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Art Patron as 'Taste Scapegoat'?

Complicity and Disavowal in Mumbai's Contemporary Art World

Olga Kanzaki Sooudi
University of Amsterdam

I am not bothered about the flight of buyers;
the serious collectors will stay and fly-by-night
speculators will leave.

(Neville Tuli, CEO of Osian's Auction House,
quoted in *India Today*, 14 May 2007)

On a January evening, an art gallery opening is happening in Mumbai. The private gallery, a block away from the Arabian Sea, is in Colaba, a newly populated area. Kala Ghoda, a few minutes away by taxi, with its sprawling colonial buildings, is the city's established art district. But lower rents have brought galleries to the so-called Arab Quarter. Along the noisy street, cluttered with Muslim vendors selling perfumes and shawls, are marked signs of gentrification – a Barista coffee shop sits across from a high-end Italian

restaurant. The gallery itself is tucked a few floors above the street; no large signs indicate it.

It is dark inside, with only a few lights lit from the ceiling. There is a repeating sound-cycle of soft shirrs and booms coming from the new media installations. The gallery opens up to a three-artist exhibition on its walls. About 15 people are there, talking in small clumps, short-stemmed wine glasses in hand. Most of them have seen each other before – fellow artists, art aficionados, art writers and critics, and gallery owners.

This gallery opening, one of many during Mumbai's fall and winter cultural season, serves a critical function: it allows art industry insiders to maintain their relationships. Indeed, though such openings are ostensibly vehicles for promoting art, they primarily serve to consolidate the art community (Cohen 1985).

I attended such events for an ongoing research project, begun in December 2011, on Mumbai's contemporary art scene.

Many told me – only half-jokingly – that they saw the same people nightly at such events. This circuit allowed for ongoing, overlapping conversations. It also underlined this world's limited contours: a number of people meeting repeatedly in galleries, parties, and art fairs overseen by private security and accessed with invitations. This gallery opening was where Mumbai's art players enacted their public personae. It was a performance space for displaying one's pedigree, patronage, accent, dress and comportment. Such fine distinctions regarding membership, codes of behavior and trends constitute 'status-defining institutions' like art worlds (DiMaggio and Useem 1978: 153). These gatherings, as ritualized activities, reproduce a class of elite tastemakers and foster social and ideological cohesion. Just as insiders' distinction and cultivation are validated, non-members are distanced. Those who fail to articulate the proper tastes, fashions and knowledge within the art world thus become peripheral (*ibid.*).

It was therefore unsurprising that on this January evening, most attendees knew each other, or at least had heard of one another. These insiders often lived in the same Mumbai neighborhoods, had attended the same schools and colleges, and spoke with practiced ease of canons such as the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group. Another critical element bound this community: a deeply felt and oft-professed love of art. At first, this may seem obvious; yet in the context of recent convulsions in Mumbai's art world, such love might be considered less an individual feeling than a sign of belonging.

For such insiders, artistic creation is usually upheld as a sublime pursuit. Artworks cannot be simply reduced to monetary sums, or exchanged like other, mundane commodities (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). This doxa is enacted through the collective activity and complex networks of artists, dealers, galleries and consumers (Becker 1982). As guardians of high culture, taste is a primary idiom through which identities and social hierarchies are expressed (Bourdieu 1984; Gans 1999; Lamont 1992). Good taste in art legitimates, in a twofold manner: gallerists, dealers, critics and artists must first legitimate the artworks, and second, continually rationalize their authority as rightful tastemakers (Baumann 2007).

But good taste, whether as 'refined' behavior or a finely-tuned aesthetic eye, is, as many sociologists have pointed out, something hard to come by. Good taste is attached to high levels of cultural capital, forms of skills, knowledge and codes of behavior that take time, usually in the form of extended higher humanistic education, to attain. Moreover, it is not, nor is it meant to be, democratically shared. Cultural capital, for example, unfolds over the long-term, through inter-generational transmission (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; DiMaggio 1987; Halle 1992).

At the Colaba gallery, and in my other conversations with art world insiders, people kept talking about someone who, in their minds, had no taste. This was the Indian businessman: while physically absent, he was, discursively, ever-present. Among Mumbai art insiders I met, the businessman was the key player during the Indian 'art boom' of recent years. 'Boom' was an emic term, for what insiders perceived to be a liminal interval. They did not mean it as a description of

cyclical economic movement, but as a disruption of what they saw as normal conditions between 2005 and 2008 (Turner 1987).¹ During this time, Indian art prices rose, and Indian artwork garnered newfound attention. Private art galleries, centered mainly in Delhi and Mumbai, multiplied. The domestic press kept a tally on the record highs Indian art commanded at international auctions.

Yet the boom was spoken about with great ambivalence. On the one hand, it was 'the good times', in the words of one artist, when opportunities for selling and self-promotion mushroomed for artists and dealers. On the other, the market highs did not last, crashing in late 2008, in lockstep with the global recession.² Over-extended, new galleries closed, auctions dwindled, and Indian art prices fell. Years later, art world insiders were reflective about this recent, liminal period. For many Mumbai galleries and artists, the boom's end meant a severe decline in income. Nevertheless, they praised the retreat from financial opportunism and overproduction. It was seen as an opportunity to create lasting art, a more refined audience and a mature set of institutional practices.

The tumultuous years were framed as a euphoric windfall, but one for which art insiders incurred a large cost in the long run. Their ambivalence about this phase was repeatedly embodied by a particular, discursive figure, the Indian businessman. This spectral figure was referred to by a variety of names: the 'stockbroker', the 'banker', the 'speculator', the 'wheeler and dealer' and 'fly-by-night investor.' Omnipresent but invisible, and invariably gendered male, he was a greedy individual of means and impatient acquisitiveness but no taste. Anthropologically, in symbolic terms, such

portrayals allow artists, dealers and gallerists to become legitimate arbiters of artistic production. In both his obvious attempt to acquire social prestige by collecting art, and his insatiable desire to turn a quick profit through art investments, the businessman engaged with art in the *wrong way*. In this narrative, the businessman, after a period of uncertainty and disappointment, was blamed for hastening the end of an opportunistic frenzy that he actually helped to create.

