

# **Disobedient Objects**

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This discussion was carried out over email in Autumn 2013, as the exhibition was being prepared.

### **John Holloway**

These objects speak of pain and fury and dignity. They scream their 'No!' at us.

If our conversation is to have meaning, it must be to make that 'No!' louder, to magnify the pain and the fury and the dignity. There is always a danger that in placing an object in a museum, you silence it, you literally dumb it down. You, Gavin, have asked us to accompany the objects, with the intention, I hope, of getting us to turn up the volume, so that the visitor to this exhibition does not go out saying just 'how interesting, that was fun!' but leaves with rage in his or her heart. Rage because we too, all of us, are battered and beaten and trampled upon, and humiliated by the power of money. Rage because the obscenity of capitalism grows all the time: the grotesque inequalities; the lying, corrupt humbug of the politicians; the tearing up of the earth by the mining companies; the subjection of information, education and thought itself to the logic of a system based on profit. Rage because capitalism attacks us and attacks us and attacks us.

Look at that homemade gas mask over there, worn by the protesters in Gezi Park in Istanbul just a few months ago, and remember. Remember the simplicity of their demand. They wanted to stop a shopping mall being built on top of a

park in the centre of the city, and for that they were beaten and gassed. And so they made masks to protect themselves and went on protesting. More than that, they turned the masks into a mockery of the system – '*chapuling*', they call it. There is a photo of the protesters dancing the tango in the park, with gas masks on their faces. Absolute mockery of the system, absolute proclamation that our struggle is not symmetrical to capital's struggle, that the world we want to build is quite different from the world of money. A beautiful echo, too, of the gas masks worn by the musicians in the centre of Sintagma Square in Athens just two years earlier, playing their bouzoukis as the gas grenades exploded around them.

Or look at that banner recalling the great miners' strike in Britain, and think of the women and men who fought and fought and fought not just for their jobs, not just for their traditions and their way of life, but against the surrender of the country to the great god of Money. Look at the banner, look around you at what the country has become and thank the miners for the anger and the dignity that they have handed on to us.

Or see the jewellery over there, made by the Black Panthers held in the prisons of the United States of Incarceration. See the pain turned into a thing of beauty, but a thing of beauty that does not and should not let us forget the pain that engendered it. Their pain, our pain.

Over there, that pot from the *cacerolazo* in Argentina tells us of

the people who went down into the streets when their anger boiled over on 19 December 2001, who went out and chanted '*que se vayan todos*', 'out with the lot of them' – away with the whole miserable gang of politicians and exploiters. And they overthrew one president after another in the weeks that followed and showed the world how we can make it a different place, by taking over factories and hospitals, creating neighbourhood assemblies, setting up workshops and kitchens and schools. Not enough, but a blazing light of inspiration in the sky.

Look, then, at all these objects and feel the rage and dignity and hope they express, and know that that hope and dignity and rage are ours. And then, curator, commentators (us) and visitors, let us go out and shout it from the rooftops.

### **T.V. Reed**

John has raised a number of key points. Most importantly, he has eloquently started to carry out the amplification these objects deserve, and has called upon us to remember the terror of the systems these decontextualized containers of rage resist. It is inevitable in placing these objects in a museum that their material and emotional context is obscured. Floating free from their home in political contestation, including life and death struggles, they are indeed in danger of becoming curios and fetishes. The surrounding texts and videos can certainly help reconstruct their

original grounds, but a profound act of sympathetic imagination is also required. Cut out from the pain, suffering, but also the joy of struggle, they are like characters in a play that have wandered off stage. Only those who know the play can fully catch their meaning.

Of course, my choice of analogy is not random. Protest is always theatrical, and it is most effective when it is most imaginatively theatrical. This is not to trivialize, because all political life is theatrical. It is just that mostly all we see is reruns, both from the powers that be and all too often from resisters. My chant these days is 'A slogan/ exhausted/should never be repeated.' The current, rather jaded and bloated, mediascape calls for ever more artfully crafted acts of challenge to the systems that be. If there was ever a time when the arts of protest needed to be honed, it is now. In that sense, having these objects in a 'center for art detention' (Ishmael Reed) is not so inappropriate. If the lived context is dulled, the new context can serve as a reminder that creativity is absolutely key to meaningful transformation.

