Constructing, Confirming, and Contesting Icons

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The Alan Kurdi Imagery appropriated by #humanitywashedashore, Ai Weiwei, and *Charlie Hebdo*

By Mette Mortensen

Introduction

Digital media have dramatically increased the number of images produced and shared from areas of conflict. The current era of "image oversaturation" (Dabashi, 2016) raises searching questions about which images shape and define the popular imaginary about contemporary conflicts: Which images become prevalent? Which are remembered (and which are forgotten)? Public discussions appear to be informed only to a limited degree by the multiplicity and diversity of visual sources available from current conflicts. Attention seems to gather around a small number of images. As a leftover from the analogue media landscape, some images are still proclaimed to be 'iconic': They are broadly circulated, set the news agenda, turn into frames of reference in public debate, and, in the course of time, come to represent history in media and popular culture. However, visual icons should not merely be regarded as 20th century relics. This becomes apparent if we turn our attention to appropriations of icons. While it is nothing new that "[i]conic news images are notoriously migratory", as Kari Andén Papadopoulos puts it (2008: 6), social media and the more active role assumed by users now play a major part in citing and re-citing, appropriating and re-appropriating icons.

In this article, I respond to the call for "focus on the image […] to be matched with equally attentive study of its history of appropriation" formulated by Robert Hariman and John Luis Lucaites in their seminal book *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (2007: 38). I argue that appropriations are central to both the *production* and *reception* of icons. On the

one hand, appropriations are instrumental in iconization processes. They confirm and consolidate the iconic status by recycling the image in question. On the other hand, appropriations are also vital to their reception in today's convergent, transnational media circuit. Appropriations help shape and delimit the publics and discourses surrounding visual icons by raising questions about morality and political obligations; commenting on the media's construction and mass dissemination of iconic images; reproducing or satirizing the pathos-filled rhetoric with which they are usually addressed; and so on.

Proceeding in four main sections, this article first draws on existing research on icons and appropriations by among others Hariman and Lucaites (2007), Mortensen (2011; 2015), Stage (2011), Kurasawa (2012), Hubbert (2014), Hansen (2015), and Boudana, Frosh et al. (2017) to develop a theoretical framework for how appropriations contribute to both the construction and reception of visual icons and how personification constitutes the main link between icons and their appropriations. The second section introduces the empirical point of departure for this article, the salient images from 2015 of Alan Kurdi, the drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee boy, as well as the qualitative and quantitative approaches deployed. The third – and longest – section analyzes three sets of appropriations of the Kurdi imagery. First of all, the numerous appropriations circulated on Twitter under the hashtag #humanitywashedashore were instrumental in the initial iconization process and show the spectrum of responses in appropriations, from emotional outcries of grief and compassion to calls for political solutions to the so-called 'refugee crisis.'[1] Based on genre analysis of the appropriations, two overall modes are singled out: the appropriations either *decontextualize* the figure of the drowned child from the setting of the original photographs or *recontextualize* this figure in a new setting. The two other analytical cases test the limits of decontextualization and recontextualization. In the second case studied for this article, Ai Weiwei decontextualizes the Kurdi imagery in a reenactment, which, despite the Chinese artist's intention of paying tribute to Kurdi, was denounced as tasteless and self-promoting. The third case is a series of cartoons by the French weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, which was condemned for satirically recontextualizing the photo of the child to criticize why and how this imagery

was turned into an icon. Fourth and finally, the conclusion reflects on the ways in which appropriations are symptomatic of the 'global' circulation and the 'local' receptions of digital images representing current conflicts.

Appropriating Icons

Appropriations of icons belong to current online visual, citational culture. Collective visual frames of reference are constituted and confirmed, but also contested and challenged through extensive citational practices. While adaptations are an enduring trait of culture and art, appropriations in the modern sense developed during the twentieth century, when various avant-garde movements and later pop - and appropriation art repurposed familiar motifs and objects from pop culture and art. Visual citation assumes new forms in the digital era as media users circulate and/or create appropriations and other visual, viral comments such as internet memes and gifs.

Appropriations are a defining trait of icons; "[c]opying, imitating, satirizing, and other forms of appropriation are a crucial sign of iconicity" as Hariman and Lucaites contend (2007: 37). From a scholarly perspective, appropriations are not merely interesting as spin-offs of iconic images. They constitute a genre in their own right, which often introduces a critical-reflexive dimension to icons and their reception. This critical edge forms a contrast to the usual communicative mode of visual icons, distinguished by simplicity, emotional appeal, and semantic openness, as research in this field has recurrently emphasized (Brink, 2000; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Mortensen, 2013; 2015; Boudana et. al., 2017). Like icons themselves, appropriations traverse media, platforms, and regions in the digital media circuit, especially when they address controversial subjects and/or are controversial themselves. Apart from the Kurdi-case, recent examples include artworks, graffiti, editorial cartoons, etc. of the so-called "hooded man" from the Abu Ghraib prison (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2008; Hansen, 2015) and video footage of the killing of Neda Agha Soltan during a demonstration in Tehran in 2009, which was transformed into artifacts such as t-shirts, posters, demonstration banners, and sculptures (Assmann

and Assmann, 2010; Mortensen, 2011; Stage, 2011).

