Thingifying Neda: The Construction of Commemorative and Affective Thingifications of Neda Agda Soltan

By Carsten Stage

Abstract

The article investigates how the participatory creation of global interest in the shooting of Neda Agda Soltan was not only influenced by the online dissemination of texts and images, but also by the construction of things or "image-objects". By analyzing three specific cases that turn images of Neda into material objects I argue that the cultural role of these "thingifications" is to enable 1) the opening of the present towards a specific historic event, 2) the sharing of affect and 3) the articulation of specific political interpretations of Neda and the Iranian regime. The objects are thus oriented both towards the past by pointing at the importance of the shooting, but also aim to facilitate relationships in the present and future that may use the event to build more just and politically righteous communities.

Keywords: Neda Agda Soltan, Iran, thingification, participatory culture, transposition, image-object, affect.

Case Presentation and Focus

On 20 June 2009 a sniper from the Iranian regime killed a young woman named Neda Agda Soltan (26) during a street demonstration in Iran's capital Teheran. The protests were aimed at the Iranian government and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who was reelected in 2009. His reelection was controversial with the Iranian opposition and the reformist "green movement" led by Mir-Hossein Moussavi accusing the government of fraud and manipulation.

Images of Neda before and after the shooting quickly became an icon for the opposition's struggle against the regime, and also for the international protests. The incident is, of course, interesting for political reasons, because it clearly underlines the totalitarianism of the Ahmadinejad government. But the killing of Neda and the way it became a global event is also significant when it comes to understanding the new potential of global media networks, the ongoing breakdown of the nation-state's ability to control information and everyday citizens' increasing capacity to document and spread information about local events to global audiences. Two videos of the killing of Neda made by local Iranians were posted onto the internet on the day of the shooting, thereafter spreading like a wildfire to millions of individual users of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, as well as to broadcast media all over the world. On June 23 2009 – only three days after the shooting – US president Barack Obama explained that he had seen the video of the killing and that it was heartbreaking: "I think that anybody who sees it knows that there's something fundamentally unjust about that" (Kennedy 2009).

The movement of information from the streets of Teheran – via a camera, social media platforms and broadcast media – to the White House was in other words extremely quick and efficient. The killing of Neda clearly shows that the participatory culture of new social media is a communicative force that is very difficult for state authorities to control. The Iranian regime had prohibited the foreign media from attending the demonstrations in order to suppress coverage but despite these efforts the events became world news. This was all down to the fact that every owner of a camera can very easily record and disseminate information on a global scale with almost no delay (Virilio 1997; Tomlinson 2007; Mortensen 2011).

But why did the shooting of Neda become such a political event? On a daily basis people are killed all over the world by totalitarian regimes, but very few of them receive the same attention as Neda. A combination of different insights from the study areas of new media, visual culture and affect seem to offer the most promising path to understanding the event. From this perspective it becomes apparent that the media event that developed around the death of Neda was made possible by 1) the existence of a globalised media network open to non-professional production and distribution of media material, 2) the fact that images are easy to distribute globally and interpret locally (often in different ways), and

3) the incidental recording of an "event" with a huge potential for producing affect and political response.

After the shooting various pictures of Neda started circulating online. Some of the most distributed pictures were family photos of Neda, others showed her suffering on the road in Teheran, while some used existing pictures and added some sort of meaning to them by editing them or creating written supplements. In the process the image of Neda (in its various forms) according to Aleida Assmann and Corinna Assmann went from being a referential image to an iconic image symbolizing a greater cause and struggle: "What had started as an *image of* ends up as an *image for*" (Assmann & Assmann 2010: 235). The particular interest of my analysis is however not the visual afterlife of Neda, but rather how all these images also motivated "rematerializations" of Neda in different ways. More specifically I will analyze three different types of rematerialization – or strategies of "thingification" (Lash & Lury 2007) – in relation to the shooting of Neda. The first focuses on Neda as a sacral figure drawing comparisons with the creation of commemorative statues; the second materializes Neda as a political commodity; the third turns the face of Neda into a tangible mask, which can be worn in order to embody ones protest against the Iranian regime. All cases aim at criticizing the killing of Neda, but use different strategies and object designs.

The reason for choosing this particular "thingification" perspective is that the material dimension of online participatory culture is often overlooked. Events, which are created online, do not only live on as representations. These representations are also turned into things. The case shows that the creation of a global event is not only about traditional semiotic material circulating rapidly online, but also about the creation of objects with different capacities to commemorate, commodify or relate to Neda's death. The media processes thus increasingly blur the boundaries between image and object, between mediated material and unmediated material. I will thus argue that Neda increasingly became an "image-object" after her death, and the aim of the article is to try to grasp the cultural roles of these often unnoticed thingifications.

