



The following posts grew out of a Parsons Design Studies workshop on “Design and Political Agency,” which was inspired by “Stand Up For Democracy,” on September 8th, 2017. Each student read the “Open Letter to the Design Community: Stand up for Democracy” and chose an object that fosters (or deters) people’s power to speak and act in the political sphere. In the particularities of each observed thing, the students identified the potentialities of design to afford a larger form of agency and politics.

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THE CAMPAIGN BUTTON

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Campaign button for
George Washington

These circular metal objects have been pinned to shirts, collars, jackets, and hats. Slogans of support and of dislike, proudly worn for others to bear witness. Their pins pierce our clothing and announce our political identities, for as long as candidates hold our allegiance. The campaign button or pin finds its way back to George Washington¹, whose supporters wore sewn on buttons – emulating (and also critiquing) Britain’s pride in its monarchy— substituting “Long live the President” for “Long live the King.” The practice took hold and evolved into tradition and quickly became an expected component of political campaigns. Many of the slogans found on these pins have been long forgotten but some are well-remembered, such as the rhyming “I like Ike” for Dwight D. Eisenhower’s presidential campaign.

As a visual bullhorn, buttons share our views on the world, with the world. They have become so ubiquitous that they have also been adopted in political commentary and art. Multiple satirical presidential

candidates, such as Pat Paulson and Stephen Colbert, have shaped their campaigns to appear more legitimate with the aid of these buttons. Even so, the campaign button is still a popular platform for proclaiming our opinions.

But one must also question, at what point can wearing our political views on our sleeves and chests do more harm than good? If we already know the beliefs of another, there would be no point in talking to them, especially in today's political hostile environment where we shun those wearing red hats and 'red hats' shun us. When the possibility of communication is deterred, we also lose the ability to sit down with one another and discuss or debate our differences. With this being a possibility we must then consider the true intentions of the campaign button and question whether it is contributing to the severe divisiveness amongst our citizens. Perhaps, we may even consider what our political landscape could look like if, rather than proclaiming our political opinions, our buttons urged strangers to ask us about them.

¹King, Elizabeth. "Presidential Campaign Buttons and Pins: The Inside Story." Time. May 17, 2016. Accessed September 24, 2017. <http://time.com/4336931/campaign-buttons-history/>.



Photograph by By Mark Dixon from Pittsburgh, PA (Trump-WomensMarch_2017-1060202)
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DEFIANCE: NOW AVAILABLE IN SHOCKING SHADES OF PINK

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Less than 24 hours after the inauguration of the 45th President of the United States, hundreds of thousands of women and men gathered along the streets of Washington, D.C. to send a message to the new administration: Women's Rights are Human Rights and Human Rights are Women's Rights. With a cohesive platform of defining principles, participants in the march also united in their choice of headgear. Forming a dense sea of hot pink hues, the hand-crafted hats spoke volumes for the disposition of those assembled at the wintry National Mall.

In what could be considered part of a bold new wave of Resistance Attire, the aptly christened "Pussyhat" —a word play between "pussycat" and "pussyhat" is reminiscent of the brightly-colored balaclavas worn by the Russian feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot.¹ The vexing moniker also embodies a purposeful desire to

to underscore Donald Trump in 2005 when he claimed his fame and manhood allowed him to do “anything” to women, including “grab their pussy.”²

In response to the 2016 presidential election, the Pussyhat Project was created to provide opportunities to “make a collective visual statement”³ in support of women’s rights. Co-founded by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman, members of the Little Knitters in Los Angeles, the website encourages visitors to “Make and Give.” Celebrating knitting and crocheting (traditionally considered women’s crafts), it offers simple customizable patterns for all skill levels of expertise. Their work turned political in the months leading up to the D.C. Women’s March when they prompted activists to participate in the democratic opposition with a new mandate to “Make, Share and Declare,” adding pink as a firm color requirement. Those who could not attend were encouraged to either donate their wooly creations including messages of support and solidarity, or march on social media by joining the Pussyhat Global Virtual March.

Mass gatherings of Pussyhats continue to proliferate throughout the world. As a powerful symbol for a reinvigorated feminism that reaches more broadly towards the reform of gender, racial, and economic inequality, the hats provide a forceful unifying voice. The shockingly pink caps have come to represent a diverse and truly global sisterhood of solidarity. They are a symbol of defiance for those who wear them; and they are evidence of the power a simple act of making can exert—through radical rows of knits, knots, and purls—transforming a march into a compelling global movement.

¹For images see the Pussy Riot blog: <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/>

²Mr. Trump’s lewd comments were captured by “Access Hollywood” on the set of the soap opera “Days of Our Lives” before making a cameo appearance on the show. Trump: “...And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything... Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.” Bullock, Penn, “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Taped Comments about Women.” New York Times.com. October 8, 2016. Accessed September 17, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>

³Pussyhat Project. Accessed September 4, 2017. <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/>

THE RED CLIP

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Thinking about design as an endeavor to shape not only materials and virtual worlds but also shape how we live, interact and communicate with each other and with the environment, provokes us to rethinking the potentials and consequences of design in affecting or even regenerating human-based systems like the politics. How might designers represent and promote a political concept such as agency through their work?