How do we explain the businessman's spectral presence in the context of the Mumbai art world's attempt to reestablish normative boundaries and codes? In this paper, I draw on ethnographic research in Mumbai's art community, scholarly literature on artistic taste and the anthropological notion of the scapegoat. Firstly, I argue that community members perceived their 'boom', which we can call a liminal period (Turner 1987),³ as a social crisis that confused established distinctions, foremost that between art as artistic creation and art as vehicle for capital accumulation. I follow René Girard's (1986, 1988) definition of a social crisis as an 'erasure of differences'. For Girard, the collapse of normative distinctions, attributed to particular outsiders, throws the community's valorized self-beliefs – here the art world as a status-defining institution and arbiter of artistic taste – into question. In this milieu, the outsider is the businessman, whose lavish and indiscriminate art trading 'polluted' the community. In the recent past, this liminal figure was seen to make dealers and artists money-hungry, foster overproduced, sub-par art, engage in dubious financial dealings, and drive art values radically higher, then lower.

Secondly, I describe how, after this period's end, art world insiders symbolically distanced themselves from

this corrupting figure. This may seem unsurprising, because the businessman's heightened presence in the Indian art scene was enabled by community insiders, to mutual benefit. But his group membership depended on his wealth, not enduring mastery of norms. Thus once the market foundered, and his wealth ceased to benefit the art world, he could be readily scapegoated as both the boom's catalyst and violator of art world norms. His departure, relatively speaking, was therefore understood as 'curing' the Mumbai art world of the boom's deleterious effects, allowing it to reinvent itself by producing quality art, and reestablishing insiders' reputations.

Consequently, I describe the businessman as a 'taste scapegoat'. Taste is, as we have seen, an idiom for making coded distinctions about social status (Lamont 1992; DiMaggio 1987). Here, the businessman's judgment and standards are thought to diminish the community and its self-understandings. Hence, the retrospective accusation and disavowal of the businessman, around the idiom of bad taste, redraws art world boundaries. By considering taste as a vehicle for differentiating and scapegoating, taste not only articulates social hierarchies and group membership, but also enables the reestablishment of community norms and identities post-crisis.

Background: India's art world

The art world I began to research at the end of 2011 is still relatively new. As an art critic in Mumbai told me, '30 years ago, there was no art market to speak of in India.' Scholarly work on the Indian contemporary art

world and market is still nascent, and most writing on the recent art boom is limited to the news media and blogs. In the international media, India's art market is often clumped with those of the other BRIC countries as an emerging art market.⁴ Accordingly, the findings of this article are based on ongoing research; the Indian contemporary art world itself is evolving rapidly.

A look at the recent past illuminates some of the peculiar qualities that art world insiders ascribed to the boom. After Independence (1947), Indian art, and related fields like architecture, were primarily focused on asserting a 'modern' identity and defining national subjectivity (Brown 2009; Kalia 1999; Singh 2009). Institutionally, the immediate postcolonial period birthed state-supported art museums, such as the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in Delhi in 1954. Though the NGMA was begun with progressive intentions under Nehru, it took on an attitude of 'pastness' towards art, paying little attention to the modern Indian art it was supposed to patronize (Singh 2009). Such national art museums are a ubiquitous trait of postcolonial nation building. Across decolonized Asia, such museums were either newly established or renamed colonial museums, tasked with articulating, through artifacts, artworks and curatorial crafting, narratives of national becoming and cohesiveness, often from antiquity. Inclined to celebrate the national myth in terms of great, pre-colonial pasts, modern art was of little significance, and at most an afterthought (*ibid.*: 28).

Starting in the early 1980s, Indian art's concern with reconciling how to be simultaneously modern and Indian gradually lost its urgency. Increased wealth, art patronage by Non-Resident Indians and new galleries began to shape the contours of the present scene, and

enable the consolidation of a domestic artistic canon, based around modern artists and regional schools (Brown 2009: 161). More broadly, the national government's liberalization policies and gradual dismantling of a socialist agenda from 1991 onwards radically transformed the economic and cultural landscape. The influx of international brands, goods and images, from clothing and cars to beauty ideals and advertisements (Munshi 1999), fostered a climate of 'neo-liberal optimism' for the English-speaking, urban upper middle class who most benefited from these changes (Jeffrey 2010; Saldanha 1998: 2). Circulating images of middle-class prosperity enacted fantasies of wealth and upward mobility, via consumption or migration (Fernandes 2006). A new class of Indian entrepreneurs and businesspeople, often trained or having worked in the West, emerged.

The privatization of services brought on by liberalization in some ways mirrors the privatized nature of the Indian art world. Today, the government plays little role in defining artistic trends and values; Indian public art institutions do not occupy center-stage. While many I met in Mumbai derided the latter as 'dinosaurs', they also lamented the absence of state involvement in art as fostering the Indian art scene's vulnerability to fluctuations in 2005-2008. Specifically, the government's failure to buy artworks, regulate the art market and related investment schemes, and develop museum infrastructure, were critiqued.

Mumbai's best-known gallery, the Jehangir Art Gallery, is a case in point. Run by the Bombay Art Society, a private trust, it was also established early, like the NGMA, in 1952. Located on a major thoroughfare in South Mumbai, it has the advantage of public accessi-

bility. However, many I spoke with said it held exhibitions of highly uneven quality, making it an unreliable gatekeeper for Indian art. As one art critic told me:

The problem with the Jehangir is that anyone can show there. So in that sense it's truly democratic – it's great if you're a young artist and want to get your work out there. But there's no filtering, so all kinds of stuff get put up, some of it is really bad. Because anyone can show, it doesn't necessarily mean much.

In contrast to the seemingly erratic and arbitrary exhibitions at the Jehangir, art world insiders said that newer, private art institutions were of high quality and more authoritative arbiters of taste. As described in *ARTIndia*, in India, private galleries and collections take on the role of canonization and classification of contemporary art.⁵ Moreover, canon formation is still emergent, only begun in the 1990s (Khair and Wadhwani 2010). This is marked contrast to the US or Europe, where public museums critically define benchmarks of artistic accomplishment, and serve as ideal final destinations for artworks (Velthuis 2005). Today, apart from a few initiatives like the Devi Art Foundation in Delhi, the nation's first private contemporary art museum, begun in 2008 by a collector, much of the contemporary art scene unfolds within circuits of private galleries and international art fairs,⁶ such as the scene described at the start of this essay, among smallish networks of peers.

