

This chapter could have been entitled “Objectionable Objects,” because the images it discusses are so often treated as material objects and subjected to physical abuse. But as we have seen in the preceding chapter, objects—especially objectionable and sacred ones—are never merely material things. It is possible to imagine, I suppose, certain objects that would be seen as objectionable “on their own,” without some form of representation or presentation to call attention to them. Excrement, garbage, genitals, corpses, monsters, and the like are often regarded as intrinsically disgusting or objectionable. What I am interested in, however (and what I suspect really interests most of us), is the moment when such objects are deliberately placed before us verbally or visually, represented or mediated in some way. This is the moment when objectionable (or inoffensive) objects are transfigured by depiction, reproduction, and inscription, by being raised up, staged, framed for display. So the question of the object always returns to the image, and we still have to ask what it is about images that gives them such remarkable power to offend people.

A better question might be, what is it about people that makes them so susceptible to being offended by images? And why is the response to the offensive image so often a reciprocal act of violence, an “offending of the

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FIGURE 36  
Dennis Heiner defacing Ofili's  
Virgin at the Brooklyn Mu-  
seum. Philip Jones Griffiths,  
Magnum Photos.

image” by destroying, vandalizing, or banning it from view? Iconoclasm, the defacement or destruction of images, is the best place to start in understanding the nature of offensive images.<sup>1</sup> The psychological forces that lead people to be offended by an image are invisible and unpredictable. But when people set out to offend an image, to censure, denounce, or punish it, their behavior is out in the open where we can look at it. A kind of theatrical excess in the rituals of smashing, burning, mutilating, whitewashing, egg- and excrement-throwing turns the punishment of images into a

1. See my essay, “The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm,” in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) for reflections and further references on this matter. I have also found useful Bruno Latour’s “Few Steps toward an Anthropology of the Iconoclastic Gesture,” in *Science in Context* 10 (1997): 63–83; David Freedberg’s *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Michael Taussig’s *Defacement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

spectacular image in its own right (the destruction of the World Trade Center being the most horrific example in our time).<sup>2</sup> When the Soviet Union collapsed, the spectacle of what Laura Mulvey called “disgraced monuments” (in her film by this title), the toppling and humiliating of statues of Lenin and Stalin, made for wonderful cinema, just as the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statues after the fall of Baghdad in the spring of 2003 made for effective television. But exactly what sort of wonder, and what sort of effectiveness? What makes us think that “offending images” is a good way to deal with them? What assumptions make this kind of behavior intelligible at all?

Two beliefs seem to be in place when people offend images. The first is that the image is transparently and immediately linked to what it represents. Whatever is done to the image is somehow done to what it stands for. The second is that the image possesses a kind of vital, living character that makes it capable of feeling what is done to it. It is not merely a transparent medium for communicating a message but something like an animated, living thing, an object with feelings, intentions, desires, and agency.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, images are sometimes treated as pseudopersons—not merely as sentient creatures that can feel pain and pleasure but as responsible and responsive social beings.<sup>4</sup> Images of this sort seem to look back at us, to speak to us, even to be capable of suffering harm or of magically transmitting harm when violence is done to them.

As we have noted, this magical view of images is often described as if it were something we have grown out of—a premodern issue, a superstition found only in highly religious societies, or in the so-called primitive cultures studied by anthropology.<sup>5</sup> Or it is expressed as a “half-belief,” simultaneously affirmed and disavowed. I hope it goes without saying by this

2. See the discussion in chapter 1 above.

3. For more on this subject see chapter 2 above.

4. On images as persons and as living things, see Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), chaps. 13 and 14.

5. See Belting (*Likeness and Presence*, 16), who argues that the cultic “era of images” (from antiquity to the Middle Ages) has been replaced by an “era of art” in which “subjects seize power over the image” in collections and aesthetic experiences. A similar argument is made by Freedberg in *The Power of Images*, though Belting regards Freedberg’s position as unhistorical (see xxi). My sense is that there can be no history of images without some notion of what is abiding about them. The question is not whether images “come alive” or not, but where, how, and what kind of life they take on, and how people respond to that life.

point that while there are important historical and cultural differences in the power attributed to images, the tendency to endow them with life and immediacy (and then to disavow that endowment or project it on someone else) is fundamental to the ontology of images as such, or to a form of life we might call “being with images.” Modern, urban cultures may not have many cults of saints or holy icons, but they do have an ample supply of magical images—fetishes, idols, and totems of every description, brought to life in mass media and in a variety of subcultures. Supposedly obsolete or archaic superstitions about images, moreover, have a way of breaking out in thoroughly modern places like New York City and London. That is why people can still be hung in effigy, why we do not casually throw away or destroy photographs of our loved ones, why we still kiss a crucifix, why we kneel before an icon or deface it. And when images offend us, we still take revenge by offending them in turn. Far from being defanged in the modern era, images are one of the last bastions of magical thinking and therefore one of the most difficult things to regulate with laws and rationally constructed policies—so difficult, in fact, that the law seems to become infected by magical thinking as well, and behaves more like an irrational set of taboos than a set of well-reasoned regulations.<sup>6</sup>

In part, the intractability of offensive images stems from their tendency to take up residence on the frontlines of social and political conflicts, from the ancient quarrels of the iconoclasts, to the conflicts between Catholicism and Protestantism, to the art scandals of the modernist avant-garde, to the culture wars that have degraded American political discourse during the last fifteen years. They make their appearance in these conflicts not only as causes and provocations but as combatants, victims, and provocateurs.

