

The Museum of *Cruel Designs* at Banksy's Dismaland

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It would be possible to write quite a history of the inventions made since 1830, for the sole purpose of supplying capital with weapons against the revolts of the working class.

Karl Marx, Capital

Cruel Designs is an exhibition of things that were made to hurt you. We usually think of designers as a progressive force for improving our world. But design is often used to force obedience on behalf of capitalism and the state: from Britain's leading role in anti-homeless spikes and CCTV; to Proytecta's booby-trapped border fences; to body-worn workplace surveillance devices like the Motorola WT-4000; to the continuing militarisation of the police. Museums rarely exhibit trauma until long after the event. *Cruel Designs* puts on display the ongoing trauma of British neoliberalism – that doctrine, introduced by Thatcher, that the capitalist market is an ethic in itself, capable of resolving all human problems.¹

These bad designs target individual bodies. But they also map out the systemic violence of corporate and government policy, and the cruel designs they have on you. The business of control is booming under austerity. Since the late 1970s there have been a series of market bubbles in gated communities, surveillance, border controls and military-industrial technologies. This has been a time of capitalism recomposing our lives: From 'participatory' office design; to urban 'Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design'; to micro-targeted ambient

advertising; to the defence corporations militarising international borders, modern disciplines of governmentality have become ever more interwoven.



Cruel Designs exhibition detail: anti-homeless spikes and anti-sitting benches, 2015.

Cruel designs circulate from margin to centre. They often first enclose non-human animals, moving to colonial subjects before being introduced domestically on poor and marginal groups. The first human body-worn monitoring devices were ankle-monitors for prisoners, but the technology saw early use as location tags for cattle. Pigeon spikes were introduced to London around 1980 after pigeons' status shifted from messenger to vermin. Human anti-sitting spikes appeared on lower ledges by 1985. The 'less' of 'less lethal' rounds was discovered by firing them at pigs. The first human tests of baton rounds and tear gas were on enemy or colonial 'natives' in Vietnam, Hong Kong or Northern Ireland.² Today, Israeli companies Elbit and Magal market new cruel designs to the US-Mexico border as 'field tested' on the Palestinian people.³

These designs which enclose and exclude also map neoliberalism's move from colonial enclosure to the domestic 'new enclosures' of privatisation and 'deregulation'.⁴ As border fences make Europe a gated community against migrants from former colonies, anti-homeless spikes keep the domestic victims of austerity out of sight. In 2014, the police 'national barrier asset' kept people protesting against war away from a NATO summit in Wales. This year, the same fence was sent to Calais to keep out people migrating, most of whom were fleeing conflict in Syria and other African countries.

***Prisons resemble factories,
schools, barracks, hospitals,
which all resemble prisons.***

**Michel Foucault,
Discipline and Punish**

These obedient objects create what Timothy Mitchell calls 'the state effect': they are objects in which power is not 'up there' but enacted daily: a silent, sharp delimitation of what we accept as our public sphere.⁵ Policies, laws and markets may seem abstract. But they take shape in painful, designed interactions which flow through our bodies. They reshape us in bluntly material ways, from office ergonomics and 'wellness' to waterboarding and tazers.⁶ These objects compose and embody state and capitalist order, accompanying the formation of repressive laws and unjust social relations. The market for these designs is produced by successive moral panics, from communism, mugging, hooliganism, hoodies and immigration to terrorism.⁷ While they most dramatically impact the public, designs such as hi-tech fences and CCTV also affect managers and police, automating their roles at the expense of their jobs as accountable figures. They outsource violence to objects, and the responsibility for them to the networks of people commissioning, designing or buying them who are all 'just doing their job'. These designs are one way in which violence and inequality become structural. One police term for this is 'designing out crime', using unpleasant lighting of various kinds, public seating which cannot be used by the homeless, insistent classical



Melilla border fence, 2012. © Jose Palazon.



Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear defence wall. Deployed against an anti-austerity protest march. London, 2011.



Remote-control gun tower, 'automatic kill zone' of the Israeli separation barrier, 2015. © Ryan Beiler.



