Barbie Revolution

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Mia Hunt was arrested on September 21, 2009 at 1:39 in the morning of the parking lot of Glenbrooke Mall, along with three other women. Four others had fled the scene, and have since remained anonymous.

Mia Hunt was convicted of unlawful assembly, trespassing, criminal mischief and vandalism, and interference with official acts. For six months prior to the night of her arrest, Mia and the other revolutionaries met two or three times each week to devise their plans to break into the toy store of Glenbrooke Mall and liberate each one of the eighty-seven Barbie dolls. I was able to sit down with Mia, to uncover the planning and implementation of the Barbie Revolution, and how she has reacted to the overwhelming support in the aftermath of her arrest and conviction. What follows is the story of the Barbie Revolution, as told by Mia Hunt.

So Mia, how did the Barbie Revolution start?

I was watching Hugh Hefner’s bimbo dolls on some HBO special with my ex. They’re Barbie replicas, y’know? The super-long, platinum-blond hair. Their waxed bodies held up by those obnoxious five inch heels. They all talk in this shrill, screeching, ugh... you get the picture. So, yeah; we were sitting there and my ex takes a swig of his 1554 dark ale and says, “God, I’d love to nail one of those chics. Mia, you could totally pull that look off, right? Just dress yourself up like a god-damned Barbie”. Before I could get up to storm off, he slapped my ass. His deep chuckle let out a stale stench of alcohol. I locked myself in the bathroom and lingered in front of the mirror. My reflection was a sharpened image focused on my imperfections. My deep frown lines and forehead creases, the grey circles under my eyes, the way my boobs hung loosely and in opposite directions under my pale tank-top. Suddenly, everything seemed to click for me. Why I had always dated douche bags, why women are mutilating their bodies to fit into this perfect mold crafted for us by society... and I realized it all started with Barbie. I have a five year old niece. Cutest little shit around. My brother buys her god-awful amounts of Barbie dolls. Not to mention every accessory: the miniature oversized handbag, clear and sparkly high heels, heart-shaped sunglasses; you name it, Barbie has it. And so does Anna. Little Anna gets replica jean jacket and mini-skirt.
outfits, straw-colored wedges, and blue eye shadow and pink lipstick. She is five years old. I'm surprised my sister-in-law hasn't exploited the poor girl on that reality show 'Toddlers in Tiaras.' But yeah... that's how this started. The Barbie doll can no longer be the role model for young girls who grow up to have no self-esteem and become ego-service for men. I realized something had to be done.

So, you began recruiting?
Hell yes! I knew I couldn't pull this off on my own. I phoned up my best friend Sasha and we got together and started brainstorming the best way to make some sort of a public demonstration. Something big. Something people wouldn't forget. And, mostly, we wanted the message to go straight to little girls; they're the ones fueling the Barbie industry. After a couple weeks of dumb ideas and an empty bottle of So-Co, at three in the morning on a Thursday, I hear what sounds like someone breaking my door down. It was Sasha. She barreled in, out of breath, and was holding a discarded Barbie doll. The hair was chopped real short and colored blue. Little freckles had been dotted on her cheeks and one of those fake unicorn tattoos from a fifty cent machine had been put on her stomach. Sasha didn't even have to say anything. I knew this is what we would do. We'd make Barbie real. We'd liberate her from her perfection. We'd let little girls know it okay to have freckles, shaved heads, birth marks, or small breasts.

What did the planning process look like once you began meeting?
We usually had pizza or take-out and beer. Why waste time cooking supper when you're planning a revolution? Sasha passed around the Barbie we had re-named Emma... [Emma?]
After Emma Goldman. She's Sasha's favorite feminist anarchist, and her Barbie sort of became the mascot of our Revolution. Anyway, we passed her around and started brainstorming ideas for liberating other Barbie dolls from their perfection. We got this huge flip-pad. I was the first to liberate a Barbie in my image. Using a "Pretty in Pink Prom Barbie" I immediately tossed her shoulder-pad ball gown aside. I chopped her hair off to her ears and dyed her hair jet black. I used some old tanning bronzer on her skin 'til it was rich, and multidimensional in tone. Using Emma's unicorn tattoo as inspiration, I bought some black tribal tattoos from the fifty cent machine at Pizza Hunt and made a tattoo sleeve on the Barbie's arm. I dressed her up in J.I. Joe combat boot and an indigo silk nightie,
borrowed from another Barbie. Some women did sketches at first, and then they began practicing on Barbies brought in from when they were kids. When those were used up, we started practicing on ones we bought from the Salvation Army or Goodwill.

What other ways did you and the women liberate Barbie?

