The sign of crossing through can, to be sure … not be a merely negative sign of crossing out.

– Martin Heidegger, letter to Ernst Jünger, "Zur Seinsfrage," 1956. This translation is cited in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976). Crossed-out words, as a form of deletion that lets erased terms remain legible, appear in the writings of Heidegger (as "~~being~~") and, later, Derrida, in a strategy opening words to the possibility of new acceptations and pointing out the limitations of language. For Derrida, it was "an erasure which allows what it obliterates to be read."

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Cover: Book illustration anonymously censored with paint, c. 1999–2011, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (detail). The artwork depicted is Johan Zoffany's *The Tribuna of the Uffizi* (1772–78).

JUNE 2018

I'm off to the attic to get my *'abāyah*. In a clothes rack's procession of typical Western clothes I recognize, like a long-lost friend, a black sleeve embroidered with blue arabesques. Seven years ago I wore this coat every day. Its pattern shimmers like foliage alight in the shade.

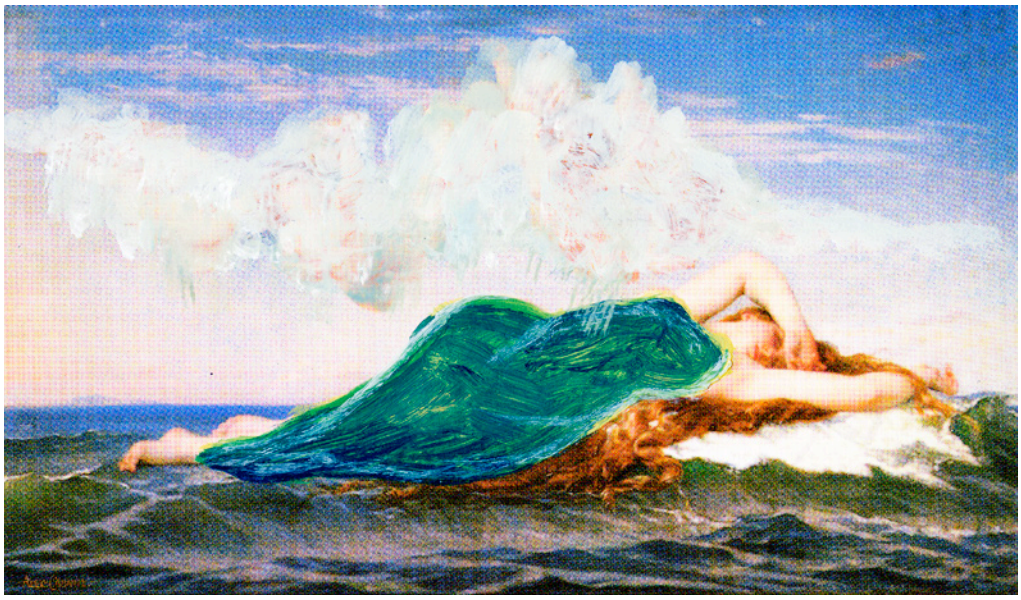
I take the *'abāyah*, weightless and soft to the touch, synthetic. I put it on and once again feel the pleasure of the graceful, poised bearing lent by this ample, opaque, severe and yet extravagant garment, like a judge's robe. I move and my body recalls movements cut short, encumbered by these long, spacious sleeves and these coat-tails that reach the ground. From the same hanger I unfold the *hijāb*, a matching yet even lighter, diaphanous black veil. When I wrap it over my head and around my neck I'd like to think I look like an exotic princess, but the mirror shoots back that underwhelming look characteristic of expats forever incapable of wearing the *hijāb* properly, incapable of wrapping themselves with style. I gaze at this misplaced quasi-elegance, turn around wondering if it's beautiful; the back is embroidered from the feet up to the neck. I feel faintly and even strangely — given the vastness of the outfit — smothered. I take off the veil and the coat; their mild warmth lingers on my skin like an aftertaste. This souvenir has taken me back to the burdensome comfort of the *'abāyah*, which obscures the body but also throws it into relief, as one shades a drawing, like an underlined word. Here, in France, women cross their legs and keep their elbows in; over there, in Saudi Arabia, their figures billowed in their wake.[1]

1. As traditional dress participating in the upholding of female modesty and a local cultural identity in the rapidly modernizing and increasingly cosmopolitan social landscapes of the Arabian Peninsula, the *'abāyah* is worn throughout the region but in Saudi Arabia it is legally enforced by a "Committee for the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice." The *'abāyah* is always long and dark, usually black with very little ornamentation if any. The brightly embellished, wide-sleeved style I am describing here presents a departure from tradition, a sartorial approach that was limited to certain privileged circles of upper- and middle-class women.

