Introduction

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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«¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.

- ¹ 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.
- ² »The picture is the image with a medium,« as Hans Belting states in *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton 2011, p. 10.
- ³ 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.