As I suggested, John is absolutely right to point toward the great pain and suffering that helped give birth to these objects. But these objects also contain great hope. Pain and suffering most often lead not to action but despair. The bravery of the producers of these objects is that they raged not inwardly but on the world stage, and those acts are

acts of hope. That the symbolically real gas masks were featured in dancing reminds us that this is not only a mocking of the system, but also an embodiment of joy (Yes, Emma, fuck Lenin if he won't let you dance). One of the best-kept secrets about protest is that it is exhilarating. Throwing your whole being, body and soul, into a call for radical change is a profoundly positive, empowering act. Hannah Arendt wrote about 'public happiness', SNCC workers in the most deadly dangerous depths of the struggle against US racism and apartheid spoke of a 'freedom high'. Like all highs, freedom highs can be abused, can even become addictive, but these autonomous zones, however temporary, can have extraordinarily joyful power. They say 'No!' but they also say a great 'Yes!' to life lived intensely and meaningfully.

#### **Julia Bryan-Wilson**

I want to expand on the ideas of negation and exhaustion that were so eloquently articulated by both John and T.V., and connect them, however provisionally, to the ambivalence of repetition. I am struck by the fact that a hand-stitched banner, first created for a political occasion, Occupy LSX, is being remade specially for the exhibition at the V&A. One could say that this recreation, fabricated anew not for protest but for display, is a fraudulent duplicate, a bad copy that violates the object's intentions (even if it will be returned to its makers after the show). Why insist upon this *material* recreation? Why

not show photographs of the banner in situ, with hands holding it aloft, as a reminder, precisely, of both its collaborative function and its loss? What sort of logic of substitution is being enacted when handcrafted objects such as banners are remade?

If a 'fine arts' piece such as a painting had been destroyed, would it seem normal for a museum to simply repaint it some years after it had been produced? Maybe, but maybe not: craft objects, especially textile-based works that are often collectively made (not least those created for protest contexts) lend themselves to replication because they are usually constructed out of easily located resources and were anonymously made in the first place. (Not to mention, of course, that in the West such textiles are associated with lesser-valued 'women's work'.) This repetition could be viewed as showing a dangerously blithe disregard for historical circumstance, replacing the textures of use and wear that such a banner accrues in its life on the street with a fresh version that might *look* the same, but holds none of that memory in its threads.

That's one side of the story: the suspicious side, the anti-institutional side, the side that believes that to 'museumify' is to deaden and de-fang, full stop. But repetition does not have to be understood only as an accomplice to regression: it can also be a potent reactivation. To return us to the images of gas masks, consider artist Allison Smith's recreations of handmade gas masks from the

early part of the twentieth century in her 2009 project *Needle Work*.<sup>1</sup> These are based on her research at military history museums in the US and Europe, and in remaking them in all their strangeness, fragility and cloth flimsiness, she highlighted their apparent *insufficiency* as devices of protection. This is a queer repetition that forcibly drags the past into the present. Smith's masks disobey our tendency to think that current crises are somehow unique.

Smith also demonstrates that museums can function as usable archives, not just as repositories of prized things but also as holders of collective memory. Of course, we should be cautious about what happens when objects such as protest banners enter institutions divorced from their use, but that is true of all objects. And if not in museums, where would we rather have them? Cosseted in private collections? Mouldering in basements? At the end of the day, I applaud the fact that the 'Capitalism is Crisis' banner is being given a second life, along with a wider set of viewers. Let's acknowledge that an exhibition such as *Disobedient Objects* might be both a compromise and a revelation. Let's hope that the Museum itself becomes disobedient, fostering new kinds of conversations around these objects and performances and histories, and reaches out in radical ways to new publics. Alongside the calls for a more searing 'No!' and a more joyous 'Yes!', I say: Maybe. Sometimes. It depends.

