

Seizing Dead Objects

Ben Knight responds to *Peace at Last! A Response by Kate Davis to Glasgow Museums Collection*, at the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, until 16th October

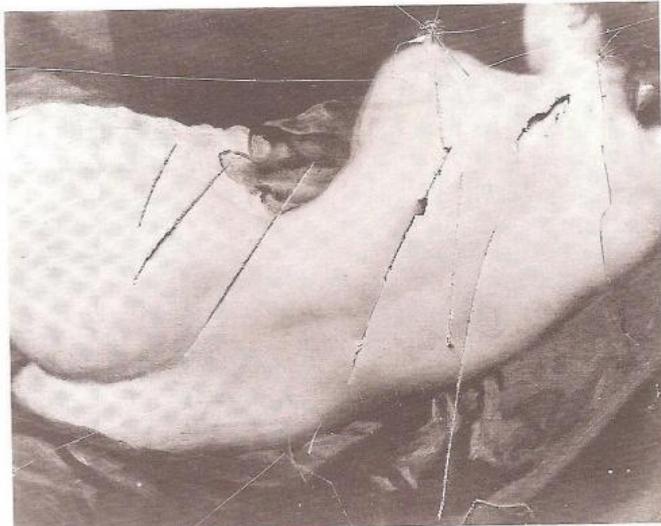


Figure 1. Detail from Diego Velázquez's, *The Rokeby Venus* after Mary Richardson's attack, National Gallery 1914. From Dario Gamboni's *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (Reaktion Books, 1997). She smashed the protective glass, and tore into the canvas with her axe, right across Venus's backside. And then these scars were overturned, a silence conserved in the paint.

In 1914, militant Suffragette Mary 'slasher' Richardson attacked Diego Valaquez's the *Toilet of Venus*, also known as *The Rokeby Venus*. It is clear that the attack left the painting badly scarred, but not scarred for life: the conservators at the National

Gallery were able to remove all traces of this violent history. Richardson's action is consigned to the archive, dislocating it from the visible presence of the gallery space. Kate Davis' new exhibition *Peace At Last!*, a response to the Glasgow Museums' Collection, stages a space between the exhibition space and the archive. It what Davis calls a 'contemporary conversation' that exhibits neglected artefacts alongside widely received historical narratives. [1] Davis stages a clash of the dominant and the residual, staging a dynamic sense of the present.

The exhibition includes work from a two-hundred year period, including prints from a series of etchings by Francisco de Goya, *The Disparates*, publications relating to Christabel Pankhurst and the Suffragette movement as well as photographs by Jo Spence and Terry Dennett. Between these various meetings Davis exhibits her own work which draws out the clashes and affinities of her response to the archive. With its array of postcards, photographs and mass-produced pamphlets, some of which have no identifiable author and are in a sorry condition, *Peace At Last!* becomes an encounter with a history that is inscribed on more everyday items. It is a clash within the present that rubs received history against the grain to reveal the discontents woven into the fabric of historical narrative. It is a staging of the silences and silencing produced by the archive and the museum.

