

Death Rattles: Soft Guns for a Dying Empire

By Abigail Dahlke and Charlotte Richardson-Deppe

Charlotte Richardson-Deppe's soft sculpture series *Death Rattles* consists of squishy constructions of limb-like tubes. They are sewn in a patchwork of colorful fabrics and hung on the wall on pegs. Viewers are invited to take them off the wall to hold them. In hand, they are light but not delicate: they invite squeezing manipulations that reveal their inner mechanisms of rattles and squeakers. These result in a whimsical and surprising sonic landscape of honks and tinkling bells, at odds with the referent form I have yet failed to describe: they are shaped in a likeness of guns.

I grew up in a staunchly pacifist household, and like anything illicit, guns and the imagery of warfare titillated me. In our current political moment, it is impossible to ignore guns. Most everyone holds an ideological stance on these weapons that often informs deeply-held political convictions. Our contemporary relation and proximity to weapons dictates our relation to life itself.

This essay addresses how Richardson-Deppe combines guns, toys, and bodies in their work, alternately embracing and rejecting the connotations and limitations of each referent form. Working from aesthetics to ergonomics and back again, *Death Rattles* is a prescient synthesis of the absurd and devastating political landscape today, as well as a gently-biting indictment of the neverending human preoccupation with tools and ideologies of violence.

Against Tactical Aesthetics

In October 2025, federal agents and armed masked men aligned with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) descended on Portland, OR. Seth Todd, a young Latinx protestor, donned an inflatable frog costume. He stepped forward. The police stepped back. He was pepper sprayed through the air vent in the costume. The next night, there were more inflatable frogs outside the ICE detention facility. Fascism depends on a projection of the aesthetics of power in order to maintain authority. These brave and buoyant frogs eschew the posturing inherent in aesthetic brinksmanship with each side trying to project images of strength, conformity, and authority. Rather, they draw on the visual language of humor and absurdity to contrast ICE's tactical aesthetics, making the power of the costumes undeniable.

As the line between war and peace dissolves, the aesthetic of the tactical has expanded in lockstep with the militarization of our police. Police ranks swell with federal agents from a byzantine jumble of three-letter agencies. The aesthetics of strength both drive and are driven by the expansion and entrenchment of fascism. Tactical aesthetics are meant to project an

impression of ruggedness, utility, and ultimately, of decisive force. Ornamentation, craftsmanship, and fashion are anathema to the tactical aesthetic. American consumers eagerly amass these rugged baubles, blurring the lines between our conceptions of effectiveness, utility, and violence.

These mass-produced items are effective at enforcing conformity. This aesthetic of preparedness for confrontation thus invites confrontation. To respond to this hardness with equally inflexible posturing is ultimately self-defeating. When one side wants confrontation, the only viable response is to show flexibility. This should not be confused with contrition, or even nonviolence. When the fascists march with bullet proof vests, show up with inflatable frogs.

Richardson-Deppe's *Death Rattles* directly challenges tactical aesthetics. Where tactical aesthetics demand conformity, Richardson-Deppe's "guns" are each unique. Where war requires fabric that stops bullets, these guns are hand sewn with clothes off our own (collective) backs. Where the military operator strains for deadly silence, these guns squeak, crackle, and rattle, giving away an operation before it even begins. This is the failure of your special equipment, the squeaky step on the stairs, the fumble, slip, and crunch: a crack in the shield.

In contrast to the olive and black of covert operations, these soft guns are brightly-colored, visually more aligned with an elementary school classroom than a boot camp. The *Death Rattles* guns reject precise, intended functionality. Instead, they invite the audience to hold them in many ways without prescribing a single mode of interaction. Their negative space is stretchy and moldable, ensuring the participant freedom to define the edges of their own body in relation to the gun. There is no right way to wield a soft gun.

Bodies Bodies Bodies

Not everything that is soft is benign; not everything that is pliant is welcoming; and not everything childish is innocuous.

While maintaining an inviting and playful toy-like facade, the sculptures of *Death Rattles* are also distinctly bodylike. Created from discarded clothing, the echoes of bodies are built into their structures, informing associations of limbs, organs, or genitalia.

These bent and patchworked sculptures evoke intestines or amputated limbs sutured together: the collected products of violence. Taken at face value, this can be evaluated as the cause and effect of a gun combined into one hybrid form. A gun composed of the gore which it might create.

However, we must further consider the interactive component of *Death Rattles*: the process of discovery that connects the viewer-participant, located in their own body, to the piece. This positions them as an active agent of the work.

Whereas the intestinal, organic quality of the soft guns evoke the very viscera a gun destroys—or creates—gore itself is dehumanized, inert, and irretrievably moving toward decay. These sculptures are reactive and responsive. The viewer-participant animates them through movement and sound. Thus they become a limb-like extension of the participant's own body.

Violence is not abstract, but visceral. So if these guns are bodies—if these tubes are guts—then this gun is an extension of the participant's hand. For marginalized communities who lack the privilege of distancing themselves from technologized violence, conflict is always personal. When we wield weapons, they are made of our own bodies.

In an era of drones, satellites, and long range cruise missiles, *Death Rattles* rejects the distancing effects of an increasingly technologized battlefield. The aforementioned technologies function to sanitize and abstract the actual grim aesthetics of war. The organic quality of these soft guns returns a direct embodied reality to the aesthetics of war, while masking and contrasting warlike and bodily aesthetics with playful color and form.