To repeat a disclaimer often brought up in critical discussions about 'icons,' they should not be seen as a universal or essential type of images, but rather as constructions in public discourses involving intense circulation across media platforms along with repeated statements about their iconic status and ability to symbolize topical tensions or conflicts in society (e.g. Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Mortensen, 2016). As appropriations are integral to the production and reception of iconic images, they offer a key entrance point for theorizing and analyzing the current role and impact of icons. The viral spread of appropriations epitomizes the ongoing transformation of iconic images. Traditionally, icons emerged primarily in the top-down interplay between mainstream news media and political actors. Today, however, citizens, activists, and other non-elite actors increasingly infiltrate iconization processes from below. This changes both which images gain iconic status and how they gain iconic status. "Portability" (Hubbert, 2014: 117) has long characterized iconicity, but the online spread of icons and their appropriations drastically extend both the spatial and temporal dimensions of dissemination to the extent that "we can scarcely imagine globalization outside an international iconic sphere" (Bartmanski, 2015: 1). Icons travel faster and farther. When circulated in the transnational media circuit, meanings are lost and found in translation between contexts. Appropriations might point to difficulties involved in translation and they might add to the difficulties themselves.

Previous studies have not provided a clear answer as to whether this ongoing transformation challenges inherent power structures in the mobilization of visual icons. Instead they point to intricate interplays between legacy media and social media as well as between media producers and – users (Mortensen, 2015; 2016). Be that as it may, icons invariably raise questions of power: which visual representations become dominant (and which do not) in relation to topical crises and conflicts? This question is particularly prominent in today's digitalized and convergent media ecology, in which the tension between (proclaimed) iconic images and visual saturation brings to the forefront issues about when and how the public becomes informed about and engaged in humanitarian catastrophe and

other urgent crisis situations.

Appropriations feed iconization processes by citing or copying the image in question, thus confirming its iconic status as a prevalent frame of reference and part of collective visual memory. At the same time, appropriations form the major visual response to visual icons, which are spun into an intertextual web by referring to previous icons and giving way to appropriations and possibly also future icons (Hansen, 2015; Mortensen, 2015). Appropriations help shape and delimit discourses surrounding iconic images e.g. by raising questions about moral spectatorship and political responsibility, the public's compassion or compassion fatigue, and the role of media in favoring certain images while disfavoring others. In the words of Hariman and Lucaites:

> …appropriations are a key feature of iconic circulation precisely because the images are being used to do the work of democratic legitimation. They are used by citizens to negotiate the self-understanding of a democratic society amidst historical change and to work out public opinion and personal attitudes about specific political actors, policies, and practices (2007: 38).

Appropriations, accordingly, have the potential "to mobilize collective memory and political imaginations to new ends" (Hubbert, 2014: 124). They are instrumental not only in constructing icons, but also in offering and negotiating between competing interpretive frameworks in relation to topical conflicts, which are uncertain, unsettled, and require the public to take a stand.

Appropriations often involve a certain iconoclasm as they challenge from within the icon and the values associated with it. As Lene Hansen observes, the study of appropriation entails a double enquiry: "An appropriation can thus be theorised as an intervention in a double sense: into the icon itself and into the discursive field of which the appropriation becomes a part" (2015: 276). Icons typically display simple messages about human despair, calling for compassion in response to situations

of conflict, which are anything but simple. By contrast, appropriations become "sites of contestation" (Hubbert, 2014: 118), as they confirm, confront or poke fun at the hegemonic vision of society crystallized in iconic images. Some appropriations earn a degree of independence or aspire to become icons themselves. The most famous example is probably Thomas E. Franklin's photograph of firefighters raising a flag in the debris of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, which cited Joe Rosenthal's World War II icon *Flagraising of Iwo Jima* (Mortensen, 2013). However, as long as reference to the original icon is brought up, appropriations hardly make up independent icons.

Appropriations not only take part in the production and reception of iconic images, but also meta-communicate about their status and function in public discourses. In the digital media circuit, appropriations raise questions about the relationship between original and copy as well as between singular image and image abundance. Moreover, by transforming genres and modes of expressions, appropriations confer a *Verfremdungseffekt* to iconic images. They 'de-naturalize' the matter-of-course air iconic images quickly obtain through ubiquitous media presence and repeated claims about their impact on public opinion, policmakers, etc. (see also Hubbert, 2014: 117).

