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REFRAMING ART HISTORY'S ARCHIVE: SELF-AS-OTHER AND OTHER-AS-SELF IN AMRITA SHER-GIL'S AND PUSHPAMALA N.'S CITATIONS

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ABSTRACT:

In this article I analyze two self-portraits by women artists that question art history's power structures by citing canonical paintings by men from the discipline's archive. In *Self-portrait as Tahitian* (1934) Hungarian-Indian woman artist Amrita Sher-Gil depicts her own half-nude body, while referencing the (in)famous *Tahiti* paintings by Paul Gauguin, underscoring the various complexities of the global trajectories of modernist artistic practice. The photograph *Lady in Moonlight* (2004) casts Pushpamala N. as the idealized lady of an 1898 Raja Ravi Varma oil painting. I argue that through a double bind position (Spivak) taken by the artists, *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* and *Lady in Moonlight* make gender visible in art history's archive and display its structuring power in canonical logics. Through a citational move, the artists place themselves simultaneously in- and out-side art history, and posit not only the self as other, inherent to any self-portraiture, but also the Other as self.

KEYWORDS: Other; Self; Double Bind; Art Historical Canon; Self-portrait; Citation.

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1. Introduction

In 2018 the *New York Times* declared Hungarian-Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941) to be "no longer overlooked" (Mzezewa 2018). *UNESCO* had called 2013, the centenary of her birth year, as the "year of Amrita Sher-Gil" (Mzezewa 2018); *Tate Modern* hosted an exhibition of her works in London, calling her art "a true fusion of east and west" (Coxon 2007). The retroactive canonization of artists who have been marginalized in traditional art history, as well as attempts to introduce socio-political and identarian issues to the discipline, are not new. However, the traditional canon of mostly white European male artists remains a tenacious configuration within art history, which traditionally gathers and produces "genius" artists in a linear narrative of progress. From a feminist perspective, critiques of the canon solidified with Linda Nochlin's famous essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1973 [1971]). A postcolonial perspective emerged with (among others) Partha Mitter's *Much Maligned Monsters* (1977) and Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (2019 [1978]). Further disputes on the imperialist foundations of art history came to the fore with key exhibitions in the 1980s and 1990s.[1] To some, my attention to the *canon* might therefore appear somewhat outdated, a repetition from old debates that started in the 1970s. However, I (re-)enter this discussion today from the context of the so-called "global turn" in art history.[2] Recent political calls for the decolonization of institutions (universities, museums) and disciplines (philosophy, art history) – intensified by the international momentum for anti-racist activism garnered by the *Black Lives*

[1] I refer here to the MoMA's *Primitivism* exhibition (1984) and the Centre Pompidou's *Magiciens de la Ter*re (1989), as well as the criticism these approaches received and the counter discourses they prompted, like Rasheed Araeen's "Our Bauhaus Others' Mudhouse" (1989).
[2] See for example: *Atlas of World Art* (Onians 2004); *Is Art History Global?* (Elkins 2007); *Contemporary Art and the Museum: a Global Perspective* (Weibel and Buddensieg 2007); *A World Art History and Its Objects* (Carrier 2008); *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Zijlmans and Van Damme 2008); *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Belting, Buddensieg, and Araújo 2009); *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* (Belting, Birken, Buddensieg and Weibel 2011); *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Davis 2011); *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Belting, Buddensieg and Weibel 2013); as well as discussions in "Art History after Globalization: Formations of the Colonial Modern" (Mercer 2013); "The Worlding of the Asian Modern" (Clark 2014); "Whose Global Art (History)? Ancient Art as Global Art" (Colburn 2016); "Art History and the Global: Deconstructing the Latest Canonical Narrative" (Joyeux-Prunel 2019).

Matter movement – have brought the *canon* yet again into sharper focus and underlined its exclusionary nature.[3]

In *Self-portrait as Tahitian* (1934) Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941) depicts her own half-nude body, while referencing the women depicted in the (in)famous *Tahiti* paintings by Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). For an art historian from the Global North first encountering the painting, it presents an unexpected, defiant opposition to Gauguin's objectifications of women of color; a question posed by a woman artist from a country still under colonial rule at the time. In the photograph *Lady in Moonlight* (2004), Pushpamala N. (b. 1956) makes a comparable gesture by citing an oil painting made by Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) in 1898, and casting herself in the role of the idealized "native" woman. In this article, I analyze these two self-portraits, looking at both artists and their respective painted and photographed images. Made by women from different generations of artists from India (modern and contemporary), I investigate their potentiality in challenging the gendered discursive systems of art history.[4]

Sher-Gil counts as an important voice in modernism in India and underwent a process of canonization since the 1940s. Her mixed parentage (Jewish Hungarian and Punjabi Sikh) and migratory movements in her life (born in Budapest, growing up between India and Europe and having studied in Paris) have rendered her a much-researched artist in locating multiple modernisms, as well as an icon for feminist art historians. *Self-portrait as Tahitian* was painted in Paris, just after Sher-Gil's education at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* from 1930–1933. Her reference to Gauguin underscores the complexities of doing justice to the intercultural movements of modernist artistic practice within art history's Eurocentric folds: a Hungarian-Indian woman artist in conversation with Gauguin becomes difficult to place within a traditional narrative of modernism centered in Europe, and additionally within any national border that the discipline remains structured around. Pushpamala N. is a contemporary feminist mixed-media artist. Her work was included in the exhibition *Global Feminisms* (2007) at the Brooklyn Museum New York, which specifically aimed to move beyond Eurocentric narratives of

[3] *Black Lives Matter* started as a decentralized movement in 2013 to protest racist police brutality in the United States. When George Floyd was murdered by police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020, demonstrations on a global scale ensued to protest racism in its various forms in different societies.
[4] This article is partly based on a chapter of my 2020 RMA thesis "In/Outside Art History. Self-portraiture and the Canon: Re-reading for Self and Other", Leiden University, supervised by Prof. Dr. C.J.M. Zijlmans.

