

## Exposing Broken Promises: Nalini Malani's Multiple Exposures

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Artworks come to life when they are being seen. Exhibiting art inflects the artworks, showing them in a specific light. To place one artwork next to another makes a difference to both; the juxtaposition adds layers of meaning, based on the "side effect" of metonymy. The curation, thus, is part of the work, and vice versa. In this essay I comment on the art of Nalini Malani not only as politically and artistically unique, but I look specifically at those features in view of how the work is exhibited in the retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 2017. Her art asks for this, for its political force resides in being "site-responsive" as well as "viewer-affecting." Malani's work is, as has been noted frequently,

... intensely political, but this politics is not available to the viewer in terms of the straightforward declamation of manifesto. It appears instead in the form of embodied meaning, intrinsic to the artist's formal devices and offered up in immersive, visceral experiences where the viewing gaze and body is fully implicated in a transaction with the artist's provocations. (Sambrani, 2004, n.p.)

The challenge lies in "transaction," comparable to "translation"; as in "acting" or "carrying through," from one context to another. The artist Nalini Malani "translates" in more complex and multi-layered ways than one would think possible. This bears on the curatorial concept.

The French verb for "exhibiting" is "exposer." While the English verb simply means "showing," when the French one is anglicised — "exposing" — it remains perfectly understandable, but shifts towards multivalence. "To expose" can mean showing, but also explaining, as in presenting a discourse about something; baring, as in "laying bare" what usually remains hidden; and revealing, betraying, even denouncing, when showing what is best kept secret. This is where the political of "exposing" comes in, with "bringing to visibility" as its primary meaning. In Malani's words, "my endeavour is to make visible the invisible" (quoted in Devenport, 2004, n.p.). The noun "double exposure" refers to the technical mistake in analogue photography when the

photographer forgets to turn to the next frame and uses the same frame twice. This “mistake” and others of its kind can also be put to aesthetic use.

(1)

Exhibiting is exposing in the multiple sense of the word. With monographic (single-artist) exhibitions, one rarely reflects on the noun “exhibition” but focuses on the artist. Especially when the itinerary through the exhibition is pre-established as historically chronological — youthful works, maturity, and decline — and spatially linear, with a clear entrance and exit, the presentation is easy to read; the curation, as invisible as possible, presents the career of the artist. But when an exhibition is *both* more or less chronological, and at the same time non-linear, built on in-depth reflection on curating, the shape of the space, and the nature of the works that frequently recycle issues and images from earlier works, the many meanings of “to expose” are activated. This fits the “unity in diversity” (to allude to one of the exhibited works) of Malani's work perfectly. The curatorial concept is an “exhibitionary” semiotic.

For Malani's art, this translation of exhibiting into exposing as double or multiple exposure is more than a pun. The exhibition implies a vision of what exhibiting is, can be, and can do, in its mode of showing — as proposing a dialogue with — a multilayered oeuvre. To begin with the first double exposure: the exhibition has two beginnings. The first is a set of two wall drawings on the outside walls, erased during the show; hence, performative in their fugitive existence, which jars with their large scale; the ongoing process of their erasure, which challenges their status as enduring artworks; and the disturbing content that asks visitors to reflect on the ongoing violence, neglect, and misogyny in the world, both in general and specifically in border zones, such as the one resulting from the India-Pakistan Partition that has marked Malani and her art for life.

The second beginning is the first work seen once visitors enter the space itself. This work, a shadow play from 2007/11 in the collection of the Centre Pompidou, is a complex figuration of circular forms that foregrounds in its multiple circularity the disorienting, or rather, freedom-enhancing organisation of the exhibition. From there, one can go right, to the earliest

work (1969), or left, to the latest work from 2016, shown for the first time. Both options are equally valid, but the experiences they yield are very different.

### **On Memory, Drawing, and Erasing**

Malani draws figures of women on the exterior wall in charcoal. This medium, material, or tool (better: all three) is suitable for the job: as a material for mark-making, it facilitates making large-scale images, unlike a lead pencil; and it can be erased, although, confusingly and creatively, not without leaving traces. These traces are as much an integral part of the work as is the performance of erasure. They constitute a palimpsest of the actively disappeared drawings. The term "palimpsest" denotes both history, in keeping the past present, and layering, being "under" the surface, as its previous state. These concepts of palimpsest, trace, history in the present, and layering are always activated in Malani's work. They enact the title of the stop-motion video animation *Memory: Record/Erase*, part of the video sculpture *The Job* (1996), also in the exhibition. The noun "memory" sets the tone for the conflation of object and process. Briefly, one doesn't "have" memories, as if stored away, and alien to the present time; one "does" memories, in what I have called elsewhere "acts of memory." (2)

Through memory, the word "palimpsest" also alludes, indirectly, to the theatre as an art form. Theatre is both fugitive and conducive to remembrance, and in this sense it is the model for this exhibition and several of the individual works in it. Every time one remembers a theatrical performance after having seen it, it has changed, for the subject's own imagination participates in the newly created memory. The theatre as a metaphor for exhibition draws attention to this memorial aspect of the latter while being primarily spatial. Recording does not prevent the erasure that forgetting is. This dynamic between recording and erasing is better described as the palimpsestic layering of memories, both recorded and erased due to the nature of memory in this process-oriented view, accentuated by the erasure and the remaining traces. Recording and erasing are inextricably bound up together.

Malani devised the artistic strategy of *Erasure Performance* in 1992 with *City of Desires*, when in India the frame was still functioning to delimit and

isolate the artwork from “real life” and the white cube remained in place. When Malani started to do these “performative wall drawings,” the connection to the theatre also manifested itself when the public came to visit the gallery; it generated spontaneous interaction, conversations about the class and caste society, the neglect of artworks, and other topics close to Malani’s heart. This makes the erasure performance a paradigm of the dialogic nature of her art.