Personification

Appropriations explore the symbolic impact attributed to iconic images, which both function as an *image of* and an *image for*, as Aleida Assmann and Corinna Assmann (2010: 35) put it: they refer to a specific, historical situation and allude to overriding societal challenges and conflicts (see also e.g. Brink, 2000; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Boudana et al, 2017). Personification is the pivotal point for this double statement of the authentic and the symbolic. The individuals in the images are mostly depicted as archetypal victims, heroes, villains, etc. in a semantically open form allowing for audience identifications and investments. In this way, iconic images are tied to specific situations, geographical locations, and personal biographies while also pointing to larger issues and collectives of people, for instance the 'refugee crisis,' the 'threat of terror' or, in more general terms, human suffering and

despair. As in the case studied for this article, suffering or dead children are a frequent motif. By showing innocent victims, these iconic images make plain the human cost of conflicts and activate a "deep register of moral response" (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007: 178). Fuyuki Kurasawa comments on the preference for personification in iconic images:

> Personification is a representational genre that singles out a specific person's condition as a figurative and literal embodiment of the gravity or intensity of the suffering caused by a humanitarian crisis (2012: 72).

Personification strips icons of "any contextual information" (ibid.) and detaches the represented individuals from the specific circumstances. Appropriations usually take their point of departure in the personification presented in icons, which is explored in decontextualized or recontextualized forms. In this way, appropriations highlight the tensions between individual and collective identities, factual reality and symbolic meaning, ethics and aesthetics.

Personification also plays the important role of tying appropriations to their source, the iconic image. Whereas icons typically fall within realistic photojournalism, appropriations morph the motif into different genres. Unfastened from the documentary claim associated with the original photograph, the central figure(s) and scene are imitated in more performative genres such as satire, photo collage, reenactments, etc. Across shifting genres, personification becomes the main cue for audiences to decode appropriations. They recognize the screaming girl in Nick Ut's Vietnam War icon "Accidental Napalm" (1972) even if this figure is holding hands with Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald in an appropriation by artist Banksy (see also Boudana et al., 2017: 14). Likewise, they recognize the composition of a man standing in front of a row of tanks from the iconic photos by Jeff Widener of the so-called "tank man" in Tiananmen square in 1989, even if Obama, Michael Jackson or Marge Simpson (of the animated sitcom *The Simpsons*) are confronting the tanks or if the tanks have

been replaced with oversized rubber ducks. In other words, personification is a decisive factor in iconic images and constitutes the essential link between icons and appropriations.

Appropriations of the Alan Kurdi Imagery: Case and methods

Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy of Kurdish background, drowned in the Mediterranean Sea and his body washed ashore on a Turkish beach near the holiday resorts at Bodrum on September 2, 2015. Two photographs taken by Nilüfer Demir for the Dogan News Agency became widely known, even though the images were mostly referred to in singular as one icon (see also Assmann and Assmann, 2010: 234). One shows the drowned child lying on the shore and the other a Turkish coast guard carrying the body. First circulated under the Twitter hashtag #humanitywashedashore, the images traversed media platforms within minutes and hours after their release (Vis et al, 2015). Following the customary pattern, numerous appropriations emerged instantly as part of the iconization process.

Public debate and opinion on refugees to a high degree depend on and are framed by visuals, even if the effects and affects prompted by iconic images of distant suffering are often as unpredictable as they are ephemeral (Höijer, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006; Bleiker et al, 2013; Mortensen and Trenz, 2016). The Kurdi images were instantly declared to be iconic for powerfully symbolizing the humanitarian disaster caused by the 'refugee crisis', one of the largest transnational challenges in recent years, and the simple, tragic iconography of the drowned child at the beach called for fierce expressions of grief, sorrow, moral outrage, and political condemnation. Even if the news media had covered the hardship of refugees for months, this particular imagery resonated strongly and especially among European publics. One contributing factor to this appeal could be that the images collapsed the distance between 'there' and 'here' usually upheld in news photographs of refugees, which either represent distant suffering or the economic, safety, social, and logistical challenges related to refugees seeking asylum in Europe:

Few refugee news stories make the connection between 'there' and 'here': sympathetic coverage of those in far-off lands affected by disaster and war appears in stark contrast to the media treatment of those seeking asylum in the West (Wright, 2014: 1-2).

From the perspective of European spectators, the Turkish border to the Mediterranean, where Kurdi was found, became the junction "between the 'there' of the boy's home context of the war in Syria and the 'here' of Europe" (Mortensen and Trenz, 2016: 354).

Whereas existing research on humanitarian communication centers on photojournalism, this article broadens the scope by engaging with appropriations in a range of genres, including cartoons, photo collage, and reenactments, which are usually not studied in relation to humanitarian issues or to the role performed by iconic images and their appropriations. Furthermore, this specific case has not been analyzed from the perspective of appropriations; previous research has mainly concentrated on social media dissemination and opinion formation (e.g. Vis et al, 2015; Mortensen and Trenz, 2016).