‘Boom’ stories

The liminal period of 2005–2008, and the ways in which it is discursively produced, may be understood via a ‘new India’ emergent over the last two decades. The very idea of ‘art as investment’ (Poulsen 2010) was fueled by new wealth, social ambition and conspicuous consumption (Dasgupta 2009), appearing as a tool of capital accumulation. A useful parallel may be drawn with property: in urban India until 1991, speculation and redevelopment was dampened by widespread state land control, as well as a cultural bias against profiteering. In the past two decades, however, the urban property market has become officially deregulated, profitable and infused with speculation (Appadurai 2000). Like property, art can be seen as a material and symbolic manifestation of a newly acceptable way to store and increase wealth. Just as myriad kinds of investors have bid up the price of urban land, and used property to launder ‘black money’ and display prestige, so too did Indian art emerge as a vehicle for speculation and status.

Art was thus the newest incarnation of the ‘India Story’, with the so-called boom beginning as early as 1995 when Sotheby’s in New York held the first auction dedicated to Indian art.⁷ The million-dollar mark for Indian artwork was surpassed for the first time in 2005, when modern artist Tyeb Mehta’s painting *Mahishasura* was sold at Christie’s in New York for \$1.58 million.⁸ The financial gain that art offered led to investment of different kinds. For large corporations, building an art collection became commonplace (Gaurav, interview); for wealthy investors, buying art, and into ‘art funds’ – which operated like mutual funds but without the same

regulatory oversight – allowed Indian art to become a long-term wealth asset. These art funds became notorious emblems of the period afterwards, blamed for driving up art prices so high and so quickly.⁹

Art funds exemplify the blurred lines between two essential elements to art worlds’ operation – patronage and capital accumulation. For example, Neville Tuli’s Osian’s Art Fund, peaked in value at Rs. 100 crore, and Ajay Seth’s Copal Art Fund at its height was worth Rs. 1000 crore (one crore is approximately \$200,000). Both men entered the Indian art world from other professions – Tuli was famously a horse-race gambler and Non-Resident Indian (Susan 2010), and Seth a PET bottle industry billionaire. When their three-year schemes matured in 2009, neither could fully repay their investors.¹⁰ While Tuli was left with unsold stock and debts, Seth faced allegations of overpricing art, bouncing checks and keeping artists on retainer to produce more work.¹¹

Tuli and Seth, reviled after the collapse of Indian art prices in 2008, were examples of, and complicit with, art world insiders. The boom-and-bust, rise-and-fall arc of Tuli and Seth mirror the period’s trajectory as recounted to me by artists, gallerists and dealers. As Girard (1988) argues, social crisis is not necessarily a matter of material indicators, but something perceived and, importantly, represented as such, in stories and texts. It is therefore important to examine the tale of the businessman’s approach and exit from 2005–2008, as a retrospective narrative of a crisis period and liminal actors. It should not be seen as evidence of his actual absence. I want to suggest two possible ways in which the boom narrative, and the businessman’s presence within it, are liminally framed.

First, Tuli and Seth's ambiguous characters point to the impossibility of drawing lines between insiders and outsiders. Several of the insiders I met in Mumbai, whether dealers or gallerists, came from business backgrounds themselves. The porosity of the art world's borders is also indicated by the lack of art world infrastructure in India; there is a historical dearth of state investment, but also few professional art schools, residency programs for artists, or degree programs for curators.¹² Many curators lack access to formal training as a result, something that new initiatives are beginning to address.¹³ While financial scandals have led the press to call the Indian art world 'amateurish' and 'immature',¹⁴ this fluidity at multiple levels might rather index an emergent art world, and the recent transitory 'boom' part and parcel of its evolution.

Second, while new players and opportunities emerged for art investment during the last decade, the businessman is hardly new to art worlds, in India or elsewhere. Moneyed classes and businessmen are basic to art worlds anywhere. The wealthy have patronized the arts and individual artists for centuries, in India and the West (Becker 1982; Mitter 1992). Corporate art collecting dates from the early twentieth-century US (Wu 2003). Today, the 'super-rich' drive the global art market with their unmatched buying power,¹⁵ art's investment volatility notwithstanding.¹⁶ For these reasons – the fluidity of the Indian contemporary art world's shape, and the enduring, constitutive presence of wealthy patrons in art worlds – symbolically, the businessman is both meaningful insider and exceptional stranger (because of his wealth). These render him an effective scapegoat (Girard 1988).

Thus far, we have established how a small group of

urban Indian art insiders set parameters for artistic taste and value during the first decade of this century. We have also seen how the peculiar dynamics of the Indian art market contributed to a frenzy of speculation and flipping works – unsavory behavior that, while implicating everyone, were retrospectively attached to the businessman. This period of overreaching spawned negative attention, failed businesses and soiled reputations. How, then, do those in Mumbai's art world recalibrate their agenda and purpose? Anthropology is well-suited to detailing how communities in crisis reestablish normalcy. Below, I analyze how Mumbai's art community, after rapid upheaval, reset its borders through accusation and disavowal.

The businessman's bad taste

When I asked Mumbai's artists, dealers and critics why Indians bought art, they responded with disappointment. Whereas serious, long-term collectors, who they said were locally few and far between, truly appreciated good art, the vast majority of consumers did not. For them, it was a matter of purchasing immediate status. The businessman was the paradigmatic example of this kind of 'average' Indian buyer: while he had ample financial capital, he lacked cultural capital. The businessman sought to short-circuit the usually long-term, inter-generational flow of financial capital to cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Moreover, artworks are themselves a form of symbolic capital; through their purchase and accumulation, they become material evidence of 'personal taste' and distinction (ibid.).¹⁷ Accordingly, taste can enable belonging to an imagined community,

wherein the 'taste/tastelessness' dichotomy articulates who does and does not belong to a specific group, in this case, the art world (Haug 1987).

I met Vijay, a successful and established artist in his 50s, at a gallery opening where he displayed his work. He described this outlook in contrast to his artistic duty:

In India, the average buyer still sees art as a status marker. Art is basically about status. That's why people buy it – once you reach a certain level, you buy art. You have a big house, five Mercedes, what do you do next? You need to buy something to put on your walls that befits that status. The next step is to buy some paintings.