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feminism and presented itself as "the first international exhibition exclusively dedicated to feminist art from 1990 to the present." ("Global Feminisms" 2007). In the series *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs* (2000–2004), executed in collaboration with British photographer Clare Arni, Pushpamala emphasizes the performative aspects of gender by taking on a multiplicity of stereotypical gender roles in front of the camera. Sher-Gil and Pushpamala's work bear witness to the place of woman in the (anticolonial) nationalist project. The symbol of the gendered body to represent the nation recurs in many nationalist ideologies, and is in India epitomized by the figure of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India): woman as goddess as nation.[5] The dynamic of the "native woman of genius", as art historian Geeta Kapur (1997) phrases it, is expressed by Sher-Gil through a romantic, modernist vision and a primitivist inclination to paint rural women upon her return to India, after painting *Self-portrait as Tahitian*; and by Pushpamala with a quintessential postmodern approach that displaces any "authenticity" to be ascribed to the native woman as national symbol.

In its hegemonic "mythic" structure, the canon casts women in the role of *object*, *model* and *Other*,[6] and men in the roles of *subject*, *artist* and *Self* (Pollock 1999): as Pushpamala and Sher-Gil take on the roles of *both* subject and object, artist and model, Self and Other, this gendered structure is brought to the fore. By citing canonical paintings by men from the discipline's archive, Sher-Gil and Pushpamala question art history's power structures through the specific subject-object relation of the "double bind", as articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In what follows I will first briefly look at critiques of the art historical canon, how it could be seen as archive and its structuring devices. Then I will turn to *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* and *Lady in Moonlight* and the respective western[7] modernist and national Indian canonical paintings they cite, to explore how these self-portraits

[5] In the case of China, see for example Prasenjit Duara's "The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History in Modern China" (1998); in the case of the visual culture of Bharat Mata see Sumathi Ramaswamy's *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (2010).

[6] Throughout this article I make use of psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory, in which the capitalized Other has slightly different meanings. While the lower case other refers to the projection of the ego in the imaginary, the Other in psychoanalytic theory refers to radical alterity with which no identification is possible, inscribed in the symbolic order. For Jacques Lacan woman is always Other. Lacan's work has been inspirational as well as heavily criticized by feminist philosophers like Luce Irigaray (2010 [1974]) and Hélène Cixous (1976). In the postcolonial writings of, for example Edward Said (2019 [1978]), Gayatri Spivak (1986) and Frantz Fanon (2004 [1963]), the Other refers to the colonized in colonial structures of thinking against which the Self of the colonizer is defined.

[7] I choose to use lower case when referring to 'the west' as geographical and epistemological qualifier in an attempt to decenter it.

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present not only the "self-as-other", inherent to any self-portrait, but also the "Other-as-self". The portrayals of Other as self eventually result in a double bind position in- and out-side art history, showing its gendered structure.

2. Art history's canon as structuring device

Although convictions of universal validity underlying the workings of the canon are perhaps less endorsed by art historians today, the canon and its hierarchies remain quite unperturbed in the field of art at large (Langfeld 2018, 1–2).[8] Since the art historical canon appears as a universal, permanent collection of objectively the "best" works of art, uninfluenced by context, time and place, feminist art historian Griselda Pollock states we should see it therefore as "the retrospectively legitimating backbone of a cultural and political identity, a consolidated narrative of origin, conferring authority on the texts selected to naturalize this function." (1999, 3). I find Pollock's approach to the *canon* as *discourse* productive in emphasizing its entanglement with power; or, to use Michel Foucault's term (in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 2002 [1969]), for its embeddedness in the field of power-knowledge.

A similar emphasis on power can be achieved when approaching the canon as archive. As Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) writes in "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression" (1995), the archive is both commencement (where things begin in physical, historical or ontological sense) and commandment (the place from which order is given). Derrida thus connects the archive directly to power; there is no political power without control of the archive. As the structure of the archive already determines what is archivable content, "the archivization produces as much as it records the event." (Derrida 1995, 17). This is paralleled by the process of canonization, which does not "document" genius artists but *produces* them. For Derrida, there is no archive without a place of consignation (a gathering of signs), and no archive without an outside. However, where this exteriority begins remains opaque. Apart from the fact that art historical scholarship (as any historical scholarship) is based on archival material (documents on artists' lives, artworks) translated to narrative, approaching the art historical canon as archive stresses its entanglement with power in its productive capacity. The archive houses the power

[8] For example, when one takes a look at textbooks, monographs on artists, introductory art history courses, etc.

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to interpret and to classify. Like the archive, the canon has an institutive and conservative function: it posits the law (structure) and simultaneously maintains, conserves it; endlessly reproduces it in reiterations. When we approach the canon as an archive determining discourse, we can analyze the devices the canon's narrative makes use of. Reproduction of canonical works allows for the possibility of endlessly repeating the "best" works of art. This repetition reinforces the canonical status of artworks, cultivating their familiarization (Silver 2019a, 3). Repetition consequently affords the appearance of "naturally valuable" to works that are *made* canonical.

