedene Zielgruppen mit sehr unterschiedlichen Zielen ansprechen. Und wir sollten nicht aus dem Blick verlieren, wie unterschiedlich sie Bilder betrachten. Beide geben sich große Mühe, visuelle Artefakte wertzuschätzen, den Betrachtern Hingabe zu entlocken, beim Erleben der Bilder Aura zu erzeugen und diese zu lenken, indem sie Bilder mit einem umfassenden Instrumentarium versehen. Doch die eine stattet das Singuläre, Einzigartige mit einer Aura aus, während es der Anderen darum geht, das Heilige zu verbreiten, sodass die Kopie keinen Verlust der Aura bedeutet, sondern vielmehr eine Überfülle davon. Das Kunstwerk und das Andachtsbild gehören jeweils zu verschiedenen, wenn auch parallel und häufig einander überschneidenden Bildkulturen, da sie sich beide der Herstellung und Aufrechterhaltung heiliger Objecte widmen.« David Morgan: *Kunst und das Andachtsbild: Visuelle Kulturen des Heiligen*, in Isabelle Malz (ed.): *The Problem of God*, Dusseldorf 2015, p. 63.
- <sup>18</sup> Belting: *Likeness and Presence* (see note 7).
- <sup>19</sup> Scholars advocating the pictorial or iconic turn took up concepts pertaining to images in the sphere of religion, such as »idol«, »totem«, »fetish«, and »icon«. See e.g. William J. T. Mitchell: *What do Pictures Want? The Loves and Lives of Images*, Chicago 2005, pp. 188-196, on totem, idol, and fetish; Hans Belting: *Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions*, in *Material Religion* 12/2 (2016), pp. 235-237, on the notion of the icon. For a recent historicizing analysis of contemporary visual culture in the light of the »afterlife« of pre-modern understandings of and struggles over religious images, see Weigel: *Grammatologie* (see note 2).
- <sup>20</sup> See Aaron Rosen: *Art + Religion in the 21st Century*, London 2015. Acknowledging animosities between art and religion, Rosen calls attention to contemporary artists who »engage seriously with religious traditions, themes and institutions«. He argues: »As a new millennium begins to find its legs, it is time we set aside old assumptions about the antagonism between art and religion and look at the topic with fresh eyes. When we do so we discover a tremendous potential for reciprocity.« (p. 17). His point is not to question the distinction between art and religion per se, but to explore positive adoptions of religious imagery by artists that may easily be overlooked in light of current debates about blasphemy, for example about Serrano's *Piss Christ*, Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, or Maurizio Cattelan's *La Nona Hora*, showing Pope John Paul II struck down by a meteorite. The book offers many examples of artworks inspired by various religious traditions.
- <sup>21</sup> Overall, a secular perspective assigns low artistic value to religious art, i.e., artworks produced as part of devotional practice, for instance Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*



(1940), or does not regard it as art at all. See David Morgan: Warner Sallman and the Visual Culture of American Protestantism, in Morgan, David (ed.): *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, New Haven 1996, pp. 25-60; David Morgan: *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, Berkeley 1998.

<sup>22</sup> The exhibition *The Problem of God*, for instance, was organized at the invitation of the Deutsche Bischofskonferenz to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council to indicate »eine stärkere Öffnung des Kirche zur Gesellschaft und damit auch der Kunst«; see Isabelle Malz: *The Problem of God* (see note 17), p. 6. See also Oliphant's evocative exploration of an art project titled *Suite Grünwald*, in which the French Catholic Church offered a space for contemporary artists to reflect on Mathias *Grünwald's Isenheimer Altar* (1512-1516). She sees this project as part and parcel of the culturalization of Catholicism, through which it becomes perfectly compatible with – and even a cradle of – the French form of secularism (*laïcité*); Elyane Oliphant: *Beyond Blasphemy or Devotion. Art, the Secular, and Catholicism in Paris*, in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21/2 (2015), pp. 352-373.

<sup>23</sup> See Rosen: *Art + Religion* (see note 20), p. 15-16, who argues that Serrano's and Ofili's despised artworks stand closer to Catholic devotion and conventions of representing the sacred than do their religious critics, who dismiss these artworks as blasphemous, might realize. Of course, such an explanation cannot and should not serve to overrule the existence of hurt feelings.

<sup>24</sup> On the simultaneity of pleasure and disgust, see Carolyn Korsmeyer: *Savoring Disgust. The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*, Oxford 2011. See also Jojada Verrips in this volume.

