

## **In Possession of Weapons: Guns and Violences in the Work of Contemporary Women Artists**

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**Abstract:** How does one position oneself in a world that threatens constantly to destroy one's ability to live peaceably? To explore this and related issues, the current essay focuses on works by women artists in which guns are pivotal or prominently featured. Yet it is not so much the guns themselves that are of interest here, but the way that in the hands of women artists, they allow us to perceive the frequently unacknowledged multiplicity, obscurity and aleatory workings of violence. Why, when one is in a position to pull the trigger, one would *not* do so? In tackling these questions, the essay considers how the artists Milica Tomić, Olivia Plender, Maria Kulikovska and Rita Duffy *use* guns to raise questions about the radically conflicting modalities of violence that are routinely folded into a single term. In such art, the gun – that which so often is used to situate women as passive possessions in need of defence – is now paradoxically positioned. Itself less the focus of analysis, these artists' guns re, on the one hand, symbolic of the delegation to some and not to others of the right to self-preservation. On the other, they are the very means by which political, sexual and bodily integrity and agency can be restored; the means by which art can strike out at violence with violences of their own.

Drawing in particular on Elsa Dorlin's work, as well as on classical philosophies of violence, the essay thus considers the question of violent self-defence as an aesthetic, political and somatic counteroffensive. It shows how in the hands of women artists, art emerges not as a routine, representational response to (gun) violence, but as that which has the capacity to

*generate*, to act within and *upon* a variety of violence(s) in ways that reveal and transform their conditions.

**Keywords:** guns in art; women artists; feminist theories of violence; modalities and styles of violence; critiques of violence; practices of self-defence; martial ethics;

The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinisation in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level. André Breton.<sup>1</sup>

This weapon was a tool for me to understand actually, where am I? and how this city lives with this history or in this contemporary moment. Milica Tomić.<sup>2</sup>

How does one position oneself in a world that threatens constantly to destroy one's ability to live peaceably? And, when one is in a position to pull the trigger, why would one *not*? These questions are raised, dialectically and dramatically, by the opening quotations. On the one hand, Breton – pistol (apparently) already levelled against the crowd – maliciously and joyously calls for a 'total revolt' against 'insubordination' (*Manifestos*, p125). On the other, the artist Milica Tomić (whose work will be investigated in detail below) proposes to use the gun (literally) as a (re)traumatising mechanism through which to (violently) interrogate the past from a set of vantage points in the present and the near-present.

Yet despite these artists' (ostensibly) combative stances, something else is going on, other than that which one might too quickly assume. Neither Tomić *nor* Breton offer anything like

‘straightforward’ valorisations of the instruments or the aims of violence.<sup>3</sup> For Breton, the point is *not* that violence can have ‘emancipatory’ ends. He does *not* naively believe that surrealism will bring about the downfall of a debased socio-political system. But *neither*, his quote insinuates, can violence be (at least in any simplistic way) condemned in advance as a *prima facie* wrong. Rather, a subversive, aesthetically-loaded violence is seen as a vital, transformative fuel for igniting social and cultural phenomena, without which society and culture would be inconceivable (*Manifestos*, p125). Similarly, for Milica Tomić, the gun is more than a mere instrument of ruin and injury. It is charged with a composition of dissimilar forces that combine a variety of political, sensible and affective energies. An architect of human misfortune it may be, but it is also a symptom of historical over-determination. It is dispersed via imaginations as well as agents; by friends as well as enemies.<sup>4</sup> In place of any simplistic condemnations of violence, we are now faced with the artists’ readiness to vigorously confront and contest ‘normative’ dogmas – those presuppositions about violence that prevent us from deeply interrogating the manifold ways that ‘it’ shows up in, or folds deeply into our world.

These two quotations then, bring us to the first, and perhaps most important point at issue in this essay. As Richard Bernstein says,

although, (or perhaps because) there is so much discussion of violence, there is enormous confusion about what we even mean by violence.<sup>5</sup>

In a world in which violence can seem unremittingly, glaringly obvious, the significance of this statement cannot be underestimated. It is not just that there are many different *types* of violence (direct, structural, political, domestic, economic, psychological, aesthetic, symbolic,

linguistic, media, epistemic, environmental etc), or that, as Bernstein stresses, there is ‘no consensus’ as to how these various schema relate to each other, but that so often, the critiques of violence reduce ‘it’ to a homogenous, standardised object, concept or event. Thus, as Michael Staudigl argues, ‘there is *no* violence per se’ – merely a set of analyses that assume the right to define what violence ‘is’.<sup>6</sup> Yet this too makes for a difficult point of departure, in that it leaves open the question of what kind of methodologies, if *not* critical analytical ones, can recognise the obscurity, multiplicity and aleatory workings of violence. How can we address the radically conflicting modalities and experiences of violence that are routinely flattened into a single term?

### **The Starting Gun: Art and the Many Styles of Violence**

To undertake such a task, this essay proposes a point of departure that diverges radically from many normative or classical formulations of violence.<sup>7</sup> In contrast with these, what is at stake here is the ability of artworks – specifically the works of women artists using guns in their work – to move *beyond* conventional claims as to what violence ‘is’ and show instead, that a ‘pure’ or ‘universal’ experience of violence does *not* exist. In the works of Milica Tomić, Olivia Plender, Maria Kulikovska and Rita Duffy, as will be discussed below, multiple violences or *styles* of violence unfold – on different levels, in different ways, according to whose gun is raised, or when, where and at whom it is aimed. In possession of weapons, these artists guns are of peripheral interest as objects in themselves. Yet they expose us *both* to the explosive impact of machinegun fire *and* to the slow, almost imperceptible advance of violences that rebound across successive generations. Not only do these women artists *use* their guns to extend ordinary conceptions of what *counts* as violence, but they implicate us – more deeply than we might wish – in different modalities of violent action. Thus the gun – the paradigmatic mechanism through which violence is thought to irrupt – becomes in the

hands of these women artists, even at the very moment it appears to take centre stage, something other than a gun.

Yet now the stakes are raised. We are in the presence of a weapon that is already drawn – in both senses – as that which is available to be fired, but as that too, which is exposed to representation, through which it is infinitely shared, dispersed, positioned. A firearm has been designed, as everyone knows, to kill and maim. Yet it is more than a gunpower-burning, projectile-shooting machine. When the gun recoils, it is not just with the violent discharge of a bullet, but with the drawing of itself into representation. To discount its (perhaps just as deadly) metonymic function is to disregard the latter's essential contiguity with violence. This is why so many of us who have neither seen nor handled a gun, know exactly what it looks like, how it's used, what it can do. It is why those of us who have had guns pointed at us have felt, before the trigger clicks, our lungs empty of oxygen, as if – in anticipation of an event that may never happen – we have already been shot in the face. A gun is neither merely a machine for killing, nor an image for entertaining. It is, in addition to both, an aesthetically-fuelled event in which the action has to some extent, already occurred – shot through as it is with a complex mix of physical, symbolic, virtual, historical and spectacular a/effects, more than one of which is potentially deadly.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to many conventional, theoretical accounts of violence then, this essay argues that the guns that these women artists 'carry', can nevertheless shoot us beyond analytical conditions to the very nerve-endings of violence. As we will see, Tomić, Kulikovska, Duffy and Plender are less interested in guns as discrete objects, than in how they can *generate* something of the very stuff of violence as it folds into 'itself' a variety of shattering, somatic but also aesthetic-laden properties. On the other hand, such works do not occlude theoretical

understandings of violence. On the contrary, by sweeping us into the impulses and designs of violence, they make us sense more vividly, the complicated arrangements of those violences that lie within ourselves – challenging us to reflect more deeply on the ends and impacts of violences, by alerting us to our own hypocrisies and prior assumptions as to what ‘violence’ *is*, in whose name and to whom ‘it’ is supposedly done.

In such works, the story of ‘violence’ is a complicated one. Each work tells us more than merely (as art is so often supposed to say) that violence is *bad*. Each artist’s gun musters a variety of violences that can neither be homogenised, nor simply cast off by siding with some nobler ‘non-violent’ resistance.<sup>9</sup> In the presence of her gun, we are exposed to the sheer complexity and intractability of violences’ grip on us; we must admit that our societies are based on many violences – that our bodies, minds, pasts, and futures are full of it. Rather than a universal violence, there are a dizzying array of intensities, from inconspicuous, to terrible, to thrilling.

