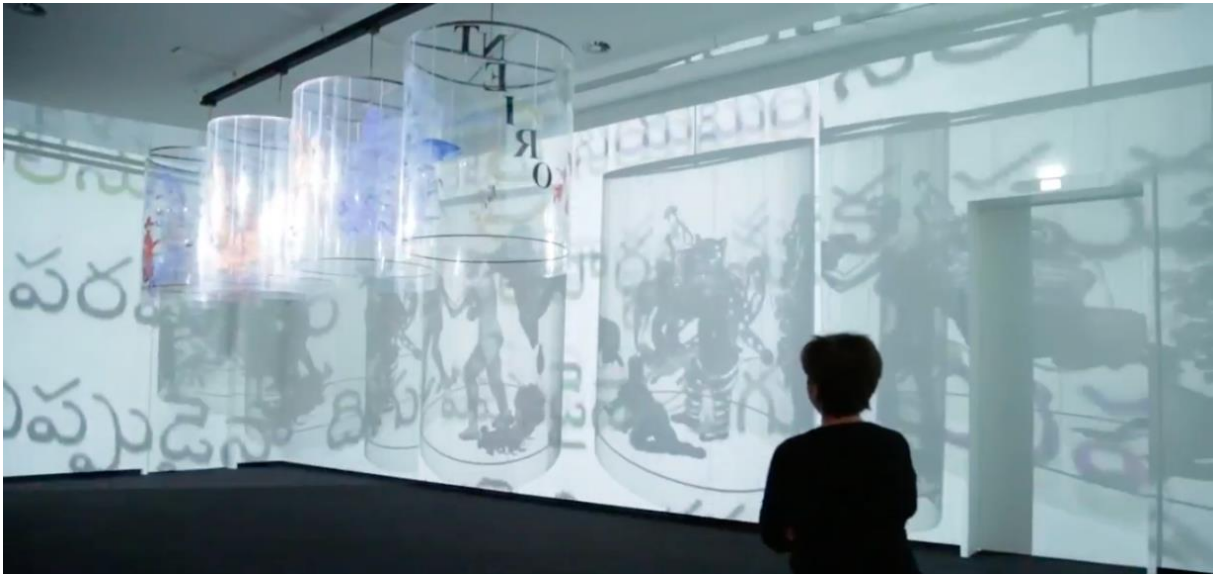


NALINI MALANI: TRANSGRESSIONS

In the Context of Its Exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum
Amsterdam in 2017



Bachelor Thesis
Name Minke van Schaik
Student No. 5734215

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Coordinator Dr Mary Bouquet
Supervisor Dr Linda S. Boersma
University College Utrecht

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Introduction

From 18 March to 17 June 2017, *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, a small retrospective exhibition of the work of Mumbai-based artist Nalini Malani (1946, Karachi) took place at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Upon entering the exhibition space, the visitor was confronted with the large ephemeral wall drawing *City of Desires* (1992/2017) (Image 1). In the following room a large variety of works by Malani was on display, from artist books such as *Hieroglyphs of Lohar Chawl* (1991), to a two-channel presentation of her earlier video work *Utopia* (1969-1976) (Image 2 and 3). These works led up to the final room of the exhibition space, that was dedicated to *Transgressions* (2001), the three-channel video/shadow play, that gave name to the exhibition, and which this thesis will focus on (Image 4). The video/shadow play is a combination of mediums consisting of transparent painted cylinders upon which video images are projected. The video and the shadow that activate the installation are cast on the back walls of the exhibition space, accompanied by an audio loop reciting a poem. In a mix of different stories and myths, the language on the cylinders of *Transgressions* is referring to multiple instances of violence and oppression. It references the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, which caused Malani's family to move from Karachi to India, and which affected her life profoundly.¹

The video/shadow play *Transgressions* was first made for an exhibition called *Unpacking Europe*, that was held in the Boijmans Van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam. For this exhibition, eighteen international artists were asked to reflect on the question 'How European is Europe?' (Hassan and Iftikhar 2001: 12).² After *Unpacking Europe* in 2001, this

¹ The Partition of India was a step in the decolonization of British India in which Pakistan and India were separated. This division was based on religious difference, not considering other demographic aspects, such as cultural differences. The Partition therefore resulted in a violent conflict and forced migration of parts of the population. Being born in the year before these events occurred, Nalini Malani's family has been greatly affected by the events of the Partition, which is why they form a continuous influence on her work:

'Besides this unorthodox free spirit, it is the disastrous effect the Partition of 1947 had on my family that still influences my work till today. They fled from Karachi as refugees with whatever they could take and moved to the city of Pune. They knew nothing about the religion, the language or anything' (Nalini Malani in Kurjacović 2017: 107).

² *Unpacking Europe* was a group exhibition, accompanied by an academic publication, edited by Sudanese art historian Salah Hassan and Pakistani artist Iftikhar Dadi, on the occasion of

first version of the work was acquired by the Stedelijk in 2002. *Transgressions* was remade for two occasions, namely version II at the exhibition *Transgressions* at the Asia Society in New York in 2014, and at the exhibition *You Can't Keep Acid in a Paper Bag* at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi in 2014. For each version, the visual language on the cylinders is slightly different, adapted to the context of the exhibition.

Nalini Malani: Transgressions at the Stedelijk was organized as one of six exhibitions that interrogate the concept of migration using the museum's own collection (Stedelijk 2017). Considering both its context of production for *Unpacking Europe* in 2001 and the context in which the work was exhibited in 2017 at the Stedelijk, this thesis will aim to answer the question: How can *Transgressions* be interpreted, both on its own and in the context of its exhibition in *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*?³

Theoretical Context

The analysis of *Transgressions* can be situated within the broader framework of global art history. It ties into the approach that art history initially took in its distinction between Western and non-Western art, critiqued for example by Pakistani artist, curator and writer Rasheed Araeen in his article 'Our Bauhaus Others Mudhouse' (1989). In this article, he voiced his concerns about the approach taken to the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989. This exhibition focussed on the works of rural non-Western artists, which it presented as 'authentic', part of a non-mutable tradition, thereby decontextualizing their work and superimposing it to that of Western artists. He concluded in his article that:

It is easier to be cynical and dismissive about modernism in Third World countries than to recognise not only those structures which are responsible for what is actually happening in other cultures, but also those assumptions which continually reinforce the marginalisation of the Third World (Araeen 1989: 14)

Rotterdam as Cultural Capital of Europe, a nomination by the European union to stimulate cultural projects. The exhibition catalogue will serve as the main source on this exhibition, along with an installation photograph. Unfortunately, the wall texts were not available in the Boijmans' electronic archive, nor in their library.

³ The visual language on the cylinders is thus slightly different. Because *Transgressions I*, the version of the work from 2001, is the only version seen by the author, this thesis will focus on this version of the work.

In *Transgressions*, Malani contributes to this discussion, presenting ‘authentic’ images from Indian culture, while mobilizing these references in a work that is much more contemporary and relevant, as this analysis will elaborate on. This is supported by Monica Juneja, professor in global art history at the University of Heidelberg, who describes how this need for ‘authenticity’ fell together with the need for representation that was stifling, for it prevented artists from showing any influence from other cultures on their work (2001). She refers to Malani as an example of one of the artists that undermine this label, in an original attempt to mobilize ancient traditions to comment on today’s political situation. Her use of a variety of images and icons from different canons plays with this authenticity, oscillating between an orientalist representation of Indian culture through appropriating it and commenting on contemporary situations, by investigating their relation to historical or mythical instances of violence.

By analyzing *Transgression* and how this work uses the concept of authenticity, this thesis forms a contribution to the globalization of art history, especially because it analyses the context of its presentation in a Western museum.

Outline of the Thesis

Taking techniques, images and references from many origins, Malani introduces a meaning that is specific to the moment and place in which *Transgressions* was made. *Transgressions* has been produced for a European audience, presenting the visitor with a variety of figures. How the audio-visual text presented by *Transgressions* can be interpreted, will therefore be the subject of the first chapter of this thesis.