<sup>25</sup> »Die Tatsache, dass mit dem Blick zurück auf das Bild vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst insbesondere auch Bilder in

religiösen und kultische Zusammenhängen wieder für die gegenwärtige Bildtheorie relevant geworden sind, gilt auch für eine Grammatologie der Bilder. Das betrifft nicht nur die genannte nahezu sakrale Auratisierung vieler Bildwelten, es schließt auch akute Verwerfungen im öffentlichen und politischen Umgang mit Bildern ein, die teilweise die Gestalt eines neuen Bilderstreits, wenn nicht Bilderkriegs angenommen haben – wie etwa im Streit um die sogenannten Mohammed-Karikaturen: ein »clash of cultures«, der als Kampf um Bilder ausgetragen wird. Darin wirken tradierte Schismen in der Auffassung und Bewertung von Bildern fort, deren kultgeschichtliche und bildtheologische Voraussetzungen reflektiert werden müssen.« Weigel: *Grammatologie* (see note 2), p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> As pointed out in my earlier work, the relative neglect of religious images and sculptures as compared with words and texts is one of the symptoms of the post-Enlightenment Protestant framework that has long structured knowledge production in the study of religion. In the aftermath of the Reformation, scholars of religion tended to neglect images as serious objects of study and privileged text as the prime medium of religion, while art historians were not inclined to take modern religion into account. See Birgit Meyer: *Mediating Absence – Effecting Spiritual Presence. Pictures and the Christian Imagination*, in *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 78/4 (2011), pp. 1029-1056; id.: *Picturing the Invisible. Visual Culture and the Study of Religion*, in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 27 (2015), pp. 333-360. Working at the interface of religious studies and art history, David Morgan played a central role in profiling the study of religious visual culture, c. g. *The Sacred Gaze. Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, Berkeley 2005; id.: *The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity*, Berkeley 2015. See also the recent, groundbreaking initiative by Sally Promey to found the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion: <http://mavcor.yale.edu> (accessed on Feb. 4, 2017).

- <sup>27</sup> See Maria Micheale Luiselli / Jürgen Mohn / Stephanie Gripentrog (eds.): *Kult und Bild. Die bildliche Dimension des Kultes im Alten Orient, in der Antike und in der Neuzeit*, Würzburg 2013. See especially the general reflection on the relation between religion and art in the chapter by Jürgen Mohn: *Von den Kult-Bildern zum Bilder-Kult »romantischer« Kunstreligion. Religionsgeschichtliche Interpretationen zu Philipp Otto Runge's Zeiten-Zyklus in religionsästhetischer Perspektive*, *ibid.*, pp. 203-242.
- <sup>28</sup> Hans Belting: *Likeness and Presence* (see note 7) offers a close reading of the icon and the struggle over its devotional use. Christiane Kruse: *Wozu Menschen malen. Historische Begründungen eines Bildmediums*, Munich 2003, explores the relation between image making and world making by taking into account ideas and debates at the interface of theology and art in medieval and early modern times.
- <sup>29</sup> Along with this book project on offensive images, I am also involved, with Terje Stordalen, in editing a volume on the Figuration and Sensation of the Divine in Abrahamic Traditions, which explores the attitudes toward pictorial representation in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. One of the central aims is to explore aesthetic practices in representing the divine, and the world at large, from a critical perspective that rejects the presumed aniconism of these traditions.
- <sup>30</sup> For an insightful analysis of clashes around the Muhammad cartoons in Indonesia from divergent perspectives that rest on different »semiotic ideologies« that stipulate the value and status of images, see Webb Keane: *Freedom and Blasphemy. On Indonesian Press Bans and Danish Cartoons*, in *Public Culture* 21/1, pp. 47-77. He shows that a Western take on cartoons, as displayed by many secular defenders, is based on a semiotic ideology according to which images are mere vehicles of ideas and meanings and the press a site of free speech. By contrast, an experience of images as offensive does not regard them primarily in referential terms, but as an actual presence.
- <sup>31</sup> Birgit Meyer: *Sensational Movies. Video, Vision and Christianity in Ghana*, Berkeley 2015.
- <sup>32</sup> Birgit Meyer: *Picturing the Invisible* (see note 26); *id.*: *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence*, with a response to comments by Hans Belting, Pamela Klassen, Chris Pinney, Monique Scheer, in *Religion & Society. Advances in Research* 5 (2014), pp. 205-254; see also David Morgan: *The Sacred Gaze. Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, Berkeley 2005; and Sally Promey: *Sensational Religion. Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, New Haven 2014.
- <sup>33</sup> The Internet is a huge repository of images likely to evoke a sense of offense. Though they are publicly accessible (just a click away, so to speak), they rarely stir debate. It seems that charges of blasphemy and of being hurt are more likely to arise when images are presented in newspapers, books, and cinema. At the same time, the Internet plays a key role in globalizing such charges, as the Muhammad cartoon affair showed.
- <sup>34</sup> The distinction resonates with the old nature-nurture debate in anthropology, which is problematic because it presumes an all too neat distinction between what is regarded as natural and what is regarded as cultural.
- <sup>35</sup> This is one of the central points of the book by Talal Asad / Wendy Brown / Judith Butler / Saba Mahmood: *Is Critique Secular?* (see note 6).
- <sup>36</sup> Furthering research in this direction is the central concern of the journal *Material Religion*, which I am co-editing with David Morgan, Brent Plate, and Crispin Paine. See Birgit Meyer / David Morgan / Crispin Paine / S. Brent Plate: *Material Religion's First Decade*, in *Material Religion* 10/1 (2015), pp. 105-111.
- <sup>37</sup> Birgit Meyer: *Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion*.