Three sets of appropriations are studied in the following. First, appropriations disseminated under #humanitywashedashore, the most prominent Twitter hashtag in relation to the Kurdi case, were analyzed by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. To provide an initial overview, all appropriations disseminated under this hashtag in the period from 2. September 2015 to 1. September 2016 were sorted according to the simple categories of type of image, number of times circulated, genre, and motif. Next, a qualitative analysis was conducted of the two overriding modes: *decontextualization* and *recontextualization*, to which the genre analysis pointed. The two other cases demonstrate how appropriations continued to be produced after the initial iconization phase; I analyze the most publically debated appropriations, which take decontextualization (the artistic reenactment by Ai Weiwei) and recontextualization (the satirical cartoons by *Charlie Hebdo*) to extremes. Both analyses are based on public responses to the appropriations and draw on news media content retrieved through the nexis search engine.[2]

#humanitywashedashore: Genres and Modes of Appropriation

Appropriations of the Kurdi imagery were shared under many hashtags and on many social media sites. #humanitywashedashore by no means includes the total amount of appropriations. However, the purpose of this quantitative analysis is not to give a complete overview or track the trail of dissemination, but rather to gain an impression of which appropriations were circulated, which were the most popular, and to which genres they belonged. Only the hashtag #humanitywashedashore was studied, and not the Turkish counterpart #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik, due to the assumption that this would prompt the most international response (even if the predominant language on #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik is still English and the images shared under the two hashtags overlap to a large degree).

1634 images were shared under #humanitywashedashore, the vast majority during the first three days.[3] Of these, 656 images or 40 percent were appropriations. 147 unique appropriations were shared, but not in equal measures. The most popular is a cartoon shared 72 times of Kurdi lying peacefully in a bed, which will be interpreted below. The second most popular appropriation is a sand sculpture of Kurdi on the beach by Indian sand artist Sudarsan Pattnaik. A text in front of the reenactment repeats the hashtag "Humanity washed ashore" and above is written in capital letters "SHAME SHAME SHAME." This specific image was circulated 47 times, while a different photograph of the same reenactment was circulated six times. The third most shared image (39 times) was a cartoon of Alan Kurdi with wings and holding a rose. Of the remaining appropriations, 19 were shared 10 times or more. 89 appropriations were only shared once. It goes beyond the scope of this article to account in detail for the other images circulated under the hashtag. They included mainly the original images of Alan Kurdi, especially the one of him as a sole figure on the shore. Other frequently disseminated images were family snapshots of Kurdi alone or with his brother (who also drowned) from before the flight, images of refugees in boats and drowned children, as well as news media clips.

Genres of Appropriation

Dividing the appropriations into genres provides an entry to understanding how they contribute to the production and reception of the iconic imagery. Initially, six genres were identified (figure 1): 1) "Non-realistic drawings" are cartoons, comics, etc. featuring non-mimetic versions of the Kurdi figure. 2) "Photo collages" combine the imagery with other photographs. 3) "Photo documentations of reenactments" show sand sculptures or people imitating the Kurdi figure. 4) "Realistic drawings" are drawings of the motif in an essentially unaltered form. 5) "Unaltered photos, with text" refer to one of the original photographs, on which text is written on the actual image, i.e., this category does not include images which merely add a caption or frame the photographs in a news story. 6) "Other photos" are images with clear reference to the Kurdi imagery, e.g. the most shared one showed a stranded whale surrounded by people, which formed a contrast to the representation of Kurdi as a solitary figure.

	Non-realistic drawings	Photo collages	Photo docu-mentations of reenactments	Realistic drawings	Unaltered photos, with text	Other photos
Unique images	85	22	4	16	16	4
Times shared	434	86	60	44	17	15

Figure 1: Genres of appropriations

Non-realistic drawings were by far the most popular genre, both in terms of unique images and circulation. In most cases, establishing the artist or producer as well as the original source was difficult. Many appeared to be editorial cartoons created by professional cartoonists/artists. Most non-realistic drawings contributed to the major narrative of compassion and grief, some with political undertones (two *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons constitute exceptions to this general pattern, but are not treated separately in this section). Moreover, the numbers indicate that the most circulated appropriations translate the photojournalistic imagery into the performative genres of non-realistic drawings, photo collages, and documentations of re-enactments. Concerning the ratio between unique images and times shared, photos of appropriations were comparatively speaking shared most frequently, with four images

shared 60 times.

Decontextualizing and Recontextualizing the Icon

Based on the genre analysis, two modes of appropriations were identified. They cut across the genres and allow us to address the communications and functions of appropriations on a more general level. *Decontextualization* isolates the figure of the drowned child and includes appropriations within the genres of realistic drawings and photo documentations of reenactments. *Recontextualization* inserts the figure into new contexts and contains the four remaining genres. Recontextualization is by far the most frequent mode in terms of unique images and their circulation (figure 2).