As I am not an expert in Iranian culture and society I do not claim to be writing an analysis of the local context, but rather of the ways social actors globally have used Neda to articulate thingified protests against the regime in Iran. And you simply cannot understand these globalized processes by strictly focusing on the cultural history of Iran, because this particular context has no authority to define how Neda is globally (or rather glo*c*ally) used, understood and rearticulated (Robertson 1995; Assmann & Assmann 2010). In other words Neda is decontextualised by global media technologies and thereafter recontextualised in different ways and social situations. And it is this materializing movement of Neda into distant contexts – where she is given new forms and meanings – that I wish to analyze.

This way of analytically moving Neda outside Iran can possibly be accused of being problematic, or even ethnocentric, because it turns an object deriving from one part of the world into a figure used to analyze other – for instance American or European – contexts. But it is surely not my aim to westernize Neda as an analytical object. Instead my goal has been to investigate one particular part of the process making Neda into a global protest icon by following her journey beyond an Iranian context and how she is used in different attempts to articulate or express criticism against the regime in social situations far away from the streets of Iran. This of course implies that my conclusions cannot be transferred directly to an Iranian societal situation. But the article can hopefully contribute with a piece of the puzzle as to how the killing of Neda was interpreted and thingified in different contexts.

Analytical Concepts and Strategy

In the following I will outline various theoretical concepts that will be used during my analysis. First I will describe how the concept of "participatory culture" needs to be focused more explicitly on participatory modalities other than images and texts through the consideration of objects and phenomena in between the images and objects. Through such consideration it becomes apparent, that part of the participatory culture following the killing of Neda is also realized by creating things, not only by posting or forwarding more traditional semiotic material. Secondly I will define and describe the concepts of "thingification" and "transposition" in order to underline that the creation of "Neda-objects" is based on media material and to focus on intensity and affect as important driving forces behind the different acts of thingification. As a part of this description I will introduce the concept of the "image-object" in order to emphasize how the different types of thingification are not opposed to mediation, but rather a sort of hybrid materiality.

The Materiality of Participatory Culture

That Neda became an icon discussed all over the world in the summer of 2009 clearly proves the existence of a media cultural situation, where new media technologies turn the traditional media user into a globalizing media produser (Lister et al. 2009). The precondition of this situation is of course the rise of global media networks and especially the internet (Thompson 1995; Tomlinson 1999; Hjarvard 2003; Jansson 2004; McNair 2006; Silverstone 2007), but also "media convergence" on both a cultural and technological level. According to Henry Jenkins technological media convergence designates how different kinds of media are increasingly united in the same media object (e.g. a mobile phone being both a phone, a (video) camera, a message tool, a small computer interface etc.) (Jenkins 2006). In that way a lot of people carry with them rather advanced media machines and are thus always potentially ready to document an event as it happens.

Cultural media convergence describes the fact that media users are more and more able to both produce and circulate media material on a potentially global scale (cf. YouTube and Twitter). Both types of media convergence are relevant in the Neda case. It was citizens who happened to be standing close to Neda that both documented the shooting and uploaded it to the internet, and then it was ordinary media users who helped spread the videos and the message by sharing it online (Mortensen 2011).

This situation has two main consequences, which are relevant for understanding the case. First cultural and technological media convergence clearly challenges the ability of the nation state to control the stories that are told about internal events. Despite the lack of foreign journalists on the street of Teheran, local media produsers succeeded in spreading the event to the outside world. This verifies Brian McNair's point that "the sovereign nation-state is faced with the erosion of many of its traditional powers, not least among them the power of control over information crossing its borders and circulating within its territory" (McNair 2006: 9). The second and related consequence is that the media users are empowered because of their ability to affect, communicate and pass on information that they find important. Following Nick Couldry in *Why Voice Matters* (2010) new online technologies seem to have the potential to create a place for new voices to articulate their message, to increase mutual awareness of events going on in distant localities, to enable new types of globalised organization in relation to specific cases, to connect people independent of physical coexistence, and to create new types of listening as we are all challenged to listen to a broader range of voices (Couldry 2010).

Of course it is important not to fall into the trap of technological determinism by claiming that certain media technologies create positive social consequences (like individual emancipation), while others have negative ones. Older broadcast media of course also had the ability to disseminate individual and moving stories or visuals (e.g. the Chinese tank man image from 1989), and new media are likewise capable of supporting nation-state agendas and censorship (e.g. China blocking Google) as state institutions attempt to "control the flow" (Mirzoeff 2005). Couldry also points at the important fact that having a voice (for instance online) is not the same as being heard or having effect on the world (Couldry 2010). Traditional power structures determining who can speak with what weight is of course not destabilised once and for all by the rising participatory culture. When this is said it seems to be overtly pessimistic not to acknowledge that the increasing ability of citizens to produce and disseminate media material can have important effects on the creation of global knowledge about incidents who could easier have been hidden by states in a media situation defined primarily by broadcast media logics. The killing of Neda and the uprisings in the Middle East in 2011 are among the clearest examples of this knowledge creating potential of new media.