- Inaugural Lecture, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 6 October 2006; id.: *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence* (see note 32).
- <sup>38</sup> See also Jojada Verrips: *Offending Art and the Sense of Touch*, in *Material Religion* 4/2 (2008), pp. 217-218.
- <sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, iconic representations of Muhammad were created in the Islamic world, with his face sometimes (but not always) «veiled, obscured by light, or, more rarely, inscribed with a type of grid that evokes his variant names, denotations of specific qualities». This calligraphic representation evokes a mental image of the Prophet; Finbarr Barry Flood: *Inciting Modernity* (see note 5), p. 48. See also Christiane Gruber: *Prophetic Products. Muhammad in Contemporary Iranian Visual Culture*, in *Material Religion* 12/3 (2016), pp. 259-293.
- <sup>40</sup> Frank Peter / Sarah Dornhof / Elena Arigitta: Introduction. *Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe*, in Frank Peter / Sarah Dornhof / Elena Arigitta (eds.): *Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe*, Bielefeld 2013, p.17. See also Mahmood: *Religious Reason and Secular Affect* (see note 6).
- <sup>41</sup> Irritation about religious images being represented outside of their proper place may occur in many contexts. In his research on the conversion of a Catholic church into a worldly dance studio in Amsterdam, Daan Beekers reports that Church authorities were not prepared to leave Catholic material forms, including a mosaic depicting Jesus and Mary, to the new non-religious users of the building. From their perspective, such forms would be out of place in a worldly setting. Daan Beekers: *Sacred Residue*, in Susanne Lanwerd (ed.): *The Urban Sacred. Städtisch-religiöse Arrangements in Amsterdam, Berlin and London. How Religion Makes and Takes Place in Amsterdam, Berlin and London*, Berlin 2015, pp. 39-41.
- <sup>42</sup> Beth Hinderliter et al.: *Communities of Sense. Rethinking aesthetics and politics*, Durham 2009.
- <sup>43</sup> Birgit Meyer: Introduction. *From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations. Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms and Styles of Binding*, in Birgit Meyer (ed.): *Aesthetic Formations. Media, Religion, and the Senses*, Basingstoke 2009.
- <sup>44</sup> Bruno Latour: *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge/Mass. 1993.
- <sup>45</sup> See, for example, Andreas Reckwitz: *Affective Spaces. A Praxeological Outlook*, in *Rethinking History* 16/2 (2012), pp. 241-258.
- <sup>46</sup> Birgit Meyer: *Aesthetic Formations* (see note 43).
- <sup>47</sup> Birgit Meyer / Jojada Verrips: *Aesthetics*, in David Morgan (ed.): *Key Words in Religion, Media, Culture*, London and New York, pp. 20-30. See also Bd 35 / 1,2 (2006) Jojada Verrips: *Aisthesis and An-aesthesia*, in *Ethnologia Europea* 35 ½, pp. 27-33.
- <sup>48</sup> I have just started a new collaborative research program, titled *Religious Matters in an Entangled World. Things, Food, Bodies and Texts as Entry Points to the Material Study of Religion in Plural Settings*, at Utrecht University that will run over a period of eight years (2016-2024).
- <sup>49</sup> Jacques Rancière: *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, London 2006.
- <sup>50</sup> Brian Larkin: *Techniques of Inattention. The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria*, in *Anthropological Quarterly* 87/4 (2014), pp. 989-1015.
- <sup>51</sup> Susan Buck-Morss: *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*, in October 26 (1992), pp. 3-41. See also Jojada Verrips: *Aisthesis & An-Aesthesia* (see note 47).



