

Women with guns: resistance, re-appropriation, revolution HILARY ROBINSON

Women in patriarchal and sexist societies have always been outgunned, if not outmanned, and the image of the armed woman has frequently been hyper-sexualised. Images of women with guns are commonplace in certain places of representation.

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There are many other examples of women with guns that have been produced in support of revolutionary movements. Of the images from women within armed struggle, they are on the whole romanticised and removed from reality, the women in heroic and valourising poses. Frequently, the identity of the artists are lost or were never made public, so their gender identity can only be guessed at. For example, the named muralists of the IRA in Northern Ireland have been male, though it is unclear who painted this; while there were women volunteers, these are not individual portraits, but idealised ones, and they are not taken from existing photographs that I have been able to find of women volunteers in action.

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The same is true for the protestant loyalists who also - though rarely - produced images of weaponised women. The Loyalist 'Mother Ulster' and the farmer's wife protecting her husband - interesting that it is more seemly for the woman to wield the gun and her husband to work the tractor than vice versa.

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For another example, if you walk through the streets of Havana, you will find signs beside particular doors indicating a local office of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women), with an image of a smiling woman with a gun slung over her shoulder.

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The same image is found on medals commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Federation. This image is not a Cuban Everywoman, but is Vilma Espin, revolutionary, feminist, founder of the Federación in 1960, the wife of Raul Castro, and according to some one of the most important people in developing and implementing the plan of the Cuban Revolution.

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The image of Vilma has an interesting photographic source. Taken in 1959 it shows Vilma standing next to Fidel in an informal group of men and women in military clothing. The photo is far from hi-def, but it is clear that the object behind her shoulder is not the rifle in the graphic, and the strap on her shoulder appears to be supporting a handbag.

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There are a number of photographs of Vilma, as she is known, with a gun; so why alter this particular one to weaponise her? It is a pleasing photograph of her, but surely the need for an image of her as a powerful individual could have been

fulfilled with an image of her well-known face alone, the gun was not necessary; or, if it was, in order to support notions of constant vigilance, continuing revolution, a posed photograph could have been produced.

What becomes more interesting to me is the ways in which artists who are women have picked up guns themselves and used them in the making of artworks. There is a long strand of women who have used actual guns in their work, in the performance of resistance, re-appropriation, and revolution.

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In 1961, in France, Niki de Saint Phalle began what turned into a two-year project of shooting-works. In 1960 she left her husband and children, had a disastrous affair with another artist, and in order to separate from him, she first bought a pistol that she could carry in her handbag - it had no bullets, but its presence was both a comfort and made her feel powerful. She then created this work, *Portrait of my Lover*, 1961, from one of his shirts and a toy dartboard, threw darts at it, and invited the audience to do likewise. (it is worth remembering that until 1975, the mitigating circumstance of 'Crime Passionnel' could be used in France by men who had murdered their unfaithful wives if they caught them with their lovers).

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That same year, she made some reliefs with the express intent of shooting them with a gun: they had items in them that would bleed paint and other liquid or semi-solid items like foodstuffs. By this time, she had incorporated the handbag gun into an artwork, so had to borrow one from a fairground stall - the stall's owner insisted on being present. It was a .22 long rifle.

The first two shooting sessions were in February, in her Paris studio; Pierre Restany, who was present, immediately invited her to be part of the New Realists group (which was all male). The third shooting session, in March was in Amsterdam. On April 17th, the attempted invasion of Cuba by the USA at the Bay of Pigs occurred, with the subsequent nuclear stand-off. On the 21st, Saint Phalle performed a shooting session that was broadcast on the French 1pm tv news.

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June 20th, a concert-performance was arranged by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg at the US embassy in Paris; Saint Phalle made a shooting painting; she used a professional shooter, as the musician, David Tudor, was frightened he might get shot. A few days later, also in Paris, she had a one-person show where (in what now appears an extraordinary act of collaboration) she invited members of the public to come to shoot at the reliefs. At this point, Saint Phalle had enough money to buy her own gun - also a .22 rifle.

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The works progressed through 1961 from being made with bags of paint and spaghetti and rice that would 'bleed' when shot, to cans of spray paint, and of tear gas that would explode. The Algerian war was at its height at this time; and on October 17th the police massacred an unknown number, possibly over 300, Algerian demonstrators on the streets of Paris, by shooting, beating, and drowning them in the River Seine.

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Saint Phalle said that she stopped making the shooting paintings after two years because she felt "like a drug addict", was hooked on it, and felt stoned afterwards. As an artist she did not want to lose control in this way. However, she recognised also the sexualisation of her by the press: "If I had been ugly, they would have said I had a complex and not paid any attention... I was screaming against men in my interviews and shooting with a gun. This was before the women's liberation movement and was very scandalous."