6. Anthony Julius’s interesting book, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), came to my attention too late to be reckoned with here. As his title suggests, Julius comes at the problem of the offensive image mainly from within the visual arts, not from standpoint of a more general iconology that would include vernacular and mass media images. He also focuses on the issue of transgression (and therefore laws, rules, and codes) rather than actions and beliefs. Transgression is, of course, not the same thing as offense. In the art world, as Julius notes, the offensive thing would be to produce a work of art that *fails* to be transgressive in any way, and is merely innocuous and safe. The line between “law” and “taboo” is another place where our arguments intersect. I would argue that the reason almost every interesting image turns out to be “transgressive” in Julius’s sense is that there is something inherently transgressive (but perhaps not offensive) about every image. That is certainly what is stated, not merely implied, by the literal sense of the second commandment, which prohibits all image-making of any kind.

To remind you of some notorious offenders that have been centers of controversy and debates over censorship, I offer the following nearly random list of examples, both ancient and modern:

1. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, which offended workers by disrupting the space of the Federal Plaza in New York City, was repeatedly vandalized, and finally removed.<sup>7</sup>
2. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial by Maya Lin, which was denounced as an antiwar countermonument that demeaned the memory of the heroism of American soldiers, but has since gone through a remarkable transformation into one of the most revered memorials in the United States.<sup>8</sup>
3. Robert Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980), which offended conservative viewers, who found it obscene and pornographic, and was also seen as an offensive reinforcement of a racist stereotype about black men.<sup>9</sup>
4. Michelangelo's *David*, found offensive for its frank display of the penis, which has sometimes been covered with a fig leaf. So far as I know, it has never been denounced for reinforcing a stereotype about white men.<sup>10</sup>
5. A 120-foot-high portrait of the Roman emperor Nero on linen that so displeased the gods, according to Pliny the Elder, that they struck it down with lightning.<sup>11</sup>
6. The swastika, which after a long history as a religious symbol was appropriated as an insignia of National Socialism in Hitler's Germany, and now functions as an almost universal symbol of unredeemable evil.
7. The Confederate flag, which flies atop the South Carolina state capitol and has been the object of protests and legislative initiatives aimed at its removal.

7. See Serra's own defense of his work and other discussions of this controversy in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

8. For an exhaustive discussion of the reception of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, see Levi Smith, "Objects of Remembrance: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Memory of the War" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1997).

9. See Kobena Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, in association with the Open University, 1999), 435–47.

10. I could have included here the bare-breasted female statues at the U.S. Justice Department which have been veiled out of deference to the moral sensibilities of former Attorney General John Ashcroft.

11. Pliny, *Natural History*, 10 vols., trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 9:277. See also the discussion in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 337–38.

8. Jasper Johns's *Flag* (1955), which caused a scandal in Cold War America as a degradation of the American flag, and is now regarded as one of the great masterpieces of modern painting.<sup>12</sup>
9. The painting *Myra* (1995), by British artist Marcus Harvey, a ten-foot-high portrait of Myra Hendin, a notorious accessory to serial child-murders. This painting, executed with imprints of a child's hand, was regarded as the most offensive image in the Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1995. It was excoriated in the popular press, led to the resignation of senior members of the Royal Academy, and was vandalized. When shown in the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 1999, it attracted relatively little notice, and was upstaged by Chris Ofili's painting of the Virgin Mary with dung.<sup>13</sup>
10. Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (plate 1), which became the central focus of the controversy over the Brooklyn Museum's Sensation show, was condemned as obscene and sacrilegious by New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who attempted to cut off the Brooklyn Museum's city funding. The painting was defaced by a pious Catholic who covered it with white paint (fig. 36).
11. Damien Hirst, *This Little Piggy Went to Market* (1996), which was expected to offend visitors to the Brooklyn Museum, but which failed to stir much outrage, even from proponents of animal rights.
12. *The Adoration of the Golden Calf* (see fig. 31), the biblical idol, as rendered by Nicolas Poussin in the early seventeenth century. The actual calf so offended God that he ordered Moses to melt it down and force the Israelites to drink it. Then he ordered the massacre of three thousand people, including women and children, for violating a law (the second commandment) that he had not yet delivered to them. Poussin's rendering of this scene, on the other hand, has never to my knowledge been accused of violating the second commandment, though it was the victim of a knife attack in the National Gallery in 1978.<sup>14</sup>

12. For further discussion, see Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, chapter 7, pp. 236–38.

13. It would be worth pondering the contrast between the Royal Academy and Brooklyn Museum scandals as a tale of two cities, and of two "moms." In London, the scandal was the elevation of an evil mother into a popular icon and a focus of liberal sympathy in the context of widespread hysteria about pederasty and child abuse. In New York, the scandal was the degradation of a good mother by an inappropriate pictorial rendering, and an offense to Christianity and organized religion more generally. Offending images are clearly not just individual matters but lightning rods for the energies of large social formations and local cultures.