The medium of the video/shadow play was invented by Malani herself. In *Transgressions*, it is formed by four Mylar-plastic cylinders, which continuously rotate, making four circles a minute. The cylinders are painted from the inside, presenting images made using a reverse painting technique.⁴ This technique is inspired by Kalighat painting, a style that finds

⁴ About the technique of reverse painting, Malani explains: ‘The technique that I use, which is an old technique called reverse-painting on glass, (but because of new material we are able to use things such as acrylic and Lexan). What you put in first in the painting are the features: how the mouth looks, how the eyes trait out as you look. So that’s the first emotion that you have to have to put down in the reverse painting. And this already gives me the contact. I create a personage, like

its origin in colonial times, constituting a mix of Indian and Occidental influences.⁵ On the painted cylinders, video images are projected from three different points. These projections add an additional narrative layer to the work. Over this, an audio loop is played, which constitutes the recording of a text that is recited by a transformed voice. This combination of different mediums is then activated by the visitor who might interrupt them, casting their own shadow over the video/shadow play, or talking through the recitation. The original, self-constructed medium of the video/shadow play combines painted images with video images in a way that makes the meaning move. While the images on the cylinders provide an archive of stories and cultural references, the medium and material used to produce *Transgressions* exerts influence over the ways in which it can be interpreted. The second chapter will therefore look into the medium of the video/shadow play, and try to interpret Malani's choice of medium, both how she came to this invention and what its significance is in the interpretation of the work.

The variety of images that form the point of analysis in the first chapter are presented to the visitor of the Stedelijk exhibition, accompanied by some wall texts and quotations that steer their interpretation of the *Transgressions*. To explore the way this work was presented to the visitors of the exhibition, the third chapter will focus on the presentation of *Transgressions* at the Stedelijk. Using the Italian curator and art historian Francesco Manaconda's idea of the ideal visitor, this chapter will analyze how the interpretation of the work is guided through the exhibition (2016).

After these chapters focusing on *Transgressions* and its exhibition at the Stedelijk the conclusion will return to the larger context of global art history, and reflect on the way this shift is visible in the display of the Stedelijk, not only through the temporary exhibitions such as *Nalini Malani: Transgressions* but also working through in the display of their regular collection, thereby establishing artist like Malani into the formerly strictly Western canon of art history.

a character, like a writer would, and then weave the context around it' Centre Pompidou Paris 2017, (9.11- 10.01).

⁵ This technique originated in 19th century Bengal, and was initially used to make religious imagery of the Hindustan goddess Kali. As a quick and therefore cheap technique of painting, the technique was thereafter taken up to depict contemporary issues, by painters who often relied on British patronage (Bal 2016: 325). By its trajectory, and use in different areas and period, Kalighat is a style that itself shows how Indian cultural practices have been influenced by the British and vice-versa.



Image 1 Nalini Malani *City of Desires*, 1992 [2017], charcoal Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 2 Nalini Malani *Hyroglyphs of Lohar Chawl, Degas Suite, Penelope and Utopia*. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 3 Nalini Malani: *In Search of Vanished Blood* and *All We Imagine as Light*. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

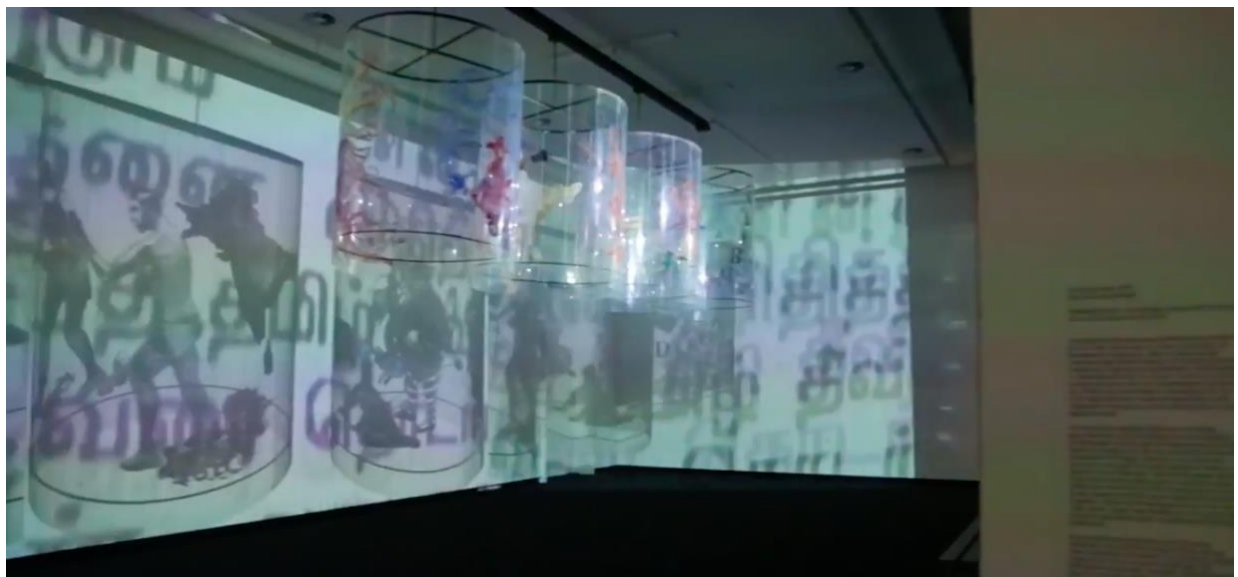


Image 4 Nalini Malani *Transgressions*, 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Reading *Transgressions*: A Continuous Stream of Images

For me, history, fantasy, ritual remembrance, dream life, memory, transformation can all be melded in the crucible of narrative.

Nalini Malani (Pijnappel 2007: 26)

One of the many ways in which *Transgressions* can be interpreted is by deciphering the images painted on the cylinders. Rendered in different colors and styles, these images present fragments of different myths and stories, some more easy to interpret than others. While the work seems initially figurative, it continuously refuses interpretation oscillating between abstract and figurative as some of the meaning is blurred by the motion of the cylinders.

These images are activated by a video stream projected on the revolving cylinders. This seven-minute video features a variety of moving images, such as clouds of smoke and an archaic animation of six different languages falling down the exhibition wall and the cylinders. While the video projections illuminate the images on the cylinders, they cause them to appear as shadows multiple times on the back wall of the exhibition space. This installation is then pulled into the present by an audio loop that features the artist's own voice, digitally modified to sound like that of a child. These verses, set in a non-coherent rhyme, draw the work into the present, referencing contemporary phenomena such as genetic modifications and mobile phone providers, in what appears to be a warning against globalization.

The following chapter will provide an analysis of the work *Transgressions*. This will be taken from my own observations of the work at the Stedelijk exhibition in 2017, supplemented by the iconographic interpretation of *Transgressions III* by Dutch literary theorist and video artist Mieke Bal, who provides a visual interpretation of the version of the work that was on display in New Delhi in 2014 (2016). Some of the figures' interpretation can therefore be taken from Bal, while some figures are specific to this first version, and are featured in the first analysis of the work by Dutch art historian and curator Johan Pijnappel, in his entry to the exhibition catalogue of *Unpacking Europe*.

A Stream of Images

Recognizable on the first cylinder is a representation of Durga, the Hindu goddess of death (Image 5) (Bal 2016: 227). Stretching her many arms, she holds the heads of several figures that have expressions of severe anguish. Meanwhile her own face is calm. She seems not at all affected by her own terrible act, and executes it as her daily routine. This figure is illustrative for the many other figures that follow in its violence and oppression. The other side of the cylinder features a map of England, in a different style. Durga is painted in a technique that is reminiscent of Kalighat, a fast and therefore undetailed style. This results in a voluminous representation of Durga, who seems to pop from the surface, because of her dark contours. The map of England however, is depicted in a different manner. For this map another style is used, that recalls Pat painting, which is a water color technique.

The second cylinder shows the map of India. This map is rendered in the same flat technique that is used for the map of England. Two boxers that are featured on the opposite side of the column, represent a conflict. According to Bal, the combination of their imagery with the map of India, suggests a political dimension to their fight (2016: 228). One boxer could for example represent Pakistan, the artist's country of birth, while the other represents India, the country she currently lives in, continuously in conflict. As the cylinder turns, the boxers alternate between being on the same side and on opposite ones, referring to the countries' unified existence under colonialism, and their opposing positions after the Partition. Painted in pink and orange, they clearly represent two different groups. This cannot be a fair fight, as shown by the lack of boxing gloves on the hands of one of the boxers.

