A Sensible Politics
Image Operations of Europe's Refugee Crisis

Bishnupriya Ghosh

Refugee image cultures are the dangerous supplement to refugee crises. As such, they invite critical opprobrium, sometimes for the unethical sensationalism of particular images and sometimes for the desensitizing effects of image overloads. At first glance, the steady stream of images serves only to numb rather than to incite real-time responsibility toward the migrant waves that seek passage into new territorial enclosures. Or the deluge of images invokes withdrawal and aggression, once host polities confront the thorny questions of resource distribution. Or indeed, especially sensational images are considered unethical in the extraction of surplus value from subaltern tribulations. Such allegations are well-founded, but they obscure the complex politics of the images that find unanticipated distributions across media forms and platforms. My essay tracks the trajectories of one iconic image that became an instant cultural mnemonic for the highly mediated European refugee crisis, ongoing since 2015. The poetic and circulatory effects of the image are exemplary instances of the problems that accompany the image production/distribution of the refugee crisis. The image of a two-year old Syrian boy found dead upon the beach of a fancy resort in Turkey became a social media event within hours of its first distribution as a news photo. The "event" inheres in the proliferation of a single image, its accumulating mediatic traces turning it into a media phenomenon. I focus on the Twitter storm ensuing from passing on the image—retweeting, liking, and sharing it—which further ricocheted between media platforms. This media explosion *preceded* deliberations on what the image meant or what was to be done.

Habitual as micro-actions on Twitter are, I argue that they signal an important mode of participatory political life: an affective-performative rather than deliberative publicness widely regarded as improper in more ways than one. The murky and often-opaque politics of social media users who seek to participate in the large and small decisions appear unruly. Often seeking to partake in political decisions, often uninvolved in civil deliberations or institutional politics, their participation is nevertheless an assured fact of political life. So much so that social media is now an unfettered political beast that invites scorn, dismissal, and opprobrium—and certainly critical conjecture. I join media theorists and political thinkers to think about the *group form* that social media users inhabit as participants in a viral spread. What kind of affective publics are these? Where do they stand on the refugee crisis? My analysis has the advantage of quantitative data on the viral spread of the iconic image in question.

The University of Sheffield's Visual Social Media Lab (henceforth, VSML) conducted a rapid research response of the Twitter storm and the discussions that followed in its wake, collating news items, forums and blogs, Twitter feeds and Google searches on the Pulsar platform.[1] Their data visualizations tracked the amplification of the image beyond its anticipated distribution, therein offering a rare opportunity to think about its popular purchase.

For some years, I have been preoccupied with the *sensible politics* of popular images.[2] Popular by dint of their wide distribution, these images can be heroic or epic, banal or trashy; they are of particular interest when they generate strong political affects. One can hardly find a better instance than the Alan Kurdi photograph, a poetically poignant, tailored image that later found elaboration in memes, artworks, graffiti, and even live performances. My pursuit of this image as affective-performative mediation leads me to track its viral circulation and not its representational capacities. In this regard, my essay builds on previous arguments that I have made elsewhere on the circulation of iconic images and their popular reception.[3] As we shall see, the Alan Kurdi image assumed astronomic proportion, so much so that there is documentation of a "before" and "after" to the Twitter storm it provoked. The VSML dossier records this temporality as a discursive shift enacted with image + hashtag (#refugeeswelcome, #refugeecrisis …). Within a day, the image + hashtag turned talk of a "migrant crisis" into that of a "refugee crisis." Thus the Twitter storm that punctured and reoriented existing plans and programs, policies and agendas was a creative event: in its distribution, the image produced a perceptual shift in the relation between social media users and the oncoming "wave" or "horde." With the child refugee as worthy beneficiary of humanitarian intervention, something new entered the perceptual register, something that demanded real-time responsibility in all the ways refugees can—at least, historically,

---

1 I'd like to thank Joshua Neves for his insights on the first version of this essay, as well as the editors of this volume for their invitation to the workshop for which this was written, and thereafter their many constructive criticism, suggestions, and intuitions that sharpened the argument. I further acknowledge the longstanding projects behind the piece: the many conversations with Dilip Gaonkar (on the role of media in public cultures) and with Bhaskar Sarkar (the convener of the global-popular initiative from which arises my sense of unruly and uncivil politics). Lastly, this paper, in particular, owes a debt to Corinne Bancroft's paper on this image written for a graduate seminar, The Global-Popular (Spring 2016), in which she discussed the Visual Social Media Lab's data visualizations. Visual Social Media Lab, *The Iconic Image in Social Media*.

2 See, for instance, McLagan and McKee's *Sensible Politics*, as well as works like Gould's *Moving Politics* among others that theorize the affective turn in public culture.