During the show, every day a member of the Centre Pompidou staff will publicly erase a part of the drawings. The traces of what was there before will be supplemented with labels containing written texts, which can also function as a pointer to Malani’s mastery of literature, especially poetry. While it emphasises the performative nature of art making and is thus part of the work, erasure as an act is far from innocuous. It is an attempt to make something invisible; a counter-exposure. But the traces witness to its impossibility, to the tenacious presence of the past in the present, which threatens the attempts by oppressive regimes to obliterate the past. Making invisible makes itself visible. Thus traces preserve continuity, including continuity of responsibility. Even social ills from a past long gone, of which, in a chronological idea of history, we can think ourselves innocent, do not absolve us from the responsibility of living in and perhaps benefitting from the aftermath; responsibility is not the same as (personal) guilt. (3)

In addition to challenging our tendency to construe history as linear, these wall drawings-in-erasure also defy that other stubborn preconception: the spatial binary between inside and outside. In his influential book *The Truth in Painting* (1987 [1978]) Derrida persuasively argues, in dialogue with Kant, that the frame of the picture in delimiting what is “in” the work of art also evokes its exterior, an ambiguity that is frequently elaborated by painters who crop elements of the image as if recalling that no image is a complete rendering of anything. The revolt against the white-cube ideology in the 1960s testifies to the artificiality of the inside-outside opposition. (4)

This untenable opposition emerges from a dualistic way of thinking. Briefly, this thought structure consists of three consecutive moves:

- it reduces complexity to simplicity, helping us to grasp important elements in the chaotic world, but also making us repress or forget the complexity;
- it further reduces the smaller number of possibilities to two single poles, which inevitably but unnecessarily end up in *opposition* to each other;
- it orders the two poles *hierarchically*, so that one pole is valued and the other is not.

For a keenly political artist such as Malani, this *de facto* deconstruction of the boundary between inside and outside not only undermines the delimitation of the exhibition space itself, connecting it to the other art in the museum, but also brings in the city outside, the country, and the world.

Because there is no limit to that *ripple effect*, it can pause at a more specific inside-outside boundary: the artificially drawn line between Pakistan and India, in the wake of which so much horrific violence has been committed. The remembrance of this violence is never absent from Malani's work. The drawings refer to women protagonists of stories set at the border between India and Pakistan, thus undermining the very idea of borders as lines, and putting in its place a concept of borders as spaces for negotiation. The white dots sprinkled over the figures counter another opposition, between (visual) access and the inhibition of it. They add a layer of visual modesty. As we will see, every aspect of this ephemeral work that constitutes the first beginning of the exhibition will recur "inside," in other works in the show. (5)

### **Entering the Circularity of Violence**

To begin with one such recurrence: memory — as the bond between recording and erasing — is also at the heart of the work that constitutes the second beginning, the boisterous shadow play *Remembering Mad Meg* into which one walks when entering the first space. "Into," not in front of: this preposition indicates the immersive relationship that pertains to the relationship between Malani's art and its viewers. "Boisterous," because it is uncontainable, both in its artistic manifestation and in its political and historical affiliations. It opposes the framed easel painting. In the exhibition

space it is the *spine* — the central work that, in (spite of) its centrifugal form, holds everything together — rather than the beginning. Installed between the two side wings of the space, it sets the tone of turbulence, of the movement of images, of sound, of circularity; and it posits the importance of painting. Filling all four walls of the first room with images, light, shadows and sounds, this work belongs to a genre or medium Malani has invented, full of references to older traditions: of painting itself, but also the pre-cinematic moving image as well as contemporary art of other political artists, yet unique in the way it is shaped under the hands and eyes of this artist. The first unique feature is both the memory and the mode of painting. And painting is at the heart of the work as a whole, its content and its form, indissolubly connected. But none of it is easel painting. (6)

Consisting primarily of eight of Malani's signature life-size cylinders of transparent Lexan, these are filled with images painted in reverse, according to the older *reverse glass painting* tradition that came to India from China. Thus the technique participates in the persuasion that history is part of the present. Videos of animations with round, circular forms are projected through the turning cylinders. They cast a combination of video and shadows on the walls. This makes the images both durable — since they are painted (record) — and fugitive (erase) — because they move and disappear constantly, while the images recall older figurations (memory). Circularity is a key element for this work, the other works, and the exhibition. Shadows embody the return of the past, the sad circularity of violence; its haunting presence. The shadow play with its multiple shadows of paintings and projections foregrounds the layering of images. The seemingly messy, but in fact highly calculated combination and calibration of these different media invites visitors to stand around, inside the turbulence, at first flabbergasted, then participating in the mad world of Mad Meg. This “programs” the exhibition; there is no other possible way to enter it.