While Vijay said that he had to 'put this out of mind' when making art, there was a large disjuncture between the artist's vision and value for the artwork and that of the consumer. The notion of buying status is a kind of conspicuous consumption. For instance, in the West, objects like expensive clothing and art and particular foods were historically closely linked to elevated social status. In modern society, this link is replaced by consumption of such goods for the sake of display (Gronow 1997; Veblen 1994). Moreover, anyone who has the capital can purchase these.

The Indian businessman's attitude towards art is no different, Vijay argues, from his attitude towards any other status object, whether a large home or luxury cars. In this sense, the businessman is similar to late nineteenth-century American *nouveaux riches*, who Veblen describes as seeking 'shortcuts' to social status by buying European castles, or adopting old-world affectations,

such as employing butlers (Veblen 1994). The result of this 'trickle-down effect', which is actually a means of upward social mobility for consumers (McCracken 1988), is the vulgarization of taste. The businessman's approach to art consumption is an example of 'vulgar taste', that is, when goods become increasingly relevant status symbols, yet paradoxically are accessible to anyone with means to buy them, thus becoming delinked from their original binding to specific lifestyles (Gronow 1997: 41).

The Phoenix Mills shopping mall in Mumbai's Lower Parel is a shiny, sprawling monument to the 'new India's' embrace of conspicuous consumption. At its narrow entrance, luxury vehicles deposit well-dressed shoppers in expensive sunglasses, picking up others with crinkling shopping bags from high street and high-end chains. In the mall's long shadow, just across the road, Gaurav, a contemporary art dealer, has his gallery in another redeveloped mill compound. Unmarked outside, Gaurav's gallery testified to another aesthetic – just as costly as his neighbor's, but far more restrained and minimalist. He contrasted the vulgar businessman's taste with the 'true' lover of art:

You have people who buy art to display it, it's just a display of wealth. I've got a big house, and I've got six cars, and I have all these walls. These walls are this many feet long and wide, how am I going to fill them? And they call [me] and ask for an artist to do a painting that is this and this big to put on a wall. They are not collectors. Collectors don't show their art. These people display art and hold parties for people to look at it, and then sell it from their walls – you want it? How much? Ok, here you go. The

market's really been spoiled by private trading and profiteering.

The businessman's avarice extended to his improper way of going about things. Utterly lacking in what Gaurav called 'professionalism', they mixed money-making with private affairs. In other words, while art ownership becomes a powerful status symbol, its conspicuous consumption and circulation risks it becoming kitsch, connoting tastelessness and imitation (Gronow 1997; Veblen 1994).

This idea of the mercantile, uncultivated businessman echoes similar stereotypes that serve as judgments of taste. A related, long-running set of dichotomies concern the Punjabi and Bengali professional. Stereotypes of Bengalis dwell on braininess, and artistic creativity in poetry and music. By contrast, Punjabis have long been associated with material acquisitiveness and crass ostentation – as one well-known Bengali writer terms it, 'what was once called "bad taste"' (Chaudhuri 2005). Though the Punjabi may be ridiculous and vulgar, he is simultaneously an object of envy, unburdened by cultural nostalgia, an enthusiastic materialist and social climber (ibid.). Unlike the Punjabi, who is able to reap the benefits of 'post modernism and globalization', the Bengali, imprisoned by his elitist cultural sensibility, is left behind, superiority intact.

The simple, questionable tastes of the newly rich, upwardly mobile, post-1990s middle class are likewise an object of mockery. Architect and writer Gautam Bhatia (1994) playfully describes this as 'Punjabi Baroque', in reference to nouveau riche ostentation, embodied in architecture that is imitative and pastiche, drawing from imagined ideals of American suburbia

and European aesthetic genealogies, resulting in 'Baroque villas with no link to Rome' (Bhatia 2001). Here, the wealthy's double ignorance – of both western and indigenous histories of art and architecture – produces a bankrupt aesthetics that has simultaneously ridiculous and predatory effects.¹⁸ Like the stereotypical Punjabi, Mumbai's art world insiders described the businessman with ambivalence. While this spectral figure was thanked for sponsoring the party, the ones attending it generally saw themselves as less materialistic and more refined.

At the same time, according to insiders, the businessman corrupted the valuation systems of Indian art. In established art markets, artworks accumulate value slowly, their rise carefully calibrated by networks of dealers, galleries and collectors. Gallerists and dealers attentively select specific artists and work, as well as the people who can buy them (Velthuis 2005). Yet according to Nitin, an art critic, this normative architecture imploded into a frantic 'mania' of buying and selling in 2005–2008:

People [artists] with no historical validation were selling for the same money as ancient Chola sculptures. People [buyers] had no idea what they were doing. It's a lot like late nineteenth-century Indian collectors, maharajas, the stuff you can find in palaces today – painting, statues – what they bought was mostly junk, they had no taste. None of it has retained its value, because it has no historical importance. You have to ask, 'Does this have a place in history?' – because that is the ultimate arbiter of value in the long run.

But instead of asking these questions about timelessness, posterity and ultimately unquantifiable values, the bankers mainly thought of making cash. Whereas the value of artwork also often rises in relation to the artist's age and experience (Velthuis 2005), this, too, was not the case during the boom. Numerous Indian news articles and art blogs repeat Nitin's description, with one curator disgusted and shocked at how young art students were 'asking for lakhs of rupees' for their paintings.¹⁹ These youngsters were simply taking their cues from other new artists, barely their senior, making it big on the market. Ostentation and greed thus infected artists as well, implying total complicity in profit-making.

The victims of this rampant confusion in systems of valuing and regulating art, were, perhaps, the businessmen themselves. What Nitin describes above, through a comparison to wealthy nineteenth-century Indian collectors, is akin to 'uninitiated perception' and the absence of 'artistic competence' (Bourdieu 1993: 220–221). Such competence allows for true aesthetic appreciation of an artwork, distinguished by the ability to locate the work within larger classification systems, identify specific stylistic markers, and evaluate it within a delimited field of artistic representative possibilities, rather than within the field of everyday objects (ibid.: 221–222). The uninitiated eye lacks familiarity and knowledge of the object of contemplation and its context, and thus its enjoyment is 'aesthetic perception reduced to simple *aisthesis*,' as opposed to the '*delight* procured by scholarly savouring' (ibid.: 220).

