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Exhibition Review

Disobedient Objects, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 26 July 2014–1

February 2015

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A well-worn leather Diadora trainer lies on the side of the road, separated from its twin some time ago. The shoe is lifted up quickly by an 8-year-old boy, its tongue cut out at the base and the two laces pulled through its eyelets. His small hand finds the frayed ends of each lace and threads them through holes at the edges of the tongue, securely fastening them with double knots. He picks up a large stone from a pile gathered from the nearby hillsides, all the perfect size to nestle into the shoe's pouch. The stone rests there as he walks into the middle of the road. Holding the tongue heavy with the stone in the air, pulling the two laces taught in the other, the boy releases the pouch and starts to swing it around his head, releasing one end of the string on the second rotation. The stone flies high, hurtling towards the two Israeli army trucks up ahead.

In another time and place, a length of bamboo culm is passed up and secured to complete the third tier of scaffold. The statue's head, shoulders and uplifted arms holding the torch get lowered onto its torso by a group of young art students standing on wooden planks. The sun is setting and down below, friend's link arms, protecting the carts that carried the sections of statue, scaffold and tools

while the artists complete their Goddess of Democracy. It is warm and the metal armature makes it heavy to handle, its foam and papier-mâché skin shining white in the evening light. The students cover their artwork with a blue and red cloth. After a long night, two people chosen from the crowd pull the cords to reveal the statue to the thousands of supporters shouting 'long live democracy'. The Goddess stares silently into the eyes of a large photo of Chairman Mao.

We imagine the lives of these objects encountered in the exhibition *Disobedient Objects* at the V&A, yet we were not present at either of these two events. Curated by research fellow, Gavin Grindon and V&A Prints Curator, Catherine Flood, the exhibition (with accompanying catalogue, conference and blog) explored 'object-making within social movements, a people's history of art and design from below' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 9). Banners hang from the ceiling and sounds came from the bike bloc speakers, the compilation of video footage and interviews projected on the back wall. The exhibition took place in a room adjacent to the main foyer of the V&A. It included objects from social movement cultures around the world starting from the late 1970s to the present day (with the exception of, for example, the Suffragette tea set from 1910). Struggles being represented range from deregulated capitalism in Argentina, sexism, racism and corruption in the art world, loggers in northern India, union busting in London, land rights in New Zealand and the rise in tuition fees in Canada. The exhibition celebrated the imagination for protest and alternative futures that emerge from experiences of pain, anger, injustice and violence in these various conflicts.

The structure of the exhibition, designed by Barnbrook using scaffolding and chip board display systems, focused on four strategies for social change, labelled: Direct Action, Speaking Out, Making Worlds, Solidarity. The fifth section, A Multitude of Struggles, showcased initiatives such as the Guerrilla Girls, Top Goon, the Tiki Love Truck and Bike Bloc. The curators were informed by the values and principles of Participatory Action Research to develop the exhibition. They tried to open up the research process to those involved in the struggles themselves for example the labels included quotes from the object's makers. However, they admit not being able to carry out this properly due to 'institutional constraints' and 'because we weren't engaging with a single local community context' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 24). The catalogue and free How-to Guides (both also designed by Barnbrook) outlined how to make a number of the exhibits (such as makeshift tear-gas masks, lock-on devices and bucket pamphlet bombs). In the corner of the room was crowded wall space where visitors added their own campaigns, struggles and opinions.

The final 'afterword' in the catalogue goes to the V&A Director, Martin Roth, who calls *Disobedient Objects* a 'brave and unusual exhibition' and recalls the 'radical' mission of the V&A to bring art and design to all and that they 'recognise the ongoing 'struggles for freedom taking place around the world' (Flood and Grindon 2014:136).