And that participation throws us into several historical times at once. The (reverse) painting already superimposes two times: the late nineteenth century when this technique came to India from China; and the period since 1988 when Malani began painting in that old technique. But when we put the recurring shadowy figure of the running woman together with the title, we are

hurled back into sixteenth-century Europe, when Pieter Brueghel the Elder painted *Mad Meg* in protest against war around 1562. In his painting, the figure of Meg is too large to fit into the landscape, yet too small to completely take over. This ill-fitting matches Malani's figure as both central and ungraspable, accompanied, overlaid, and overshadowed by a multitude of other figures. The Flemish title of the Brueghel is *Dulle Griet*. This creates an issue of translation across time. In contemporary Flemish "dul" means the same as dull in English — boring, flat, gloomy, or daft and stupid. Such a state could be a symptom of trauma, but also of "subnormal" talent; what we now call with an American euphemism, "mentally challenged." Hence the translation "mad." (7)

In Renaissance Flemish "dul" meant "furious." The choice of "mad" overshadows Malani's act of multiple exposures, not only in the temporal (memorial) sense but also geographically. No one can cite the local specificity of violence as an excuse to forget the ongoing violence in the rest of the world; the circle also hints at the globe. The figure of Mad Meg stands for the aspect of Malani's relentless memory prodding that bridges the distance between places and times, in order to argue for an inextricable bond between the "global" and the "local" as circular. The difference between mad and furious also asks what has made her furious. And conversely, looking back from fury to mad: what has made her mad? This difference sets the entire painting in movement. What is she running from and towards? What is she setting out to do? In relation to the idea of madness and fury together, Malani sprinkles monsters among the figures painted on the cylinders.

The voice-over isn't reassuring. Adapted from Heiner Müller's play *The Task* from 1979, the voice says:

When the living can no longer fight, the dead will, with every heartbeat of the revolution flesh grows back on their bones, blood in their veins, life in their death. The rebellion of the dead will be the war of the landscapes, our weapons the forests, the mountains, the oceans of the world. I will be forest, mountain, ocean, desert, I — that is Africa, I — that is Asia.

Death and revolution, expressed by resurrection of destroyed lives — their “un-erasability”; war and the entire world. The short text expresses the idea of *Memory: Record/Erase* with a threatening inflection.

Within Malani's rich series of shadow plays, this one stands out in four respects. Here the projections that splice the images on the turning cylinders and cast their shadows are stop-motion animations, evoking four different short stories of subaltern women in line drawings. In the loop, coloured projected circles appear intermittently and interweave the images on the cylinders, making the shadows into superimpositions of paintings and drawings, bringing two of Malani's media together. Secondly, there is an emphatic presence of female figures in this work. The cylinders and the projections confront us with a whirlwind of such figures that flash memories of readings and photographs, paintings and drawings that feel like an archive of subaltern girls and women, including babies and umbilical cords. Young girls, caught in a history of violence and poverty, one with a leg blasted off by a mine, another, Alice-like, jumping rope as an innocent version of reiteration; a young homeless girl or protester peeing in public space, signifying poverty but also recalling the prestigious precedent of Rembrandt that we will see on the other side of the exhibition. Goya-like torture and execution; a monster morphing into a woman, or the opposite; the series goes on. The emphasis on “remembering” as an active verb in the progressive form leads, thirdly, to the interpretation of memory as active and ongoing. Here, the act of memory needed is close to the subject because it is that of the victim-participant, the person who is so deeply embedded in a culture of violence that she inevitably becomes an accomplice. Forgetting this is the deeper cause of the endless repetition of violence — the circular form is there to remind us of this. (8)

Victimisation, collusion, and forgetting together make up the state of human beings incarnated by the figure of Mad Meg. The work's title prompts us to remember this figure, on an ongoing basis. What must be remembered is not just how she was hurt but what she did as well — how her violation turned her into a “mutant,” another key figure in Malani's work, contaminated not only physically but also morally. The fourth distinguishing feature is the centrality of that singular figure emblematic of violence



undergone and perpetrated, brought to us in painting. No other shadow play has a "main character." This centrality is not based on the individualism of Western novels and films, but embodies the multidirectionality of both the layered narrative mode of the images and the movement between times and cultures that this central figure of Meg encourages.

These movements, turning between forms of violence, make up the turbulence of the work. As the spine of the show, the uproar contaminates both side wings. Between small narratives and the archival, between myth and modernity, and between visibility and the thought-image (my shorthand for political art), Meg, and the artist who created this shadowy version of her, wanders through the world's storage rooms collecting triggers for acts of memory. The figure raises this question about herself: is she mad, furious, or the one because of the other? If the latter, does violence lead to madness, and what has the way we look at her to do with that state? These are all aspects of the underlying question about what needs to be remembered, and how. Hence the ineluctably immersive installation.

The many female figures that populate this shadow play lead the way. Nurses in the madhouse of the world, they assist the formation of memory acts through their own historic features. They do this by means of suggestions for the transformation of memory from singular meanings to many tentacles, going in different directions in time and space — a multiplicity to which the form of the installation already hints. What binds these different acts of memory together is the *affective* ground on which they can be performed. Therefore, *place* contributes profoundly to the acts' effectiveness; and hence, a certain subtle site-responsivity in the negotiation of local and global memory sites, on behalf of "multidirectional" memory. Memory is necessarily heterochronic and heterotopic. "Multidirectional" means just that: extending the reach of political memory to other situations in time and space that need such memory, too. (9)

### **Circular Blindness**

From inside the spine of the exhibition, the left and right spaces become like the pages of a three-dimensional open book. This form gives the visitor freedom and expresses the openness of the artworks — they do not impose

meanings but offer them for reflection; in their multiplicity they cannot impose a single thought or a political one-liner. Their heads still spinning with the turmoil, visitors will turn either right or left through the openings in the walls — penetrating through the shadows-and-projections. On the right is a film diptych with the promising title *Utopia*, devoted to an idealistic but never realised housing project for “New Bombay” by India's greatest architect Charles Correa (1930–2015); Malani's first broken-promise work. Given the symbolic meanings of “left” and “right” in a world that is constantly pulled to the political right, I turn left first.

