

What is iconoclasm?

Prologue: A Typical Iconoclasm

This image comes from a video. What does it mean? Hooligans dressed in red, with helmets and axes are smashing the reinforced window that is protecting a precious work of art. They are madly hitting the glass that splinters in every direction while loud screams of horror at their action are heard from the crowd beneath them that, no matter how furious it is, remains unable to stop the looting. Another sad case of vandalism captured by a camera of video-surveillance? No. Brave Italian firemen a few years ago risking their lives, in the cathedral of Turin, to save the precious Shroud from a devastating fire that triggers the screams of horror from the impotent crowd that has assembled behind them. In their red uniforms, with their protective helmets, they try to smash with axes the heavily reinforced glass case that has been built around the venerable linen to protect it – not from vandalism – but from the mad passion of worshippers and pilgrims who would have stopped at nothing to tear it to pieces and obtain priceless relics. The case is so well protected against worshippers that it cannot be brought to safety away from the raging fire without this *apparently* violent act of glass breaking. *Iconoclasm* is when we know what is happening in the act of breaking and what the motivations for what appears as a clear project of destruction are; *iconoclash*, on the other hand, is when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive. This exhibition is about *iconoclash*, not *iconoclasm*.

Why Do Images Trigger So Much Passion?

“Freud is perfectly right in insisting on the fact that we are dealing in Egypt with the first counter-religion in the history of humanity. It is here that, for the first time, the *distinction* has been made [by Akhenaton] that has triggered the hate of

those excluded by it. It is since this distinction that hatred exists in the world and the only way to go beyond it is to go back to its origins.”¹ No quote could better summarize what I see as the goal of *Iconoclash*. (I should warn the reader from the start that none of the curators completely agree on the goals of this exhibit! As an editor, I just have the privilege of having my say first). What we propose here in this show and in this catalog is an archeology of hatred and fanaticism.²

Why? Because we are digging for the origin of an absolute – not a relative – distinction between truth and falsity, between a pure world, absolutely emptied of human-made intermediaries and a disgusting world composed of impure but fascinating human-made mediators. “If only, some say, we could do *without* any image. How so much better, purer, faster our access to God, to Nature, to Truth, to Science could be.” To which other voices (or sometimes the same) answer: “Alas (or fortunately), we cannot do *without* images, intermediaries, mediators of all shapes and forms, because this is the only way to access God, Nature, Truth and Science.” It is this quandary that we want to document, to fathom and, maybe, to overcome. In the strong summary that Marie-José Mondzain proposed of the Byzantine quarrel over images, “La vérité est image mais il n’y a pas d’image de la vérité.” (Truth is image, but there is no image of truth.)³

What has happened that has made images (and by image we mean any sign, work of art, inscription, or picture that acts as a mediation to access something else) the focus of so much passion? To the point that destroying them, erasing them, defacing them, has been taken as the ultimate touchstone to prove the validity of one’s faith, of one’s science, of one’s critical acumen, of one’s artistic creativity? To the point where being an iconoclast seems the highest virtue, the highest piety, in intellectual circles?

Furthermore, why is it that all those destroyers of images, those “theoclasts,” those iconoclasts, those “ideoclasts” have also generated such a fabulous population of new

¹ _ Retranslated from the French. Jan Assmann, *Moïse l'égyptien. Un essai d'histoire de la mémoire*, Aubier, Paris, 2001, p. 283: “Freud a parfaitement raison d’insister sur le fait que nous avons affaire en Egypte à la première contre-religion monothéiste qu’ait connu l’histoire de l’humanité. C’est ici que s’est opérée pour la première fois la *distinction* qui a attiré sur elle la haine des exclus. C’est depuis lors que la haine existe dans le monde, et le seul moyen de la dépasser est de revenir à ses origines,” since the English version is very different: “Freud concentrates all the counter-religious force of Biblical monotheism in Akhenaten’s revolution from above. This was the origin of it all. Freud stresses (quite correctly) the fact that he is dealing with the absolutely first monotheistic, counter-religious, and exclusivistically intolerant movement of this sort in human history. The similarity of this interpretation to Manetho’s is evident. It is this hatred brought about by Akhenaten’s revolution that informs the Judeophobic texts of antiquity.” (*Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 167).

² _ On the genealogy of fanatics and other *Schwärmer*, see the fascinating account of Dominique Colas, *Le glaive et le fleau: généalogie du fanatisme et de la société civile*, Paris, 1992. Grasset, Olivier Christin, *Une révolution symbolique*, Minuit, Paris, 1991.

³ _ See her chapter in this catalog and Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, icône, économie. Les sources byzantines de l’imaginaire contemporain*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1996.

**BILDUNTERSCHRIFTEN A1
BIS A5 FEHLEN NOCH.
BILD A4 FEHLT.**

Firemen breaking the shroud of Turin to save it / filmstill



images, fresh icons, rejuvenated mediators: greater flows of media, more powerful *ideas*, stronger *idols*? As if defacing some object would inevitably generate new faces, as if defacement and “refacement” were necessarily coeval (see Belting, Powers).⁴ Even the tiny Buddha head that Heather Stoddard offered for our meditation, after having been smashed by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, managed to take up a new sarcastic, cringing and painful face ... (see Stoddard).

And what has happened to explain that after every icono-*crisis* infinite care is taken to reassemble the smashed statues, to save the fragments, to protect the debris? As if it was always necessary to apologize for the destruction of so much beauty, so much horror; as if one was suddenly uncertain about the role and cause of destruction that, before, seemed so urgent, so indispensable; as if the destroyer had suddenly realized that something *else* had been destroyed by mistake, something for which atonement was now overdue. Are not museums the temples in which sacrifices are made to apologize

for so much destruction, as if we wanted suddenly to stop destroying and were beginning the indefinite cult of conserving, protecting, repairing?

This is what our exhibition attempts to do: this capharnaum of heterogeneous objects that we have assembled, broken, repaired, patched up, re-described, offers the visitors a meditation on the following questions:

Why have images attracted so much hatred?

Why do they always return again, no matter how strongly one wants to get rid of them?

Why have the iconoclasts’ hammers always seemed to strike *sideways*, destroying something *else* that seems, after the fact, to matter immensely?

How is it possible to go *beyond* this cycle of fascination, repulsion, destruction, atonement, that is generated by the forbidden-image worship?

An Exhibition About Iconoclasm

Contrary to many similar undertakings, this is not an iconoclastic exhibition: it is *about* iconoclasm.⁵ 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 sacrificial arm holding the sacrificial knife ready to cut the sacrificial lamb’s throat. It is an attempt to turn around, to envelop, to embed the worship of image destruction; to give it a home, a site, a museum space, a place for meditation and surprise. Instead of iconoclasm being the meta-language reigning as a master over all other languages, it is the worship of iconoclasm itself which, in turn, is interrogated and evaluated. From a *resource*, iconoclasm, is being turned into a *topic*. In the words proposed by Miguel Tamen’s beautiful title: we want visitors and readers to become “friends of interpretable objects” (see Tamen).⁶

In a way, this exhibition tries to document, to expose, to do the anthropology of a certain gesture, a certain move-

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... Several centuries after Farel, the Neuchâtel iconoclast, had burnt books and smashed statues of the Catholic church, he himself was honored by a statue in front of the now emptied church. See picture and text by Léchot in this catalog. The most striking cases of speedy replacement of one idol by an icon (or depending on the point of view of one idol by another one) are described in Serge Gruzinski, *La colonisation de l’imaginaire. Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol XVI^e XVIII^e*, Gallimard, Paris, 1988. When during the Spanish conquest of Mexico priests ask other priests to tend the statues of the Virgin Mary in the very places where the “idols” lay smashed to the ground.

... See for instance the Bern and Strasbourg exhibit in 2001: Cécile Dupeux, Peter Jezler, et al., (eds), *Iconoclasm. Vie et mort de l’image médiévale*, Somogy éditions d’art, Paris, 2001. The Bern exhibit was entirely built in the honor of the courageous icon breakers who had freed the city from the power of image to lead to the superior symbolism of the cross ... all the way to a diorama where wax figures were melting useless chalices and reliquaries to mould useful Swiss gold coins! But in a nice iconoclash the last room showed the permanent remnants of the broken statues which had been transmogrified from hideous idols into art work piously conserved! No indication was given the visitors of any possible iconoclash ... The same iconoclastic *piety* can be seen in the Louvre recent exhibit by Régis Michel called *La peinture comme crime*, Réunions des musées nationaux, Paris, 2002.

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... Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2001.

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Tintin in Congo. Broken Fetiche / Hergé / Tintin au Congo / image from the comic / ©Hergé/Moulinart, Brussels, 2002



ment of the *hand*. What does it mean to say of some mediation, of some inscription that it is *human-made*?

As is well known from art historians and theologians, many sacred icons that have been celebrated and worshipped are called *acheiropoiete*; that is, *not* made by any human hand (see Koerner, Mondzain). Faces of Christ, portraits of the Virgin, Veronica's veil; there are many instances of these icons that have fallen from heaven without any intermediary. To show that a humble human painter has made them would be to weaken their force, to sully their origin, to desecrate them. Thus, to *add the hand* to the pictures is tantamount to spoiling them, criticizing them. The same is true of religion in general. If you say it is man-made you nullify the transcendence of the divinities, you empty the claims of a salvation from above.