Here, *aisthesis* resembles Paul Stoller's (1989) conception of 'non-theoretical' senses of taste, wherein taste and tastelessness are literal, visceral and highly

sensual reactions to things in the world, such as food, or, in this case, art. Stoller describes non-theoretical taste in terms of food that is deliberately prepared to taste bad (or delicious) in order to communicate a message to those who consume it. Yet while Stoller argues for the ethnographic importance of such apparently simple expressions of taste, among art insiders in Mumbai, the businessman, like the colonial Indian prince, foiled his faux-cosmopolitanism with his aesthetic art approaches. Accordingly, those I met spoke of the 'average' Indian art buyer's preference for 'pretty, decorative art'. Within contemporary art, decorative art, based on patterns and design aimed at pleasing the consumer's eye, is generally held in lower esteem than conceptual art, whose appreciation resides more in its philosophical message (Halle 1992).

'Bad taste' is often a way for cultural elites to define themselves as refined and discriminating, against the mediocrity of the 'average man', making references to differences in lifestyle, consumption choices and aspiration (Lamont 1992). In Mumbai, the businessman figure's bad taste was blamed for the collapse of art world norms – specifically in terms of how art should be patronized and appreciated – during a liminal period. He selected art based on superficial aspects like size and decorative value, and tried to use it as a means of acquiring cultural capital, failing miserably, lacking the education and training to discern and classify art.

The proliferation of bad aesthetic taste, via the businessman, was one way in which people interpreted the 2005–2008 years as a kind of social crisis. Girard (1988) defines a social crisis as the 'eclipse of culture' (ibid.: 14), when a sudden lack of social order is expressed through the loss of 'rules and "differences"' that inform

cultural norms (ibid.: 12). As established roles and differentiation between internal groups collapse, socially, the most disturbing dimension of this crisis is the breakdown of the community's identity as unique and different from everyone else (ibid.: 13). In Mumbai, the businessman's bad taste led to the heightened patronage, and thus visibility, of art deemed sub-par by dealers, critics and gallerists, at the expense of better art. This effectively 'infected' the market, as it was influenced by businessmen who lacked basic traits valued within the community: artistic competence and connoisseurship.

Money and the misuse of art

The same ambivalence about the businessman's aesthetic taste and ostentation extended to a second dimension of his relationship with art. According to art world insiders, the businessman was at heart a financial speculator, whose artistic interest was spurred by profit. While he bought art with apparent abandon, he sold it on quickly, to other financiers or at auctions. Gaurav recounted stories about these practices, among his own clientele:

A guy used to call me up and ask who's doing well right now, whose work is selling, how much is this work per square inch, and you tell them, [Syed Haider] Raza is this, another guy is this, and then they're like, okay, give me five of this guy, and they ask us to roll up the canvases and send them to them. They don't even come to look at the work, or ask what it's about before they buy it.

Art appreciation is commonly held to be something that requires time, practice and above all, education to develop, and, as noted earlier, artworks' value does not translate easily into economic terms (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). Insiders like Gaurav maintained that the businessman had bad taste in a second way: he used art as a simple tool of capital accumulation. Gaurav told me of how 'bankers...weren't thinking about the art and what they were buying; it was just making money.'

This mercenary relationship to art was characterized by speed – a rapid turnover to maximize profit. They treated art like 'any other commodity, like banana stocks,' in the words of one gallery owner. When it came to making money, their bad taste and patchy veneer of cultivation gave way to ruthless mercantilism. As Velthuis (2005) has noted, American and European art worlds are perennially distrustful of art auctions, both because of their fiscal volatility and the pervasive sense that selling art to the highest bidder is 'immoral' and even 'unethical', rendering art and artists slaves to market whims (ibid.: 83).²⁰ In Mumbai, the businessman epitomized the speculative, gambling spirit that auctions often embody: he regularly 'flipped' artworks at auctions only a month or two after purchase, and liked to 'sell short' in art funds. To 'sell short' is to speculate based on the anticipation that stock prices will fall. One buys and then immediately sells on shares at a particular price, and then only later, after prices fall, pays for the original shares bought, pocketing the difference. But, as one art critic told me, this did not work well because art can only make a profit when prices go up. According to Nitin, by selling short, speculators dramatically drove down the value of artworks, ultimately hastening the end of opportunism.

Not only was the businessman quick to sell on his acquisitions, his art-related activities occasionally veered from the distasteful into the illegal. Art could be a means of money laundering:

Some of these stories are out in the open. Really rich guys would pay for half of a painting in cash and half in check, it's tax evasion. Then they go resell it at Christie's right away [for a higher price] and the black money all comes back in white (Atul, dealer).

The envy and disdain accorded to the art-world businessman echoes a residual but deeply felt undercurrent in India towards money. During the post-1947 years, popular discourse was adamantly poised against figures such as the 'smuggler' or 'black-market hoarder' whose private gain was at public expense. While this vocabulary has become somewhat stale in contemporary India, much of the legal and symbolic apparatus that mitigated against the open circulation and display of money has remained. These contradictions come to a head in incessant talk of 'black money', that is, funds acquired through unlicensed work, or on which taxes have not been paid. In a place such as Mumbai, talk of 'black money', whether concerning payment for an apartment, or purchase of a postmodernist sculpture, is rampant (Appadurai 2000). 'Black money' is therefore both necessary for the functioning of the modern Indian art market (and city), and a polluting element quietly excised from the mind. India's post-independence ambivalence towards mercantile activity and 'black money' is thereby manifested in how art industry figures scapegoat businessmen.

The businessman attempted to apply capitalist production principles to art. For instance, sometimes, to get the best price, instead of buying artworks directly from galleries, following established custom, businessmen went straight to the source. Gaurav, Nitin, Atul and Mira were ambivalent about the businessman's informal approach, as it circumvented mediating figures like themselves. Sometimes, they were cut out altogether:

Some guys had artists on their payrolls for two, three years. They find out who's doing well, and call them up directly and say, 'Hey, I've got this nice house, there's all this space, you can come here and paint,' and get them to work for them. They ask them to make 100, 200 canvases for them, and then the businessmen would resell them...but the work was no good. And a lot of people are sitting on a lot of artwork out there that they can't sell. You had one businessman asking for 100 canvases by Husain, and he can only sell two of them now (Gaurav).