<sup>52</sup> See Rosi Braidotti: Conclusion. The Residual Spirituality in Critical Theory. A Case for Affirmative Postsecular Politics, in: Rosi Braidotti / Bolette Blagaard / Tobijn De Graauw / Eva Midden (eds.): *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere*. Postsecular Publics, New York 2015, pp. 249-272.

**CHRISTOPH BAUMGARTNER** is Associate Professor of Ethics in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. He studied theology and chemistry at the University of Tübingen, and served as scientific Coordinator of the International Centre for Ethics in the Sciences and Humanities at the University of Utrecht (2001 – 2004). His main areas of research are religion in the public sphere, freedom of religion and freedom of expression, »blasphemy,« tolerance, citizenship, and secularity and (post-)secularism.

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ASIF JEHANGIR studied biomedical engineering at University College London, Imperial College London and the University of Manchester, where he also took courses in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies. He has translated a number of Sufi works from Urdu, Punjabi and Farsi and works as a mathematics instructor in a number of international schools.

MONICA JUNEJA holds the Chair of Global Art History at the University of Heidelberg. She has been Professor at the University of Delhi and held visiting professorial positions at the Universities of Hannover, Vienna, Zurich and Emory University in Atlanta. She was recently Visiting Fellow at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Her recent publications include »Multi-Centered Modernisms: Re-Configuring Asian Art of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries« (Transcultural Studies, 2010); »Global Art History and the »Burden of Representation«,« in Hans Belting et al (eds.); Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture (2011); Disaster as Image. Iconographies and Media Strategies across Asia and Europe (2014, edited with Gerrit Jasper Schenk). Her forthcoming book, *Can Art History Be Made Global? A Discipline in Transition*, is based on her Heinrich Wölfflin Lectures at the University of Zurich. Juneja edits the series *Visual History of Islamic Cultures* (Routledge). She serves on the editorial board of *Visual History of Islamic Cultures* (De Gruyter); *Ding, Materialität, Geschichte* (Böhlau); *History of Humanities* (University of Chicago Press). She also co-edits *Transcultural Studies*.

ANNE-MARIE KORTE is Professor of Religion and Gender at the Faculty of Humanities of Utrecht University, The Netherlands. She is initiator and project leader of the NWO funded project *Beyond Religion versus Emancipation: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Conversion to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe* (2016 – 2021). She is editor-in-chief of *Religion and Gender*, an online international journal for the Systematic Study of Religion and Gender in Interdisciplinary Perspective ([www.associationre-](http://www.associationre-)



ligionandgender.org) and president of the International Association for the Study of Religion and Gender (IARG) ([www.projectreligionandgender.org](http://www.projectreligionandgender.org)). She currently studies the role of gender, sexuality and human materiality in contemporary works of art and performances accused of blasphemy and sacrilege. See a.o. Anne-Marie Korte: The Political Gesture of ›Blasphemous‹ Art. Facing Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer, in Martin van Bruinessen/ Michiel Leezenberg/ Anne-Marie Korte (eds.): *Gestures. Religion Qua Performance*, New York (forthcoming).

**CHRISTIANE KRUSE** is Professor of Art History and Visual Culture Studies at Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design in Kiel, Germany. She studied art history, German literature and medieval literature in Göttingen, Munich, and Florence. From 1996-2003 she was a post-doctoral lecturer at Konstanz University. From 2004-2010 she was visiting professor at Trier, Karlsruhe, Braunschweig, Marburg, and Dresden. In Berlin, she was a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study from 2010-2011 and visiting professor at the Department of Cultural Studies at Humboldt University from 2013-2014. The main focus of her work concerns Bildanthropologie (anthropology of images), art in visual culture, and aesthetic reception theory. Her current research project is on »powerful images.« Her book recent publications include (with the artist Antje Majewski): *Ziran/ Nature. Art, nature and ethics*, Berlin 2015; (with Victoria von Flemming): *Fassaden? Zeigen und Verbergen von Geschichte in der Kunst*, Munich 2017.