More generally, the critical mind is one that shows the *hands* of humans at work everywhere so as to slaughter the

sanctity of religion, the belief in fetishes, the worship of transcendent, heaven-sent icons, the strength of ideologies. The more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image's claim to offer truth (see Tintin's prototypical example). Since Antiquity, critics have never tired of denouncing the devious plots of humans who try to make others believe in non-existing fetishes. The trick to uncover the trick is always to show the lowly origin of the work, the manipulator, the counterfeiter, the fraud behind the scenes who is caught red-handed

The same is true of science. There, too, objectivity is supposed to be *acheiropoiete*, not made by human hand. If you show the hand at work in the human fabric of science, you are accused of sullyng the sanctity of objectivity, of ruining its transcendence, of forbidding any claim to truth, of putting to the torch the only source of enlightenment we may have (see Lévy-Leblond). We treat as iconoclasts those who speak of the humans at work – scientists in their laboratories – behind or beneath the images that generate scientific objectivity. I have also been held by this paradoxical iconoclasm: the new *reverence* for the images of science is taken to be their *destruction*. The only way to defend science against the accusation of fabrication, to avoid the label of “socially constructed,” is apparently to insist that no human hand has ever touched the image it has produced (see Daston).⁷ So, in the two cases of religion and science, when the hand is shown at work, it is always a hand with a hammer or with a torch: always a critical, a destructive hand.

But what if hands were actually indispensable to reaching truth, to producing objectivity, to fabricating divinities? What would happen if, when saying that some image is human-made, you were *increasing* instead of decreasing its claim to truth? That would be the closure of the critical mood, the end of anti-fetishism. We could say, contrary to the critical urge, that the more human-work is shown, the *better* is their grasp of reality, of sanctity, of worship. That the more images,

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⁷ Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison, The Image of Objectivity, in *Representation*, 40, 2001, pp. 81-128; Galison chapter in Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (eds), *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, Routledge, New York, 1998.

Mandaron being destroyed / 6 September 2001 / Castellane, France / policemen destroy the effigy of the Mandaron secte guru because of his unlicensed construction / © AFP, Patrick Vallasseris/STF



mediations, intermediaries, icons are multiplied and overtly fabricated, explicitly and publicly constructed, the more respect we have for their capacities to welcome, to gather, to recollect truth and sanctity (“religere” is one of the several etymologies for the word religion). As Mick Taussig has so beautifully shown, the more you reveal the *tricks* necessary to invite the gods to the ceremony during the initiation, the stronger is the certainty that the divinities are present.⁸ Far from despoiling access to transcendent beings, revelation of human toil, of the tricks, reinforce the quality of this access (see Sarro, de Aquino).

Thus, we can define an *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, to dispel one’s illusions, to let the air out? 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 maintain, to collect truth and sanctity?

But then of course, the second commandment can no longer be obeyed: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below.” No need to try to fudge the intention and tension of this exhibition as we have imagined it for the last four years: it is about the second commandment. Are we sure we have understood it correctly? Have we not made a long and terrifying mistake about its meaning? How can we reconcile this request for a totally aniconic society, religion and science with the fabulous proliferation of images that characterizes our media-filled cultures?

If images are so dangerous, why do we have so many of them? If they are innocent, why do they trigger so many and such enduring passions? Such is the enigma, the hesitation, the visual puzzle, the *iconoclash* that we wish to deploy under the eyes of the visitor and reader.

Religion, Science and Art: Three Different Patterns of Image-Making

The experiment we have devised consists in bringing together three sources of *iconoclashes*: religion, science and contemporary art. We want to situate the many works, sites, events, and examples presented in this catalog and exhibition amidst the tension created by this triangular set-up.

Although *Iconoclash* assembles lots of religious material, it is not a theological pilgrimage; although it offers many scientific inscriptions, it is not a science museum for pedagogical wonders; although it assembles numerous works of art, it is *not* an art show. It is only because each of us, visitors, curators and readers, harbors such a different pattern of belief, rage, enthusiasm, admiration, diffidence, fascination, suspicion, and spite for *each of the three* types of images that we bring them to bear on one another. What interests us, is the even more complex pattern created by their *interference*.

Icons and Idols

But why bring so many religious icons into this show? Have they not been emptied by aesthetic judgment, absorbed by art history, made routine by conventional piety, to the point of being dead forever? On the contrary, it is enough to remember the reactions to the destructions of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban in Afghanistan, to realize that religious images are still the ones that attract the fiercest passions (see Centlivres, Frodon, Clement).⁹ From Akhenaton’s “theoclast” onwards, destroying monasteries, churches, and mosques and burning fetishes and idols in huge bonfires, is still a daily occupation for huge masses of the world exactly as in the time of what Assman calls the “mosaic distinction” (see Pietz, Corbey, Taylor). “Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their sacred poles” (Exodus, 34, 13): the instruction to burn the idols is as present, as burning, as impetuous, as

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— Michael Taussig, *Defacement. Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999.

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— Pierre Centlivres, *Les Boudhas d’Afghanistan*, Favre, Lausanne, 2001.

Scene from the Bunraku puppet theater / Miyagino (left) & Shinobu (right) from Go Taiheiki Shiraiishi Banashi-Shin Yosiwara Ageya no Dan Puppeteers Yoshida Minesuke-Miyagino (left) and Kiritake Monju-Shinobu (right) / National Bunraku Theater. Osaka / 1997 / © the puppeteers



subterranean as the ever threatening lava flows along the Etna. Even in the hilarious case of the destruction this summer of the “Mandrom” – a hideous, gigantic statue erected by a sect in the South of France – the destruction of which, the believers have compared to the demise of the Afghan Buddhas.

And of course, idol smashing is in no way limited to religious minds. Which critic does not believe that her ultimate duty, her most burning commitment, is to destroy the totem poles, expose ideologies, disabuse the idolaters? As many people have remarked, 99 percent of those who were scandalized by the Taliban gesture of vandalism descended from ancestors who had smashed to pieces the most precious icons of some other people – or, indeed, they had themselves participated in some deed of deconstruction (see Nathan, Koch).

What has been most violent? The religious urge to destroy idols to bring humanity to the right cult of the true God or the anti-religious urge to destroy the sacred icons and bring humanity to its true senses? An *iconoclash* indeed, since, if they are nothing, no one knows whether those idols can be smashed without any consequences (“They are mere stones,” said Mollah Omar¹⁰ in the same fashion as the Byzantine and later Lutheran iconoclasts) or whether they have to be destroyed because they are so *powerful*, so ominous (“If they are so vacuous why do you take up on them?” “Your idol is my icon.”) (See Koerner, Christin).

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“Ou ces statues sont liées à des croyances idolâtres, a commenté le Mollah, ou il ne s’agit que de simples cailloux; dans le premier cas, l’islam commande de les détruire, dans le second, qu’importe qu’on les brise,” Centlivres, Paris, 2001, p. 141.

Scientific Inscriptions

But why, then, scientific images? Surely, these offer cold, unmediated, objective representations of the world and thus cannot trigger the same passion and frenzy as the religious pictures. Contrary to the religious ones, they simply describe the world in a way that can be proven true or false. Precisely because they are cool, they are fresh, they can be verified, they are largely undisputed, they are the objects of a rare and almost universal agreement. So the pattern of confidence, belief, rejection, and spite is entirely different for them than the one generated by idols/icons. This is why there are so many of them here and, as we will see, why they offer different sorts of *iconoclashes*.

To begin with, for most people, they are not even images, but the world itself. There is nothing to say about them except learning their message. To call them image, inscription, representation, to have them exposed in an exhibition side by side with religious icons, is already an iconoclastic gesture. “If those are *mere* representations of galaxies, atoms, light, genes, then one could say indignantly, they are not real, they have been *fabricated*.” And yet, as will be made visible here (see Galison, Macho, Huber, Rheinberger), it slowly becomes clearer that without huge and costly instruments, large groups of scientists, vast amounts of money, long training, nothing would be visible in those images. It is *because* of so many mediations that they are able to be so objectively true.

Here is another *iconoclash*, exactly opposite to the one raised by the worship of religious image-destruction: the more instruments, the more mediation, the *better* the grasp of reality (see Schaffer). If there is a domain where the second commandment cannot be applied, it is the one ruled by those who shape objects, maps, and diagrams “in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below.” So the pattern of interference may allow us to rejuvenate our understanding of image making: the more human-made

images are generated, the more objectivity will be collected. In science, there is no such a thing as “mere representation.”

Contemporary Art

Then why link religious and scientific mediations to contemporary art? Because here at least there is no question that paintings, installations, happenings, events, and museums are *human-made*. The hand at work is visible everywhere. No *acheiropoiete* icon is expected from this maelstrom of movements, artists, promoters, buyers and sellers, critics and dissidents. On the contrary, the most extreme claims have been made in favor of an individual, human-based creativity. No access to truth or to the divinities. Down with transcendence! (see Belting, Groys, Weibel).

Nowhere else but in contemporary art has a better laboratory been set up for trying out and testing the resistance of every item comprising the cult of image, of picture, of beauty, of media, of genius. Nowhere else have so many paradoxical effects been carried out on the public to complicate their reactions to images (see Gamboni, Heinich). Nowhere else have so many set-ups been invented to slow down, modify, perturb, lose the naive gaze and the “scopic regime” of the *amateur d’art* (see Yaneva, Lowe). Everything has been slowly experimented against and smashed to pieces, from mimetic representation, through image making, canvas, color, artwork, all the way to the artist herself, her signature, the role of museums, of the patrons, of critics – not to forget the Philistines, ridiculed to death.

Everyone and every detail of what art is and what an icon is, an idol, a sight, a gaze, has been thrown into the pot to be cooked and burnt up in the past century of what used to be called modernist art.¹¹ A Last Judgment has been passed: *all our ways to produce representation* of any sort have been found wanting. Generations of iconoclasts smashing each other’s faces and works. A fabulous large-scale experiment in

nihilism (see Sloterdijk, Weibel). A maniacal joy in self-destruction. A hilarious sacrilege. A sort of deleterious aniconic inferno.