Designers play a significant role to empower people to collaborate, co-exist, and act in society. Consider a banal object like a simple wooden bench in a small local park and think how it could be engaged in motivating social movements with a bit of creativity. Here, the Dutch designers of Pivot Creative¹ have made a radical change with a slight reconfiguration of a clip. When the designers add a simple red clip to the seat or back, not only does they transform a park bench into a piece of multi-purpose furniture but they turn the park into a



public library where people gain knowledge and exchange it through conversations, and the things they leave behind.

The designers, therefore, establish a second public space within the first public space of a local park by redesigning a piece of street furniture. Since the public places are potential environments for community activities and community activities are indisputable feature of a democratic society, the addition of clips to the benches can be interpreted as a kind of social innovation—a social innovation that helps people to collaborate and generate new ideas in the same arena. This kind of social change could empower people to be more democratically involved in the society.

¹Pivot Creative is a design studio in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Ruilbank is the name of this public space intervention that encourage social exchange and interaction through reading materials in Amsterdam. These red clips are called Ruilbank which are metal clips attached to several public typical benches in Amsterdam from July 28 to Sep.28, 2013. www.thisispivot.com/

SECURITY CAMERAS AS POLITICAL AGENCY

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Security cameras. They were the first strange objects that caught my attention right after moving to New York City. At first I didn't know what they were exactly, as they take different shapes than those I'm used to seeing in my country. Entering my new apartment, I found myself looking up hard into this strange-, scary-looking object silently sitting above my doorway. I just did it as a self-protective reaction to a strange object, but I'm sure the camera has caught me in such awkward movements that I could be seen as "a shady suspicious woman". This is how I eventually came to think of this object as having the power to deter people from speaking and acting.

Security cameras are essentially meant to give security to people, or to put it conversely, to prevent people from doing bad things (sometimes criminal acts). Cameras that are constantly on, are expected to function as an effective remedy for crime by way of both prevention and, with the occurrence of incidents, tracing the suspects

whose figures and movements are recorded. They are installed for good causes, but once you start to notice the existence of these big-eyed gadgets almost everywhere, don't they create a feeling you are being watched every step of the way in your everyday life? Protection is much welcomed, but how about freedom of action? This sense of freedom can only be secured when privacy is guaranteed.

For better or worse, the cameras sit there as if they are asserting their own presence with their fish-eyes. I say "better" here, as one might say it's better at least to be able to sense their existence than to live without noticing the fact of being surrounded by less visible high-tech types of protection. When the demands for security reach the point of overprotection, this feeling of being watched may erode our healthy free spirits and eventually block our power to speak or act, and in the end, even without their actual presence, the same reaction may well be prompted. People will censor themselves.

UNLOCKING PRISON SYSTEMS

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Democracies around the world have failed to produce progressive and humane prison systems. Prisons date back to the origins of civilization, yet, have barely kept pace with social progress. True, dungeons are largely things of the past, but today's prisons are still mired in old forms of punishment and injustice, they remain an uncomfortable reminder of how inhuman the world remains.

French philosopher Michael Foucault espoused that prisons enhance crime, that they are recruitment grounds for criminals. This observation, when applied to the growing prison population in the United States takes on alarming proportions. In October 2013, the incarceration rate of the U.S. was the highest in the world at 716 per 100,000. The U.S. is home to 4.4% of the world's population and 22% of the world's prisoners. Per Marc Santora of The New York Times, it costs New York City, alone, \$ 167,731 per inmate.¹ The burgeoning problem is at odds with the underlying tenants of the nation's democracy. Crime can stem from a wide range of socio-economic causes, not least also from a depressed economy. Ross Calvin's analysis for the Reuters, shares that most criminologists, sociologists and police chiefs interviewed by him, anticipated a rise in crimes as the economy went into recession.² The U.S. has always been associated with good commerce and a dramatic shift from this leadership position can become a contributor towards economic anxiety and crime.



Yet, here is evidence of progressive thought in the history of incarceration in the U.S. Consider the Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania.³ In 1787, a young doctor named Benjamin Rush, with the support of Benjamin Franklin, was sent to Paris to explore whether crime was a moral disease. Rush exchanged ideas with Parisian scientists, philosophers, and literati. He returned to the United States and executed changes, transforming the Walnut Street facility into a place where prisoners could meditate on their crimes, experience spiritual remorse, and, hopefully, undergo rehabilitation.⁴ Most germane to this particular transformation was the belief that repentance would lead to freedom from imprisonment. Of course, this experiment did not take into account prejudicial arrests or the concept of wrongful imprisonment.