We each came up with different types of “imperfections” women have and figured out how to put those on Barbie. For example, for hair, we brought in mini bottles of dyes and paints of purple, teal, black, red, orange, grey and started dying and cutting and shaving hair. The hair we cut and shaved off we snipped up into little bits to use to attach the under Barbie’s arms and on her pubic bone and legs. We used clear adhesive glue for that. For skin imperfections, we drew on freckles, moles, birthmarks, and scars. One woman decided she wanted to make some of the Barbies different skin tones. She used different bronzing sprays, sort of like I did, but she began combining different layers of shading to get black, brown, olive, and any shade in between. Oh yeah, and the boobs. Those disproportionate plastic bumps needed to be filed down. There’s a girl in our group, Amina, who can file a pair of Barbie boobs down in thirty seconds. We filed them down to different shapes and sizes. Some were pointy; sometimes we made one bigger than the other, sometimes we filed them down completely. It made the night of our revolution go so much faster when Amina was in charge of filing duty.

Tell me about that night.

Well, the girls and I stuffed black backpacks with our “tool kits”, and headed out at different times to go to the mall and wander around ‘til closing. We luckily recruited one of the girls who worked at the toy store to be part of our team. The mall closed at eight, and we had all hidden in various bathrooms and janitors’ closets. Luckily, none of us was caught. For a couple months we had been tracking the routine of the security guard. A fresh-out-of-high school punk on a power-trip; who was easily followed around by Tiffany, the girl seventeen year old drill team captain who worked at the toy store. After closing up the shop, and meeting me in the bathroom to hand off the keys, she requested the kid to escort her to her car. She led him all the way across the parking lot to her car, where she had slashed her own tire before walking into work that afternoon. Claiming she had no idea how to change a tire, she kept the guard busy by making him change the tire.

Meanwhile, inside, we got a mass text from Tiffany at 8:13pm
that said “do it to it bitchez!” It was hilarious to see us with our tool kits, sneaking around from each corner of the mall; it kind of played out like a low-budget action film as I watched our mismatched group of revolutionary women sneak over to meet me at the gate. I opened the gate with the key Tiffany had passed off to me just a few minutes before. We pulled the creaking metal gate closed behind us, and worked in the dark, apart from the head lights we had strapped around our foreheads. I remember saying, “Alright Barbie Revolutionaries! Let's 'do it to it' and liberate these dolls!” We formed our assembly line.

Leading the line was Bev, a thin, tan woman with long jet black hair and deep brown eyes. She was in her early forties, and in between factory jobs. She unpackaged the Barbies by ripping apart the top of the cardboard box and pulling out the plastic she was twisty-tied into. Bev united each twisty and pulled Barbie out and tossed her to the next woman. While Barbie moved down the line, Bev emptied out the other contents of each box; blinding pink sun dresses, or silky revealing evening gowns that hung to the tips of Barbies pointed toes, endless pairs of shoes like Converse sneakers, daring purple peep-toed stilettos (but never black lace up combat boots), and threw them all into giant black Force Flex garbage bag and set the box aside for replacement.

Joyce, a robust and eccentric woman in her mid-sixties, still capable of jogging for short distances even with mild arthritis, was in charge of skillfully removing Barbie's outfits and tossing them into the same garbage bag Bev was dumping unnecessary accessories into. Once Barbie had been stripped of her assigned identity, we gave her a new one. We let our imaginations work through Barbie; she spoke to each of us. Each Barbie had some deep and mysterious idiosyncrasies longing to be realized from behind the carbon copy plastic mold.

Next was Kara, a twenty-four year old hair stylist, was in charge of giving Barbie a new do. Pouring different colored cheap hair dyes of black, purple, fuchsia, auburn, gray, she transformed the Blonde bombshell. She shaved many of their heads as well; plastic Sinead O'Conner look-a-likes. Apart from cutting, coloring or removing hair, Kara also had little Ziploc bags full of dyed Barbie hair from all our practicing. She had chopped up all the hair she cut off from other Barbie dolls and used that hair for the Barbies in our assembly line. She took quick drying, clear adhesive and brushed the glue under Barbie's armpits, over her pubic bone and down her legs. She then dipped the Barbie in hair that corresponded, or contrasted, to the hair on her head.

Kara handed the hair-full Barbie to Harmony, a new age hippie
and high school dropout, also close friend of Tiffany's was in charge of skin detail. Her position in the assembly line smelled like a mixture of patchouli and lemongrass essential oils she used for perfume, and the spray-on bronzer and paints that were used on Barbie to create different shades of skin, from the palest ivory to rich olives, to luxurious ebony. She also used eye liner pencils of different hues to place birthmarks, freckles, moles, or other blemishes on the dolls.