Cruel Designs exhibition detail, 2015.

musak and ‘mosquito alarms’ – devices emitting an irritating noise that only young people can hear.

These are all bad designs. They fail to address the root causes of social problems, redefining them as ‘security’ problems which can be ‘designed out’. They also fail in their brute attempt to force people’s agency. When it comes to workplace discipline, capital depends on the autonomy and initiative of workers at the same time as it tends to take those things from them. Hitachi’s ‘business microscope’ for monitoring workers’ location, gestures, conversations and ‘wellness’ wrestles with this contradiction. CCTV has had a negligible impact on crime levels, while the increase in defensive design has *increased* feelings of social fear, by framing the rest of society as a threat and segregating communities so that local interactions that build social trust do not occur. At the border, no fence is unconquerable and can at best (in words of the Mayor of Calais) “only push the problem back a few metres.” These fundamental contradictions extend all the way into the objects’ design. As military designs are adapted for domestic control, the brutality of the designs is limited by democratic public protest. These limits are exposed in contradictory design principles: ‘less lethal weapons’, ‘anti-sit benches’, ‘humane slaughter’. These designs are shaped not only from above, but also by people resisting them.

Objects - ‘things’ - are capable of information processing and communication with each other and

with their environment autonomously. Autonomy is a capability (or a set of capabilities) that enables a particular action of a system to be automatic or ‘self-governing.’ Today, object-oriented philosophy is popular for the ways it suggests objects might have their own agency and might interact with each other without human intervention, Unfortunately, the first sentence in this paragraph... comes from an article on transport logistics. And the second comes from a recent study by the US Department of Defence on human-system collaboration in logistics.

Stefano Harney, Thingly Debt

Design, violence and the idea that objects have independent agency have been the subject of several recent broad curatorial projects. But this exhibition emerges specifically as a follow-up to 2014’s V&A exhibition *Disobedient Objects*. Many cruel designs are direct responses to objects in that exhibition. This exhibition draws on critical engagements with design history, technologies of social control, urban planning and business management.⁸ From armouries and police museums to contemporary art, museums have always been sites for the display of power. This raises the question of whether exhibiting cruel designs can expose power rather than celebrate it. Our ‘chamber of horrors’ emphasises charmless bad design, from the obsession with totalising prisms evident in documents leaked by Edward Snowden, to the adolescent sexual imagery and photoshop explosions of arms trade marketing. Departing from standard armoury displays, weapons are not displayed side-on, as if tools available for a masterful viewer. They are pointed at you, as you would more likely experience them. Most makers proved unwilling to discuss or lend, and some objects were only made visible through the Freedom of Information Act. So company logos and ‘british made’ brands are made prominently visible; while infographics map funding connections between designs, profits and policies of dispossession. We also

included labels written by victims of these objects. Redacted labels evoke how much is still hidden.

In focusing on the public sphere, this small exhibition neglects design for war, torture and imprisonment: such as the Maze prison in Northern Ireland and its use of the ‘five techniques’ of white torture, later used by British troops in Iraq. *Cruel Designs* only offers a glimpse of shadowy making which deserves to be exposed. Concrete objects in the world may make exclusion and exploitation appear simply ‘the way things are.’ But these designs were not a natural progression. They were specifically made. They can be unmade.

Footnotes

- 1 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2007.
- 2 Anna Feigenbaum, *Tear Gas: The Making of a Peaceful Poison*, 2015.
- 3 Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, 2012.
- 4 Midnight Notes, *The New Enclosures*, 1990.
- 5 Timothy Mitchell, “Society, Economy, and the State Effect,” in *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn*, 1999.
- 6 Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, 2015.
- 7 Studies of the military, police-prison and border-industrial complexes paint a fuller picture than is possible here. Ruben Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.*, 2014; Stuart Hall, *Policing the Crisis*, 1978; Anna Minton, *Ground Control*, 2012; Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America*, 2008; Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue*, 2015.
- 8 Stefano Harney, *State Work*, 2002; Carol Ackroyd et al, *The Technology of Political Control*, 1980; Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire*, 1988. Once begun, I noted the singular term ‘cruel design’ used by Leopold Lambert in a related way, though his focus is on physical suffering more broadly.