And yet, of course, as one might expect, here is another *iconoclash*: so much defacement and so much “re-facement” (see Obrist, Tresch, Lowe). Out of this obsessive experiment to avoid the power of traditional image making, a fabulous source of *new* images, *new* media, *new* works of art has been found; *new* set-ups to multiply the possibilities of vision. The more art has become a synonym for the destruction of art, the more art has been produced, evaluated, talked about, bought and sold, and, yes, worshipped. New images have been produced so powerful that they have become impossible to buy, to touch, to burn, to repair, even to transport, thus generating even more *iconoclashes* ... (see Gamboni). A sort of “creative destruction” that Schumpeter had not anticipated.

A Reshuffling of Confidence and Diffidence Towards Image

So we have assembled three different patterns of image rejection and image construction, of image confidence and image diffidence. Our bet is that interference between the three should move us beyond the image wars, beyond the “*Bildersturm*.”

We have not brought religious images into an avant-garde institution of contemporary art to have them again subjected to irony or destruction, nor to again present them to be worshipped. We have brought them here to resonate with the scientific images and show in which ways they are powerful and what sort of *invisibility* both types of images have been able to produce (see Koerner, Mondzain).

Scientific images have not been brought here to instruct or enlighten the public in some pedagogical way, but to show how they are generated and how they connect to one another, to which sort of iconoclasm they have been subjected (see

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¹¹ See for instance the magnificent Tim J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999.

Galison, Schaffer), what peculiar type of invisible world they generate.

As to contemporary art pieces, they are not being shown here to compose an art show, but to draw the conclusions of this huge laboratory experiment on the limits and virtues of representation that has been going on in so many media and through so many bold innovative enterprises (see Weibel).

In effect, we are trying to build, for recent iconoclastic art, a sort of *idol-chamber*, similar to the ones made by protestant desecrators when they tore the images away from cult, turning them into objects of horror and derision, *before* they became the first kernels of the art museum and aesthetic appreciation (see Koener). A little twist to be sure, and more than a little ironic, but much welcome.

The routine patterns of respect, wonder, diffidence, worship, and confidence, which usually distinguish religious, scientific and artistic mediations should be, more than slightly redistributed throughout this show.

Which Object to Select?

As should be clear by now, *Iconoclash* is neither an art show nor a philosophical argument, but a cabinet of curiosities assembled by “friends of interpretable objects” to fathom the source of fanaticism, hatred, and nihilism generated by the image issue in Western tradition. A small project, if any! But since the curators of this show are not totally mad, we have not tried to cover the whole question of image worship and destruction from Akhenaton to 911. Ours is not an encyclopedic undertaking. On the contrary, we have very selectively chosen only those sites, objects, and situations where there is an ambiguity, a hesitation, an *iconoclash* on how to interpret image-making and image-breaking.

Each of the curators has a different selection principle which they present below, so I will state mine as clearly as I

can: I am interested in representing the state of mind of those who have broken fetishes – or what I prefer to call “fetishes”¹² – and who have entered into what Assmann names “counter-religion.”

An Impossible Double Bind

How can they stand living with the broken pieces of what, until they came along, had been the only way to produce, to collect, to welcome the divinities? How startled they should be when they look at their hands which are no longer able to complete the tasks they had succeeded in doing for eons: namely, to be busy at work and nonetheless to generate objects which are not of their own making? Now they have to choose between two contradictory demands: is this made by your own hands, in which case it is worthless; or is this objective, true, transcendent, in which case you cannot possibly have made it? Either God is doing everything and humans are doing nothing, or the humans are doing all the work and God is nothing. Too much or too little when the fetishes are gone.

Yet, of course, fetishes have to be made. Human hands cannot stop toiling, producing images, pictures, inscriptions of all sorts, to still generate, welcome, and collect objectivity, beauty, and divinities, exactly as in the – now forbidden – repressed, obliterated old days. How could one not become a fanatic since gods, truths, and sanctity have to be made and there is no longer any *legitimate* way of making them? My question throughout this exhibit is: how can you live with this double bind without becoming mad? Have we become mad? Is there a cure to this folly?

Let us contemplate for a moment the tension created by this double bind, which may explain a lot of the archeology of fanaticism. The idol smasher, the mediator breaker is left with only two polar opposites: either he (I guess it is fair to put it in the masculine) is in full command of his hands, but then what he has produced is “simply” the “mere” conse-

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– Bruno Latour, *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux Faitiches*, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 1996; How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion?, in C. Jones / P. Galison, op.cit., pp. 418-440; *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the reality of science studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

quence of his own force and weakness projected into matter since he is unable to produce more output than his input; in which case, there is no other way for him but to alternate between *hubris* and despair depending on whether he emphasizes his infinite creative power or his absurdly limited forces.

Or else he is in the hands of a transcendent, unmade divinity who has created him out of nothing and produces truth and sanctity in the *acheiropoietic* way. And in the same way that he, the human fabricator, alternates between *hubris* and despair, He, the Creator, will alternate wildly between omnipotence and non-existence, depending on whether or not His presence can be shown and His efficacy proven. What used to be synonymous: “I make,” and “I am not in command of what I make” has become a radical contradiction: “Either you make or you are made.”¹³

This brutal alternation between being in command as a powerful (powerless) human creator or being in the hand of an omnipotent (powerless) Creator is already bad enough, but worse, what really knots the double bind and forces the strait-jacketed human into extreme frenzy, is that there is no way to stop the proliferation of mediators, inscriptions, objects, icons, idols, image, picture, and signs, in spite of their interdiction. No matter how adamant one is about breaking fetishes and forbidding oneself image-worship, temples will be built, sacrifices will be made, instruments will be deployed, scriptures will be carefully written down, manuscripts will be copied, incense will be burned, and thousands of gestures will have to be invented for recollecting truth, objectivity, and sanctity (see Tresch on the striking case of Francis Bacon, Halberthal on the sad case of the Jerusalem temple).

The second commandment is all the more terrifying since there is no way to obey it. The only thing you can do to pretend you observe it is to *deny* the work of your own hands, to *repress* the action ever present in the making, fabrication, construction, and production of images, to *erase* the writing at the same time you are writing it, to *slap* your hands at the

same time they are manufacturing. And with no hand, what will you do? With no image, to what truth will you have access? With no instrument, what science will instruct you?

Can we measure the misery endured by those who have to produce images and are forbidden to confess they are making them? Worse, either they will have to say that the demiurge is doing all the work, writing the sacred scriptures *directly*, inventing the rituals, ordering the law, assembling the crowds, or else, if the work of the faithful is revealed, we will be forced to denounce those texts as “mere” fabrications, those rituals as make-believe, their making as nothing but making up, their constructions as a sham, their objectivity as socially constructed, their laws as simply human, too human.¹⁴

So the idol-smasher is doubly mad: not only has he deprived himself of the secret to produce transcendent objects, but he continues producing them even though this production has become absolutely forbidden, with no way to be registered. Not only does he hesitate between infinite power and infinite weakness, infinite creative freedom and infinite dependence in the hand of his Creator, but he also constantly alternates between the denial of the mediators and their necessary presence. Enough to render one mad. Enough at least to produce more than one *iconoclash*.

Freud, in his strange nightmare about Moses, has offered to explain a similar madness – the invention of “counter-religion” – a most bizarre legend, that of the murder of the selfish, overpowering father by the primitive horde of his jealous sons.¹⁵ But the tradition offers another, more revealing legend, where it is not the father that is killed, but the father’s *livelihood* that is smashed to pieces by his over enterprising son.¹⁶

Abraham, at the age of six, is said to have destroyed the idol-shop of his father, Terah, with which he had been temporarily entrusted (see insert). What a good *iconoclash*! To this day no one understands the ambiguous response of the father to the son’s question: Why does your ear not listen to

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_ See a striking case in La Fontaine’s fable *Le statuaire et la statue de Jupiter*, Livre neuvième, fable VI, see Gamboni for another interpretation.

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_ See Jean-François Clément, *L’image dans le monde arabe: interdits et possibilités in L’image dans le monde arabe*, G. Beaugé, J.-F. Clément (eds), Editions du CNRS, Paris, 1995, pp. 11-42. For a careful inquiry into the “jealousy” of God the Creator towards the artist and the constant possibility of atheism in the maniac rejection of idols, see the catalog.

15

_ Sigmund Freud, *L’homme Moïse et la religion monothéiste. Trois essais*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996.

14

_ The difference between the two types of murders, might explain some of the strange visual features of Freud’s cabinet. See Marinelli, and more largely what Andreas Mayer calls “psychic objects.”

what your mouth says? Is the son shaming his father for his idol worship, or is it, on the contrary, the father who is shaming his son for not understanding what idols can do (see Nathan)?” If you start to break the idols, my son, with what mediations will you welcome, collect, access, assemble, and gather your divinities? Are you sure you understand the dictates of your God? What sort of folly are you going to enter if you begin to believe, that I, your father, *naively* believe in those idols I have made with my own hands, cooked in my own oven, sculpted with my own tools? Do you really believe I ignore their origin? Do you really believe that this lowly origin *weakens* their claims to reality? Is your critical mind so *very naive*?”

