

This is not a bomb – matériel culture and the arms trade

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Figure 1: Bomb stress-ball. Copyright: Ricky Adam. Reproduced with kind permission.



Figure 2: Grenade stress-ball. Copyright: Ricky Adam. Reproduced with kind permission.



Figure 3: 'Welcome to Hell' sweet. Copyright: Ricky Adam. Reproduced with kind permission.



Figure 4: Tank. Copyright: Ricky Adam. Reproduced with kind permission.

A general-purpose bomb sits by the reception desk leaving a slight indentation in the carpet. Next to it are three display cases, each mounted on a platform of blue light. The first has a selection of medium calibre ammunition, the shells arranged in ascending height with different coloured tips – yellow, mimosa, turquoise, and indigo, with contrasting stripes. The second holds tank shells; the third, a single shining mortar. A rep notices I am looking and holds out a small bomb. He squeezes it and explains it is a stress-ball.

This chapter concerns a selection of gifts that I have collected from arms fairs, trade shows for military equipment in London, Paris, and Abu Dhabi. They include stress-balls in the shape of bombs, mortars, and grenades; tanks made of foam rubber; a facsimile ammunition shell, hollow with an orifice so it can be used as a whistle; condoms; and toffees. I will suggest that the gifts reflect the way that weapons are regarded in the arms industry. The stress-ball does not resemble a contemporary bomb. A black sphere with a string fuse, it evokes a cartoon idea of a bomb. It is a bomb imagined as a sign. Saussure (2013) argued that signs have shifting meanings. In an arms fair, bombs also have shifting meanings. They are presented as seductive objects, a focus for personal and state power, international co-operation, defence, and jobs. In short, weapons are treated in the arms industry as commodities. It was Marx's (1867) insight that the 'use value' of a commodity is eclipsed by its 'exchange value'. A site of changing values and meanings, a commodity has a similar status to a semiotic sign. As Camus put it, 'The society of merchants can be defined as a society in which things disappear in favour of signs' (2018: 7). The stress ball is made from soft foam plastic, a material with shape-shifting properties resembling the changing meanings of weapons in the arms industry. Its function as a gift conveys the status of the bombs as commodities, objects of exchange. But of course, weapons are not simply commodities, or signs. A bomb may be promoted as a focus of fantasies and desire, but when it is used, it has devastating material effects that are not open to interpretation.

The chapter explores what happens when the gifts are removed from the spaces of the arms trade and shown, instead, in spaces critical of that industry. For instance, I showed the stress-balls, condom and sweet in *The Etiquette of the Arms Trade*, Bradford Peace Museum exhibition, April 2018 – March 2019. What happens to the meanings of these objects when displayed on plinths, or indeed as photographs in this book? In an arms fair, the gifts take part in a disavowal of the material properties of weapons. Is it possible to subvert this function, by using them to reveal processes of commodification in the arms industry? Or do the gifts continue to seduce viewers?

Materials are central to this discussion. The influence of militarized capitalism on materials is evident in the etymology of the word. Borrowed from the old French *matériel* and the Latin *materialis* in the early 14th century, 'material' was originally used as an adjective to describe the real, ordinary and earthly, and by the late 14th century as a noun to describe the components from which things are made. This sense developed a more specialized meaning in the early 19th century when *matériel* was borrowed from the French again and used, this time with the original spelling, to describe military equipment. This new usage coincided with the emergence of industrialization, and the mass-production of armaments. It is as if, as the world was increasingly plundered and fought over, the etymological source-word of material had to be retrieved and redefined as the stuff of military campaigns. Now, in globalized capitalism, *matériel* has been reimagined again as a commodity linked to a share price. The chapter title

makes a play on these meanings, referring both to the culture of the arms industry, and to the study of materials and things.

The chapter begins with a discussion of ‘the material turn’, a new focus on materiality in the arts and humanities, in reaction to the postmodern emphasis on signs and signification. In particular, I will use Karen Barad’s (2003) performative understanding of meaning and materials, to argue that the gifts enact the deceptions of the arms trade. The duplicity of the arms trade raises problems for empirical approaches, so I will then discuss methods, particularly the influence of Dada on the project. This is followed by a description of the gifts in the spaces of the arms trade and, finally, in spaces critical of war.

Material culture and the Material Turn

It is not only in arms fairs that things are presented as signs. Academic discourse has focused on the social construction of meaning at the expense of the material properties of things since the 1980s in semiotics, post modernism, post structuralism. Academic work does not hover outside economics and politics, but is intertwined within it. Fredric Jameson described postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, and linked it to ‘a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world’ (1991: 5). The idea that meaning is entirely socially constructed colludes in the disavowal of materials at the heart of militarized capitalism. As Jane Bennett puts it in *Vibrant Matter* (2010): ‘The image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption’ (p. ix). This is not to discount social constructivist approaches. As with most cultural developments, they can be understood as dialectical with the potential to be both radical and reactionary. The idea that meaning is socially constructed has been progressive in acknowledging marginalized voices and experiences, and yet problematic in ignoring nonhuman material agency, and in the potential for relativism where any account is given as much credence as the next.