There, one is faced with another left-or-right decision. The statement about exhibiting, or exposing implied in this open-book set-up is: chronology is but one concept, or syntax, that allows visitors to follow how the artist has developed her work. Due to the circularity in Malani's work, elements of the early work return in later pieces; in his catalogue essay *Pijnappel* traces how the early works he recently discovered link to later works. The reverse also holds: if one turns left and left again — radically left? — many aspects of the most recent works, especially allusions to Correa's utopian project, will return towards the end of such an anachronistic visit, when the time-rebellious viewer ends where it all began. This circularity within the oeuvre is embodied by the predominance of circular movements in *Remembering Mad Meg*. It is also the circularity of history itself, where violence and destruction keep returning.

The title of the new work, *All We Imagine as Light*, is beautiful, poetic; but don't be fooled: its beauty entices visitors to sit down and take the time to contemplate it, but the work refers to current and recent horror in the allegedly democratic country of India, as an example of the circular recurrence of violence and destruction. In the context of the ongoing dispute (since the 1947 Partition) over Kashmir between Pakistan and India, police shoot (present tense) young, teenage protesters not with water guns or tear gas but with pellets, leaving many blind. It couldn't be more contemporary: Malani painted these works, six large tondi — again that circular form — and an eleven-panel painting — again that unity in diversity — in 2016/17 during the events of police violence that deprived innumerable teenagers of their

eyesight, for life. Teenagers who are not able to see the paintings made in their honour, to remember their horror. (10)

This room constitutes a theatre of images that do not move but show and solicit movement. Darkened and with the walls painted black, the paintings are lit to create bright interruptions of the darkness — literally as well as figuratively. This also makes them appear to protrude, coming forward from the darkness. In addition to the tension between flatness and depth within the images, this spot-lit presentation yields another level of depth. Seated, the viewer will want to see them all, and this creates the paradox of *immobility mobilised*. Eyes flit from one panel to the next, actively making sense of the unity in the diversity of figures, scenes, objects, and words. While viewers sit confronting the eleven panels, the large tondi on the side walls keep luring the eyes into more movement, making heads, even upper bodies move. There is, in addition, a recurrence of figurations as well as colour that activates the sitting spectator. Thus, it is a “reverse-cinema” where still images make viewers move, while also inviting still sitting. These works demand, and need, durational looking to achieve that “filmic view” that Pijnappel discusses. The combination of the cinematic and the stillness of the images as installed adds to the experience an exhilarating sense of freedom that galvanises; that electrifying effect is these works’ political force.

Each visitor will stop at certain panels, or details. Just one example. Imagine one is caught by *You Needed to Perfect Me*. The words inscribed follow the upper arc of the circle: “At a certain moment I lost track of you. You needed me. You needed to [gap] perfect me.” Like its neighbours, the image is both flat — a flatness enhanced by the shiny surface — and full of details that invoke three-dimensionality. But even the flatness itself is ambiguous; the sheen covers the image with reflections in which the viewer sees herself in depth, unable to disentangle herself from the scene yet also unable to get close. Thus we take our place in this history of the present. This is how the material participates in the effect of the image. The round form is also enhanced by the composition of the three primary figures: three women, one a young girl, one likely the mother who literally backs her up, and above, turned ninety degrees in another kind of movement, an older woman, grabbing her head as if in despair, her gesture causing the gap in the text.

They are all three close to the frame. Overlapping as in double exposure, these three figures with their grim facial expressions tell of separation (“I lost track of you”). “At a certain moment” is the historical, real version of the fictional fairy tale opening “Once upon a time”; the words speak of the instantaneousness of an event that has such durable consequences. It has no “happily ever after” ending.

The background foregrounds the three-dimensionality, an effect of depth in tension with the flatness that states the image's status *qua* image. On the left, a faraway mountainous landscape is separated from the foreground by a bluish plane that can be a desert or a sea; the latter possibility encouraged by the reflection of the mountain. Depth is created by scale. Somewhere on this plane, two smaller figures stand on a platform, leaning to the left, suggestive of classical sculpture — of Niobe, who lost her children to violence? At the edge of the frame, a pyramidal figure looks like a subaltern woman desperately clutching her head. On the right a structure of cubes recalls Malani's early film work *Dream Houses* that viewers who have turned to the right see first, as one wing of the diptych *Utopia*. The Escher-like cubes could signify houses — when seen with depth — or a clean tile floor — when seen as flat. The upper ones crush the woman figure below them. They seem to push against all three women. This stylistically different element produces one of the compulsions to move the eyes, for it recurs in other panels and in most of the tondi, such as the one with the ominous circular text “One day the streets of the world will be empty. From every [gap] tomb I'll learn all we [gap] imagine as light.” (11)

Here, the cubes are larger, and on the left overlap a bit with another form that the utopian housing project takes, of a more “finished” architectural structure. This we then also recognise in “Desire,” a work with no sentence but seemingly disconnected words: “desire, greed, mend, rupture, connect, power, hide, heal,” words that alternate separation and connection. There, the structure is also on the left, stretched out. It is on the right side in the tondo *Your Perfect Enemy*. This architectural idealism that inaugurated modernity in India and that was the subject of Malani's earliest animation keeps rearing its head, in protest against its broken promise. Once noticed, visitors will move from one to the other and, in the process, see the figures to which the

architecture is a background of disappointment and despair. In *You Needed to Perfect Me* the allusion takes on historical duration when we see in front of the cubes a subaltern woman on her knees; below, another sculptural shape might invoke the Descent from the Cross, a Pietà or another scene of a mother holding an adult dead or wounded — or blinded — child.