Na'ima and Amina are fourteen year old twins. We tried to recruit their mom, but she was too caught up in her own subversive activism for anti-globalization in response to the world trade center's next conference, that she suggested her daughters take her place. Na'ima held the Barbies in front of a fan to dry as they were finished and passed from Harmony to her, while Amina got ready to file down those boobs. Amina was our quickest filer, completely filing off Barbie's over-sized, nipple-less boobs in thirty seconds; she attributed her skill to piano lessons, and the constant practice of using her fingers swiftly and gracefully to create music; now she manipulated a thin metal file to shave down Barbie's boobs to correctly correspond with her proportions.

Sasha, my over-educated bestie and Women's Studies lecturer at the University, was in charge of fitting Barbie with pre-sewn body suits (mostly sewn ahead of time by Joyce) to alter her body shape to resemble the curves of real women. These body suits were also sewn onto new outfits. These included baggy pants and tank-tops, turtle necks and boot cut cords, leggings and over-sized sweaters, football jerseys, cut off shorts, combat boots and lace tops. Others we left completely naked for the entire world to see Barbie's new natural beauty. Full-figured Barbie, pear-shaped Barbie, muffin-top Barbie... the body types we fitted her with were endless. We also created a few transgender, gender-neutral, or queer-identified Barbies. Not every human identifies as either a male or a female; we Barbie Revolutionaries see gender as a fluid identity, shifting on a continuum, and created through the process of socialization and not some preordained fate.

Finally, the Barbies got to me, and I re-packaged them into the boxes I collected from Bev's pile. We thought things were going great; we had finished on schedule, and had dropped the Barbie's back into their packages. We hot glue gunned the packages shut (they had been plugged into outlets and heating up the entire time we worked). After we had replaced each liberated Barbie back onto their shelf, we began packing up our tool kits. Tiffany sent out an unexpected mass text at exactly 9:27pm.

"hez comin in! stay in store, will text l8tr". And we waited. Thirty minutes went by, and we had seen the security kid pass once doing his
rounds. We sunk lower onto the floor, behind the closed gate, our head lamps turned off. How he didn't smell the bronzer, the paint, the acidy stench of adhesive and hair dye, lemongrass patchouli and the sweat of our hard work, that had been blown across the mall by Na'ima's fan I have no idea. I waited until he was out of sight and sent a text to Tiffany.

"WTF is up? Where r u? Wht happnd?!" Seven, eight, nine minutes went by. The girls and I were beginning to get anxious. The light from my iPhone suddenly illuminated my face and this picture of Tiffany with a naked Barbie doll propped up on her head lit up behind her text that read "got tire changed, had to split, get out fast!". I sat there, paralyzed. I didn't know what had happened, but I didn't have time to ask. For whatever reason, Tiffany had left and was not coming back. All the women were staring at me and after what felt like another ten minutes Harmony said "She split, didn't she? Now what?" We all knew Tiffany was the person in our group who was the least committed but had the biggest responsibility.

"We wait here until we can get a good idea of how often the guard does his rounds. We time them out, then after three or four times, we open the gate and make a run for the emergency exit". The weight of the situation and the uncertainty of these women's futures was pressing my belly into the cold tile floor of that toy store. We waited for another three anxious, painful hours, and the guard hadn't walked by. I decided we go for it. There was no telling when or if he would ever come by again. I made sure none of us had left anything behind and then army-crawled up to the gate and checked out the mall. No sign of him. I readjusted my backpack and squatting, curled my fingers around the metal links and lifted the gate from the inside. Screeching, blaring, deafening cries came from all sides as I hoisted the gate above my head. I didn't know it then but Tiffany had warned to get out fast because after midnight the alarm system was activated if any gates were opened within the mall. Bev and Sasha grabbed Joyce (she was a bit arthritic) and helped hobble her out in a slow jog towards the exit door, which was only a few stores down and to the left. The younger girls had wanted to stay and help me close the gate, but I urged them on. I watched as the last of the women turned the corner to go out the exit. I didn't want anyone to be left behind. I guess I had this leader mentality, y' know? Well, I heard the mall cop's black boots beating steadily onto the tile and I turned to see him running from Younkers, past Coach House Gifts, and I finally got the gate shut and started running towards the exit right as he passed Hot Topic. I busted my way out the exit doors and ran straight into three squad cars and guns pointed at my head lamp. Apparently, they knew one more person was running to the exit;
the security guard had radioed the information out to them. He said I was potentially ‘armed and dangerous’. As I lifted my hands above my head and dropped to my knees, I felt the cool, cutting metal of the cuffs link my hands behind my back.

What were you thinking when you got arrested?