3 These reflections on the circulation of this iconic image update my previous analysis of the political affects in *Global Icons*. There, I argued that iconic images are recursive graphic signs that become *naturalized* over time and are etched in collective memory. As "natural signs," they appear to be qualitatively like their referent; a trace of indexicality haunts the otherwise poetically expressive sign. The trace initially bears the stamp of authoritative sanction; but, in its recursive circulation, that original matters less and less and the icon becomes cultural shorthand, a mnemonic for a larger system (think Google Earth or any other graphic on one's computer that function as apertures into systems). As we shall see, within a day, the Syrian boy opened into the larger tragedy of Syrian migrants whose perilous passages had become everyday fare. It is not a stretch to argue, then, that the image acted as a trigger for accumulated affects surrounding these ongoing tragedies for nine months in 2015. As the Twitter storm gathered, those affects found sensible figuration.

in context of the 1951 Refugee Convention.[4] In Jacques Rancière's schema, a hitherto invisible part of the *demos* crossed the partition of the sensible, heightening exposure to deadly states of injury. The Kurdi image focalized an undefined "horde" or undifferentiated "wave" pouring across European borders and spilling onto beaches through the singular image of the injured child—pre-political, innocent, non-threatening, demanding benevolent dispensation. An image cut-out from the ground of endless numbers, this "image operation" reconstituted migrant flows as a refugee crisis and reframed them as a matter of human rights.[5]

But, as we know, while the initial response to the Kurdi image was forceful, political legislation was another matter altogether.[6] Since that Twitter storm, more than one European nation has closed borders, erected fences, deployed coastal regulations. More importantly, the invocation of the injured refugee worthy of special dispensations became muddier still within a very short span of time. In November 2015, the Paris attacks—the deadliest in Europe since the Madrid bombings of 2004—turned the refugee into potential threat, even though subsequent investigations established the attackers as French and Belgian citizens who had not entered Europe as refugees. Following closely on the heels of this debacle came the New Year's Eve attacks in the city center of Cologne (mass sexual attacks, rapes, theft). When the attackers were identified as men of Arab or North African descent, the single male refugee/migrant came to embody not just threat but aggression toward the historical West.[7] In this context, the Kurdi image had a short lifespan as the lightning rod for affective intensities around the unadulterated figure of the refugee. And it is precisely this brief temporality that makes it a plum instance of a surging affective-performative politics that seems to go nowhere and whose causal relation to structural change remains obscure. These politics and the affective publics they disclose are the subject of this essay.

The figure of the injured refugee immediately raises the question of culpability. Who was responsible for these deaths? Who exactly was the "we" that confronted a coming "they?" The VSML visualizations provide some insight into the locations of social media users who passed on the image, and I will turn to these more substantially. The first tweets emerged from Turkey, and shortly thereafter from West Asia, before entering European and North American Twitter feeds; international organizations played a major role in the latter distributions of the image. These visualizations tell us there were European social media users for whom the highly mediatized crisis was on

4 See, Xenos, "Refugees." Writing about the ethical fictions of incorporation even in the heydays of the Refugee Convention, Hannah Arendt noted posing refugee crises as a problem of numbers actually concealed political inefficacies: there is, in fact, not a "material problem of overpopulation," she argues, but a problem of "political organization." Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 294.

5 I take my cue from Jens Eders and Charlotte Klonk, who define images as *producing* events, not only representing them: for example, aerial images in war zones are the basis of military operations. *Image Operations*.

6 Lucy Mayblin's "Politics, Publics, and Aylan Kurdi" remarks that David Cameron, for one, offered to take 20,000 from camps in Syria but not from Europe, but that move was soon undercut with the a bill that restricted resources allocated for refugees (pitched by the then-Home Secretary, Theresa May).

7 As two-thirds of the attackers turned out to be asylum-seekers, debates broke out over whether or not the category refugee included the asylum-seeker. When the German right-wing got in on the action and sold merchandise with the slogan "Rapefugees not Welcome," the leader of a premier group was accused of sedition.

their shores and at *their* borders; after all, at the time of this Twitter storm, the Syrian refugee crisis had been ongoing for months. No doubt the image generated heightened affective intensities for these users. And then there were remote social media users that engaged the "refugee crisis" as a distinctly "European problem," and not directly relevant to their lives; but, even here, one may think of proximate remoteness of different kinds. For instance, Californians or Texans living in the borderlands may have had greater investments in the politics of incorporating migrants into the body politic. Finally, a more complex category of social media users were intimately involved with Europe's migration policy because of intertwined regional histories. With Turkey's location at Europe's edge, Turkish social media users, for example, exemplify the latter; no doubt the concerted European effort to make Turkey a triage center for the flow of Syrian refugees would impart greater intensities to their responses. These distinctions complicate the "we" that approached the "they" as refugee-migrants. Yet despite such distinctions, it is not a stretch to argue that the problem of a *demos* that exceeds the rights-bearing formulation "the people," a *demos* invisible within and at the border, is now a *global* concern, and especially in times when democratic institutions are under attack from myriad authoritarianisms. In other words, the Syrian refugee crisis was not only an international negotiation of quotas but also a political dilemma resonant across national and regional contexts. Hence, the European incitement to refugee incorporation hit a collective nerve. The ensuing public culture around the Kurdi image tells us that there was little consensus as to what could be done in concrete terms. Yet the sensuous image made the refugee *sensible* in a visual translation of a hitherto abstract politico-juridical category.