14. Freedberg discusses this event in *The Power of Images*, 421ff., noting that the attacker never gave any reason for his actions.

I cite these images to provide a broad context for thinking about the nature of offending images in general, as well as in the specific case of the Brooklyn Museum's scandalous Sensation show. This context may help us to recall some obvious points about the complexity and variety of offense and transgression in images and to suggest some less obvious ways in which those images are treated as if they were persons or animated beings. Here are the obvious points:

1. Offending images are radically unstable entities whose capacity for harm depends on complex social contexts. Those contexts can change, sometimes as a result of the public debate around an image, more often because the initial shock wanes, to be replaced by familiarity and even affection. The offensive character of an image is not written in stone but arises out of social interaction between a specific thing and communities that may themselves have varied and divided responses to the object.
2. Offending images do not all offend in the same way. Some offend the beholder, others the object represented. Some offend because they degrade something valuable or desecrate something sacred, others because they glorify something hateful and despised. Some of them violate moral taboos and standards of decency, while some are politically offensive, insults to national honor or unwelcome reminders of an ignoble past. Some offend because of the manner of representation, so that a caricature or stereotype offends not because of *who* but *how* it represents. Like persons, images can be found "guilty by association" with the wrong kinds of people, values, or materials.
3. If an image offends very many people, sooner or later someone will invoke the law, and along with it judges, legislators, policymakers, and the police. The cry will go up that "there ought to be a law" about offensive images, and symposia will be convened to formulate policy guidelines. Like a person, the image may even become a "legal subject," a witness or defendant in a legal proceeding, as in cases such as *United States v. Thirty-Seven Photographs* or *United States v. 12 200-Ft. Reels of Super 8MM Film et al.*<sup>15</sup>
4. Finally, images are not all offended in the same way. Sometimes the effort is all-out annihilation (as in the melting down of the golden calf), to make the image disappear from the world forever, to render it extinct. Sometimes the iconoclastic gesture is only partially destructive, a defacement,

15. *United States Reports, Cases Adjudged in the Supreme Court, October Term, 1970 and 1972.* My thanks to Geoff Stone for calling these cases to my attention.

disfiguring, dismemberment, decapitation, or other mutilation that does not destroy the image but humiliates or “wounds” it in some way.<sup>16</sup> The effect of this tactic is quite different from that of annihilation. The object is not to make the image disappear but to keep it around and to render its appearance in a new way, one that is offensive to the image and what it represents. Caricature is, in this sense, a form of disfigurement and iconoclasm. Most curious of all is a strategy that neither disfigures nor destroys but attempts to “disappear” the image, to hide it away, cover it up, bury it, or conceal it from view. This strategy may or may not be a way of “offending” the image; it is compatible, as we shall see, with a respectful defense of the image against desecration. To summarize, then: there seem to be three basic strategies of iconoclasm: annihilation, disfigurement, and concealment.

Images have been offending people since the beginning, since (for instance) God created a human creature in his own “image and likeness,” and that creature set about disobeying its Creator’s orders. Images are not just “like” persons; the relation is much stronger than that.<sup>17</sup> It is common in creation myths for persons to be actually created *as* images (usually sculpted figures rendered in clay or stone).<sup>18</sup> And in most versions of this story, the (human) images “have minds of their own.” In the biblical account, Adam and Eve (the images of God) are tempted by forbidden knowledge, and quickly get out of the control of their creator. Offended by the disobedience of his creatures, God expels Adam and Eve from paradise and sentences them to die. Their sin is, in effect, a kind of iconoclasm in that it has disfigured the image of God reflected in them. When God decides to give his chosen people a second chance, only if they will follow his laws, the first law he prescribes is one that forbids the making of images:<sup>19</sup>

*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the*

16. Belting notes “‘injured’ images” react to desecration “like living people by weeping or bleeding” (*Likeness and Presence*, 1).

17. As Belting notes, “the image . . . not only represented a person but also was treated like a person” (*ibid.*, xxi).

18. See chapter 12 for further discussion.

19. I call this the “first law,” even though it is the second commandment, because the first commandment is not really a prohibition of any sort, merely a declaration by God that he is who he is, and no one else. This leads to the prohibition on worshipping other gods, especially in the form of images.



*earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. (Exod. 20:4–6 [KJV])*

This commandment, which, so far as I can tell, has never been very well understood, and certainly never obeyed literally, is clearly the most important law in the Decalogue. God spends more time explaining and defining it than all the other commandments put together. And it seems clear that this is the commandment he takes most seriously, the one that is really “written in stone.” Commandments like “Thou shalt not kill” are not absolute, merely advisory.<sup>20</sup> They are suspended when the situation requires it. Most notably, the commandment against killing is suspended when the act is carried out as punishment for an act of idolatry. When the Israelites break the second commandment and erect a golden calf, God instructs Moses and the Levites to kill all their brethren who have been involved in this most hateful offense, the creation of an image that is offensive to God.

Why is God offended by the golden calf? The simplest answer is jealousy: the calf is a substitute for God, like a rival lover who moves in when the husband is away.<sup>21</sup> The Israelites are “whoring after strange gods,” and idolatry is a form of adultery. So there is nothing special about the calf; it would have been just as bad to make an image of a lamb or an eagle or a man—even Moses himself. God would be equally upset at being replaced by any image. The second commandment therefore forbids making an image of *anything*. It does not say that only images of God, or of rival gods, are prohibited, but “any likeness”—presumably in any medium (gold, stone, paint, clay, even words)—of any thing on earth, in the sky, or in the sea.<sup>22</sup>

20. See Walter Benjamin on the contingent character of the commandment against murder in his “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978): “those who base a condemnation of all violent killing of one person by another on the commandment are therefore mistaken. It exists, not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have . . . to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it” (298).

21. See Jeremiah 3:1: “If a man divorces his wife, and she leaves him and marries another man, can he ever go back to her? Would not such a land be defiled? Now you have whored with many lovers: can you return to me?—says the Lord.”

22. The commandment refers to the making of a *pesel*, an image carved from wood or stone, but it is generally agreed that the prohibition includes the making of metal figures as

Taken literally, the implication is that there is a “slippery slope” principle at work: if you start making images, it is inevitable that they will, as we say, “take on a life of their own,” become idols, take the place of God, and thereby become offensive. The best policy, then, is to stamp out the potential for offense at its origin, and prohibit the making of any sort of images. Needless to say, this is an impossible commandment, and neither the Jews nor any other aniconic, monotheistic religion has ever followed it literally, but has always found ways of getting around it and explaining it away.<sup>23</sup> Periodically, American politicians propose the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schoolrooms (usually after some outbreak of violence). But none of them, to my knowledge, have noticed that if these commandments were followed, art classes would have to be prohibited and art teachers and students would have to be stoned to death.

But beyond its being an image at all, is there anything specific about the golden calf that is offensive to God? One common reading of the second commandment is that images make something material and visible that should be immaterial and invisible. Idolatry, according to this view, is “the worship of wood and stone,”<sup>24</sup> a fetishistic obsession with base matter. Even worse is the use of the specific materials of gold, suggesting earthly riches,

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well. “To the prohibition of an image is attached a further specification [the ban on ‘likeness’] which broadens the prohibition to include every representation. The term *temunah* designates the form or outward shape of an object” (Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* [Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1974], 404–5). The prohibition on images as likeness extends, in commentators like Maimonides, to figurative *language* and concrete descriptions or adjectives of any sort, so that ultimately, the language of scripture itself becomes a temptation to idolatry, and the worshipper is reduced to silence. See Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 56–57.

23. Even more striking is the tendency of commentators to ignore the literal meaning completely, and to assume that the offensiveness of images is not “built in” to them but must be added to them by wrong usage (adoration of the image), wrong representation (no image of any sort can represent the invisible Jehovah), or wrong referent (this image represents the wrong god, a “strange” god). See Kelman Bland, *The Artless Jew* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), for a decisive refutation of the characterization of Judaism as a culture of aniconism and iconoclasm, and a comprehensive inventory of ways that Jews have evaded any literal reading of the ban on images.

24. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 39. There could be other reasons for offense besides degraded materiality, of course. The offense could come from the use of the wrong image (a calf), which degrades God to the level of a brute; or it could derive from the adoration of any image at all, regardless of what it represents.

and even worse, the gold jewelry which the Israelites brought out of Egypt, and which therefore hearkens back to the Egyptian captivity and the idols of Egyptian religion. The image is offensive, then, both for what it seems to say (“I am god”) and for what it is—the crass, vulgar materiality of Egyptian gold. The calf is made out of tainted money—filthy lucre, as it were.