Before developing this argument further in relation to Tomić, Kulikovska, Duffy and Plender’s artworks, it is necessary to foreground another important issue – namely, that so often in discussions about violence, women are positioned as faceless prey: the passive victims of repression, the targets of physical or sexual violence. However, by starting from the embodied position of women artists with guns, we are already running counter to an imaginary in which women are assumed to be defenceless or indefensible.<sup>10</sup> To this end, this discussion draws deeply on Elsa Dorlin’s work, which unlike many other philosophical approaches to violence, begins by considering how some of us are systematically *disarmed*, made defenceless or taught and forced to live like prey. For Dorlin, there are no violence-free positions – only the recognition that these bodies are always already traversed by violences

that must be lived with and through, on different levels. If, she argues, one's life is already shaped by violence, then access to practices of self-defence becomes part of a 'martial ethics of the self' – an active preparation for an engagement with violence as a possibility not just against us, but also *for* us (*Self-Defence*, p18). Dorlin's work is therefore indispensable in helping us engage more carefully with the works of women artists whose guns position them as *both* complex *agents* in possession of arms *and* as subject to violences that drive the very constructions and embodiments that distinguish men 'from Others' (*Self-Defence*, p170).

Important as Dorlin's work is to this discussion however, it is also vital to recognise the ways that these artworks shift the analysis of violence from a discursive to an operational, or evental register. The artists selected for discussion here *use* their guns to compel us to deal with violences that are not only irreducibly plural but viscerally and perceptually taxing. This is a question not only of means and ends, but of intensities. In the hands of women artists with guns, 'violences' are neither good nor bad, but (somewhat shockingly) both at once: we are propelled into double-barrelled, 'emotional territorialit[ies] that...divide[s] up spaces, stigmatise[s] bodies, and naturalise[s] relations of aggression/victimization, security/insecurity, us/them, and fear/trust' (*Self-Defence*, p162). They drag us into the confusion and disarray of many violences, preventing us from stepping back to the comparative safety of the witness; calling us to the 'limit events' of history<sup>11</sup> where we are forced to imagine ourselves as *operants* as well as objects of pain and injury. The scandalous possibility is opened up even, of a pleasurable violence in which women are on the other side of the crosshairs.

To take such a point of departure is not only to disavow the usual frames of reference around which debates about violence are frequently organised. It is ‘to begin from muscle rather than from law’:

this is certain to change the way in which violence is theorised in political thought ... the stakes of defensive violence are nothing other than life itself: to not be cut down where you stand. Physical violence is thus understood as a vital necessity, a praxis of resistance (*Self-Defence*, p18).

### **Woman Bearing Arms**

To explore these issues, we turn first to Milica Tomić’s *One Day, Instead of One Night, A Burst of Machine-Gun Fire Will Flash, If Light Cannot Come Otherwise*, (Oskar Davičo, fragment of a poem), 2009. The title itself gestures towards the protean qualities of that which oscillates indistinctly between violence and counter-violence; between political, state violence and self-defence. Davičo, a surrealist poet, partisan, and initiator of the Yugoslavian Communist party, developed his style as an articulation of the revolutionary movement against Fascism. His fragment is already a call to arms – a threat, even: in the absence of any other prospects, light can always be generated by machinegun fire.





Fig. 1. Milica Tomić's *One Day, Instead of One Night, A Burst of Machine-Gun Fire Will Flash, If Light Cannot Come Otherwise*, (Oskar Davičo, fragment of a poem), 2009.

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In 2009, Tomić paces the Belgrade streets for two whole months – Kalashnikov in one hand, plastic supermarket bag in the other – plotting the sites of antifascist actions conducted by members of the People's Liberation Movement (PLM). The historical circumstances prompting PLM resistance are necessary to remember: Hitler, blaming the Serbs for causing World War I and generating Germany's post-war predicament, had instigated a reprisal in the form of 'Operation Punishment' (1941), thus destroying fifty per cent of Belgrade's residential area and killing an estimated 5000 people (*Concise History*, p393).<sup>12</sup> The living monument (which Tomić subsequently builds with her commemorative action) memorialises

the fact that women as well as men were active resisters against the fascist invasion – a fact that, Tomić suggests, is systematically ‘forgotten’ under the current Serbian government (Tomić Interview). Meanwhile, her unholstered AK47, clearly if nonchalantly conveyed, is also steadfastly ‘forgotten’ (ignored) by virtually everyone – both in Belgrade, where she carries a replica and more puzzlingly, in Copenhagen where in another iteration of the event, Tomić carries a real Kalashnikov:

... the image of an armed woman in civilian clothes is something non-recognizable [...] the anti-fascist struggle and People’s Liberation Movement are no longer part of public memory [...] I tried to confront an erasure of the anti-fascist struggle from public history, and new forms of fascism which developed alongside [...] Even the police ignored me.<sup>13</sup>

Born in a country that no longer exists, Tomić’s perspective on this erasure comes from a place that is radically different from that of conventional commentators. While she shares their broader concerns with the legacy of political violence, her work encompasses a chaotic range of mutually entwined issues, some of which are visceral: the deeply felt (even irrational) relationship between national, ethnic and gender identity; the tense social epochés produced by governmental manipulation of ‘public memory’. For Tomić, these issues operate on somatic as well as cognitive levels and must be explored as such. Walking the streets of Belgrade, her gun has somehow receded in visibility – has become ‘conspicuously inconspicuous’.<sup>14</sup> Yet carrying it, even nonchalantly, she insists of passers-by that they should see that which is already there but repels attention. How, *if not through you*, she silently demands, are individual experiences transformed into collective ideology? Who do

you permit to use violence? Who do you prevent and why? What violences are you *unable* to admit to, even when they stare you in the face?

The white grocery bag that Tomić grips in her other hand nods pointedly to another, less visible form of violence. Issuing from a post-war Serbian chain of supermarkets, the bag alludes to a ‘violence’ that Tomić identifies as ‘the privatisation process in Yugoslavia’(Tomić Interview). She clutches her bag in solidarity with the middle-aged women overwhelmingly employed by the chain, who carry this same logo on their uniforms, for the twenty-eight days of the month they are required to work. For Tomić the diverse violences that underly Serbian ‘collective memory’ must all be acknowledged.<sup>15</sup> ‘This country’ she argues, that is no longer called Yugoslavia, ‘is a product of ethnic and resistant wars’.<sup>16</sup> It is a territory, she contends, that is forged on the one hand by the gun and on the other, by the ruinous operations of capitalism and patriarchy:

In the former socialistic countries, ultra-racist gender politics are restored, reducing woman, and all the politics surrounding her (*Global Feminisms*).

Carrying her AK47 as if it were a purse, Tomić traverses shopping quarters and train tracks, winging in and out of bus stations and residential streets. The gun points not at passers-by but the ground she walks on – the bedrock of a history saturated with different violences – from those that are formally acknowledged and celebrated, to the opaque, gender and capitalist violences expunged from official purview.

And yet Tomić insists, there is a historical legacy rooted in the emancipating politics of socialism that cannot be reduced to totalitarianism (Tomić Interview). This, she gives voice

to, literally, in her interviews with female and male partisans accompanying the filmed depiction of her action. Now, as she criss-crosses Belgrade, gun dangling by her side, we hear the voices of those who went before her – their rationale for joining the resistance; the risks they took; their views of the contemporary antifascist movement.

However, Tomić takes up arms, not just to declare continuity with the PLM's struggle, or to execute a public intervention into Serbia's mediated official memory.<sup>17</sup> Dedicating her work to the Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative (ASI) of Belgrade, she takes a stand too in a contemporary struggle – pledging alliance with six activists<sup>18</sup> who (despite the widespread condemnation of their arrest as a travesty of justice motivated by right-wing and nationalist interests in Serbian politics) were nonetheless detained on charges of 'international terrorism'.<sup>19</sup>

This scalar shift in Tomić's work from historical to contemporary resistance produces a diachronic layering of violences. It breaches assumptions as to what counts as 'violent resistance' or 'terrorism' – constructing instead, a dyssynchronous montage, in which Tomić questions what is possible in the name of armed resistance and how women can be agents rather than casualties of political action:

Today, whether we are in a direct war situation or not, we find ourselves in a state of permanent mobilization. However, is it possible to use armed force without establishing a strict division into the terrorist versus the terrorized? (*Trust*, p184)

This complicated question is emphasised in the aesthetic of Tomić's film, whose montage technique (following that of experimental filmmaker, Lev Kuleshov<sup>20</sup>) allows this (dis)array

of violences to be broached simultaneously. As methodology, montage induces a radical openness to new interpretations and events, ensuring the work's continued resonance today – fourteen years after its first iteration when the international 'war on terror' prevailed. Tomić's adoption of a revolutionary *aesthetic* (montage) from the early twentieth-century is now apposed to a revolutionary *praxis* in the early twenty-first.

