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Alberto Korda, *Guerrillero Heroico* (1960)

Che Guevara bikini, worn by Gisele Bündchen for Cia Maritima (2003)

In a world where billions of photographs are taken every day, it's hard to imagine one (just one!) making it through the visual noise to the point where it becomes iconic. However, the 20th century is marked with such photographic moments. Now imagine that all the pictures in the world have disappeared apart from two. One is *Guerrillero Heroico* – a portrait of the revolutionary leader Ernesto 'Che' Guevara – by the Cuban photographer Alberto Korda (1928–2001; left, top), and the other is *The Ultimate Confrontation: The Flower and the Bayonet* (1967; overleaf) by the French photographer Marc Riboud (1923–2016). Only one of these images can survive. Which will it be? This thought experiment can help us to understand the factors that go into making an image so readily recognisable that it reaches what we might refer to as iconic status. By what criteria can we decide which photograph has more value, and therefore survives? First, we might ask, what is the social value of the image? And, second, does it reinforce or undermine dominant ideologies? To address these questions, we need initially to look at the context: what were the circumstances of the photograph? Where does it sit in the history of photography and in social history? Does it have any metaphorical messages beyond the frame? Why is it so popular?

Both Korda's and Riboud's photographs are of historical importance and are considered 'iconic' in the history of photography. This means they are instantly recognisable, even when their political context has been stripped away. Of Korda's image we can safely say that it has been overused. Does that make it more worthwhile saving, or less? The Riboud image may strike us as a bit 'hippy', emblematic of the 1960s counter-culture and the slogan 'Make love, not war', but clearly there is something about both images that resonates. They both register on emotional levels around the issue of protest, and their original handmade prints have capital value at auction. More importantly, however, they convey a particular meaning to nearly everyone who sees these images.

Both images were made for popular consumption from the outset. The Korda photograph was made as part of a journalistic assignment but not immediately used. It later became a poster. The Riboud image was for *Look* magazine. This popular consumption has increased in their enduring lifecycles and now both images are equally popular on the Internet or a museum wall. From here on, it is only a small step to postcards and mugs. This may seem a shallow way of understanding what may or may not become iconic, but popularity and familiarity certainly play an important role in how we value images and their importance to culture at large.

Korda's portrait of guerrilla leader Che Guevara, taken when he was 32 years old, has been reproduced on posters, T-shirts, mugs, baby bodysuits and bikinis (see opposite, bottom). You can even buy a coolbox featuring this portrait to make your picnic look revolutionary. But not everyone is aware of the causes he fought for. In the same way, other photographs by Alberto Korda and other portraits of Che Guevara are not so familiar. There are well-known photographs taken after his death, and several where he is smoking a cigar. However, none are as famous as this image that has transformed from a would-be news photograph to a global symbol of rebellion and subsequently the epitome of commercial exploitation of a portrait. It's all somewhat ironic considering the politics of Che himself and the communist Korda, who resisted the commercialisation of the image.

When a photograph like *Guerrillero Heroico* becomes one of the most reproduced images in the history of photography, it perfectly illustrates the discursiveness and multiplicity of traits so intrinsic to the medium. A 'classic' postmodernist approach to photography suggests that photography cannot be understood as having a static identity or singular cultural status. John Tagg states, 'photography as such has no identity ... its nature as a practice depends on the institutions which define it and set it to work ... its history has no unity'. Contexts and meanings shift and change. Divorced from its original context, the initial meaning and substance become more diluted and the image today works almost purely as graphic icon. What was a symbol of militant Marxism has ironically become a device of capitalist appropriation.

Of course, part of the image's iconic strength lies in its effective use of certain photographic strategies. Shot from below, the subject appears big and heroic. It was cropped for dramatic effect and all extraneous photographic information has been removed to make it more graphic. The starkness of the blacks and whites were further emphasised when the image was first printed. The upturned gaze into the distance, too, suggests vision and strength. In 2006, a poster showing presidential candidate Barack Obama under the 'Yes we can' slogan would adopt similar strategies.

What contributes greatly to how Korda's picture nestles in our collective consciousness is that it was unprotected by copyright for more than 40 years. Reportedly, Fidel Castro wanted the image to represent the Cuban Revolution worldwide. The journey of this photograph and how it was endlessly reproduced is a case study of iconisation, commercialisation and mythic fantasy. It perfectly illustrates the discursive and slippery nature of photographs where ownership and authorship are more complex than in many other types of art. It also demonstrates the clash of the

opposing ideologies of communism and capitalism. And on a different level it raises the question: would Che's portrait have iconic status today if he were twice as old and half as handsome?