It is clear that the shooting of Neda became a global event because technological media convergence made it possible for citizens to document and distribute material and because thousands of people disseminated pictures and messages over social networks. Despite the obvious importance of these online activities I believe that to fully understand the Neda case a *broadening of the concept of participatory culture to also include offline actions related to online processes* is beneficial. In the Neda case the internet users' cooperative attempts to spread the information about her death take on material forms. When looking at the concept of participation in for instance Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* (2006) the focus tends to be on online actions, where users help each other to disseminate pictures and text or cooperate in online environments in order to build knowledge or create social relations. But as I see it another way of taking part in the participatory "hyping" of an event would be to create material objects somehow linked to these online processes. *The participatory creation of events* can also be about *the creation of things*.

Thingification and Transposition

A key inspiration for my analysis is the concept of "thingification" developed by Scott Lash and Celia Lury in *The Global Culture Industry* (2007) as part of a description of the current media culture. In this particular book, an increasing conflation of imaginary and reality, mediation and things, representations and objects is used to characterize this culture. Lash and Lury argue that the contemporary global media culture creates a situation in which it is impossible to uphold the idea that mediation is basically about transmitting representations, because media products are also turned into objects and things/spaces are turned into media. In that way we experience "the mediation of things" as well as "the thingification of media". "In global culture industry, what were previously media become things. But also, what were things become media" (Lash & Lury 2007). Materiality and media in other words increasingly intertwine, because mediation materializes (e.g. merchandise from films) at the same time as the materialities surrounding people are filled with media surfaces (e.g. media facades) or become objects transmitting meaning to other human beings (e.g. brand commodities).

Thingification according to Lash & Lury refers specifically to *the way mediated products in contemporary consumer culture are turned into objects*. A Pixar animation is not only a film, but also a resource of material creativity (e.g. dolls, pencils, bags, games etc.). In that way media materials are constantly (re)materialized or "thingified". Although Lash & Lury are mainly describing phenomena linked to consumer culture their thesis and awareness of the blurring boundaries between mediation and materiality is also very helpful in relation to the case under discussion, because Neda herself moves between different ontological states. First she is a body on the streets of Teheran. Second she is an image circulating all over the world via both online and broadcast media. And third she

is rematerialized via the creation of numerous objects, which can both be described as concrete materiality (a mask, a cup, a statue), but also as reworkings of images due to the fact that the objects are modeled on prior mediations.

By using a thingification perspective I will consequently focus on the way Neda – after becoming an image circulating all over the world – is turned into a range of new objects. These objects are often thingifications due to the fact that it is the circulating images of Neda that make it possible for people all over the world, who have not witnessed the shooting at first hand, to create material forms relating to the event and her body. The circulating images of Neda are on the one hand materialized, but on the other hand the objects in an odd way also recirculate the images of Neda. The thingification of Neda is thus also the making of an "image-object".

Lash & Lury make a very helpful distinction between "translation" and "transposition" as different ways of describing the global movement of objects. If a certain narrative (e.g. Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes) moves from being a book to being a television series and a film we are facing a process of translation because the varying forms are linked to each other by reproducing a common "aesthetic integrity" or "discursive unity of sorts" (Lash & Lury 2007: 25). The figures and cultural forms share the same origin (Conan Doyle's novel) and are characterized by a kind of narrative continuity during the serial and linear process of translative remediation (Bolter & Grusin 2003).

When faced with the Neda case we are instead dealing with a process of transposition "in which it is the intensive features of the object, rather than any kind of aesthetic unity, that enable movement" (Lash & Lury 2007: 25). Approaching Neda as such an object in movement – both between different localities and ontological states (cf. from body to picture to thing) – she travels as a result of her intensity. In other words she moves because her death elicits an immediate response and people react emotionally to the pictures, texts and objects. But why does Neda produce so much intensity and affect? Firstly she dies *too early* in the sense that she is a very young and beautiful woman. Her death is simply a regrettable waste of potential life and growing. Secondly she dies during the protest against an *unjust political regime*. Her death is consequently a symptom of political unfairness and a symbol of frightening individual vulnerability. Thirdly she is a rather *changeable figure* in the sense that the circulating pictures of Neda make it possible to relate to her in many different ways. In some of the highly distributed online pictures of her she is wearing a headscarf looking serious, in another she is smiling innocently without a scarf. Neda is therefore characterized by a kind of semantic openness making it possible for a lot of different people to identify with her. In other words Neda dies to early, she is too beautiful to die, her death is politically unjust and she can be used as an object of identification in many different ways. Furthermore the fact that we actually see her *as she dies* naturally intensifies the affective potential of the event.

All of this turns Neda into a figure with an extreme ability to travel around the world by means of a logic of transposition. This is underlined by the fact that the specific Neda objects do not tell the same narrative, but are characterized by a high degree of multiplicity as they create "an intensive, associative series of events" (Lash & Lury 2007: 25). During these transpositions of Neda the idea of a common origin is also lost in favor of "the multiplication of origins" (Lash & Lury 2007: 25). Contrary to the process of translation, where the same content is reproduced by creating new cultural forms, transpositions are more about the circulation and creation of related, but differentiated objects, which share some sort of intensity that emotionally affects people faced with these objects. When Neda is spread all over the world and is turned into new objects it is precisely because of her affective/intensive potential and the objects created are therefore not related to each other because they tell the same narrative or have discursive unity, but rather because they share and thingify the intensity of the experience of Neda's death in different ways and contexts.