Following the recent school shootings in Belgrade in May 2023,<sup>21</sup> a new, unsettling layer of meaning insinuates itself into Tomić's work – the killing by gun of children by children, in a society that is not only highly militarised but haunted by a 'psycho-history'<sup>22</sup> replete with multiple historical, political and invisible incarnations of violence. The significance of these events is palpable for Tomić, who recalls visiting her son's school and observing, scrawled on the children's desks, 'Kosovo is Serbia' (Tomić Interview). Her own schooldays, during which she was taught target practice under the Defence and Protection policy, were equally militant. Thus, she maintains, 'political heritage' comes to be transformed into a kind of historical revisionism. For Tomić, Serbian 'socialist' values are, on one hand, framed as needing protection (hence militarisation is deeply embedded in Serbian society). Yet on the other, these values, she maintains, are constantly compromised by accelerating forms of privatisation. For Tomić, such structural violence<sup>23</sup> exists conjointly with the direct violence of war, both of which, she maintains, have remained invisible in Serbian society:

It was invisible in the media. It was invisible in culture that we were consuming.

It was invisible on the streets. It was not there, you know, and this is the problem [...]

But we are not allowed to talk about violence while it is happening ... we can't name it. We can't talk about this. So [...] I'm just trying to make this visible.

For Tomić the workings of capitalist expansion and accumulation is rarely seen (in both senses of the term) as violent. Yet, like a gun that repels visibility, its effects are as forceful. Her work reminds us of the Milošević regime's manipulation of the mass media prior to and during the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, when even the Siege of Sarajevo remained literally invisible to viewers of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), who were shown 'pictures of the city taken months and even years beforehand, to deny that it had ever occurred.'<sup>24</sup> This optical regime, Tomić contends, 'was based on reviving memories of past oppression of the Serb people' to invent 'the image of Serbia as a victim of foreign oppression.'<sup>25</sup>

Recent governments have continued to narrate Serbian identity through an ultra-nationalist lens, seeking to occlude evidence of Serbian involvement in war crimes committed during the nineties.<sup>26</sup> To this day, Serbian secondary-school history-books describe neighbouring countries as 'Serb states': Serbian suffering is accentuated whilst Serbian atrocities are downplayed or anonymised.<sup>27</sup> For Tomić, this denial of Serb violence contrasts jarringly with the condemnation of the Belgrade Six as 'terrorists' and the fact that, despite strict gun laws, Serbia has one of the world's highest gun ownership rates per capita.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly then, the violences that Tomić's quasi-invisible gun calls forth are multiple: revolutionary, state, patriarchal, anarchic, symbolic, criminal and terroristic violences are all conjured in an encounter that occurs at somatic and aesthetic levels. While theorists seek clarity by severing disparate forms of violence from one another – say as Benjamin does, with his separation of 'revolutionary' from 'legal' violence, or 'divine' from 'mythic' violence<sup>29</sup> – Tomić produces instead, an encounter with multiple modalities of violence that blaze up sporadically, scattering out in different directions. Thus, as discourse orders violence, art ruptures and frays the orders of discourse. Tomić's gun is an object still, but one

in which violences collide chaotically in a kind of heterochronic, affectively-charged, thinking-doing space – a visceral battlefield in which past, present and future crash together without closure in an endless series of temporal and spatial migrations.

### **How to Shoot an Army**

Like Tomić's piece, the gun that appears in Olivia Plender's two-channel video, *Hold Hold Fire*, is never triggered. Unlike Tomić's gun however, Plender's is incapable of being fired. A stagey wooden cipher, it nevertheless conjures up an intense encounter between multiple violences, starting with the symbolic moment at which the Suffragette movement turns to the 'violence of direct action' (*Self-Defence*, p64). In this way, Plender's gun deals dissimilarly with a predicament that both Tomić and Dorlin raise (either directly or indirectly): namely, if the state is responsible for institutionalising forms of injustice that are structurally violent, how can it be challenged?

...demands for civil equality cannot be made to the state peacefully, since it is the primary cause of inequalities' (*Self-Defence*, p64).

I will return to Plender's gun shortly but to understand her piece, some context is necessary first. Most important is the fact that *Hold Hold Fire* is the culmination of a two-year collaboration with contemporary women activists, actors and theatre-makers. While some are named in Plender's book-length documentation of the project, others are not – to protect the identities of those exposed to a variety of violences, both 'direct' and 'structural', ranging from unequal pay and poor working conditions, to domestic violence, the punitive effects of the benefits system and other intersectional forms of oppression exacerbated by disability, class, race and gender discrimination.

Plender's project began as a series of group readings focussing on Sylvia Pankhurst's little-known play, *Liberty or Death* (c. 1913). During collective readings of the work, Plender describes being

... struck again and again by how much contemporary women can identify their own struggles with those of figures who lived over a hundred years ago...they outline the return of nineteenth century conditions and attitudes – which for some is the legacy of the British Conservative government's austerity policies, put in place in 2010, and for others the notoriously racist hostile environment policy adopted by the Home Office under Theresa May. (*Neither Strivers*, p101.)

Plender's project highlights these sharp parallels between historical activists (as portrayed in Pankhurst's writings) and the collaborating women, who detail their own experiences of physical and structural violence. Members of these groups, Plender recalls,

... described being pinned to the ground by police [...] really violent interactions [...] What I wanted to point out was [...] since austerity measures, the financial crisis, the very harsh right-wing governments we've had [in the UK] [...] there's been a return to conditions last seen a hundred years ago – the roll-back of the welfare state, the level of poverty people are living with. There's that intimate violence of poverty – bad working conditions, appalling housing conditions – that affects your body, your relationships, your ability just to live a life, in the most intimate, private way. But then also how, since people started doing activism around that, the reaction of the state and the police is exactly the same. There's a sort of structure and a pattern.<sup>30</sup>



*Hold Hold Fire* starts from the effects of irreducibly plural violences felt by women over a century – in their minds and muscles; in their social, economic and cultural circumstances. In one discussion, Plender’s collaborators focus on a scene from Pankhurst’s play, in which a Suffragette, Mary, is physically attacked by her husband. Mary cares for her infant baby whilst eking out a paltry living working two jobs – one in a coffee shop; the other, setting bristles in brushes (a painful work that disfigures her fingers and makes her face swell). The immigrant women in Plender’s group sympathise with Mary. In echoes of a recent BBC report on modern slavery, they describe lives in which they earn £2 an hour, are forced to work for twelve-hour days and are subjected to frequent sexual harassment.<sup>31</sup> Others describe eviction resistance or housing protests involving police intimidation, including in one case, the confiscation of a buggy that police claimed was being used “as a weapon”, before throwing it over a fence (*Neither Strivers*, p85).

The historically authorised aim of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) as it was formally designated, was to gain ‘votes for women’. But its broader concerns went far beyond that, instigating a programme of gender reforms that was fundamentally ‘directed against women’s subordinate roles in education, employment and the family, as well as in politics’.<sup>32</sup> It was, in short, a movement for women’s emancipation, rather than merely their enfranchisement.

WSPU’s chosen motto, ‘Deeds, not Words’, was an overt indicator of the violent action that Suffragettes gradually grew willing to take against the sitting government – including the use of arson, bombing and self-declared ‘guerrilla warfare’.<sup>33</sup> For Edwardians, the motto was likely reminiscent of the ‘propaganda by deed’ strategy pursued by contemporaneous

anarchists and Irish freedom fighters.<sup>34</sup> Certainly by 1912, Suffragette activism had become markedly militant: breaking windows at 10 Downing Street and in West End shops; interfering with railway signals; cutting telegraph and telephone wires; setting alight sports' pavilions, churches, pillar boxes, farm buildings and haystacks; slashing Velázquez's Venus; planting bombs in or around properties associated with authority. Their incendiary devices were sometimes rudimentary: candles, sawdust, fabric, mustard tins and bicycle bells were all used; milk-can bombs wrapped in Suffragette newspapers were stuffed with hair pins. Gradually, more sophisticated time-delays were deployed. Acid and nitroglycerine were deployed as well as dynamite, or bombs were packed with hexagonal nuts, designed to cause maximum disruption – leading the Metropolitan Police to observe that the Suffragettes were 'far better' than the IRA in doing 'substantial damage'.<sup>35</sup>

For Plender, the centennial celebrations of the Suffragette Movement in 2018, though conspicuously celebrated by British political parties of all stripes, were purged of these publicly inconvenient historical details – including the awkward fact that women activists had previously been condemned by the same parties as 'terrorists' in possession of arms including guns, and therefore as subject to legal imprisonment, police violence and torture (Plender Interview).

However, descriptions of the various violences encountered by historical and contemporary women activists are merely the backdrop, not the substantive focus of Plender's work, which turns instead, to the bodily and collective tactics that women can learn to resist everyday violence and police aggression. The film shows the group learning techniques of self-defence and care – the "collaborative methods of feminist pedagogy [ ... ] developed and practiced by feminist groups, especially in women's spaces and activist organisations".<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Jackson,

a theatre director trained in Jujitsu is shown coaching Plender's group in the same techniques of self-defence employed by the Suffragette movement since the 'jujitsu parties' of the early 1900s.<sup>37</sup> Yet, as the group discovered, even this 'boundaried' form of violent self-defence was surprisingly difficult, as the women struggled to overcome their reluctance to employ physical force. As Plender says,

It took a lot of work to get the women to the point where they would push each other for example. A simple thing like that already felt incredibly taboo and difficult to do. (Plender Interview.)