The third cylinder shows another violent struggle. Here a man is dressed in a suit and top hat, seated on an elephant, while hunting down a tiger. The man in his suit possibly refers to an English businessman. The unequal power balance is evident from the scene alone, but it is emphasized by the scale of the figures. For example, the English hunter is depicted far larger than the other figures, illustrative for their unequal power relation and referring to violence that accompanies this process. These images bring multiple associations, such as the violence inflicted during colonialism and how this violence and inequality is continued through globalism.

On the opposite side of the cylinder, there is another deity. This is Varaha, an incarnation of the Hindustan principal god Vishnu, in the incarnation of a boar (Bal 2016: 229). Here however, he only has the face of a boar and instead the body of a man. In his hands, he has the strings of a puppeteer, only he is keeping power over a crouching figure on the ground.

This figure challenges the depiction of colonialism on the former side of the cylinder, by showing the complicity of religion in the suppression of subjects during colonialism and continuing in post-colonial times. The figure of Vishnu himself is covered in dots, a form of erasure that shows the ephemerality of the figure, endangered by the emergence of globalization (Rajadhyaksha 2003). The uncertainty of his existence points to the fact that in times of globalization, the position of the oppressor can be taken by whoever is most powerful. In the image, only the shadow of Vishnu is visible in its shadow form (Image 7). It is hardly possible to capture this figure on a photograph on the cylinder itself, because of the subtle pat-like rendering, in combination with the shiny Mylar surface and the distortion done by the video projection. This difficulty is illustrative of Vishnu's ephemeral existence in the video/shadow play.

On the fourth cylinder, large letters spell out ORIENT (Image 11). This refers to the region of the Orient, a geographically undefined area that stages the Westerners' need for exoticism. This is a concept featured in Edward Said's theory of Orientalism.⁶ The word is placed together with the image of a large snake. Bal puts forward the biblical association this brings to the mind, referring to the original sin (2016: 233). The snake is also eating a fish far smaller than itself referring to an unequal fight, like many of the other figures on the cylinders already described.

The last big figure on the fourth cylinder is a single hand holding strings (Image...). Only this time, the strings are not used to control a single person, instead they hold entire countries on their hooks. These countries are again represented in a simple style, suspended on strings and held by hooks, as though their existence is simply dependent on the overpowering hand that holds them.

Another small figure that is featured on this last cylinder resembles Jheronimus Bosch's The Pedlar, a figure who represents an everyman from popular late 15th century Dutch moral tale who 'goes through life weighed down by the baggage of his earthly existence' (Boijmans). By depicting this figure featured on a famous painting from the Boijmans collection, Malani draws a link between the deprivation in different times.

⁶ *Orientalism* (1978) the seminal work by Palestinian-American scholar Edward Saïd is often seen as the starting point of postcolonial studies. It introduces the theory that "the West" uses a certain image of "the Orient" to oppose itself to it, which aides in the affirmation of its own identity.

Overall the language on the cylinders seems to function as a warning against globalization. It uses older painting traditions and symbols of religion and myths. The sound loop however, pull the installation into the present, by focusing on contemporary issues.

A Cyclical Narrative

The images on the cylinders refer to different myths and stories. They are recurrent in her oeuvre. On this, Malani states that:

Often I find that the subject I pick up, is vaster then just one artwork. For example, if I have been working with Cassandra, the myth of Cassandra. I started with the painted book. From the painted book it became a video installation, and then it went into paintings. It's a vast subject. Because the myth of Cassandra can give you so many ideas. So I do use different materials, that can help the language to flow.

(Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 2017b)

How this system works in *Transgressions*, is foregrounded by the exhibition at the Stedelijk, showing Malani's occupation with figures throughout different works. For example, in the work *Hieroglyphs of Lohar Chawl* (1992), subaltern figures from the Lohar Chawl district are depicted by Malani in this artist book. However, she did not want to draw them directly, in fear of infringing their privacy, and therefore painted them from memory (Stedelijk 2017c). These subaltern figures can also be seen on the cylinders of *Transgressions*, showing Malani's continued preoccupation with their situation.

By the turning of the cylinder, she shows how their placement in this unfortunate position is completely random, as compared to that of the privileged few of society. This recurrent appearance of characters also holds true for Malani's depictions of deities and mythical creatures. According to French art historian Christine Vial Kayser, Malani uses figures referring to myths to employ an 'interclass vocabulary', since particularly in India, mythical narratives are a part of the daily life (Vial Kayser 2015: 6). On this the artist states,

I am a narrative artist. I am not a Hindu, but I am attracted to the myths, because for me it's the language to link with people. There are so many characters that give you complex psychological stories which have come down to us through the ages where there are universal truths.

Nalini Malani
(The MET 2015)

She thus re-appropriates these images from an Indian religious context, and re-used them in her own narrative, commenting on contemporary issues. According to Chaitanya Sambrani, curator and lecturer at the Australian National University, this re-telling of stories Malani practices, is part of an oral tradition of storytelling that is inherently performative, and thereby non-canonical, allowing multiple interpretations. The re-interpretation of these myths is thus part of tradition (Sambrani 2004).

In the context of the exhibition however, the images do not activate this reservoir of stories. Instead they present 'a plethora of seductive colors and forms in which Malani makes her interpretation of Western dominance through the concept of Orientalism' (Pijnappel 2001: 370). It is thus the image of India, constructed by the Western eye that we are presented with here.

Audio/Video Addition: Activating the Play

In *Transgressions*, video images are used as a light source. The video itself depicts the result of colonialism and globalization. It features for example the image of a tattoo in Kalighat style, adorning a Western man's arm, as a sign of appropriation. In *Transgressions*, we see this image bringing us how India and the West are not just now intertwined with the negative influences of current globalism, but have instead always been intertwined.

The languages dropping visually in the video are languages in danger of becoming extinct because they are not used anymore. Instead, English has become the main language they speak. Clouds of smoke are shown in the video as well. This is one of the recurring images in Malani's oeuvre, where they referred to nuclear disasters, for example in the installation *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1992), where clouds of smoke were shown following the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The clouds featured in the video of

Transgressions could point to this, or also to the contemporary reality of pollution, a phenomenon that leaves large cities such as Mumbai covered in a layer of smog.

The added haunting voiceover brings in another layer of narration to the work.⁷ Recorded by Malani herself, and then digitally modified, the sound loop provides a layer that activates the myths and stories referred to on the cylinders and pulls them into the present. It references the recent influence globalization is having on India. For example, the word ‘Orange’ refers to a telecommunication company. The same goes for ‘airtime’, referring to the time on the telephone (Stedelijk 2017a). In the context of 2001, mobile phone use was coming up, and changing the conception of communication. Another example of these contemporary issues is ‘terminator seeds’ or ‘clucking potatoes with chicken genes’. These words refer to genetic modification, and warn against its use from an ecological perspective, even more emphasized by ‘Big science watching over your food needs’. The intonation of the narration partly creates this atmosphere. The critic Ashish Rajadhyaksha makes a reference to high pitch children’s voice used in horrorfilms to signal danger, which in *Transgressions*, contributes to the unsettling atmosphere that is created by the sound loop, contrasting the aesthetic quality of the installation and rendering impossible a positive interpretation (2003: 6).

Conclusion

The many images painted on the reverse sides of the cylinders of *Transgressions* are fragments to a large range of stories, stemming from Hindu mythology as a work from the Boijmans collection, and universally interpretable stories relating to colonialism. While some figures stem from a Western canon, the Indian characters are presumably largely unknown to the visitor of the Dutch museums. The images therefore constitute a blind spot to the visitor, like some of the abstract matter on the cylinders and the fleeting images of shadows on the back wall of the exhibition. While *Transgressions* is initially a narrative work, an iconographical interpretation of the images on the cylinders is continuously interrupted by the turning of the cylinders, of the changing video images and the shadows they cast. However, these disruptions constitute the most interesting aspects of *Transgressions*.