	Decontextualization (Photo documentations of reenactments, and realistic drawings)	Recontextualization (Non-realistic drawings, photo collages, unaltered photos with text, and other photos)
Unique images	20	127
Times shared	104	552

Figure 2: Modes of appropriations

Personification of Kurdi	Figure unaltered	Figure altered	Figure not included
Total	106	22	19
Decontextualization	20	0	0
Recontextualization	86	22	19

Figure 3: Personification

If we first turn to decontextualization, personification needless to say comprises a key characteristic as the appropriations center on the figure of Kurdi (figure 3). All appropriations within this mode reproduce the figure of Kurdi lying on his stomach, while the one of him being carried by a coast guard is not appropriated at all. The most shared appropriation (17 times) within this mode is a drawing of Kurdi in subdued colors, which replaces the photograph's representation of the beach with a black background (ill. 1).

This is typical of the way these appropriations emphasize the iconic status and symbolic impact of the Kurdi images by isolating the motif and detaching it from photojournalism's claim to reality. Even if they accentuate symbolicity and iconicity, the appropriations typically leave the precise meaning of the image open. This confirms the widespread belief that iconic images require 'no caption' because they are thought to be self-explanatory and unite audiences in the same understanding (although empirical research suggests the opposite, e.g., Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Mortensen, 2015). The appropriations that decontextualize the Kurdi figure shift attention away from the specific instance of the drowning and the context of the 'refugee crisis' to evoke a general register of emotionality such as solidarity and mourning. Stripped of context, the refugee child is depicted as a universal or ideal victim (Ensor, 2010; Mortensen, 2016).

With regard to *recontextualization,* personification is still a strong factor, although not as dominant as in the previous mode (figure 3). The recognizable figure of Kurdi is again deployed in most (86) of the 127 unique images. 22 images have altered the figure, for instance showing Kurdi swimming in the ocean or holding the hand of a Jesus-like figure. 19 do not show Kurdi, but represent him by means of visual metonymies such as a teddy bear, referring to a family photo of him with a teddy bear, or his blue and red clothes hanging on a clothes-line, i.e., personification by proxy. The recontextualizing appropriations are within a continuum between the political and the emotional in so far as they either thematize what the depicted scene shows about the world (mainly in political terms) or what the world could and should be (mainly in emotional terms). Appropriations signposting 'what this shows about the world' are primarily photo collages in keeping with this genre's tradition for

political criticism. The most frequently shared photo collages insert the figure of Kurdi into the middle of grandiose round tables of assemblies at the Arab League (shared 25 times) (ill. 2) and the UN (shared 20 times) as an indication that the 'refugee crisis' should be the centerpiece of political discussions. Other photo collages combine Kurdi with leading politicians: the figure is placed on a birthday cake while Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad (ill. 3) and his family are blowing out the candles, implying that the president, leading a privileged life, does not assume responsibility for the refugees fleeing his country. A couple of other photo collages add then-British prime minister David Cameron carrying a surf board to create the illusion that he is walking past the little drowned boy without taking notice. Once again, this hints at the leisurely life style of political leaders and their failure towards refugees. Photo collages also explore the "inter-iconity" of this image (Hansen, 2015) by presenting the imagery in juxtapositions with preceding iconic images, which have likewise been attributed the power to move public opinion and political decision-making processes such as the above-mentioned "Accidental Napalm" from 1972, starving Somali children from 1993, etc.

The appropriations that recontextualize the imagery in emotional displays of 'what the world could and should be' mainly belong to the genre of non-realistic drawings. The most circulated appropriation falls within this mode (ill. 4). Judged from its online circulation of more than 25 billion, this appropriation could almost qualify as iconic in itself.[4] This cartoon was first published on September 2, the day when the drowning took place and the images of Kurdi first came out, to which this appropriation presents a counter-narrative. It shows Kurdi lying indoors on a children's bed underneath a mobile of the night sky. The curtain is partially drawn and the sky outside is visible as if to indicate that the figure is still safe, even if he is not shut off from the world. This appropriation tells "how his story should have ended," as Steve Dennis, the artist behind it, wrote in the tweet publishing it.[5]

To sum up this first part of the analysis, the appropriations shared under the Twitter hashtag #humanitywashedashore were initially divided into six genres. Based on this, the modes recontextualization and decontextualization were singled out, which enabled me to point to two overall functions of appropriations: they either isolate the motif or transpose it into different contexts.

In the next two sections, the modes will be examined in greater depth. Ai Weiwei and *Charlie Hebdo* created the appropriations of the Kurdi imagery that drew most international attention. The conspicuous differences between the Chinese dissident artist and the French satirical weekly aside, they were both well-known beforehand for their often provocative takes on controversial, political subjects. Ai decontextualizes and reenacts the position of Kurdi's body on the beach, which led to intense discussions about the legitimacy of this artistic gesture. *Charlie Hebdo* was condemned for recontextualizing the figure of Kurdi to criticize the iconization of his image. In this manner, the two (in)famous appropriations test the limits of decontextualization and recontextualization in public debates about icons and their appropriations: how far can appropriations go in assuming the identity of a victim who has suffered a tragic death and in criticizing the construction of this victim's identity?