Little by little, as the women rehearse movements or practice throws, they start to build consciousness of themselves as a resistant, collective agency – the learning of martial art techniques facilitating a kind of bodily and political cohesion that is clear to see in filmed sequences. They practice the 'linked arms' techniques used by Women Against Pit Closures and activists at Greenham Common.<sup>38</sup> Once a sign of 'non-violent' protest, the forcefulness of the women's locked arms, even in training, is obvious.<sup>39</sup> Yet the sight of these women using their bare arms to stand their ground is oddly moving. Tenderness and rage combined, it calls to mind the Latin root of the word *arma*, meaning both 'limbs' and 'weapons of war', and deriving from the suffix *ar* – 'to fit together'.



Fig. 2. Olivia Plender, *Hold Hold Fire*, 2019. Video, 11 min. 36 sec., still. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

This collective training and consciousness-building create the conditions necessary for Plender's central motif in *Hold Hold Fire* – the recreation of an archival image depicting men and women from Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), guns raised, in training for The People's Army.



Fig. 3. Norah Smyth, Members of the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), engaged in a shooting exercise at Victoria Park, London, c.1913. Reproduced by kind permission of Paul Isolani-Smyth.

For Pankhurst, the power of this Army was threefold: it allowed those who joined it to ‘fit themselves to cope with the brutality of Government servants’; it sent a powerful message to police or anyone who thought of women as ‘weak’ and it attracted radical new activists prepared to fight in defence of ELF’s principles.<sup>40</sup> As Pankhurst said,

... the police now shrank from attacking us in the East End; I wanted that shrinking accentuated. (*Suffragette Movement*, p861.)

Smyth’s rarely-seen image remains challenging for contemporary audiences – partly perhaps, for the scandalous appearance of men taking up arms alongside these terrorist-women but partly also, for its aesthetic power. At the heart of the photograph are the two tiers of prominently raised guns, cutting right across the picture plane, in twin horizontal lines. It is

an effective aesthetic device, underscoring the discipline and determination of the revolutionaries who are unflinching, both in the face of the camera and in their commitment to use violent means to push for social transformation. The symmetrical arrangement of the guns charges the picture with insurgent *and* rhetorical force. Smyth's 'shot' reinforces the *strategic* violence of The People's Army, reminding us of Berger's one-time assertion that 'the word trigger, applied to rifle and camera, reflects a correspondence which does not stop at the purely mechanical'.<sup>41</sup>

The gun used in Plender's *Hold Hold Fire* helps to re-stage and redouble Smyth's image as a *tableau vivant* – a shot set in motion, only now, with a studio backdrop rendition of Victoria Park. The men in the original image have disappeared. Here, in full frontal rather than lateral view, the women raise their wooden guns against the unseen enemy and glare directly at the lens – a reminder perhaps of the etymology of the term 'stare' – the Latin *stare decisis* refers to the legal doctrine of precedents, 'to stand by things decided'. In staring, the women take a stand: at once declaring their continued agency and resistance over time, and challenging the narrow historical representations of women and violence. The schematic contour of their guns is deliberately crude – replicas could easily have been secured, but these wooden ciphers perfectly evoke history painting's 'staginess' as a genre and, 'realistic' detail is unnecessary when one needs only hold two fingers together and point, to call the gun to mind (Plender Interview).

We're very familiar with these monumental history paintings of battle scenes, which were then taken into cinema ... This is an image of women with guns, so it's a world upside down that makes you look at the genre afresh. But then a lot of the violence that women are subjected to, is *not* turned into monuments ... It doesn't end up

represented in some heroic painting ... There's no equivalent genre that that would heroically celebrate a woman struggling with bad housing conditions; living as a single parent with three jobs, none of which pay her adequately to support herself and her family.



Fig. 4. Olivia Plender, *Hold Hold Fire*, 2019. Video, 11 min. 36 sec., still. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

In Plender's 'queered'<sup>42</sup> reiteration of the historical image, women's experiences, both as agents *and* objects of violence, are juxtaposed diachronically in a feminist weave across revolutionary time, memory and narrative. As in Tomić's work, Plender's guns point at no-one in particular: the violences they evoke are heterogeneous and dynamic – a whirlpool of state, patriarchal, terrorist, indirect and structural violences that spurt up repeatedly over time, cresting, or rippling away in waves of fluctuating intensity and force. Though the diverse

violences of the past are folded into those of the present, nevertheless, there is no synthesis between the various modalities of violence that are distinctly and uniquely felt by the women in Plender's work and the People's Army that partly inspire it. While Schmitt may warn us constantly of the changing nature of 'enmity', ultimately his infamous friend-enemy distinction can only be named in loose categorical terms. His constant warnings as to the changing nature of 'enmity' seem thin in comparison with Plender's work, wherein suffragettes are terrorists now honoured by governments; where the police are guardians of the state *and* perpetrators of violence; where men are both abusers *and* feminist compatriots. Wooden they may be, Plender's wooden rifles are nevertheless alarming. They do not so much point *at* us as they point *us*, in the most forcible way, to a bewildering relay of violences – from financial, to political, to physical. Schmitt, by contrast, resorts to a blanket condemnation of an undifferentiated violence which 'turns the whole social order into a battleground for absolute annihilation and the enemy into a criminal whose very humanity is denied'.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, Schmitt's violence is addressed to everyone and no one at the same time. In *Hold Hold Fire* however and irrespective of the woodenness of their guns, the women are calling the shots. They face us down, force us into their fray. Their guns take aim, pointing us to those many violences that they, both real and historical women, have faced and mobilised – from drab and dreary to all-consuming and intense.

### **Not A Shot, A Salvo**

Maria Kulikovska's work returns us to the question raised at the outset: how does one position oneself in a world that threatens to destroy one's ability to live peaceably? Or alternatively put, if someone is shooting at you, why would you too, *not* learn to use a weapon? For Kulikovska, born in 1988 in the Crimean city of Kerch, this is no abstract



question, so before we look at the use of the gun in her work, we must look briefly first at her background and previous work.

Kulikovska's childhood was shaped not just by the fallout from the USSR's structural collapse, but by the EuroMaidan Revolution<sup>44</sup> and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which subsequently set in motion a protracted war in the Donbas, well before the 'full-scale' invasion in 2022.<sup>45</sup> Forced to take Russian citizenship or lose access to her homeland, Kulikovska, who was then studying at Kiev's Academy of Fine Arts & Architecture, chose the latter, consigning herself to live as a Ukrainian Refugee – Number 254 – whilst still 'at home' in Ukraine.<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 5. Maria Kulikovska, *Homo Bulla: Human as Soap Bubble*, part of *Army of Clones*, 2012. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

At the time of the annexation, Kulikovska's *Army of Clones* was on show in the grounds of the Izolyatsia Arts Foundation at Donetsk. Twenty-three life-size casts of her naked body – one for every year of her life – were fashioned out of plaster and raw soap.<sup>47</sup> For Kulikovska, the significance of these materials lay in their very instability. They expressed the fragility and breakability of bodies, baring to all, the intimate injuries of the flesh we never see on Greek marbles, now scored onto soap and plaster skins, and exposed to the harsh Ukrainian winter. This naked female army became for Kulikovska, a kind of declaration of war against the patriarchal structures and misogyny she encountered first-hand, both in her private life (abused by a partner, aged sixteen), and at the Academy, where the nearly exclusively male staff, enmeshed in late-socialist art doctrines, saw no value in her, or her work. Bluntly told to stop working long hours and learn instead to 'cook nicely and find a husband who is an architect', she refuses to accept their censure (Kulikovska Interview).

Instead, *Army of Clones* takes inspiration from the history of the Izolyatsia Arts Foundation – once an insulation factory, the building was constructed almost entirely by women, after the Second World War wiped out most of the local male population (Kulikovska Interview). Strong, brave and capable of doing 'men's work', these women did not fit the dominant values of 'defenceless femininity' (*Self-Defence*, p. 71). And thus, gathering strength from this heritage, Kulikovska set about building her fleshly army of selves – exposing them, right down to their cloned labias, to both the elements and the disapproving, scandalised male gaze.

Until, that is, 9 June 2014, when Kulikovska's act of defiance was quashed: the Foundation, seized by Russian proxies (the Donetsk People's Republic, DPR), *Army of Clones* was shot at and destroyed, leaving huge gaping bullet holes in virtually every sculpture.



Fig. 6. Maria Kulikovska, *Army of Clones*, after its destruction by pro-Russian militias.