A principal device of the canon is ascription of value, which, "including value judgment, and its plural – values – lie at the core not only of canon creation but also of canon destruction." (Papadopoulos 2019, 62). A second device in the canon is the placement of canonical artworks in a linear, chronological and teleological timescale (first formulated by the German art historian and archeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768)). Thirdly, the canon is often produced along borders of nations and cultural identities, delineating their artistic traditions as intrinsically tied to territories and peoples.[9] Fourth, the canon ascribes paramount importance to the art object. Anthropologist Alfred Gell (2007 [1997]) has argued that art history produces the system of terms and relations in which an "art object" acquires meaning: it does not have an "intrinsic" meaning outside of this context. Fifth, theorists Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal (1991) have stated how art history is a mythic narrative to idolize the artist, which often produces interpretations on the basis of the *author=corpus* model. This means that artwork is often taken to bear a direct relation to the events in artists' lives (Bal and Bryson 1991, 182). Sixth, and most significantly to the argument at hand, the canon produces a structure in which the positions of "Self" and "Other" are allocated to specific groups. The Self is the one who stays unmarked, the "standard", the "natural" artist: what Spivak would call the "privileged male of the white race" (1986, 225). The Other is marked by difference from the norm, the law, rule or standard. Women, people of color, other marginalized groups are Others in the art historical canon.

Art historian Larry Silver takes the concept of "marked" versus "unmarked" identities from linguist Roman Jakobson in his discussion of Jewish modernist

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[9] This feature of art historical discourse is brilliantly explored by Eric Michaud's genealogical approach to the constructs of race in art history, in *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art* (2019).

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artists (2019b, 291). Women artists, especially women artists of color or women artists outside Europe or the United States, fall outside of the art historical canon as *subjects*, in its structuring as a celebration of male creativity, a narrative to idolize great, genius white male artists. As *objects* women fall inside the structures of the art history canon – as many canonical works depict (naked) women.[10] Although many women artists or those from minority groups have rejected being categorized by their identities on the basis that it is either essentializing (as if there exists an intrinsic "feminine" or "Black" art) or marginalizing,[11] those that fall outside the norms for the archetypical artist in the canon are "marked" in relation to that norm. Silver writes:

> […] they are used in opposition to terms that are unequally weighted or hierarchical. Socially, in the United States, unmarked, dominant terms, also called the 'zero sign' terms by Jakobson, would be: *white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle class, straight,* and *male.* They are used by the dominant culture almost without comment and are regarded as being neutral or 'natural'. Anyone who does not fit into those categories – people who are Jewish (or Catholic), women, people of color, gay or lesbian people, and those who are economically disadvantaged – would be marked and seen as more complex.[12] (Silver 2019b, 291)

What falls outside of the hegemonic thus stays "marked" as diverging from the norm. Silver concludes with saying that those artists that are marked have no other option but to be situated in dialogue with the dominant culture of the majority (2019b, 292). The canon, literally referring to a *rule* or *standard,* finds its tenacity, like the archive, on the power-knowledge nexus: as discursive system and repository of knowledge; as hegemony, tradition and common sense; defining what is marked and what stays unmarked. To summarize, the canon thus structures what counts as "Self" and what counts as "Other".

[10] This structure is exemplified by the famous question posed by the Guerilla Girls in 1989 to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?".

[11] Although working from the margins can be a fruitful place for the building of resistance, as bell hooks argues in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), resonating as well with the worthwhile political move Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls "strategic essentialism."

[12] Here Silver speaks of the United States specifically; one could discern the "zero sign" in different contexts: in the Netherlands for example the list stays similar, except for *Anglo-Saxon*; in India the "zero sign" would include *Hindu* and *upper-caste*, etc.

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3. Self-portraiture and the woman artist

Art historian Anna Brzyski states in *Partisan Canons* (2007) that artists themselves have agency in placing themselves in or outside the canon. As the canon structures who counts as Self (artist/subject) and Other (model/object), those who fall outside the category of the Self/artist in the canon have made gestures to claim their place within it. Historically, male self-portraiture has been utilized to display artistic skill, examine self-consciously ideas of creativity and play with establishing artistic identity (West 2004, 166–167). Imagining the self through a self-portrait has also been a tool to declare artistic aspirations (West 2004, 173). There is a lineage of self-portraits by those who are both artists and marginalized in art history meant to show their artistic skills and establish artistic identity. A well-known example is Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-portrait as 'La Pittura'* (1630) in which she presents herself simultaneously in the process of painting and allegorically as "Painting"; there is Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Self-portrait in a straw hat* (after 1782) which asserts her place in art history by modelling the self-portrait on a painting by Rubens; or Renee Sintenis' portrayal of herself both as nude model and artist in *Nude self-portrait* (1917). Postmodern examples include Cindy Sherman's citations of femininity as performance in visual culture, not only in her most famous *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), but also her portrayal of herself as model in old master paintings in the *History Portraits* series (1989–1990); Yasumasa Morimura's quotations of canonical works (among them Eduard Manet's *Olympia* and Frida Kahlo's self-portraits) which highlight and ironically explore performances of gender and race, for example in *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Collar of Thorns)* (2001); and more recent series of self-portraits like Juliana Huxtable's *Universal Crop Tops For All The Self Canonized Saints of Becoming* (2015).