Apart from its representational function (a crucial characteristic of any icon), issues of communication and transcendence must also be acknowledged when considering why a certain image is more famous than another. An image must be evocative and transcend what it depicts into some larger context, recognisable not only to a small group of people in the know, but to many. Marc Riboud's photograph shows an American student protesting against US involvement in the Vietnam War in Washington in 1967, but to numerous people, it represents a broader protest against war, hate and violence. The picture is one of two halves. On one side a young woman, 17-year-old Jan Rose Kasmir, holds a chrysanthemum up to her face. This strongly contrasts with the phallic weapons that are held up to her by the men in helmets facing her on the other side of the photograph. She does not look afraid. 'All of a sudden, I realised "them" was that soldier in front of me – a human being I could just as easily have been going out on a date with,' Kasmir said later of the men. 'It wasn't a war machine, it was just a bunch of guys with orders. Right then, it went from being a fun, hip trip to a painful reality.' The contrasts between their clothes, their gestures and their 'weapons' demands a difference between them, but really they are just all young people doing what they believe is right. The photograph transcends the actualities of the event by representing the Flower Power movement, gender politics and perhaps simplistic symbolism of guns equal war and flowers represent peace.

The photograph is imprinted in the minds of many and it can be seen to be embedded in a more recent photograph, *Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge* by Jonathan Bachman for Reuters, showing Leshia Evans taking part in a Black Lives Matter protest in 2016. Consciously or unconsciously, the image directly references the earlier photograph's graphic and symbolic strategies of gender stereotypes of aggression and resistance.

Whether a photograph becomes iconic relies on many factors beyond the actual image. Graphic strength and aesthetics count, but often photographs have become famous or iconic because they relate to a specific event. This, of course, is changing as we increasingly rely more on moving images to cement memories or visualise famous events. Combined with all other forms of media attention surrounding the events, the photographs are reproduced repeatedly over time and become fixed in the minds of the public consciousness. The number of times we see it, where we see it and why are all crucial to a photograph being considered an iconic image.

Riboud's photograph seems to resonate more today than ever as protests increase around the world and political tensions are high. It is an easy image to read, playing on ancient symbols of innocence and experience, good and evil, supposed feminine virtues of peace and male aggression. One wonders if the image would resonate so effectively if the person holding the flower were a young man instead of a young woman?

So, to return to the question that opened this chapter – what image holds more value and should therefore survive if only one could? Can we even consider photographs like this without issues of taste and preference coming into the equation? So perhaps the question should change from which one into why. Why are these images iconic and why is that?

Marc Riboud, *The Ultimate Confrontation: The Flower and the Bayonet* (1967)

Nick Ut (born 1951)
***Napalm Girl* (1972)**

This harrowing photograph is probably one of the most famous in this book, and certainly among the most memorable images of the 20th century. Nonetheless the circumstances surrounding it are largely unknown, often forgotten or wrongly described. The picture shows children running from a napalm attack outside Tráng Bàng, a village about 19 miles (30 kilometres) outside the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). The napalm was dropped by a South Vietnamese plane mistakenly, so this photograph depicts a result of what is known as 'friendly fire'. The open-mouthed horror on the face of the boy in the foreground, and the nakedness and outstretched arms of the screaming nine-year-old girl at the centre of the image, Phan Thị Kim Phúc (the 'Napalm Girl'), who had torn off her burning clothes as she fled, are shocking and disturbing to look at. Superficially, it is unclear from the photograph alone whether the soldiers are friend or foe, whether the soldiers are haranguing the children or helping them escape. Indeed, the difficulty of determining which was the 'right' side and which was the 'wrong' was something that many of the photographers who documented the war attempted to show in their work.

Photography played an important role in the Vietnam War, bringing home its horrors to a wide public. It has been argued that this photograph along with Malcolm Browne's *Burning Monk* (1963) and Eddie Adams's *Saigon Execution* (1968) raised awareness and did much to sway a strong resistance movement in America. One can ask whether photography alone has that kind of power. Can it really change the course of world events? Expectations of news photographs have always been high, but it is vital to remember to keep them in context.