Izolyatsia Art Centre, Donetsk, 2014. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

Izolyatsia, situated at the entrance to Donetsk and facing the airport, was strategically important for the DPR's occupation of the city. As the militia later admitted (Kulikovska Interview),<sup>48</sup> the Foundation also represented the 'perverted' liberal, pro-European values of 'degenerate artists'.<sup>49</sup> Kulikovska, whose performative same-sex marriage to Syrian-Swedish artist Jaqueline Shabo was well known, epitomised such values (Kulikovska Interview).<sup>50</sup> It was partly for these reasons that not only was her work shot to pieces, but her name was added to a Russian Special Services blacklist, as a 'terrorist and person dangerous to society' ('Battlefield'). Foundation staff were forced to relocate to a shipyard in Kyiv and Izolyatsia was turned into a 'secret' prison run by the DPR's State Security Ministry.<sup>51</sup>

In the years following these events, Kulikovska fled from one temporary shelter to another. Finally, tired of feeling like a moving target, she decided to strike out against the various violences she faced with a new self-defensive *style* of violence emerging directly from her destroyed work. Now living in Sweden, she purchased 300kg of soap from a factory in Malmö. The same factory, she discovered, supplied human-sized blocks of soap to Swedish weapon manufacturers for use in ballistic testing – the soap targets allowed comparisons to be made between various weapons’ capacity to cause damage (Kulikovska Interview). Recalling a pair of Nazi-era gloves made of soap and human skin, still on display at the War Museum in Kiev, she added blood, semen and the juice of plants to her casts (Kulikovska Interview).

By 2018, three new replicas of *Homa Bulla* had been made and were shown at the Cultural Centre at Santiago de Compostella. But when Kulikovska was invited (by Ukrainian director and screenwriter Daria Onyshchenko) to advise on *The Forgotten* (a film about a Ukrainian language teacher in separatist-occupied Luhansk), Kulikovska seized her opportunity to place herself on the other side of the crosshairs. She agreed to work on the film, but only on condition that she would undertake her own unscripted art performance within it. Dressed in the clothes of the enemy, she took a weapon and fired, blowing multiple, floriated holes in the soapy replicas of herself:



Fig. 7. Maria Kulikovska, *Six Shot Sculptures*, 2019. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

I look with this eye through the crosshairs and start to shoot and with every shot, I felt stronger and stronger. In the end, I didn't want to stop to shooting....and then I understood why *they* shoot. (Kulikovska Interview).

When you are staring down the barrel of a gun' says Dorlin,

the only response is a gunshot. Self-defence is then a counteroffensive, producing another semiology of the militant body... It is not about the metaphysics of ends but the immediacy of a blow. (*Self-Defence*, p97.)

In Kulikovska's work, firing the gun allows her to see, feel and experience in her own flesh what it means to act from the other side. 'Art is my way to survive' she says, 'a way to remember that I am existing, it is my way to fight.'<sup>52</sup> In this way, the gun restores the ethnic and sexual integrity of an artist who has been pounded by an array of violences – sexual, institutional, ethnic, military, political. It stands in for all those who have failed to defend or protect her and marks the moment at which she starts to defend herself. For Kulikovska, the gun constitutes, not just the metonymic figure of violence, epitomising the heteronomy of women relative to whatever takes the form of their right to self-defence, but it constitutes also the artist's own powers of destruction and creation, now self-consciously asserted. It allows Kulikovska to feel what it is *like* to be powerful; to say 'only I have the right to destroy my work and take pleasure in that destruction'.

In Kulikovska's work then, the gun is paradoxically situated.<sup>53</sup> On one hand, it is symbolic of the delegation of powers of self-preservation to the chosen few:

...like laws and husbands, the weapon appears as an object that materializes [...] the authority to which defence is delegated and which is endowed with a violence that the subject is unable to express except through them ... [it is] a classic apparatus for the delegation of the right to self-defence and self-preservation as [...] traditionally defined [...] with a weapon, I am defended, and without one, I am defenceless ('Landscape', pp172-173).

On the other hand, Kulikovska's gun is the very means by which political, sexual and bodily integrity and agency are restored. She shifts from perpetual 'crisis-readiness'<sup>54</sup> to a position

in which she asks what can be *done* with these different modalities of violence? What can she *make* of them? The experiences that have constituted her person, shaped her body, subjectivity and political rights, now become visible not just to the viewer, but to the artist herself. Firing the weapon, Kulikovska seizes on one violence to prevent another from engulfing her; now with another perspective, she sees a world traversed by relations of force. The exit wounds in her clones open like blooms as she physically experiences what it is to pump that trigger. Dorlin might call this a study in agnotology, for it discloses how the powerful are served when the perspectives of their prey are derealised or obstructed – alienated from their own powers of action (*Self-Defence*, p196). The gun allows Kulikovska to de-invisibilise that violent order under which some are pursued and some pursue. Through *Six Shots*, she outguns it, reclaiming her powers of self-defence and creation.

It is worth noting in passing, that Kulikovska's attitude both to violent self-defence and her status as a refugee, contrasts dramatically with Hannah Arendt's. At first glance, the parallels between the two seem irresistible. Both are refugees. Both are deeply concerned with the effects of violence. But while in *On Violence*, Arendt argues that power is something quite distinct from violence and that to think violence is necessarily to think *against* it,<sup>55</sup> Kulikovska claims her *right* to the instruments of violence as a means of clawing back agency and autonomy. This contrast between Kulikovska and Arendt is most startling when considering 'We Refugees' – Arendt's fiercely biting autobiographical essay. While Kulikovska's *Six Shots* indicate her endorsement of a 'martial ethics', Arendt's displaced exile is portrayed, by contrast, as *unable* to 'fight back': 'if somebody dies', Arendt jokes, 'we cheerfully imagine all the trouble he has been saved'. It is not a little ironic then, that Arendt's essay later concedes: 'after so much bad luck, we want a course as sure as a gun.'<sup>56</sup>

## Where Guns Go After Decommissioning

The women's use of guns in these works do not produce new definitions of violence, nor enable us to keep count of its various occurrences. But they do trigger us to acknowledge the shocking promiscuity and shape-shifting abilities of the many violence(s) – both animate and inanimate – that they face and wield. Again and again, they point us to the many violences that act upon and within life itself – those violences that, as Dorlin says, are both propelling *and* restraining; provoking *and* reassuring. Fired or unfired, these artists' guns make us tremble. They force us to ask the question, is it is time 'to strike, or not strike' (*Self-Defence*, pp18-19). Or be struck? By acknowledging the irreducible plurality of violences, such works cut across normative constructions of 'gun violence'<sup>57</sup> allowing us to detect an aporia between regimes of knowledge ordinarily deemed important (or unimportant) in understandings of 'violence'. By contrast, the artists' guns attempt not to represent but to *fuse* with violences' power to stimulate and inhibit relationships, memories, institutions, cultures, nations, at the level of thoughts, muscles, senses, actions and reactions.

In this final study, the violent legacy of political symbols unfolds via the use of a gun by Irish artist Rita Duffy, to evidence the violence of colonial powers, as well as that of sectarian and patriarchal fiefdoms. Duffy's work begins in a quasi-secret room in Carrickfergus filled with decommissioned weapons from the Northern Irish conflict – AK 47s, improvised machine guns, bombs made out of Maxwell House family-size jars. A grey plastic pipe, housing a packet of McVitie's chocolate digestives, has been attached to a homemade rocket launcher: an effective shock absorber, the biscuits break disc by disc on impact, dissipating the force so the fighter doesn't end up with a battered shoulder.<sup>58</sup> In these neighbourhoods of improvised weaponry, violence is wedded to visual artistry and ballistic ingenuity. When the apparatus of



shooting becomes that of artistic invention, what is known, seen and imagined about ‘gun violence’ weirdly rebounds. The notion of what a gun *is* is somehow dishevelled.

Supervised at all times by a brown-coated detective, Duffy is not permitted to remove or photograph anything – not the guns, not the floor-to-ceiling stacks of brown envelopes that still haunt her, because inside them are ballistic reports on every shot fired in Northern Ireland (Duffy Interview).

Duffy returns the next day, taking a mould of an AK47 – the weapon of choice for terrorists/freedom fighters the world over and plentiful in the parts of Belfast where Duffy grew up. Some claimed, just by the sound of their fire, ‘to be able to tell the difference between the Armalites and Kalashnikovs used by the Provisional IRA, and the SLR used by the British army’.<sup>59</sup>

Duffy’s rifle still bears the somatic index of its handler, who once had wound a Band Aid around the gun clip – perhaps to get a better fixing on it. The plaster leaves a ghostly print on Duffy’s mould, which, along with the gun’s serial number, is still legible in the chocolate that Duffy goes on to cast it in. Later, when viewers in London delight at the gun’s chocolatey aroma, those in Northern Ireland home in instead, on its serial number. They want information. How did she get it? When? From whom? (Duffy Interview.)