Self-portraiture as practice envelops a contradictory position with respect to what we can call "inside" and "outside". The self-portrait *an sich* demands an impossible position, for the artist inhabits simultaneously the place of the viewer and the viewed. The look of self-portraiture, as art historian T. J. Clark (1992) writes, thus always oscillates between exteriority and interiority. We see someone looking at herself, perhaps to negotiate psychologically with an inner truth (inside) or to approach only outer appearance (outside). As the maker of the self-portrait is presumably the person who knows the depicted self best, it is tempting to reason that the self-portrait shows us a "truth" about the artist, or that we come to know

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the artist better. By making a self-portrait, the artist approaches herself through the look of someone outside of herself, focusing on "the *exotic* entity of the self's own appearance" [my emphasis] (Clark 1992, 114). The viewer subsequently becomes implicated in this complicated exchange of looks:

> "We" [...] are meant to assume – to *re*sume – the position of consciousness whose outside is there on the canvas. That outside is not just the evidence for the position, it is its product; and the cast of mind on show is not general - not an invitation to any and every projection on our part - but specific. What we are shown is consciousness directed to that exotic entity: its own outside, its "appearance." And is not that where and how our consciousness is directed? Cannot we duplicate as viewers those very movements of seeing or mind that are pictured and that led to the picturing? (Clark 1992, 114)

As we view a self-portrait we are thus invited to participate in the look of the artist who sees herself as other. The self-portrait functions like a metaphorical mirror in which we see not ourselves but the artist seeing herself. This implicit presence of a mirror in which the self is seen as other echoes Jacques Lacan's (1977 [1949]) elaborations on the drama of the "mirror stage". The function of the mirror-stage for Lacan is to establish a relation between *inside* and *outside*, the subject and its reality (1977 [1949], 4). Symbolized when a child recognizes herself for the first time in a mirror, it is the moment of "transformation that takes place in the subject when he [sic] assumes an image." (Lacan 1977 [1949], 2). The formation of subjectivity of the self thus originates from an *aesthetic* recognition: an image of the self. Since the perfect and unified image in the mirror of the body does not correspond with the fragmented, chaotic body of the child's vulnerability, the image becomes an ideal, taking place in the realm of the imaginary. When the subject recognizes herself in the mirror, as image, this creates an Ideal-I which the subject strives to be yet never attains. The relationship between the image of the self (a projection as other) and the self is thus one characterized by competition and desire. The mirror stage is a drama, because the subject is jealous of the perfect image that is presented in the mirror (Lacan 1977 [1949], 4–5). The act of recognizing the self in the mirror is equivalent to constituting the self as other; because to say that the person in the mirror is me, is to say that the image as other is me. It is thus a process of self-alienation: recognizing the self inevitably entails the othering of the subject. Inherent to the attempt to portray the self lies an initial failure, as by the very act of producing the self, the self has become other.

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In the case of the woman artist however, this becomes even more complicated. It is significant here to shortly elaborate on the difference between the "other" of the self-portrait or the mirror stage, the other that is a projection of the self; and the "Other" as mentioned before in the archives of art history. As discussed above, within the canon woman is always Other in the capitalized sense: a position of radical alterity, with which no identification is possible, as the Self is always the mold of the male artist. The Other is what Lacan would call the symbolic order, characterized by difference and the unconscious, taking place in culture. Woman as Other in the canon is hinted at by Kapur's positing of the double bind of the woman artist's iconicity:

> A woman artist may find herself internalizing a certain iconic aspect over and beyond her intent. A peculiar concept of embodiment may thus come into play, a critical form of condensation where the woman artist becomes a peculiarly propitious site: as body-icon, as representational agent, as allusive object of a widely refracted desire. (Kapur 1997, 179)

This "widely refracted desire" is thus not only the desire of the self as other as image. It is the desire of a discourse to define or represent the radical alterity of the Other, an impossible option within the hegemonic structure of the canon. The contradiction that Spivak would call a "double bind" is the paradox that the Other cannot be accessed as the system of representation needed for this access structurally includes its occlusion. To conclude, inherent to any self-portrait is the projection of the self which makes the self other. However, the self as Other is something that is inherently unrepresentable. For Spivak however, it is an ethical imperative to still attempt to *relate to* (rather than represent) the Other of radical alterity. This is what imagining the Other as a Self entails, to which I will return. But first let us look closely at Amrita Sher-Gil's and Pushpamala N.'s self-portraits.

4. Citing the Canonical I: Sher-Gil's *Self-portrait as Tahitian*

Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941) acquired an iconic status in India (Mitter 2007, 45). As mentioned, she lived between Europe and India; her mother was a Jewish-Hungarian musician and her father a Punjabi Sikh aristocrat (Sher-Gil and Sundaram 2010, xxxiii). The family moved to Paris in the 1930s, where Sher-Gil studied at the *École des Beaux Arts*. In the 1930s she worked on multiple self-portraits, of which *Self Portrait as Tahitian* is the last one; after its completion Sher-Gil moved back to India where she painted mostly rural women, in resonance with

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the anticolonial nationalist project. Her early death at the age of 28, her intercultural upbringing and relationships with men and women made for much mythologizing. Somewhat ironically but perhaps unsurprising, the artist persona Sher-Gil devised was built from the idea of the modern male artist. Sher-Gil worked within a national context to paint women "in and through their experience of otherness," as Kapur puts it (1997, 168).