This legendary dispute can be seen everywhere in more abstract terms, whenever a productive mediation is smashed to pieces and replaced by the question: “Is this made or is this real? You have to choose!”¹⁷ What has rendered constructivism impossible in the Western tradition? Tradition which, on the other hand, has constructed and deconstructed so much, but without being able to confess how it managed to do it. If westerners had really believed they had to choose between construction and reality (if they had been consistently modern), they would never have had religion, art, science, and politics. Mediations are necessary everywhere. If you forbid them, you may become mad, fanatic, but there is no way to obey the command and choose between the two-polar opposites: either it is made or it is real. That is a structural impossibility, an impasse, a double bind, a frenzy. It is as impossible as to request a Bunraku player to have to choose, from now on, between showing his puppet or showing himself on the stage (see picture).¹⁸

To Increase the Cost of Criticism

So, for my part, I have selected items that reveal this double bind and the fanaticism it triggers (for the prototypical

example at the origin of this show see insert “Abraham and the Idol Shop of His Father Terah”).¹⁹ It is as if the critical mind could not overcome the original breaking of “factishes” and realize how much it had lost in forcing the fabricator into this impossible choice between human construction and access to truth and objectivity. Suspicion has rendered us dumb. It is as if the hammer of the critique had rebounded and struck senseless the critic’s head!

This is why this exhibit is also a *revision of the critical spirit*, a pause in the critique, a meditation on the urge for debunking, for the too quick attribution of the naive belief in others (see Koch).²⁰ The devotees are not dumb (see Schaffer). It is not that critique is no longer needed, but rather that it has, of late, become too *cheap*.

One could say, with more than a little dose of irony, that there has been a sort of *miniaturization* of critical efforts: what in the past centuries required the formidable effort of a Marx, a Nietzsche, a Benjamin, has become accessible for nothing, much like the supercomputers of the 1950s, which used to fill large halls and expend a vast amount of electricity and heat, and are now accessible for a dime and no bigger than a fingernail. You can now have your Baudrillard’s or your Bourdieu’s disillusion for a song, your Derridian deconstruction for a nickel. Conspiracy theory costs nothing to produce, disbelief is easy, debunking what is learned in 101 classes in critical theory. As the recent advertisement of a Hollywood film proclaimed, “Every one is suspect ... everyone is for sale ... and nothing is true!”

We wish (I wish) to make critique more difficult, to increase its cost, by adding another layer to it, another *icono-*clash**: what if the critique had been uncritical enough to the point of making invisible the necessity of mediation? What is the western underbelly, modernism’s hidden spring that makes its machinery tick? Again, what if we had misunderstood the second commandment? What if Moses had been forced to tone it down for the narrow bandwidth of his people?

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— Nowhere is it clearer than in science studies, my original field, where it organizes every position between realism and constructivism, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

— To be compared with the illustration of La Fontaine fable in insert.

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— Anantha Murthy, *Bharathipura*, Macmillan, Madras, India, 1996.

— Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, University of Minnesota Press and catalog, Minneapolis, 1987.

Maurizio Cattelan / La Nona Ora / 1999 / polyester resin, natural hair, accessories, stone, carpeted floor / dimension variable / courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin / © Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris



A Rough Classification of the Iconoclastic Gestures

Now that we have some idea of how the material for the show and the catalog has been selected, it might be useful for the reader as well as for the visitor to benefit from a classification of the *iconoclashes* presented here. It is of course impossible to propose a standardized, agreed-upon typology for such a complex and elusive phenomenon.

It would even seem to run counter to the spirit of the show. As I have claimed, somewhat boldly: are we not after a *re-description* of iconophilia and iconoclasm in order to produce even *more uncertainty* about which kind of image worship/image smashing one is faced with? How could we neatly

pull them apart? And yet it might be useful to briefly present the *five types* of iconoclastic gestures reviewed in this show, for no better reason than to gauge the extent of the ambiguity triggered by the visual puzzles we have been looking for.

The principle behind this admittedly rough classification is to look at:

- the inner goals of the icon smashers,
- the roles they give to the destroyed images,
- the effects this destruction has on those who cherished those images,
- how this reaction is interpreted by the iconoclasts,
- and, finally, the effects of destruction on the destroyer's own feelings.

This list is rudimentary but sturdy enough, I think, to guide one through the many examples assembled here.

The »A« People are Against All Images

The first type – I give them letters to avoid loaded terminology – is made up of those who want to free the believers – those they *deem* to be believers – of their false attachments to idols of all sorts and shapes. Idols, the fragments of which are now lying on the ground, were nothing but obstacles in the path to higher virtues. They had to be destroyed. They triggered too much indignation and hatred in the hearts of the courageous image breakers. Living with them was unbearable.²¹

What distinguishes the As from all other types of iconoclasts is that they believe it is not only necessary but also possible to *entirely* dispose of intermediaries and to access truth, objectivity, and sanctity. Without those obstacles, they think one will at last have smoother, faster, more direct access to the real thing, which is the only object worthy of respect and worship. Images do not even provide preparation, a reflection, an inkling of the original: they *forbid* any access to the original. Between images and symbols you have to choose or be damned.

Type A is thus the pure form of “classical” iconoclasm, recognizable in the formalist’s rejection of imagination, drawing and models (see Galison) as well as in the many Byzantine, Lutheran, revolutionary movements of idol smashers, and the horrifying “excesses” of the Cultural Revolution (see Konchok). Purification is their goal. The world, for A people, would be a much better place, much cleaner, much more enlightened, if only one could get rid of all mediations and if one could jump directly into contact with the original, the ideas, the true God.

One of the problems with the As is that they have to believe that the others – the poor guys whose cherished icons have been accused of being impious idols – believe naively in

them. Such an assumption entails that, when the philistines react with screams of horror to pillage and plunder, this does not stop the As. On the contrary, it proves how right they were (see Schaffer). The intensity of the horror of the idolaters is the best proof that those poor naive believers had invested too much in those stones that are essentially nothing. Armed with the notion of naive belief, the freedom-fighters constantly misconstrue the indignation of those they scandalize for an abject attachment to things they should destroy even more radically.

But the deepest problem of the As, is that no one knows if they are not Bs!

The »B« People Are Against Freeze-Frame, not Against Images

The Bs too are idol smashers. They also wreak havoc on images, break down customs and habits, scandalize the worshippers, and trigger the horrified screams of “Blasphemer!, Infidel!, Sacrilege!, Profanity!.” But the huge difference between the As and the Bs – the distinction that runs through this whole exhibit – is that the latter do not believe it possible nor necessary to get rid of images. What they fight is *freeze-framing*, that is, extracting an image out of the flow, and becoming fascinated by it, as if it were sufficient, as if all movement had stopped.

What they are after is not a world free of images, purified of all the obstacles, rid of all mediators, but on the contrary, a world *filled* with active images, moving mediators. They do not want the image production to stop forever – as the As will have it – they want it to *resume* as fast and as fresh as possible.

For them, iconophilia does not mean the exclusive and obsessive attention to image, because they can stand *fixed* images no more than the As. Iconophilia means moving from one image *to the next*. They know “truth is image but there

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²¹ As recalled into Centlivres (see catalog) Mollah Omar made a sacrifice of 100 cows, a very costly hecatomb by Afghan standards, as atonement for having *failed* to destroy the Buddhas for so long: 100 cows to ask remission for this horrible sin of eleven centuries without wrecking them.

is no image of truth.” For them, the only way to access truth, objectivity, and sanctity is to move fast from one image to another, not to dream the impossible dream of jumping to a non-existing original. Contrary to Plato’s resemblance chain, they don’t even try to move from the copy to the prototype. They are, as the old iconophilic Byzantine used to say, “economic” (see Mondzain), the word meaning at the time a long and carefully managed flow of images in religion, politics, and art – and not the sense it now has: the world of goods.

Whereas the As believe that those who hold to images are iconophilic and the courageous minds who break away from the fascination with images are iconoclastic, the Bs define iconophilic as those who *do not* cling to one image in particular but are able to move from one to the other. For them iconoclasts are either those who absurdly want to get rid of all images or those who remain in the fascinated contemplation of one isolated image, freeze-framed.

Prototypical examples of Bs could be: Jesus chasing the merchants out of the Temple, Bach shocking the dull music out of the Leipzig congregation’s ears,²² Malevich painting the black square to access the cosmic forces that had remained hidden in classical representative painting,²³ the Tibetan sage extinguishing the butt of a cigarette on a Buddha’s head to show its illusory character.²⁴ The damage done to icons is, to them, always a charitable injunction to *redirect* their attention towards other, newer, fresher, more sacred images: not to do without image.

But of course many *iconoclashes* come from the fact that no worshipper can be sure when his or her preferred icon/idols will be smashed to the ground, or whether an A or a B does the ominous deed. Are we requested, they wonder, to go without any mediation at all and try out direct connections with God and objectivity? Are we invited to simply change the vehicle we have used so far for worship? Are we spurred into a renewed sense of adoration and asked to resume our work of image-building anew? Think of the long

hesitation of those waiting at the foot of Mount Sinai for Moses to return: what have we been asked to do? It is so easy to be mistaken and to begin molding the Golden Calf (see Pinchard).

Are neither the As nor the Bs sure of how to read the reactions of those whose icon/idols are being burnt? Are they furious at being without their cherished idols, much like toddlers suddenly deprived of their transitional object? Are they ashamed of being falsely accused of naively believing in non-existing things? Are they horrified at being so forcefully requested to renew their adhesion to their cherished tradition that they had let fall into disrepute and mere custom? Neither the As nor the Bs can decide, from the screeching noise made by their opponents, what sort of prophets they are *themselves*: are they prophets who claim to get rid of all images, or the ones who, “economically,” want to let the cascade of images move again to resume the work of salvation?