The fact that the young girl was naked was one of discussion at the time, as many newspapers had policies excluding full frontal nudity. However, it was decided by the editors that this picture was too important not to show and it was widely disseminated worldwide. Unlike some of the photographs in this book, this photograph has not dated and is as upsetting today as it was when it was first published, even if the full circumstances are not as widely known as the image itself.

Eleanor Macnair (born 1976)
***Original photograph: Identical Twins, Roselle, N.J., 1967 by Diane Arbus rendered in Play-Doh* (2015)**

At the heart of this fun and funny project is a continuation of conceptual investigations by many artists to disrupt and question the hierarchies of art and photography. By dismantling the nature of high and low art the viewer is left asking why a particular photograph – here Diane Arbus's unnerving photograph of identical twin sisters in matching dresses – has become so famous and iconic in the first place. There are many ways in which artists have done this: dot-to-dot drawings (MacDonaldStrand), colouring book-style outlines (Martin Parr), or remodelling scenes out of food (Vik Muniz). The British artist Eleanor Macnair uses Play-Doh, creating a whole series of tableaux that take on the work of some of the 20th century's most celebrated photographers including William Eggleston, Claude Cahun and André Kertész.

It is this that makes Macnair's project so joyous: Play-Doh is fun, it's for kids, and there is a sense that, in making these tableaux, the artist does not take herself too seriously. The effect of Macnair's reworking is that it defuses the menace and restores a certain childhood innocence to the picture.

The pieces are also really skilful. Another reason these photographs are popular is that Macnair's website and the image-sharing site Instagram were initially the two main outlets for her work (even if subsequently they have also been shown in galleries and museums around the world). Both these ways of encountering her work are far removed from the art gallery or the newspaper in which many of the original photographs were, and continue, to be found.

By dismantling a photograph and reducing it to shapes and primary colours, the artist encourages the viewer to look more closely at an image rather than just scanning it, as we are so accustomed to doing with photographs now.

Andy Warhol (1928–1987)
***Debbie Harry* (1980)**

Which celebrity picture is iconic to you? This probably depends on your age and gender. What often is meant by 'iconic' is just 'famous and recognisable'. Is this image iconic purely because it is instantly recognisable as a Polaroid photograph by Andy Warhol of a famous singer? To truly deserve the appellation, an image should also carry with it a connection to a larger, preferably universal meaning. Thus, Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) is not just a multiple-canvas work depicting tomato soup cans; it has come to symbolise pop art and tells us something about the relevant era, especially the commercialisation of culture, repetitive mass images and a desire for speed and ease in American culture.

By making instant pictures of friends and celebrities, Warhol documented his life in a way Instagram documents our lives today. However, his portrait of new wave band Blondie's singer Debbie Harry also captures an important moment in musical and cultural history – a female singer who was as rebellious as she was glamorous. The fact that she is incredibly photogenic certainly helped her become an icon for both men and women worldwide. The combination of Harry and Warhol works to cement the credibility and status of both artists. He lends her art-world exposure, and she admits him into a world of cool celebrity. Their individual fame helps bolster the other.