Sher-Gil's reference to Gauguin takes place in the context of primitivism: the movement which indicates modern western artists' turn towards colonized cultures. The primitivists generally felt disillusioned with modern life and fantasized about an exoticized and idealized Other as an antidote to the perils of modern western society. Primitivism invokes a romantic desire for premodernity, and is complicit with colonial ideology's portrayal of non-western cultures as essentially "premodern", closer to nature, outside of culture and history. This fetishization of the Other, especially the Other woman, induces fear as well as desire (Mitter 2008, 542). Primitivism's preoccupation with the non-west was thus very much focused on the western Self, projecting its anxieties on the Other rather than listening to or letting people speak for themselves; however, the primitivists did simultaneously turn against modern western society. Many anticolonial modernist artists took to primitivism as a discourse of resistance, as Partha Mitter has eloquently argued in the case of the Indian anticolonial nationalist movement, in which primitivism became mobilized as alternative to Enlightenment rationality (2008, 538):

> […] modernism's revolutionary message furnished ammunition for cultural resistance to colonial empires, as each colonized nation deployed the language of modernism to fight its own particular cultural corner. (Mitter 2008, 533)

Primitivism thus became a tool for critiquing modernity and connected critics of industrial capitalism in east and west alike. Hal Foster writes in *Prosthetic Gods* (2006) how "the primitivist seeks both to be opened up to difference – to be taken out of the self sexually, socially, racially – and to be fixed in opposition to the Other – to be established once again, secured as a sovereign Self." (20). Just like Said argues in his seminal *Orientalism* (2019 [1978]), the obsession with the Other originates from a desire to define the Self.

The gap separating Self and Other could be said to be larger in the case of Gauguin's portrayal of Tahitian women than in Sher-Gil's self-portrait: in the sense that Sher-Gil's brown female body resembles the Tahitian women more than

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Gauguin's as a white male; and while Gauguin paints Tahitian women from an outside perspective Sher-Gil decides to inhabit their place. Another difference between their positions is their nationalities of colonizing (France) and colonized (India, although Sher-Gil also had Hungarian nationality) countries. While Gauguin's work is referenced in the title of the self-portrait, art historian Saloni Mathur (2011) has suggested that *Self-portrait as Tahitian* underlines how Van Gogh's experimental self-portraits inspired Sher-Gil, rather than Gauguin.[13] In *Self-portrait as Tahitian* Sher-Gil's upper body is nude; she wears what appears to be a white cloth or skirt. Her position is turned to the left for three quarters, slightly leaning on the right side of the picture plane – her gaze is fixed slightly downward on something outside of the painting's scope. The light falls on her body from a frontal light source and highlights her left breast and the left side of her face. Her arms are in a closed gesture; her wrists crossing at her hips; her hands, especially her right hand, is painted with quite a bright red. Her shoulders are slightly drooped. Her long black hair is tied at her neck and reaches her hips. Her lips are a plump red, her eyebrows sharp. The viewer's gaze follows her left breast and face, which catch the most light, to the figures depicted on the scroll behind her. The background scroll portrays "Oriental" figures in brown, grey, black, white and light blue, rendered schematically with rough brushstrokes, the diluted colors standing in opposition to the many layers of paint that make up Sher-Gil's body. The figures have often been described as Japanese (by Mathur 2011 for example) yet Khullar connects them to a Chinese scroll prevalent in artistic circles in Paris at the time (2015, 49). The most intriguing part of the painting is the shadow which emerges on Sher-Gil and the scroll on the background. Painted in a greyish wash, the shadow seems to embody the mold of a male viewer, looming over the scene. The overall effect is that Sher-Gil's alter ego in the painting as nude female Tahitian model displays an awareness of being watched. With her gaze averted and an expression that is a mix of disinterestedness and defiance, a background that sketches "Oriental" imagery, and a pose adopted for the female nude study, the viewer is present, made visible and implicated in the scene. The biggest difference with Gauguin's depiction of Tahitian women is perhaps this background: where Gauguin

[13] Mathur writes that the painting "subverts and rejects several of Gauguin's gestures of objectification in relation to the female nude and makes visible, albeit in a more oblique fashion, Amrita's preoccupation with the art of Van Gogh and the elusive experimentation with alterity and self-portraiture that characterized the latter's engagement with Japan." (2011, 542).

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paints fresh fruit, flowers, and nature to underscore the sexualized, exoticized representation of Tahitian women as "one with nature," Sher-Gil presents us with the Tahitian woman as a product of culture (the background of the scroll), in which the position of the viewer (the male shadow) plays an important role in its construction. As Khullar writes:

> Whereas Gauguin's joyous paintings of Tahiti stress a seamless continuity between women and land, Sher-Gil's strange self-portrait asserts the link between the feminine and the primitive to be the product of culture, not nature. It is pessimistic about the possibilities for an unmediated or redemptive encounter with the East, Woman, and Nature. *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* presents the screen, the model, the artist, and the viewer as participating in a history of visual representation, even as it suggests that female and Oriental subjectivity is known only through such representations. (Khullar 2015, 50)