But this is not the end of our hesitation, of our ambiguity, of our *iconoclash*. As and Bs could, after all, be simply Cs in disguise.

The »C« People are not Against Images. Except those of Their Opponents

The Cs are also after debunking, disenchantment, idol-breaking. They too leave in their trail plunder, wreckage, horrified screams, scandals, abomination, desecration, shame and profanation of all sorts. But contrary to the As and to the Bs, they have nothing against images in general: they are only against the image to which their opponents *cling* most forcefully.

This is the well-known mechanism of provocation by which, in order to destroy someone as fast and as efficiently as possible, it is enough to attack what is most cherished, what has become the repository of all the symbolic treasures of one people (see Lindhardt, Sloterdijk). Flag-burning, painting-

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... Denis Laborde, Vous avez-tous entendu son blasphème?
Qu'en pensez-vous? Dire la Passion selon St Matthieu selon
Bach, in *Ethnologie française*, 22, 1992, pp. 320-333.

... Heather Stoddard, *Le Mendiant de l'Amdo*, Société d'ethnographie, Paris, 1985.

Boris Groys, *Staline, oeuvre d'art totale*, Editions
Jacqueline Chambon, Paris, 1990.

slashing, hostage-taking are typical examples. Tell me what you hold to be most dear, and I will wreck it so as to kill you faster. It is the mini-max strategy so characteristic of terrorist threats: the maximum damage for the minimum investment. Box cutters and plane tickets against the United States of America.

The search for the suitable object to attract destruction and hatred is *reciprocal*: “Before you wanted to attack my flag, I did not know I cherished it so much, but now I do” (see Taussig). So the provocateurs and those they provoke are playing cat and mouse, the first looking for what triggers indignation faster, the others looking eagerly for what will trigger their indignation most fiercely.²⁵ During this search, all recognize the image in question as a mere *token*; it counts for nothing but an occasion that allows the scandal to unfold (see Koch). If it were not for the conflict, everyone in the two camps would be perfectly happy to confess that it is not the object that is disputed; it is just a stake for something entirely different.²⁶ So for the Cs, the image *itself* is not in question at all, they have nothing against it (as the As do) or for it (as in the case of the Bs). The image is simply worthless – worthless but attacked, thus defended, thus attacked ...

What is so terrible for idol smashers is that there is no way to decide for good whether they are As, Bs or Cs. Maybe they have entirely misunderstood their calling; maybe they are misconstruing the screams of horror of those they call philistines who witness their idols smashed to the ground. They see themselves as prophets but may be they are mere “agents provocateurs.” They see themselves as freeing the poor wretched souls from their imprisonment by monstrous things, but what if they were, on the contrary, scandal-mongers looking for ways to shame their opponents most efficiently?

What would happen to me if, in criticizing the critics, I myself was simply trying to create another scandal? What if *Iconoclash*, in its pretension to re-describe iconoclasm, was

nothing but another boring iconoclastic gesture, another provocation, the mere repetition of the endless gesture of the intelligentsia’s most cherished treasures? We don’t know for sure.

Ah, but that is why it is called *Iconoclash*.

The »D« People are Breaking Images Unwittingly

There is another kind of icon smasher present in this exhibit, a most devious case, those who could be called the “innocent vandals.” As is well known, vandalism is a term of spite invented to describe those who destroy not so much out of a hatred of images but out of ignorance, a lust for profit and sheer passion and lunacy.²⁷

Of course, the label can be used to describe the action of the As, the Bs, and the Cs as well. They *all* can be accused of vandalism by those who don’t know if they are innocent believers furious at being accused of naiveté, philistines awakened from their dogmatic sleep by prophetic calls, or scandal-lovers delighted at being the butt of criticism and thus able to demonstrate the strength and self-righteousness of their indignation.

But the innocent vandals are different from the normal, “bad” vandals: they had absolutely no idea that they were destroying anything. On the contrary, they were cherishing images and protecting them from destruction, and yet they are accused later of having profaned and destroyed them!²⁸ They are, so to speak, iconoclasts in *retrospect*. The typical example is that of the restaurateurs who are accused by some of “killing with kindness” (see Lowe). The field of architecture is especially filled with those “innocents” who, when they build, have to destroy, when their buildings are accused of being nothing but vandalism (see Obrist, Geimer). Their heart is filled with the love of images – so they are different from all the other cases – and yet they trigger the very same curses of “profanation,” “sacrilege,” and “desecration” as all the others.

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_ For the mechanism of scandal mongering in contemporary art, see Heinrich, Gamboni, in this catalog and his book, *The Destruction of Art. Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, Reaktion Books, London, 1996. For social and political “affaires” see Luc Boltanski, *L’amour et la justice comme compétences*, A.-M. Métailié, Paris, 1990. The typical mechanism for seeing objects as tokens has been proposed by René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1987.

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_ Political correctness is part of this attitude: scouting everywhere for good occasions to be scandalized.

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_ Louis Réau, *Histoire du vandalisme. Les monuments détruits de l’art français*, Edition augmentée par Michel Fleury et Guy-Michel Leproux, Bouquins, Paris, 1994; André Chastel, *The Sac of Rome – 1527*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983.

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_ Censorship may be one aspect of the Ds: tearing down or hiding images for the sake of protecting other images and choosing the wrong target. Filmmakers are busy deleting images of the World Trade Center from their film so as not to shock the viewers. In *International Herald Tribune*, 25 October 2001.

Life is so difficult: by restoring works of art, beautifying cities, rebuilding archeological sites, they have destroyed them, their opponents say, to the point that they appear as the worst iconoclasts, or at least the most perverse ones. But other examples can be found like those museum curators who keep the beautiful New Guinean “mallagans” although they have become worthless since, in the eyes of their makers, they should be destroyed after three days ... (see Derlon, Sarro) or those African objects which have been carefully made to rot on the ground and which are carefully saved by art dealers and thus rendered powerless – in the eyes of their makers (see Strother).²⁹ The apprentice sorcerer is not a really wicked sorcerer, but one who *becomes* wicked out of his or her own innocence, ignorance and carelessness.

And here again, the As as well as the Bs and the Cs can be accused of being Ds, that is, of aiming at the wrong target, of forgetting to take into account the side effects, the far reaching consequences of their acts of destruction. “You believe you freed people from idolatry, but you have simply deprived them of the means to worship;” “You believe you are a prophet renewing the cult of images with fresher images, you are nothing but a scandal-monger thirsty for blood;” and similar accusations are frequently leveled in revolutionary circles, accusing one another of being constantly on the wrong foot, of being, *horresco referens*, reactionary. What if we had killed the wrong people, smashed down the wrong idols? Worse, what if we had sacrificed idols for the cult of an even bloodier, bigger, and more monstrous Baal?

The »E« People are Simply the People: they Mock Iconoclasts and Iconophiles

To be complete, one should add the Es who doubt the idol breakers as much as the icon worshippers. They are diffident to any sharp distinctions between the two poles; they exercise their devastating irony against all mediators; not that they

want to get rid of them, but because they are so conscious of their fragility. They love to show irreverence and disrespect, they crave for jeers and mockery, they claim an absolute right to blasphemy in a fierce, Rabelaisian way (see Pinchard), they show the necessity of insolence, the importance of what the Romans called “pasquinades,” which is so important for a healthy sense of civil liberty, the indispensable dose of what Peter Sloterdijk has called cynicism (by opposition to the typically iconoclastic cynicism).

There is a right not to believe and the even more important right not to be accused of believing *naively* in something. There may be no such a thing as a believer. Except the rare icon smasher who believes in belief – and, strangely enough, believes himself or herself to be the only *unbeliever*. This healthy, wide ranging, popular, indestructible agnosticism may be the source of much confusion because, here again, the reactions they trigger are indistinguishable from those created by the As’, Bs’, Cs’, and Ds’ acts of destruction-regeneration. It is so easy to be shocked. Everyone has a quantity of “shockability” that can certainly be applied to different causes, but not in any case emptied or even diminished.

Take the now famous icon of Pope John-Paul II struck to the ground by a meteorite (see Maurizio Cattelan, *La Nona Ora*). Does it demonstrate a healthy irreverence for authority? Is it a typical case of a cheap provocation aimed at *blasé* Londoners who expect to be mildly shocked when they go to an art show but don’t really give a damn for the killing of such boring image as that of the Pope? Is it, on the contrary, a scandalous attempt to wreck the belief of Polish museum visitors when the piece is shown in Warsaw? Or is it, as Christian Boltanski claims, a deeply respectful image showing that, in Catholicism, the Pope is requested to suffer the same breaking, the same ultimate destruction as Christ himself?³⁰ How is it possible to test this range of interpretations?³¹

Hence the *sound-scape* of this exhibit.

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²⁹ Other cases could be found of retrospective destruction in technology: asbestos used to be the “magic material” before its producers were accused of killing thousands of people with it; DDT used to be the magic pesticide before being accused of the same crimes. See Ulrich Beck, *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, for an account of this retrospective accusation around the notion of “after-effect.”

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³⁰ Christian Boltanski, personal communication.

³¹ I proposed a test to Cattelan: to replace the Pope, whom everyone (but perhaps not the Poles) expects to see smashed to the ground, by someone whose destruction would trigger the intellectuals’ indignation: for instance to show Salman Rushdie shot to death by an Islamist bullet ... Too horrifying, too scandalous, I was told (Obrist, personal communication). Ah ah! so the Pope can be struck but not someone *really* worthy of respect in the eyes of the critically minded! But when I proposed what appeared to be a true sacrilege and not a cheap one, what was I after? Another provocation directed at faithful critics instead of faithful Popists? Who is to tell? I can’t even be sure I understand the reactions of those who recoiled in horror at my suggestion.