Analytical Strategy

My analytical strategy is twofold, as I want to map both the material forms of Neda after her death and analyze the particular thingifications. My approach is partly inspired by the "actor network theory" (Latour 2005) and attempts to describe how a certain event is turned into an image spread globally and thereafter turned into new objects. This analytical approach is based on Bruno Latour's idea of "the social" as an ever-evolving process of relations between human and non-human (e.g. animal or technological) actors and social analysis as an attempt to describe these relational processes without pre-understanding them by referring to some sort of social logic or basic principle. In a similar line of thinking Lash & Lury describe their method as based on the idea of "following the object": "(…) in this sociology of objects, we track the object as it moves and transforms through a media environment" (Lash & Lury 2007: 31). In relation to the Neda case this would mean to follow how Neda moves from being a body and an image circulating online to being different kinds of things and to understand the cultural meaning of these things. In other words my method will be to focus on tracing relations created between humans, media technologies and things in the aftermath of a particular event. I will thus approach the thingifications of Neda as part of an evolving social field consisting of relations in the making.

A second methodological inspiration is discourse analytical as I wish to investigate the particular form and cultural meaning of each thingification. While "follow the object" is a method for both investigating a particular social event and the broader tendencies of thingification and transposition, the discourse analytical method focuses more on the encoded meaning of the object or on what the thingification tries to communicate. As mentioned Neda moves from being a body, then a circulating image to entering a state of the image-object. My analysis will focus

on the last part of this development and therefore also investigate the different forms that the image-objects are given or rather – to use a concept by Kress & van Leeuwen – their "design". "Designs are means to realize discourses in the context of a given communication situation", according to Kress & van Leeuwen, who furthermore stress that the realization of discourses can use many different modalities (Kress & Leeuwen 2001: 5). As an example they describe how houses have changed over time by being designed in accordance with changing discursive understandings of the relationship between public life and private life. By approaching a certain thingification as a design structure you basically ask what kind of cultural discourse the thing relates to or rearticulates.

Analysis

In my analysis I will focus on three specific strategies of thingification by taking three cases as my point of departure. The first is the portrait busts of Neda made by sculptor Paula Slater, the second is the range of commodities related to Neda on www.cafepress.com, and the third is the "Neda-masks" used during the so-called "Neda mask actions". I have chosen these cases because they highlight very different aspects of the thingification of Neda by either focusing on her as 1) a sacral figure fighting for freedom, 2) a commodity used to express values and create social relations, or 3) a person incarnating that vulnerability is a basic human condition. By choosing these cases I get an opportunity both to follow how Neda is transformed into different kinds of image-objects and to focus on the design of each particular thingification. After the analysis I will conclude by pointing at the three primary roles of thingification in relation to the Neda case: 1) thingification as a way of collectively remembering an event, 2) thingification as a way of maintaining and spreading affect in relation to an event, and 3) thingification as a way of interpreting an event.

Neda as Spiritual Memorabilia

The first type of thingification I will analyze gives Neda an angelic or spiritual quality. The American sculptor Paula Slater created two portrait busts called "Neda 'Angel of Iran'" (ill. 1) and "Neda 'Angel of Freedom'" (ill. 2). Slaters statues were made and exhibited in an American context, and provided clear examples of how Neda travelled as online images throughout the global media networks, which resulted in her being objectified and contextually interpreted. Both of the portraits are clearly modeled on heavily circulated images of Neda – one where she wears a scarf and one where she does not – and as such the portraits are exactly image-objects or thingifications relying on prior mediations.

Ill. 1. Paula Slater: "Neda 'Angel of Iran'". Source: www.paulaslater.com

Ill. 2. One of the most online circulated photos of Neda. Source: http://ncr-iran.org

Slater explains her reason for making these busts in the following way:

> Neda has become known as The Angel of Iran, The Angel of Freedom. I was so saddened by the senseless murder of this lovely young woman that I wanted to turn the pain I felt into art. So I sculpted this life size bust of Neda and when it is cast in bronze I will donate it and hope it can help to memorialize this Angel of Iran. The Iranian government banned Neda's family from even having a memorial for her. However, you will not be forgotten Neda. It is my prayer that countries around the world will hold memorial services for this Angel of Freedom (Slater).

In the quote Slater turns Neda into a sacred figure (4 x "angel") that is linked to signifiers such as "freedom" and "Iran". Furthermore Slater even addresses Neda directly as if she is sitting somewhere listening "as we speak" (cf. "you will not be forgotten Neda"), which underlines the religious discourse guiding Slater's object designs.