Ai Weiwei's 'Crass Selfie': Testing the Limits of Decontextualization

Ai Weiwei posed as Alan Kurdi on the beach of the Greek island Lesbos to "raise awareness about the plight of refugees" in a photograph taken by Rohit Chawla for *India Today* in January 2016 (Biri, 2016). From the appropriations disseminated on Twitter, we know that reenactments were quite common. Ai symbolically assumed the identity of the victim, which in recent years has been a recurrent gesture in online expressions of mourning over deaths receiving public notice. For instance, the Twitter hashtag "je suis Charlie" was widespread in the wake of the January 2015 shootings at the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and the slogans "I am Neda" and "we are Neda" became prevalent in public displays of

grief and anger after the shooting of Neda Agha Soltan (Assmann and Assmann, 2010; Mortensen, 2011; Stage, 2011).

Himself a political refugee, Ai had long fought for improving the circumstances of refugees and had taken residency on Lesbos to document and help at one of the European entry points for refugees. The reenactment was intended as a "tribute" to Kurdi (Dabashi, 2016). In contrast to the original color photograph, Ai's reenactment is reproduced in a more aesthetically refined black and white. The artist mimes the position of Kurdi as he lies on his stomach in the pebbles. His eyes are closed, his body appears to be motionless.[6] In an interview with UN's refugee agency, Ai explains the rationale behind the work:

> Alan Kurdi is not just one person. In the past year, in 2015, everyday two persons, two young persons just like him drowned. It's very important to put myself in that condition and I always believe you have to be involved, you have to act (UN Refugee Agency, 2016).

The act of putting himself "in that condition" is to be taken both literally and metaphorically: Ai meticulously imitated Kurdi's pose to accentuate the symbolic meaning of the original photographs. According to Ai, Kurdi stood for all young refugees drowning, two each day in 2015. Thanks to Ai's prominent status in the art world, the photograph of his reenactment became an icon in its own right, according to Sandy Angus, co-owner of India Art Fair, which lent exhibition space to this piece:

> It is an iconic image because it is very political, human and involves an incredibly important artist like Ai Weiwei […] The image is haunting and represents the whole immigration crisis and the hopelessness of the people who have tried to escape their

pasts for a better future (Tan, 2016).

In line with Ai's own interpretation, Angus argues that this appropriation succeeds in moving from the photographic documentation of one drowned refugee to a general symbolization of the "hopelessness" of the "immigration crisis." This, in Angus' opinion, means that the appropriation achieves iconic status itself.

Other commentators failed to see the iconic potential. Ai's work was met with harsh critique for being "a crass, unthinking selfie" (Jones, 2016) "crude," "thoughtless," "egotistical" (Ratnam, 2016), "overt[ly] insensitiv[e]" and "vulgar" (Amirkhani, 2016), "blunt," "deluded," "very frivolous," a "very cold-hearted exploitation" (Korte, 2016), "bad taste," "victim porn" (Steadman, 2016), and a way to "sensationalize" and "aestheticiz[e]" the refugee crisis that was reminiscent of a "fashion shoot" (Biri 2016). Attacking the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the appropriation, the disapproving reactions were numerous and severe. Given this article's focus, it is particularly interesting that one recurrent objection concerned the appropriation's lack of context. This was addressed on two levels as a lack of interpretive context for the work of art and a lack of factual context about the drowning.

Regarding the first level, Professor Hamid Dabashi and other critics stated that this appropriation left them unsure of how to respond:

> What does it exactly mean when a world renowned artist, a rather portly middle-aged man,
> poses as the malnourished dead body of a Syrian refugee child washed ashore as he and his
> family were trying to escape the slaughterhouse of their homeland? (Dabashi, 2016)

This appropriation seemed to come without a manual in the opinion of Dabashi and others; a feature shared by the other appropriations within the mode of decontextualization studied for this article. Judging by the critical voices, the identity, status, and physical appearance of Ai, the "renowned artist"

and "rather portly middle-aged man," stood in the way of acknowledging his imitation as a tribute. In other words, the gap could not readily be closed between the reality depicted on the original photo and the symbolic claim of the appropriation. Personification was not deemed successful in this instance. Even if Ai is a refugee himself, this appropriation could, from a critical perspective, be regarded as an explication of a difference or even hierarchy in representations of refugees: between Kurdi from an 'ordinary' Syrian-Kurdish refugee family and Ai the influential artist, between those safe and privileged and those suffering or death.

Skepticism towards the other missing context, the influencing factors behind the drowning, was expressed by, among others, art scholar Jordan Amirkhani:

> By harnessing a viewer's attention and emotional investment in the image through pity, he bypasses any contextual elements of the causes or explanations for Kurdi's death, and mobilizes the image to represent the entirety of the Syrian humanitarian crisis. In doing so, Weiwei turns the spotlight toward himself rather than prioritizing and creating space for the suffering to speak for themselves (Amirkhani, 2016).