#### Gavin Grindon

Julia opens up the question of the potential failure of the show, which is a real possibility, but she then leads us to ask on whose terms might it fail? Those of a newspaper critic? Those of the movement participant-researchers who helped establish its criteria and form? Another banner in the show comes from Russian protests against the government's election fraud and its incarceration of activists in the prison-industrial complex. Playing on the double-meaning of *predstavliat*, it reads both 'You don't even represent us' and 'You cannot even imagine us.' Resituated in this exhibition, it might be seen to also resonate against the exhibitionary complex (as Tony Bennet called it) and its limited ability to represent movement cultures. But should it be able to? In 2007 the Turbulence collective, in a paper distributed at the Heiligendamm protests, asked 'What Would it Mean to Win?'<sup>2</sup> Herman Wallace and Kenny Zulu Whitmore's jewellery, which John mentions, certainly resonates with these issues of ambiguous success and failure. We'd hoped to include a letter from Herman Wallace, addressed to the Museum visitor. But just last Tuesday, Herman had his conviction overturned and was released. Suffering from terminal cancer, he died three days later – a free man. Showing the jewellery he made now suddenly has very different resonances, but maybe that's no less true of any of these objects, whose meaning isn't resolved.

#### Jack Halberstam

Can there be a collectivity of objects? How do things live together in a public museum, in an exhibit, in a show? And how differently do they live together there than in the street, the house, the private gallery? Do the objects on display here only represent a disobedience that was performed elsewhere, or can there be a disobedience that emerges from their juxtaposition? When we call an object 'disobedient', do we mean that it captures and frames a disobedient gesture from another time and place or that it is disobedient to its status as an object and disobedient in its relation to the propulsive and willed function of the subject? Can the object refuse to be collected, fail to cohere, renege upon its signifying function?

These objects excite us in their multiplicity, their repetition and their implied use value. But the disobedience of objects might lie as much in their failure to capture or recapture the original context out of which they emerged (a protest, an occupation, a sewing circle, a riot, an intervention, an act of piracy) as it does in their ability to form a new vision of protest as they leave that context. What does the suffragette teapot say about gender, freedom and democracy when placed alongside a *cacerola*? How do the Syrian finger puppets of *Top Goon* signify when situated next to the Barbie Liberation Organisation's repurposed Barbie dolls? How does the Black Panther jewellery read

alongside the anti-apartheid badges? The objects make visible lines of connection and solidarity between struggles as much as they offer images of the distinctness of each instance of protest.

When does a collection become a collective, unified less by theme and aesthetic value and more by intent and a shared sense of purpose and will? Part of the answer lies in the repetition across objects. Julia calls Allison Smith's recreation of handmade gas masks in her *Needle Work* project 'queer', implicitly referencing a non-nostalgic relation to the absent original. Being 'lost' in fact names the act of removal that the exhibition performs. All of these objects are lost, all out of context, all take up contrary relations to originality; all signify as prosthetics, as parts not wholes, as fragments of a broken vessel that cannot and must not be fixed. The brokenness of protest is part of what we celebrate here, the failure that registers as resistance to the whole notion of winning in the first place. And what objects are missing from this show because they are not obviously and assertively 'political'? What about dildos, drag queen costumes, burned bras, punk safety pins, 'zines, smashed guitars and torn T-shirts? What are the lost objects of this exhibition? What is not here because something else is?

In order to make worlds, other worlds must be unmade; new memories require forgetting; new paths require us to get lost. When

objects are disobedient they also perform some of this unmaking, and so, as much as the objects assemble, produce, create, gesture, represent and speak, they also collapse, fall silent, sit still, shatter, obliterate, randomize and disappear. They represent not only the presence and here-ness of protest, but also the absence and the disintegration of dreams, fantasies and aspirations. Objects must certainly affirm our protestations with an affirmative and joyous 'Yes!'; they should certainly register our despair with a resounding 'No!'; they must contain our ambivalence with a wavering 'Maybe'. But objects, being objects, collectively perform acts of silence and stillness that living humans can only ever approximate.

#### Julia Bryan-Wilson

I have a quick observation at the level of a meta-comment that spins into a series of questions, so bear with me ... This discussion has attended to both the titular terms of the exhibition, as we have all tried to tackle our multiple understandings of 'disobedience' and 'objects' (their capacities to speak, as well as their stubborn muteness – thanks for that, Jack). But it leads me to reflect upon some of the absent, haunting terms here, especially the spectre of 'obedient objects'. What might those look like? Are they not in some cases the same as disobedient objects?

