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Alien She

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Exhibition Review

Alien She

Touring exhibition, Carnegie Mellon's Miller Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA, September 21, 2013 to February 16, 2014. Vox Populi, Philadelphia, PA, March 7, 2014 to April 27, 2014. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA, October 24, 2014 to January 25, 2015. Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA, February 15 to May 24, 2015. Pacific Northwest College of Art: Feldman Gallery & Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, OR, September 3, 2015 to January 9, 2016.

Co-curated by Ceci Moss and Astria Suparak. Exhibition design by Tesar Freeman.

Reviewed by Erik Scallon

Erik Scallon is an adjunct professor of ceramics at California College of the Arts in Oakland, California, and at UC Berkeley, in Berkeley, California.

Alien She, organized by Astria Suprak and Ceci Moss, considers the legacy of Riot Grrrl, a punk feminist movement from the early nineties, on recent artistic production. The show's introductory wall text frames the exhibition through "collaborative organization, creative resistance, and DIY ethics," as some of the core tenants of Riot Grrrl. These ideas could easily be transposed from this traveling exhibition to many a craftivist or craft-themed exhibition of the past ten years. With posters, zines and a reading room, as well as works by Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Tammy Rae Carland, Miranda July, Faythe Levine, Allyson Mitchell, L.J. Roberts, and Stephanie Syjuco, the exhibition reveals how these makers employ "craft" to wrestle with agency, politics and identity in various ways.

To familiarize those who do not know about Riot Grrrl, the entrance to the show offers a neatly arranged wall of Xeroxed flyers announcing parties, performances, marches, and other past events. A stenciled version of one of the various Riot Grrrl manifestos and a video provide a

backdrop to the ephemera, which tells the story while also introducing the look and feel of the movement. The hand-drawn posters with cut-and-paste letters land squarely within the do-it-yourself look of punk rock, but closer reading reveals a shift from DIY to DIT, or do-it-together. The collaborative, connective ethics of the people involved in Riot Grrrl helped shape not only the look and sound, but also the production values of the movement. Geographically dispersed, eight of the centers of Riot Grrrl are each represented with a listening station (Figure 1), reminiscent of Tower Records circa 1993, and vitrines, which include a collection of t-shirts, CDs, and hand-drawn mix-tapes. A zine stand invites visitors to sit and read—the content revealing how Riot

Grrrl feminism broadens its scope to include to ideas of race, class, queerness, and body type. Overall, the antechamber to the exhibition acts as an archive of the Riot Grrrl Movement as much as it is an introduction to the work itself.

Given the collaborative and handmade nature of the scene, it's no surprise, then, that a made-by-hand aesthetic would play a heavy part in this exhibition. Signs of craft are revealed repeatedly in the show. One might attribute this to a historical lineage of third-wave feminists looking back to second-wave feminist artists and their attraction to craft for its accessibility and its democratization of making. William Morris' call for people to "take over the means of production" feels like the ghost in the room when one of the various Riot



Fig 1 Installation view, *Alien She*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2014. Images courtesy Phocasso and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

Grrrl manifestos written by Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hannah urges that "... we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings."¹ And, in addition to the agency that is claimed by those that do, craft practices and materials as presented in this exhibition can hold a kind of sincerity, directness and authenticity of experience that fits nicely with the messages the artists and curators seek to convey.

The largest gallery at YBCA holds the bulk of the work, and even without the contextual information, the show conveys strength, power, but also affinity. Upon entering, one peers into the remainder of the exhibition through L.J. Robert's work *We Couldn't Get In. We Couldn't Get Out* (2006–2007). This towering, full-scale and loud pink knit chain-link fence almost cages Allyson Mitchell's *Ladies Sasquatch* (2006–2010). Mitchell's oversized "she beasts" made of found textiles and stuffed animal fur seem aggressively celebratory, while Robert's fence is ambiguously keeping them in, or keeping us out. This staging of the works feels as much like a curatorial statement in visual form as any didactic text might attempt to communicate.

Faythe Levine's book and documentary *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft and Design*, actually and literally spells out DIY craft as it could be understood in the context of Riot Grrrl. More interesting and less familiar is her photography project *Time Outside of Time* (2010–ongoing), which documents alternative and intentional communities. The connection between craft and utopian ideals is not new, but when these images are viewed in this Northern California location on the travelling tour, one can't help but call to mind artist colonies like

Marguerite Wildenhain's Pond Farm, located just to the north of San Francisco, or artist communities in Ojai, where Beatrice Wood's studio was located. In both the Riot Grrrl and studio craft movements, skills in making promise a form of autonomy to the maker/doer; a rhyme that echoes in both craft and feminism.