While Amirkhani implicitly agrees with Ai's own claim about the work's symbolic gesture, she finds it problematic that the appropriation comes to stand for "the entirety of the Syrian humanitarian crisis" and bypasses "any contextual elements." Amirkhani draws the conclusion that, ultimately, the work is more about Ai himself than about Kurdi and other victims of the humanitarian crisis, who were not granted a representational space in this appropriation. The critical voices inferred that by assuming Kurdi's identity, Ai failed to explore both the symbolic layers and the underlying reality. Instead of voicing genuine compassion or political critique, decontextualization in this case amounted to precisely this: a lack of contexts for the reenactment and its representation of Alan Kurdi. In this way, the appropriation pointed to two key questions regarding decontextualization, which by repeating the

central figure/scene of the icon, comes across as personification in its purest form: how should this be interpreted as a work in its own right and what does it tell us about or add to the original imagery?

"Je Suis Charlie" No More: Testing the Limits of Recontextualization

"Charlie Hebdo makes fun of dead Syrian child and no one's laughing!" (DailyBhaskar.com, 2015). In this way, an entertainment news site summarized the controversy sparked by *Charlie Hebdo's* series of appropriations. Whereas Ai's appropriation was criticized for lacking context, the French satirical weekly was condemned for bad taste, callousness, and racism after transposing the figure of Kurdi into contested religious, cultural, and political contexts.

Charlie Hebdo considered the public outpouring of grief, outrage, and shock over the photographs to be hypocritical seeing as the general attitude and policies towards refugees remained largely unaffected. The magazine published series of cartoons in September 2015 and January 2016. Among the most debated was a cartoon showing the little boy's body beside a billboard advertising McDonald's children's menus and a caption reading: "So close to the goal." Critics contended that this cartoon mocked refugees for risking their children's life to have a share of European commodities. Meanwhile cartoonist Coco maintained that her intention had been to expose "the capitalist dream that the smugglers have sold to parents" (Mackey, 2015). An equally contentious cartoon released in January 2016 showed pig-faced men running after women under the caption: "What would little Alan have grown up to be? Ass groper in Germany".[7] Making an explicit reference to the series of sexual assaults on New Years Eve 2015 in Cologne by men from Middle Eastern countries, this cartoon addressed the U-turn taken in public opinion on refugees and asylum seekers since the publication of the Kurdi images. Other cartoons played on French themes and figures, such as left-wing politician Jean-Marie Le Pen, and caused less furor. The magazine received about 20 death threats for their first front-page cartoon of Kurdi next to the McDonald's billboard (Chazan, 2016).

Regarding the role performed by appropriations, journalist Leonid Bershidsky (2015) commented on *Charlie Hebdo*'s satirical cartoons of the Kurdi imagery: "Modern day icons lose their potency quickly. When they come back as harsh satire, they regain some of their healing qualities". Even if appropriations consolidate and prolong the iconic status of certain images, healing qualities are not guaranteed. Appropriations such as the ones by *Charlie Hebdo* also reopen wounds and inflict new ones. Debates in news and social media indicated that moral disgust was the prevalent response. Deploying satire to comment on the tragic death of an innocent child seemed to border on the sacrilegious. The harshest critique came from Alan Kurdi's father, who stated that *Charlie Hebdo* was "inhuman and immoral," and as wicked "war criminals and terrorists" (Allegretti, 2016), thus underscoring the, by then, great divide between the historical incident of the drowning and the symbolic significance of the iconic imagery explored in appropriations.

Others responded by making appropriations of the appropriation, once again emphasized that debates on visual communication often assume a visual form. Receiving the most attention, Queen Raina of Jordan tweeted a counter-image of a doctor under the headline: "What would little Aylan have grown up to be," which became immensely popular on Twitter for showing an alternative future prospective for Alan Kurdi (had he not drowned) than "ass groper". Appropriations in this way rectify other appropriations and thereby redraw the borderlines of the public surrounding iconic images.

The attention stirred by *Charlie Hebdo* is not least ascribable to how two major international crises in recent years intersected in the appropriations: 1) the 'refugee crisis' and its representation in the iconic photographs of Kurdi, and 2) *Charlie Hebdo* was one of the epicenters in the so-called cartoon crisis after it re-published the Mohammad drawings originally printed in the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. As far as *Charlie Hebdo* is concerned, this crisis culminated on January 7 2015 with the deadly attack at the editorial offices in Paris, which shocked the public and

prompted numerous displays of compassion, including four million people demonstrating peacefully in Paris. When *Charlie Hebdo* published the appropriations of Kurdi, many worried whose identity they had adopted when expressing sympathy and defending freedom of speech under the tagline "je suis Charlie." Did this weekly advocate free speech or simply hate speech?

Whereas Ai was claimed to have created an independent icon, *Charlie Hebdo* questioned the iconization. This accords with the magazine's declared policy of "destroying symbols, breaking down taboos, bursting bubbles of fantasy" (Bershidsky, 2015). Laurent "Riss" Sourisseau, whose signature was on the cartoon of Kurdi as a future "ass groper," stated that:

> This image is spoken of as a relic endowed with enormous powers, an icon that will bring back our faith and open our hearts […] It must be so, Christian Europe. A Europe that still believes in miracles (Mackey, 2015).