What does this golden calf teach us about the scandal of the Brooklyn Museum’s Sensation show? The offensiveness of Chris Ofili’s Madonna seems, to begin with, to have almost nothing to do with idolatry as an adulterous “god-substitute” but everything to do with its use of materials, the notorious elephant dung (plate 1). Like the golden calf, Ofili’s Madonna is (at least partly) composed of filthy lucre—filth because it is excrement, but “lucre” because (as Ofili argued) it has great symbolic value in African culture as a sign of fertility and the nurturing of Mother Earth. Ofili’s declaration of intentions, however, was widely disregarded by commentators who were determined to be offended. The artist’s respectful use of elephant dung was taken as an insult to the image of the Madonna.<sup>25</sup> The question arises, however: is it really the material that offends, or the interpretation of the material as making a statement or (worse) actually *doing* something to the image of the Madonna, defiling her “effigy” as it were? How do we decide whether elephant dung is a symbol of great value and reverence (as the artist insisted) or of filth and degradation? And how do we know what the Madonna does to dung, or dung to her? Does it degrade her, or does she elevate it, redeeming even the basest matter by the appearance of her image?

Ofili’s Madonna helps us to see the complexly indirect and mediated character of offensiveness in images. One could argue, for instance, that it is not the image that offends us in this work of art. On the contrary, it is the image (of the Madonna) that is *being* offended by it. Pious Catholics are offended not by Ofili’s image of the Madonna but by the way the image is presented, the materials in which it is rendered. This shows us how crucial it is to distinguish between the image or “motif” (the feature of this painting that links it to innumerable other pictures of the Madonna by Rubens, Raphael, Leonardo, and so on) and the concrete materiality of a specific picture. It is not the species that offends (the class that includes all Madonna

25. The question of whether elephant dung really *is* a sacred substance in African religions is somewhat in doubt. Ofili’s use of the same substance in what seem unquestionably respectful paintings of African-American heroes, however, seems to support his declaration of intentions, no matter what the facts about African values turn out to be.

pictures) but the specimen, this particular “incarnation” of the species in a monstrous or disgusting version.<sup>26</sup> And the spectator’s sense of offensiveness is not direct but vicarious. The logic goes like this: the Madonna’s image is offended by being rendered in excremental materials; if her image is offended, then she herself must be offended. And if she is offended, then all who venerate her and her image must be offended as well. If the thing I respect or love is insulted, then I am insulted.

The outrage over Ofili’s Madonna, then, is not just a matter of being offended by an image. It is outrage over an act of iconoclasm, or violence to an image, the painting itself seen as an act of desecration, disfigurement, and defacement. Language seems incapable of overcoming the imagined insult to the image. Ofili’s protestations of benign, respectful intentions, and the obvious prettiness of his composition, were completely ineffectual in countering the outrage. And the most visible expression of this outrage, the defacement of the painting by Dennis Heiner (fig. 36), takes a very specific form that is worth pondering in its details. Heiner did not speak out against the painting or carry a sign in front of the Brooklyn Museum. He did not attack the painting, slashing it with a knife or throwing eggs or excrement at it. He very carefully and deliberately covered Ofili’s composition with white paint. Instead of violent defacement or destruction, Heiner chose a strategy that might be called “veiling” or “effacement” of the image, a gesture of protection and modesty. The water-soluble paint was easily removed, and did no damage to the composition. Heiner’s act, then, can be seen not so much an act of vandalism as a defense of the sacred image of the Madonna against its sacrilegious defacement by this painting.

It would be fascinating to ponder what the reaction to Ofili’s painting would have been if the artist had declared that it *was* his intention to insult and degrade the Madonna, instead of denying it. One can imagine, for instance, a pious Muslim—or a Jew or Christian fundamentalist, for that matter—arguing that the second commandment makes it a sacred duty to offend or destroy all images, and especially one that depicts the Mother of God and thus is well on its way down the slippery slope to idolatry. One of the strangest moments in the whole scandal was the unwavering solidarity of Jewish organizations with the Roman Catholic Church against the offen-

26. For further discussion of this distinction between images and pictures as “species” and “specimens,” see chapter 4. The concept of the image as “motif” comes from Erwin Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 29.

sive Madonna. Has everyone forgotten that Mariolatry and the cult of images of the Virgin Mary violate the second commandment?<sup>27</sup>

It is somehow fitting that the moral objections to dung madonnas are paralleled by the hand-wringing over filthy lucre in its literal sense—that is, money. The “greater” scandal of the Sensation show was that it revealed (oh marvelous revelation!) that art museums are in competition with movies, shopping malls, and theme parks. Art, it turns out, has something to do with wealth and speculative capital. There is nothing so edifying as the moral shock of capitalist cultural institutions when they look at their own faces in the mirror. High-minded people in the museum world (Phillippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for instance) were shocked by the corruption of aesthetic, curatorial, and institutional autonomy entailed in the relation of the Royal Academy and then the Brooklyn Museum to the Saatchi family.<sup>28</sup> Are they modern Medicis? Or hucksters of hype? Was the Brooklyn Museum really guilty of unethical and unprofessional conduct in its dealings with the Saatchis? Or was it merely guilty of being indiscreet, flaunting a bit too openly what is a common practice in art museums? Candor and openness about the financial underpinnings of contemporary art have never been very welcome in the art world. Hans Haacke managed to offend the Guggenheim Museum by displaying photographic images of the New York tenements owned by some of its principal trustees.<sup>29</sup> Haacke’s strategy might be seen as the obverse of Ofili’s. Instead of bringing a sacred image into too close of a contact with profane materials, Haacke brought images of profane realities into the sacred space of the museum. The ugly facades of slum properties make visible the filthy lucre that supports the sanitized realm of the aesthetic.