Ill. 3. A plaster cast of Paula Slater's "Neda 'Angel of Freedom'" brought to a "green" demonstration in Washington. Source: www.paulaslater.com

Ill. 4. Another online circulated image of Neda. Source: http://kpn.dk

The Neda busts on the one hand refer to a very specific person who lost her life, but also to a spiritual character – resembling a saint – whose death will be remembered in order to strengthen people's faith in certain ideas or values. In this light it is clear that Slater's thingifications – underlined by her direct promise to Neda that she will never be forgotten – approaches Neda as a person who died for a cause and understands the remembrance of her death as a way of affirming this cause and keeping it alive. The thing is therefore a way of keeping a specific death present for a certain social grouping in order to affirm the existence of a greater cause (cf. the struggle for freedom in Iran).

In that way the thingification of Neda serves as a way of keeping her (ascribed) values alive or rather to create a portrait of a saintly figure to which people can connect and fight for larger ideas of freedom and justice. Thus Neda becomes an example of a person who unwillingly made the ultimate sacrifice and therefore also a person who can be used to energize the struggle for the ideals related to her image. To make that point Slater quotes Bryan Joseph Costales: "When a tyrant dies, his rule ends. When a martyr dies, her rule begins" (Slater). The thingification of Neda creates a lasting relation to the desired values and makes it accessible to the living through commemoration and identification. In that way Neda is clearly positioned as a sacred entity – or even a martyr – facilitating the realization of a better world.

The quote linking Neda to martyrdom is interesting for several reasons. Firstly it shows that Slater actually reproduces a way of linking personal deaths, sanctified representations and political causes, which is well known in Iran after the Islamic revolution. And secondly this way of using Neda to protest against Ahmadinejad and the regime is quite different from the way she is used as an antiregime icon in the Iranian context. Slater's Neda statues resemble "martyr memorabilia", which according to anthropologist Roxanne Varzi was an important dimension of Aytollahs Khomeini's rule in Iran during the 1980s. In this case the martyrs were those who died in, for example, the eight year long war against Iraq and they were commemorated publically in order to win the people's willingness to perform the ultimate sacrifice in order to defend Iran as an Islamic nation. As Varzi states in her study of the regimes commemoration of martyrs in Iran, the martyr is nothing without memorialization and this act of remembrance is only possible if pictures of or objects linked to the dead person (and the idea he/she incarnates) are available. Varzi actually also indirectly describes the concept of thingification when outlining the relationship between pictures and sculptures in the celebration of dead soldiers from the Iraq-Iran war:

> Martyrdom is meaningless without memorialization, and memorialization is not possible without a photograph. The painter cannot paint a man he has never seen. A sculpture park on the Basra River in Iraq displays eighty sculptures of dead soldiers produced in the likeness of their photographs. If one is not photographed in life, then he will not be memorialized (visually) in death. Photography is vitally important in bringing the dead back to life, or rather bringing death to everyday life, by providing

an image that can be replicated by someone who never knew or ever saw the dead
soldier (Varzi 2006: 26).

A lack of images creates a lack of commemoration that turns the potential martyr
into an ordinary dead person perhaps only remembered by friends and family.

In this light the transposition of Neda to an American context enables the crea-
tion of a new Iranian martyr – designed from the outside – which is both sacred
and incarnates values of freedom. Slater is thus also participating in a kind of icon
war, because the critique of a certain Islamic political system led by Ahmadinejad
is outlived by replacing the old martyrs, who were willing to die for the religious
state, with another type of martyr: a young woman coincidentally present at a
street demonstration in the wake of a questionable election. As such Slater's mar-
tyr busts are classical iconoclastic figures, because the act of replacing the old
icons with new ones is a way of attacking an existing political system to give way
for a new one. The battle between different political worldviews is also a battle
between different image or icon regimes (Mirzoeff 2005; Varzi 2006; Belting
2007). The thingification of Neda as a piece of martyr memorabilia is a way of
fighting the religious dictatorship of Ahmedinejad by putting forth a new sacral
figure incarnating the future Iranian society.

What is ironic in Slater's way of creating an anti-regime martyr is that in the
Iranian context the protest against the rulers is exactly also a protest against dec-
ades of martyr culture. As described by Shahram Khosravi in *Young and Defiant
in Tehran* (2008) contemporary youth and student culture (cf. "the third genera-
tion"), which played a prominent role in the 2009 election protests, is character-
ized by lesser religious activity, a critical attitude towards the parents' embrace of
political Islam and, as a part of this, the boundary between a less restricted private
sphere and a very restricted public sphere. "The feeling that their generation has
been sacrificed for a revolution their parental generation made has induced bitter-
ness and deep cynism" according to Khosravi, who furthermore shows the differ-
ent strategies of protest and "celebrations of the self" employed by the Iranian
youth (Khosravi 2008: 137). In this perspective Neda does not so much become a
martyr for the Iranian protesters as yet another proof of the injustices of decades
of suppression. This produces a paradox in relation to Slater's thingification of
Neda: in Iran Neda is supposedly used as an icon to fight the regime's martyr cul-
ture described by Varzi, while Slater keeps her tribute to Neda inside the logic of
politico-religious sacrifice. The quest for a political situation in Iran, which trans-
gresses the old regime, is therefore thingified in a way that fail to acknowledge
the protest movement's attempt to go beyond the creation of evermore martyrs.
Instead they are offered a new one from their outside supporters.