Where are my girls? Are they okay, did they make it out safely? I was running through all these thoughts in my head and simultaneously throwing my hands in the hair and dropping to my knees. As they were rambling on about my rights, I saw the twins smiling and waving their cuffed hands through the window (their mom was so proud). It was the first time they had protested something they believed in, and had been arrested for unlawful assembly and conspiracy. Harmony was cuffed and getting frisked, leaning against the second car, grinning. It looked like Bev, Sasha, and Joyce had gotten away, but I had no idea where they had run to, especially with Joyce’s knees.

We were taken to jail and charged with a bunch of shit, and eventually the twin’s were released when their mom paid for their bond; she paid for Harmony’s too. None of us told the cops what we did inside the mall. We wanted to wait until the public found out for themselves. I got to spend the night in jail, and I’ve pretty much been here since the trial.

The public has had some pretty strong reactions to your revolution. Here is a statement from Mattel:

“The self-labeled ‘Barbie Revolutionary’ Mia Hunt has committed an act of domestic terrorism against the American way of life. We cannot imagine the trauma little girls have been facing, walking into their favorite toy store, expecting to take home Barbie as they have known and loved her for nearly a century; only to find a Barbie that was mutilated and disfigured. We regret that this terrible act of violence occurred, and have ordered the deformed Barbies to be disposed of, and have restocked the store. Now, little girls shopping at the toy store of Glenbrooke Mall will have the real Barbie back!”

What is your reaction to this statement? Do you believe you are a domestic terrorist?

I would not label myself as a ‘domestic terrorist’; it seems a bit explosive. I prefer the label “revolutionary”. That’s what we were trying to do. Revolutionize the way American’s think about beauty and through an unlawful act we captured the public’s attention. One that spoke directly to
young girls. Mattel is a corporation interested in protecting their profit, not the "American way of life". What is the American way of life anyway? You can't base this fictional American ideal on the white, middle class, heterosexual, Christian; you end up with a mythical norm that is exploited by the media as a way to assure fearful white people their beloved country isn't being taken over by diversity.

Barbie to me embodied this mythic norm and an unrealistic, unattainable standard of beauty. Marketed to little girls, Barbie has always been a training tool for their exposure to and acceptance of anorexic models donning Versace and stumbling down the runway in six inch heels, and Hugh Hefner's blonde boob jobs that speak, only to pander to men's interests. In my mind, Mattel is the domestic terrorist.

In contrast to Mattel's statement, I wanted to conclude the interview with some fan mail...can you share with us what some of the women and girls saying?

Oh yes! The fan mail has been amazing. Turns out, a bunch of people raided the trash bags to get their hands on our liberated Barbies. People are sending in pictures with them, and even beginning to create their own. I got a letter from an eight year old girl, who had gotten a hold of one of our Barbies. Let me read a part of it here:

"Miss Mia, my mom gave me a Barbie you made. She has lots of freckles all over her face and arms, and a big belly. I got lots of freckles too, and my belly is a little bigger than some of the other girls' bellies. The other girls at school call me fat freckle-face. One time, I asked them why they said those things to me and they said, 'Cuz Barbie is skinny and she doesn't have freckles; if you don't look like her you can't be in our club!' Those girls didn't look like Barbie either! But, when I got my Barbie, I was so happy there was a doll who looked just like me. I took her to school and I showed her to the other girls and said 'There is too a Barbie who has freckles and she has a big belly too, and we're beautiful!' My mom and I started making Barbies like yours for other girls in our town. Thanks Miss Mia for making a Barbie doll just for me! Love, Jenny."

Other letters that stuck out to me included those from a college girl who had survived an eating disorder and remade her Barbie into her own new and healthy image, a woman who decided not to get implants after she took one of the small breasted Barbies from the mall's trash bin, women who have stopped waxing their body hair, and transgendered people who have bought Barbies or Ken dolls to go through their transformations with
them, by changing the dolls simultaneously as they go through their own changes.

The support has been overwhelming. There is a trend developing. More and more people are beginning to salvage old Barbies and liberate those dolls to revolutionize the way beauty has been conceptualized and marketed to children. I plan to make a book out of all the letters and pictures I get in jail; I haven't got anything else to do, so keep them coming!

Mattel has no idea the amount of people that have been craving for a new way to define beauty. Imperfection is beautiful. The revolution that is growing is one that embraces imperfection, revels in diversity, and challenges us to linger over our reflections in the mirror; to look at the wrinkles, the moles, the sagging breasts, the crooked teeth, the thick thighs, the shaved head, and to say to ourselves: “Today, society will not dictate how I feel about myself. Not today, not tomorrow, or the day after that. I am beautiful because I choose to love who I am, not who I am told I should be”.