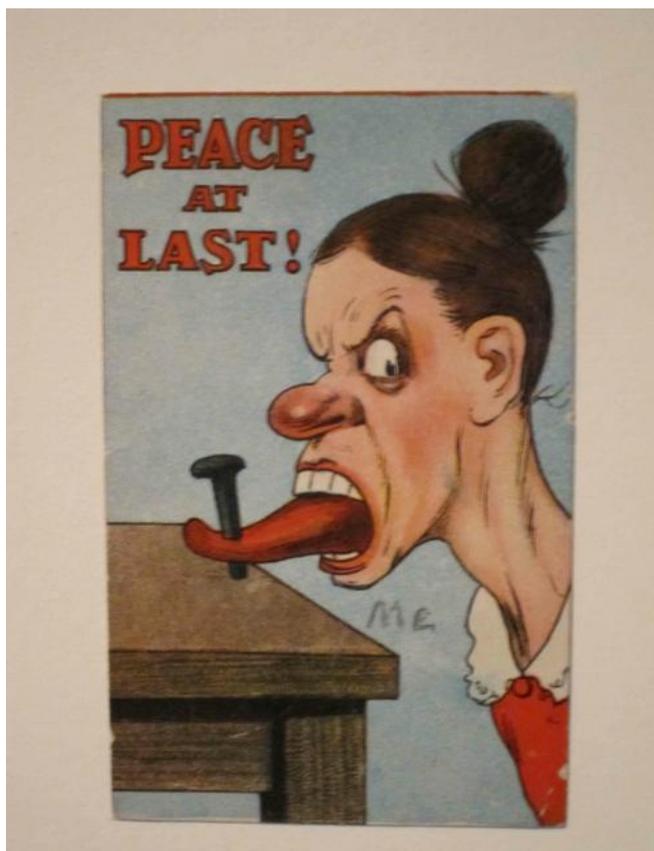


Figure 2. *Peace at Last!*, artist unknown, early twentieth century. From Kate Davis' response to the GMRC, 2011.

This early twentieth century anti-suffrage postcard is a gruesome visual statement of 'women, know your place'. The radicalised woman is seen here nailed to the kitchen table, silenced by a violent action: without her tongue, her voice is reduced to a frustrating glossolalic cry. Here the statement writ large on the postcard marks a silencing suggestive of a patriarchal world turned the right way up again. This return to the status quo suggests that this silencing is an act of counter-violence. Although there is no known artist or a specific date attached to this illustration, it could be interpreted as a response to the militant methods advocated by Christabel Pankhurst in the 1908 pamphlet, *The Militant Methods of the NWSPU*, as well as resonating with Mary Richardson's act of iconoclastic Valaquez slashing. A nail through the tongue is a wish

to return to a state of supposed placidity but the announcement of peace is an awkward declaration: peace is established through violent means, and the traces of disruptive energy are still visible and audible. Through this staging, Davis is 'interested in the contradiction that this exclamation mark could imply.' [2] This complicates the celebratory affirmation of the postcard, throwing it into a state of representational tension that is vulnerable to reinterpretation.

Exhibiting the more 'unremarkable', everyday items alongside the work of renowned figures such as Goya reminds me of Ben Highmore's understanding of montage. Highmore suggests that montage, 'allows fragments and fractures to connect' and 'micro-descriptions [to] sit suggestively and awkwardly on a stage of ill-disciplined totality.' [3] Through her curatorial decisions and the exhibition of her labour intensive, photo-realist drawings, Davis stages an intervention into the notion that the museum is simply a 'resting place or cemetery for objects.' [4] It is an intervention that begins by paying close attention to the disruptions and defacements located on the surface of objects.

Looking closely at the postcard you can see that the word 'ME' has been inscribed – a visible disruption to the surface of the postcard that makes the confident statement of the postcard appear unsure. As there is no tangible archival documentation for this artefact, we can only speculate about the intentions of this suggestive historical intervention. The scribe that produced these marks could have identified with the woman nailed to the table, her voice of protest ignored and silenced but with her hands free to deface the postcard, inscribing residual 'micro-descriptions' into the surface of history. Displaying such resonant, suggestive documents creates a vibrant present within the museum, one that is inspired by Paulo Freire's call to *claim history critically*. [5] Freire's statement is visible on the gallery wall as you enter the space, and its presence creates a sense of urgency for the task of reinterpretation. It sets up the gallery as a crucial space of resuscitation and enquiry, allowing us to ask what is at stake in the 'dead' vitrines of the museum.



Figure 3. 'Bobalicon', from *The Disparates*, Francisco de Goya.



Figure 4. Detail of *Peace At Last! (Bobalicon)*, Kate Davis, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Sorcha Dallas. In *Peace At Last!* Davis creates a clash of moments, where the artistic and political merge as an intertwined narrative. It is a discordant collage reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's notion of 'seizing hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.' [6] In *Peace At Last! (Bobalicon)*, Davis stages an imaginary meeting between a figure from a Goya print (Bobalicon) and a bust from the museums' collection. Davis' drawing is placed on a green screen-printed background, reminiscent of the colour of the exit signs in the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre. Davis' artists talk about the exhibition shed further light on her continuing fascination with *The Disparates* series. These prints were commissioned from the etchings that Goya had left unfinished at his death in 1828.