Social media users who passed on the image turned the numbers game—how many refugees can be settled and where—into affective intensities. If the numbers game represents one kind of institutional composition of the European *demos*, then the affect-driven image provides a counterpoint to these politics proper. The Twitter storm is therefore an affective-performative intrusion into ongoing political deliberations that sought to establish a new relation between rights-bearing European citizens and a potentially reconstituted demos. This intrusion suggests that social media users passing on the image *dissented* from institutional counts and quotas, agreements and stalemates. They entered the fray as uninvited partakers, amplifying a composition that overtly eschewed calculative rationality in favor of affective intensities. I characterize such intrusions as an *improper politics*, a kind of politics that is all-too-visible on social media. Nothing good seems to come of affective-performative gestures. Too politically thin, too superficial; too transient and too compromised; too deluded and clearly anxiety provoking. Whatever the diagnoses—and there are plenty of them—it is unclear what exactly is social about social media. In this context, one may argue that habitual retweets constitutive of Twitter storms are often just that: knee-jerk responses that cannot be plotted along an ideological spectrum. Thus it would be disingenuous to argue that the circulating image indexed a particular worldview of the refugee crisis; that to share or like the image implies anything beyond a habitual empathy for an injured child. Conversely, it is equally disingenuous to argue that a Twitter storm that rendered a seismic shock to previous perceptions of the crisis had no collective dimension whatsoever. This essay attempts to ford this contradiction, for therein lies a complex affective-performative politics that is now the new normal.

Taking up the central concerns of this volume, I elaborate moving images in two ways. First, in the micro-actions of sharing, liking, or re-tweeting, the image of the refugee crossed a perceptual barrier: it moved social media users. The consequent sensible composition put pressure on the externality of the refugee to the body politic. Second, the micro-actions of amplifying the distribution of the image exhibit a desire to move *others* and therein to "structure the possible field of actions of others" as Michel Foucault once said of power.[8] Such amplifications seek to impact the politics *of* movement, of who can cross borders and how. In all these respects, the moving image materializes the affective intensities of a sensible politics.

Visualizing the Creative Event

The image is unforgettable: the two-year old Alan Kurdi in a red shirt and blue jeans lying face down upon a beach in Bodrum, an upscale resort in Turkey. One of twelve refugees trying to reach the Greek island of Kos, Alan drowned alongside his mother and brother. For reasons banal and profound, Alan Kurdi made major headlines within a day of Nilüfer Demir's photographic capture for Turkish news agency, the Doğan Haber Ajansi. At 5:30 a.m. on September 2, 2015, Demir snapped the now-iconic photograph, originally one among fifty pictures. When the news agency released the photograph, it began to be tweeted with the accompanying caption, "Drowned Syrian Boy." Within 12 hours, 30,000 tweets later, 20 million had shared the photograph. It had become the recursive graphic that we understand as an iconic image. Like iconic images, it endures as one of the 100 most shared images in contemporary Europe—a powerful *figural trace* of a protracted refugee crisis in which 4 million (in 2015) among the 11 million Syrians displaced by war sought asylum.

I am less concerned with the signifying power of the trace than I am with its circulation in social media, and specifically on Twitter. For it is on Twitter that a photographic event became a media phenomenon that changed perceptions of the crisis at hand. The findings of the VSML show that the image played a constitutive role in shifting perceptions of the "migrant crisis" to a "refugee crisis" within days. VSML conducted a rapid response search for the 12-day period between September 2 and September 14, 2015. If for the previous nine months in 2015, the terms "migrant" and "refugee" as qualifiers to crisis were pretty much head-to-head—5.2 to 5.3 million tweets in the same volume of conversations—*after* September 2, "refugee" spiked at 6.5 million to "migrant" at 2.9 million. The data visualizations document the speed and scale of signal amplification. Read together, they make legible something like a seismic shock. That is, the peaking quantifications amount to a *qualitative change* in perceptions of the kind of crisis. The appearance of the "refugee" instantly invoked questions of social vulnerability and historical responsibility. As we shall see, key activists, journalists, and leaders had a hand in shaping such perception. In many instances, they rode the wave, grabbed an opportunity. But they could ride the wave *because* there was a *new baseline* for the crisis: something new had entered the sensible, something infectious; something that was perhaps not entirely legible.

8 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 790.