This description leaves unclear who the “I” and “you” are in the personalising text. This must remain unspecified, so that the many in that situation of separation can all find symbolic shelter and recognition in this image, and its neighbours. The head of the middle woman is exactly in the centre of the circle, and is circular itself. It looks a bit like a cat, an animalistic tendency that Malani insinuates in other works as well, expressing connections among living beings far removed from the politics that hurt these figures so. She looks sideways and up, as if addressing that “you” she needed to perfect; or as if “listening to the shades” of what she has been expelled from. She may be listening to Cassandra, the doomsayer to whom no one paid heed. A child perfecting her mother, by the demands children make on their parents? The child that the middle figure is protecting has such an old face, looking in the same direction. The different position of the older woman expresses an irremediable separation by means of the turn of the tondo that, due to its large diameter, becomes a wheel of fortune, ready to spin. When mother and daughter become separated, this lifelong learning process of mothering is halted, destroyed. But the verb “to perfect” can also refer to the utopian housing project symbolised by the cubes with their neatly delineated three-dimensionality built up of blue, ochre, and white. The “losing track” alludes to the broken promise of a humane existence. (12)

Like the other ones in this room, this painting speaks of violent separation, the destruction of family bonds, belying the promises of peace (after Partition) and of a way out of sub-human existence (the housing project). This denunciation the work utters is all the more forceful as the “I”–“you” discourse and the accumulation of women figures speak a highly personal, intimate language. Like the flat-3D dynamic, its subtle palette of, primarily, ochre and blue in all their nuances gives expression to both the beauty of the painting and the confinement of the figures, locked up in a circular, no exit situation. This is the force of Malani's political art. It is not

about a particular political cause but produces an affective intensity that, when ruminated for some time, makes it possible to live the beauty and see the horror, as well as vice versa: beauty as glue.

### **A Tragedy of Errors**

The theatre effect in this wing becomes stronger as we move on. At the other side of the partition (*sic*), the presentation zooms out a little in order to literally show the form of the theatre that underlies the exhibition. *Hamletmachine* (2000) consists of three standing screens set up as a triptych, and a fourth formed by a bed of salt flat on the floor. On all four, images are projected. The floor in front of the visitors, a surface painted in shiny black, looks like dark reflecting water. They sit on benches placed in a curve, ordinarily the stage. In one of Malani's typical materialisations of the past, this alludes to Gandhi's salt march on March 12, 1930, a non-violent protest against British unfair taxation on salt. The pain and destruction evoked in the images and the voice-over bind Gandhi's non-violence to the subsequent violence, like the utopian housing project to its failure. Due to the white, the bed of salt seems elevated, an island floating on the dark water. On this bed a fourth moving image is projected. (13)

The images show the butoh dancer Harada Nobuo executing the *Surya Namaskar*, a prayer to the Sun god. Pijnappel gives an excellent sense of the layered video images: "a man crouching, before rising slowly, mysteriously, into a projection of himself standing" and

[P]ortraits of fascist leaders bleed over the body, moving the visual cadence into a cathartic highpoint from which emerges the large deformed face of a woman howling. The face, distorted in pain, is "eaten" by masculine faces that lie beneath her skin (55).

Some images of the dancer's face, some sections of his body, are overlaid with seemingly abstract stains of red. This makes his face, when it appears, look threatening at times, like a tragic clown at others. With eyes closed and mouth overshadowed, he looks entirely disempowered, dehumanised, like a mutant. At other times, the red looks like flames, burning the body parts up. While the images show body parts overlaid with stains

and flames — images of the religious riots of 1992 and 1993 — the voice-over of a woman performer reads painful passages from Heiner Müller's 1977 *Hamletmachine*. Like *The Task*, this short postmodern play invokes issues of feminism, ecology, and violence. The dancer's body becomes the canvas, where the multiple video projections transform him into different personages, including that of a woman.

In an article on Malani's video works, Ashish Rajadhyaksha evocatively describes the effect of the images that spill out of the frame, are slowed down or sped up, with layers that insinuate thick, pollution-produced viscous matter looking poisonous (2003). The layering becomes a medium in itself, detaching the image from its realistic bodily backdrop. The material becomes a character, Rajadhyaksha suggests. In a kind of *reverse videography*, I'd add that the dancer's body, cut up and at times inflamed by the rapidly moving, sinister orange-red overlays, loses its character function and instead, acting as a canvas, becomes an embodiment of historical disaster. Materiality and character function switch places, when the violence overwrites the human. This can be seen as "reverse videography," analogous (but reversed, coming forward) to Malani's reverse painting technique.

Becoming three-dimensional, these images are projected very large. Through the conjunction of scale and movement they bring in associations with Nazi concentration camps as with the violence following the destruction of the Babri mosque; two forms of fanatic "othering" that have marked world history indelibly. The chronology-destroying leaps through history are not a flattening compression of time but a warning concerning the circularity of ever repeated violence. This is how the work's visual and material features meet Müller's evocations of disaster, ecological, and otherwise.

The reversals and circles explain the title of this section of my visit-essay. In a classical comedy of errors, the misapprehensions concern persons, and Shakespeare wrote some of those, too. Between Müller's East Germany and Malani's India, the abducted text fragments at times seem to be misdirected, but the horror is that they are not; violence is everywhere. Instead of a comedy of errors, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a tragedy, and so is Müller's text, which does not quote directly from Shakespeare yet alludes to the play constantly. Malani's video play is a tragedy, too. And so is the machinic

destruction of life to which the work's title alludes. There are plenty of errors in this work and its pre-texts, but none of it is comical. "Errors" is a euphemistic, softer word for broken promises, deception of the people, and violent repression of any attempt to protest — starting with Gandhi's salt march, not ending with the youngsters shot blind.