Neda as a Countercultural Commodity

Another type of thingification of Neda is based on a process of commoditization
turning Neda into a political symbol, which can be used to display one's political

values and thereby relate to other people in the local context. From this perspective the object is not a mediator making it possible to commemorate a certain event and spiritualized cause, but rather a tool used by the subject to relate socially to its fellow beings via consumption.

Online you can buy loads of products related to Neda. Looking at the huge number of goods under the category "Neda gifts" on the website cafepres.com, which has specialized in making merchandise related to contemporary events and popular culture, Neda is turned into a political commodity in many different ways. At the site you can buy bags, cups, posters, bumper stickers, magnets, t-shirts, underwear and caps all with some sort of connection to Neda.[1] The point of buying and wearing these kinds of products is of course to visualize and thus communicate your political support for the reformist movement in Iran or perhaps just to show that you are a politically-aware person and disapprove of Neda's destiny.

Consumers all over the world can buy the goods online, but most buyers would naturally be situated outside Iran, where this kind of commoditized communication is very risky. In other words these thingifications make Neda relevant in distant contexts as a way of communicating a certain political agenda and knowledge of Iran to other co-citizens. In that way the process of mediating the shooting of Neda is leading to the creation of objects that function like a kind of media (Lash & Lury 2007) or more specifically commodities, which communicate a certain relation between the owner of the commodity and a political cause (Andersen and Stage 2010). The use value of the product may be important, but the products ability to create relations or its social "sign value" is also vital in understanding this type of thingification.

Following both Nigel Thrift and Brian Massumi affects can be understood as spontaneous and pre-reflexive bodily reactions to meetings with external impulses (Thrift 2008; Massumi 2009). In this context the products are, therefore, not only valued for their extensive dimensions, but precisely for the affective/intensive encounters or communicative acts that they are able to motivate. The many hearts and declarations of love on the Neda-products (cf. ill. 5-6), which aim at showing and communicating affects, underline the importance of intersubjective feelings of intensity between the consumer and the "receivers" decoding of the commodities. In other words there is a "softness" to the products, which clearly shows that the act of consumption is also a way of building social environments by showing and sharing political dedication. When buying and using the products the consumer makes herself into a political statement or an emotional sign-event, which can be read and responded to by others.

Ill. 5. Neda bag. Source: cafepress.com

Ill. 6. Neda Iphone cover. Source: cafepress.com

Ill. 7. Neda t-shirt. Source: cafe-press.com

In relation to these commodities we are dealing with thingifications for two reasons. Firstly Neda only became a global political icon or brand because of intense media circulation, and secondly some of the merchandise is clearly modeled on circulating images. As an example the pattern of blood on Neda's face depicted in the original videos are often used as an emblematic visual structure, which is easy to remember because of the remarkable way the blood draws lines on Neda's face. Furthermore the circulating images of Neda, which were also the point of departure for Slater's busts, are often depicted directly on the objects (cf. ill. 7).[2]

In this process of commoditization you could claim that Neda is turned into a "countercultural" commodity in line with e.g. the classical merchandise with pictures of Che Guevara. The aesthetics of left wing countercultural movements have always used different kinds of rebel characters, because of their ability to associate the consumer with a dynamic, non-conformist and vital quality standing in direct opposition to the "established", stationary, conformist and almost dead society. Countercultural groups who see themselves as innovative and avant-garde, have, as shown by Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter in *The Rebel Sell* (2005), always been closely linked to certain styles and consumer goods (e.g. the hippies of the 70s drove VW Beetles, punks wore Doc Martens in the 80s). Following this line of thinking having Neda on your bag is a way of relating and associating yourself to a victim-rebel and communicating this relation – and political associations of non-conformism – to your surroundings.

Neda as a Human Mask

After her death a picture of Neda was turned into a mask, which was used during two so called "Neda Mask Actions" in Paris (July 2009) and Washington (June 2010) (ill. 8-9). The Iranian-French photojournalist Reza was the man behind the mask actions and before the second action in Washington he explained the basic idea in the following way:

> As you have seen in the Paris group photo, my main goal is to create a strong visual with the mask in each city, using the worldwide known monuments in those cities. Even though the photo shoot would be during the demonstration but the main condi-

tions is that NO other images, banners or words should be held while this photo is taken but only the poem "Ma hame yek Nedaeem, Ma hame yek sedaeem" in both Persian and English: We Are All One Neda, We Are All One Calling (Reza 2010).