Francesco D'Orazio tracks the Twitter storm that followed the first tweet at 10:23 a.m. In that first hour, the 33 retweets were mostly in Turkish; but in the next two hours, Turkish journalist and activist Michelle Demisherich's retweet with the hashtag #refugeeswelcome went viral through Lebanon, Gaza, and Syria. The color-coded data visualizations available in the online VSML dossier represent the growing storm in vivid bursts and intensities. One burst comes when the Free Syria Hub got in on the action, spearheading the Twitter wildfire in the Middle East. Another comes when Peter Bouckaert, the Emergency Director at Human Rights Watch in Geneva urged the European community to develop a plan for refugee admission and rehabilitation. His call prompted 664 retweets. When at 12:49 p.m., Liz Sly of *The Washington Post* based in Beirut tweeted the photograph, her tweet was shared 7,421 times in 30 minutes. By 1:10 p.m., *The Daily Mail* carried the first story with the title: "Terrible fate of a tiny boy who symbolizes the desperation of thousands." At the end of the day, 500 articles on Alan Kurdi's journey had entered the twitterverse. In this essay, I'll focus on the Twitter storm that passed on the image and its attendant artisanal compositions before the image entered the news and entertainment ecosystems.[9] By the end of the day, news platforms owned the "Alan Kurdi story" and used it to carry their own content, and web-based companies such as Buzzfeed invited artistic recompositions of the image. These later stages together constitute the public culture around this iconic image. As Sam Gregory notes in the VSML dossier, these recompositions were further amplifications of "counter-speech" already evident in the hashtag punctuations of the first Twitter storm[10]—roughly occurring between 10:23 a.m. to 1:10 p.m. before the first story broke in *The Daily Mail*.

I focus on this short window because it draws attention to the upsurge of affects before their organization into cultural sentiment or considered reflection. The Twitter storm *before* the capture of the image in memes, caricatures, and cartoons highlights not only accumulated intensive forces triggered by the image, but also the extension of those forces through social networks constitutive of Web 2.0. The latter movement is the heart of social media: in other words, the possibility of affective connectivity is what makes social media tick. The Twitter storm that amplified the Kurdi image disclosed the desire of social media users to transmit whatever affected them across a vast social-technological field. The data visualizations provide distant readings of this desire—thickening, expanding, assuming new directionalities. The particular affects driving the spread are far more difficult to pin down: they would include everything from anger and grief to horror and repugnance, as well as admixtures of these affects. Not yet composed into recognizable emotions, such affects are best described as forces that register at their peaking intensities, rising and dissipating, accelerating and slowing. Such intensities are now commonplace in political life, and therefore the brief temporality of the Kurdi image makes it an exemplary object of study.

There is much to say about why *this* image caught fire. But I'll be brief in these explanations, since my focus is on the amplification of the image on social media. Certainly, it was chosen with care. In the VSML dossier, Claire Wardle notes that, just a couple of days before Alan Kurdi's death, a photograph of dead babies on a Libyan

9 The VSML dossier distinguishes the visualized Twitter storm from the counter-speech that followed the circulation of the images as two different moments in the life of the iconic image.

10 For more on the histories of digital punctuation, see Scheible, *The Digital Shift*.

Beach had surfaced, but it was quickly reported and removed from Facebook. Drawing on her experience as senior Social Media Officer at the UNHCR, Wardle's point is that platform protocols often regulate what can circulate; they constrain the amplification of counter-speech and restrain the agency of social media users. To these soft controls, one might add the aesthetic histories that shape viewing photographs of dead or injured children.[11] News agencies routinely regulate tragic photographs of injured children; in this sense, these media are akin to fine art, with its historical norms and conventions. An analysis of the photograph's aesthetic composition would fully unpack the representational truth-effects (*mimesis*), expressivity (*poiesis*), *and* affective capacities (*aisthesis*) that constitute, Rancière argues, political mediation. I focus primarily on the last category, *aisthesis* or affect; yet it is worth noting that the Kurdi image had a substantial poetic and mimetic charge. A few news platforms such as *Vox* and *Slate* initially refused to carry "gruesome images" of "dead children," but those refusals receded after the Doğan News Agency's *tailored* image went viral—an image centering the red-shirt clad vivid form against the intense gray dissolve of sea and sky. Further, despite the overly poetic capture, the indexical truths of the boy's death haunted the photograph. In part, the photograph had high institutional credentials: it was well "brokered" before Demir's first tweet, in all the ways that Zeynep Gursel tracks in her ethnography of news photos.[12] Then, it was filtered through distributive chokepoints. Social media users put their trust in reputable reporters such as Michelle Demisherich and in media hubs such as Free Syria and Human Rights Watch. So despite the explicit *poiesis*, strong reciprocal ties enabled the photograph to generate mimetic truth effects.

No doubt the sentimental portraiture of a fully clad, middle-class boy individuated against the universal eschatological space between life and death had much to do with its becoming instantly iconic. Indeed, the Human Rights Watch director Peter Bouckaert pitched his own response through his own experience as a father, as did Sam Gregory of WITNESS (a video testimony platform). These are clear class-based affinities that made the image so powerful. Yet the individuated isolation of social media users makes it difficult to claim there was but one reason for the photograph's infectious proliferation. For it is also the case that many remained *unsympathetic* to the image of the dead child. Mike Thelwell notes in the VSML dossier that one strain of censure saw Alan Kurdi's death as just dessert for the boy's father, who was reputedly a smuggler. Still others protested the indignity of circulating an image of a dead child; Alan Kurdi's aunt, for one, offered pictures of Alan, lively against a blue slide in a playground, in order to combat the tragic image. Several others saw the circulation of the image as pornographic consumption, an unethical sharing of violence that

11 Think of the controversies over Nick Ut's photograph Phan Thi Kum Phuc in 1972 (better known as "the Napalm girl") or Kevin Carter's 1993 "Starving Child and Vulture" shot in famine-stricken South Sudan. Nick Ut took pains to explain that, after the photograph, he stopped his van to carry the burning children to the hospital, while Kevin Carter protested he was not *waiting* for the vulture to descend on the child but had been instructed *not* to touch the children. In the fallout over the controversy, Carter committed suicide within a year of snapping the photograph. The extreme instance tells us something about the interrogation of regulated objectivity in the face of horror.