Both the video and the audio contributions to the installation form an additional narrative layer that draw the cylinders into the present. While the video shows the loss of

⁷ See the full text of *Transgressions* added in annex 1.

tradition and loss of meaning through cultural appropriation, the voiceover focusses on the downside of globalism. By presenting the different elements together, Malani invites the visitor to draw the connection between these events, and see the continuation of violence under colonialism to religion and capitalism, tension between figuration and abstraction, between the aesthetic and the political.

The division between the different layers of narrative provide a useful tool to decipher the different images put into *Transgressions*. However, the medium of the video/shadow play refutes this type of interpretation. The continuous rotation and the combination of different mediums that tumble over one another constitute an experience that initially blurs the interpretative layer of the work in order to show the aesthetic one. How this medium is used, and what significance can be attributed to its different mediums, will furthermore be the subject discussed in the second chapter.



Image 5 Nalini Malani *Transgressions* (detail), 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
 . Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2017.



Image 6 Nalini Malani *Transgressions* (detail), 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
 . Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2017.



Image 7 Nalini Malani *Transgressions* (detail), 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
 . Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2017.

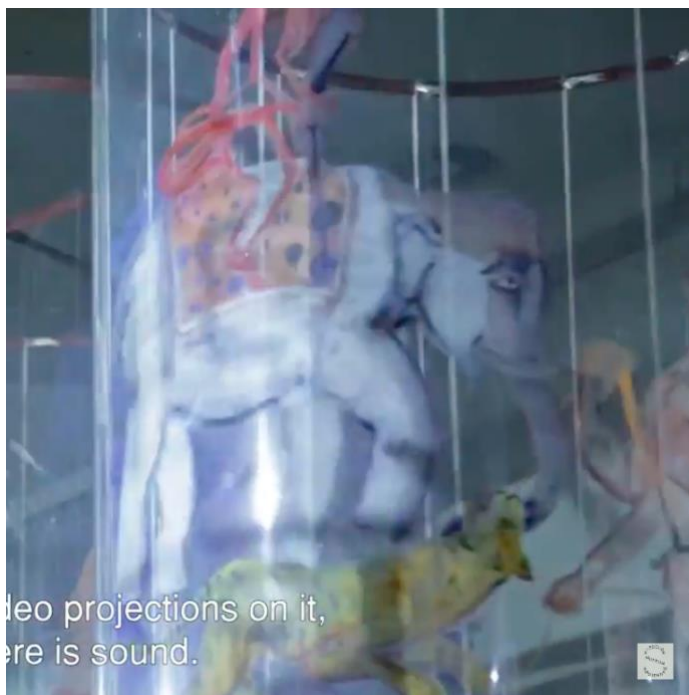


Image 8 Nalini Malani *Transgressions* (detail), 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
 . Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2017.



Image 9 Nalini Malani *Transgressions* (detail), 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2017.



Image 10 Nalini Malani *Hieroglyphs of Lohar Chawl*, 1992, artist book, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 11 Nalini Malani *Transgressions*, 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 12 Nalini Malani *Transgressions*, 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 13 *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, 1998–99, video installation, 20 minutes, four DVD projectors, sound, 12 monitors, quilts, tin trunks, mirrored Mylar, Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay.

The Video/Shadow Play as Medium

The video/shadow play is a medium invented by Malani herself, and *Transgressions* is the first the artist made. After this, she used the medium more often, for example in *In Search of Vanished Blood*, that was presented as a video/shadow play at the dOCUMENTA 13 in 2012. Inspired by the multicultural tradition of shadow plays, Malani first came to *The Sacred and the Profane* in 1998, a shadow play using Mylar cylinders. This shadow play can be found in Western as in Bengal and Chinese tradition (Huyssen 2013: 14).

After this the medium developed into the video/shadow play by replacing the light source with three video-projectors, adding another narrative element to the installation. Malani had been one of the pioneers of video art in India in the 60's, but abandoned the medium in the period from 1972 to 1992, in favor of drawing and painting (Pijnappel 2012: 60). After 1992 however, Malani felt the need to 'break out of the frame' as she phrased it in an interview with the critic Johan Pijnappel (Pijnappel 2012: 60). This was influenced by the increased political upheaval and interreligious violence, namely the destruction of the Babri Mosque by Hindu fundamentalists, because they claimed the mosque was built on holy ground and the riots that followed (Sambrani 2004). In such an explosive political climate, with the increased threat of violence and religious fundamentalism, Malani felt the need create her own medium, making more engaging work that could reach a larger audience (Pijnappel 2007).

The following chapter will consider the use of the video/shadow play as a medium, and provide several readings of the importance of the use of this medium in the interpretation of *Transgressions*. The first part will therefore consider the main constituents of this medium, namely painting and video. While the painted figures have already been discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter will look into how the two mediums are influenced by each other in the video/shadow play. The second section will discuss some of the techniques Malani uses. The video/shadow play is a mix of several techniques and mediums, some of which could be considered out of date, such as the Kalighat style. In her personal re-appropriation of these mediums and techniques, Malani's work interrogates the notion of progress as an increase in technological development. The third section will then consider how the medium of the

video/shadow play underwrites the understanding of cultural memory, drawing primarily on the theory of memory scholar Andreas Huyssen, who considers Malani's video/shadow plays as artworks that inform the idea of cultural memory, not merely presenting an example, but showing the structure and the working of cultural memory.

Between Painting and Video

While being one of the pioneers of video art in India in the 60's, Malani regularly stresses that she sees herself primarily as a painter:

I paint therefore I am. But I don't want to make this sound pompous. The language that probes other material is extended through painting. I work with de-forming the colors in video - keying them in as I would with watercolors. Or as my work in reverse painting – 'throwing' colors, embedding them into the supports. I am not interested in the mimetic, which is a given factor in this medium.

Nalini Malani
(Pijnappel 2005)

The recurring narratives throughout her works are presented in a pictorial form and are activated by the videos projected on them. By the video projection however, as well as by their movement, the images become more difficult to read. According to critic Bernard Fibicher, the movement of the cylinders make the painted figures never really congeal, since their image would always remain fleeting to the eye of the visitor (Fibicher 2010: 8). By this process, their interpretation is never fixed, but instead their meaning can be reinterpreted at any moment in other contexts. This ties into Chaitanya Sambrani's remark on the nature of Hindu mythology in the previous chapter, showing that they are part of an oral tradition which allows reinterpretation of mythology, instead of having a fixed meaning (Sambrani 2004).

The movement of the cylinders on which the images are placed, also blurs the boundaries between the images. According to Sambrani,

The painted images behind their Mylar surfaces are eternally on the verge of blending into each other, or of retreating, being subsumed into the maw of primal mucus out of which they have been coated – if only for the time being – by the insistent manifestations of the artist's brush (2007: 29).

The Mylar forms an additional layer between the visitor and the image, because the cylinders are painted from the inside. Thereby, the images have a gloss over them, that contributes to their aesthetic but blurs their appearance by reflecting the gleam of the video projections. Simultaneously their movement is essentially linked with the concept of video, being that of moving image. According to German art historian Doris von Drathen, the procession of images in the shadow plays have a cinematic quality, recalling early experiments with cinema (2010: 29).

While the actual images in the video not only form an obstruction to the reading of the images on the cylinders, they also form a narrative layer of their own. The video images feature for example clouds of smoke, possibly pointing to the result of a nuclear explosion. According to Pijnappel, Malani's preoccupation with film developed earlier in her career, and gave her what he calls a 'filmic view' (2017: 60-2). He argues that Malani's use of video not only stems from the political turbulence or the influence of international video art at that time, but also originated from her early film experiments in the 60s and 70s, as part of the video art collective VIEW, the Vision Exchange Workshop in Mumbai. However, in this collective, she was continuously ignored by male fellow artists, and meanwhile influenced by feminist thinkers. This becomes visible in her later work such as *Transgressions*, where not only the female point of view is taken to contemporary events, but also the female voice becomes a main topic (Pijnappel 2017: 96).