It is crucial to consider the realms of ideology, enforcement, policing, law and regulation that

might compel or enforce obedience unequally, putting extra pressure on certain subjects. What sorts of privileges sometimes accompany acts of disobedience? How is obedience sometimes a necessary form of survival?

Finally, do we assume that only subjects and objects can object (to use the verb form)? And how does one account for the disobedient intangibles, like disobedient sounds, or disobedient moods?

#### Jack Halberstam

Julia, the question of 'obedient objects' is a really good one, as are the other questions that you pose about the necessity of certain forms of obedience for heavily policed subjects. I guess the category of 'obedient objects' functions like all kinds of normative classifications that are only glimpsed as constructions because we see that they depend upon certain constitutive exclusions. 'Obedient objects', in other words, could be everything ... and nothing. As you say, some of the disobedient objects – especially the craft ones, like quilts and embroidery, teapots and jewellery – could certainly function as obedient as well. But nothing about their creation necessarily speaks and signifies obedience in the way that something might signal refusal within the category of the 'disobedient'.

So, what do you imagine would round out this category, especially for the purposes of display in a museum? Torture instruments, canes,

classroom implements, prison keys? Since these kinds of objects are not constructed under the same kind of pressure and with the same fierce aesthetic and political commitments that dissidents and prisoners, protesters and radicals bring to the creation of their 'disobedient objects', would they even form a genre at all? Is there anything that would bind 'obedient objects' to one another, or to obedience for that matter?

The mood/sound questions are awesome, too, but I will leave those to others and end with my own question: how do these objects reimagine or help us to reimagine not just politics but the act of protest itself? As T.V. stated, modes and methods of protest, as well as their slogans and chants, have quickly become stale and redundant. What styles, modes and aesthetics of protest might this collection summon? What is the role of aesthetics in creating an effective challenge? Can we think differently about protest and collectivity?

#### **Julia Bryan-Wilson**

What an interesting response. Actually, I was not thinking of 'obedient objects' as the literal, material culture of discipline – i.e. leg braces or prison keys – but, rather, as what we generally speak of as 'art', in its most normative (if perpetually contested) definition. Paintings, sculptures and other works created explicitly in relation to the realm of the aesthetic are often taken as quiescent, content to hang on living room walls or sit

in galleries, in contradistinction to, say, scrawled signs used for street demonstrations. Of course, the art history I am invested in argues, vigorously against this assumption, but it might be useful to confront, and more fully flesh out, the status of 'art' and, as Jack suggests, of aesthetics in this exhibition and in resistant, 'disobedient' cultures. As artists like Glenn Ligon are aware, in a painting like *Untitled (I Am A Man)*, from 1988, protest signs have their own dense visual appeal. The graphic look of such protests is crucial to their power.

#### **T.V. Reed**

We have rightly been raising questions about what the context of an aesthetic site, and a historically rather conservative one at that, might do to our 'disobedient objects', but what of the reverse? We are dealing with an ongoing process, one in which seriously critical works of 'art' are involved just as much as our putatively non-aesthetic objects of protest. 'Art' objects and protest signs may not be that far apart. Art objects that were once aimed at the heart of capitalism now adorn the walls of multinational corporations. All one has to do is trace the fate of an artist like Picasso – a revolutionary artist who was also at times an artist revolutionary – to understand that there is no resolution to this situation, but only an ongoing dialectic (often in recent decades at least a 'negative dialectic', as Theodor Adorno articulated with such richly obscure clarity). A negative dialectic

perhaps includes Jack's 'Maybe' and many kinds of silence. We need both positive and negative forms of creativity to make what a wonderful recent handbook of protest calls *Beautiful Trouble*.<sup>3</sup>

Take an object like *Guernica*. A brilliant piece of protest/art that has many times moved from Adorno to adorn and back again. Even the most highly resistant art object can be captured by aesthetic neutralization, or museumization. But the art objects and the protest signs decidedly speak back to this process. Picasso was in Nazi-occupied Paris during much of World War II, and was, because of his 'decadent' art and association with 'known Jews', subject to periodic harassment by the SS. During one search of his apartment, an officer saw a photograph of *Guernica*. 'Did you do that?' the German asked Picasso. 'No,' he replied, 'You did.' Yes indeed.