12 In *Image Brokers*, Zeynep Deyrim Gursel traces the multiple agencies "broker" a news photo goes through before it makes the news.

re-victimizes. The undecidability of reactions challenge attempts to extract *a* political position from the social media event.

For despite all brokerage, it was clear there was no agreement on the refugee crisis. Nor was it intelligible who should carry the burden of responsibility. The hashtag "#refugeeswelcome" was most popular in the UK, US, Canada, Australia, India, Germany, Turkey, France, Spain, Netherlands, Austria, and Switzerland, but not in others (where the hashtag was just #refugeecrisis). In many countries, Google search terms in the week following the photograph's publication were "What happened to Alan Kurdi?" or "Why do Syrians leave Turkey?" In Germany, a dominant query was "How to volunteer to help migrants?"; in Hungary, "How should Christians respond to the migrant crisis?"; in Italy, "How to adopt a Syrian orphan child?" And so on. The heterogeneous Google searches indicate that in fact there was no consensus over what was at stake or what was to be done. And yet, the photograph circulated, making the image of the coming refugee *sensible*. Instantaneously iconic of the Syrian refugee crisis, the asynchronous temporality of Web 2.0 ensured Alan Kurdi would keep washing up on that beach in Bodrum each time to different effect.

Affect Machines

Social media platforms are affect machines. To put it this way brings to the fore self-organizing organisms articulated with technological and social environments. On the one hand, social media users inhabit a technological environment that is deeply integrated into their cognitive systems; on the other, their species socialities remain irrevocably salient to their cognitive makeup. Affect illuminates the biotechnical and the biosocial articulation of carbon-based life-forms and their machinic integration. Media theorists variously model the distributed cognition constitutive of the social-technological subject of Web 2.0 social media.[13] Their insights suggest knee-jerk tweets are both biotechnical, a media habit, *and* biosocial, communicative sendings to the multiplicity of YOUs. Approaching social media in the context of biological, technological, and social wirings suggests habits are once-conscious actions that have settled as embodied responses. Both Wendy Chun and Kris Cohen privilege this part-conscious impersonal nature of social media actions, even when social media users entertain illusions of personal agency or empowerment.[14]

Chun explores the singular subject, the YOU in social media, who confronts constant crises in habitual new media.[15] As more than one critic has noted, crises are everyday occurrences in neoliberal times.[16] On social media, the demand for real-time responsibility can prove exhausting. Turning points or thresholds, crises send the YOUs running for cover. Like all living organisms responding to change, argues Chun, they attempt to reinforce the pattern that they recognize as the "self." This is simply protec-

13 See, for instance Hayles, *Unthought*.

14 Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*; Cohen, *Never Alone, Except for Now*.

15 *Updating to Remain the Same* is the last in Chun's trilogy that includes *Control and Freedom* on how a technology of control was managed and sold as freedom and *Programmed Visions* on computer as the tools for negotiating an increasingly complex world.

16 The point is made forcefully in Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* and Povinelli's *Economies of Abandonment*.

tion against change, against coming uncertainties. Habit is the conditioned response that maintains the self-organizing system (the singular YOU). The return to a structure is a socially learned and deeply embodied response to the change. Chun underscores the creativity of the habitual in a memorable formula: Habit + Crisis = Update. One updates the self-organizing structure in confronting crisis with habit; in other words, the constant update "deprives habit of its ability to habituate."[17] In context of this formulation, one might ask: where does affect fit into the picture? Generally, affects are understood as pre-personal intensities that accumulate and gather force in the embodied mind; they are pre-personal because they respond to external stimuli before conscious recognition of that stimuli as particular object. One's lungs throw a spasm when a shadow looms in the alley, a visceral biosocial response. One implicitly perceives the stimuli one has encountered before; the perception is socially habitual, distributed through sensory and motor systems. Chun makes a similar claim about media habits that emerge from the integration of sensory and motor system with machines. She locates social media habit in implicit memory which is distinct from explicit memory. The latter is what we consciously recall, Chun maintains, following Eric R. Kandel's *In Search of Memory*; it is long-term memory housed in the brain. By contrast, habits arise from implicit memory: they are a form of knowing without knowing. We are not conscious of inherent conditioning through habituation; there aren't any memories *stored* that can be retrieved. Rather, habitual responses reconfigure and reinforce past goals/selves/experiences in acts of constant care that look not to the past (what must be preserved) but to the future (what enables survival). Affects are accumulated forces that drive this constant care. The human perceptual apparatuses *process* external stimuli, and especially noxious signals, in micro-actions such as liking, sharing, and retweeting. In this sense, mediation is an act of survival; it is constitutive of species socialities. Clicking an anger icon as response to a mass shootings in the U.S. or a sad icon for floods and fires may appear desensitized, since we mostly understand sensitization to be enhanced alertness. But if we think about distributed perceptions at the interface of sensory, motor, and technological systems, then habitual responses are active engagements with stimuli that arrive from the social-technological environment that one inhabits.