OCTOBER 2011

A student was scribbling. Scrutinizing her copy of the handout, I went up to her and found the athletic, outspread Greco-Roman figure of a *Discobolus* wearing an enormous, fuzzy pair of shorts. Worried, I scanned the nearby desks — this photo of a silhouette made of stone, seen in profile, had seemed alright to me; it looked all the more removed from a naked body since the photocopier had smudged its contours. But I should have known; it had been one semester since I had begun teaching art history in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah — a port metropolis by the Red Sea, dubbed the "gate" to nearby Mecca — in a women's university where the depiction of nudity was prohibited, as everywhere in the Kingdom and as often, elsewhere, in the Muslim world.

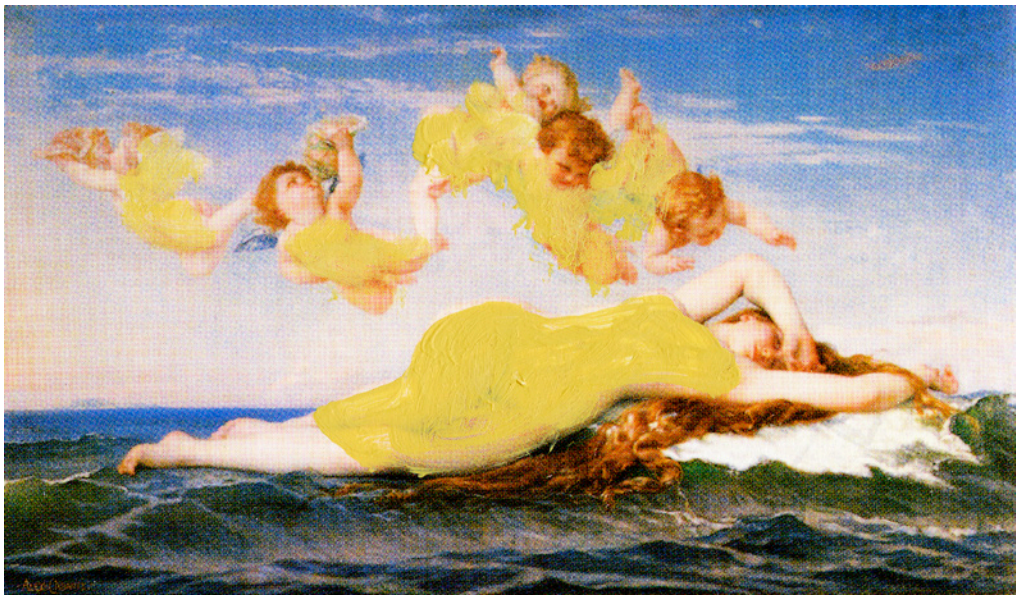
Or, rather, as nowhere else. We could find there, for example, a kind of mermaid whose dress woven of wavy brushstrokes looked like a soft patch of seaweed. In the rest of the country and across the Gulf region, the undressed women of the globalized West were either digitally censored or crossed out with one stroke of black marker. But here, in our school



library, this illustration of an art book imported from Europe or the United States had been patiently censored using paint, in several shades matching the seascape: two kinds of blue and a glaucous green found in the hollow of the waves. In a second copy of the book, that same nude wore a strapless dress in a similar cut but bright yellow this time, sunny and complementary to the painting's blue-greens.

That *Birth of Venus* by Alexandre Cabanel, admired by crowds of visitors at the Salon of 1863 and today at the Musée d'Orsay, did not seem to mind these novelty dresses recalling the opulent fashion of the Second French Empire or, closer to our day, a Hollywood type of glamor. This stereotypical prettiness looked like a pastiche of the academism displayed by the artwork underneath. The peculiarity of these additions even seemed fitting, considering the curious syncretism of an erotic-mythological composition showing the ancient goddess in a state of excessive languor, very 19th century, exposed as if profane—although too smooth and white to be flesh and blood, and nonetheless still and submissive, erotica too picture-perfect to signify the divine. From one dress to the other, censorship appeared instead to conjure up sunlight, sea foam, and wind.