Piéta / fifteenth century / Musée Anne de Beaujeu, Moulins. Collection Tudot



A Welcome Cacophony

Our show aims at *hearing* those cries of despair, horror, indignation, and stupefaction simultaneously, all at once, without having to choose too fast, without having to join our usual camps and brandish some hammer to complete some act of deconstruction. Hence the *cacophony*, which is the audible equivalent of the *iconoclashes* and which occupies so much of the space of the exhibit (see Laborde).

Through sound as well as image, we want to restore this sense of ambiguity: who is screaming against destruction and why? Are these the lamentations of the eternal philistines shocked to be forced out of their boring and narrow circle of habits? Hear, hear! Are these the wailings of humble worshippers deprived of their only source of virtue and attachment, the sacred relics, the precious fetishes, the fragile factishes that used to keep them alive and which are now broken by some blind and arrogant reformer?³² Hear, hear! The weeping sound made by the As realizing that they will never attain the gentle violence of the prophetic Bs, and that they have simply emptied the world and made it even more terrifying. Hear again, behind the cacophonous laments, the sardonic laugh of the blasphemous Es, so healthy, so happy to deploy their juvenile charivari. And behind it all, what is it, this other sound? Hear, hear! the prophetic trumpet waking us out of our deadly attachment to resuscitate a new sense of the beauty, truth, and sanctity of images. But who makes this horrible raucous noise? Hear, hear! what a racket, the blaring sound of the provocateurs, looking for new prey.

Yes, a pandemonium: our daily world.

Beyond the Image Wars: Cascades of Images

How can we be sure that our show is not another iconoclastic show? That we are not asking the visitor and the reader to descend one more spiral in the inferno of debunking and

criticism? That we are not adding another layer of irony, piling disbelief upon disbelief, continuing the task of disenchantment with even more disenchantment? Again, among the curators, no one agrees and anyway, agreement is not our goal since we are after *iconoclashes*, not certainty. And yet our exhibition claims to be able to go *beyond* the image wars. Always a bold claim this little preposition: beyond. How can we be faithful to it?

By presenting images, objects, statues, signs, and documents in a way that demonstrates the connections they have with other images, objects, statues, signs, and documents. In other words, we are trying to claim that we belong to the people of the Bs against the As, the Cs, the Ds, and even the Es. Yes, we claim to be of prophetic stock! Images do count; they are not mere tokens, and not because they are prototypes of something away, above, beneath; they count because they allow one to move to *another* image, exactly as frail and modest as the former one – but *different*.³³

Thus, the crucial distinction we wish to draw in this show is not between a world of image and a world of no-image – as the image warriors would have us believe – but between the *interrupted* flow of pictures and a *cascade* of them. By directing the attention of visitors to those cascades, we don't expect peace – the history of the image is too loaded for that – but we are gently nudging the public to look for other properties of the image, properties that religious wars have completely hidden in the dust blown up by their many fires and furies.

The Opacity of Religious Icons

Take for instance this small and humble Pieta coming from the Museum of Moulins in France. Protestant or later revolutionary fanatics (or maybe vandals), have decapitated the Virgin's head and broken the limbs of the dead Christ – although the scriptures say that none of your bones will be broken. A tiny,

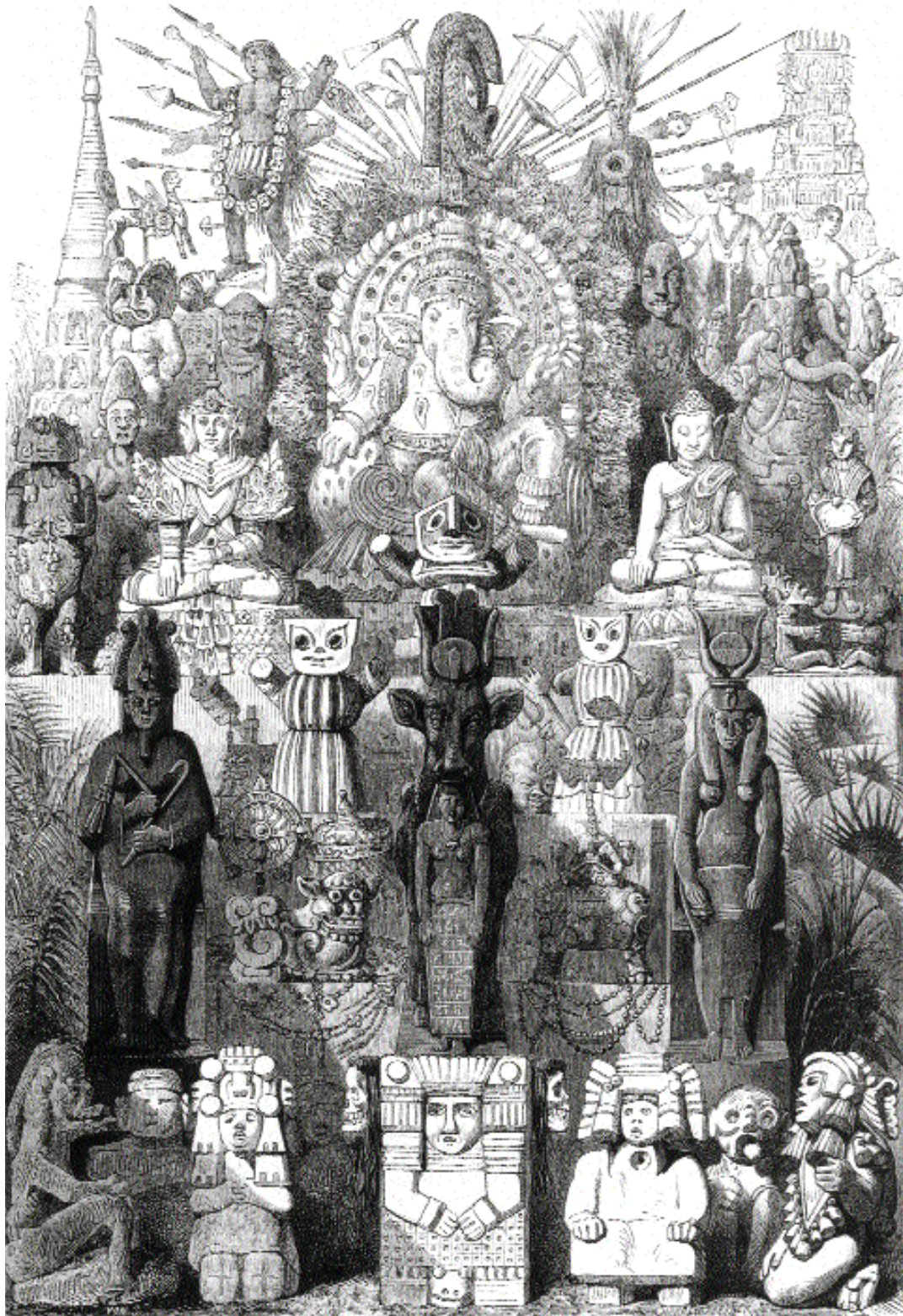
32

– Tobie Nathan, *L'influence qui guérit*, Editions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1994.

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– In his nice visual summary of images and their prototype, Jean Wirth, *Faut-il adorer les images? La théorie du culte des images jusqu'au concile de Trente*, in C. Dupeux, P. Jezler, J. Wirth, op.cit., pp. 28-37, manifests once more the perfect contradiction of the argument since in order to show the difference between respect for the image (*dulie*) and adoration of the model (*latrerie*), he is *forced*, by necessity, to *draw* two images – one for the prototype and another one for the original.

M. Kreuzberger / Les Idoles au Champ de Mars. L'Exposition universelle / éd Dentu, Paris, 1867 / © photo: Agence photographique de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux



LES IDOLES AU CHAMP DE MARS. — Dessin de M. Kreuzberger.

intact angel, invisible in the picture, holds in sorrow the falling head of the Savior. An iconoclastic gesture, to be sure. But wait! What is a dead Christ if not another broken icon, the perfect image of God, desecrated, crucified, pierced, and ready to be entombed? So the iconoclastic gesture has struck an image that had *already* been broken (see Koerner). What does it mean to crucify a crucified icon?

Are we not confronted here with a good *iconoclash*? The idol smasher has been redundant since he (for rather obscure reasons, I keep maintaining the masculine for that sort of deed) has smashed a pre-broken icon. But there is a difference between the two gestures: the first one was a deep and old meditation on the weakness of all icons, the second has only added a sort of simple-minded will to get rid of all idols, as if there were idols, and idol worshippers! The image warriors always make the same mistake: they naively believe in naive belief. Has not the idol-breaker only demonstrated his naiveté in imagining that the first was an idol-worshipper whereas he or she must have been a pretty good icon-breaker ... In this tradition, image is always that of a breaching to render the object unfit for normal consumption (see Mondzain, Stoddard).³⁴

As Louis Marin has argued in a beautiful book, the same is true of Christian religious paintings that do not try to show anything but, on the contrary, to obscure the vision.³⁵ Thousands of little inventions force the viewer, the worshipper, into *not* seeing what is presented in front of him or her. Not, as the defenders of icons often say, by redirecting the attention away from the image to the prototype. There is no prototype to be looked at – this would be Platonism run mad – but only the redirecting of attention to *another* image.