Fig. 8. Rita Duffy, *Dessert*, Chocolate AK47 on linen with lace, 2001. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.<sup>60</sup>

*Dessert* arrives, a few short years after the Good Friday Agreement, against a background of negotiations around the verified disposal of illegally-held weapons – an issue still threatening to derail the peace process.<sup>61</sup> Laid out on the lace-rimmed linen that routinely dresses Christian altars, this chocolate gun exudes religious ritual and Benjaminian aura.<sup>62</sup> But as a piece of confectionary, it also emits the opposite: it is a homely gun – deliciously indulgent. In this paradoxical concoction, gender, race, religion and nation cohere, for Duffy, in a mythical product in which fantasy is inextricable from exploitation:

the food of romance. Too much of it, and it will make you very sick. It almost parallels beautifully with dictatorships. Think of American South American chocolate farms (Duffy Interview).

Women have traditionally been central to the consumption and construction of chocolate as a commodity; the explicit targets of chocolate advertising, they are characterised as seducible (by Milk Tray-bearing paramours); or as nurturing providers of treats and soothing bedtime drinks. On the other side of the industry, they are pressed into service as cheap labour for industrial mass production.<sup>63</sup> For Duffy, these features make chocolate an intrinsically politicised material, pointing not just to colonial but to the casual patriarchal violence endemic in her community and resonant of ‘the despotic misogyny I was forced to live around and get past in Belfast’ (Duffy Interview).

In this way, *Dessert* prefigures Anna Burns’ novel *The Milkman* (set during The Troubles), where boys dig up other people’s gardens to hide their guns: ‘Somebody McSomebody’ is tried in a kangaroo court for ‘taking guns unauthorised from dumps to use for getting dates with girls’.<sup>64</sup> In this context, the guns used to fight a colonial/sectarian/revolutionary war are simultaneously the means by which to bully women in night-clubs: they fuel a sexual violence that the narrator’s community continually fails to recognise as a violence at all. Duffy acknowledges, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak does, that colonial violence impacts disproportionately on women and that therefore, the thinking about colonial violence must be gendered (Duffy Interview).<sup>65</sup>

Like Burns, Duffy sets out to unpick the romance of the ‘macho Irish freedom fighter’ that has endured since Cú Chulainn (Duffy Interview).<sup>66</sup> Thus, the mythical chocolate gun signals a continuum – from ancient to recent paramilitary traditions – that is far harder to ‘decommission’ than its physical counterpart. As an aesthetic material, chocolate has the benefit of accurately capturing the minutest of traces. It is a quality that resonates sharply

with those practised in the official investigations that follow episodes of life-changing, explosive violences. As Duffy says of the rifle that served as her prototype:

You're holding it and you're aware that your hands are traceable. You know your fingerprint is going on this (Duffy Interview).

Duffy's visual and sensory alertness counterpoints (without overtly countering) the positivistic language normally used to describe violence as a supposedly unambiguous phenomenon. In one respect, her chocolate gun appears to re-enact, ironically perhaps, the political act of decommissioning. What is possible, it asks, in a particular political context? In another, Duffy's gun advances a form of deactivation that simultaneously suggests the power of creative action. Without an obvious end point, it nevertheless offers the possibility of an intervention into the intolerable – a response to 'the utter singularity of the battle'.<sup>67</sup>

For Duffy, guns, whether interred in gardens or pushed into chests, were always there. She recalls a winter's morning in the 1970s when her classmates find a Kalashnikov on the lawn outside her school.

The girls brought it up the steps of the convent and Mother Laurentia, who's a little tiny nun, took it by the dangerous end, walked back down the drive and threw it back over the wall (Duffy Interview).

We don't know who dropped it or why it was there. But we know that there was gunfire in that street when the girls took their exams; that someone's father was shot as he stopped to drop his girls off at the bus stop; that someone's brother was serving twenty-six years for

putting a bomb in a car showroom. The nuns didn't want the recrimination that would come if the gun was turned in to the police (Duffy Interview).

The crisis-readiness that was palpable in Kulikovska's *Six Shots* is hard-wired into Duffy's society too. Her mother changed her name from (the Catholic) 'Maura Duffy' to (the Protestant, Scottish) 'Moira Duff' just to get a part-time job. Her uncle changed his in the opposite direction – from 'Frankie McCann' to 'Proinsias Mac Cana'. Her grandfather "gave his life for King and country", five years after which, his Catholic family living in a street between the Falls and the Shankill Road were burnt out of their home (Duffy Interview). Throughout her work, Duffy explores these contiguous violences: from the 'legitimate' 'defence of the realm' to the kneecappings, domestic abuse and colonial violences that coloured her world:

I was driving down the lane – a leafy lane – and there's a guy lying face down with blood coming out of the back of his knees and two men standing over him. One of them, still holding the revolver that had just kneecapped him. Turned out the guy was refusing to give his taxi over for a bomb to be put in the centre of Belfast (Duffy Interview).

The drawing she subsequently makes is censored from exhibition until Gerry Adams intervenes.<sup>68</sup> On the twentieth anniversary of British troops being on the streets of Belfast, Duffy gives a talk about the incident:

The two guys in the front row [at my talk] were the same two guys [involved in the kneecapping] ... and they're just looking at me. I was never more terrified in all my life (Duffy Interview).

### **Guns Drawn and Re-drawn**

From one day to the next, what does violence do to our lives, to our bodies, to our muscles? And what can our bodies both do and not do, in and through this violence? (*Self-Defence*, p20).

This essay is not exhaustive. There are many more women artists with guns than one might imagine.<sup>69</sup> Even so, collectively these works demonstrate that the conditions of possibility of thinking about violence, let alone venturing a critique of it, cannot be limited to talk alone. Violence is not a rigid mould into which facts are poured – to think so is to know only what forms ‘it’ from the outside. *Violences* must be plural, separated from the easily formed *ēthea* – the habits of knowing that Foucault and others have alerted us to<sup>70</sup> – and seen instead from within the dilemma of not knowing how to know what one sees. These women artists using guns in their work generate not *certainty* about a universal violence that is supposedly recognisable to all, but a barrage of hesitations, complexities and heterologies. By generating radically conflicting *modalities* (styles) of violence, Tomić, Plender, Kulikovska and Duffy expose (subject) us to the throng of *violences* that are routinely shrunk into a single term. They call, not for rigid binaries of good and bad but, as Ann Laura Stoler had it, an ‘epistemological hesitance ... where doubt confronts emphatic claims’.<sup>71</sup> Their use of guns alert us to the textures, compartments and sensory regimes of *violences*’ dispositions and ends – changing how violence is conventionally understood, and producing instead, not

merely an intersectional phenomenon<sup>72</sup> but an *interactive* one, a mode of encounter in which we act and are acted upon. How do the guns in our hands, in our heads, in our histories *construct* us? For these women artists using guns in their work, this is not a question of what violence *is*, or what the ends of violences are, but of how those ends are repositioned and transposed. Not without a shudder, we see the guns they have drawn and drawn again, with light as well as shade.

### Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks go to Milica Tomić, Olivia Plender, Maria Kulikovska and Rita Duffy who so generously and enthusiastically gave me their precious time in extended interviews and granted me permission to use images of their works. I am also indebted to Paul Isolani-Smyth, who graciously allowed his great-aunt's image of The People's Army to be reproduced here. My thanks go too, to Debbie Smith (Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives) and Carla Mitchell (Four Corners) who helped me trace that image back to Norah Smyth and her family. Thanks also to the two blind peer reviewers who gave such encouraging feedback and spotted those pesky typos. Finally, my heartfelt thanks to Rod Dickinson, Francesca Ramsay, Sarah Cefai and Daphne Plessner for their brilliant readings and reassurance at critical moments.

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<sup>1</sup> André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism', 1930, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor, 1969, p125. (Hereafter, *Manifestos*.)

<sup>2</sup> Milica Tomić. Interview by Bernadette Buckley, 13 June 2023. (Hereafter, Tomić Interview.)

<sup>3</sup> For an otherwise penetrating writer who falls afoul of this error, see Dominick La Capra, 'Toward a Critique of Violence', *The Modernist Imagination: Intellectual History and Critical Theory*, Berghahn, 2008, p210.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, University of Chicago, 1996. The friend/enemy distinction connotes a sharp distinction between two political (public, not private) collectivities. (Hereafter *The Concept of the Political*.)

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking without Bannisters*, Polity, p1. (Hereafter, *Violence*.)

<sup>6</sup> Michael Staudigl, 'Tropics, Problems and Potentials of a Phenomenological Analysis of Violence', *Phenomenologies of Violence*, edited by Michael, Staudigl, Brill, 2014, p2.