Above the blue and green Venus a few cherubs fluttered behind a cloud. Their carnation showed through the uneven wash in small patches like flashes from the pink horizon; the very light verdigris chosen for this detail by the anonymous woman who had censored the image recalled the drapery highlights she had attempted lower down on the dress. And yet here, in our library, angels were rarely censored. Instead, one often found a disclaimer glued onto the flyleaves:



Dear reader,
This book contains pictures and scenes which are inappropriate to our Islamic beliefs and values, such as pictures of:
– Angels
– Jesus and his mother Mary (peace be upon them)
– Crosses and the crucifixion
– Bottles containing alcohol
– Scenes that contradict Islamic belief
… The College neither promotes nor condones such pictures, but due to the educational contents of this book, they remain untouched.

The yellow Venus was still accompanied by her cherubs, who wore costumes matching her dress. Roaming the aisles of our library's art section, leafing through its contents at random, one could find a scattered multitude of nudes similarly "retouched."

In *Attempting the Impossible*, René Magritte painted a generic interior: a little patch of dun wall with plain paneling and brown floorboards bereft of texture, evoking some imitation of a wooden floor. There stands a man dressed in a dark suit, holding a palette with smudges of black, gray, and a yellowed cream tone. This self-portrait of the painter at work is almost realistic, bordering on sfumato but with a graphic element reminiscent of collage or comics, as velvety shadows unfurl within neat outlines. The soft rendering of relief and the tidy contours combine in a semi-illusion, half-reverie, half-poster. This climate of being neither here nor there clashes with the sensational "impossible" announced by the title, this prodigious feat the painting lets us witness: the character is painting without a surface, as if on the air or into space, a woman who appears to be coming to life.

He would often move his hands to test and touch it,
Could this be flesh, or was it ivory only?
No, it could not be ivory. His kisses,
He fancies, she returns; he speaks to her,
Holds her, believes his fingers almost leave
An imprint on her limbs, and fears to bruise her.
He pays her compliments, and brings her presents
Such as girls love, smooth pebbles, winding shells,
Little pet birds, flowers with a thousand colors …

The quiet scene in dull shades depicted by Magritte is far from the effusion and "thousand colors" described by Ovid in his story of Pygmalion (here in Rolfe Humphries's translation). Instead, the painter's Pygmalion is a craftsman engrossed in his project, standing straight before his creature though without rigidity, without any particular stance; her face and his have the same vacant air, their eyes do not meet, their bodies do not touch — only the tip of the brush he barely holds, in his atonic hand, tickles her unfinished shoulder.

But you opened a book and this peace was disturbed. A shimmer ran across a page that you turned, and then it died once the page laid flat. With one tilt of the head it came back to life; a silver surface had materialized. Oblong, it superimposed onto a full-page *Attempting the Impossible* a straight, mid-length dress evocative of the flapper style and lamé of the roaring twenties — an elegance befitting a lady painted in 1928. The addition was so thin that you could discern the dark fold between her legs; there, the silver looked as though it were blackened. Strange censorship. Neither effective, nor discreet. Nor blatant, as censorship sometimes means to be; but subtle, present then silent according to the angle of incidence of the light, a shiny silver then merely gray and so blending into the neutral palette chosen by Magritte. The censor had even gone to the length of adding a touch of that silver-gray to the palette held by the painted painter.

If this censorship is strange, so is the painting underneath. In the original she's naked while he is fully dressed, but that's not what the matter is — that's unremarkable to a contemporary Western eye. What is shocking is how this image of nakedness does not conform to the rules of the "nude." The conventions of that modern Western genre — a limited range of postures, glances, options for the *mise en scène* — normally combine to represent a body-thing addressing us, "offered" to us. But here one finds this striking symmetry between the characters: they are the same height, have a similar posture and expressionless features; this one-to-one is constructed as if one were a reflection of the other. In this formal equivalence between René-Pygmalion and Georgette-Galatea — the model is the woman Magritte loved — in the closed circuit they form together, one does not identify that sensual yet disembodied phenomenon haunting the screens and museums of Western culture: a woman promised to the viewer, indissociable from his gaze which she summons, and which judges and dominates her.