The Use of Out of Date Techniques

Throughout *Transgressions* several outdated techniques are used. For example, Kalighat painting, which is a technique used to paint religious imagery in the nineteenth century. While Malani herself is not from a Hindu background, she uses these styles, as well as the medium of the shadow play is an appreciating remembrance of these old traditions. This is however not a regressive nostalgia, but instead a re-appropriation that activates these old styles in a similar way as she uses ancient myths to tell stories to comment on contemporary issues. Huyssen discusses Malani's choice of medium in this context, stating that

[Malani's] use of the traditional, even obsolete techniques of representation marks a turn against a technological triumphalism that privileges only the digital. It is no longer a philosophy of history that anchors this kind of avant-gardism, but, on the contrary, a

sustained doubt in mere technological progress combined with political critique of a failing present that has not redeemed the promises of modernity (Huyssen 2013: 74).

Huyssen sees this re-appropriation in contrast to the digital, and more in general in contrast to the supremacy of technological progress as a goal for a society. Interestingly Ashish Rajadhyaksha interprets Malani's use of techniques differently, seeing instead a connection between her work and the space it creates for multiple interpretations 'and the many "virtual" spaces that have newly opened up with digital technology' (2003: 59). Rajadhyaksha bases his argument on the deformed cyborg voice that is part of the audio of *Transgressions*. This aspect of the installation draws the video/shadow play into the present by presenting contemporary issues linked to the older stories and myths told on the cylinders.

Instead of focusing on Malani's possible relation to the digital, Huyssen considers techniques appropriate for a medium of memory because 'the trauma to be remembered is rendered in older techniques that themselves belong to the memory of contemporary media culture' (Huyssen 2013: 64). Focusing more on his treatment of memory, the next subsection will consider how the video/shadow play is a suitable medium of memory.

A Medium of Memory

As has been previously discussed, Nalini Malani uses the medium of the video/shadow play to reference different traumatic events, for example related to the Partition, earlier colonialism, or people who have been disadvantaged by globalization. Referring to multiple histories at once can be related to the concept of multidirectional memory by literary theorist Michael Rothberg, of a competitive model, brings up many examples of monuments of media referring to multiple histories at once through the same monument or artwork (2009). *Transgressions* works as one of these multidirectional sites of memories, as it stems from the Partition as an underlying motivation for Malani that informs her entire practice, while having been directly invoked by the violence starting in 1992. Then, in its context of display at the Stedelijk Museum, the work is used to refer to migration specifically, invoking the migration background of Malani to contribute to the contemporary situation of the migrant crisis in Western Europe (Kruijt 2017). By referring to multiple histories at once, *Transgressions* is one of these spaces where memory works multidirectional. However, *Transgressions*, like Malani's other shadow plays, can be seen to represent the process of cultural memory on a meta level, as according to Rothberg's model, 'It is precisely that convoluted, sometimes historically

unjustified, back-and-forth movement of seemingly distant collective memories in and out of public consciousness that I qualify as memory's multidirectionality' (Rothberg 2009: 17). The turning of the cylinders thereby represents how the violent events addressed in *Transgressions* move in and out of the collective consciousness. According to Huyssen, 'It is in the reinvention of the shadow play that Malani registers the very structure of political memory itself: its alteration/ oscillation between emergence and vanishing, compulsive repetition and motivated evasion' (2012: 51). The circular movement of the cylinders thereby refers to the recurring cycles of violence Malani depicts, but also to the cyclical narrative that Malani employs, using myths and icons from different origins time and again throughout her different works. Their vanishing, as happens by every turn of the cylinder, when the figures are not visible for a moment, is a recurring occupation of Malani's, for example through the ephemerality of her wall drawings, which symbolize how some stories are consciously kept out of the collective consciousness, by not being part of the official narrative of history. According to Huyssen, 'these works give us the shadows of time itself in their focus on discarded fragments of history, the detritus of culture and social life, the everyday of the subaltern' (2012: 58). This project of representing histories that are kept out of the official narrative of history, is an inherently political project, as it counters narratives of national unity.

For this politically engaged project, the medium is also devised to engage the viewer in the act of durational looking. By means of the aesthetic quality of the colorful images on the cylinders and the video projections, the visitor is drawn into the play. By fleeting presentation of the video/shadow play, the attention of the viewer is then kept, in a fascination with the procession of 'exotic' images:

Translation is demanded, even if there are moments that first appear untranslatable. Malani's moving image worlds want to be read slowly in multiple viewings of this ...video/shadow play. Ultimately the reader may then get lost again in the aesthetic charm of circling images, but now with a deeper knowledge of an installation that, in its structure of repetitive loops, may point to the simultaneous futility and unavoidability of political memory work (Huyssen 2013: 63).⁸

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⁸ Interestingly, the viewer is addressed as 'reader' in this quotation by Huyssen, something which is continuously done by Bal as well (2016). This address points to the way in which Malani uses primarily literary sources of inspiration for her figures, while it is also a result of the fact that Bal and Huyssen are both primarily literary theorists.

The visitor is thereby encouraged to find an interpretation for the figures. As some of these figures, stemming from Hindu mythology, are not generally known to a Western audience, *Transgressions* instead creates a space in which ‘visitors can dwell, co-perform and mobilize their own memories, as well as participate in their collective memories evoked on the cylinders, the projections, and the shadows’ (Bal 2016: 45). The working of the video/shadow play thereby engages the visitor in a mobilization of their own memory (Image 14). *Transgressions* thereby works as a medium of memory in an additional way, namely as an example of prosthetic memory. Prosthetic memory is a concept coined by historian and art historian Alison Landsberg, and is useful to understand the transmission of memory from *Transgressions* to the visitor of the exhibition. Landsberg explains this concept as follows:

The cinema, then, might be imagined as a site in which people experience a bodily, mimetic encounter with a past that was not actually theirs. [...] Like cinema, television and experiential museums also provide the occasion for individual spectators to suture themselves into history, to develop prosthetic memories (Landsberg 2004: 14).

The exhibition of *Transgressions* thus transmits memories of the Partition, of colonialism and of interreligious violence through its display. These are memories Malani herself acquired through familial transmission, literary sources or lived experience, which she now transmits to a larger anonymous audience. While this same audience does not initially seem to relate to the instances of violence Malani references in *Transgressions*, she reminds her audience of the fact that we all live in a world effected by the memory and the continuing influence of colonialism and globalization.

Conclusion

The video/shadow play as a medium informs any interpretation of the work *Transgressions*. By its continuing oscillation between appearing and vanishing characters, it demonstrated the working of cultural memory. This movement also motivates the viewer to engage in durational looking, aiming to uncover the different narratives, references and connections that *Transgressions* suggests. Within the video/shadow play, painting and video are interacting, inviting us to consider them as part of the same project of storytelling. Painting and video are thereby presented to influence one another, as the painted images on the revolving cylinders recall cinematic experiments and the colors used in the video recall the

practice of painting. In its use of outdated techniques, the video/shadow play furthermore functions as a medium of memory. In this use, it questions technological progress as the kind of progress to strive for. Furthermore, the medium of the video/shadow play can be interpreted as a medium of memory, as it functions multidirectional, referencing multiple histories at the same time. The medium thereby demonstrates the working of cultural memory, in its constant tension between appearing and reappearing images and histories.

While working in all the ways mentioned above, the video/shadow play has a primarily engaging effect on the visitor. Placed in a separate exhibition room, *Transgressions* draws the visitor into this archive of stories told on the cylinders. While these images are partially taken from Hindu mythology, they might be unknown to the Western museum visitor, who sees the work at *Unpacking Europe* in 2001 or at *Nalini Malani: Transgressions* in 2017. However, the significance of the medium of the video/shadow play, as this chapter has set out to argue, lies precisely in these blind spots of the visitor, in the images that he or she cannot find an interpretation for. It is exactly those blind spots that activate the visitor to mobilize their own memory, and to participate in *Transgressions*. How the visitor is guided in his or her interpretation of *Transgressions*, how the work is contextualized in the artist's oeuvre as well as in academic discourse, and how the visitor is almost forced to participate in the work, will therefore be the subject of the following last chapter.