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A key feminist work from before the time the phrase 'feminist art' was coined, is Valie Export's *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik* of 1969. Using the *Aktionshose* - the jeans with the crotch cut out, that she created the previous year, this drew upon a performance also from 1968 called *Genitalpanik*. Wearing the *Aktionshose*, Export had walked through the rows of the seated audience in the *Augusta Lichtspiele*, an art-house cinema in Munich; inevitably, her naked genitals were at the same level as the heads of the people seated.

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The *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik* is a photograph intended to be seen en masse, and indeed was wheatpasted on the walls of Vienna in 1969. It has belatedly entered the collections of major museums like Tate in London (2007), the Pompidou in Paris (2008) and MoMA New York (in 2010) it has done so at Export's stipulation that it is only owned and exhibited in batches of six. This is the image that has been sold to Museums;

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At least seven black and white photographs from this session are still in circulation in different formats: as the original silk-screened poster, as reproductions in books and journals, in web-based formats, and as prints mounted on different support material for museums and collectors.

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Export weaponised herself in these images, though she did not own the gun. The photographs were taken by photographer Peter Hassmann working at her direction; the gun, borrowed from a collector, is likely the US-produced 1928 Thompson, possibly the M1928 A1.

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The live action, *Genitalpanik*, in 1968 was not documented photographically, but Export did not carry the gun in it. She has pointed out that if she had carried a weapon it would have put her in danger of being shot herself by security guards.

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1968 saw student and labour uprisings around the world; Martin Luther King was assassinated; 1967 was the assassination of Che Guevara; in 1970 the Baader-Meinhoff Group formed in Germany and the Brigade Rosse formed in Italy; the Vietnam War brought violent images to the TV each night.

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Additionally, one photograph of EXPORT standing uncannily anticipates photographs of Patty Hearst robbing a San Francisco bank with the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974.

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In Cuba just last year a young artist, Khadis de la Rosa, who just graduated from art school, made a short video work where a woman (we never see her face) is seen in a bedroom, removing a medal and a gun from the back of a drawer.

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She removes the bullets from the gun,

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In a workshop, removes the explosive from one and makes a mould of the casing.

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She melts down the medal

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and with the molten metal, she makes a new casing,

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puts the explosive into the new casing,

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and then inserts this new bullet into the gun, which in turn is replaced with the empty medal case into the bedroom drawer. The medal used in the video was issued by the Council of State of the Republic of Cuba and was given to fighters with service time of more than 30 years in the Ministry of the Interior; this one was awarded to de la Rosa's parents in their retirement ceremony from the military. The gun is American, manufactured in the early 1900s. It legally belongs to de la Rosa's father. In this action, the father's weapon is deconstructed and given new functionality by the daughter. The work is intimate and political, in that it is familial and in that it uses the memorial medal and was produced by a young woman after the easing of relations between Cuba and the USA by Obama, and in the months before the death of Fidel, but after power had been handed to Raul.

Che Guevara's Manual of guerilla warfare of 1961 is startling in its directness. Che indicates that the weapons used are most likely to be taken from the enemy, and once taken, must not be relinquished - He also points out that the biggest problem will be in getting hold of ammunition. and indeed women carried ammunition around Cuba in pockets in their petticoats.

Che Guevara's comments on women in The Manual is advanced in that he writes positively of the ability of women to fight in the front line, to use weapons, and states that they do not cause sexual tensions among the fighters, contrary to popular myth. He points out that women can often be deployed as messengers to carry information and ammunition, as they will not be so readily suspected as men. However, he also says that women are also of great use in providing food that actually tastes of something, unlike the meals the men produce; they can be used to set up little enterprises to make uniforms; and they can teach basic literacy and political theory to the peasant classes that the insurgents need to work amongst.

Che's exposition of guerrilla warfare, his acknowledgment of the importance of captured, stolen and smuggled weapons would seem to be directly at odds with Audre Lorde's admonition that 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House'. Yet, I do not think that this is the case. Che's Manual was a directive to think strategically, and act tactically: Highly practical, it focuses on how to respond tactially to specific situations. He does not speak of fundamental political struggles or aims.

Lorde's text is quite different in its aim. Unlike Guevarra's, this is a text that addresses fundamental political theory within the women's liberation movement,. She is not saying that women should not steal or smuggle anything that is necessary, but rather, she is lambasting the repetition of patriarchal structures that maintain divisions between women and thwart productive affective relationships between women.

She writes: "Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening."

This is the thought I would like to leave you with, as it resonates fully today. While the works I have shown (and many others made by women foregrounding guns) share a background of feminist struggle, the struggles are varied: against colonialism, against totalitarianism, against authoritarianism, towards liberation, against patriarchy, and within individual familial or affective relationships. The play between the political and theoretical on the one hand, and the tactical on the other, remains urgent and it is crucial that one is not allowed to eclipse the other.