FEBRUARY 2011

Preparing my first class, I had the ill-advised although, it turned out, instructive idea of selecting for a group reading a text I had enjoyed as a photography student in London. I wanted to get to know my students and establish from the outset a link between the history we would be studying and advertising, a contemporary use of the image I assumed would be of interest since their major was graphic design. It was a short essay by John Berger from his popular 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, opening with what I took to be a truism: "In the cities in which we live, all of us see hundreds of publicity images every day of our lives. No other kind of image confronts us so frequently." But on the streets of Jeddah, there weren't so many ads. I hadn't noticed this, only gradually

accessing an urban expanse where women weren't allowed to drive. As I depended on a driver, taxis and, later, a few friends to get around, my daily view of the city came down to a clipped perspective afforded by the tinted, backseat window of a car.

Continuing our reading, Berger told us: "in no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual messages." That fabric of signs, there, came loose: the main roads were punctuated only with banners showing a photo of King Abdullah smiling. On a few large billboards I savored, illiterate, letters unrolling in mysterious loops. But I found the shopping malls unsettling when storefront posters displayed photos of women and girls with their faces blurred.

After our reading, and without referring to the ideas I had thought they would take up and discuss, my students declared their love of advertising — more precisely the not-so-public and much more glamorous ads found in magazines, only discreetly amended with photoshopped leggings, sleeves and collars. When one of them said, "it allows me to dream," the others agreed.

His head resting on one hand and his gaze wandering, in a self-portrait Picasso pictured a dream prefiguring the painting by Magritte. In *The Artist and his Model* (1914) there is this same distance between two characters, and between them and the viewer; there's a similar vagueness in their eyes. It is thought that here as well the muse was a partner, Eva Gouel. There's also a similar dissonance between neat outlines and soft depths, heightened because Picasso only painted part of the canvas,

sketching the rest in pencil. But unlike the discreet chic that so well suited Georgette Magritte, on a black and white plate you saw Eva in a sky-blue tunic with black edging, an outfit weirdly garish in the gray, dusty picture.

The arbitrariness of a censorship that varied so much from one book to the next showed even more on the figures Picasso had distorted. His *Demoiselles d'Avignon* took turns getting dressed and undressed; one of them wore a bottom, another one a top, a third put on a skirt; outfits could be slinky or large and geometric; the first stripped while another bundled up to the chin in red paint thick like a fur; then they all wore long, deconstructed, asymmetrical outfits. But overall, in the numerous monographs on the shelves dedicated to Modern art, censors had rarely concerned themselves with these angular *Demoiselles*. Far from systematic, that lenient style of censorship, that bricolage, revealed a DIY atmosphere.

SEPTEMBER 2011

I was equipped with a black marker and its whiff of permanent ink was making me dizzy. That smell mingled with the glue-and-paper scent of all those new books and with the sweet taste of biscuits. I had thought one did that quietly, in some deep recess of the building, but our censoring session looked like a picnic. In that classroom filled with hot evening light and a crackling Fairuz song, the young children of my colleagues were playing among little towers of stacked-up textbooks. We were a dozen teachers busy with hundreds of copies to be distributed to the students. Laughter, Arabic, and English mixed in my ears. The chant of felt-tip pens filled the air, as though we were humming the quietest of songs.

Someone said that some years before the books weren't censored, but parents had complained.

"Carla, it's waist to the knees, right?" asked Zeyneb.

"Everybody waist to the knees. Women, no cleavage, no breasts, okay?"

"Found some!" declared Judy, giggling.

"Well then just give her a little … You know … I've been drawing bells."

Crescents, smiles, waves and zigzags, or tildes, ribbons, sat like garlands over countless breasts in the library copy of *Ways of Seeing* I had borrowed for my first day of teaching. Next to the illustrated text these

2. It is this *Grande Odalisque* we see wearing a gorilla mask on a well-known poster (1989) by the New York-based activist collective Guerrilla Girls, asking: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female." After a new count in 2012, the poster was updated: the number of female artists at that institution was down to 4%.

strokes enacted signs of crossing out, parentheses, and asterisks that seemed to stress the words of a chapter on the nude. Sitting on a vignette like an added question mark, a thick and flowing stroke disrupted a *Vanity* by Hans Memling (c. 1485) beneath which was written: "you painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure."