The role of excrement in the realm of offending images is not exhausted

27. It did occur to some commentators at the time that the real offense might have been the *blackness* of the Madonna, an affront to those who are accustomed to blonde, blue-eyed images of the Virgin. In this case, Heiner’s whitening of the image takes on a racial overtone. So far as I know, no one had the effrontery to say this publicly. See Belting’s excellent analysis of Mariolatry in *Likeness and Presence*, chap. 3, “Why Images?” 30–47.

28. See also the essay in Rothfield, ed., *Unsettling “Sensation”* by James Cuno of the Harvard Art Museums, who argues that there is a moral distinction to be made between respectable, clean money (the Mellons and the Astors?) and the contaminated money (earned in advertising?) of the Saatchis. In the same volume, Gilbert Edelson’s essay on the actual financial arrangements that underlie museums’ relations with wealthy collectors and the art market shed considerable light on this whole matter.

29. See Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*; first exhibited 1972.

by its role as an agent of symbolic desecration and disfigurement, or as a sign of the material and monetary foundations of artistic purity. There is also the key question of what is sometimes called bad art. I take it as a given that many people in and out of the art business think that a fair amount of contemporary art is a bunch of shit. Despite the art world's timorous and belated defense of the Brooklyn Museum, almost every defender of the Sensation show felt obliged to show his/her good taste by declaring that most of the work in that show was just plain "bad art." (There was the ritual exception made for Rachel Whiteread, a firmly canonized artist, whose tasteful castings seem incapable of offending anyone.) The mystery is why anyone should be offended for confirming what everyone already knows: 90 percent of artistic production is not likely to be remembered very long. This is hardly a scandalous revelation; it's just plain common sense. At least half the art made must be, as a matter of logic, "below average"; only in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon can all the children be above average. And there is nothing deplorable or shocking about this fact—no scandal to be uncovered. Vast amounts of second-rate art have to be produced as a kind of mulch or fertilizer for the rare flowering of truly outstanding work. By now, one would think that a jaded, sophisticated crowd like the art world would have come to terms with this as a kind of natural law, and given up on the posturing and hand-wringing whenever a group show of new, young artists appears. The Sensation show, like most group offerings of this sort, was a mixed bag, with a few outstanding and promising works and a fair amount of competent but unmemorable efforts. My own sense of Sensation was that it was, as these things go, somewhat above average in matters like technical skill, wit, and professionalism of presentation.

As for the display of waste products as art objects, surely this was a moment for art connoisseurs to remind an outraged public that this sort of thing has been going on since the "dirt painters," or rhyparographers, were banned by the laws of Thebes.<sup>30</sup> Excrement, as Jacques Lacan (and every infant) reminds us, is the first medium of artistic expression.<sup>31</sup> For analogues in contemporary art, one should see, for instance, Robert Morris's "Scatter

30. See G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 9; and Mitchell, *Iconology*, 108, on the control of the arts by civil law in antiquity.

31. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1981): "The authenticity of what emerges in painting is diminished in us human beings by the fact that we have to get our colours where they're to be found, that is to say, in the shit"

Pieces” or Joseph Beuys’ corners stuffed with rotting fat. Ofili’s tastefully lacquered dung piles are heirs to a long and distinguished art tradition: they are, more precisely, the symbolic pillars of material and spiritual wealth on which the work of art stands—filth and waste transformed to gold by the alchemy of art.<sup>32</sup> Like the Brooklyn Museum, Ofili is guilty only of candor. The great proponent of high modernist “purity,” Clement Greenberg, remarked long ago that the avant-garde was linked to the ruling classes by an umbilical cord of gold.<sup>33</sup> Isn’t it a bit late, then, to be outraged that museums cater to the rich, and must do so in order to survive?

Although the framework of freedom of speech is often invoked to ensure the utmost latitude for art museums in their exhibition policies, is it important to ponder the difference between speaking and image-making, a problem that usually comes up when conservative legal theorists are trying to deny artistic images any protection under the first amendment because they are not “speech” in any sense.<sup>34</sup> What is the difference between offensive images and offensive words? When modern secular law addresses images, it generally models them on speech—that is, on linguistic, discursive, and rhetorical models—in relation to the first amendment protections of freedom of speech. Laws regulating speech do not generally address the issue of poetics, that is, of language formally organized to create a mimetic representation or image, a verbal work of art, but deal with language as persuasion, argument, or performance (as in a “speech act” of promising, threatening, or insulting). Most of the attempts to define the offensive character of pornography are based on cases that involve photographic or cinematic images, but which treat the images then as if they were conveying speech acts that insult, degrade, and humiliate

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(117). Lacan connects the thematic of feces with “the domain of oblativity, of the gift,” which is the “drive” of the painter: “he gives something for the eye to feed on” (104, 111).

