This Is Not a Gun

Why is black skin perceived as a threat in American public spaces? How come a 17-year-old boy is portrayed in the American media as a thug? And how do a sandwich, a bible, or a bunch of keys get identified wrongfully as weapons and lead to the shooting of innocent passersby? Rotem Rozental writes about artist Cara Levine's project "This Is Not a Gun," which reacts to dozens of incidents of police shooting at citizens – mostly black men – as a result of misidentification.

Essay / Rotem Rozental November 17, 2020

The roots of the project *This Is Not a Gun*, by artist Cara Levine, are found in a story published in *Harper's Magazine* in 2016, titled "Trigger Alert." The report listed items the police had wrongfully identified as weapons – misidentifications that from 2001 and on led to the shooting of civilians by the police. Among them: a wallet, a sandwich, a bunch of keys, and a bible. Levine writes that she has encountered the report on her Instagram feed, and what caught her attention was what had been missing from the text: identifying information of the civilians who had been shot – names, ages, ethnicity. That winter, the encounter with the report triggered a process in her studio. She started to carve the items mentioned in the magazine story in wood. Later she organized a ceramics workshop titled "This Is Not a Gun," in collaboration with 100 Days Action, an artists' collective from the Bay Area, which brings together art, activism, and community building through creative actions, the artist Amanda Eicher, and the Tenderloin Museum in San Francisco. Since then, Levine organized 17 similar workshops. Hundreds of people participated, aiming to establish a non-judgmental space that allows for mutual reflection and coping with racism and its various historical and current manifestations. Among the institutions collaborating with the workshops were Creative Time in New York, the Berkeley Art Museum, and the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA in Los Angeles.

The project's most recent incarnation is an eponymous book comprising 40 artists, writers, and activists reacting in texts and images to the items misidentified as weapons. The reactions are organized chronologically by the date of the incident, beginning in 1999. Each is dedicated to a civilian who has been shot; not all of them were killed. 83% are black men. In these last moments before the presidential elections in the United States - when citizens already line up in voting centers, when President Trump encourages conspiracy theories regarding the validity of the ballots, when the country is still seething from the demonstrations against police violence and the confrontations between supporters of Black Lives Matter and their opponents - it seems that the book and the intimate viewpoints it distills creates, perhaps the way Levine's workshops do, a space where it is possible to delve into individual situations of injustice that together are perceived as a body of indescribable, improbable, and unnecessary pain. When Levine invites artists and writers to share texts and images in response to the incidents, she expands the individual story of the injured and the murdered, connecting them to a collective experience. Thus it becomes possible to reshape the relations of vision - directing our gaze toward those who were denied participation in the civic space.

this-is-not-a-gun.jpg



[1]Cover of the book This Is Not a Gun. Ed. Cara Levine, Sming Sming Books & Candor Arts
Courtesy of Sming Sming Books & Candor Arts

thisisnotagun-back.jpg **[2]**



[3]Cover of the book This Is Not a Gun. Ed. Cara Levine, Sming Sming Books & Candor Arts
Courtesy of Sming Sming Books & Candor Arts

Levine, an artist who lives in Los Angeles, examines the intersections of the traumatic, delusional, physical, and metaphysical. In this context, This Is Not a Gun anchors the central themes of her practice in recent years, which encompasses sculpture, video, and social activism.1 Before the publication of the book earlier this year, Levine released on Instagram several still images from a piece intended to be included in an exhibition that had been delayed because of the virus, in an attempt to share her deep frustration with the political fluctuations around her and the way they have been affecting everyday life. The video work *Cried Listening to the News Again* [4] is a 24-hour documentation of helium balloons that spell out the work's title. She hung the balloons from the balconies of her building, in Hollywood. For Levine, this was a way to think about how we share personal feelings in public spaces and communicate emotions to each other - a preoccupation that intensified during the coronavirus lockdown imposed on California.

475A7421-41.jpg **[5]**



[6]Workshop at the "For Freedoms Congress," led by Cara Levine, Angela Hennessy, and Candice Price