<sup>7</sup> Common-sense understandings of violence tend to construe it as necessarily involving physical force. By contrast, 'classical' political theories deal with a greater variety of violences, including political, mythical, colonial, structural, symbolic, legal and religious violence. Too various to mention here, the most influential or

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‘canonical’ theorists of violence are predictably ranked to include Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek. See for example, Bernstein’s *Violence*, or Brad Evans and Terrell Carver, eds, *Histories of Violence: Post-War Critical Thought*, Bloomsbury, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Verso, 2013. Baudrillard’s suggestions – that in terroristic violence, the ‘symbolic’ has collapsed into the ‘real’ and that the image has fused with the event – are less my concern than the claim that aesthetics play a role in every aspect of violence – design, operation, ends and after-effects.

<sup>9</sup> It is not within the scope of this essay to detail these arguments at greater length. For more on the complexity of the relationship between violence and ‘nonviolence’, see Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*, Verso, 2012, p219: ‘What is in question here is the complex relationship between violence and nonviolence, in which a commitment to the latter might still require the performance of the former. Paradoxically, an ethics and politics of nonviolence cannot exclude the possibility of acts of violence.’ See also, Judith Butler, *The Force of Non Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, Verso, 2020. While Butler disagrees in principle with Critchley, arguing that resistance to violence is not necessarily a form of counter-violence, she nevertheless acknowledges the complex, necessarily intertwined relationship between the two: ‘For nonviolence is not an absolute principle, but an open-ended struggle with violence and its countervailing forces’ (p46).

<sup>10</sup> Elsa Dorlin, *Self-Defence: A Philosophy of Violence*, Verso, 2022. (Hereafter *Self-Defence*.)

<sup>11</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human Animal Violence*, Cornell UP, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Dejan Djokić, *A Concise History of Serbia*, Cambridge UP, 2023, p393. (Hereafter, *Concise History*.) The regency and Yugoslav government were deposed in 1941, after popular riots and protests. A furious Hitler was bent on punishment – not just for the Belgrade coup and rejection of the Tripartite Pact, but for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. The history of Serbian resistance remains controversial. ‘While the Četniks were predominantly royalist, the Partisans, or at least the communists among them, were opposed to the pre-war political system and bourgeois society’ (p400).

<sup>13</sup> Milica Tomić, in Andreas Broeckmann et al, (eds), *Trust*, ISEA, 2010, p184. (Hereafter, *Trust*.)

<sup>14</sup> I have redeployed this term from its original use by Robert Musil, who used it to describe the invisibility of monuments in everyday life. See *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, Archipelago, 1995, p64.

<sup>15</sup> The term ‘collective memory’ is subject to considerable disagreement between scholars. See especially, Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1915; Maurice Halbwachs, *The Social Frameworks of Memory*, 1925; Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire*, Vols 1-4, 1999-2010; Jan Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 125-133; Andreas Huyssen, ‘International Human Rights and the Politics of Memory: Limits and Challenges’, *Criticism* 53, 4 (2011), 607-624; Carol Gluck, ‘Operations of Memory: ‘Comfort Women’ and the World,’ in *Ruptured Histories: War, Memories, and the Post-Cold War in Asia*, eds. Sheila Miyoshi Jager and Rana Mitter, Harvard UP, 2007, pp 47–77).

<sup>16</sup> Milica Tomić, ‘Global Feminisms’, Brooklyn Museum Talk, 23-25 March 2007.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoZqDdeT-BY>. (Hereafter, *Global Feminisms*.)

<sup>17</sup> These themes are explored repeatedly in Tomić’s work. In *Remembering*, 2000/2001, the artist, dressed as a Partisan, steps between two bronze statues of American and Soviet soldiers, challenging any post war politics of restoration. In *Belgrade Remembers...Neither Oblivion nor Memory*, 2001, Tomić stages her own ‘hanging’, in commemoration of the execution by Nazi troops of five members of the NOP2 (the first anti-fascist activists in Belgrade) in 1941.

<sup>18</sup> *Freedom News*, 19 February 2017. The six ASI activists were held in prison for the maximum period of six months before being acquitted. Their case was re-opened a year later. They were finally cleared of all charges after an eight-year court battle.

<sup>19</sup> Their protest at the Greek Embassy was undertaken in solidarity with Thodoris Iliopoulos – a hunger-striking Greek anarchist, arrested (along with another 270 people) while protesting against the fatal shooting of fifteen year old Alexis Grigoropoulos by police in 2008. See Christos Memos, ‘Dignified Rage’, *ephemera*, 9, 3 (2009), 219-233.

<sup>20</sup> Kuleshov was best known for synthesising fragmented shots to create a filmic landscape or ‘creative geography’. See Krista Geneviève Lynes, ‘Global Pictures: Formalist Strategies in the Era of New Media’, *Postmodern Culture*, 25, 2 (2015), n.p.

<sup>21</sup> On 3 May 2023, nine children were shot to death by a fellow schoolboy in Belgrade. The following day, a second shooting occurred, in which a further eighteen people were killed by twenty-year-old, Uroš Blažić. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic stepped down as leader of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) on 27 May 2023 but continues to act as Head of State. See Hans von der Brölie, ‘Mass Protests Demand Political Change in Serbia’, *Euronews*, 22.06.23.

<sup>22</sup> The term is borrowed from Didi-Huberman’s, ‘Sampling Chaos: Aby Warburg and the Photographic Atlas of the Great War’, *Études Photographiques*, 27, 2011.



- <sup>23</sup> Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence is perhaps most notable here. See Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6, 3 (1969), 167-191.
- <sup>24</sup> Renaud De la Brosse, 'Political Propaganda & the Plan to Create a "State For All Serbs"', Report for Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, January 2003, p74. (Hereafter *Political Propaganda*). 'RTS created a strange universe in which Sarajevo ... had never been besieged and ... the devastated Croatian town of Vukovar had been 'liberated' (p74).
- <sup>25</sup> See Kent Fogg, 'The Milošević Regime and the Manipulation of the Serbian Media', European Studies Conference, 2006, p7. Official media created images of a victimized Serb population to persuade the population that defence of Serbian interests should be paramount. Croats were compared to the WW2 Ustaša regime (allied to Hitler) and Muslims were called 'Turks', recalling the Ottoman Empire. <https://www.wm.edu/as//globalstudies/european/conference/pre-2009-conference-docs/fogg.pdf>.
- <sup>26</sup> President Vučić notoriously claimed that the massacre of 1999 (in which Serbian forces killed forty-five Kosovo Albanians) was fabricated by the former head of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission. Milica Stojanovic, 'Serbia: A Year of Denying War Crimes', *Balkan Insight*, 26 December 2019.
- <sup>27</sup> Nevena Bogdanovic, 'This Is What a Textbook is Teaching Young Serbs about the Balkan Wars', *RFERL*, 30 November 2022. Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina are described as 'Serbian States'. War crimes against Croat civilians (1991-95) are never explicitly mentioned. Genocides committed during the Siege of Sarajevo are depicted as infractions against Serbian victims.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Serbia ranks third behind the US and Yemen, according to the 2018 Small Arms Survey. [www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Annual-Report-2018.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Annual-Report-2018.pdf). This fact was highlighted in recent 'Serbia Against Violence' protests, dismissed by Vučić as a 'political' stunt' orchestrated by foreign powers. 'Thousands Rally in Belgrade Against Government and Culture of Violence', *Guardian*, 3 June 2023.
- <sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On the Critique of Violence', *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, 1985, pp 132-154. Benjamin follows Sorel whose *Reflections on Violence* calls for 'revolutionary violence' as an antidote to the nerveless, morally compromised society he saw around him. However, as La Capra points out, Benjamin's 'notion of the state or mythical (fate-imposed) violence functions in a dubiously homogenising fashion', leading him to 'lump all states together independent of their constitutions or political and economic regimes. All are violent in a 'rotten' manner'. Dominick La Capra, 'Violence, Justice and the Force of the Law', *Cardozo L. Rev.* 11 (1989), 1065.
- <sup>30</sup> Olivia Plender. Interview by Bernadette Buckley, 23 June 2023. (Hereafter, Plender Interview.)
- <sup>31</sup> As reported by BBC File on 4, modern slavery cases in the UK care industry have more than doubled since the same period in 2022. *BBC News*, 24 July 2023. See also, *Neither Strivers*, p71 ff.
- <sup>32</sup> Harold Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign, 1866-1928*, Longman, 1998, p82.
- <sup>33</sup> Emmeline Pankhurst, 1913 speech to WSPU members, cited in Red Chidgey, *Feminist Afterlives: Assemblage Memory in Activist Times*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, p71.
- <sup>34</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst's unpopular support for the Easter Rising of 1916 (which had promised universal suffrage) was well known. Suffragette publications carried sympathetic accounts of Irish rebellion, arguing that 'Irish men and women are compelled to become Communists in word and Deed.' Geoffrey Bell, 'Sylvia Pankhurst and the Irish revolution: The Little-Known Story of her Engagement with Ireland' in *Decade of Centenaries*, 24, 1 (2016).
- <sup>35</sup> Rebecca Walker, 'Deeds, Not Words: The Suffragettes and Early Terrorism in the City of London', *The London Journal*, 45, 1 (2020), 53-64.
- <sup>36</sup> <https://oliviaplender.org/many-maids-make-much-noise/hold-hold-fire/>
- <sup>37</sup> By 1908, defence training for use against domestic and protest violence, or as a focal point for empowerment was commonplace. See David Waldron and Zeb Leonard, 'Ju-Jitsu's Role in the Fight for Women's Suffrage', *Agora*, 56, 1 (2021), 7. (Hereafter 'Ju-Jitsu's Role'.)
- <sup>38</sup> The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (1981 to 2000) objected not only to the deployment of cruise nuclear missiles from RAF Greenham Common, but to military and nuclear violence more generally.
- <sup>39</sup> Indeed, since Plender's video was made, this technique has been criminalised by the Public Order Act of 2023, prohibiting individuals from causing disruption by attaching either to objects or to *others*. See, Police Powers Act 2023, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/502/made>
- <sup>40</sup> E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: The History of the Women's Militant Suffrage Movement*, Virago, 1988, p861. (Hereafter, *Suffragette Movement*.)
- <sup>41</sup> John Berger, 'Photos of Agony', *About Looking*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p43.
- <sup>42</sup> 'Queer temporality' rejects the logic of 'straight' temporalities, its governing logics and foreclosures. For queer theorists such as Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, Jose Esteban Muñoz and Elizabeth Freeman, queer temporality pushes back against heteronormativity's framing and disciplining of time, charting 'queerer' ways of thinking about history, peace, relationships, success and the linear segmentation of past/present/future.
- <sup>43</sup> Banu Bargu, 'Unleashing the Acheron: Sacrificial Partisanship, Sovereignty, and History', *Theory & Event* 13, 1 (2010), 3. Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political*,