32. For a more general study of the relation between painting and alchemy, and the transmutations of “base materials” by painters, see James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

33. Clement Greenberg, “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, 14 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1:11; this article first appeared in *Partisan Review* in Fall 1939.

34. It’s also important to remember that free-speech defenses of offensive art risk “winning” hollow victories in court that translate into long-term defeat in the public sphere. See David A. Strauss, “The False Promise of the First Amendment,” in Rothfield, ed., *Unsettling Sensation*, 44–51.

the (mostly female) subjects of representation and, by extension, all other women as well.

But images are not words. It is not clear that they actually “say” anything. They may show something, but the verbal message or speech act has to be brought to them by the spectator, who projects a voice into the image, reads a story into it, or deciphers a verbal message. Images are dense, iconic (usually) visual symbols that convey nondiscursive, nonverbal information that is often quite ambiguous with regard to any statement. Sometimes a picture of a pipe or a cigar is just saying something innocent and straightforward, like “This is a pipe.” But it seems to be part of the nature of visual images that they are always saying (or showing) something more than any verbal message can capture—even something directly opposite to what they seem to “say” (for example, “This is not a pipe”). That is why a picture is said to be worth a thousand words—precisely because the exact words that can decode or summarize an image are so indeterminate and ambiguous.

A picture is less like a statement or speech act, then, than like a speaker capable of an infinite number of utterances. An image is not a text to be read but a ventriloquist’s dummy into which we project our own voice. When we are offended by what an image “says,” we are like the ventriloquist insulted by his own dummy. One could decode the dummy’s rebellious voice as the discourse of the unconscious, a kind of Tourette’s syndrome projected into a wooden object. Or we could simply acknowledge that this uncanniness of the dummy, its taking on a “life (and voice) of its own,” is fundamental to the game of ventriloquism as such. The voice must not simply be “thrown” into the inanimate object; it must seem to make that object speak with its own voice. The really good ventriloquist doesn’t simply impose his voice on the mute thing, but expresses in some way the autonomy and specificity of that thing. When Marx in *Capital* asks what commodities would say if they could speak, he understands that what they must say is not simply what he wants them to say. Their speech is not just arbitrary or forced upon them, but must seem to reflect their inner nature as modern fetish objects. When I claim, then, that the offensive statement made by the image is actually projected there by the spectator, I don’t mean to say that the perception of this statement is merely a mistake or misinterpretation.

That is why it somehow feels both right and futile to punish images, to offend them for the offense that they do to us or “say” to us. Why should we be any smarter than the God who passed an anti-image law that no one



could understand, much less obey? We are always on the slippery slope that leads back from idolatry, offensive images, desecration, and iconoclasm to the mere fact that human beings seem to be inveterate makers of images—images which then seem to have “a mind of their own” and get out of control.

The confusion of images with speech acts is one reason people can be offended by images that they have never seen. Mayor Giuliani, and indeed a great many of the people who found Chris Ofili’s *Madonna* to be offensive, never actually saw the painting. It was enough for them to hear about it, particularly to hear about its use of elephant dung as a material. Many of those who only heard about the image assumed (as legal scholar Stephen Presser does) that the elephant dung must have been smeared on or “flung at” the painting, rather than applied carefully, with meticulous ornamentation, as you can see for yourself.<sup>35</sup> The mere verbal report—“image of *Madonna with elephant dung*”—was enough to convict the image of being offensive. The actual sight of Ofili’s *Madonna*, by contrast, was strangely inoffensive. The picture struck most viewers as sweet and innocuous. It is the verbal label, the naming of the dung, that provokes the perception of offensiveness and the conclusion that the painting must have been transmitting a disrespectful message. Like Andre Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, it is the name and connotations of the material that offend, not the actual visual appearance; it is the imaginary, fantasized image provoked by the words, not the perceived visual image. Serrano’s urine produces a golden glow around the crucified Christ which reminds one of the golden aureole or mandorla that is often associated with sacred images. If Serrano had called his image *Christ Bathed in Golden Light*, he might have gotten away with it until some wily critic exposed the connection with the “golden shower” as a perverse sexual practice.