**BIRGIT MEYER** is Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, she studies religion from a global and post-secular perspective, seeking to synthesize grounded field work and theoretical reflection in a broad multidisciplinary setting. She is vice-chair of the International African Institute (London), and one of the editors of *Material Religion*. Her publications focus on the rise and popularity of global

Pentecostalism; religion, popular culture and heritage; religion and media; religion and the public sphere; religious visual culture; the senses and aesthetics; material religion and religious pluralism. In 2015 she was awarded the Spinoza Prize by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Academy Professor Prize by the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). Her most recent publications are *Sensational Movies. Video, Vision and Christianity in Ghana* (2015) and *Creativity in Transition. Politics and Aesthetics of Cultural Production Across the Globe* (ed. with Maruška Svašek, 2016).

**SIMON O'MEARA** is Lecturer in the History of Architecture & Archaeology of the Islamic Middle East at SOAS, University of London. His research interests concern the materiality of Islam and Islamic visuality. He has a forthcoming monograph on the Kaaba.

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**NIKA SPALINGER** is a multimedia artist based in Zurich. Her work has been featured in many national and international solo- and group shows and includes a series of works in the public sphere. She has been teaching at the Department of Design & Art at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (BA and MA) since 1996. Her main topics are: art in the public sphere, tourism, interculturality and religion. She initiated two interdisciplinary research projects supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation: *Art and Tourism* (2005–07), in collaboration with P. Spillmann a.o.; and *Holyspace, Holyways* 2008–12, a project on art and religion in collaboration with Silvia Henke a.o. Spalinger was a member of the Swiss Federal Art Commission from 2008–2012.

**MARUŠKA SVAŠEK** is Reader in Anthropology at the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at Queens University, Belfast. Her main research interests include material culture, art, migration and emotional dynamics. Recent major publications include *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production* (2007), *Emotions and Human Mobility. Ethnographies of Movement* (2012), *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions* (2012), and (with Birgit Meyer) *Creativity in Transition. Politics and Aesthetics of Cultural Production Across the Globe* (2016). She is a Fellow at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, and co-editor of Berghahn's book series, *Material Mediations*.

**JOJADA VERRIPS** is Prof. Em. of Cultural Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. He has conducted fieldwork in Tunisia, the Netherlands and Ghana; and he has written on religion in a Dutch village, bargemen in the Low Countries, Ghanaian canoes, and cars. He is founder and past editor of *Maritime Anthropological Studies (MAST)* and developer of the anthropology of the »Wild (in the) West.«



## BECKER

[FIG. 1] Yang Zhichao: Planting Grass (performance documentation), Nov. 5, 2000, Suzhou Road, Shanghai

Image source: <https://transgressivechineseart.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/yang-zhichao-planting-grass.jpg>

[FIG. 2] Zhu Yu: Eating People, (performance documentation), Sept. 2000, Shanghai

Image source: [http://media.tumblr.com/tumblr\\_ljdp6ccdK-biqhbzuj.jpg](http://media.tumblr.com/tumblr_ljdp6ccdK-biqhbzuj.jpg)

## FREMBGEN / JEHANGIR

[FIG. 1] Billboard advertising the Bollywood movie *Dirty Picture*, Metropole Cinema, Abbot Road, Lahore

[FIG. 2] Scene from the violence-ridden film *Guddu Badshah*, placard, Lahore

[FIG. 3] Women with gun from the film *Bloody Mission*, placard, Lahore

[FIG. 4] Three females with a simpleton from the film *Bbola Sajan*, placard, Lahore

[FIG. 5] Placard advertising a typical Punjabi action movie, Lahore

[FIG. 6] Female dancer, placard, Lahore

[FIG. 7] Poster advertising the film *Quarter of Sin*, Pakistan Talkies Cinema, Lahore

[FIG. 8] Blackened female bodies on a poster advertising the Punjabi film *Taksi 420*, Lahore

(All pictures taken by Jürgen Wasim Frembgen)

## JUNEJA

[FIG. 1] M. F. Husain: Saraswati, pen and ink on paper, c. 1970  
In Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.): Barefoot across the Nation. M. F. Husain and the Idea of India (Series Visual and Media Histories, ed. Monica Juneja), London 2010, p. 16.

[FIG. 2] M. F. Husain: Draupadi in the game of Dice (from the *Mahabharata* series), Lithograph 1983  
In Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.): Barefoot across the Nation. M. F. Husain and the Idea of India (Series Visual and Media

Histories, ed. Monica Juneja), London 2010, p. 178.