Mira, the gallery owner, retold a similar story, about caches of sub-par paintings stashed in some wealthy man's storage, an embarrassing reminder for both patron and artist of the recent period's euphoria. I asked Gaurav what the hundred paintings were like: were they any good? 'No!' he said. 'It's all copies, all the same thing. It's no good, just reproduction.' It was not possible, he said, for an artist to produce anything very good when he/she was making so many paintings so quickly. The sped-up time of the market highs thereby distorted the time cycles of artistic production.

At the same time, the links between individual

artists and wealthy patrons are established. Artistic patronage by wealthy businesspeople or rulers has a long history in India and elsewhere (Becker 1982; Mitter 1992). In India today, patrons are often 'über-businessmen', such as steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, who sponsored artist M.F. Husain in the years before his death in 2011 to produce paintings on the history of Indian civilization.²¹ Despite art insiders' criticism of businessmen's production-like models, some, like artist Vijay, told me that while an artist had to 'shut out' commercial pressure when making art, there was nothing wrong with working on commission – in fact, it was necessary, a valuable opportunity. This relationship of mutual dependence and complicity between art producers and mediators on the one hand, and businessmen-cum-patrons on the other, was, in interviews, both acknowledged and disavowed. It is no surprise perhaps, then, that painter M.F. Husain, while lambasted for his 'courting of rich patrons and ... penchant for gimmickry and showmanship' (ibid.), is upheld among India's greatest modern artists. The line between acceptable forms of patronage, and plain greediness resulting in sloppy work, seems fine.

Businessman as 'taste scapegoat'

Why was the businessman retrospectively scapegoated by art world insiders? As described in this essay, art world insiders in Mumbai describe the boom period (2005-2008) in Indian art as a liminal period, wherein assumed hierarchies of value, institutions and exchange, as well as timeframes, were confused. The 'businessman' emerges among art world insiders, as a figure of blame

for all that went wrong, because of his bad taste. This bad taste manifests in two senses – aesthetic taste (or lack thereof), the product of education, training and social reproduction processes (Bourdieu 1984; Gronow 1997), and moral – cast as voraciously materialistic, the businessman misuses (and misreads) art as merely for capital accumulation. I have shown how insiders used the businessman to talk about their community's complicity in open greed. Next I will argue that retroactively, people pointed to the businessman and his bad taste as the source of this greed, rendering him the 'infectious scapegoat' (Girard 1986).

As René Girard tells us in *The Scapegoat* (1986), the term signals a multiplicity of meanings: that the scapegoat is in fact innocent, that there is collective opposition to them, and that this leads to a collective outcome (ibid.: 39). Scapegoats appear in moments of social and cultural crisis. The experience of extreme social crisis does not vary much regardless of the crisis's cause. Rather, the resulting 'collective persecution' of particular groups within a society leads to universally common experiences (ibid.: 12). Moreover, Girard places central importance on *how* people *represent* and *narrate* the crisis and subsequent persecutions. The scapegoat is a figure selected and blamed by the crowd for what has gone wrong. By choosing a scapegoat/victim, society is thus able to renew itself, and, so to speak, move on (ibid.: 24).

Girard outlines four 'stereotypes of persecution' that mark representations of any historical crisis, proving collective persecution: a general collapse of differences, crimes that cause this breakdown of differences, the choosing of victims (the scapegoat), and the violence leading to the scapegoat's expulsion from the commu-

nity (ibid.: 24). Nitin described the local art world's breakdown of difference in the following way:

Don't believe anyone who says otherwise – not a single artist would say that the boom was a bad thing ... People say that there is this tension between art and commerce, and a lot of artists now say that everything they do is political, but there's a lot of political pretension among artists. In India at least, it's all talk, when push comes to shove.

He went on to give examples of artists he felt were hypocritical in this way, unable to resist fame and fortune, despite claims otherwise. While he accused artists, his remarks imply the difficulty of resisting financial opportunism. Others mentioned stories of a power nexus between some galleries, artists and auction houses to deliberately drive up prices. When I asked one person more about it, she retreated, 'Well, it's just a rumor. I don't know if it's true.' Yet news stories document how investors and gallerists worked together to make false bids, driving up prices in 2005–2006.²² Though the businessman was singled out, he was hardly the only guilty party.

Accordingly, the scapegoat or 'surrogate victim' is selected not for the crimes he is accused of, but 'for the victim's signs that they bear, *for everything that suggests their guilty relationship with the crisis*' (Girard 1986: 24, my italics). In this symbolic process, then, people could obliquely acknowledge insiders' own 'crimes' of mimicking the businessman, while blaming him for *causing* the boom and setting into motion its negative effects. His bad taste and wealth were signs of his guilt. Whereas the avowed role of galleries is conventionally

to shield artists from market volatility, especially in auction houses (Velthuis 2005), here, these more noble roles were betrayed. Vijay, the artist, was more straightforward, and recalled the good times with both nostalgia and slight mockery:

Everyone was complicit in it. The galleries, the buyers, the artists, too ... Artists were doing really well. I mean, during that time our phones wouldn't stop ringing, and at some point we had to say, okay, enough, and just shut them off. And the calls were not just from India, but from Korea, Japan, Europe ... The galleries loved it too. Oh yeah. In order to get the artists they wanted they would promise them the world – huge openings, it was Black Label all the way, a catalogue *this* big, as big as some famous artist's, and *four* major writers for it, lots of publicity.

We, however, were drinking Sula wine and eating crisps and sandwich cookies at this opening. According to the Indian media, artists over-produced art and became 'factories'; galleries whipped up 'hype and hoopla' to draw in buyers 'with little or no clue about art'; dealers 'with absolutely no ethics' ran the scene; buyers themselves threw their weight (and cash) around in the mix.²³ The period is epitomized by the example of the Bodhi Gallery, which many I spoke with described as the moment's defining establishment. Opened in 2006, the Bodhi quickly expanded to several international locations: New York, Singapore, London and Berlin, showing the work of many celebrated Indian artists. Yet with the crash of the market, Bodhi shut down its international branches in early 2009, with prices for their artists falling by 50 to 70 per cent.²⁴

The lure for cash and recognition led some very successful artists to adopt a more structured, corporate model for themselves. While the businessman is accused of attempting – faultily – to copy what he sees as the superior tastes of the art elite, here, the artists themselves mimetically draw from the efficient, commercial techniques of the businessman.

