Amber Ginsburg and Joe Madrigal

The idea of using Boston’s 1973 Pulitzer Prize–winning photo of George Harris placing a carnation in a rifle barrel has become an iconic image of peaceful protest. The gesture that earned the photographer “flower children” has become a staple of anti-war protest while continuing to reappear in films, graphic design, and art. "Flowering," as a symbol of nonviolent revolution was continually redefined after Vietnam, with Portugal’s Carnation Revolution in 1974 and the later Colour Revolutions in the former USSR and Baltic states in the 2000s. While the latter have not been entirely bloodless, the idea of the flower has been adopted to represent civil resistance, whether actual flowers are employed or not, from Kyrgyzstan’s 2005 Tulip Revolution to the recent naming of Arab Spring protests, Tunisia’s The Jasmine Revolution and Egypt’s The Lotus Revolution.

Perhaps taking the idea that every revolution begins with flowers, Amber Ginsburg and Joe Madrigal have collaborated the history of military training, the craft of flower arranging, and the history of cooperative education into FLOoretalia, a site for activating material, histories and audiences, staging a temporary terracotta factory in the Soap Factory, Minneapolis, Minnesota, US. Ginsburg and Madrigal set to work casting over five weeks roughly 14,000 pounds of clay into hollow, ceramic dummy bombs. Alongside this operation is a selection of seed shakers, constructed from a similar mould, filled with flour and seed mixture to be checked out and used for acts of informal urban gardening. While the connection between filling bombs with seed mixture seems rooted in the now iconic juxtaposition of ammunition and flowers, a less familiar history underlies FLOoretalia and its play between spellings: the manufacture of test bombs across the US towards the end of WWII.

In 2001, 100 ‘dummy’ bombs were sent for Woodbridge Township, New Jersey, where Federal Terra Cotta of Woodbridge and New Jersey Terra Cotta of Perth Amboy had produced architectural terracotta for ornamental caddies. The bombs had been left on a pallet by a railroad siding, eventually growing over with weeds until rediscovered by the Woodbridge Historical Association. The bombs had been used in training for aerial bombers when the US entered into war in 1939. With architectural work drying up during wartime, the terracotta firms temporarily manufactured these dummies on commission, which were filled with plaster or white flour in order to train a mark where they had burst open upon impact. For FLOoretalia Ginsburg and Madrigal offer up white blooming, clover and arable foreign mixtures mixed with white flour.

FLOoretalia presents multiple, generative actions. The reproduction of the bomb, via original blueprints, is an exercise in visualizing and acting out histories, putting both the artists and audience in contact with the labour behind their original manufacture. But as their press release states, FLOoretalia “inserts a poetic underpinning into that military history, by filling the bombs with seed mixture and deploying them around Minneapolis via a check-out system that posts a second generative act in the hands of volunteers: the spreading of seeds. If the flower has become a symbol of civil resistance, by placing the seed shaker in the hands of volunteers, civil resistance is posed to grow, through wide dispersal over time, across the landscapes in which volunteers choose to intervene.

Deviations is key to this project. While the artists worked to activate materials and objects through their reinterpretation and reproduction, the narrative deviates away from the history they re-perform. While the original dummy bombs were employed to train pilots in accuracy, the reproduction bombs were employed to activate deviations. The seed-shakers could be checked out for one seed-walks or Soap Factory visitors could participate in artist-led walks through the park system or bicycle seed rides intended on random dispersal. The artists have derived a project from the initial history of an object and, in turn, passivated those objects for another possible drive on the part of the participant. Perhaps those persons followed the psycho-geographical contours of the city, their usual relationship with the city altered, heightened and changed by the instruction of the seed shaker into their explorations. Random deviation is also left to the birds, the wind and the rain at the close of the exhibition when unified bombs filled with mixture were deployed at a number of locations – leaving them to break and melt away with the earth with the contents left to chance.

FLOoretalia offers a live consideration of not just making, but re-making things as a proposition for not only how to relate to others, but to histories, landscapes, materials and objects.

Footnotes

Shannon Storms is the Executive Director of Sherrills, Chicago. She teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is the 2012 Critical Studies Fellow at The Cranbrook Academy of Arts.