I agree with Khullar that through embodying the "Tahitian woman", Sher-Gil exposes the cultural terms which structure such a category and makes them visible. Coming back to Lacan, the difference of positing the "seamless continuity between women and land," a depiction of fullness, and the cultural terms of such representations in the sense of difference characterizes respectively the order of the imaginary and symbolic. It displays the mediation of representation, staging the practice of painting an exotic female model as a scene. Because the painting is a self-portrait, Sher-Gil occupies both the position of subject and object. She enters in a dialogue with western canonical artist as *subject* (the painter) yet identifies with Gauguin's Tahitian women, as *object* of fantasy (the model). As discussed earlier, self-portraiture harbors the illusion that the viewer can discover something about the artist through looking at the self-portrait. However, Sher-Gil's self-portrait is not only a projection of the self as other. It also attempts to portray herself as *Other*, explicitly stating her inhabitation of the category of the Other as Tahitian woman. It is through this double position that she occupies a salient place in canonical modernism: she places herself both inside and outside of this canon.

5. Citing the Canonical II: Pushpamala's *Lady In Moonlight*

The series *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs* (2000–2004) re-performs a various set of images, ranging from mythical goddesses from the Ramayana, British colonial ethnographic photographs, the oil paintings and oleographs of nationalist painter Raja Ravi Varma, to contemporary newspaper clippings. Pushpamala N. (1956) was trained as a sculptor, but gained international

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recognition with her photo-performances (Bhullar 2018, 176). She is known for her feminist work and often cites frames from popular culture, theater, film, photography and art history, to interrogate cultural memory (Freundl and Sinha 2019, 63). As curator Roobina Karode notes, these citations originate from urban popular culture: "she consciously and persistently refers to a lineage of performative space that has a long history in India." (2019, 82). Pushapamala performs in most of the photographs; the series is carried out in collaboration with British photographer Clare Arni, who is based in Bangalore (Parameswaran 2012, 61). The project exists in different formats: as photobook, as different curated exhibitions and as cheap postcards (Parameswaran 2012, 61). The photobook is divided in four sections:

> *1) The Native Types: A Series of Photographs illustrating the Scenery and the Mode of Life of the Women of South India;*
> *2) Ethnographic Series: An Exhaustive Scientific Analysis and Anthropometry of the Female Inhabitants;*
> *3) The Popular Series: An Album of Picturesque Scenes of Native Beauties;*
> *4) The Process Series: A Complete Record of the Procedures and Systems used for the Study.*

The ten characters that are established in the first series *The Native Types*, recur in slightly different poses and settings in the other series. The second series utilizes the visual language of ethnography and anthropometry to repeat the ten archetypes of "native women of South India" as established by the artists in the first series; the third series casts them in settings borrowed from popular visual culture; and the *Process Series* shows the stage of production of Pushpamala and her collaborators. Using English as the language of both colonial and post-independence state administration (rather than any South Indian language like Tamil or Malayalam), they ironically cite the official vocabulary of knowledge production entangled with colonial ideology, with terms like "picturesque scenes of native beauties," "exhaustive scientific analysis" and "complete record of the procedures and systems." (Parameswaran 2012, 62). The photographic performances underscore the different stereotypes of female subjectivity as Pushpamala embodies the various shapes the category "native woman" takes. As Karode notes, a too quick or uninformed reading of the images could lead the viewer to "believe" them – in the sense that they are not perceived as re-staged, ironic performances (2019, 83).

Three of the ten archetypes of the first series embody female subjects borrowed from Raja Ravi Varma paintings: *Returning from the Tank* (oil painting),

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Lakshmi (oleograph) and *Lady in Moonlight* (oil painting). Academic artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) was a fashionable portrait painter in his time, prized by both the British Raj and Indian aristocracy: he died as a celebrity (Mitter 2001, 176–177). He was one of the first Indian painters to use oil painting for academic realism. Ravi Varma adapted ancient Indian epics and classics in the naturalist style of Victorian salon art in his history paintings, which were also turned into very popular mass-produced oleographs (Dave-Mukherji 2012). Although quickly after his death his paintings were denounced for being "unspiritual" and no longer fitted nationalist aspirations (Mitter 2001, 177), they still occupy an important starting point for the story of national Indian art. Additionally, the voluptuous women of the oleographs still appear in the cultural landscape in India today (Mitter 2001, 176). The revisiting of Ravi Varma's paintings of women thus is not merely a citation of the past, but more importantly an inhabiting of visual cultural memory that is still at work today. As Dave-Mukherji (2012) writes:

> Situated in the interspace between the popular and the elite, her [Pushpamala's] act of appropriation is not strictly postmodern in Boris Groys' sense, as the images of goddesses do not belong to a past. They may be traced back to the past of Ravi Varma's time but as copies they are also part of the contemporary popular visual culture and a repository of public memory. (Dave-Mukherji 2012, n.p.)

Pushpamala thus presents a past that is not "uncontaminated" by the present or colonial ideology, in opposition to traditional Indian modernist valuations of the classical past. Rather, the past is shown as always already mediated and influenced by colonial presence, or as Bhullar writes "a reminder of the past that bears the mark of the colonial episteme to the audience." (2018, 176). Theater and performance studies scholar Ameet Parameswaran similarly argues that *Native Women of South India* "inhabits the category showing the continuities of the colonial taxonomy even in the contemporary period." (2012, 63). Secondly, he argues that the series dismantles the assumptions which underlie the "native-as-Indian" within the nationalist narrative (Parameswaran 2012, 63).