At the time of the exhibition there was a very real struggle taking place within the

walls of the V&A where staff members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) were fighting for fair pay, having experienced a drop in real terms of their wages, down 10 per cent over three years (PCS 2014a). The general institutional recognition of worldwide struggles for freedom (in the director's statement), PCS's struggle against pay cuts and the curating of *Disobedient Objects* rubbed up against each other in the spaces of the V&A. As Duncombe and Lambert point out in their letter to critics writing about political art: 'Political art has a dauntingly large venue: the street, the marketplace, the mass media' (Duncombe and Lambert 2012). It is not usually encountered in the controlled space of the museum. Perhaps the more overtly 'living' part of the exhibition was the wall of stickers, leaflets and messages that visitors kept adding to. PCS stickers were also stuck on the scaffold and chipboard in the exhibition, disrupting the aesthetic of the display systems. As part of their fair pay campaign, PCS members held their own 'disobedient protest' outside the museum during the exhibition (PCS 2014b: 7). Artists from the exhibition, including the Guerrilla Girls, joined in handing out postcards and stickers. Following this, management entered negotiations with union representatives and agreed to give some of the lowest paid workers in the V&A a pay rise (2014b). In this sense the sticker moves from museum object to being directly experienced in the protest on the steps of the museum.

The seemingly objective, unbiased and authoritative act of curating in the museum is dislodged in *Disobedient Objects* as we are presented with histories

of struggle from below through objects and their application. Julia Bryan-Wilson in the catalogue refers to the idea that to 'museumify' is to 'deaden and defang' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 131) and the curators ask: 'what happens when you place disobedient objects at the heart of a building that was conceived for such obedient purposes?' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 19). The exhibition avoids a purely historical look back at previous heroic acts of disobedience by including live struggles.

The makers of these objects might not be concerned about being labelled artists, designers and/or activists, rather it is the objects they produce using calculated designs and impulsive finds that are foregrounded. As the curators write, 'social movement objects' are not necessarily composed from a 'recognizably activist subjectivity' but from 'the micro-politics of the everyday' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 11). This exhibition is not the terrain of professional activists and artists, and in the catalogue the curators distance their approach from exhibitions on 'critical design' and 'interventionist participatory art' (such as *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in 2004–2005). Instead, they prioritize grass roots activist social movements and their selection of strategies for social change (Flood and Grindon 2014: 10).

In resuscitating these objects, *Disobedient Objects* was an invitation for us to question the gaps in our knowledge of social change movements and why these gaps might exist. John Holloway suggests the visitor should leave with 'a rage in

his or her heart' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 130). These strategies are positioned not as polite, formal approaches to having a say but inspirational, uninvited gestures of those who do not wait to be asked to participate. The objects become microcosms of their maker's circumstances, a reminder of a decision to act. In this sense, they scream out to be uncaged and put back to use, hence our small attempt at activating the objects through imagined narratives above. On their own, these objects are absurdly feeble, what is wearing a badge going to do? But together they are loud – they create a storm. It is an uncomfortable, unhappy but hopeful display that questions the purpose and methods of protest as well as the museum as an awkward host who, we sense, keeps looking at their watch, anticipating the moment these objects leave so they can get back to preserving, conserving and entertaining some more obedient artefacts. As the curators explain, 'normal V&A rules concerning plinths, barriers and touching distances have all been revised' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 24). The objects have been treated differently to other items in the collection. They are unfinished, lying in wait, temporarily on loan awaiting reactivation.

What does it mean to encounter these objects such as the slingshot and model of the Goddess of Democracy objectified in the V&A, miles from where they were used? In this state, the process of their making is foregrounded. Duncombe and Lambert state, 'If one's goal is to effect change, form serves function' (2012). While the labels in *Disobedient Objects* give clues as to their function, a deeper understanding of the context of each struggle and the details of the politics they

are engaged in seems crucial. A lack of context can result in drastic misreadings of the objects on display. This is the hazard of the museum: appropriating objects from their context can result in a taxonomy focused on form (an extreme example of typological taxonomy is the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford) and this can make it hard to imagine the complex field in which it functioned or functions. Andrew in 'Give Up Activism', a response to the global day of action on 18 June 1999, writes about the networking forums for activists where what they have in common is that they are activist groups and 'what they are actually concerned with seems to be a secondary consideration' (1999: 8). We have a similar observation of *Disobedient Objects*: what the objects have in common is that they are stemming from forms of activism but the context becomes secondary when they enter the museum. As T. V. Read remarks, this can mean 'their material and emotional context is obscured' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 130).