A more recent example of progressive thinking comes from Dan Pacholke, Deputy Secretary for the Washington State Department of Corrections.⁵ He calls attention to the fact that the term, “Department of Corrections” is a misnomer. In his TED talk he says that these institutions focus on containing and controlling inmates instead of rehabilitating them. Pacholke’s innovative techniques apply design thinking for the betterment of inmates and prison staff alike. His methods include inmates as active contributors towards environmental initiatives and sustainability in the prison. Pacholke’s experiments have shown to bring positive change from inmate inclusion, not exclusion

While prison sentences can become inevitable when a crime has been committed, can we not reverse the negative flow to one of positive contributions towards society? How can we support efforts like Pacholke’s to become a sustained movement and not an isolated example of excellence? But the most important question of all is: What are the practices that need to be changed outside prison?

¹ Marc Santora, *City’s Annual Cost Per Inmate Is \$168, 000, Study Finds*, The New York Times, August 23, 2013.

² Ross Calvin, *Economic Downturn Hits U.S. Police With Double Whammy*, Reuters, October 21, 2008.

³ Chai Woodham, *Eastern State Penitentiary, A Prison With A Past*, Smithsonian.com, September 30, 2008.

⁴Ibid.

⁵ “How Prisons Can Help Inmates Live Meaningful Lives”, Dan Pacholke, https://www.ted.com/speakers/dan_pacholke, posted August, 2014



A street in Marseille, France, March 2017

THE POWER OF WASTE AND ITS POLITICAL AGENCY

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Waste is the result of capitalism and societies marked by over-consumption – societies and their governments which conceal it from view by municipal cleaning. As with cemeteries, the geographic localization of waste is mostly outside of our towns and cities, in a kind of other space that we don't visit and we don't have any relation to, unless you or someone you know works there. The dustmen in a lot of cities, work very early in the morning beginning around 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. to collect and make any evidence of our way of consumption disappear.

Everyone produces trash everyday, but everyday it is whisked away by the magic of the dustmen. This is why almosty no one has any real contact with it. The only representations that we encounter are statistics on tv, in the newspaper, or online. Even so, few can imagine the real impact of waste; few have any real

contact with it in every day life. Instead, we compress it in a box or a dustbin or trash-bags and evacuate it as efficiently as possible. We are afraid of it because of it's signification of dirtiness.

But waste can be power.

Ordinarily, the dustmen don't have any political agency. They are part of the unknown realm of waste. They are people whose names and stories we don't know. Nobody cares about them until they don't do what they are expected to do.

The dustmen of Marseille (pictured above) reversed those expectations when they wanted to tell the world about their terrible job conditions, so terrible they made them sick. In 2017, they decided to strike and stop collecting our waste for days. For us it was a disaster. The streets began to be uncrossable and unwalkable because of the smell, the bugs, and the rats that infested them.

The accumulated waste was an illustration of chaos. One piece of it does not create panic, but millions of pieces of waste are chaos. Piled up, the waste became a visual, three-dimensional, powerful object, It was this characteristics that give it political agency. The government was forced to think about their demands about their conditions of work , salaries, and days off. They could not ignore that trash was now everywhere in their city.

On a bigger scale, the strike made a very political point that we need to realize how our attitudes toward consumption are critical, and that our behaviors matter especially the behaviors of our government leaders. The fact that for the first time the people of Marseille were surrounded by it everywhere hopefully increased their awareness (and the awareness of those who read about the strike) that seemingly invisible trash has size, shape, and smell, not to mention rodents and insects. We need to think about how we can change our behaviors, from recycling, to buying products with less packaging, to asking for fewer plastic bags. We urgently need to sharpen our knowledge and generate less waste.

WHEN A STOOL CHANGES A NATION

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Woolworth Lunch Counter Stool. Image courtesy of W. Sitomer

We often take for granted the power of the objects we encounter every day. But when one of these objects stars as the centerpiece of a political action, we begin to reconsider just how significant everyday objects can become.

The year was 1960. Woolworth's was the iconic hangout spot for young adults in towns across the nation including, most famously, Greensboro, North Carolina. There four nondescript barstools that stood beside the lunch counter of the famous American diner found themselves at the center of major controversy. The stools fit the modern atmosphere of their surroundings. Their sleek silver metal backs are slightly curved and have minimal lines. The colors of the plastic seat cushions pop out and contrast with the white tile walls and black countertop of the diner. The seats are supported by sturdy black columns of hollow metal that flatten out as they touch the floor to support the weight of the structures.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, they were known as soda fountain stools and stood as symbols of youth and social life. However, this changed dramatically when four young black men turned these stools into a voice of equality and power by sitting peacefully atop the teal and pink seat cushions in an act of protest against racial inequality.

After being refused service while seated at a “whites only” lunch spot, these men sat quietly in protest of the discrimination they were experiencing. Following suit with other peaceful civil rights protests, the men remained unmoved despite the hatred and anger that was directed their way. The stools, while seemingly just a perch for them to sit, perfectly reflect the peaceful protest that was happening. They act as an extension of the men, giving them support in this trying situation. The black columns look as if they are driving themselves into the ground, anchoring the men in place with an unmovable force. The sturdy structures relaying their unyielding desire for equality.