The photograph *Lady in Moonlight* casts Pushpamala in the role of an idealized woman as in Ravi Varma's 1989 oil painting of the same title. She is sitting sideways on a couple of rocks by the lake, her head half-turned to look at the viewer directly. She wears a luxurious looking pink *sari* with golden details, a *choli* in a dark color and elaborate jewelry – anklets, bracelets, toe rings, earrings, necklaces. Her legs are crossed at the ankles; her right hand rests on her upper legs

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while her left hand absentmindedly seems to touch her chest. Her long black hair is shiny, has a middle parting and falls down her back. There is one light source, which comes from the right side of the frame and highlights her bare shins, upper arms, neck and left side of her face. The foreground of rocks stays mostly in the dark. In the background we see an atmospheric landscape: a moon on the upper right corner of the picture, slightly hidden behind the clouds, a lake surrounded by trees, the moonlight lighting up the water on the right side, brownish clouds filling the left side of the picture plane. There is a contrast between the soft focus of the background and the sharp lines of the woman in the photograph. Her face, with dramatic chiaroscuro effect, and wearing a *bindi* on her forehead, gazes with a deadpan look at the viewer. In the painting of the same name by Ravi Varma the lady has exactly the same position yet her gaze turns to something outside of the painting on the left, and is characterized more by a look of longing rather than the disinterested directness of Pushpamala's gaze. A difference with the painting is the colors; in Pushpamala's photograph the background turns a soft brown, while in Ravi Varma's version the lake is divided between the yellow of the moon and the blackness of the clouds. The brushstrokes with which Ravi Varma painted the lady in the moonlight are soft and slightly impressionistic; Pushpamala's photographic precision looks sharply delineated in comparison.

In a photograph from the *Process Series* we see how the background, like in many photographs of the series, is actually painted on a large rectangular frame. Pushpamala takes position in the center as five men around her make preparations for the photograph: one is holding a reflector, two others carefully adjust her *sari*. This photograph in the *Process Series* on the one hand exposes the artificiality of *Lady in Moonlight* of *The Native Types* series. However, the picture showing the process of photography does not appear like a candid snapshot either. The light too carefully falls on Pushpamala; the composition too perfectly frames her standing figure. The pictures of the *Process Series* next to *The Native Types* show us the staging of the stage, yet do this through another staging: we never have access to anything "authentic". Pushpamala embodies Ravi Varma's romanticized lady and enters into a dialogue with his representations of Indian women. This dialogue does not only take place with the past of his paintings, but also with a present in which these representations still proliferate in popular culture. Pushpamala is both *subject* (the artist) and *object* (the represented woman). This self-portrait however, like

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Sher-Gil's, does not portray Pushpamala as other in the sense of a projection of the self, but gestures at her relation to an *Other*, one of the multiple (ten in *The Native Types*) articulations of the category of "native woman" within colonial and nationalist ideology. Parameswaran delineates how the term "native" has come to mean "difference" through colonial discourses of ethnography, categorizing the "Other" to western civilization: "While the colonizer is universal and "human," the native is specific, marked by territory, caste, language, gender, class, religion, clothing, customs, and manners." (2012, 2). In the case of India, colonial governmentality predates the nation and is thus always linked to it (Parameswaran 2012, 3). By referencing Ravi Varma's visual language in her performance, the photograph both locates itself in the canonical story of national Indian art, yet displays the practice of representing the model, the "native woman", as a scene that is always produced and staged.

6. The double bind of Other as self

The paradoxical subject-position that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls a "double bind" is elaborated upon in the text that addresses her most famous question, first asked in 1983, provoked by the work of the *Subaltern Studies* group:[14]

> On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak*? [emphasis in original] (Spivak 2010a [1983], 2117)

The question is, as cultural and postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi writes, "utterly unanswerable, half-serious and half-parodic." (1998, 2). The (un)representability of the subaltern ends primarily in a double bind: knowledge of the Other subject is impossible, in which "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow" because "both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant." (Spivak 2010a [1983], 2118–2121). Rather than making the point that thus the subaltern in a space of difference cannot speak, Spivak (2010b) has later emphasized the absence of the institutional structure of validation which makes the speech unacknowledged. We

[14] "Subaltern" is a term from Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) work and refers to oppressed people within a given society. The Subaltern Studies group in the 1980s focused on South Asian history and attempted to make the voice of subaltern groups audible within historic discourse (Gandhi 1998, 1-2).

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need the representation of the subaltern to come to know what she (the subaltern) means, yet the act of re-presentation equals entering into systems of meaning production that irrevocably distort the meaning of the condition of subalternity. Like one could say of self-portraiture; the project has failed from the start. In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012) Spivak returns to the question of the double bind. She emphasizes *relation* rather than *knowledge* in the problematic of the ethical: in the realm of ethics it is necessary for Spivak to imagine the Other woman as Other as well as a Self (2012, 104). As it remains impossible to imagine the Other as Self (impossible in the sense of the paradoxical position of the double bind) this indicates that "the image of the Other as Self produced by imagination supplementing knowledge or its absence is a figure that marks the impossibility of fully realizing the ethical." (Spivak 2012, 104). What is important for Spivak is that this double bind is not a position that is characterized by the possibility of *knowledge* – this comes back to her pessimism about the representability of subalternity. Rather, the double bind is experienced, played and shapes the condition for decisions on the ethical, which are decisions concerning *relation*.