In response, in what has become known as ‘the material turn’, a number of academics and artists have highlighted the agency of materials and things. An idealized realism runs through much of this work, with materials described as glowing with authenticity outside human structures of meaning. Bennett (2010) challenges ‘the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute or inert’ (p. vii), and emphasizes instead its ‘vibrant materiality’ (p. viii). As an example, she describes a set of objects - a glove, pollen, rat, bottle cap and stick that she encountered in the street and initially interpreted as debris, until they broke through her definition and ‘started to shimmer and spark’ (2010: 5). She explains ‘In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics’ (2010: 5). The adjectives ‘vibrant’, ‘vivid’, ‘shimmer and spark’ suggest light, and connotations of truth. The archaeologist, Bjørnar Olsen also invests things with authenticity. Olsen argues that we need to understand ‘things in themselves’ (2010: 172). He acknowledges that things are often part of signifying systems, but suggests we explore their role beyond this. He asks ‘What is their *integrity* so to speak?’ And he continues, ‘things are not words, nor are they primarily signs to be read or products ready to be consumed or ‘sublated’. Things possess their own nonverbal qualities and are involved in their own material and historical processes that cannot be disclosed unless we explore their integrity qua things’ (2010: 172). But, do things always have ‘integrity’?

In contrast, Karen Barad argues that meaning and materials are entangled: ‘The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated’ (2003, 822). She uses the work of the physicist Niels Bohr to argue for a performative understanding of meaning that incorporates the human and non human, the social and scientific, materiality and discourse (2003: 808). She writes, ‘Meaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility’ (2003: 821). Barad challenges the Cartesian distinction between the knower and the known, but her concept of meaning is not so free-flowing as to leave out issues of responsibility. What is unusual in her account is that she maintains the idea of meaning as a performance, alongside the possibility of objectivity. She writes, ‘what is important about casual intra-actions is that marks are left on bodies. Objectivity means being accountable to marks on bodies’ (2003: 824). Barad is referring here to marks made as part of measurement, however her remarks are equally applicable to the impact of weapons. If objectivity is possible in relation to ‘marks on bodies’, then, so too is deception. If matter and meaning are entangled in ‘an ongoing performance of the world’ (2003: 821), it is worth remembering that some performances are based on pretence. Borne out of the international arms trade, the gifts enact the capitalist disavowal of the material effects of weapons, of ‘marks on bodies’. Objects may not be reducible to signs, but the stress-ball bomb masquerades as such. This raises a problem: how to research something that is always dissembling?

Dada as a method

This chapter is based on an art project - for the past ten years I have visited arms fairs by dressing up as a security consultant. The method is influenced by Dada, an art movement formed in 1916 in opposition to WW1, and, more particularly, the culture that validated the war. As such, Dada methods remain relevant.

In the introduction to *The Global Arms Trade: A Handbook* (2010) Andrew Tan notes a curious lack of research into the arms trade. He says that whereas there are important primary sources, there is little secondary analysis of the industry. He links this to a shift to post-positivist approaches in security studies, and argues that ‘a more positivist analysis’ is needed to ‘provide a better description of the current phenomenon that is the arms trade’ (2010: 6). But perhaps the opposite is the case. Perhaps, the arms trade is under-researched because it slips out of view of academic methods, both positivist and post-positivist. The handbook contains an invaluable analysis of global trends in arms expenditure, exports, and procurement, but whether this fully describes the ‘current phenomenon that is the arms trade’ (Tan, 2010: 6) is another matter.

What many of the chapters show is the extent to which the globalized arms trade defies reason. Elisabeth Sköns (2010: 237) explains that at the end of the Cold War, it was widely expected that the American and European arms industries would shrink as part of a ‘peace dividend’, with military production converting to civilian uses. Instead, the arms industry went through a process of globalization with defence companies merging into multinationals, diversifying into security, and focusing on international sales including to repressive regimes and regions of conflict. The arms industry receives significant support from Western governments despite the international focus of sales, with high military spending in the US, and subsidies and permissive export licences in the UK. Sam Perlo-Freeman (2010) suggests that this makes little economic sense. The globalized arms industry contributes relatively little to UK jobs or the economy in comparison to the subsidies it receives. He accounts for government support in terms of the