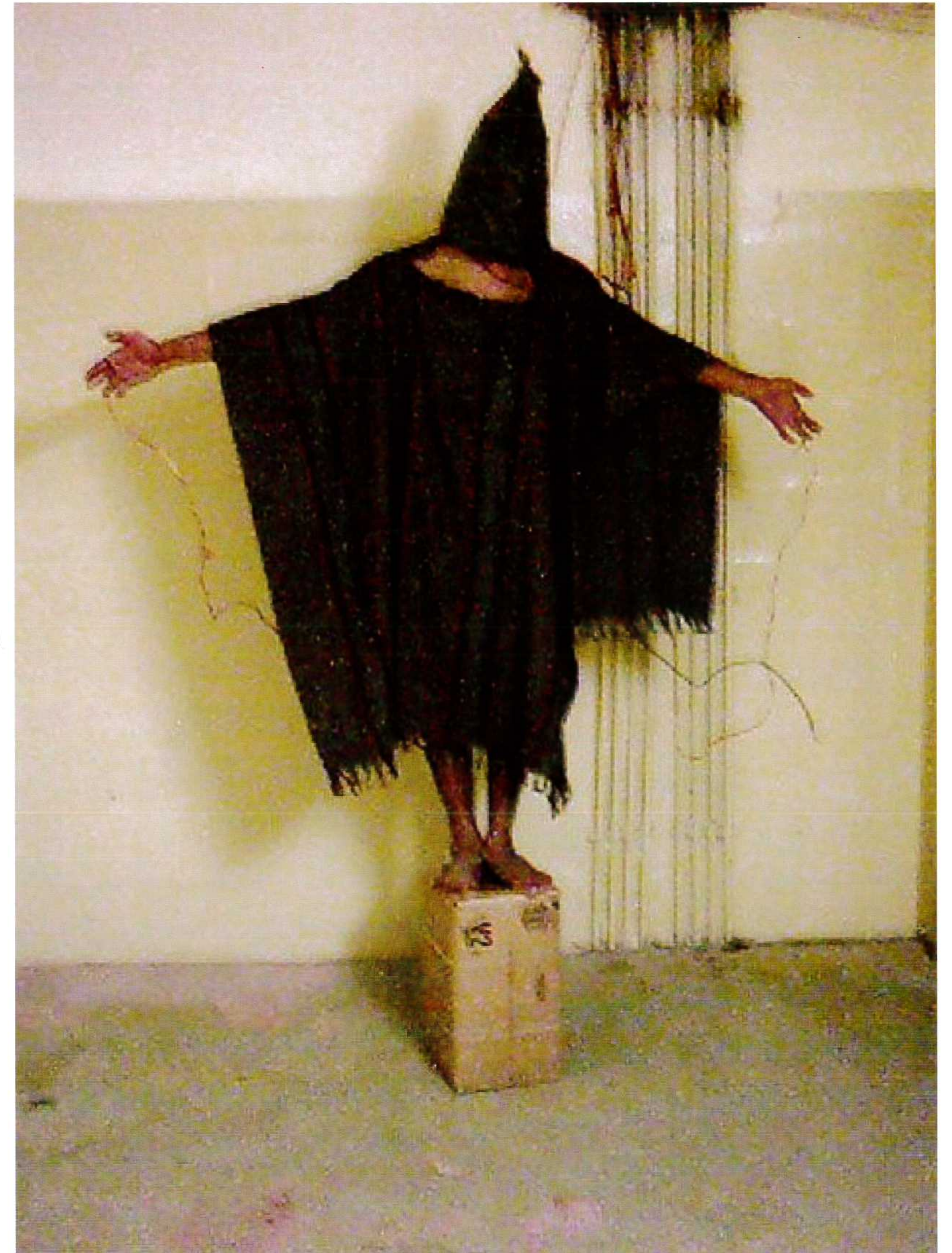
The Polaroid was then used as a template for his famous silk screens of Harry in 1980. The washed-out blondes and beiges that made the Polaroid technique so particular are gone, replaced by vivid pinks. With the transformation of Harry from photograph to silk screen the hierarchies of painting and photography are brought back into play. By giving her his signature treatment, her iconic status is sealed – not just by her musical achievements, but also by the fact she has been 'Warholed'.

Sergeant Ivan Frederick (born 1966)
Ali Shallal al-Qaisi at Abu Ghraib Prison (1994)

The distasteful practice of 'trophy photography' has a long history. The term originally applies to game hunting where hunters pose behind the animals which they have killed, but it has also been used to describe the use of photography when photographing the dead in warfare. Few examples are as shocking as those taken in Iraq in 2003, the first instance in which photographs taken in conflict were captured digitally and shared across different platforms. This photograph is just one of many taken at Abu Ghraib, a prison on the outskirts of Baghdad which the US military were using as a detention centre. It is not by a professional photographer but a sergeant in the military who, along with several of his colleagues, tortured and humiliated Iraqis who were being detained. Photographs of the American soldiers torturing inmates revealed the dubious ethics of the war and, as in the Vietnam War, highlighted the fact that not all US allied soldiers were heroes or indeed saviours.

This photograph became the most reproduced and therefore the most famous, as it was the least graphic in many ways. Several elements of the photograph nonetheless make it disturbing. The outstretched arms of the Iraqi prisoner, Ali Shallal al-Qaisi, make him resemble Jesus on a cross, and the electrical wires tied to his hands add to the macabre theatricality, while the hood strips the prisoner of any remaining dignity.