If nothing else, we have our bodies. In *Death Rattles*, we return to a collapse. Especially in the overwhelming precarity of our current political moment, we must be reminded that here and now, our bodies are weapons.

Connective Tissues and Inviting Ergonomics

A gun is something that separates. It demarcates power with violence, whether that violence is threatened or enacted.

The ergonomics of a gun help dictate its relation of power. There is an ergonomic end of a gun that is eminently holdable. On the opposite end is danger and threat. The user of a gun holds power, bolstered by tactical ergonomic choices built into the design of the gun. *Death Rattles* problematizes the classic ergonomics of a gun. Each sculpture is gun-like while defying every ergonomic functional design choice that a gun should encapsulate.

There is no correct way to hold Richardson-Deppe's guns. They are comfortable and forgiving, favoring flexibility. They are guns that invite interaction and exploration, guns that are "safe." None of the sculptures are symmetrical and there is not a clear orientation in which they are meant to be held. Should you cradle it like a teddy bear? Brandish it like a weapon? Hold it at

arms length like a carcass? The handler's manipulation is exploratory and humorous, inevitably resulting in frequent but unexpected clown-like eruptions of sound.

Ultimately, the “guns” of *Death Rattles* are guns that invite connection, rather than demarcate separation. They induce reflection that is not contained to individual minds, but is inherently collective, given how they puncture a gallery setting with honks and buzzes that ricochet around the space. Galleries are often expected to be sterile, serious, and quiet spaces for internal contemplation. Via tactile and sonic means, *Death Rattles* instead elicits shared experience and community interaction.

Material Resonance

Richardson-Deppe's soft guns combine the materials of mass production with the irregular construction of the handmade. These little bodies are swathed in cheap synthetic fabrics cut from thrifted clothing, and animated by mass-produced, Amazon-bulk-purchased plastic organs. The beating hearts and breathing lungs of the soft guns are squeakers, bells, and pull-string vibrating motors. This is material resonance—each chosen material, its history, connotations, and limitations—strengthens and supports the conceptual aims of this piece.

For \$6.99, you can have 50 squeakers for Dog Toys, 30mm Noise Maker Insert Replacement for Pet Supply Cat Toys delivered to your house. For \$7.49, 20 pcs Rattle Balls Inserts Rattle Box Repair Doll Noise Maker Insert Rattles Ball for Animal Puppy Doll Pet (24mm), and for \$8.59, 6 pcs DIY Movement Plush Toy Supply - DIY Accessory Plush Vibration Motor Kit Pull String Mechanism for Crafting Repairing Creative Toy Projects. This search engine optimization psychobabble means I can have whatever I want at my door in two days flat. This would not be possible in a world in which everyone was paid fairly for their work. Technological marvel is—simultaneously, necessarily—social depravity. Gun components, too, are marvels of material, labor, and technology revelations and degradations alike.

Also built into these soft guns is rejection and rescue. Thrifted clothing is rejected and discarded from society. Originally mass-market imports from overseas, these garments are now unwanted echoes of our bodies become too old, too thick, too thin, or too dirty. Donated to a thrift store, which is usually only a brief feel-good diversion from an untimely eternal grave polluting some other place—usually in the Global South—with microplastics and decay. Instead, they have been plucked for the higher purpose of art and given a new task. Every echo of their hybrid plastic past in factories that formed them in the likeness of our bodies is now utilized to consider bodies in a different way.

The guns' innards, too, are plastic. Poly-fil is a fluffy, shredded plastic product, used primarily to fill pillows and stuffed animals. Originally bought new, this polyfil has been recycled in and

out of multiple sculptures by Richardson-Deppe in the last few years. As it is stuffed into tubes, a fine layer of plastic dust sifts through the air and settles on all surrounding surfaces, permeating the world with more and more plastic. This environmental microdisaster, too, on the scale of one pair of hands, one home, represents the sickness at the heart of many of the issues named here: consumerism, capitalism, overproduction, and waste. Just like their violent older siblings—real, dangerous guns—these soft guns overflow with contradictions. Formed primarily of mass-produced, plastic materials, they will never rot.

Soft Guns for a Dying Empire

In times of strife, we grasp for what we can. Sometimes, it rattles or honks. Richardson-Deppe's work occupies an ambiguous space that is both menacing and whimsical, revealing a false dichotomy between play, toys, and fantasy; and action, equipment, and violence. When the aesthetics of martial domination and fantasies of violence take on a life of their own, fascists are playing soldiers on battlefields of their own invention. With *Death Rattles*, Richardson-Deppe invites a new paradigm of tactical contemplation.

We imagine the violent as serious and the whimsical as harmless. This obscures the reality of both. Embedded within the universal experience of playing soldiers is real violence and real whimsy. *Death Rattles* exposes the inextricability of violence from play, and of both violence and play from their deeply-lodged sites in our bodies and minds. Acknowledging the societal scope of this presence within us, Richardson-Deppe offers art that is not just to be seen, but also to be heard and touched: participants in *Death Rattles* handle these hybrid symbols in a collective experience of embodied contemplation.

Death Rattles elicits laughter from symbols of violence and play from dislodged limbs, turning tactical aesthetics on its head with primary colors and pliable forms. I want a future where guns cannot separate the oppressor from the oppressed, where rigid systems are made malleable and violent tools ineffectual. *Death Rattles* notices the violent contradictions of a collapsing empire, and offers them to you to hold, squish, and squeak.