For artists, the goal is to reach a certain status. During the boom time, several artists came to acquire status, and a normative way of doing this was established. You get five, six assistants, you get an office, these assistants work for you, and everything they produce comes out under your name – their work is yours. It's a corporate model. Status comes from all of these things you acquire. Once you have all of these appendages, you become a brand...I am a bit of an anomaly in this regard, because I have no assistants. I always do my own work; I like to have control and be in touch with it (Vijay, artist).

Artist 'self-branding', and the use of teams of assistants, is a globalized art production model. But in the above remarks, Vijay uses it to both admit the complicity of Indian artists in the very detrimental profiteering practices that the businessman is accused of – mass-producing art, self-promotion – and quickly distance himself personally from these shady practices. In this sense, the chance for big and fast profits 'erased' the articulated differences between insiders and the 'outsider' businessman. The erasure of difference in moments of crisis is troubling not because it confuses internal differentiations (such as among artists, buyers

and dealers), but rather as it lays bare the possibility for the system, here, of the art world, 'to differ from its own difference, in other words not to be different at all' (Girard 1986: 21). Though the businessman was charged with treating art like any other commodity, worryingly, so was everyone else.

While narrating their own complicity in these practices, art world insiders scapegoat the businessman, distancing themselves from him and what he represents. The second and third stereotypes relate to the naming of 'crimes' that led to the destruction of differences, and linking them to a chosen 'victim' (ibid.: 24). The speculative businessman was called names – 'wheeler and dealer', 'fly by night speculator', 'greedy', a 'shark'.²⁵ Moreover, he had 'no taste', and bought things to fill his monstrously big homes. His crimes can thus be grouped as having the wrong relationship to art – greedy, simplistic, superficial, desperate – and his reckless behavior leads to the 'ruin' of the market for everyone. The notion of a scapegoat, while connoting a marginal, disadvantaged figure, is not always so. Rather, the scapegoat embodies any 'abnormality', such as extreme wealth or power. Indeed, the most powerful, like the spectacularly moneyed businessman who seemed to be able to buy what he liked and do as he wish, are turned upon during crisis (Girard 1988: 19).

Victims are also simultaneously insiders and outsiders, 'well-known strangers' (ibid.: 32). The businessman is constructed as an outsider to the art world – a buyer with little or no foreknowledge of art or how to engage with it. Here, we may make a direct link with taste itself. Girard notes how foreigners are often rendered victims of persecution, accused of not respecting differences in the culture and taste of their

host society. By mixing 'the only truly significant distinctions,' like in local languages, they reveal not their difference from everyone else, but that they are no different at all (ibid.: 22). In the case of art, to have aesthetic taste is to be able to discern differences and classify the distinctive characteristics of an object, like a painting (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991: 40). By contrast, 'barbarous taste', such as that of the working class (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu and Darbel 1991), is marked by a failure to distinguish between 'disinterestedness', the correct approach to aesthetic engagement, and 'the interest of the senses' (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991: 40). Here, the barbarian is not the poor or foreign man, but the businessman, who, while having means, also lacks taste, the ability to distinguish. This is two-fold: he cannot discern quality art because he has no education, and he makes no distinction between art and any other commodity.

Conclusion

The final step in the scapegoating process is expulsion: made responsible for the crisis, the community reconstitutes itself by destroying or banishing the scapegoat (fourth stereotype). In the extended aftermath of the 'boom', I found people continued to use this liminal period, and the businessman's symbolic exile, as a reference point for understanding the current Mumbai art world. If those years were a moral and financial failure for those who gambled on their endurance, it was because they were afflicted as if by a sickness, a temporary 'mania'²⁶ and 'frenzy'²⁷ of extreme excess that could not last. But now, symbolically, at least, the businessman

had exited the stage. It was no coincidence that all those I spoke with described the art scene's current climate as one of 'waiting', a time to recoup an authenticity they felt was lost. Gaurav, the art dealer, told me stories of artists whose integrity was damaged because they had spent so little time on art sold for great sums. 'It's not about painting now, it's about [trying to make] something that's lasting, thoughtful,' he said. To do his part in creating a less-flawed consumer, he held yearly, invitation-only 'art camps' that brought together potential wealthy clients and carefully selected, up-and-coming artists. By educating people with money about art, these camps cultivated good taste. By molding clients who know what good art is, and how to treat it, Gaurav hoped to ensure the recent years' confusion would not repeat itself in the future.

This idea of endurance was echoed by Rajiv, a painter: 'I think the bust is a good thing for art and artists. You have more time to sit with your work, to think about what you're doing. The pressures that were there before are not anymore.' Phrases like 'sincerity', 'artistic integrity', 'quality' and 'lasting value' cropped up repeatedly in individual conversations, in reference both to artists and their work and buyers themselves. Nitin, the art critic, insisted that the art boom 'didn't leave any lasting changes,' precisely because it primarily affected the private sector (galleries and buyers), whereas infrastructure, such as national museums, and government regulation, had barely changed. Mira, a gallery owner, brushed off the suggestion of a long-term effect: 'These people,' she said, 'are long gone.'

Still, the businessman's story seems somewhat contradictory: after all, the art world is a business, anywhere in the world, so why was financial complicity

understood as negative? The tension between adding artistic and economic value to artworks, and the inevitably incomplete attempts to find equivalences between them, is an enduring feature of art worlds (Ardenne and Vale 1995; Becker 1982; Velthuis 2005). Similarly, the prominence of the businessman as a discursive figure does not easily map onto their actual presence and patronage in the art world, as the exceptionally wealthy are often the only ones who have the means to buy much art in the first place.

