

Keynote presentation at the launch of

*Arpillera Journeys*

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V& A

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I first heard about *arpilleras* while I was researching *Disobedient Objects* – an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum about the art and design produced by grassroots social movements over the last 35 years. I was talking to political mosaic artist Carrie Reichardt about ‘craftivism’ – a term coined to describe the rise in recent times of people exploring craft as a form of political activism. Carrie suggested I look at the textiles sewn by women in Chile in resistance to the Pinochet regime. She suggested that these were important precursors of what we now call craftism.

I was intrigued and started to research where I could go to see examples of *arpilleras* and whether it might be possible to borrow any for the V&A exhibition. The Museum of Memory and Human Rights (Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos) in Santiago, Chile has a large collection of *arpilleras*, but they do not have a policy of lending them to other museums. I then discovered that in 2008 there had been an exhibition of *arpilleras* at the Tower Museum in Derry. I phoned Margaret Edwards, Education Officer with Derry City Council’s Museum Service, to find out where the items they displayed had come from. She told me that one of the best collections of *arpilleras* and the person who knows most about them is here in Northern Ireland just across the water. That’s how I began talking to Roberta Bacic. She invited me to come and stay and look at her collection.

It was the best kind of research. Roberta got out a big pile of *arpilleras* and we peeled them away layer by layer. And as we looked Roberta began to unpack the different layers of their meaning. Out came the everyday and extraordinary stories depicted in the *arpilleras*, the real life people represented by the dolls, and the symbolic motifs. There was their materiality and everything that the scraps of sacking and fabric told about the realities of the lives of the women who made them. There was the process of making them and how gathering together into workshops to sew their stories gave women the emotional and collective strength to begin speaking out. And there was the impact they had when they were smuggled out of the country and became windows that allowed the outside world to see what was happening inside Chile. Finally we came to recent *arpilleras* from Colombia, South Africa and Ireland and I learned that, far from being an historical phenomenon, *arpillera*-making is a technique that has travelled from Chile to be used by women all around the world in many different situations of resistance. And I began to see how Roberta’s work with her collection has been the catalyst for this process.

We agreed that Roberta would lend a number of her *arpilleras* to the *Disobedient Objects* exhibition. Chronologically they marked the beginning of the period covered by the

exhibition as one of the first examples of creative resistance to the emerging forces of neo-liberalism. In planning the Chilean coup in 1970 President Nixon instructed the CIA 'to make the economy scream'. The *arpilleras* in their act of making and their depiction of murders and disappearances alongside sunrises over the Andes Mountains embody both a scream of negation and a thread of hope for another future.

*Disobedient Objects* was a very different kind of exhibition for the V&A as it allowed us to ask some important questions about what we place in museums of art and design and ask people to pay attention to. The project started by asking why big museums of art and design like the V&A don't collect and represent the culture and creativity of social movements? The simple answer lies in the fact that history is usually written from the perspective of those in power, and the history of art and design is no different. The V&A is full of examples of fine craft – highly finished objects created for the private consumption of elites and produced under various forms of governance: patronage, institutional training and the codes and controls produced by guilds, academies and market forces. Social movements produce objects such as *arpilleras* under very different conditions – quickly, under pressure and with few resources. Such objects might be made by highly skilled artists and crafts people, but they are working by any means necessary using the tools skills and materials they have to hand. The purpose is not to create art for art's sake or to demonstrate mastery of a particular technique, but to address a social problem.

Placed next to more traditional V&A exhibits, the objects produced by social movements can therefore appear rough and unfinished. They might appear to fail the narrow test of technical quality that the museum imposes. But they are considered and often beautiful responses to complex problems. We could turn the question around – most of the objects in the V&A collections could be considered failures in the task of making social change. Are we only interested in the form and aesthetic of an object or in the impact that it has on society? *Disobedient Objects* was an attempt to start telling a history of art and design from below.

The exhibition had an amazing response from the public. The final visitor figures were 417,000 making it the most visited exhibition at the V&A since 'Britain Can Make It' in 1946. It is evidence that people want content in their museums that relates to their lives and events happening in the world. The visitor response also demonstrated that museums can be spaces for debate, not just entertainment. One of my favourite visitor comments (on Twitter) was 'Long time since I've debated with strangers in a museum'.

There were, however, very real concerns about bringing these kinds of objects into a museum like the V&A which to many represents the establishment. In asking what disobedient objects would do to the museum, we also had to question what the museum would do to disobedient objects. The main concern voiced by makers and lenders was whether their objects would be fetishized by placing them in the V&A, divorced from their original context. Would tools for action be transformed into static objects of aesthetic contemplation? We needed to challenge the idea of the museum as a mausoleum where

objects go to die when they have no more active use in the world and can be neatly slotted into a narrative that makes the world as it is seem somehow inevitable.

In addressing these issues, Roberta's work provided inspiration for how a collection and an exhibition can be something active and alive. Roberta has shown her *arpilleras* in countries all around the world – but as her *arpilleras* travel she has ensured through the workshops that she runs that the technique of *arpillera*-making travels with them. Women are shown how with simple know-how and materials they too can make *arpilleras*. Indeed the emotional power of telling your story in this way can hardly be understood until you have experienced making a doll about your own situation or your own family.

In *Disobedient Objects* we tried to capture this inspirational provocation - that you don't have to be part of a professional practice or commercial process to be an artist or a designer. You can take making into your own hands and make something that makes a change in the world. Making reminds us that we are powerful. We wanted to encourage visitors to think about the objects on display, not as the end point in a design process, but as open-source prototypes that are there to be adopted and modified for the next struggle. To this end we produced a number of 'how-to' guides showing people how they could make some of the objects in the exhibition from everyday materials – often things they might have at home. During the course of the exhibition our guide to making a DIY tear gas mask from a water bottle was downloaded from the V&A website and used by protestors in Ferguson and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (see <http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/disobedient-objects/ferguson-the-design-dimension-exploring-makeshift-tear-gas-masks-on-bbc-4>).

One of the main things I learned from *Disobedient Objects* is that curating is a collaborative process, it is as much about bringing people together as objects. This is something that Roberta does extremely successfully and is the reason why many of us are here today.