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Cover image: **Fig. 4** *For emergency use soft shoulder*, by Corita Kent. 1966. Screenprint, 76.2 by 91.4 cm. (Courtesy the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles; exh. De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).

# Exhibiting Feminisms (Part II)

by Amy Tobin • 02.04.2019

In Part I of this review I discussed the ‘disorganising feminism’ of *Still I Rise, Act I* at Nottingham Contemporary. I described the ways in which the exhibition curators challenged teleological narrative structures, reframing feminism not in terms of chronology or postmodernist deconstruction, but as an expanded, intersectional set of juxtapositions and connections. At the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, the thinking is the same and yet, despite a few familiar pieces, the exhibitions are quite distinct.

The exhibitions' unusual two-part structure is signalled by the subtitles of ‘Act I’ and ‘Act II’, although perhaps every touring show could be similarly described, since differences in context, architecture and curatorial approach rearticulate every iteration of every exhibition. Nevertheless, in *Still I Rise* the difference is more significant. If the Nottingham version picked up on the city’s histories of resistance, and woman-centred activism, then the De La Warr display looks to experiments in architecture and design that parallel the utopian principles that shaped its modernist building. Works that have travelled from Nottingham take on new meanings in their surroundings at Bexhill. Most obvious is Alice Constance Austin’s *Constance City Plan* (c.1916), which made childcare and cooking communal, and therefore transformed the isolated labour of reproduction into social work. While in Nottingham this almost unknown project spoke to histories of eco-feminism, anti-nuclear protest and craft, in Bexhill it finds a correlative in the architecture of the gallery, which was originally conceived for the betterment of the surrounding community, as well as in surrounding exhibits including an archival display of the Matrix Architecture Collective’s Jagonari Educational Resource Centre for Asian Women, which was not included the first version of the show.

This two-act structure disrupts the exhibition-as-narrative, and with it the curatorial authority that often accompanies group exhibitions. The exhibition’s guiding mind map too, has been re-drawn with new themes, and new names now printed in black and white **FIG.1** rather than Nottingham’s peachy pink. The result is a palpable sense of contingency, or what the curator Rosie Cooper calls an ‘ongoing conversation’ between the works. This brave (dis)organisation shows up the hubris of the so-called landmark exhibition. It questions the will to be definitive and to make a mark, rather than to be collaborative and to open up a set of possibilities for exploration in future exhibitions. With this gesture, *Still I Rise*

may have overcome the longstanding threat of the politicised exhibition, that one per generation is sufficient.

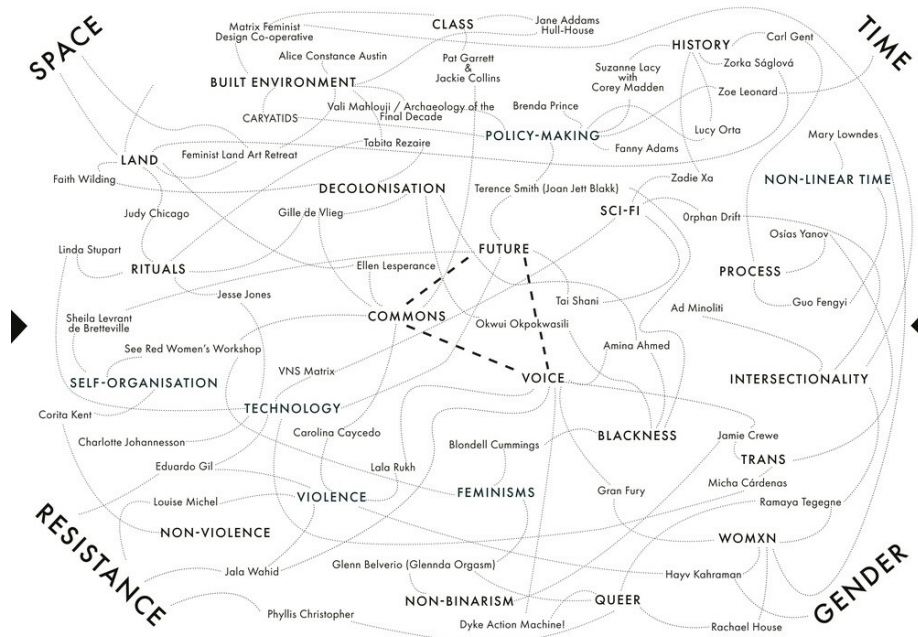
Contingency is evident within as well as between the two exhibitions. At Nottingham the exhibition was accompanied by an extensive performance programme, and four thematic sections described in active terms – A Rumour, A Spell, A Dance, A Call – all contingent and temporary things. I wrote in Part I of this review of how these sections created a sense of collectivity between the works in the galleries, as if in their gathering they activated the space. And yet, the Nottingham display was perhaps more about performance, or the performance of resistance than resistance itself. This shifts at Bexhill so histories of resistance become the activating force. There are fewer works at the De La Warr – which has a far smaller floorplan than Nottingham Contemporary – but more activist, graphic or design exhibits. The curators have invited new contributors including Zadie Xa, Tabita Rezaire and Jamie Crewe, while Hayv Kahraman is given the entirety of the first-floor gallery in a parallel but separate solo presentation titled *Displaced Choreographies* FIG.2. If the larger galleries at Nottingham Contemporary created some ‘strained coalitions’, then the juxtapositions here have more synergy. Contingency emerges as the condition under which many of these acts of resistance exist, as well as in the precariousness of the works and exhibits in relation to history. That so many works in *Still I Rise* remain little known until their inclusion in this exhibition is testament to this instability.