And the viewers? As in *All We Imagine as Light*, they sit in semi-darkness. But whereas there, the still images solicit movement, here the opposite happens. While the images move tempestuously, the viewers sit nailed to the benches, I imagine, for the daunting black sheen and the life-size standing screens, doubled by their reflections on the floor, are as sticky as glue, and the sound, relatively loud, does nothing to assuage the effect of that stickiness. It is as if the video images also move in three-dimensionality, threatening to contaminate the viewer. Contamination is itself contagious, in an artistic feedback loop. This affectivity, rather than the reassuring idea of cleansing, might be what Aristotle meant with his concept of *catharsis*. The theatre, as a space one can enter and temporarily inhabit, sharing it with others; as a fictional art form that allows fantasising without danger; and as a form that easily elicits identification but can also repel is here turned into a hotbed of images that do not seduce into facile emotional effect but are nevertheless "sticky." In the context of this exhibition, the theatre is both "just" one element, and one that casts its shadow over all the other works, binding the imagination and the cruel reality together. In its frantic movement and loud sound, *Hamletmachine* works like a theatre of tragic errors, making us feel the madness of the world.

### **The Archaeology of Class**

Traversing *Remembering Mad Meg* again to reach the right wing of the exhibition, the right-or-left choice comes up again. In the first room, that exhibits the diptych projection *Utopia*, consistent in my reverse chronology and itinerary I turn left. The contrast between the atmosphere of the *Hamletmachine* room and the one I reach, is staggering; yet they both pertain to the theatrical imagination. This room is both full, with a variety of works, and quiet in atmosphere, compelling a meditative mood. This is not to say that the horror evoked in the other spaces has receded. It has simply



taken another rhythm, temper, and form. The room looks like a neat bourgeois living room, but with the previous works still on our mental retina, this is emphatically a fictional, theatrical décor. Such living rooms pretend to a “neutral” look — just intimacy and comfort; cosy. But “neutral” is equivalent to blind. In addition to the fact that so many people don't even have a roof over their heads, let alone the luxury of that family room, the décor is deceptive.

Can one live in such a class-blind living room? The works here suggest one cannot; at least, not without nightmares -- unless the older histories of class — its archaeology — are taken on board, among the period lamps, armatures, and seating. Sculptures, paintings, video works furnish the room with the ambiguities of the class/caste society Malani works in, on, and out of. In such a room one expects paintings, photographs, perhaps a sculpture. We get it all. \*\*\* changes from here:

Continuing clockwise, we reach the wall decorated with a gilded picture frame, bringing in the late nineteenth century. In it, the video starts with an animation of the text *Unity in Diversity* over a painting that recalls another broken promise — the foundational one. That painting, *Galaxy of Musicians* by Ravi Varma (1848–1906) with its harmonious orchestra of Indian women from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, has become an emblem of the post-colonial slogan “unity in diversity” — the primary broken promise. The rich attire of the women and their orientalist inflection are not auspicious for the harmony that the composition promises. And its use at the World Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1883, where the philosopher Swami Vivekananda addressed the danger of orthodoxy in religion, turned out wasted when the 2002 Gujarat atrocities against the Muslim minority were condoned by the same state that had promised modernity in precisely those terms. (15)

*Unity in Diversity* (2003) brings illusory harmony and violent dissidence as the reality to the living room. The painting in its gilded frame is overwritten by video footage that brings the depicted women to life, showing their anxiety, alternating with cruel micro-violence to brains and intestines. The first woman opens her eyes when sounds like gun shots resound. The animation of the painting and the overlaid footage never present the women all together; let

alone in harmony. A male voice reads a letter from his deathbed, giving back the impossible task of organising democracy. A child's voice begins saying "I am the Angel of Despair." A long, endless scream. The women who were earlier carrying musical instruments now march with rifles over their shoulders. The end, spoken in Hindi by the same narrator, utters the most unspeakable horror: "They poured petrol in the mouth of a six-year-old and threw in a lit match — he blew up like a bomb". A really cosy living room.

On the same wall, on either side of the gilded frame, small framed photographs of Nehru and Gandhi match the living room ambience quite well. One would hang framed pictures — of weddings, family gatherings, children — but when the pictures are of politicians, the privacy of the room is emphatically broken; its harmony impossible. On the next wall two large paintings of monstrous women in dark grey monochrome propose the future of the ecological disaster as the inevitable outcome of the hysterical capitalism we have reached in the world. The figures of women are distorted and overlaid. They

... oscillate between opacity and transparency, embodiment and erasure. They call attention to the contingent, mutable, unstable territories within which inscriptions of the female body and/or its fragments and vestiges engage. (Chadwick, 2010: 15).

In the one, machines completely encapsulate her body, which becomes a production site, deprived of life. Her eyes are blinded, her genitals taken over by an electrical socket. The other, against a background of a grid structure resembling both a beehive and bubble plastic, seems to preserve a remembrance of life. Although the woman is flattened by structure and black paint looking like dirt, a thin yellow line-drawing of a girl skipping rope brings in another time. The girl's face is turned towards the socket, but downcast as if in refusal. We remember this figure from *Remembering Mad Meg*. We might consider it a self-portrait of the girl who, at age twelve, discovered both art and the horrors of the world, especially the relentless denigration of women. The paintings are made of fabric dye on milk cartons, which embody the poisoned milk powder dumped onto Indian babies after the Chernobyl disaster. Again the material carries the political thrust as much as the

figuration. And the lesson the country (un)learned: it enhanced its own nuclear testing programme. *Cosy*. (14)

This is also foregrounded in the video sculpture *The Job*, oversized as well as otherwise misplaced for a harmonious living room; a three-dimensional mutant. This work is placed near the following wall. We see a patient lying on a metal hospital bed. Coming closer it turns out to be a stuffed puppet with a monitor for a head, on which the animation *Memory: Record/Erase* loops endlessly, as her memory membrane. This work also undermines the illusion that a living room is “private” (*cosy*). Behind the bed hang five bell jars with transparent gloves containing the basic elements of an Indian meal: rice, lentils, (Gandhi-)salt, turmeric, chili powder. These simple and cheap ingredients state the need and the possibility to feed all. But no: in front of the bed is a vinyl text on the floor, the heart of the related theatre production from 1996 that was based on a short story by Bertolt Brecht: BY THE SWEAT OF THY BROW SHALT THOU FAIL TO EARN THY BREAD. What God in Genesis 3:19 inflicted on man as punishment was, in fact, too optimistic concerning women.

