

# Bharti Kher

## *Movements*



*Movements* is a tool designed by DHC/ART Education to encourage in-depth explorations of key concepts evoked by the works presented in *Bharti Kher: Points de départ, points qui lient*. By highlighting these points of conceptual departure through the document *Movements*, DHC/ART educators intend to inspire dialogue about the exhibition and encourage visitors to elaborate on the proposed themes through their personal interpretations and reflections. Over time, these *migratory concepts*<sup>1</sup> are subsequently enriched as they inform new contributions to our evolving conversations about art.

*Movements* also serves as a reminder that an aesthetic experience engages the body—its senses and its movements—as much as the intellect. The body’s physical, emotional, and perceptive gestures are intimately linked as we move through the exhibition space and our senses are awakened. The rhythm of our trajectories and changing perspectives also mobilizes our vision; images take shape as our memory and imagination are touched by the emerging aesthetic landscape. *Movements* is thus an invitation for the visitor to become immersed—mind and body—in **DHC/ART** exhibitions, thereby developing a rich and dynamic understanding of the works.

1. **BAL, Mieke** (2001). “Concept.” *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

# Context: *Postcolonialism*



Bharti Kher, *Points of departure IV* (detail), 2018.

Far from neutral depictions of geographical areas, maps influence the way in which we perceive the world and point to dominant ideologies from the time of their production. In 1569, Gerard Mercator introduced a map projection that allowed him to represent the spherical shape of the Earth on a flat surface in a way that preserved the shape of continents at the expense of size distortion. Using a mathematical formula that stretched the latitudes towards the poles, the Mercator map made continents south of the Equator appear considerably smaller.<sup>1</sup> The map soon became the standard for nautical charts and played an important role in the European colonial project, by facilitating exploration, exploitation and settlement and contributing to the continuous subjugation of nations in the global South.

In *Points de départ, points qui lient* at DHC/ART, Bharti Kher uses a series of maps to address issues around history, migration, colonization, geodesy, nation-states and border politics. As she puts it: “I wanted to communicate the ideas of movement as people on this planet, both physically and conceptually; and what clearer metaphor than a map.”<sup>2</sup> Born in London to Indian parents, and then moving to New Delhi as a young adult, Kher understands the fluidity of identities and refuses to be defined by them. Indian, British, female, artist, insider, outsider—it is at the intersection of these and many more overlapping identities that lies her poetry. “Geography and history – doesn’t everyone have them?”<sup>3</sup> she asks. Yes, and no, her work seems to answer, offering us different accounts of the world.

In *An Inveterate Habit of Elation 1* (2017), Kher carefully covers a North Sea map with layers of white, red, and blue round bindis of different textures in an almost Cartesian manner. Other maps with bindis, shown for the first time in this exhibition, range from the political map of an ancient continent to a map of USSR’s heavy industries, and also include maps of France, the Eastern Mediterranean, China and Japan. Here, Kher employs bindis of multiple colors, sizes and shapes—dots, sperm-shaped, arrows and swirls—in order to cross, blur, destabilize and write over borders. *Points of departure V* (2018) is covered by a circular grid with multiple sections that hides most of the map, while at the center of *Points of departure IV* (2018) is a big black swirl, hinting at the decentralization of power structures and the flux of people across the globe. In her own bindi language, the artist expresses the complex ways in which economic and labour issues are intertwined with the dominant discourses around nation-states, contested borders and foreign intervention. “It seemed particularly relevant to use the bindis to both reveal and obscure the ‘truths’ of the maps. To enliven the surface and subsume meaning,”<sup>4</sup> Kher says.

*Counter-mapping refers to a collaborative map-making process where communities appropriate maps as a state technology and create their own alternative versions.<sup>5</sup> By challenging dominant power structures, counter-maps are used as tools through which communities claim rights to land and natural resources. Consider some of the other uses of this mapping method. If you were to make your own, what shape would it take, what would you include and why?*

*Bharti Kher subverts narratives of neutrality and objectivity by including a plurality of voices in her works. What are some of the strategies she uses in Six Women (2013-2015) and Heroides (2016) to problematize questions around femininity?*

<sup>1</sup> TOBLER, Waldo (2018). “A new companion for Mercator.” *Cartography & Geographic Information Science*, vol. 45, no. 3., pp. 284-285.