[FIG. 3] M. F. Husain: Untitled (later captioned *Bharat Mata*, Mother India), Acrylic on canvas, 2005

In Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.): Barefoot across the Nation. M. F. Husain and the Idea of India (Series Visual and Media Histories, ed. Monica Juneja), London 2010, p. 10.

[FIG. 4] Young woman painting her eyes, detail from temple frieze, Parshvanath temple, Khajuraho, ca. 970 C.E.

Photograph by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, Paris

[FIG. 5] M. F. Husain: Installation, Husain ki Sarai, Faridabad, 2005.

In Pradeep Chandra: M. F. Husain. A Pictorial Tribute, New Delhi 2012, p. 184.

[FIG. 6] M. F. Husain: Between the Spider and the Lamp, oil on board, 1956

In Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.): Barefoot across the Nation. M. F. Husain and the Idea of India (Series Visual and Media Histories, ed. Monica Juneja), London 2010, p. 31.

[FIG. 7] M. F. Husain: From Mother Theresa Series, oil on canvas, 2005

In Pradeep Chandra: M. F. Husain. A Pictorial Tribute, New Delhi 2012, p. 128.

[FIG. 8] Yashoda Nursing Krishna, copper alloy, early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Vijayanagara, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
In Axel Michaels/Christoph Wulf (eds.): Emotions in Rituals and Performances, New Delhi 2012, p. 408.

## KORTE

[FIG. 1] Cover of Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims: I.N.R.I., New York, 1999

(<https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/41VBGQ-XMWGL.jpg>)

[FIG. 2] Oscar Rohena (Boston): From her *Confessions Tour*, Madonna on a mirrored cross, July 6, 2006.

(<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madonna-cross.jpg>)

[FIG. 3] St. Wilgefortis, 1513, Egidienkirche, Erlangen-Eltersdorf, Germany

unknown photograph (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7763933>)

[FIG. 4] St. Wilgefortis, Museum of the Diocese Graz-Seckau, Graz, Austria, wood, figure: 107 cm, cross: 254 cm, late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Origin: Ursulinenkloster in Graz, Austria

photograph by Gugganij, (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=27324725>)

[FIG. 5] Edwina Sandys: Christa, St. John the Divine, New York City, 1975

(<http://adrielint.nl/the-crista-project/>) With kind permission from the author of the photograph, Adrie Lint, and the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York, USA. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

[FIG. 6] Madonna performing *Live to Tell* at London's Wembley Arena on her *Confessions Tour*, August 12, 2006

photograph by Pascal Mannaerts; Flickr: Madonna - Wembley Arena 120806 (16).

([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4a/Madonna\\_-\\_Wembley\\_Arena\\_120806\\_%2816%29.jpg/507px-Madonna\\_-\\_Wembley\\_Arena\\_120806\\_%2816%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4a/Madonna_-_Wembley_Arena_120806_%2816%29.jpg/507px-Madonna_-_Wembley_Arena_120806_%2816%29.jpg).)

[FIG. 7] Madonna performing in Paris, France, on her *Confessions Tour*, August 31, 2006

photograph by Pascal Mannaerts; Madonna's Confessions in Paris 2.jpg · Wikimedia Commons.

([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madonna's\\_Confessions\\_in\\_Paris\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madonna's_Confessions_in_Paris_2.jpg))

#### KRUSE

[FIG. 1] Chris Ofili: The Holy Virgin Mary, private collection, 1996

Chris Ofili: Chris Ofili, New York 2009, p. 79.

[FIG. 2] Dennis Heiner smearing white paint over Chris Ofili's work during the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, December 1999

Chris Ofili: Chris Ofili, New York 2009, p. 80.

[FIG. 3] Chris Ofili: The Holy Virgin Mary, the virgin's breast

(detail Fig. 1)

Chris Ofili: Chris Ofili, New York 2009, p. 80.

[FIG. 4] Chris Ofili: The Holy Virgin Mary, flying vaginas (detail Fig. 1)

Chris Ofili: Chris Ofili, New York 2009, p. 79.

[FIG. 5] Conchita Wurst's appearance at the ESC 2014, *Tagesspiegel*, May, 12, 2014

(<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/images/heprodimagesfotos-86120140512993463-01-02-jpg/9876486/4-format6001.jpg>)

[FIG. 6] Candy Darling, *Cosmopolitan*, Nov. 1972

(photograph by Francesco Scavullo)

([http://blogs.artinfo.com/outtakes/files/2011/05/beautiful\\_darling\\_05-Cosmo-mockup-.jpg](http://blogs.artinfo.com/outtakes/files/2011/05/beautiful_darling_05-Cosmo-mockup-.jpg))

[FIG. 7] Unknown artist: Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Byzantine icon, 15<sup>th</sup> century, Rome, Esqueline Hill

([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Our\\_Mother\\_of\\_Perpetual\\_Help.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Our_Mother_of_Perpetual_Help.jpg))

[FIG. 8] Blumberry GmbH: Germany's Future in Good Hands, CDU campaign ad, Berlin, 2013

(<http://cdn2.spiegel.de/images/image-539329-breitwand-aufmacher-bsnh-539329.jpg>.)