Riss argued against the vast power attributed to the "relic" of Kurdi acting as a game changer in public discourses on the 'refugee crisis', which he regarded as a religious leftover from a Europe that believed in "miracles" and that an "icon" will "bring back our faith and open our hearts." If we take Riss' explanation at face value, *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons can be seen as an iconoclastic attempt to contest the emotionality awakened by the photographs of Alan Kurdi. Riss associated the iconization of this secular icon with the cult of worshipping religious icons (Brink, 2000), thus underlining how the iconization was not within the realm of rationality and realpolitik.

The appropriations by *Charlie Hebdo* address the clash between the values ascribed to the Kurdi imagery and other discourses on refugees. This is most evident in the cartoon speculating that Alan would grow up to be an "ass groper in Germany." The recontextualizations open for re-formulating collective identities if Kurdi is not seen as an "ideal victim" but rather as one out of many refugees suffering and dying: who are "they," the refugees, are they regarded as victims or potential

threats? And who are "we," citizens of countries to which refugees flee and spectators to the images of the deceased child, do we belong to a transnational, solidary community or a precarious national state to be protected?

Conclusion

Digital images representing current conflicts travel nearly effortlessly across linguistic, cultural, and regional boundaries. But they do not always translate. The images of the little drowned refugee boy at the Turkish beach seemed to call forth a unity of emotions and opinions. However, the apparent consensus in construing the Kurdi-imagery as 'iconic' was accompanied by dissensus about what it meant and what it should mean. While the visual icon swiftly became a standard reference in debates about the 'refugee crisis', short-hand for the humanitarian catastrophe and the missing political solutions, the appropriations point to diverging interpretive frameworks and local receptions. They explore and add to the emotional and political tensions underlying the seeming unity of reception: Decontextualizations raise the question of how audiences are to cope with the traumatic reality represented so bluntly in the Kurdi imagery and deal with the interplay between aesthetic expression and the tragic death of a refugee child. Recontextualizations point to the moral implications of focusing on one particular victim out of many and ask how we are to assume political responsibility on individual and collective levels in the face of the humanitarian catastrophe.

Moreover, appropriations help form public discourses on visual icons by, at once, contributing to and meta-reflecting on their reception. Boudana, Frosh et al propose that certain appropriations of historic icons may be "destroying the significance and iconicity of the picture" (2017: 16), i.e., when a tragic image from the past returns in a present-day comic form. The appropriations of the Kurdi-imagery emphasized how publics generated around contemporary icons to an extent self-regulate by ongoing negotiations of what constituted responsible political interpretive frameworks and sound models for moral spectatorship. This became manifest when Ai and *Charlie Hebdo* were criticized

for taking decontextualization and recontextualization too far. Despite the opposing strategies embraced by these appropriations, public disapproval indicates an important borderline drawn by the publics surrounding visual icons: Appropriations might explore the emotional and political potentialities of the icon, they might assume the identity of the victim in decontextualizations and be satirical-critical in recontextualizations. But they are condemned when actors are believed to bring focus on their own agendas and/or themselves and thus move beyond the usual binary interpretative space opened by appropriations between the real-life incident and its symbolic meaning.

Any history of conflicts and images would confirm that there is nothing new in attention forming around certain images, even though the current visual maelstrom of course renders this tendency more paradoxical. What is new, is that in today's connective media, the singular image instantly prompts the instantaneous production and dissemination of numerous other images. While appropriations highlight that iconic images are exclusive and one-of-a-kind by imitating the specific, recognizable image, they also make it clear that icons lend themselves to endless replicas, reproductions, repurposing. The 'messiness' of the mass circulation of appropriations and even appropriations of appropriations forms a contrast to the apparent simplicity of the visual icon. At the same time, this article has identified some patterns: Appropriations form part of the construction and reception of icons, stay within certain recognizable genres, and either decontextualize or recontextualize.

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[1] 'Refugee crisis' in this context refers to the discursive construction in (primarily) northern/western European media of the challenges related to refugees arriving from Syria from 2015.

[2] The analysis of *Charlie Hebdo* is also informed by 1191 user comments on reddit.com, which contributed to my background knowledge of the case, but was not used as actively in the analysis as originally anticipated.

[3] For technical reasons, it has not been feasible to divide the images under the #humanitywashedashore into the exact days they were disseminated. However, the Twitter feed made it evident that the hashtag was used most by far in the days after the drowning.

[4] This was the number of times this appropriation was shared according to the search engine "Google reverse image search".

[5] https://twitter.com/stevedennis71/status/639304898782232576

[6] Ai's appropriation has been reproduced numerous times, see e.g. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35457936

[7] The appropriations by *Charlie Hebdo* have been reproduced numerous times, see e.g.

https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/14/charlie-hebdo-cartoon-depicting-drowned-child-alan-kurdi-sparks-racism-debate