On the fourth wall of this room, facing the mutants, hangs a two-part work that embodies a multi-layered act of memory. *Excavated Images* (1997) deploys multiple materials such as pencil-drawing, painting, and reverse print, applied on the two sides of an old, worn quilt cover that the artist's grandmother brought when they left Karachi in 1947 in the wake of Partition, to become life-long refugees in India. The quilt was used to carry more of the meagre belongings they were able to bring to Bombay. Materially, it thus begun its second life, and would remain a tool of memory. After the AIDS quilt begun in San Francisco in 1987, the merging of private and public life that the quilt as form so poignantly embodies has become a topos in memorial art. But the material support of Malani's work is an even stronger instance of an act of memory performed by matter. This quilt had been made for, and used, for the most private place in the home, the bedroom. Bringing it along was the grandmother's act of memory, insuring that that past so violently eliminated from their lives would still remain present. (16)

Malani used this object to “excavate”, by means of re-painting and re-drawing, and re(verse) printing fragments of history in images and

descriptions of the violence committed at that key traumatic moment and in its wake. This is Malani's way of bringing, in her turn, her grandmother – and her mother, herself and her elder daughter – together in a densely-tangled present that cannot live without history and future both. To further emphasize the life in and of materiality, the tools of embroidery are alluded to; tools to make, materially, such images as would preserve history. The choice of material, the insistence on materiality, and the deployment of such an intensely private support as a used quilt, to recall political violence along with the lives of her own family, bring Malani's other acts of memory holding fast to the history of violence that inhabit this room, inevitably more strongly into the private realm. Thus, this work intimates that all those other historical events were always-already such invasions of privacy that the distinction completely collapses. With this work, then, the living room as exhibitionary form gains even more poignancy.

### **Into the Abstract for Political Force**

Sneaking out of this phony living room, the exit of the theatre leads to a back alley, to morph into experimental contemporary street theatre. There the harsh reality of the lives of people who never get to go to the theatre appears. Once one enters *Alleyway, Lohar Chawl* (1991), one walks into an installation that configures a dirty alley. This work, arguably Malani's first shadow play, stages subaltern inhabitants of the streets of the neighbourhood where she had a studio for over twenty-five years. She thus seeks to give agency to the invisibility of the subaltern population. The shadow play arranges the sheets with life-size drawings of some of the inhabitants one after another, with enough distance between them to allow the visitor to enter the labyrinthine space. Its zigzagging alleyway is modelled after the small poorer streets of the area of Lohar Chawl. Rembrandt's etching *Peeing Man* figures among them, in nearly full body length. (16)

The experience of this shift in scale, time, and social environment, from upper class to subaltern and the lowest caste, enhances the "catharsis" of the theatrical exhibition. This is a good mood to enter the final room. This room brings together where it all began: the themes, motives, and materialisations we have encountered. Regardless of the sequence of the visit, the exhibition

begins and ends with the double, indeed multiple exposure of broken promises.

The main subject of the next and last two rooms is a body of works which were made in Bombay and Paris in the period 1969–1976. They explore the potential of abstraction for political reflection. The main form this abstraction addresses is nascent modernism in India. Three short black and white films show different forms of abstraction suitable for bringing up delicate issues in a forceful way. *Still-Life* visualises without showing it, the potential sex life of a woman we do not get to see; only her things, as if she and her partner have just left the room to do who knows what. The descriptive film only hints at action; it never shows it. In film, description only is considered abstract, especially when we see only things, taking on a vibrant but invisible temporality. In *Onanism* we do see an active body of a woman filmed from above, but not the actual act her convulsions suggest. The bed cover is striped horizontally in shades of grey. This horizontality is interrupted by the vertical figure of the woman's outline in black. And *Taboo* shows actions of weavers that leave the question open what the taboo concerns, until one realises that only men do the weaving. Resonating with the abstract structure in *Onanism*, it ends with a shot of a loom where the weft cuts across the long warp threads, in a manner that brings it back to the abstract, now signifying the women who may not touch the loom, bringing them together with the women not shown making love or masturbating. These daring hint-only films from 1969, made when the artist started out without any teaching in filmmaking, already feature the delicate balance between figuration and abstraction that so vigorously characterises her later work. (17)

It seems fitting that the early photographs based on collage and double exposure are truly abstract. Made without camera in the darkroom, by covering the photo paper for accurately planned time periods with different densities of translucent paper, exposing it to the light of the enlarger, these photographs insist on the value of abstraction as promise. For, as Gilles Deleuze proposed (1987), and John Rajchman explained (1998), abstraction is not the rejection or avoidance of form but the *promise* of new forms. Abstraction emanates intensity instead of expression; abstract art bristles with unknown and unseen possibilities. These go from the work to the viewer, and

back; they are by definition relational. Only when one is blind to the habitual is one able to suspend already known forms. (18)

This view of abstraction prepares us for the experience of the last work, the diptych *Utopia*. It is made up of two films, one abstract animation and one showing a woman from the back, both filmed in 1976. As if looking out over what, in 1969, was an abstract yet evocative animation of cubes representing Charles Correa's housing project. In his essay for this catalogue Pijnappel describes this much better than I can:

By using double exposure, the housing model of *Dream Houses* is turned into 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.