[FIG. 9] Rogier van der Weyden: Bladelin Altarpiece (Praying Hands of Our Lady), Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie Stephan Kemperdick and Jochen Sanders: The Master Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden, *Ostfildern* 2009, p. 321.

#### MEYER

[FIG. 1] Message placed on stairs of Schöneberg train station, Berlin 2016

(photo by Jojada Verrips)

[FIG. 2] Message placed on stairs of Schöneberg train station, Berlin 2016

(photo by Jojada Verrips)

#### O'MEARA

[FIG. 1] Internet meme: Apple vs. Islam

(<http://www.friends-korner.com/forum/showthread>.)

php/99540-New-quot-Kaaba-quot-Bar-will-be-open-in-New-York-Astaghfirulla)

[FIG. 2] Screenshot of the Google search window following a search of the combined words »Kaaba« and »copy« (taken on Dec. 16, 2014)

[FIG. 3] Mappamundi with a representation of the Kaaba at the center, pasted into a copy of an anonymous 16<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman work, History of the West Indies, dated 1650. Gouache, gold, and ink on paper; 13.6 x 23.2 cm

© Leiden University Library, MS Leiden Or. 12.365, fol. 90b

[FIG. 4] 'Āli al-Sharafi al-Safaqsi's nautical diagram of 1572, showing a 40-sector division of the Kaaba for determining the qibla direction, superimposed upon a 32-division wind rose. Gouache and ink on paper; 20.7 x 26.8 cm.

© Oxford, The Bodleian Libraries, MS Marsh 294, fol. 4v

[FIG. 5] Diagram of the Islamic cosmos with the Kaaba at the centre, from a copy of *The Book of Gnosis* by the Ottoman Sufi and scholar, İbrahim Hakkı, composed in 1757, gold, gouache, and ink on paper; 26 x 14 cm

© The British Library Board, MS Or. 12964, fol. 23v

#### SCHMITZ

[FIG. 1] Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): Crucifixion scene with Pasolini's mother, in *Il vangelo secondo matteo*, 1964

Videoprint: Pasolini, Pier Paolo: Das 1. Evangelium – Matthäus, Arthaus, Kinowelt Home Entertainment © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

[FIG. 2] Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): Image of an ancient city geography, Entry into Jerusalem, in *Il vangelo secondo matteo*, 1964  
Videoprint: Pasolini, Pier Paolo Das 1. Evangelium – Matthäus, Arthaus, Kinowelt Home Entertainment © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

[FIG. 3] Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): Piero della Francesca's Sadducees and Pharisees, in *Il vangelo secondo matteo*, 1964  
Videoprint: Pasolini, Pier Paolo: Das 1. Evangelium – Matthäus, Arthaus, Kinowelt Home Entertainment © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

[FIG. 4] Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): Totò and Ninetto as vagabonds with the raven as the author, in *Uccellacci/Uccellini* 1965  
Videoprint: Pasolini, Pier Paolo: Große Vögel, Kleine Vögel, Filmgalerie 451, Stuttgart/Berlin, 2008 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

[FIG. 5] Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): The »holy ceremony« of Togliatti's funeral, in *Uccellacci/Uccellini*, 1965  
Videoprint: Pasolini, Pier Paolo: Große Vögel, Kleine Vögel, Filmgalerie 451, Stuttgart/Berlin, 2008 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

[FIG. 6] Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): Fiori or erotic miniatures from the »Orient« in: in *Il Fiore delle Mille e Una Notte*, 1974  
Videoprint: Pasolini, Pier Paolo: Erotische Geschichten aus 1001 Nacht, EuroVideo Bildprogramm GmbH, Ismaning, 2011 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

[FIG. 7] Pier Paolo Pasolini (dir.): The romantic reality of Persian architecture in *Il Fiore delle Mille e Una Notte*, 1974  
Videoprint: Pasolini, Pier Paolo: Erotische Geschichten aus 1001 Nacht, EuroVideo Bildprogramm GmbH, Ismaning, 2011 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