Published posthumously, they never received a comprehensive historical definition in Goya's life time. Yet again a representational tension surfaces, but in this instance it is in the history of a celebrated

male artist. In Davis' collage, a strange threat of silencing is produced, reminiscent of the more blunt depiction seen in the anti-suffrage postcard. The ghoul Babalicon, brandishing castanets, and flanked by two disturbing, disembodied screaming heads meets the archived bust of John McCance. The meeting weaves the dissonant noise of hand percussion and agonised vocal cries into the materiality of the work, but it is a dissonance faced with the silent 'dead object' of the archived bust, which is tagged. Throughout the exhibition space, Davis has used other institutional colours, such as blue and grey on the gallery walls to emphasise a tension of representation. Here, the fire exit green replaces the swirling dark void of the original Goya etchings, the result is that the noise of Bobalicon and the serene bust are suspended in the awkward silence of the institution – between urgency and a possible complacency.



Figure 5. 'Votes For Women' Rosette, 1905-1914.

The clamour of the suggested dissonance is left unresolved, presenting us with a tantalising constellation of the past within present, suggestive of Benjamin's 'Thesis of the Philosophy of History'. The presence of the colour green in this constellation, especially as Davis' collage is hung on the adjacent wall to one of her other pieces, *Reversability (Militant Methods)*, presents us with a re-interpretation of Benjamin's notion that resonates more closely with Davis' project. *Militant Methods* is Davis' interpretation of the cover of a NWSPU pamphlet, featuring a defaced portrait of Christabel Pankhurst. This work has a green screen printed border, although it is not the institutional green of the GMRC but the colour scheme used by the suffrage movement. The historical clash in the present that Davis harnesses here is more akin to Virginia Woolf's philosophy of history. In her essay, 'The Burden of the Past, The Dialectics of the Present', Sanja Bahun states that Woolf engages 'with the past in such a way that she enacts at all times the dynamic

triangulations of the past with the present and the future'. [7] Throughout Woolf's work, the present moment was often loaded with potential. Writing *The Years* in 1937, as Fascism escalated in Europe, Woolf's narrator announces that the character Eleanor Pargiter only has: 'the present moment, Here she was alive, now.' [8] In previous work, such as *What Have We Got To Do With A Room Of One's Own* (2010), Davis explored the validity of Woolf's work in light of the present. In *Peace At Last!* the present moment is up for grabs, it is a dynamic triangulation where this institutional green shifts from a silent void towards the clamour of present day articulation. It is important to articulate this urgency of interpretation within the public frame of the museum and the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre. In her artists talk, Davis reminds us that the GMRC is open to the public for tours and not just selected artists, suggesting that these present moments can only be seized in an ongoing process of collective meaning making.

So far, Goya's prints have been significant in unmooring totalised claims on the museum and archive, and there is clearly much to salvage from Goya's work. However, it is important to state that Goya's work is very much part of a representational history that takes the feminine form as its historical object. This is made clear through the prints selected by Davis, with titles such as *Feminine Foolishness*, and it is a current that runs through the documentary screened in the gallery, *Goya: Crazy Like a Genius*, presented by Robert Hughes.

Mad, impulsive, creative: the connotations of Hughes' title say a lot: the male artist is yet again presented as the wayward genius. Hughes even refers to Goya as 'the greatest topographer of women'. However interesting the documentary and Hughes' past work is – he presented a documentary about the development of modern art, *The Shock of the New* in 1980 – it still has more than the odd touch of 'ironic' sexism. When he is stood in front of *The Nude Maja*, he announces that he wouldn't mind stepping into the frame of the portrait, stating that he would love to spend a dirty afternoon with the seductress. Here, the documentary functions in a similar way to the museum or archive; unreflexively reinscribing conservative values. However, the community of objects that Davis selects from the archive intervenes on such reductive understandings. Davis achieves this through a skillful avoidance of anything overly didactic, whilst provoking questions about the complicity with the institution that this engagement could result in. Even though Goya is a product of this representational history it is more important to stage an engagement that could redeem qualities and ideas hidden in his work. This confirms for me a difficult relationship between the institution and the artist, but it is one that is essential. Even if you are working in more unofficial channels than we are dealing with here, there is little point in working completely autonomously from the institution if you then don't have any leverage or significant representational potential that can create a dissensus within the museum, gallery, archive, or university.