Before these photoshoots the website http://wearealloneneda.wordpress.com/ had a picture of Neda that could be downloaded along with a five step manual describing how to construct the mask. The attempt to create a visually uniform performance shows that the mask is not only a thingification of a media image, but also "mediatized" (Hjarvard 2008) in the sense that the goal of the action is to create a powerful visual expression, which will attract media attention.

Ill. 8. "Neda Mask Action" in Paris July 25 2009. Source: http://wearealloneneda.wordpress.com

Ill. 9. "Neda Mask Action" in Washington June 12 2010. Source: http://wearealloneneda.wordpress.com

In the mask actions Neda is not articulated as an elevated or sacred representative of larger ideas or used to create commodities communicating political messages, but rather approached as a human being "just like you and me". The slogan "We Are All One Neda" points at the ordinariness of this woman, and she is represented as an everyday citizen, who was killed, because she lived in a dictatorship. The use of her face is thus a way of pointing at the need to respect the singularity of human individuals when creating a legitimate and just political system. Neda is not in herself more closely connected to freedom and democracy, but rather a coincidental "pars pro toto" representative of humans all over the world.

Putting the face of Neda in front of ones own face expresses the self of the protester as a potential "victim to be". "Neda could have been me, and I can become the next Neda" seems to be the point. The killing of Neda is therefore represented as the abstract killing of "the human being" understood as a singularity carrying rights and offered protection by the state. The act of masking the individual face of the protester is therefore paradoxically also a way of unmasking the individual as a subject who shares a fundamental vulnerability with all other human beings.

The writings of Judith Butler can help us understand two important dimensions of these mask actions. The first is the political potential of going on the streets to articulate a protest by using a victimized subject position. Butler stresses how violent and demonizing ways of understanding certain subjects are also invitations to "speak up" in order to rearticulate the victimized subject position (Butler 1997;

Butler & Spivak 2007). During the mask actions this way of protesting and rearticulating from the position of the victim is clearly at stake. Neda is victimized by the Iranian state, but as such she also holds a subject position, which can be used to articulate a protest against the outspoken injustices of the regime. During the actual mask actions the people rearticulating the victimized position of Neda are of course not necessarily direct victims themselves, but rather abstract victims in the sense that they would also be precarious individuals if faced with a totalitarian state.

This leads me to a second point made by Butler, which is developed in her recent books (Butler 2009, 2004). Here she formulates what you could call a humanist ethics of vulnerability. Subjects are according to Butler fundamentally social beings. None of us would be able to survive without other people to foster, protect and love us. In that way human beings are precarious creatures because their existence depends on the existence of others who do not take advantage of this vulnerability (e.g. the weakness and defenselessness of the human child). What we all have in common is therefore a fundamental existential vulnerability, and the Neda mask actions are exactly aimed at remembering this basic human vulnerability in a sociopolitical context (cf. the Iranian regime) where it seems to be forgotten. In Iran – as so many other places – the vulnerability of the human being is exploited for political control, rather than respected and the human being protected. By borrowing the victim's face the protesters point at this vulnerability as a human condition and as an ethical principle, which must be taken into account during the formation of just political systems.

Summing up the mask actions use the subject position of the victim Neda to rearticulate her victimhood as a broader political and ethical category. Her face simply moves from referring strictly to a personal history to symbolizing a greater cause or struggle (Assmann & Assmann 2010). Neda is clearly an exceptional human being in the sense that her destiny is particularly brutal. The point of the mask protesters nevertheless seems to be that Neda is also typical in the sense that she unveils the radical weakness and vulnerability of every human being – and particularly of those who face state formations that do not understand precariousness as an ethical invocation, but rather as an invitation to control.

Concluding Remarks: The Social Roles of Thingification

After the shooting of Neda she moves globally as an image. The next transformation occurs when Neda becomes an image-object when the images circulated online are used to construct things in local contexts often distant from Iran. This process of transposition is not characterized by reproducing a common narrative or formal coherence, but works as a rather unpredictable creation of objects, which appropriate and tell Neda in various ways. To conclude and sum up my

analysis I will identify three social roles that unite the specific thingifications that I have have been analysing during the paper.

1) Thingification as Remembrance

First of all the Neda-objects analyzed above all are all "memory things" in the sense that they try to keep alive the awareness of a certain event in the past (Otto 2005). As such the thingifications of Neda are acts of remembrance (that the killing happened) and thus linked to the creation of collective memory (Storey 2003). The statue, the commodities and the mask are all attempts to keep the shooting from being forgotten and disappearing from people's narratives about the past. In that way thingification is a way of insisting on the realness, terror and irreplaceable character of the event. And by anchoring the capacity to relate to a specific past in an actual object the possibility of forgetting is confronted more aggressively because of the things' manifest character. The main aim of the objects is to make the memory of Neda last and as such they work as mediators between past and present by creating a heterotopian effect as the present space is temporally opened up towards a specific moment in the past (Foucault 1986).