[FIG. 8] Pier Paolo Pasolini: Salò. A Gentleman with binoculars and modern art in: *Salò o le 120 Giornate di Sodoma* 1975  
Videoprint: Pasolini, Pier Paolo: Die 120 Tage von Sodom: Universum Film GmbH & Co. KG, München, 2005 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

#### SPALINGER

[FIG. 1] Johannes Gees: salat, Bern, Zurich, St. Gallen, 2007 ([www.johannesgees.com](http://www.johannesgees.com))

[FIG. 2] Gianni Motti: Minarett, Kunsthaus Langenthal, 2008 (Allahu akbar! Minarett-Kunst erhitzt die Gemüter, Tages Anzeiger, Sept. 4, 2008 (<http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/kunst/Allahu-akbar-MinarettKunst-erhitzt-die-Gemueter/story/12568996>))

[FIG. 3] Valentin Carron: Cross, Art Basel, 2009  
photograph by Nika Spalinger © 2009



[FIG. 4] Mark Wallinger: *Ecce Homo*, fourth plinth, Trafalgar Square, London, 1999

(<http://public-art.shu.ac.uk/other/4thplinth/fi/00000002.htm>)

[FIG. 5] Barbara Mühlefluh: *Meeting*, Kirche Stäfa photograph by Liliane Géraud © 2010

#### SVAŠEK

[FIG. 1] Screenshot of *Organiser's* website showing the article Wendy's Unhistory making History by Pramod Pathak

(<http://organiser.org/Encyc/2014/3/18/Wendy%E2%80%99s-unhistory-making-history.aspx?NB=&lang=4&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=&PageType=N>)

[FIG. 2] Screenshot of Wendy Doniger's home page on the University of Chicago's website

(<http://divinity.uchicago.edu/wendy-doniger>)

[FIG. 3] Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus. An Alternative History*, Oxford 2009

photograph by Maruška Svašek, 2016

[FIG. 4] Screenshot of the NDTV program's website showing *The Social Network* in February 2014

(<http://www.ndtv.com/video/news/the-social-network/why-no-wendy-doniger-over-chai-309311>)

[FIG. 5] Screenshot of Wendy Doniger's republished *The Hindus. An Alternative History*

(<http://speakingtigerbooks.com/books/the-hindus-an-alternative-history/>)

#### VERRIPS

[FIG. 1] Emmanuel Frémiet: *Gorilla Carrying off a Woman*, 1888,

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

(<http://content.ngv.vic.gov.au/col-images/api/EPUBoo0644/1280>)

[FIG. 2] Inez Doujak: *Haute Couture 4. Transport*, Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art, Exhibition: *La Bestia y el Soberano*, March 19-August 30, 2015

([http://frombrazil.blogfolha.uol.com.br/files/2014/12/14953599720\\_f1c1cf91f6\\_k-1024x683.jpg](http://frombrazil.blogfolha.uol.com.br/files/2014/12/14953599720_f1c1cf91f6_k-1024x683.jpg))

[FIG. 3] Dolce & Gabbana, 2007

(<http://cdn.2om.es/img2/recortes/2015/04/03/218237-654-368.jpg>)

[FIG. 4] Atelier Van Lieshout: *Bikini*, 2006

Photograph by Raymond Rutting © 2014

[FIG. 5] Ti-Rock Moore: *Angelitos Negros*, Gallery Guichard, Chicago, 2015

(<http://www.vosizneias.com/209431/2015/07/15/chicago-il-chicago-art-exhibit-stirs-controversy-with-ferguson-replica/>)

[FIG. 6] David Wojnarowicz: *A Fire in My Belly* (film still), 1986-1987, 2010

([http://www.flarearts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/FlareArts\\_Wojnarowicz\\_FireInMyBelly.jpg](http://www.flarearts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/FlareArts_Wojnarowicz_FireInMyBelly.jpg))

[FIG. 7] Paul Fryer: *Pietà*, (*The Empire Never Ended*, 2007), Collection François Pinault, exposed in the Cathédrale Notre-Dame-et-Saint-Arnoux, Gap, France, April 2009

([http://www.theforestmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Paul-Fryer\\_Pieta-You-Have-Been-Weighed-and-Found-Wanting-22\\_0026.jpg](http://www.theforestmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Paul-Fryer_Pieta-You-Have-Been-Weighed-and-Found-Wanting-22_0026.jpg))

(all websites are accessed on Nov. 9, 2017)



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