In the case of iconic images, both explicit and implicit memories are in play. The icon is a cultural mnemonic: an artifactual graphic sign, it appears natural because of its *habituation* in implicit memory. As such icons call forth habitual responses, ranging from disgust to devotion. But because they are a shared cultural mnemonic, iconic images always belong to collective memory. One might say Alan Kurdi's image triggered responses internal to social media users *because* of a collective habituation to images of injured children. Historically, distress, alarm, and horror at photographs of injured children as the exemplary victims of wars, famines, and genocides have provoked controversy. Many such as the "Napalm girl" are a part of a global cultural repertoire. At one level, the strength of response to the Alan Kurdi image must be understood in this context. If, as I suggest, the Twitter storm is evidence of accumulated affects, then those affects arise from embodied cultural knowledge—so embedded that it does not appear as knowledge at all. Further, visceral responses to an injured child recall

17 Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 85.

past experiences ("scars" and "remnants")[18] as points of reference for coming harm to self-organizing biological systems. Hence, the images of injured children arouse protective drives, ranging from deep anxiety to horror. Whichever direction one pursues, it is clear that complex affects—fear, anxiety, sadness—drive habitual responses to the mediatic traces of hurt or dead children. Often this complexity registers as messy, even unruly. Affects that have not congealed as discernible emotion are illegible, and therein manifest as the unreason of crowds and mobs. Over time, as iconic images circulate, they settle as expressive cultural sentiment in public cultures. In blogs and forums, the adult subject assumes an ethical and/or parental relation to the injured child. A deep sense of collective culpability begins to haunt the iconic image, a culpability sometimes repressed and sometimes acknowledged as we see in the public culture around the Kurdi image.

If we follow VSML's spatialization of the flows, it is evident that the volume of retweets amplify *through* specific distributive chokepoints such as the Free Syria Hub or Human Rights Watch. Put differently, these institutions banked on particular forms of liberal subjectivity and on the proverbial iconicity of the injured child to engineer a massive collective response to the refugee crisis. The presupposition of liberal YOUs (as Chun puts it) which is then algorithmically fed back to the individuated YOU of Web 2.0 marks the kind of controlled enclosure that make social media's mythic sense of user empowerment just that—mythic! A range of theorists have been at pains to make the point about the freedom of the internet.[19] These analyses of the privatized internet have repeatedly shown the "personal" to be algorithmically routed, a monetized commodity. Such scholarship includes platform studies of business models that underlie Facebook's and Twitter's protocols. Hence, the participatory paradigm of unfettered reciprocities and of democratic playing fields of the "free internet" had been put to bed well before Cambridge Analytica became a catchphrase for its demise. Following these insights, one might say transnational organizations such as Free Syria Hub and Human Rights Watch banked on the populational aggregate, on the liberal YOUs' value (*pace* Chun) that yielded dividends. In engineered viral spreads, not only are social media users expected to spread content through *their* social networks but each point of contact makes possible the exponential quantification of content. Corporate governance of Web 2.0 calculates this quantification. But social media users act without the predictive advantage of big data. They court uncertainty. The one surety is the desire to pass on the intensities that had them in their grip, a desire that drives the social distribution of the sensible. This desire already moves us beyond the algorithmic capture of the YOUs.

Even as she underscores the algorithmic production of population aggregates that shape the social networks of social media users, Kris Cohen argues that social media users inhabit a contorted form of *group life*: they live partly as populations and partly as affective publics.[20] It is within the market enclosures of the controlled machinic

18 Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 95.

19 Most notably Terranova, *Network Culture* and Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*.

20 For an account of the dynamics of this group life in relation to the slogan "We Refugees," see Suzana Milevska's chapter in this volume; see as well Farah Atoui's account of the relation of public affect to preemption and preemptive modes of power vis-à-vis discourses of migration-as-crisis, also this volume.

environment that the singular YOUs entertain illusions of freedom. Cohen's "affective publics" picks up on this sense of agency: on the *singular* drive to inhabit a *plural* YOU or the lonely drive to never be alone, to inhabit the social network. In this sense, the social media user is always a singular-plural subject living a distributed life on Web 2.0. Pushing beyond the market dimension to consider *how* social media users inhabit their group form, Chun initially paints a stark picture. If the YOUs in aggregated form show up in each other's feed, does this not imply that social media is deeply segregated? Is the group form simply "poorly gated virtual communities"? The YOUs friend, like, follow, recommend, and share with *others like them*. Chun names these social enclosures a prevalent *homophily*, a concept that rose from urban segregation in the 1950s. The homophilic group form strengthens already existing ties.[21] Engineered viral spreads emerge from the anticipation and management of homophilic responses. These are all the reasons why, *contra* empowerment, social media is widely regarded as politically defunct: anti-social, socially risky, and manipulative.