Writing in 1960s, philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse wrote 'Repressive Tolerance' which addressed the adoption of the patriarchal tools to fight from within. He outlined how tolerance had become a form of oppression of alternative opinions, attitudes and peoples and that voting, protesting and freedom of speech were merely accepted as a 'trade-off for a life of servitude' ([1965] 1969: 2). In a 'civil', 'liberal', 'free', 'democratic' system, opposition, dissent and creative forms of critique are tolerated, he suggests, unless they incite or practice violence against that society.

The activation of museum objects is also being carried out by a new museum in Hong Kong dedicated to exhibiting and distributing uncensored documentation of events in Tiananmen Square on USB sticks they hope will be smuggled into China (BBC 2014). Yun, co-author of this article, was 9 years old at the time of the events taking place in Tiananmen Square. Looking up to the projected video footage on the wall of the gallery, we see footage of the moment a young man stands in front of an army tank, turning to block its path every time it tries to move past him. Despite growing up in China, this was the first time Yun had seen this footage. For co-author, Sophie, who has never been to China, this was familiar imagery. Our starkly disconnected experiences of history were made manifest as we stood there witnessing the same disobedient objects. The place and moment were recognizable to Yun but had never been seen, rarely spoken of or referenced until now. These images of potential ruptures are celebrated in some parts of the world and officially swept under the carpet in others. In most cases, knowledge of these events are mediated, with the motives, meanings, experiences and complexities of the context perhaps lost or rewritten in translation.

While the *Disobedient Objects* exhibition is tolerated by the V&A and might be deemed 'brave and unusual' by its director, a more metaphorical curatorial stance might be necessary in a country, which is more overtly repressive. For example, while the exhibition catalogue was printed in China, would it be possible to tour the exhibition there? Curatorial interventions that incite action

might be difficult to pull off in a military dictatorship or regime where censorship is rife. The methods might have to be different the use of metaphor might need to be applied in order to fly below or between the radars of censors and police. We see this in the *apilleras* from the late 1970s displayed in the exhibition, made by women in Chile to document the repression and massacres they were experiencing under Pinochet. Their textiles were dismissed as folk art at the time and therefore did not attract attention from the censors, enabling the women to export them abroad. This subversive, creative media outlet enabled them to communicate the issues beyond Chile and to raise solidarity with other groups fighting oppression. A more overt public exhibition, conference or demonstration in this context would not have been possible. Stealth making and curating become ways to get the point across, with less of a risk of being arrested. The use of finger puppets in *Top Gun* and masks by the Guerrilla Girls also provide anonymity in contexts of varying degrees of threat to one's life or career.

The objects on display, relate to a range of political contexts where there is no tolerance, only repression, and people have been experiencing structural violence first hand, dissenting 'by any media necessary' (Critical Art Ensemble quoted in Duncombe and Lambert 2012) and 'out-design[ing] the authorities' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 15). For example, the first object imagined in action at the beginning of this article is titled 'Slingshot' and lies in a display case accompanied by a photograph with the caption: Second intifada, Palestine, 2000, and labelled with a description and credit to Larry Towell, the photographer. The

second part of the label reads: 'Peaceful disobedience only works when protestors have the cultural visibility and the government acknowledges their right to protest. Without this, struggles for freedom can sometimes take other forms'. On Towell's Pinterest page, he says he also found a slingshot made from a child's mitten (Towell 2000). Palestinian boys who made their own weapons to use against Israeli soldiers enacted this particular struggle for freedom. Following the first intifada in 1987, 'children of stones' became the visible front line of the conflict. The Israeli military were apparently given permission to break the bones of the children throwing stones (Tolan 2012). As the Israeli occupation continues, so does the stone-throwing with Israel recently increasing the penalty from two years to twenty years in jail if a stone-thrower is found guilty of throwing objects in a manner that is likely to cause harm. The policy also applies to dozens of Palestinian children who have been jailed for a month or two before their trial begins (Shuttleworth 2014). This is not a context of tolerance, it is extremely repressive so the tools used in the fight for freedom are necessarily oppositional and violent.