<sup>2</sup> KERSEY, Amanda (2015). “Art Up Close: Bharti Kher’s ‘Not All Who Wander Are Lost.’” *WGBW News*. Online. <https://news.wgbh.org/post/art-close-bharti-kher-not-all-who-wander-are-lost>. Consulted April 3, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> SEN, Aavek (2012). “Fragments of a conversation with Bharti Kher.” *Bharti Kher*. Exhibition catalogue (Parasol Unit, September 14 to November 11, 2012). London: Parasol Unit, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> KERSEY, Amanda (2015). *Op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> MANOFF, Einat. (2014). “Destabilizing the Map through Critical Cartography and Resistance.” *The People, Place, and Space Reader*. Online. <http://peopleplacespace.org/fr/destabilizing-the-map-through-critical-cartography-and-resistance/> Consulted April 3, 2018.

# Content: *Skin*



Bharti Kher, *An absence of assignable cause*, 2007.

*What would you say your work is about? “Lots of things... but essentially, it all comes back down to the body and the engagement of the physical self within a space.”*

Bharti Kher

Bharti Kher’s practice comprises four distinct but interrelated dimensions: bindi works, hybrids, readymades, and sculptures. At the heart of this ensemble lies the body, and with it comes the skin. For the artist, this skin is not intended to confine the body in a permeable envelope. Rather, it is manifest in a surface layer teeming with bindis, in saris embracing cement pillars or in the plaster imprints of strange and familiar bodies encountering one another.

## ***The heart of a blue whale: bindi-skin embracing the organ***

*An absence of assignable cause* (2007) is Kher’s sculptural interpretation of a blue whale’s heart. The power and immensity of this organ overwhelm us, as it serves to pump and circulate blood throughout the body of the largest mammal on earth. True to size, the sculpture gives off strength but at the same time, given the heart’s extraction from the body of an animal, fragility and vulnerability. The membrane that surrounds it is ribbed with veins and shaped by multiple clusters of bindis. From the sanskrit word *bindu* meaning point or drop, the bindi is a dot traditionally applied to the forehead in between the eyebrows to represent the third eye.

*Applied as it is to this sculptural heart, the bindi-skin transforms the organ conceptually as much as it does formally. In what ways?*

## ***The draped sari: memory, portrait, fluidity***

A number of works shown in the exhibition incorporate the sari. There are those considered by the artist as portraits, which comprise saris dipped in resin and wrapped around cement pillars. Each one is the approximate weight of the artist and is associated with a woman Kher knows. A careful consideration of each draping thus becomes a way to reflect on these women’s different stories. Also exhibited are works such as *The night she left* (2011) or *The day they met* (2011), which are composed of twisted saris working their way up or down ready-made staircases, or rolling out in a succession of folds. Associated with the South Asian woman’s body, the sari is a piece of fabric without stitches that is worn draped over the body in multiple ways. For Kher, it can, among other things, evoke the memory of an absent body, adopt a natural or animal movement or explore its various identity, cultural and political dimensions. The sari also recalls her childhood, when her father worked in textiles and her mother was a dressmaker with her own fabric store.

*Observe any work in the exhibition that incorporates a sari and examine the relationship with its partner object. By also considering the title of the sculpture, how would you interpret it?*

## ***Plaster casts: the imprint of one body to another***

From 2012 to 2014, Kher created a series of a plaster casts representing sex workers in Kolkata—each one sitting on a stool, nude, eyes closed. From this series emerged the powerful *Six Women* (2013-2015), which is presented in the exhibition. Most recently, Kher pursued her research on the body and skin with her parents. As she wrote in her journal: “When you caress the skin and rub the plaster gently over and over so that all the pores and creases are etched and filled with plaster, it’s like encasing and mummifying a living being. You are trying to capture their breath, to find the imprint of their minds and thoughts and the secrets of the soul. (...) What the cast carries only the model can give.”<sup>2</sup>

*Consider the above reflection while taking a long moment in the presence of these six women, then jot down your thoughts about this encounter on paper.*

<sup>1</sup> BLOOMBERG (2015). “Bharti Kher”. *Brilliant Ideas*. Online. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciBfW7ozNg8>. Consulted April 3, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> ROSENTHAL, Stéphanie (2016). “A Rhizomatic Invasion.” *The Breathing House*. Exhibition catalogue (Freud Museum, September 30 to November 20, 2016). London: Hauser & Wirth Publications, p. 24.