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Telos, 2007, p95. Here, Schmitt seems aware of the limitations of his methods, acknowledging that ‘the theoretician can do little more than verify concepts and call things by name’.

<sup>44</sup> In November 2013, pro-Kremlin President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, sparking a revolution that endured until February 2014, when Yanukovich fled to Russia. Since that time, periods of truce have been followed by outbreaks of fighting, until the ‘full-scale’ invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on 24 February 2022.

<sup>45</sup> For the argument that these events marked the start of conflict with Russian long before 2022, see for example, *Kyiv Independent*, 28 July 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Maria Kulikovska. Interview by Bernadette Buckley, 22 June 2023. (Hereafter, Kulikovska Interview.)

<sup>47</sup> The three soap sculptures were separately titled, *Homo Bulla: Human as Soap Bubble*.

<sup>48</sup> See also, Nathalie Hoyos & Rainald Schumacher, ‘A Battlefield – Maria Kulikovska’, 2022. (Hereafter, ‘Battlefield’.) <https://mariakulikovska.net/en/my-body-is-a-battlefield>. Luba Mikhailova, ‘Izolyatsia Was a Thorn in the Body of Donbass, as It Taught People to Think’, Interview by Asia Bazdyreva, Art Ukraine, 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/mtn2bu37>.

<sup>49</sup> Used by pro-Russian militia, the term repeats the Nazi Party’s infamous ‘Entartete Kunst’ demonised in the 1920s.

<sup>50</sup> The marriage was performed as a long-term action entitled *Body and Borders* in 2014. Upon annexation, Russian laws restricting homosexual ‘propaganda’ were transferred to Crimea. Kulikovska describes the destruction of her work as not only an act of violence but of ‘extreme patriarchal violence’. (Kulikovska Interview.)

<sup>51</sup> ‘Donbass: A Secret Prison in Donetsk Occupied Territory’, *HRWF*, 30 November 2020.

<https://hrwf.eu/donbass-a-secret-prison-in-donetsk-occupied-territory/>

<sup>52</sup> Felicie Lauro, Interview with Maria Kulikovska, *Migrazine*, August 2022/1.

<https://www.migrazine.at/artikel/art-after-crimea-became-my-way-survive>

<sup>53</sup> Take for example, the gun in Gainsborough’s *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, 1750, symbolising Mr Andrews’ power as a landowner and ability to defend his property. Mrs Andrews, as Gillian Rose notes, is depicted as the property of her husband – like the landscape, her body is an object of visual pleasure for the male gaze. Gillian Rose, ‘Looking at Landscape: The Uneasy Pleasures of Power’, *Feminism and Geography*, Routledge, 2008, p93. (Hereafter ‘Landscape’.)

<sup>54</sup> Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski, ‘Crisis-Readiness and Media Witnessing’, *The Communication Review*, 12, 3 (2009), 295-304.

<sup>55</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, Harcourt, 1970.

<sup>56</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘We Refugees’, *Hannah Arendt: The Jewish Writings*, edited by Jerome Kohn & Ron Feldman, Schocken, 2007, p266.

<sup>57</sup> The vast debate around ‘gun violence’ – much of which revolves around American history, law and society – is too broad to be plotted here. However, a small sample of that debate might include: Caroline Light et al., ‘Gender and Stand Your Ground Laws: A Critical Appraisal of Existing Research’, *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 51, 1 (2023), 50-63; Priya Satia, *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution*, Prelude, 2018; Jennifer Carlson, *Policing the Second Amendment: Guns, Law Enforcement and the Politics of Race*, Princeton UP, 2020; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, University of Oklahoma, 2000; Adam Winkler, *Gunfight: The Battle over the Right to Bear Arms in America*, WW Norton, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Rita Duffy. Interview by Bernadette Buckley, 11 July 2023. (Hereafter, Duffy Interview.)

<sup>59</sup> Sean O Hagan, ‘Are We Nearly There?’, *Guardian*, 18 March 2001.

<sup>60</sup> The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was approved in two referenda on either side of the border on 22 May 1998 and legalised in the British-Irish Agreement in December 1999

<sup>61</sup> By late 2000, the GFA had been reviewed several times and the institutions of devolved government, suspended more than once. Trimble resigned as First Minister on 1 July 2001. The UUP announced the resignation of its Executive on 18 October 2001. The IRA began decommissioning weaponry on 23 October 2001. Martin Melaugh, ‘Irish Peace Process: A Brief Note on Decommissioning’, CAIN archive.

<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/decommission.htm>

<sup>62</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Illuminations*, Penguin, 1999, pp 211-244.

<sup>63</sup> Emma Robertson, *Chocolate, Women and Empire: A Social and Cultural History*, Manchester UP, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Anna Burns, *Milkman: A Novel*, Graywolf, 2018, p312.

<sup>65</sup> Whilst she agrees with Fanon that ‘the tragedy is that the very poor is reduced to violence, because there is no other response possible to ... an absolute exercise of legitimized violence from the colonizers’, Spivak gently chides Fanon for his neglect of the relationship between gender and colonial violence. He is not, she argues, ‘there for us’ meaning that ‘we must ourselves gender “the people”’. (‘Preface’, p62). Gayatri Chakravorty

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Spivak, 'Preface To Concerning Violence', *Film Quarterly*, 68 1 (2014), 62. See also Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove, 1991.

<sup>66</sup> Cú Chulainn is a legendary Irish warrior-hero. His weapon – a spear made from the bones of a sea monster – was named in the Ulster Cycle of Irish Mythology, as the Gáe Bae. It flew with lightning speed, and when it struck, it inflicted thirty internal wounds on the enemy.

<sup>67</sup> Bernard E. Harcourt, 'Counter-Critical Theory: An Intervention in Contemporary Critical Thought and Practice', *Critical Times*, 1, 1 (2018), 5–22.

<sup>68</sup> Rita Duffy, *Kneecapping*, 1989.

<sup>69</sup> To list but a few: Claude Cahun, Nikki de Saint Phalle, Valie Export, Marina Abramovic, Yoko Ono, Xiao Lu, Jenny Holzer, Hito Steyerl, Regina José Gallindo, Cornelia Parker, Sarah McCoubrey, Adela Jušić, Shirin Neshat etc.

<sup>70</sup> As Ansell-Pearson has it, for Foucault, 'the critical task is to break with accustomed habits of knowing and perceiving, so that one has the chance to become something different than what one's history has conditioned one to be, to think and perceive differently.' Cited in Alan Rosenberg and Joseph Westfall (eds), *Foucault and Nietzsche: A Critical Encounter*, Bloomsbury, 2018, p80.

<sup>71</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Interior Frontiers: Essays on the Entrails of Inequality*, OUP, 2022, pxxii.

<sup>72</sup> Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw nearly thirty years ago, the term 'intersectionality' has changed from a relatively obscure legal concept to a highly politicised catch-all, signifying not just the intersection of race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics in lived experience, but a political flashpoint for right-wing conservatives.