While, as discussed earlier, the project of self-portraiture has failed from its initiation – as when the self assumes an image she irrevocably becomes *other* – in *Self-portrait as Tahitian* and *Lady in Moonlight* Amrita Sher-Gil and Pushpamala N. present not only the "self-as-other" of self-portraiture, but also an attempt at the "Other-as-a-self": trying to present a relation to radical alterity. Their Others-as-self-portraits cite canonical paintings by male painters of women as objects. The conclusions *Self-portrait as Tahitian* and *Lady in Moonlight* reach in relation to the canon are comparable in this respect. Sher-Gil shows us the objectified woman, as in Gauguin's paintings, and by gesturing to inhabit the Other interrogates the category of the "exotic" woman within the western modernist canon. Pushpamala's portrayal of herself as different stereotypes of "authentic" native women similarly decodes the structures at work that produce the category of this woman in a nationalist canonical framework. Both Sher-Gil and Pushpamala subsequently present us with *the stage of the production of the canonical*. The subject-object relation of the "double bind" encapsulates these artists as both Self and Other, and thereby grants the occasion to bodily perform the gendered structures of canonical logic. This bodily performance of gendered structures means that by casting their

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own bodies as models, objects and Other, they become *both* subject and object, artist and model, Self and Other, which makes the gendered structure of those positions within canonical logic visible. In Sher-Gil's portrayal of herself, the power-relationship between modernist painter and exoticized "Other woman" is dismantled and laid bare. Similarly, in Pushpamala's self-portraiture as "native woman" the hierarchy between photographer/painter and photographed/painted subject is disturbed. In both cases the artists are their own muses – exoticizing the native woman while being the object of exoticization, seeing and being seen, inside and outside, subject and object of the work. A double bind of interiority and exteriority emanates as Sher-Gil's outer appearance resonates with Gauguin's depiction of women of color in Tahiti, and Pushpamala's dressed up alter-ego with Ravi Varma's models, yet the gesture of portraying themselves as such, position them within these respective canonical artistic traditions, as artists. The shifting positions of Self and Other are thus emphasized and mobilized to shape the relations between these self-portraits and the canon as structuring device.

The shadow of the male colonial gaze on Sher-Gil as Tahitian woman, and the framing of the set-up of the photoshoot by Pushpamala point to the inevitability of relation to what Silver calls the "unmarked," the zero sign of the dominant culture. Kapur expresses this as "the double bind of otherness – as woman, as native – relating to the ubiquitous look of the male European." (1997, 175). However, in both these self-portraits, there is also an attempt at a relation with the Other of radical alterity, if it is by embodying an overburdened trope, or by inhabiting the iconicity of woman-as-nation. Here we arrive at the significant contrast between Sher-Gil's and Pushpamala's citations and their works of reference. While both Gauguin and Ravi Varma stress a "natural" relationship between woman and land – whether that is through the lens of colonialist primitivism or anticolonial nationalism – in the seamless continuity and fullness of the imaginary, Sher-Gil and Pushpamala present the Other of the symbolic order: difference, culture, the law in which these oppositions are anchored, the cultural terms that create it. While Gauguin and Ravi Varma naturalize the function of woman as Other in the canon, Sher-Gil and Pushpamala show us a relation to the structure of woman artist as Other within art history's archive. In conclusion, these self-portraits do not only present the self as other as inevitable part of self-portraiture, but also try to imagine the Self as Other.

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7. Concluding thoughts

It is important to note that what I have called "canonical" here is always transitory: canons and their connotations are always in flux and depend on one's temporal and geographical position – Raja Ravi Varma rarely appears in the western canon, for example. As I have mentioned earlier, Ravi Varma's work was extremely praised in his own time, yet shortly after his death already criticized for being trivial. However, his history paintings and goddesses live on in their contemporary popular manifestations. Similarly, the unequal power relations structuring Gauguin's move to Tahiti, ignored before, or simply deemed irrelevant by art historians, have been heavily criticized in the wake of *#metoo*. The designation "canonical" is shifting as many artists with marginalized identities are added to existing canons and declared to be "no longer overlooked." By looking at the gestures performed by Sher-Gil and Pushpamala in their self-portraits, I have argued that their potential in challenging the gendered discursive systems of art history lies in their portrayal of the terms of this construction. Through turning their citation of portraits of women by "great male artists" in respectively the western modernist canon and the Indian nationalist canon into self-portraits they are able to occupy both the place of artist and model. This allows to go beyond the self-portrait as "other" in the sense of a projection of the ego, and makes place for the imagining of the self as Other in the sense of radical alterity. For Spivak, this is fundamentally impossible while the attempt is ethically imperative. In its hegemonic structure, the canon casts women in the role of *object*, *model* and *Other*, and men in the roles of *subject*, *artist* and *Self*: the gesture of being *both* subject and object, artist and model, Self and Other, as happens in these artworks, brings this gendered structure to the fore. I have aimed to show how Sher-Gil and Pushpamala place themselves both "in-" and "out-"side of the canon, through their other-as-self and Other-as-self-portraits both of which cite paintings by "great masters" in different canons. While Sher-Gil's outer appearance resonates with Gauguin's depiction of women of color in Tahiti, and Pushpamala's dressed up alter-ego with Ravi Varma's models, the gesture of portraying themselves as such, position them within these respective canonical artistic traditions, as *artists*.

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