By means of that double exposure "mistake," Malani succeeds in giving a near abstract image that keenly political and affectively intense impact that became her signature, described by Sambrani as quoted earlier. She thus makes good on the view that abstraction, according to Deleuze, is not turning away from the world. On the contrary:

For this *world* is what abstraction is all about: abstraction as the attempt to show — in thought as in art, in sensation as in concept — the odd, multiple, unpredictable potential in the midst of things of other new things, other new mixtures.  
(Rajchman, 1998: 75)

These words sum up why this exhibition is so forceful in its artistic-political thrust — two qualifiers that cannot be separated. Not many artists succeed so densely-intensely in demonstrating this. It is, also, why I began turning to the left, to the newest work. But the earliest work, in its abstraction, circles or spirals forward with its promises.

\*This article was written with the support of a Holly Fellowship at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. I thank Rachel Burke for her helpful comments.

## Notes

(1) To avoid unnecessarily lengthening this essay while complying with academic integrity requirements, I refer to my earlier work rather than reiterating those arguments. The concept of "site-responsivity" was coined by Joanne Morra (2017). It modifies the old concept of site-specificity into a more dialogic one. The phrase "viewer-affective" is my shorthand for the affective performativity of the work. The word "mistakes" is developed in my book on the cinematic in Munch, Flaubert and my own video work (2017, ch. 1). On the artistic use of "double exposures" as a concept through which to analyse curation and exhibition, see my 1996 book, especially the introduction.

(2) On palimpsest, especially in relation to psychoanalysis, see Derrida (1978). The transitive use of the verb "to disappear" alludes to the victims of the dictatorship in Argentina, called the *desaparecidos*. On memory as active, see the collective volume *Acts of Memory* (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, eds).

(3) The seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza proposed this distinction. For an accessible presentation of the relevance of Spinoza's thoughts for today, see Gatens and Lloyd (1999). The artist created this strategy also in protest against the destruction, caused by neglect, of the fresco work by artists of Nathdwara. On this, see Bal (2016: 30), based on the 2014 three-partite exhibition in New Delhi. See the monumental book published for that exhibition (Malani, 2015).

(4) The best-known study of that revolt is Brian O'Dogherty's *Inside the White Cube* (1999).

(5) On borders as spaces instead of lines to which much of Malani's work is devoted, see Boer (2006). As chairman of the boundary committee, the British lawyer Sir Cyril Radcliffe drew the borders of the new nations, India and Pakistan. Little did he know...

(6) On the shadow play, see Huyssen (2013). For a description of the shadow play as a genre and an analysis of five major works in the genre, see my book (2016). Some of the ideas below have been taken from the chapter on this work (327–93). On the pre-cinematic experiments with moving images, see Hecht (1993) and Crary (1990), and for Malani's early "cinematic" works, Pijnappel in this catalogue. For a useful anthology of essays on art using the moving image, sadly omitting Malani's unique medium, see Leighton (2008).

(7) For a solid iconographic reading of Brueghel's painting, see Sullivan (1977). Unfortunately, this study explains away the incongruities of the work that, in view of Malani's recycling of it, are of crucial importance. That the painting contains a protest against war is my choice among possible interpretations.

(8) On *In Search of Vanished Blood* and the politics of memory, see the highly illuminating articles in Malani (2012), and the documentary video on a DVD included in this book by Payal Kapadia.

(9) On affect as a motor of art-in-interaction, see Van Alphen (2008). On how form participates in bringing trauma to visibility, Brinkema (2014). Malani's later shadow play *In Search of Vanished Blood* from 2012, exhibited at dOCUMENTA(13) elaborates these questions differently, and raises the issue of trauma, which underlies this work as well. *In Search of Vanished Blood* speaks to the traumatic situation produced by extreme violence, and made worse by the indifference of bystanders and the invisibility of traces. See Davoine (2014) on the bond between violence and madness. On multidirectional memory, see Rothberg (2009).

(10) Information from the artist. The work in this room was inspired by the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali (2010, especially the poem "Farewell," 175–77). For background on the ongoing Kashmir conflict, a border dispute between India and Pakistan, and now also China, see the collection edited by Singh Sidhu et al. (2006).

(11) The words "tomb" and "imagine" receive a pause; a verbal stop-motion animation.

(12) The phrase "listening to the shades" hints at Malani's 2008 artist book (with Robert Storr) inspired by Christa Wolf's writing on Cassandra. In addition to crossing temporalities, Malani frequently mixes mythological elements from Indian and Greek

traditions. For good reasons: for an in-depth study of the connections and differences between these traditions, see McEvilley (2002).

(13) This elevation effect of what I call colour perspective, "invented" by Caravaggio, is operative throughout the room with *All We Imagine as Light*. On baroque colour perspective, see Louis Marin (1995 [1977]).

(14) On Malani's early political and artistic awakening, see Pijnappel in this catalogue.

(15) The date of the painting is unknown; before 1883.

(16) On the cultural significance of the AIDS quilt and other acts of political-private memory, see Sturken (1997).

(16) Lack of space compels me to refer to my book for further descriptions and analyses of this powerful work (2016: 288–93). On the agency of invisibility in connection to subaltern lives, see Peeren (2014). Rembrandt's small etching is from 1633; collection Teylers Museum Haarlem.

(17) On these films, see Pijnappel's essay in this catalogue.

(18) On these photographs, see Duplaix's essay in this catalogue.

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