What, then, are the implications of all this for art museums, cultural policy, and the law? My sense is that the Sensation scandal is mainly interesting as a relatively benign outbreak of a very old malady we might call the “iconophobia syndrome.” People are afraid of images. Images make us anxious. We fight over them, destroy them, and blame them for our own bad behavior, as when we blame “the media” for encouraging moral decay

35. See Stephen Presser’s remarks on the aesthetics of “flinging elephant dung” in his article, “Reasons We Shouldn’t Be Here: Things We Cannot Say,” in Rothfield, ed., *Unsettling Sensation*, 54.

and outbreaks of violence. I'm not saying that we are always wrong to blame or ban images, or that the law should take no interest in their control and prohibition. I find it disturbing, for instance, that a New York art gallery would display early twentieth-century American photographs of lynchings. What purpose, I want to know, is being served by putting these terrible, harrowing images of evil on display for the voyeuristic gratification of the gallery-going public?<sup>36</sup> Still, I would not censor them if I had the power—only protect and veil them from idle curiosity and disrespect. My sense is that the force of law ought to intervene with offensive images only when they are being forced upon the notice of an unwilling public. People have a right not to have offending images thrust in their faces. People also have a right to look at images that others might find offensive.

The questions about the freedom to show offending images are really, then, questions about context more than content—about where and when and to whom an image is displayed. The right of free speech, even political speech, does not allow me to blast you out of your house with a sound truck at four in the morning. A similar limitation on the display of images—perhaps we could call it the “in your face’ principle”—might be invoked to regulate the exhibition of images like the Confederate flag, the swastika, or graffiti when they are imposed on unwilling spectators in public spaces, especially spaces like the South Carolina statehouse that claim a publicly representative function. Art museums, on the other hand, are very special places that ought to enjoy the broadest protections from government interference in exhibitions. Their institutional autonomy needs to be safeguarded from transitory political pressures and the moral outrage of both vocal minorities and moral majorities. Demonstrations in front of museums are a sign of a healthy state of affairs, not a regrettable anomaly that should be averted by fine-tuned policies. Only by preserving a free space of artistic license where offending images are tolerated can we hope to understand what it is that gives images so much power over people, and what it is about people that brings this power into the world.

I conclude, therefore, with a proposal for a blockbuster exhibition called

36. Since writing these words I have seen this exhibition at the New York Historical Society, and I'm fully convinced that their presentation is anything but exploitative or voyeuristic. On the contrary, the exhibition is respectful and intelligent, with a quiet and modest presentation that encourages an intensity of attention that is almost devotional. I find nothing in this to offend, but a great deal to mortify, astonish, and shame anyone who thinks America's race problem is behind us.

Offending Images, one that would gather all the most egregious offenders into one place.<sup>37</sup> This would be, first of all, an attempt to describe and analyze the multifarious modes of offensiveness, and to diagnose the social forces that give rise to them. It might aim at tracing the long history of offending images across many cultural boundaries, exploring the outbreaks of iconoclasm and iconophobia in the worlds of art and popular media. It would be an occasion for educating people about the histories of human degradation, exploitation, and dehumanization that are so often lurking in the background of the offending images. It would ask, who is offended? By whom, what, and how? It would explore the very nature of offensiveness, of the shock, trauma, or injury which images can produce, and try to identify the ways in which an image passes from being merely offensive to *harmful*, producing the graphic equivalent of yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater. And it would, finally, include a special gallery of virtual simulations of all the offending images in the exhibition, in which visitors would be provided with all the materials necessary for offending the offenders. Stones, hammers, excrement, paint, blood, dirt, and eggs would be supplied, and visitors would be invited to hurl, smear, and smash away to their heart’s content. This would provide a benign form of therapy, and allow lawyers and policymakers to focus their attention on more tractable issues. It might also have the effect of returning these things to their merely objectionable objecthood, and disenchant their status as offending images.

The story of objectionable objects and offending images clearly goes beyond the confines of the Brooklyn Museum controversy or the Chris Ofili Madonna. But this episode is symptomatic of the ways in which “bad objects” arise in borderline situations. In this case, the border was an exhibition in the United States of young British artists enthralled with the breakup of the British Empire, and a specific work by an African artist found offen-

37. Such an exhibition would be in the spirit of the Brooklyn Museum’s own magnificent exhibition, *The Play of the Unmentionable*, installed by Joseph Kosuth in 1992. Kosuth’s emphasis, however, was similar to that of Julius’s *Transgressions*: the idea was to explore the ways in which art that violates common moral sensibilities subsequently becomes canonized and acceptable as tastes evolve. “Offending Images” would try to push this strategy one step further, and explore the possibility that there are images that can *never* be accepted, that do not offer provocative “transgressiveness” of the sort so highly valued in the art world, but remain eternally disgusting. Perhaps there is no such thing, and this exhibition would help demonstrate that. I am grateful to Jessica Sack for reminding me of this exhibition, and sending me the catalog, *The Play of the Unmentionable* (New York: New Press, 1992).

sive to an image that supposedly “belongs” to the transatlantic First World nations. Like a deep undertone in a musical score, the question of imperialism and colonialism runs through this whole episode—the fate of older “fading” empires like Britain, the new hegemony of American imperialism known euphemistically as “globalization,” and the arrival of an upstart artist from Africa who rubs the face of the art world in the materiality of the postcolonial. But to examine these issues in a larger framework, we need to turn directly to the question of art and imperialism.