The Emmaus pilgrims see nothing in their fellow traveler as painted by Caravaggio, but the *breaking* of the bread reveals what they should have seen, what the viewer can only see by the very dim light the painter has added to the bread. But it is nothing but a painting. *Redirecting* attention

is always the job those pictures try to do, thus forcing the faithful to move from one image to the next. “He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” (Mark 16:6)

How wrong headed were the image wars: there is not one of those pictures that is not already broken in the middle. Every icon repeats: *Noli me tangere*, and they are accused by their enemies of attracting too much attention! Are we really going to spend another century naively re-destroying and deconstructing images that are so intelligently and subtly destroyed *already*?

Isolated, a Scientific Image Has no Referent

The cascade of images is even more striking when one looks at the series assembled under the label of science.³⁶ An isolated scientific image is meaningless, it proves nothing, says nothing, shows nothing, has no referent. Why? Because a scientific image, even more than a Christian religious one, is a *set of instructions to reach another one* down the line.³⁷ A table of figures will lead to a grid that will lead to a photograph that will lead to a diagram that will lead to a paragraph that will lead to a statement. The whole series has meaning, but none of its elements has any sense.

In the beautiful examples shown by Galison on astronomy, you cannot stop at any place in the series if you want to “grasp” the phenomenon they picture. But if you go up or down the whole series, then objectivity, visibility, veridicality will ensue. The same is true of the molecular biology example offered by Rheinberger: in radio labeling, there is nothing to see at any stage, and yet, there is no other way to see genes. Invisibility in science is even more striking than in religion – and hence nothing is more absurd than the opposition between the visible world of science and the “invisible” world of religion (see Huber, Macho). They both cannot be grasped except by images broken in such a way that they lead to yet another one.

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³⁴ See Joseph Koerner’s beautiful chapter on Bosh in Jones, Galison, op.cit. The notion of “dissimiles” in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance et figuration*, Flammarion, Paris, 1990.

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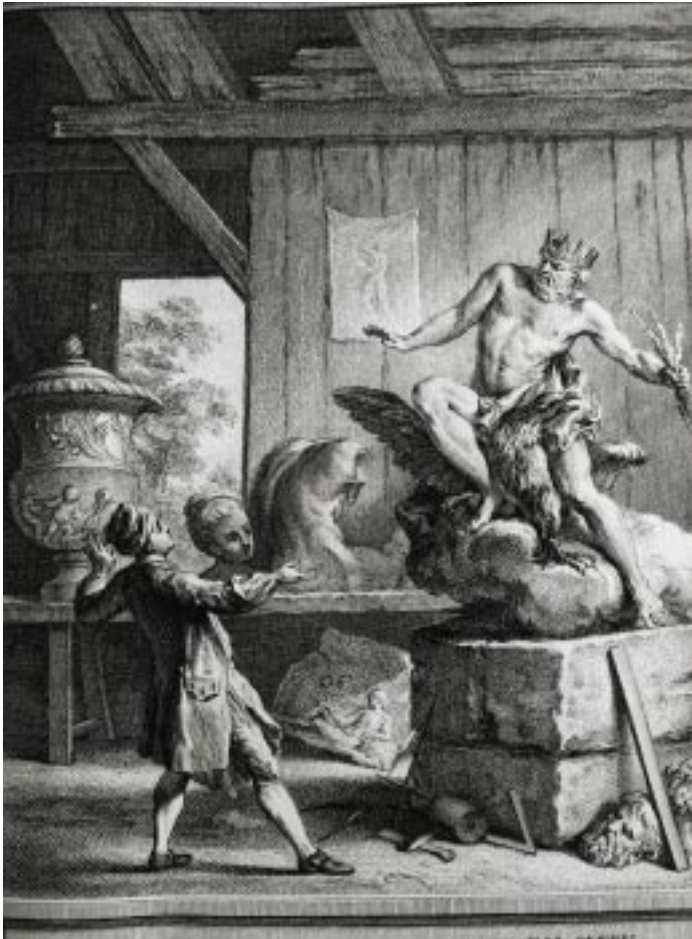
³⁵ The word “cascade” to describe this succession has first been used by Trevor Pinch, *Observer la nature ou observer les instruments*, in *Culture technique*, 14, 1985, pp. 88-107. Mike Lynch and Steve Woolgar (eds), *Representation in Scientific Practice*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1990; and Jones and Galison, op. cit.

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³⁶ For a description of this cascading effect see Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope. Essays on the reality of science studies*, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, 2000, chapter 2.

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³⁷ Louis Marin, *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation*, Usher, Paris, 1989.



J.B. Oudry / engraving / for Jean de la Fontaine, *Fables Choisies*, Charles Antoine Jombert, Paris, 1756, tome 3°, fable CLXXV, p. 117

If you wanted to abandon the image and turn your eyes instead to the prototype *that* they are supposed to figure out, you would see less, infinitely less.³⁸ You would be blind for good. Ask a physicist to turn her eyes away from the inscriptions produced by her detectors, and she won't detect a thing: she will begin to have an inkling only if she assembles even more inscriptions, even more instrumental results, even more equations.³⁹ Only down *inside* the closed walls of her ivory tower does she gain some access to the world "out there."

This paradox of scientific images is again entirely lost by the image warriors who would violently ask us to *choose* between the visible and the invisible, the image and the prototype, the real world out there and the made-up, artificial world in there. They cannot understand that the more artifactual the inscription, the better its ability to connect, to ally with others, to generate even better objectivity.

Thus, to request the idol-breakers to smash the many mediators of science in order to reach the real world out there, better and faster, would be a call for barbarism, not for enlightenment. Do we really have to spend another century alternating violently between constructivism and realism, between artificiality and authenticity? Science deserves better than naive worship and naive contempt. Its regime of invisibility is as uplifting as that of religion and art. The subtlety of its traces requires a new form of care and attention. It requires – why abstain from the word? – yes, spirituality.

Art is not To Be Redeemed

Connecting images to images, playing with series of them, repeating them, reproducing them, distorting them slightly, has been common practice in art even before the infamous "age of mechanical reproduction." "Intertextuality" is one of the ways in which the cascading of images is discernible in the artistic domain – the thick entangled connection that each image has with all the others that have been produced, the

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_ This is why it took so long for the scientific gaze to *accommodate* their sight to those strange new scientific images, as is magnificently shown in Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, Zone Books, Cambridge, 1999.

_ Peter Galison, *Image and Logic. A Material Culture of Microphysics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997.

complex relation of kidnapping, allusion, destruction, distance, quotation, parody, and struggle (see Jones, Belting, Weibel). Even the simplest connection is so important for a definition of an *avant-garde* that, once a type of image has been devised, it is no longer possible for others to produce it in the same fashion.

But there is a more direct relation: in many ways, through the question of mimetic representation, western arts have been obsessed by the shadows cast by scientific and religious pictures: how to escape from the obligation of once again presenting the credos of the faithful? How to escape from the tyranny of “simply objective,” “purely representative” quasi-scientific illustrations? Freeing one’s gaze from this dual obligation accounts for a great deal of the inventions of what is called modern art. And of course “reactionary” critics never tire of asking for a “return” to “real presence” to “accurate representation” to “mimesis,” and the worship of beauty as if it were possible to turn back the clock.⁴⁰

So here is another paradox, another *iconoclash*: what is it that contemporary art has so forcefully tried to escape? To what target was so much iconoclasm directed, so much asceticism, so much violent and sometimes frenetic energy? To religious icons and their obsession for real presence? But they have never been about presenting something other than absence. To scientific imagery? But no isolated scientific image has any mimetic power; there is nothing *less* representational, *less* figurative, than the pictures produced by science, which are nonetheless said to give us the best grasp of the visible world.⁴¹

Here, again, we have another case of image wars directing our attention to a completely false target. Many artists have tried to avoid the heavy load of presence and mimesis by avoiding religion and science, which have striven even more intensely to shun presence, transparency, and mimesis! A comedy of errors.

How long are we going to judge an image, installation, and object by those other images, installations, and objects it aims at fighting, replacing, destroying, ridiculing, bracketing, parodying? Is it so essential to art that a long retinue of slaves and victims accompany every piece? Is the distortion of an already existing image really the only game in town?

Fortunately, there exist many other forms of art types of installations, devices of all sorts that do not in any way rely on this negative connection between image and distortion. Not that they rely on mimesis, which would restrict the gaze to the most boring type of visual custom, but because what they like most is the transformation of images; the chain of modifications that completely modify the scopic regimes of the classic frozen image extracted from the flow (see Lowe, Yaneva, Jaffrennou).

This difference between iconoclast distortion, which always relies on the power of what is destroyed, and a productive cascade of re-representation might explain why, in this exhibition, Peter Weibel’s definition of art, for instance, does not intersect at all with that of someone like Adam Lowe: another *iconoclash* and, hopefully, a visually very fecund one.

After 911

As Christin, Colas, Gamboni, Assmann and many others have shown, there has always been a direct connection between the status of image and politics. Destroying images has always been a carefully planned, elitist, and governed action. Nothing less popular, spontaneous, and undirected than idol-wrecking. Although the word representation appears even more vividly in the public sphere than in science, religion, and art, we have not treated iconoclasm in politics as a separate domain.

