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

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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.¹ 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.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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.«⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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), Lithograph, 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 »obscurity,« 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.«⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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?¹¹ 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.«¹²

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-20th 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«¹³ — 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.«¹⁶

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.«¹⁷ 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-20th 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.¹⁸

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 18th century.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ 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-20th 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.²⁴

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 1973,²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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,²⁸ 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 14th 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).²⁹ 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.«³⁰

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.«³¹ 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.³² 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 »corpoethetics,« in which seeing and touching are embodied and interrelated.³³ 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.³⁴ 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,³⁵ 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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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 other³⁸ — 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.

¹ 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.

² Gregor Schneider: *Cubes: Art in an Age of Global Terrorism*, Milan 2006.

³ See Biennale in Venedig. Polizei schließt Kunstprojekt, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, May 22 2015. https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/kunst_architektur/polizei-schliesst-ums-trittenes-kunstprojekt-1.18547754, (accessed on Jan. 28, 2017).

⁴ Mitchell: *What do Pictures Want?* (see note 1).

⁵ »[...] 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).

⁶ 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.

⁷ Zitzewitz: *The Art of Secularism* (see note 6), p. 18.

⁸ Monica Juneja: *Reclaiming the Public Sphere: Husain's Portrayals of Saraswati and Draupadi*, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32/4 (1997), pp. 155-57.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 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.
- ¹¹ 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.
- ¹² Ibid, p. 18.
- ¹³ Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, New York 1968, p. 224.
- ¹⁴ Geeta Kapur: When was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India, New Delhi 2000, pp. 365–68.
- ¹⁵ Guha-Thakurta: *Monuments, Objects, Histories* (see note 10).
- ¹⁶ 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.
- ¹⁷ 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).
- ¹⁸ This exclusion continues in current writings, for instance 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.
- ¹⁹ 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.
- ²⁰ A fuller account can be found in Monica Juneja: Preface, in Ramaswamy (ed.): *ibid*, pp. xix ff.
- ²¹ Among the most frequently cited texts, which were then taken to represent art theory, was the *Citrasutra* of the *Visnubarmottarapurana*, 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 19th and 20th centuries.
- ²² Vidya Dehejia: *Indian Art*, London 1997, p. 13.
- ²³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: *Art and Swadeshi*, 2nd ed., New Delhi 1994 (1911).
- ²⁴ 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.

- ²⁵ Bean: Viewed from across the Globe (see note 19), pp. 247-48.
- ²⁶ Ila Pal: Beyond the Canvas: An Unfinished Portrait of M. F. Husain, New Delhi 1994, p. 84.
- ²⁷ Zitzewitz: The Art of Secularism (see note 6), p. 24.
- ²⁸ 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.
- ²⁹ 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.
- ³⁰ Cited in Ramaswamy (ed.): *Barefoot across the Nation* (see note 6), p. 90.
- ³¹ 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.
- ³² Diana L. Eck: *Darsan. Seeing the Divine Image in India*, New York 1998.
- ³³ 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.
- ³⁴ Ashish Rajadhyaksha: The Phalke Era. Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology, in *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, XIV-XV (1987), pp. 47-48.
- ³⁵ Richard H. Davis: *Lives of Indian Images*, Princeton 1999.
- ³⁶ 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.
- ³⁷ Veena Das: Of M. F. Husain and an Impossible Love, in Ramaswamy (ed.): *Barefoot across the Nation* (see note 6), pp. 118-19.
- ³⁸ 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)