John Berger also wrote that before a nude "the focus of perception shifts from eyes, mouth, shoulders, hands — all of which are capable of such subtleties of expression that the personality expressed by them is manifold — it shifts from these to the sexual parts" which do not express a character (an effect he calls the "anonymity of nakedness"). And so, for once, in page after page of this *Ways of Seeing*, one could take a better look at faces. One could discern the endless melancholy of a *Bacchante* by Trutat, and Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* got to trade her languid mood for an air as mischievous as the flower scrawled over her breast.[2] Stimulating, questioning, and renewing one's way of seeing, censorship there did not amount to the "assassination attempt on thought" which Flaubert equated it with.

When it sets upon images, censorship is "iconoclasm," a term whose aura is altogether different. To the collective Western imagination, censorship is a hushed universe — one where authors are exiled, speech muzzled, committees secretive — encapsulated in a word whose sibilant syllables end on a "shh." While censorship is tight-lipped and the domain of administrations and decorum, iconoclasm — with its stutter-like, hard consonants — evokes the unruly shattering of stained glass windows, toppling statues and fervent clamor. The origin of the suffix "-clasm" is the Greek κλάω, which means to "break." And yet can one speak of breakage when censorship, upon the image, comes across as a caress, a tongue-in-cheek commentary, or a touch of (black) highlighter?

JULY 2012

At a conference workshop I was told that in the United Arab Emirates a university ripped out troublesome pages; another one had allocated a sealed-off room to contentious books, which could not be borrowed. Those were efficient and discreet solutions, economies of means: one does not need to retouch a book one does not read, and when a page has been excised, how to know — should the absence even show — what, precisely, is kept from us?

A blank sheet covered a whole illustration and yet the caption, having been spared, indicated what lay hidden: a reproduction of Delacroix's enormous painting (measuring close to 4 x 5 meters) *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827). But looking closer you discovered, precisely, what the censors meant to hide: two female bodies whose paleness contrasted so much with the darkness pervading the forbidden picture, that they were all you could see, through that paper too thin to conceal a violent chiaroscuro. If we could have lifted the paper we would see one of these women brought to her knees amid a jumble of riches, in a palace on fire, a man cutting her throat; we would see the second woman prostrate against the bed of a reclining, impassive Sardanapalus, the last great king of Assyria. The title of the painting is misleading: it is not the king whom we would see dying but his women and a slave, as well as a horse, in a massacre ordered by the monarch under siege. A third concubine would be drawing her last breath at the foot of the bed, her breasts exposed and eyes closed; another one would fall over as a man unsheathed his dagger; one woman would bury her face in a veil; a last one would have hanged herself in smoke-filled shadows.

We know nothing about the death, around 630 BCE, of Sardanapalus or Ashurbanipal, whose palace was in Nineveh, where today stands the Iraqi city of Mosul — Delacroix drew from a miscellany of pictorial and (fanciful) literary sources. Much like this patchwork of a painting, colonial Europe assembled notions and fantasies about the Middle East in order to dream of the Orient as a land of extremes, where primitive mores would

intertwine with aesthetic and sensual flourish. French artists indulged in populating that elsewhere with chimeric women such as the *Odalisque with Slave* by Delacroix's rival Ingres (1842), who stretches out on crumpled satin, her face asleep but her body electric. Her maid, wearing a composite costume — of Turkish inspiration but with a plunging neckline — plays the lute; the view overlooks a garden. In a book, the reclining mistress swayed her hips under a coppery sheet that echoed the orange silk worn by the musician, and the matching folds of a curtain. Too dampening perhaps, that alteration had warped the paper, sculpting true drapery into its rendition of burnished fabric.

The *Grande Baigneuse* or *Valpinçon Bather*, also a work by Ingres, depicts another such harem figure, this time seen from behind, seated by an interior pool we may only glimpse beyond a golden brown curtain. Her hips, at our school, were clothed in a lacework of golden paint, a felicitous choice for a picture bathed in pale, warm light. That addition's looping pattern added to the painting's chorus of twirls: it took after a puffy cloth spread over the daybed where the *Bather* sits, and the towel rolled, turban-style, at the back of her head, as well as the folds of the sheet she clutches, having, it seems, just dried herself.