*Still I Rise, Act II* has a denser texture than *Act I*. The single gallery is divided by curved walls designed by f architecture FIG.3 – who also designed the installation at Nottingham Contemporary – but there are no thematic sections here. Instead ideas flow along the length of the space and guide the visitor back through to the entrance. The exhibition design has less competition from the architecture than at Nottingham, and the walls are put to greater purpose, increasing the wall space and cleaving exhibits together and apart. The necessity of walking the space twice allows connections to form and sediment. Perhaps the simplest example is the way the activist forms of the poster and banner repeat across the space. Activist posters by See Red, Gran Fury, Corita Kent FIG.4 and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, among others are paralleled by other works pasted directly onto the wall like a fly poster on a street FIG.5 including Jamie Crewe’s neon A4 works on paper titled *Terms* (2018) and *Forfeiture* (2019), which straddle a corner in an expert balance of conspicuous inconspicuousness. Suffrage banners FIG.6 hung on the back of one of the curved walls find echoes in Carolina Caycedo’s *My Feminine Lineage of Environmental Struggle* (2018), in Xa’s *Call Waiting* FIG.7 and in an outfit fabricated using Ellen Lesperance’s gouache knitting patterns, themselves translated from photographs of clothing worn at Greenham Common FIG.8. This circuit between protest banner, sheet, clothing and painting

speaks eloquently of conflicted histories of social reproduction, performance and political demonstration. The relationships between these exhibits are entangled and complex, and revealing for it. There is no easy idea of feminism presented here, but much joy and inspiration.

The interrogation and rewriting of history connect the exhibitions. This is evident on various scales at the De La Warr, from Tai Shani's monumental anti-patriarchal, anti-epic *Semiramis* – which is presented here beautifully in a series of miniature stage set maquettes – to Vali Mahlouji's and Archaeology of the Final Decade's *Recreating the Citadel* (2014–18), which gathers together documentation and artefacts relating to the destruction of Tehran's red-light district in 1979 immediately before Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. The light pencil writing surrounding reproduced artefacts and works by Kaveh Golestan in Mahlouji and AOFT's installation speak to the precariousness of certain histories, while Shani's speculative attempt to think beyond patriarchal knowledge and narrative creates a new potential space. Personal histories are explored by Amina Ahmed and Xa; art history by Guo Fengyi, Hayv Kahraman and Linda Stupart; histories of technology and spirituality by Charlotte Johannesson and Tabita Rezaire; local histories by Carl Gent; and histories of activism by Mary Lowndes, Zorka Ságlová, Phyllis Christopher and Jesse Jones. These works, along with Suzanne Lacy and Corey Madden's important *Storying Rape* (2012) – that features an orchestrated conversation between lawmakers, journalists and others involved in reporting on, prosecuting and protesting rape and its causes – breaks down the legitimacy of authoritative histories, exposing the violent mythologies of coherent narratives. If there is a feminist project that intersects these works then this attention to history is surely it. *Still I Rise* shows the feminist precedent for zeitgeisty art-critical designations like the 'archival impulse' or the 'artist-as-researcher' and re-inscribes these practices in a longer legacy.

*Still I Rise* is a historical exhibition, from its content to its concept. While many of the artists included seem to have their heads turned to the past, they are also looking forward. The curators are similarly Janus-faced, able to assert the importance of past work for the present and the future. The success of these exhibitions does not lie in the creation of an important or influential exhibition, but in the undoing of these values in favour of disorderly constellations that nonetheless settle into significance.



**Fig. 1** *Still I Rise* exhibition mind-map. Designed by One of My Kind (OOMK) and Cédric Fauq. (Courtesy De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).



**Fig. 2** Installation view of Hayv Kahraman: *Displaced Choreographies* at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2019. (Photograph Rob Harris).





Fig. 3 Installation view of *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance* at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2019. (Photograph Rob Harris).



Fig. 4 *For emergency use soft shoulder*, by Corita Kent. 1966. Screenprint, 76.2 by 91.4 cm. (Courtesy the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles; exh. De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).



**Fig. 5** Installation view of *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance* at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2019. (Photograph Rob Harris).





**Fig. 6** Installation view of *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance* at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2019, showing *Call Waiting* (2018) by Zadie Xa. (Photograph Rob Harris).



**Fig. 7** Banner for the National Union of Women Teachers, by Mary Lowndes. 1908. (Courtesy of The Women's Library collection, London School of Economics; exh. De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea).



**Fig. 8** Installation view of *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance* at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2019. (Photograph Rob Harris).

**Exhibition details**

*Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender and Resistance, Act II*

De La Warr Pavillion, Bexhill-on-Sea

Curated by Irene Aristizábal, Rosie Cooper and Cédric Fauq.

14 February–27 May 2019



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