The term 'war porn' has been attached to the Abu Ghraib photographs and other similar gratuitously violent and explicit images that are often circulated without context. This image is perhaps the first to be understood in this way and as a lasting icon of the war in Iraq it illustrates the changes in how photography is taken, disseminated and understood at the turn of the 21st century. It has not gone through the filters of an editor and shows that 'citizen journalism' is not always taken with noble intentions.



Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879)
***Blessing and Blessed* (1865)**

During the Italian Renaissance, the hitherto prevalent image of the Virgin Mary with the Christ child was replaced by the Madonna of Humility, an icon which humanised both mother and child, and was understood to represent universal human feeling and experience. Here the mother protects, feeds and derives hope from the new life; an ultimate idealisation, partly by identifying the child with Jesus Christ and the mother with characteristics such as tenderness, compassion and love.

Photography followed painting in representing this tradition as one of the noble genres of art. One of the most famous examples of this can be found in the work of Julia Margaret Cameron, an amateur photographer who photographed the image of the Virgin Mary many times over her short working life. She drew inspiration from religious iconography for this portrait: she covers her model's head, and the slight blur of the camera and the folds of clothes give an outward dramatisation of inward emotion – a reference that dates back to very early Byzantine Virgin Eleousas. In addition to the symbiotic and vulnerable relationship between mother and baby, we see an idealised and romantic image; motherhood as a holy calling.

Cameron's Madonna-and-Child images reverberate with universal, religious and personal symbolism and she purposefully calls upon the signs and symbols of religious art, making her work accessible and instantly recognisable. To this day, we see the compositional structure of the triangle of the Madonna painting, even in documentary photography, although in this genre a reality is shown in which the life of mother and child is neither idealised nor romanticised.

Kevin Carter (1960–1994)
***Starving Child and Vulture* (1993)**

Some images do not make it into a newspaper because they violate a journalistic code or because photo editors consider them too shocking for their readership. This image by the South African photojournalist Kevin Carter, taken during the 1993 Sudanese famine, did get published. There is no bloody scene, there are no dismembered limbs, and there is no face with recognisable emotions we can relate to. Instead, the photograph features a young, starving Sudanese child, who (according to the caption in the *New York Times*, where the image was first published) collapsed on the way to a feeding centre. As Carter was photographing the child, a vulture landed close by. After taking this picture, Carter drove the vulture away.

The image was used in charitable campaigns, and so became an iconic depiction of famine that helped forge public opinion. In addition, it quickly became a prominent case study in the debate over whether and when photographers should intervene during their work in crisis situations. Some readers of the *New York Times* criticised Carter for not immediately coming to his young subject's rescue. Carter later said that he hated this photo, even though he won a Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for it. A few months after he won the prize, he could no longer live with the depression he'd battled for years, and he took his own life.

Perhaps the fundamental question is: How much should viewers see of the world's miseries? And when confronted by scenes like this, is it the photographer who should take action, or the people who see their images?

Joel Meyerowitz (born 1938)
***Amy, Cape Cod, Massachusetts* (1981)**

In 1992, the Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra made a series of 'beach portraits' of girls and boys in their early teens (and sometimes younger) in the USA and in Western and Eastern Europe. Irrespective of where they come from, or however expensive or handed down their swim suits look, her subjects all seem equally self-conscious: on a museum wall, they look like monuments to teenage awkwardness. The fact that we have all been that age, which is glorious and terrifying at the same time, might well explain the iconic status of Dijkstra's photograph of a Polish girl in a green bathing suit, which is often compared to Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1484–6). However, in the Renaissance painting Venus rises from a shell in the sea close to the shore, whereas Dijkstra's muse, standing firmly on dry land, is less bombastic and does not demand our admiration. The Polish girl was not asked to strike a contrapposto pose; she did it unconsciously.

In 1987, Annie Leibovitz took a photograph of Willie Shoemaker and Wilt Chamberlain at the beach in Malibu, California, for an advertising campaign for American Express. Although the two men appear more confident than the young Polish girl, their poses are strangely reminiscent. In 1983, years before Leibovitz and Dijkstra made their beach photos, the American street photographer Joel Meyerowitz photographed this shy young girl on a beach in Cape Cod.

The fact that each image was created entirely separately makes the resemblance between them all the more remarkable. The three photographers and their subjects all seem to be taking inspiration from a collective unconscious, to represent something universal.