Figure 6. Installation view of *Reversability (It is the Body and Excised)*, Kate Davis, 2011, photograph of a drawing. Courtesy of the artist and Sorcha Dallas.



Figure 7. Detail of *Reversability (It is the Body and Excised)*, Kate Davis, 2011, photograph of a drawing. Courtesy of the artist and Sorcha Dallas.

Through her drawing, Davis makes clear that one of the most valuable aspects of these objects is how they bare witness to multifarious, complex narratives. *It is the Body and Excised* is an enlarged photograph of a drawing depicting two of Jo Spence's photographs. They are drawn, or captured, in the state Davis found them in the GMRC archive, and the metal frame that holds the work evokes the rack used to store Spence's

photographs. The blue on the gallery walls is used to evoke the GMRC, and the installation suggests another meeting between the 'dead objects' of the archive and the living fragments of an everyday reality that the archive selectively neglects. The directness of the phrase, 'it is the body' – taken by the original 1981 collaborative work with Terry Dennett – draws our attention to the female body as a living surface (like the Suffragette with a nail in her tongue) that history is inscribed upon. The second photograph, *Excised* (1990), produced a year before Spence was diagnosed with breast cancer, reminds us of the great stresses, pains and diseases that the body ordeals in everyday life. Here, the female body is produced in contrast with Goya's etchings, where these experiences are bracketed within the swirling, non-place of a void, and Hughes' sexualised framing, whose fantasies leave very little room for Spence's depiction of the female body. At present, it is possible to ask why Davis didn't simply capture this scene with a camera, but Davis' drawing is not just a straight forward depiction of the archive. She has meticulously added to the scene a reflective light, one that suggests that these more mundane moments contain a residual significance, or vibrant fragment, something that is unresolved. Drawing, which is time-consuming and not as easily reproducible as most photographs, gives us a unique perspective on these moments. These laborious marks give the impression of time slowed down – a possible suspension of business as usual that plots the finer points of Davis' repeated use of reversibility in the titles of her work. The use of this term came out of a conversation Davis had with Stephanie de Romer, Glasgow Museums' Assistant Conservator for Sculpture, who describes conservation as that which 'returns an object to a previous condition in its history'. [9] However, Davis' own 'conservation' work, particularly through her drawing, illuminates the under-represented items of the archive by exposing them to public display with all the marks of age, use and misuse. It is an act of *reversibility* that creates new living histories.



Figure 8. Installation view of *Reversibility (Militant methods)*, Kate Davis, 2011.