Marcuse wrote about a time and place where there was tolerance (we could call this a large public institution willingly embracing a politicized exhibition within its walls), he asks could such acts of tolerance be repressive and work against social change? (Marcuse [1965] 1969: 5). If so, such tolerance could be understood as a form of social control and any subversive acts made by those 'dissenters' (in this case, the curators of Disobedient Objects) could work towards strengthening the 'engines of repression' that allow them to go about their

dissenting business. Andrew, for example, points out how 'activism can bring down a business or stop a road but capitalism carries merrily on, if anything stronger than before' (Andrew 1999: 4).

The problem with Marcuse's argument is that it relies too heavily on simplistic distinctions between powerful institutions and a dissenting opposition. Alana Jelinek (2013), for example, suggests there is a problem with an oppositional stance and calls for a move away from binary stories to more complex, nuanced ways of seeing where we acknowledge that we have all become neo-liberal subjects embodying neo-liberal values of measurement, populism and efficiency. Both Lorde and Marcuse rely on the binary notion of there being an oppressed people with oppressors controlling them. Jelinek suggests the reality is more complex as individuals can hold multiple identities, biases, patriarchies and freedoms.

How does Disobedient Objects avoid replicating binary models where some people have all the power and other do not have any (dividing the world into oppressed and oppressors)? How do the movements represented in Disobedient Objects also perpetuate inequalities and abuses of power? **Can the objects presented tell nuanced narratives that complicate the binary 'them and us' story?**

To step beyond the binary understanding of power is to let go of the idea of co-optation by the museum of 'Disobedient Object's' institutional critique. If we take a more nuanced approach, another picture emerges where the curators, visitors,

managers, contributors, invigilators and workers in dispute are all 'implicated as agents and as part of the mechanism of power' (Jelinek 2013: 66). Abandoning these binary notions of power also lets go of dialectics and moves towards a Foucauldian position where there is no outside, rather multiple forms of resistance in relation to power. Rather than a revolutionary rupture that splices the past away from a new alternative future, we are faced with 'unevenly distributed multitude of points of resistance in an equally diverse landscape of shifting splits and boundaries' (Raunig quoted in Jelinek 2013: 84). As Halberstam points out in the catalogue: 'The brokenness of protest is part of what we celebrate here' (Flood and Grindon 2014: 133).

Cultural theorist Nelly Richards (2004) writing on the postmodern critique of avant-garde actions in Latin America refers to the move towards more fragmentary nuanced critiques of cultural revolutionary attempts to overthrow a regime. She calls attention to what is left unspoken and the stories of failure and conflict within these heroic, utopian gestures of resistance. Halberstam similarly points to these missing elements, asking of the exhibition: 'What is not here because something else is?' (in Flood and Grindon 2014: 133). This critique of complete transformation involves a shift towards 'altering and subverting the system through the micrological play of situated actions' (Richards 2004: 32). *Disobedient Objects* shows methods that in their material detail allow for a complexity of micropolitics of the everyday. However, there is an overriding sense of opposition. The badges, banners, bikes are made by people who are

against something; they are strategically revolutionary rather than tactically subversive. This makes it difficult to have a nuanced understanding of power and creates a binary situation. Indeed, this is hard to shrug off during pay disputes, or being faced by tanks, when it becomes starkly obvious where the power lies.

While the objects themselves might be calling for radical ruptures from existing systems, the framework of the exhibition can only ever be an intervention, a small reformist gesture within a large conservative public institution. A non-binary approach to curating (acknowledging and playing with the power one holds) allows us to think about our own relationships to struggle. These are not remote struggles that just happen over there to oppressed peoples, rather Disobedient Objects exposes our own complicities in the construction and wielding of power, a reminder that we are not outside visitors looking in but prepared to acknowledge and act upon the situations in which we currently find ourselves, whether that is Zhengzhou, London or elsewhere.

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