Smitten with love, Hassan stole the beauty's feather dress while she was swimming and buried it in a secret tomb. Deprived of her wings, the woman became his captive. Hassan married her, showered her with silks and precious stones …

"The Tale of the Lady with the Feather Dress" from the *Thousand and One Nights* is a story which the sociologist Fatema Mernissi, in her book *Scheherazade Goes West*, has recounted learning by heart at the turn of the 1950s, from her grandmother who lived in Morocco in the city of Fez, in a harem. This tale captures the bittersweet taste of attractive fabrics as a woman's prerogative — an ambivalence reflected, across the Mediterranean, by Simone de Beauvoir's observation (in *The Second Sex*), that for a woman "the feathers, pearls, brocades, and silks she blends with her flesh; their iridescent hues and their soft textures make up for the harshness of the erotic universe that is her lot." Perhaps the strangeness of our library's many-colored retouching translated the strangeness of a censorship performed by people belonging to the social category of women, on depictions of women, for an audience of women.

The voyeuristic eroticism of the Western nude was replaced, in our books, by an eroticism of the caress, represented by those expressive brushstrokes, the repeated touch of felt-tip pens and the smoothness of the paper, fine like velum, veiling *Sardanapalus*. These materials wrought into marks formed a kind of language, tactile effects to be deciphered like so many signs across pages. Fortuitously, these evocative gestures formulated erotic provocations at once differing from and equivalent to those originally achieved by displaying nudity: this censorship transposed, as a translation would, the suggestive task of erotic pictures.[3]

Mernissi explained that the written version of "The Tale of the Lady with the Feather Dress" differs from the story her illiterate grandmother used to tell. The version compiled and printed in books by men is titled "The Tale of Hassan al Basri." Elevating Hassan's anonymous wife to a hero, the feminized title is an example of the kind of retouching the oral art of storytelling afforded the women of the harem, offering them an imaginative way out. Dreaming of her granddaughter's emancipation, the storyteller passed down to her a tale that differed from the one narrated by the official Scheherazade, not only in its title, but also in its teaching: contrary to the happy ending the readers know, the unofficial version's message was a call for women to live a life of travels, alone if they must, in search of freedom: "she should stay alert and be ready to move."

In an extended family of appropriation, parody, and *détournement* strategies, which could span many Western avant-gardes and counter-cultures, one would do well to include the subversive "retouching" Arab women practiced through storytelling, and perhaps certain contemporary retouching practices such as the one we have seen. Laying ink, paint, and sentiments onto images, this communicative censorship was a message our progressive institution addressed to the conservative society outside,

3. This sensual quality calls to mind Michel Foucault's contention, in his *History of Sexuality*, that the dynamics between sexuality and censorship have historically been much more muddled, at least in the West, than the conventional Western "repressive hypothesis" would have one think: "the power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace." But the history and doctrinal grounds of censorship differ between Christian and Islamic cultures — the concept of sex as sin, for example, being distinctly Western. Closer to our images, this censorship-as-caress evokes the extreme close-ups on, successively, either a woman's face or her hair, as found in television ads for shampoo broadcast in Saudi Arabia — an editing technique allowing these two features of a woman's appearance which, together, constitute the unrepresentable, to be united in a narrative (Noor Al-Qasimi has devoted a chapter to these ads in her PhD thesis on "Reconfiguring the *Muslim Female Subject*").

as a university educating young women so they may enter a profession in a country where eight women out of ten remained homemakers — these crossed-out, translated nudes were, truly, wearing costumes.

That translation granted its audience of Saudi Arabian students access to foreign images they had to study, in a globalized art world dominated by a Western canon of works. Without censorship, these pictures would remain inappropriate to the local context and therefore impossible to read and discuss — so these additions, indeed, added more than they took away. They brought to light not only the pictures underneath, but also the very act of censoring. As a result my students and I sometimes discussed what they thought about the practice. Some argued for it; others opposed it. The full, unedited pictures were, anyway, online. As a student once remarked in jest, through censorship the country had in fact twice as many pictures as the rest of the world, each image being doubled as an original and its edited — for better or worse — alternative.

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