Although the objects share this historic aim the differences of their concrete materiality is of course also important. Slater's bronze sculptures are the most "insistent", when it comes to objectively fixating the memory of Neda's death in the present because of the heavy and enduring character of the material. The Neda commodities are also rather durable, but still part of a pattern of use and consumption that will replace them within a foreseeable future. In that way they aim at creating more momentary everyday encounters with a heterotopian product. Last but not least the masks are less focused on remaining objects in the present, but rather on making a present event that connects the protesters – and the people relating to their performance – to the past event.

2) Thingification as a Transmitter of Affect

The thingifications do not only play a historic role, but also aim at reproducing or intensifying affect. The affective potential of the things is closely connected to the fact that they re-actualize the presence of a particular death where a young beautiful woman coincidentally lost her life at the hands of a brutal political regime. Since the publication of the videos of the actual shooting of Neda this event has motivated fierce emotional responses and outrage. Re-quoting Slater it can be seen that her motivation for creating the busts was exactly affective: "I was so saddened by the senseless murder of this lovely young woman that I wanted to turn the pain I felt into art" (Slater). As such the busts distil the affect in the sense that they are created as materialized responses to an affective attunement.

The affective dimension is not only about giving the immediate response to the killing a material form, but also about disseminating and creating affect when people encounter the objects. In that way the thingifications are supposed to work

as "containers of cultural energy" (cf. Aby Warburg in Assmann & Assmann 2010: 233) or "vibrant matter" (Bennett 2010) with an ability to establish connections between objects and people. This is very obvious in relation to the political commodities that "declare" their love to Neda, but at the same time communicate emotional messages to other people seeing the objects. The same goes for the masks, which use the unjustly killed victim's ability to motivate responses and political support. The Neda mask is therefore designed as a tool to create a spontaneous affectively charged awareness among the receivers in order get the message across.

Making portraits as well as carrying commodities and masks is partly about spreading one's feelings for Neda and showing these affects as a potential for other people. In that way the things aim at being affectively contagious (Thrift 2008) as they are intended to serve as transmitters spreading a certain spontaneous feeling of care towards Neda. The thingifications of Neda are thus also acts of intensifying the affective potential of the event by sharing and multiplying spontaneous bodily reactions to the killing. The analyzed objects are therefore not only memory-things, but also affect-things.

3) Thingification as Interpretation
The thingifications of Neda share the attempt at remembering the event in Teheran and at sharing or even intensifying affective responses to it. But the things are of course also highly differentiated due to the fact that they articulate and interpret the event in different ways. In that way thingification is also an act of interpretation or articulation (Laclau & Mouffe 2001) because each thing is designed in a certain way so that specific semantic dimensions are affirmed and negated. Things or objects are also discursive phenomena because their designs rearticulate established discourses. Taking Slater's thingification strategy as example, in this case it can be understood as a material articulation of a sacred discourse as Neda is understood as an angelic figure that died for a cause and the remembrance of her death as a way of energizing the fight for the cause. The commodities are designed in a way that rearticulates a countercultural discourse by using a political and anti-authoritarian icon to express the values of the self and create social relations. Last but not least the Neda-masks are constructed in accordance with a discourse of precarious humanism that describes subjects as fragile and vulnerable beings, which need the care of others – and states – in order to survive and prosper. In that way the various thingifications also articulate Neda in different ways by relating her to sacredness, counterculture or human vulnerability.

As shown the killing of Neda in Teheran 2009 did not only become a global event because of online media users distributing images and texts. Part of the global dissemination and local interpretation of this dramatic event took place by turning the online representations into objects such as statues, commodities and masks. The making of things is part of the overall participatory creation of a glob-

al event by leaving material traces in different localities, where they can motivate remembrance, affective attunement and interpretation. As such I have argued that the analyzed thingifications all seek to secure or establish a relation between the present everyday life and a specific past. At the same time they function as contagious transmitters of affect by making it possible to keep on being affectively attuned by the event via encounters with objects. Last but not least the thingifications are also interpretations in the sense that certain semantic potentials are rearticulated through the specific object-design. In that way the thingifications of Neda function as objects of memory, affect as well as interpretation. They are oriented both towards the past by pointing at the importance of the event, but also try to facilitate relationships in the present and future that use the shooting to build more just and politically righteous communities. The objects therefore serve as relational tools reintegrating the past in the present by offering an encounter with an interpreting and attuning image-object.

Carsten Stage is Assistant Professor, Department of Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark. His research interests include: Cultural globalization; media globalization and participatory culture; national identity; discourse analysis; the relationship between discourse, affect and materiality. E-mail: norcs@hum.au.dk.

Notes

[1] See http://shop.cafepress.com/neda?page=1 (accessed March 10 2011).

[2] The t-shirt shown as illustration 7 is actually *not* an image of Neda Agda Soltan, but of an Iranian woman called Neda Soltani, whose picture by mistake started circulating as documentation after Soltan's death. Neda Soltani had to flee Iran because of the mix-up as the regime tried to take advantage of it in order to narrate the story about the killing of Neda as a scam (Assmann & Assmann 2010: 229-230).

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