There is a simple reason for that: in order to rejuvenate the definition of political mediators, it is essential to first go *beyond* the image wars. Politics is everywhere in the show but

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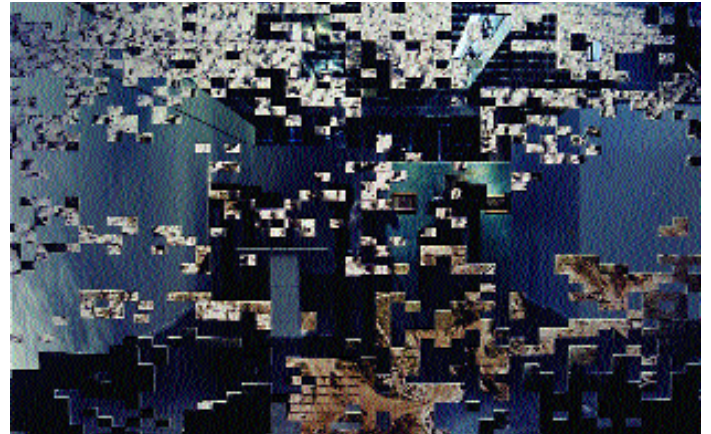
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⁴⁰ James Elkins, *Why are our Pictures Puzzles*, Routledge, London, 1999. It could even be argued that it is from looking at paintings (probably Dutch painting) that philosophers of science have taken their ideas of the visible world and their model/copy epistemology. See the classic: Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983.

⁴¹ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991; Jean Clair, *Considérations sur l'état des beaux arts. Critique de la modernité*, Gallimard, Paris, 1983. For a file about the debate around contemporary arts see P. Barrer, *(Tout) l'art contemporain est-il nul? Le débat sur l'art contemporain en France avec ceux qui l'ont lancé. Bilan et perspective*, Favre, Lausanne, 2000.



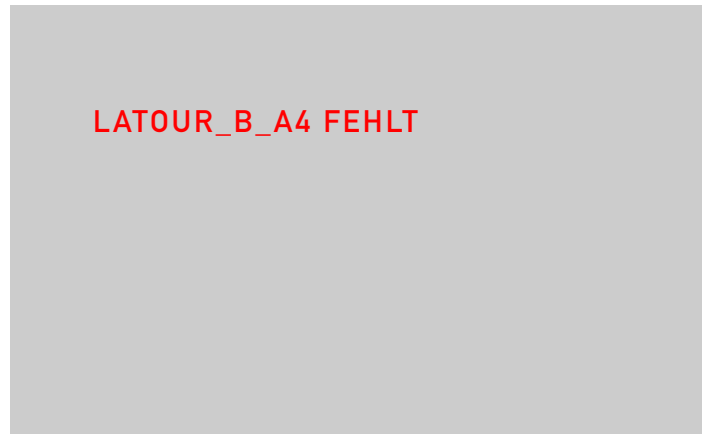
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intentionally spread out. Iconoclasm has become much too cheap when applied to the political sphere. Nowhere more than in politics can the absurd but strident request: “Is it manipulated or is real?” be heard. It is as if, again, the work of the hands, the careful manipulation, the human made mediation had to be put in one column, and truth, exactitude, mimesis, faithful representation into another. As if everything that was added to the credit in one column had to be deducted from the other. Strange accounting! – that would make politics as well as religion, science, and art, utterly impossible. Another case of an impossible application of the second commandment.

But image destruction worship, the cult of iconoclasm as the ultimate intellectual virtue, the critical mind, the taste for nihilism – all of that may have changed abruptly due to the terrifying event, strangely coded by the figure 911 – the emergency telephone number in the United States. Yes, since 11 September 2001 a *state of emergency* has been proclaimed on how we deal with images of all sorts, in religion, politics, science, art and criticism – and a frantic search for the roots of fanaticism has begun.

Nihilism – understood here as the denial of mediators, the forgetting of the hand at work in the waking of transcendent objects, the modernist cut between what one does and what one thinks one is doing – could appear as a virtue, a robust quality, a formidable source of innovation and strength, as long as we could apply it to the others *for real* and to us only *symbolically*. But now, for the first time, it is the US, it is *us*, the westerners, the courageous idol-breakers, the freedom-fighters who are threatened by annihilation and fanaticism.

In the same way as Hollywood script writers are suddenly finding unbearable the special effects of the horror-movies they had concocted because their realities are too vivid and were only bearable when they could *not* happen, we might find the constant talk of destruction, debunking,

critique, exposure, denunciation, not so funny after all, not so productive, not so *protective*.

We knew (I knew!) we had never been modern, but now we are even less so: fragile, frail, threatened; that is, back to normal, back to the anxious and careful stage in which the “others” used to live before being “liberated” from their “absurd beliefs” by our courageous and ambitious modernization. Suddenly, we seem to cling with a new intensity to our idols, to our fetishes, to our “factishes,” to the extraordinarily fragile ways in which our hand can produce objects over which we have no command. We look at our institutions, our public spheres, our scientific objectivity, even our religious ways, everything we loved to hate before, with a somewhat renewed sympathy. Less cynicism, suddenly, less irony. A worshipping of images, a craving for carefully crafted mediators, what the Byzantine called “economy,” what used to simply be called civilization.

No exhibition, no catalog can do much. I know that well, but redirecting attention to the weakness and fragility of the mediators that allow us to pray, to know, to vote, to enjoy living together, this is what we have tried in *Iconoclasm*. Now, readers and visitors, it is up to you to *see* for yourselves what you want to protect and what you want to destroy.

Ah, by the way, how should Moses have written the second commandment had he not misinterpreted it? It is a bit early to know, we need to first hear and see your reactions, but my bet is that a safer reading would be: “Thou shall not freeze-frame any graven image!” — |

J A G A N N A T H A N D H I S S A L I G R A M

“Rabbi Hiya the son of Rabbi Ada said that Terach [Abraham’s father] was an idol worshipper. One day Terach had to leave the store [in which he sold idols]. He left Abraham to manage the store in his absence. A man came and wanted to buy an idol. Abraham asked him ‘How old are you?’ And he responded ‘Fifty or sixty years old’ Abraham then said, ‘Pitiful is the man who is sixty and worships idols that are only a day old.’ So the man left in embarrassment. Once, came a woman with an offering of fine flour. She said to him [Abraham] ‘here, take it and bring it before [the idols].’ Abraham stood up, took a stick, broke all the idols, and put the stick back in the hands of the biggest idol among them. When his father returned he asked ‘Who did this to them?’ Abraham answered, ‘I will not deny you the truth. A woman came with an offering of fine flour and asked me to bring it before them. So I brought it before them, and each said, ‘I shall eat first.’ Then the biggest one stood among them, he took a stick in his hand and broke them all.’ So Terach said to him, ‘Why do you mock me? Do these [idols] know anything [to speak and move]?’ And Abraham replied, ‘Won’t your ears hear what your mouth speaks?’” ||

MIDRASH RABBAH, NOAH, PORTION 38, SECTION 13

Translated by Shai Lavi

A B R A H A M A N D T H E I D O L S H O P
O F H I S F A T H E R T E R A H

This extract from a novel by an Indian writer, Anantha Murthy, is at the origin of this show, a rare description from the inside of an iconoclast. Jagannath,⁴² the main character, is a Brahman coming back from England and decided to free the untouchables from the sway he and his "saligram" (the sacred stone of his ancestors) has on them: || "Words stuck in his throat. This stone is nothing, but I have set my heart on it and I am reaching it for you: touch it; touch the vulnerable point of my mind; this is the time of evening prayer; touch; the nandadeepa is burning still. Those standing behind me [his aunt and the priest] are pulling me back by the many bonds of obligation. What are you waiting for? What have I brought? Perhaps it is like this: this has become a saligram because I have offered it as stone. If you touch it, then it would be a stone for them. This my importunity becomes a saligram. Because I have given it, because you have touched it, and because they have all witnessed this event, let this stone change into a saligram, in this darkening nightfall. And let the saligram change into a stone." (101) || But the pariahs recoil in horror. || "Jagannath tried to soothe them. He said in his everyday tone of a teacher 'This is mere stone. Touch it and you will see. If you don't, you will remain foolish forever.' || He did not know what had happened to them, but found the entire group recoiling suddenly. They winced under their wry faces, afraid to stand and afraid to run away. He had desired and languished for this auspicious moment – this moment of the pariahs touching the image of God. He spoke in a voice choking with great rage: 'Yes, touch it!' || He advanced towards them. They shrank back. Some monstrous cruelty overtook the man in him. The pariahs looked like disgusting creatures crawling upon their bellies. || He bit his underlip and said in a low, firm voice: 'Pilla, touch it! Yes, touch it!' || Pilla [an untouchable foreman] stood blinking. Jagannath felt spent and lost. Whatever he had been teaching them all these days had gone to waste. He rattled dreadfully: 'Touch, touch, you TOUCH IT!' || It was like the sound of some infuriated animal and it came tearing through him. He was sheer violence itself; he was conscious of nothing else. The pariahs found him more menacing than Bhutaraya [the demon-spirit of the local god]. The air was rent with his screams. 'Touch, touch, touch.' The strain was too much for the pariahs. Mechanically they came forward, just touched what Jagannath was holding out to them, and immediately withdrew.' || Exhausted by violence and distress Jagannath pitched aside the saligram. A heaving anguish had come to a grotesque end. Aunt could be human even when she treated the pariahs as untouchables. He had lost his humanity for a moment. The pariahs had been meaningless things to him. He hung his head. He did not know when the pariahs had gone. Darkness had fallen when he came to know that he was all by himself. Disgusted with his own person he began to walk about. He asked himself: when they touched it, we lost our humanity – they and me, didn't we? And we died. Where is the flaw of it all, in me or in society? There was no answer. After a long walk he came home, feeling dazed." (98–102) ||

ANANTHA MURTHY, BHARATHIPURA, MADRAS/INDIA, MACMILLAN, 1996

Translated from the Kannada original

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_Not with a little irony, the hero bears the name "Jagannath," or "Lord of the world," that is also the name of the heavy chariot of Krishna under which devotees were said to throw themselves to die. That has given us "juggernaut" in English, to describe a powerfully overwhelming force! Another iconoclast.