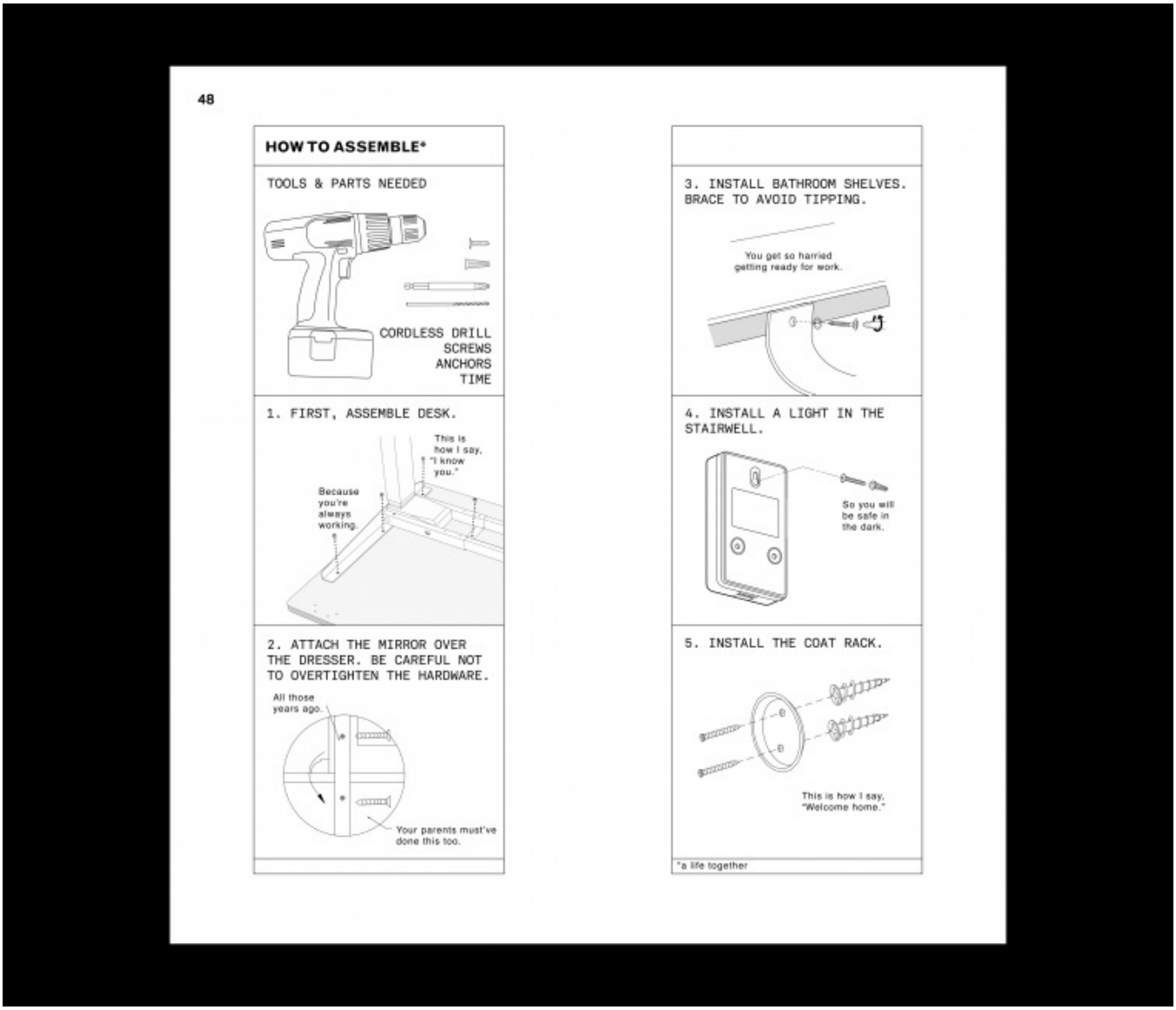
475A7291-16.jpg **[7]**



[8]Workshop at the "For Freedoms Congress," led by Cara Levine, Angela Hennessy, and Candice Price

In the prologue, the writer and cultural critic Elena Gross outlines the fluctuation between the recognizable and the unknown, the obvious and the uncertain, which characterizes police officers' hasty responses. They identify objects as something they are not (this is not a gun) and their owners as well (they do not present an immediate threat to their lives).
"[The project] refuses to accept the futility of lawless, police-sanctioned violence and resists the narratives of domination that identify a ring of keys as a weapon and an unarmed Black man as a threat. A cellphone is a cellphone. A wrench is a wrench. It is not a gun. It never was. It is what it is."
Beyond the space the workshops offer and hold for their participants, the book seems to suggest another one – a safe space to ask questions, and witness up-close the improbability that characterizes the shooting incidents: the wallet-turned-handgun, the keys that became a gun, the human body that turned into a threat. The book displays photographs of objects that resemble the original ones (a slice of pizza, a lock, a wallet), accompanied by textual responses. In fact, their presentation in the book isolates the objects from the shooting scenes, thus highlighting, again, the movement between the familiar and the unknown, between recognition and the failure to identify that Gross discusses.