Further into the exhibition, Stephanie Syjuco's *FREE TEXTS: An Open Source Reading Room* (2011–ongoing) mimics the wall of flyers at the entrance (Figure 2), but here, instead of advertising a punk show, each poster has a tear tag that allows visitors to access an illegal, pdf copy of a well-known theoretical text. It creates an open, albeit illegal, network of information-sharing, with a nod to the idea that knowledge is power, a necessary step toward "taking over the means of production."

Taking that idea a step further, Syjuco's *Counterfeit Crochet Project* is one of the conceptually strongest works within the show. However, it also highlights the difficulty of curating a social movement or activist/craft-based project and placing it within a museum context. On view are hand-crocheted designer handbags, made not by Syjuco, but brought about through her invitation to the public at large to make the bags for themselves. The project, and information about crochet construction and pattern replication, is organized through her website www.counterfeit-crochet.org. This project, in all its forms (physical objects, online platform, activated makers), raises questions about authorship and creative resistance while it levels challenges against the legitimacy of existing power dynamics and labor within capitalist structures. Here, then, we see how craft

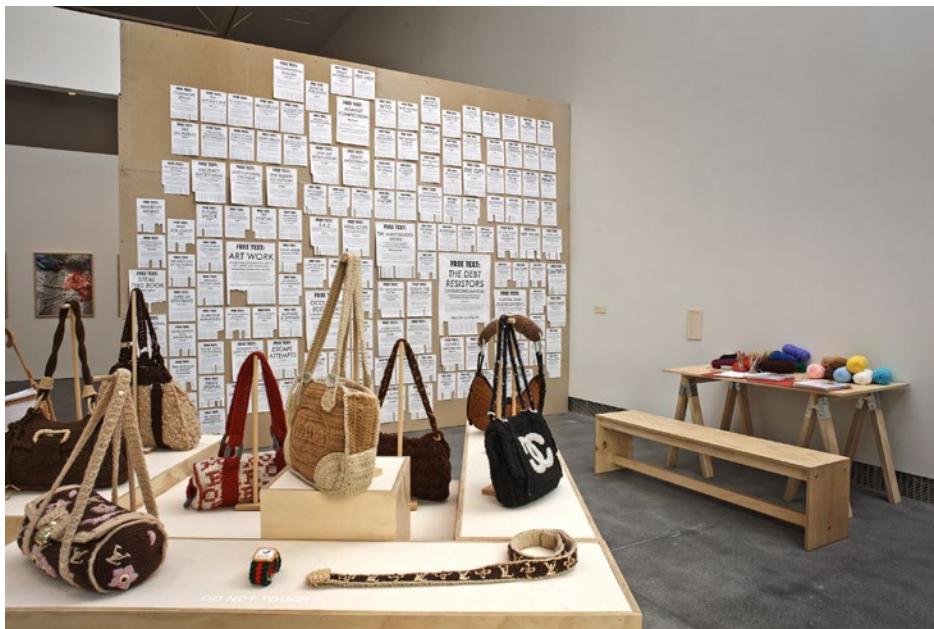


Fig 2 Stephanie Syjuco, *FREE TEXTS: An Open Source Reading Room*, 2011-ongoing, installation view in *Alien She*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2014. Images courtesy Phocasso and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

best operates in motion, in the doing over the viewing. To that end, the inclusion of a table, some yarn, and some crochet hooks along with the completed bags feels a little empty, and almost sealed off from all of its transformational potential.²

While this show ostensibly has little curatorial relation to craft, finding signs of craft within the exhibition shouldn't be of much surprise. Here, I don't mean craft as a thing, or a classification of objects based upon materials, but craft as a set of values and operating principles. Like Riot Grrrl in the nineties, the socialist roots of the Arts and Crafts Movement one hundred years earlier also sought to build utopian communities, valued networks of shared

learning, and challenged unequal access to modes of production. So then, the emphasis on "collaborative organization, creative resistance, and DIY ethics" can fit both craft and this brand of punk inflected feminism. This show opens up a wider view to both, reminding us of the agency granted through making. Sisters are doing it for themselves, indeed.

Notes

- 1 Bikini Kill zine—"Riot Grrrl Is ..." Riot Grrrl #6½, December 1991, Arlington VA. Also read by Kathleen Hannah here: <http://vimeo.com/67757523>
- 2 It's also difficult not to compare this iteration of The Counterfeit Crochet

Project with its earlier presentation in almost exactly the same spot in YBCA's "The Way That We Rhyme: Women, Art & Politics" of 2008. That iteration felt like a specifically supported making station

that put concepts into actions as seen in this video: http://youtu.be/XRc4_LYpmYA, which makes this version seem like an illustration in comparison.