What, then, can be made of political subjectivities that anticipate connectivity, if not reciprocity, with other YOUs? Is the desire to participate in political life entirely circumscribed? As both theorists argue, these controlled environments are leaky. Unexpected things happen on social media. One cannot put down all viral events to regulated homophily or to mechanized bot activity. Chun gestures toward such leakiness in positioning *heterophily* as the monstrous chimera of YOUs based on non-reciprocal relations. What if social media users inhabit their networked vulnerabilities as isolated YOUs uncertain of outcomes? What if they count not on their social network but the *originary multiplicity* implicit in the very conception of the network? Granted, the network they reach is technologically controlled, but their actions disclose a desire for undecidable quantification. Such inhabitation of the network made of reciprocal and potentially non-reciprocal ties courts risk; the outcomes are undecidable. This undecidability raises allegations of the "thin politics" of social media. The collective "we" is too transient, too wavering—it tends towards an inoperative collectivity. And yet, in such intensities of social media actions we catch a glimpse of a group form *other than* the algorithmically-governed population.

After Cohen, I call these group forms affective publics. The YOUs do not constitute a positive collectivity bearing the markers of racial, national, or other filiations; there is no self-reflexive habitation of a particular medium that marks classic public such as a newspaper reading constituency. Rather, the binding glue for the unconnected YOUs is affective intensity and the desire to transmit affects through mediation. At moments when we glimpse unanticipated affective surges, as in the Twitter storm around the Kurdi image, the YOUs become a cumulative affective public even as their micro-actions remain deeply individuated. It is a public without common features, without shared agendas, but it is equally a group form that embraces publicness. This ambiguous and weak nature of the YOUs acting "alone together," to invoke Cohen's evocative phrase, is what renders their politics suspect. If they do not have a common agenda, do their micro-politics amount to anything at all? If these affective-performative mediations have no lasting impact, what is gained from studying them as a form of political life?

21 Chun, "Virtual Segregation Narrows Our Real-Life Relationships."

Improper Politics

One way to approach these questions is to look beyond politics proper—be that the institutional compositions of the *demos* or civil society re-compositions of same. Demographic data on refugees constitute one major political composition of the European *demos* to come, with quotas and dispensations policing the implications behind incorporating new populations. Large-scale anti-border movements, supranational organizations, even local grassroots movements offer recompositions that parlay the politics of incorporation. They show how boats capsize from willed neglect, how the real issue is a lack of political will and not of material resource, and how states of exception operate to racially segregate disposable populations. We are familiar with such deliberations that manifest across media platforms. The affective publics I have elaborated above, however, are disruptive in that they dissent from the calculative rationality of these arbitrations. The unconnected YOUs puncture calculative rationality in favor of sensible relations to the coming wave. To call their politics "improper" draws on the long postcolonial engagement with *uncivil* mobilization, which is a mode of political participation for those with little access to the modern associational forms of civil society.[22] Obviously social media users have clear access to media platforms and technologies; and yet, as affective partakers disinvested from deliberative democracy, they resemble uncivil congeries whose political participation is affective-performative. Thus the micro-actions of such social media users appear unruly and sometimes uncivil; often artisanal, their mediations are often considered far too banal to elicit critical attention and far too transitory for political analysis.

In Rancière's terms, such micro-actions are eminently *democratic* political activities when they mediate an uncounted surplus that exceeds political representation. Arriving with hashtags, not making any authoritative claims, as in the case of the Kurdi image, artisanal compositions of the *demos* are antithetical to quantification and therein to the police function of states. That police function attempts to enact demographic capture by numbers: it counts the rich, the poor, the women, the illegal immigrants. It even counts the disposable and relegates them to camps and detention centers. But there is always a part of *demos* that is not as yet legible; as surplus, it re-

22 Another essay on the Kurdi image, "Big Bad Social Media: Media Populism and Improper Political Affect," is forthcoming in *Culture Machine.* There, I argue that political theories of uncivil engagements take as a given the capture of the people in populational forms. Colonial demographics perfected the biopolitical compositions of the people as life-forms incapable of governing themselves, even as indigenous or native elites were invited to the table for civil arbitration. And yet it is clear from decades of postcolonial historiography that insurgencies, appearing violent and unruly to the ruling elites, were organized through technologies of communication that fly under the radar in their artisanal and low-tech nature. In other words, no technological domain has ever totally controlled *political affects* directed against governments and/or political elites for their violent production of scarcities and precarities. These affects express as unruliness dissent—sometimes violent, explicitly emotional, not legible as agenda or platform. On social media, such dissent may inevitably increases state and corporate surveillance capacities; and yet the YOUs keep arriving uninvited to the table, attempting to structure the actions of others. Their presence is often considered repugnant, unwanted, but also not contained by algorithmic controls as the many Facebook, YouTube, and other showdowns have recently revealed. The literature on unruly mobs and crowds is too vast to cite here, but for this essay, two inspirations are Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* and Gaonkar, "After the Fictions."