Image 14 Nalini Malani *Transgressions*, 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Nalini Malani: Transgressions at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

In the spring of 2017, for a duration of three months *Nalini Malani: Transgressions* was on display at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Like in any exhibition, the impact the work has on the visitors is mediated by contextualizing it with other works. In the case of *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, this is done by exhibiting other works by the same artist, forming a small retrospect that keeps a non-chronological order (Images 15, 16, 17 and 18). This retrospective was formed together with the artist in order to demonstrate how Malani came to these video/shadow plays, according to the curator of the exhibition Margriet Schavemaker (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 2017b).

Museum displays like that of *Nalini Malani: Transgressions* are designed in a certain way. One of the ways to analyze this is by description, a practice that analyses the display as script that is formed by the exhibition makers, the exhibition space and its visitors, following the theory of Dutch heritage scholar Julia Noordegraaf (2004: 15). Similar to this, Francesco Manaconda, the artistic director of the Tate Liverpool, approaches every exhibition like a text, holding inherent an implied reading (2016). Following literary theorist Umberto Eco's concept of the Model Reader, Manaconda constructs the Model Viewer, a figure that would visit the exhibition exactly like intended to do by its makers, and pick up on all the references he or she is meant to pick up on. In his theory, Manaconda approaches the exhibition space as a text that contains an implied reading embedded in its design. Evidently, not every visitor will live up to this Model Viewer, and this is specifically the case for *Transgressions*, where the references are of an intercultural nature. However, instead of approaching the exhibition as a site in which the meaning is set, Manaconda argues for the exhibition to be a site of co-production, where some references can be seen by the visitor or discovered through undertaking further research, while others can be embedded in the display of the exhibition by the wall texts, yet other associations invoked by the display are personal to the visitor.

Following these models, the question that the following chapter will aim to answer is how the exhibition of *Transgressions* at the Stedelijk adds to the meaning of the work. To answer this question, this last chapter will first consider the intercultural references that are embedded in the work, and how the contextualization of *Transgressions* with previous work

communicates the meaning of the recurrent figures to the visitor of the exhibition. Secondly the involvement of the visitor in the artwork will be discussed, and finally the political potential of the artwork, combined with the artist's political motivations will be discussed and related to the museum's decision to have this exhibition.

Visitor Guidance

Manaconda discusses the different types of visitors that an exhibition can have. One would be the type of visitor that understands every intertextual reference that a work makes. While Malani references a variety of Hindu myths, she produced the work for an exhibition that would be seen by a predominantly Western audience, namely at the Boijmans van Beuningen museum at the exhibition *Unpacking Europe* in 2001. In the Stedelijk exhibition, the work was contextualized with other works that mainly showed references to the references relating to the Western canon, such as Penelope, a figure from the Homer's *Odyssey*.

The exhibition at the Stedelijk is constructed as a small retrospective, which shows the coherence of her oeuvre, through the reappearance of figures. According to Manaconda, any exhibition is a 'communicative construct, a temporary message, narration, thesis or even history using meta texts', which in this case would be the art on display (2016). In this 'communicative construct', the visitor functions as a 'partner involved in the designing of a museum that doesn't exist yet'. The visitor thus activates the exhibition, by bringing in their experience of the art on display, and takes part in the construction of the artwork, by interpreting it.

Reading the wall texts of *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, it is striking how the myths and literary sources Malani references are glossed over, while the general story and its political message are emphasized (Wall Text 2017). While this is completely sensible, it does take away some of the richness of the work, and the purpose all these references serve. Thereby the exhibition appears to focus on the aesthetic quality of the work, while emphasizing its political message. Most critical reviews stay very much on the surface, seeing the small size of the exhibition, it is interesting to see how generally well-received it was, for example in *Art Review Asia*, in which it was called 'a convincing overview of her practice' (Steverlinck 2017).

The works of the exhibition are further contextualized by quotations of two female philosophers that are written on the exhibition walls. The first one is by German philosopher and political scientist Hannah Arendt, placed next to the ephemeral wall drawing at the entrance of the exhibition:

To be alive means to be in a world that preceded one's own arrival and
will survive one's own own departure.⁹

Hannah Arendt

The second quotation is from Bulgarian-French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva:

The maternal body is in a position to transform the violence of eroticism – which in the process of sexual liberation women now know for themselves- into tenderness. The maternal body is in the frontier for that translation that permits a human being to live, to not become psychotic, to not die of solitude, but to live. This gives to women an enormous role, namely the destiny of humanity is in the hands of women.¹⁰

Julia Kristeva

These quotations were placed there on the initiative of Malani herself (Schavemaker 2018). The second quotation is plausibly taken from Christine Vial Kayser, who uses the exact same quotation in her article on Malani's work, in relation to the position of the female body in her work (2016: 7). The use of these quotations is not primarily to give an interpretative explanation of *Transgressions* or the accompanying artworks, but to show how it is situated in academic discourse. It shows Malani's feminist convictions, that are not as straightforwardly apparent from *Transgressions*, as they are from some of her other works. This contextualization within academic discourse serves the purpose of self-canonization, demonstrating how her own work fits into the canon of contemporary art that is now relevant. Both these quotations are a form of guidance of the perception of the work, embedded in its display. They foreground the political potential of the work that is not as overtly clear from the work itself, and which happens even more overtly in the mural that opens the exhibition.

⁹ This quotation from Hannah Arendt was taken from *The Life of the Mind* (Harcourt: New York, 1971)

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, published as "Experiencing the Phallus as extraneous, or Women's twofold Oedipus complex", in Griselda Pollock (guest ed.), "Julia Kristeva 1966-96: aesthetics, politics, ethics," *Parallax* 8 (1998) p. 29-44, p. 41.

Involvement and Complicacy in Contemporary Act of Witnessing

Upon entering the exhibition space, the visitor is confronted with the ephemeral wall drawing *City of Desires* (1992-2017) (Image 17). This drawing is more easily interpretable than the video/shadow play, because it is set, at least temporally, as opposed to the continuously revolving video/shadow play. In addition, it is made up out of clearly recognizable faces and machines rendered in charcoal. The figures are connected by dotted lines, making up some sort of diagram. Malani relates this mural to representation and communication, and considers this an act of abstracting knowledge to make it more easily interpretable:

The diagram is a way to communicate the knowledge [...] although never really comes close to what is happening, which is a felt experience. Similarly, this holds true for what I've used in the wall-drawing *City of Desires [1991/2017]* at the Stedelijk Museum. Here the diagram concerns the connectivity of people and gives a language with a dimension of clandestine communication beyond surveillance, beyond Big Brother helicopter watching you.

Nalini Malani
(Kurjaković 2017: 111)

This mural, while forming a communicative device, can also makes the exhibition more overtly political. Because of the large direct images the visitor gets at the moment of entering the exhibition space, it makes the visitor witness to actual atrocities, not shielded by more difficultly interpretable iconography, like is the case in *Transgressions*. According to critic Doris von Drathen even, the mural provides for Malani a 'proof of political engagement' and turns the viewing of her work into 'an act of contemporary witnessing', which would turn the visitor into an accomplice to the violence that is recurring throughout the works shown in the exhibition (Von Drathen: 29). This is particularly foregrounded by the eyes of the victims staring at the visitor from the wall of the ephemeral drawing. With the mural Malani reminds the visitor that the mythical cycles of violence that *Transgressions* shows, are ever present and ongoing. By making the visitor witness it so overtly, he or she becomes complicit in this violence. Malani engages the visitor by making them witness this mural, by activating the shadow play by interpreting its referentiality, and by making them cast their own shadows to

constitute blind spots in the cultural memory that *Transgressions* is depicting, all to engage the audience and to make them accomplices to this violence.

Political Activism

Malani specifically counters propagandistic interpretations of her work, even when this would be a feminist and socially motivated propaganda (Kurjaković, 2017 :113). However, Huyssen considers her work to contain some sort of propaganda, but in a way that does not have a one-sided interpretation. According to Huyssen, the political potential and social engagement of her work is the central point,

Her central question is this: How can human pain and social suffering, past and present, be rendered, be rendered visually in such a way that its representation nurtures and illuminates life, rather than indulging in aesthetic stylization, voyeuristic titillation, or succumbing to fatalism in the face of mythic cycles of violence? How can art contribute to blocking the repetition compulsion of gendered violence? Work on recognition of the problem is where art can make its mark, and recognition begins with memory.