Christine Wong Yap, text for Barry Millsap_2.jpg **[9]**



[10]Christine Wong Yap, from the book This Is Not a Gun. Ed. Cara Levine, Sming Sming Books & Candor Arts
Courtesy of Sming Sming Books & Candor Arts

The objects misidentified as guns and recreated in clay by participants in the workshops are featured throughout the book. A double-spread at the front catalogues shows them - pizza, sandwich, sunglasses, crumpled can. They emerge again, isolated, before each response. Levine's sculptural interpretation detaches them twice: once from their usability and presence in daily life, and again from the way the police saw them in the hands of those who had become shooting victims. As sculptural objects catalogued on a white page, they are almost devoid of context, almost innocent.

"This Is Not A Gun," by Cara Levine, for LAABF 2020 **[11]**

Video of "This Is Not A Gun," by Cara Levine, for LAABF 2020

Cara Levine, This Is Not a Gun, an online workshop at the 2020 LA Art Book Fair

It seems that here lies the opportunity to think about the objects in the book as a Surrealist gesture, as a nightmarish quote of the Belgian artist Rene Magrite, who provided new interpretations to common objects, detaching them from their original meaning by negating their familiar visage. In his well-known 1929 painting, *The Betrayal of the Images*, an object we recognize as a pipe is accompanied by the deceptive inscription, "this is not a pipe." What happens to the cellphone when suspected of being a gun? When the suspicion leads to severe harm to human lives? Isn't that the cruelest betrayal of images?

A bag of Skittles and a bottle of AriZona Iced Tea "represent my childhood and the innocence of most Inner-City youth," writes Shamell Bell in a text dedicated to Trayvon Martin, who was 17 years old when George Zimmerman recognized him as a threat as he walked down the street, and shot him in the back. Skittles and iced tea, Bell writes, are the objects that "sparked the early beginnings of an international movement against state-sanctioned violence." In Florida, in 2012, Martin walked down a rain-soaked street, a hoodie covering his head and a bag of Skittles in his hand. Bell recalls how the objects he was holding began to pop up in texts she was writing, in papers she had presented, and how she had deepened further into the way black skin and its presence in the public space are being pre-conceived as a threat, as weapons; how the American media preferred pictures depicting Martin more like a thug than an innocent 17-year-old boy shot for being in the wrong place, at the wrong time, in the wrong skin; and how the bag of Skittles and the bottle of iced tea he was holding were perceived not as a sign of innocence, but rather – as the right-wing media tried to present them – as a drink fortified with a prescription drug, to establish the impression that Martin was not innocent at all. Although calls to the emergency line proved that the police had asked Zimmerman not to follow Martin, the court found him not guilty. The experience of being and being seen in the world in a skin that is seen as a threat recurs in the book. "I suppose Black men can't casually roam the streets," writes Leila Weefur in a text dedicated to Joseph Fennell, written from his viewpoint: "It's a weird feeling, to walk with a restless, foreboding anticipation for white men in uniform." Fennell was shot in 2008 when his key ring was suspected as being a gun.

cara1_small.jpg **[12]**



[13]Cara Levine

The book ends with a shower hose (suspected as being a burner in some reports) and a text by Prophet Walker, shown on the page as a text message, with the original typing errors. This piece is dedicated to Sahid Vassell, a 34-year-old man murdered by the police in Crown Heights, Brooklyn after officers suspected the hose he was carrying to be a gun. Four police officers shot him several times, following reports that a man was pointing a gun at passersby. The officers have not been prosecuted. Walker was First Lady Michelle Obama's guest at the annual State of the Union speech in 2015. He served a six-year sentence for robbery before deciding to turn his life around. After his release from prison, Walker got an engineering degree, worked as a construction engineer, and founded Watts United Weekend – a program that organizes weekend meetings for hundreds of people, to strengthen the ties between law authorities, families, community members, children, and teens from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Walker writes about the sense of fear that has always lingered with him as a teenager in South Los Angeles, in the 1980s and 1990s: fear of not having enough to eat, of violence, of being shot, of the police. He recounts that every weekend, his respite was a few hours of labor in his aunt's yard, where, as a boy of eight or nine, he used to garden, weed, and plant. He writes about the sensation associated with the physical labor; the lemonade his aunt would prepare for him when the work was done; her being wheelchair-bound because of severe arthritis; and how she created a loving environment for him and his family, despite of the fact that she would not let him water the plants with the garden hose (the fun part, it should be noted), and how much he would have liked to have her with him and his daughter now. Between the hose, the text, the lurking violence in every aspect of life, and the family providing a safe, protected space, emerge the impossible contradictions embedded in each of these stories, in each of the objects that play a pivotal role in the lives of those who carry them.

- 1. Full disclosure: I became familiar with Levine's work through the community of Jewish artists I run in Los Angeles, The Institute for Jewish Creativity, as part of my work at the American Jewish University.

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