mains anonymous. The sensible image *does not count* but makes visible the space of the unknowable *demos*. In this regard, sensible images are instances of political mediation at its most democratic: "The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its subjects and its operations seen. The essence of politics is the manifestation of *dissensus* as the presence of two worlds in one."[23] The figure of Alan Kurdi brings into view a world of deadly crossings, camps and borders, roiling waters and grave injury. It is a world whose visibility the police function struggles to keep at bay. In dissenting from the police function, social media users enact an improper politics: they amplify artisanal compositions, makeshift and cursory, sometimes transitory, and often inaccurate. The sloppiness evident in the slippage between the singular child and the refugee/migrant horde lends such sensible images their political efficacy.

More importantly, impropriety lies in the *uninvited* participation of those who are not central actors in large political projects. In *Rancière's Sentiments*, Davide Panagia characterizes such actors as "part-takers" who participate in activities that might not belong to them, regardless of whether that activity is persuasive to others.[24] They are less invested in reasoned political judgement; they just want to *partake* (*partager* or share). These are exactly the social media users who enter and leave the political fray at will. Unruly or unreliable as political actors, their sudden eruptions occasionally jolt existing compositions of the *demos*. In social media, such partaking is highly regulated through algorithmic controls of reciprocal ties. Yet there are occasions when the partaking is excessive, leaking beyond established reciprocities. On such occasions, media users retweet without a clear sense of how their activity will be received. This is a drive to *feel rather than count* the number of likes and shares. The temporal intensity of unprecedented viral spreads suggest the micro-actions that constitute the spread are not merely calculative. Something else had happened, something unpredictable. We are reminded that what appears unprecedented is often well-engineered: Cohen reminds us that there are companies in the business of designing viral memes, for there is money to be made in the YOUs value of viral campaigns. But such attention to algorithmic architectures does not fully explain the virality of the Kurdi image. Put differently, why would *this* image of the Syrian refugee crisis galvanize the quantification drive at exponentially higher scales? After all, the VSML dossier presents evidence of *several* other photographs of the same crisis that did not elicit a huge response. But the Kurdi image caught fire.[25] It was *the* viral spread that was widely considered a "wakeup call," "a lightbulb moment," and an image that "shook the world."[26] Following the discussion of affects, one might argue that the force of accumulated affects reach a tipping point—they spill over in frantic sharing, liking, and tweeting—at particu-

23 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 37.

24 Panagia, *Rancière's Sentiments*, xi.

25 There is substantial evidence in the VSML dossier about the difference of this image. The Twitter storm reverberated through already existing citizen-led efforts to mitigate the plight of refugees. The Facebook group #RTWN (#refugeeswelcometonorway) that led efforts to collect provisions for refugees in Oslo grew from 200 to 90,000 immediately after the Alan Kurdi viral spread; the U.K. Charities Aid Foundation reported a similar spike, as 1 in 3 Britons made donations for refugees. See Probitz, "The Strength of Weak Commitment."

26 Burns, "Discussion and Action."

lar conjunctures that cannot be predicted. They can only be understood in retrospect. In this case, the unanticipated spread suggests that unconnected YOUs were already aware, affectively if not consciously, of the refugee wave. *They had felt the numbers already in Europe*. In the Twitter storm, the YOUs entered the fray as uninvited partakers banking on the connectivity of Web 2.0.

That their entrance could not be anticipated is what frustrates political prediction. But it is a suddenness that is now the political norm, and especially in times when many social movements explode as admixtures of Twitter and tear gas.[27] Such eruptions make it crucial to attend to affective publics who habitually exceed algorithmic capture. We see this most often in the many showdowns around *violent* viral images. In these cases, strong affective publics bound by filiation, racial or nationalist origins, attack democratic projects. They are on the rise all over the world; all the protocols and shutdowns in the world can't seem to hold them at bay. Often antagonistic to liberal democracies, they are enamored of the police function: they want the count, if only to prove their invisible historical injury. That injury is the basis for closing borders and imposing limits on the *demos*; they, too, generate artisanal composition. In contrast, there are the weak inoperative YOUs that loosely establish relations with the anonymous *demos*; this demotic structure emerges again and again in the "springs" and "occupys" of our times that *keep coming*. Against an aggressive populism, this inarticulate popular surfaces in the time-honored spaces of streets and parks and the newly durable spaces of social media. It may coalesce around avowedly local matters, but its claims as *demos* are universally salient. For better or for worse, it is the new democratic common sense.

27 We are familiar today with hybrid social movements, in which social media platforms are key interfaces to the street: theorists from Butler's "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" to Tufecki's *Twitter and Tear Gas* have spoken to the affordances and constraints of this interface.