(Huyssen 2013: 50)

It is specifically this political potential of the work that seems to be the main focus of *Nalini Malani: Transgressions* the 2017 exhibition at the Stedelijk. On the museum's website, it states that 'this exhibition is part of a long-term research program that sheds new light on the Stedelijk's collection through the prism of current topics. It is the first of six presentations in 2017 that will address the theme of migration' (Stedelijk 2017). The exhibition, considering this project, tends to focus much more on Malani's migration background, while this only exists through familial connections.

In its original context of exhibition in 2001 at *Unpacking Europe*, interestingly the work is not at all drawn in connection to migration in the exhibition catalogue entry by Dutch art historian Johan Pijnappel (2001: 368-75) Even more striking is the fact that in this exhibition, the work is called 'Transgression', not the plural form it took at the Stedelijk. In this catalogue Pijnappel does not mention Malani's personal experience of migration. Instead, he focusses on her position as a politically engaged artist within Indian society, dealing with the increased political upheaval and the changing position of the artist within this society, which even resulted in Malani receiving threats from Hindu fundamentalists (Pijnappel 2001: 369). In this

context of *Unpacking Europe*, the ‘transgression’ seems to be one of political nature, namely the rise of fundamentalism, without any reference to migration. In 2017, Malani herself primarily focusses on globalization as a continuation of the violence of colonialism as the main topic discussed in *Transgressions*. In one of the audio tour fragments for example, Malani states, when explaining the title of her work *Transgressions*, that it refers to a historical moment,

... when India ceases to have the agenda of socialism. And that is Gandhi and socialism. When globalism comes in, Gandhi’s thrown out of the window. And that was the transgression. Actually, if we had followed Gandhi, we would have been environmental-wise, ecology-wise, much more wiser, ahead of times really, we have slid backwards.

Nalini Malani

(Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 2017c)

The way in which the meaning is constructed by the art itself as well as by the person who interprets it, is visible from this statement, showing the multiplicity of interpretations possible of the work. For example, Mieke Bal in a publication preceding the exhibition, interprets *Transgressions* in a different political way:

As it happens, political cause, in *Transgressions*, is transgression of boundaries. The situation from which the work departs is what used to be firm boundaries between national, linguistic and cultural habits has been loosened, emptied of power, and even disabled to serve as middle spaces. In this work, images both on cylinders and on the projections, diverse as they are, touch, so to speak, the damage done by globalization, without simply advocating a return to local traditions. The cause that informs these choices and priorities is political (Bal 2016: 225)

Specifically, Bal’s interpretation connects to the museum’s narrative of the exhibition. The display of *Transgressions* at the Stedelijk was specifically interpreting *Transgressions* in reference to migration by emphasizing the artist’s migration background. It does so for example in the Dutch translation of *Transgressions* the exhibition took up in its wall texts, namely ‘Grensoverscheidingen’. This translation interprets the word as relating to borders and thereby migration, which the original title does not necessarily do.

Conclusion

While *Transgressions* contains many references, not necessarily every reference is picked up by the audience of the exhibition *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*. To aid the visitor in interpreting some of these references, the work is contextualized by other works in a small retrospective exhibition. The visitor is encouraged to get immersed in the environment of the installation. While the actual participation of the visitors to the installation by casting their own shadows is a rather directed form of participation, the visitor is also encouraged, mediated by this aesthetic experience, to activate their own ideas, feelings and memories in *Transgressions*. This opens up the work to other, more personal, references and memories, and uses the exhibition space as a site of co-production, such as the kind of exhibition Manaconda argues for (2016).

However, through the visitor guidance, the exhibition points to a more politically engaged reading to the work. The quotations by feminist philosophers initiated by Malani, serves to place the work in a feminist discourse that is less apparent from the work itself. The additional mural serves to give the exhibition an overt political engagement, that is emphasized by the museum in accompanying documents such as wall text that are embedded in the script of the exhibition.

. In an interview related to the project on migration this exhibition is part of, the museum's director Beatrix Ruf emphasized the political function a museum serves (Kruijt 2017). This specific period in 2017 was particularly colored by the public debate on the immigration crisis in Western Europe, and fueled by the general elections that took place right before the start of the exhibition. The exhibition *Nalini Malani: Transgressions* can be seen in light of this debate.



Image 15 *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, 2017, installation photograph, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 16 *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, 2017, installation photograph, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 17 Nalini Malani: *Transgressions*, 2017, installation photograph, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 18 Nalini Malani: *Transgressions, City of Desires*, 1992 [2017] Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

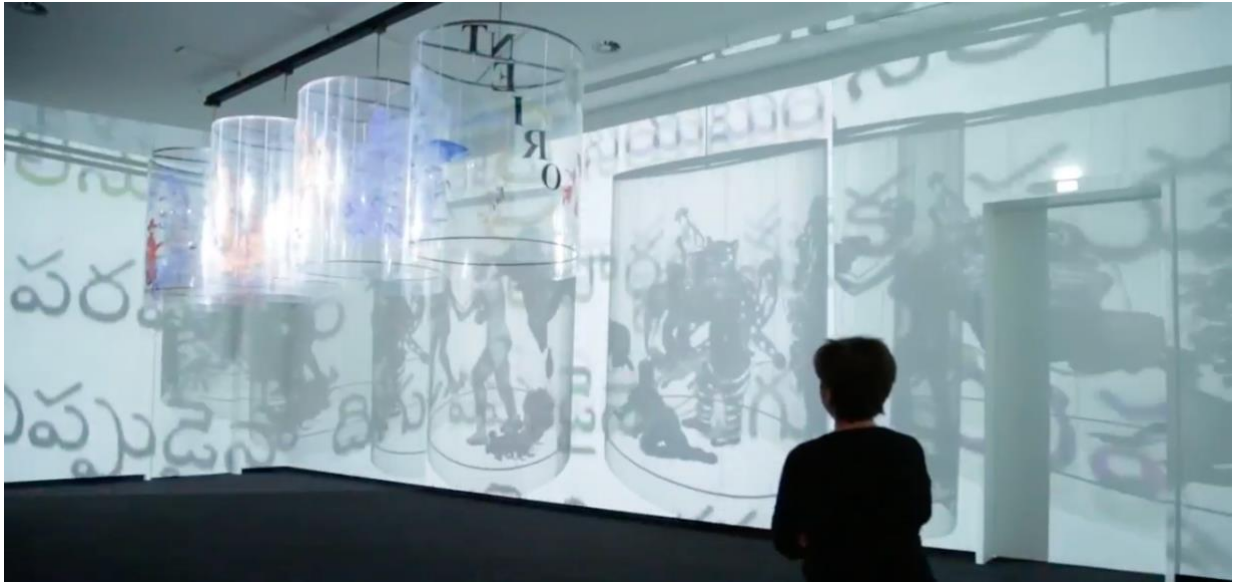


Image 19 Nalini Malani *Transgressions*, 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Image 20 Nalini Malani *Transgressions*, 2001[2017], video/shadow play, 7 minutes loop with sound, 3 video projectors, 3 DVD players, amplifier, 4 speakers, 4 reverse painted Mylar cylinders (150 x 420 cm), iron rods and rings, motors, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

Conclusion

These have been written to answer how Nalini Malani's *Transgressions* can be interpreted, both in the context for which it has been produced, namely for the exhibition *Unpacking Europe* in 2001, as for the exhibition in which it was presented to the audience in 2017, namely *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

In the discipline of art history there is a clear move towards a more inclusive canon with the shift towards a global art history. Nalini Malani's *Transgressions*, made in 2001, is a work that was first made in the same period this shift took place. The case of *Transgressions* provides an 'oriental' view of Europe, through appropriating Indian religious and mythical iconography and styles, to comment on the contemporary reality of globalization in India. In the moving stream of images that make up *Transgressions*, there are multiple narratives, that have more than a single interpretation. One way of interpreting them is in relation to the Indian context Malani is from, commenting on the contemporary reality of political and religious violence through using ancient imagery. A second would be to use the word 'ORIENT' on the fourth cylinder, and see the bulk of images as a representation of India as 'the orient' from a European perspective, in light of *Unpacking Europe*, the exhibition *Transgressions* was made for. Within the context of its exhibition at the Stedelijk, this seems sensible, as most of its visitors are simply not familiar with the Indian myths Malani references. Some of the figures that she uses show up in more than one of her works, turning her entire oeuvre into a cyclical narrative.