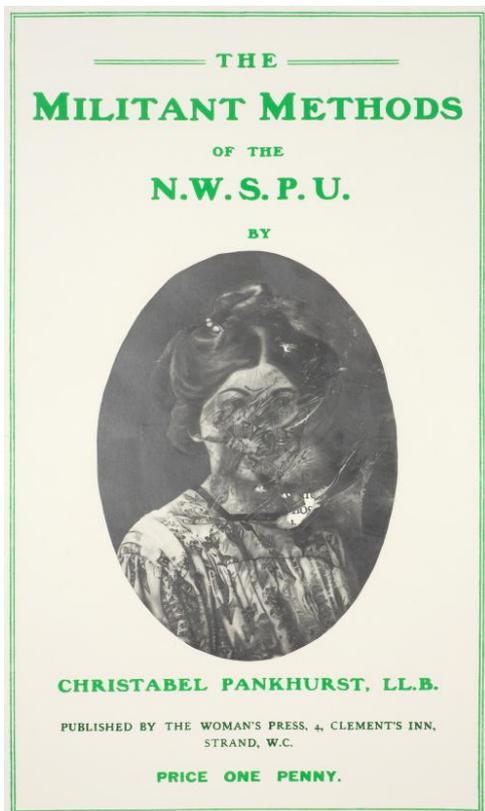


Figure 9. Detail of *Reversibility (Militant methods)*, Kate Davis 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Sorcha Dallas. Acts of defacement leave their curious marks of destruction across the exhibition, from the 'ME' inscribed in the anti-suffrage postcard, to the pockmarked photograph defaced by Davis, *Reversability (Clocks)*. Preserved on the body of the artefact, these defacements produce an unsettling sense of ambiguous violence, especially the defacement of Christabel Pankhurst's portrait on the cover of the NWSPU pamphlet. *Militant methods of the NWSPU* was printed in 1908, and it produces a speech made by Pankhurst addressing the NWSPU's use of more violent methods in their campaign. The speech and its publication must have been a direct influence on acts of radical Suffragette violence committed by the likes of Mary Richardson. The pamphlet is exhibited in a shabby state; open face down on the first two pages with a hole in the title page that goes right through the portrait of Pankhurst. This act of defacement is meticulously re-worked by Davis in *Reversibility (Militant methods)*. Unlike the pamphlet, the Valasquez painting that Richardson attacked has been restored to a state that seems to have consigned this act of iconoclasm to the archives. This act of conservation is inevitable, but its restoration, compared to the shabby state of the pamphlet sheds light on the act of defacement.

Through the work of the GMRC's paper conservator, Davis found that the pamphlet had been intentionally vandalised. *Militant methods* preserves this act whilst elevating this previously neglected artefact to the space of the gallery. This complicates the vandalism that the pamphlet has suffered, and resonates with Richardson's historical defacement. By weaving this defacement into the materiality of her drawing Davis preserves a disjuncture within the archive. This is even more pertinent when we discover the historical closure that Richardson herself tried to create in hindsight of her act. In her 1953 autobiography, *Laugh A Defiance*, Richardson writes about the Suffragette movement's waning radicalism after the declaration of the 1914-1918 war, stating that 'we [the Suffragettes] must help our country now; that is all we can do'. [10] Here, Richardson posthumously nails her own tongue to the kitchen table. However, by meticulously re-creating this minor act of defacement, Davis captures something essential about the archival object: that it is always, already broken. As is clear through *Peace At Last!*, this state is mostly visible on the surfaces of the more neglected, or everyday items within the archive, but it still creates a living link between the store room and the exhibition space. It is

an interaction with the museum that reminds us that representational space is always vulnerable to reinterpretation, and that this is not a public privilege but a right. The museum is a public space of constant tension where histories can be closed down, but as Davis' exhibition shows, these spaces are open to more dissonant possibilities.

[1] See Kate Davis' introduction in the exhibition booklet.

[2] See Davis' introduction.

[3] Ben Highmore, 'Disdained Everyday Fields: a response to Thomas S. Davis', in *Modernism and Theory*, ed. by Stephen Ross (London: Routledge, 2009) pp 80-86, p 81

[4] See Davis' introduction.

[5] 'We need to be subjects of history, even if we cannot totally stop being objects of history. And to be subjects, we need unquestionably to claim history critically.' Paulo Freire quoted in *Peace At Last!* exhibition booklet, Kate Davis, 2011.

[6] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1973) p 247

[7] Sanja Bahun, 'The burdens of the past, the dialectics of the present: note on Virginia Woolf's and Walter Benjamin's philosophies of history' *Modernist Cultures*, ed. by Daniel Moore, Vol 3, Issue 2, Summer 2008, p 109. Available online: <http://www.js-modcult.bham.ac.uk/backissues.asp>

[8] Virginia Woolf *The Years* (London: Vintage Classics, 2008) p 320

[9] See Davis' introduction.

[10] Mary R. Richardson *Laugh a Defiance* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953) p 187