# Composition: *Bindi*

The bindi is both a material and motif at the heart of Bharti Kher's practice. Our reflections on the composition of her works are freely inspired by the title of the exhibition as well as by the invitation extended to the body and mind's movements, a notion that grounds this pedagogical tool. Ideas and quotes are presented as a series of starting points that the reader is invited to read, re-read or undo, in drawing or collage.

## MERCHANDISE

Once a trace left from applying pigment to the forehead, the bindi has become an object for purchase: one can buy sheets of bindis in a range of colours in many stores throughout India and elsewhere. These are the bindis used by Kher. In this context, the history of the bindi intersects with that of mass-produced merchandise.

## WORK

The works using bindis are made in the artist's studio in Gurgaon with the help of a team of local assistants.<sup>3</sup>

## SPERMATOZOON

After seeing a woman wearing a bindi in the shape of a sperm, Kher went to the store where the woman had acquired it and bought out their stock.<sup>4</sup> Since then, this type of bindi covers many of Kher's sculptures, including *An absence of assignable cause*.

Curator Ziba Ardalan suggests that the bindi sperm is "symbolic of every single living creature on the planet, along with our vices and virtues, our existence, ideas, ambitions, and destiny."<sup>5</sup>

*Linger over one of the bindi works in the exhibition. Observe its surface, the motifs that emerge. After taking some time to look at the work, try to describe the visual effects you notice.*

## READYMADE

To create a readymade, an artist selects a pre-existing object, which they can modify or not, to make a work of art. The concept, developed by Marcel Duchamp at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, invites us to reflect on the importance (or lack thereof) of production and authorship in aesthetic judgment.

*Do you think the bindis used by Kher are a material or readymades? Where do you situate the difference between these two types of objects?*

## OPART

Op Art is based on the visual effects experienced through the juxtaposition of geometric shapes. At times Kher's works, in their visual rhythm, evoke the optical effects of this art historical movement.

The term bindu appears in the *Nasadiya Sukta*, or *Creation Hymn*, evoking the point of origin of the world.<sup>7</sup>

"The bindi is usually applied to the forehead between the eyebrows, an area that in the yogic sciences is considered to be of immense power, commonly referred to as the third eye."<sup>2</sup>

## LANGUAGE

Bharti Kher, on her use of bindis: "The density of the work is changing now. There is much more layering, much more this idea that they are like codes or languages that you can't read. You can't really focus on the image, and your eyes are constantly shifting, moving forwards and then back."<sup>6</sup>

## TARGET

Both *Cipher* placed on our building's facade on St-Sacrement St., and *Virus IX* bring to mind Jasper Johns's or Kenneth Noland's targets, Claude Tousignant's gongs, or Nadia Myre's *Meditations*.

The word "bindi" comes from the Sanskrit word *bindu* meaning point.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup> JHAVERI, Shanay (2010). "Conditions of Possibility: Bharti Kher's Use of the Bindi." Matter. Exhibition catalogue (Vancouver Art Gallery, July 9 to October 6, 2010). Vancouver/London: Vancouver Art Gallery/Black Dog Publications, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> NG, Elaine W. (2008). "Where I Work. Bharti Kher." ArtAsiaPacific. Online. <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/61/WhereIWorkBhartiKher>. Consulted April 3, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> TRIPATHI, Natasha (2017). "Bharti Kher's Bindis Mirror The Starry Night." Sotheby's. Online. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/blogs/all-blogs/on-india/2017/03/bharti-kher-bindi-the-starry-night.html>. Consulted April 3, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> ARDALAN, Ziba (2012). "Second Skin That Speaks of Truth." Bharti Kher. Exhibition catalogue (Parasol Unit, September 14 - November 11, 2012). London: Parasol Unit, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> SEN, Aveek (2012). "Fragments of a Conversation with Bharti Kher." Bharti Kher. Exhibition catalogue (Parasol Unit, September 14 - November 11, 2012). London: Parasol Unit, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> KRISHNANANDA, Swami (2018). "The Development of Religious Consciousness." *Swami Krishnananda*. Online. [https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/conscious/consc\\_2.html](https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/conscious/consc_2.html). Consulted April 3, 2018.