Until 2009 a tapestry reproduction of *Guernica* hung in the UN headquarters in New York, and recall that the stage managers of the Empire during the dark Bush years understood, as had the Nazis, that the artwork had power. This copy of *Guernica* was sitting rather tamely in the UN building becoming 'classical', when in February 2003 the US government feared its power enough to cover it up when one of its agents delivered a new batch of lies to help launch hideous new war crimes in Iraq. But like much censorship before and since, this only served to reawaken resistance in the

object and its advocates. Outside the building, a group of protesters held up copies of the painting, and soon a widely circulated protest poster, *Iraqnica* (credited to Russell Donegon and Plastic Jesus) drew precisely the link the Bush league sought to cover up. The image went viral and boosted an emergent anti-war movement. So let us not 'misunderestimate' the power our objects may have, even on Victoria and Albert. For both 'art' and 'disobedient objects' of protest, the process of incorporation and reinvention is an ongoing one that with his typically preternatural concision Walter Benjamin summarized in a one-liner: 'When politics becomes aestheticized, art must become politicized.' Art is very much part of the struggle, maybe even the same struggle, as our presumptively non-aesthetic objects of disobedience. Julia is quite right that effective protest needs artfulness, today more than ever when protests can be brushed aside by the lamestream media (the one concept I [sort of] share with Sarah Palin) as 'sixties style demonstrations', as if protest were just a retro style choice. When the students in Paris in 1968 shouted 'All power to the imagination!' they understood that the inability to imagine alternatives to current social formations is at the heart of oppression, and 'art' along with and often as part of protest movements is therefore at the heart of successful resistance and the building of new worlds. If 'another world is possible',

and it is, it begins in the imagination grounded in real worlds of pain, beauty and fiercely practical hope.

#### **John Holloway**

Disobedient words are what we want. Disobedient sounds, yes, if we could sing or speak or scream as a sonic accompaniment. But it is written words that we are invited to produce for the exhibition, words to be published in a book that will go on sale (or perhaps be stolen). How can we write words worthy of the objects that are on display? A fearsome, exhilarating challenge.

How to write words that will be part of a museum publication but at the same time leap off the page and shout 'do not close the covers of this book, do not put it away on the shelf, do not put it on the coffee table. Do not forget what you have seen, carry it with you into your daily joys and angers'?

I picture us as part of a chorus. The lead singers are the objects on display and we stand in the background, talking to each other of course, as we are now, but aware too that we are talking to those who visit the exhibition, trying to find ways of amplifying the message of the objects.

In some cases, we can only stay silent. When Gavin tells us the story of Herman Wallace's jewellery, what else can we do but fall silent and scream to high heaven?

Each object speaks of its own particular dignity. But the power of the exhibition is surely that, in

bringing the objects together, it de-objectifies them, reactivates them as Julia put it, brings them back to the diverse but collective subjectivity of those who made them and carried them, a rebel subjectivity of which we and the visitors are a part. As we see one object after another, we see a multiplicity of struggles, but not just that. Each object looks at the others and says, 'I am not alone, you are not alone, we are not alone.' And we, invited to participate from afar, look in our mind's eye at the objects, and the struggles they portray, and we say, 'I am not alone, you are not alone, we are not alone.' And the visitors, seeing the objects and reading these words, cry, 'I am not alone, you are not alone, we are not alone.' And then we all laugh for joy, so loud that capitalism falls apart and we make the world our own. That is what will happen if the exhibition succeeds. That (in response to Gavin and Turbulence) is what it would mean to win.

As part of the process, let Julia's wish come true: 'Let's hope that the Museum itself becomes disobedient [we might want to rename it on the way – Emma & Karl, perhaps?], fostering new kinds of conversations around these objects and performances and histories, and reaching out in radical ways to new publics.' Then, indeed, our disobedient words would leap off the page and join hands with the disobedient objects escaped from their cases to dance a new world into existence.