Girard tells us that the production of a narrative about a crisis has the effect of becoming a truth, that is, a myth (1988: 78). By talking about the boom as a special moment, now past, when the rules of engagement were temporarily suspended, the Mumbai art world articulates a myth about itself. Though the struggles between monetary and artistic imperatives endure, deflecting these tensions onto one particular figure, the businessman, represses ongoing, dispersed forms of (symbolic or material) violence within a community. Thus insiders are able to shore up a myth of themselves as the 'true' lovers of art, ultimately immune to base incentives. As I have demonstrated, taste is a key idiom through which art world insiders articulate community boundaries, and their fluctuation. The mythic character of this story is evidenced by historical analogy: in the late 1980s, a similar discourse about the businessman as a new kind of art buyer, motivated only by speculative zeal and quick profits, emerged in the wake of the 'art boom' in the US and Europe. Stock market crashes in 1987 were supposed to facilitate his departure, freeing the art world of his pollution and enabling the return of true art collectors (Ardenne and Vale 1995; Velthuis 2005).

Similarly, in Mumbai, according to insiders, the 2005–2008 years did not hurt the Indian art world. In addition to creating something lasting, people optimistically said that the market downturn effectively separated the wheat from the chaff; it showed buyers for what they truly were, so that only the 'real' collectors and art lovers remained. This narrative repeats itself in media stories as well.²⁸ In another story, the Deputy Director of Sotheby's India sums it up as follows: "The boom period gave birth to a new breed in the art market called "art investors". It was a flip. With the downturn, a lot of art investors have exited the market and the true collectors have come back."²⁹ Like the society that purifies itself of the infectious scapegoat, the Mumbai art world cleanses itself of the businessman's bad taste.

E-mail: O.K.Sooudi@uva.nl

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Notes

- 1 Accordingly, there is debate about when exactly the Indian art boom was, with some media sources citing 2000–2007, others as early as 1995. I have chosen 2005–2008, because these years were identified as the 'boom' by my informants.

- 2 *International Herald Tribune*, 25 January 2007; *Livemint.com* and *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011.
- 3 Liminality is a state of ambiguity, 'a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (Turner 1987: 7). Here, I refer to a liminal period as a transitional phase, when taken-for-granted structures are suspended and hierarchies unclear (ibid.)
- 4 Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) are grouped as 'emerging art economies', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 12 August 2010, http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/10_34/b4192096975152.htm.
- 5 *ARTIndia* (14)2, 2009, http://www.artindiamag.com/quarter02_02_09/editorial02_02_09.html.
- 6 India's first international art fair was held in 2008, held annually in Delhi. Events like these reflect how the traditionally Eurocentric, international art world is shifting greater attention to art produced in Asia. Nevertheless, many artists labeled as 'Indian' are in fact of the diaspora, or are based outside of India.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 The million-dollar mark was broken many times subsequently by Indian artists, *International Herald Tribune*, 25 January 2007. Between 2000 and 2010, Indian art auction totals increased from \$5 to \$85 million, *Livemint.com* and *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011.
- 9 *Livemint.com* and *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 May 2007, <http://www.livemint.com/2007/04/23034241/Inconsistencies-in-Copal-Arts.html>; *Forbes India*, 29 January 2010, <http://forbesindia.com/article/real-issue/osians-art-fund-the-broken-paddle/9532/1>.
- 10 *Forbes India*, ibid.
- 11 *Livemint.com* and *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 May 2007, <http://www.livemint.com/2007/05/11001152/Copal-Arts-financial-practice.html>.
- 12 'Geeta Kapur: On the Curatorial in India (Part 1)', *Afterall/Online*, 7 December 2011, <http://www.afterall.org/online/geeta-kapur-part1>.
- 13 For example, the Nodal Center for Curatorial Theory states its aim is to address the 'glaring absence of critical curating in India' through its new Curatorship Programme, 2010-2013, <http://www.curationtheory.com/introduction.php>.
- 14 *Livemint.com* and *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011, <http://www.livemint.com/2011/01/31222607/The-decade-in-art.html>.
- 15 *The New York Times*, 30 May 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/magazine/how-the-art-market-thrives-on-inequality.html?_r=1.
- 16 *The Times of India*, 14 March 2010, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-03-14/all-that-matters/28130861_1_indian-art-art-market-art-index.
- 17 While Bourdieu primarily took French society as his example, his work on class reproduction and distinction has been applied extensively to contemporary India, in both rural and urban settings, amongst the poor and middle classes (Donner 2011; Dickey 2002; Jeffrey 2010; Munshi 1999; Saldanha 1998). Scholars point to different forms of Bourdieuan capital (symbolic, cultural, economic) as constitutive to class production, and focus on everyday sites of distinction-making as useful to understanding practices of 'distinction' in postcolonial India. Here, I also draw from Bourdieu's theorization of taste as a key expression of status and class position, as well as from his related work on art and art reception (1984, 1993).
- 18 Predatory, because such structures are built on the labor of the extremely poor, gobble up precious land, and do nothing for the public good.
- 19 *Deccan Herald*, 3 February 2012, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/21055/boom-bust.html>.
- 20 In Mumbai, while I did not encounter anyone who criticized

- auction houses and their work (except that some 'overreached' during the boom, losing money), the sense that prioritizing the bottom line in art production and dissemination was detrimental to art was widespread.
- 21 *The Guardian*, 15 June 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/jun/15/mf-husain-obituary>. Similarly, the Tata Group explains its art patronage by drawing a genealogy between their corporate art collecting and historical art patronage by Mughal rulers in medieval India, see <http://www.tata.com/article.aspx?artid=MyygciZDMf8=>.
- 22 *Thaindian News*, 19 July 2009, <http://www.emamichisel.com/news.php?nid=96>); *Livemint.com and The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011.
- 23 *Daily News and Analysis*, 11 February 2009, http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report_everybody-wants-money-artists-dealers-and-collectors_1229888; *OPEN Magazine*, 2 May 2009, <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/arts/where-s-all-the-money-gone>; *Deccan Herald*, 3 February 2012.
- 24 Anindita Ghose, 'The Decade in Art', *Livemint.com and The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, <http://www.livemint.com/2011/01/31222607/The-decade-in-art.html>.
- 25 This last term was used by gallerist Peter Nagy of Nature Morte in Delhi to describe the super-entrepreneur Amit Judge, who established the Bodhi Gallery, for catering to well-known artists and driving up prices for their work (*The Caravan*, December 2011).
- 26 *Ibid.*; Nitin, interview.
- 27 *Livemint.com and The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Daily News and Analysis*, 11 February 2009.

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