# Considerations: *Unheimlich*



Bharti Kher, *Mother and Child* (detail), 2014.

*“Unheimlich is the name for everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible.”<sup>1</sup>*  
Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling

In *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud discusses the *unheimlich* as a revelation of that which is usually private and concealed.<sup>2</sup> It is apart from us and makes us potentially nervous, anxious, or even frightened. The *unheimlich* makes us uncomfortable in its eeriness, and is literally the opposite of *heimlich*, which can be translated as “home.”

An immediate feeling of unease is aroused upon first viewing Bharti Kher’s *Mother and Child* (2014). The main character in this work can be interpreted as the central mother figure. The mannequin, with coiffed hair and sky-blue eye shadow extending to the eyebrows, flaunts a decorticated body. One of her breasts is severed and displaced, summoning the imagery of a modern-day Saint Agatha of Sicily. But here, rather than being displayed on a platter, the detached breast is placed at the centre of the child’s back—the connotation of breast and maternity as linked to consumption blatantly clear. The mannequin’s body is left lopsided, with a gaping circle as a trace or a scar, like a slice of ruby red grapefruit. Where a naked leg once stood to support the weight of her body is a void, ending with a feminine black pump. Our eye is drawn to the empty space as the child raises a stick in a way that suggests he is about to strike. She reaches out to pat him on the head (lovingly?) with her right hand as she stares vacantly to the wall just above and behind him. Broken, incomplete, disfigured, the mannequin’s high-heeled shoes and up-do pale in comparison to her crumbling body.

The child is a crudely assembled wooden sculpture that leaves proportion and grace behind, and that contrasts with the once smooth plasticity of the mannequin mother, even though her finish is currently chipping and nicked. On the other side of the central figure, sandwiching her in, emerges a second female figure, a doppelgänger that is stark black. She is a shadow of the main figure but this time more intact, and her hand penetrates the mannequin through a hole in her back. The hole in the doppelgänger’s own back is sealed off with a bundle of fur that she wears like a protective backpack. What does this alter ego represent? The shadow and the boy, two extensions of the mannequin mother—the original *heimlich* of the work—are no longer a part of the main figure, no longer one, no longer home. They are outside of their original self. The mannequin mother, in turn, has become a broken shell of her old self by giving birth to two beings: a child and a mother. These three forms, a chimera of sorts, constitute what was, what is now, and what will be. Is this an omen of what else is to come? Or is it a revelation of suppressed emotions, exposing that which was to remain concealed but is here brought to the spotlight?

*Kher describes an encounter between herself and her son when he saw this work. His first remark was, “It’s a bit violent, isn’t it?” to which she responded, “It’s not really about you and me; it’s about the boys that we are making; these boys that we have, as women, created in this culture in the past 30 or 40 years . . . Why have we created these monsters, who are they?”<sup>3</sup> The artist mentions that this work was created following a horrendous gang rape that took place in New Delhi in 2012.<sup>4</sup> How do you interpret the above statement by Kher after having viewed *Mother and Child* (2014), and with the knowledge of the violent act that preceded the work?*

*The idea behind the doppelgänger is that it resembles a living person, but often represents something that is not acceptable to the individual in the real world, that is suppressed, and that is only attainable in wishes or dreams. How can the mannequin’s shadow be thought of as its doppelgänger?*

<sup>1</sup> SCHELLING, F. W. J. (2007 [1835]). *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*. Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> FREUD, Sigmund (1999 [1919]). “The ‘Uncanny.’” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*. New York: Vintage, pp. 217-256.

<sup>3</sup> NARAYAN, Manjula (2015), “Two of India’s most interesting artists show medium is not the message.” *Hindustan Times*, Art and Culture section (February 8 edition). Online. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/two-of-india-s-most-interesting-artists-show-medium-is-not-the-message/story-QRmeNloqGdVw5lvYSwvudO.html>. Consulted April 3, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> BARRY, Ellen (2017). “In Rare Move, Death Sentence in Delhi Gang Rape Case Is Upheld.” *The New York Times*, Asia Pacific, May 5 edition. Online. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/world/asia/death-sentence-delhi-gang-rape.html>. Consulted April 3, 2018.



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