This way of storytelling in turn counters the teleological structure of Western history. Some figures refer to religious imagery, while others refer to subaltern figures and violent conflicts. By representing these conflicts as well as the people they affect, Malani brings visibility to the people who are at the losing end of this materialist progress, which resulted in ecological disasters and disappearance of indigenous languages, as referenced in *Transgressions*. This depiction of subaltern figures is something that occupied her work for a longer time, for example in the series *Hieroglyphs of Lohar Chawl*, which she made by memory, in an attempt to represent these people without engaging in a voyeuristic or generalizing act (Sambrani 2010: 26). Their depiction through the fleeting images of the video/shadow-play reflects the inability to fully represent their histories. While subaltern figures continuously feature in her work, another recurring theme is the violence inflicted upon

them. This violence stems for Malani from the Partition, as one of the many results of colonialism, and other violent conflicts that followed.

A concept the medium of the video/shadow-play is continuously occupied with is the structure of cultural memory. In a recent article on the Memories of Europe in the art from elsewhere, German-American memory scholar Andreas Huyssen considers that 'To be articulated in art they will need embodiment in objects and media: visual, verbal, musical. Their embodiment cannot be solid and fixed, nor can it be limited to one medium. Memorized events cannot be represented in a mimetic fashion. They are inherently haunted by the limits of representation' (Huyssen 2018). *Transgressions* is one of these art works to refer to multiple occurrences of violence through one medium, thereby functioning as a multidirectional medium of memory (Rothberg 2009) (Huyssen 2013). While providing a view of Europe, as was the idea of the contribution to *Unpacking Europe*, Malani points out to us that Europe cannot be seen on its own, separated from the influences it exerts over other parts of the world through colonialism, and its continued influence through globalization. By use of *Transgressions*' outdated techniques, Malani comments on the notion of progress as technological development, and instead invites us to reconsider, bringing up some of the negative effects globalization has had on India in the voice over.

The context of the Stedelijk, *Transgressions*' placement in a monographic retrospective is significant, not only because of the importance and recognition it awards to the artist, but also because of the feminist reading the display of Malani's work it invites. This contextualization within a feminist discourse was initiated by the artist herself, and serves the purpose of self-canonization, while showing how it interacts with this discourse. The contextualization of *Transgressions* with other works, particularly the mural *City of Desires* (1992/2017) contributes to a more overtly political reading of the work than it would on its own. This political reading, especially in relation to the concept of migration, is foregrounded through the display at the Stedelijk, by means of wall texts and audio tours. It is significant to note that this association with migration did not exist in the work's initial exhibition in 2001.

For the political message of *Transgressions* there are multiple interpretations possible to almost every aspect of the work, for example the choice of medium or the use of iconography, while the work resists any facile understanding. While engaging the visitor through the aesthetic experience it offers, *Transgressions* opens the way to the political message it spreads to its visitors, which is foregrounded through its display in *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*.

Walking through the *Stedelijk Base* in spring 2018, one can see a video work by Malani, *Utopia* (1967-1977) featured prominently in the museum's permanent display.¹¹

In *Utopia*, Malani uses the technique of double exposure to comment on one of her earlier films *Dream Houses* and shows how 'the model of Dream Houses is turned to a black and white graphic layer that hovers over the woman in the left projection, revealing a palimpsest of her innermost yearnings for a better future, and then floats away' (Pijnappel 2017: 104).

This addition by a non-Western artist in the display of the Stedelijk is interesting, because it is illustrative to how there literally space for non-Western artists, not only in temporary exhibitions, placed as a separate addition to the canon, but also in the museum's regular display. Malani's work is heavily influenced by the Western canon of art and literature, maybe even more then by the Indian context she made her work in, which she initially represents to its Western visitors. By employing her rich archive of stories, media, and images, Malani performs a political activism, while claiming its own recognition and adaption into the canon of art history.

¹¹ After renovation, the museum's regular collection was placed in the basement in a display called *Stedelijk Base*. In this display the visitor is given the option select their own favourite artworks, in a less guided visit. Malani's work is displayed in this context.



Image 21 Nalini Malani *Utopia*, 1969-76, 8mm film animation and 16mm film transferred to video (black and white and color, sound) 3:44 min. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Image List

- Image 1 *Nalini Malani: Transgressions, City of Desires [1992/2017]* Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017.
- Image 2 *Nalini Malani: Transgressions, Hyroglyphs of Lohar Chawl, Degas Suite, Penelope and Utopia*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017.
- Image 3 *Nalini Malani: In Search of Vanished Blood and All We Imagine as Light*. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017.
- Image 4 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 5 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 6 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 7: *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 8 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 9 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 10 *Nalini Malani, 1992, Hyroglyphs of Lohar Chawl*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 11 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 12 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 13 *Nalini Malani, 1998-99, Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay.
- Image 14 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 15 *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, 2017, installation photograph, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- Image 16 *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, 2017, installation photograph, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- Image 17 *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, 2017, installation photograph, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- Image 18 *Nalini Malani: Transgressions, City of Desires [1992/2017]* Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2017.
- Image 19 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 20 *Nalini Malani, 2001, Transgressions*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- Image 21 *Nalini Malani 1969-76, Utopia*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

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Annex I

Text of the Video/Shadow Play *Transgressions*:

It was the best, the best, the best of times
We had everything, everything, everything before us
We were all going direct, direct, direct to heaven

Vada Pao¹² Rupees three
Air time Rupees one forty-nine
Neemboo Pani¹³ Rupees three
Air time Rupees one forty-nine

Hello? Can you hear me?
Of course you can hear me
I speak Orange,¹⁴ I speak blue
I speak your speak just like you

Let me ask you a question
How many square feet of land would the Japanese get in Tokyo
with what they spend on that golf course in Goa?
In Goa, Goa, Gooooaaaaa

(CHILD'S VOICE)

And Amma,¹⁵ please send me to English school
And Amma, she really was no fool

Newspaper reports of rainforest dreams

¹² Street food snack

¹³ Lemonade

¹⁴ Mobile network operator

¹⁵ Mother

Made of seventy tons of Renew¹⁶ cream
Avon girl on the Amazon¹⁷
Skin so soft, Hot Cinnamon¹⁸
“Hi Honey, I’m here!,” She claps and calls
She’ll be paid in chickens and manioc flour
If the piranhas don’t get her as she falls

(CHILD’S VOICE)

And Amma, please send me to English school
And Amma, she really was no fool

Vegetarian or non? What turns you on?
Clucking potatoes with chicken genes
Or tomatoes swimming where fish have been?
Here come the seeds
They are Terminator seeds¹⁹
Big science watching over your food needs

(CHILD’S VOICE)

And Amma, please send me to English school
And Amma, she really was no fool

(CHILD’S VOICE)

And Amma, please send me to English school
And Amma, she really was no fool

So, so, so la ti do
So la ti do
I do, I do in high heel shoe

¹⁶ Beauty product

¹⁷ Reference to Malani’s artist book *23 Views of the Avon Lady in the Amazon* (1977), made in collaboration with Fiona Hall

¹⁸ Beauty product

¹⁹ GMO

I do, I do want to be like you

I orange, I blue

I do, I do

(CHILD'S VOICE)

And Amma, please send me to English school

And Amma, she really was no fool

(CHILD'S VOICE)

Hello? Can you hear me?

Of course you can hear me

(CHILD'S VOICE)

I speak Orange, I speak blue

I speak your speak just like you

I speak Orange, I speak blue

I speak your speak just like you

I speak Orange, I speak blue

I speak your speak just like you

I speak Orange, I speak blue

I speak your speak just like you

I speak Orange, I speak blue

I speak your speak just like you

Text by Nalini Malani and Nandini Bedi

From: (Bal 2016: 435)