status of military production, and the influence of the ‘military industrial complex’ (MIC), a network of arms manufacturers, politicians and the military (Perlo-Freeman, 2010: 261). This is a more globalized version of the military industrial complex than the network Eisenhower described. Since 1961 political influence has concentrated into the hands of fewer, larger arms corporations extending across national boundaries. Dunne and Sköns suggest, ‘post-war restructuring may well have left an MIC that is just as pervasive and powerful, more varied, more internationally linked and less visible’ (2010: 291). The ‘pervasive and powerful, more varied’ networks of influence Dunne and Sköns describe are sensuous rather than reasoned; they are enacted and felt as the seductions and threats of power, as bonds of loyalty, and a desire for status. They are authorised with a suit and lanyard, acknowledged with a handshake, sealed with a drink and complementary gift. These practices are aesthetic in the Greek sense of aesthesis, perceived with the senses and feeling rather than the intellect. So, they remain always slightly out of sight, ‘less visible’ (2010: 291) to reason.

Here, Dada is useful. Dada developed a range of aesthetic methods to strip back the polite veneer of a corrupt culture. Dada was critical of the idea that art should be separate from society, concerned only with itself. As George Grosz put it, ‘This art mused upon cubes and the Gothic period while military leaders painted in blood’ (cited in Ades, 2006: 310). In contrast, Dada used art as a critical tool. Hugo Ball, one of the founders of Dada, wrote, ‘It can probably be said that for us art is not an end in itself – more pure naïveté is necessary for that – but it is an opportunity for true perception and criticism of the times we are living in’ (1996: 58).

Dada was characterised by an emphasis on satire, parody, and performance. Marcel Duchamp satirised rituals of art by exhibiting everyday objects or ‘Readymades’ on gallery plinths. The Readymade has since become an established method in art and no longer challenges gallery etiquette; however, the practice of placing an object on a plinth continues to offer a way of focussing attention on an item that might otherwise be overlooked.

Dada also satirised the dress, gestures and postures of respectable culture. George Grosz walked through Berlin dressed as Dada Death with a formal coat, cane, and a skull mask; Hugo Ball recited poetry while wearing exaggerated outfits, and waving flags. The emphasis on satire suggested that politics is far from logical, while the use of performance demonstrated that politics is played out through the body as much as in words. Ball wrote, ‘the only thing left is the joke and the bloody pose’ (1996: 66). For Ball, Dada was based on dissembling, ‘The Dadaist ... welcomes any kind of mask. Any game of hide-and-seek, with its inherent power to deceive’ (1996: 65). The emphasis on masks and hiding in Dada, highlighted the pretensions of wider society. The next section describes my attempt to reveal the deceptions of the arms industry by masquerading as an arms trader. In the final section, I return to the Readymade, using gallery plinths to draw attention to the gifts.

Meeting the military-industrial-complex

The military-industrial-complex meets regularly, if discreetly, at arms fairs, trade shows for military equipment. Emerging from the globalisation of the defence industry, arms fairs provide opportunities for transnational networking. The world’s largest fair, the Defence Security Exhibition International (DSEI), takes place every two years in London. It was established in 1998, and now hosts over 1,660 exhibitors from 40 countries, with around 34,000 visitors (DSEI, 2019). But, in spite of its scale, the event has a sense of exclusive membership. It is closed to the general public, and surrounded by police and security guards. Inside, visitors share codes of

dress and behaviour. I act the part by wearing a suit, formal shoes, and fake pearls. I stroll up and down the aisles gazing at equipment, and leaf through catalogues. The pretence is rewarded with gifts; as I walk around the stalls I am offered small sandwiches, a glass of champagne, a rubber tank. The gifts affirm my membership of the event. Lewis Hyde suggests, 'gifts tend to be an economy of small groups, of extended families, small villages, close-knit communities, brotherhoods and, of course, of tribes' (2007: p. xxi). In return, I find myself nodding and smiling. Whatever misgivings lurk beneath the surface, no one shows them, including me.

Meanwhile, security cameras scan the hall for unusual behaviour. Critical reactions are shut out.¹ The reason that this is necessary is perhaps because the display of weapons in an arms fair is so strange. Separated from the defence needs of any one country, missiles, bombs and tanks are presented as products. And, as Karl Marx (1867) explained, commodities are capricious, 'as soon as it steps out as a commodity, it metamorphoses itself into a sensually supersensual thing. It does not only stand with its feet on the ground, but it confronts all other commodities on its head, and develops out of its wooden head caprices which are much more wondrous than if it all of a sudden began to dance.'

At DSEI weapons are presented as 'supersensual' things. Tank shells are displayed on plinths for viewing. Hand grenades are cut open and dramatically lit to show the precision of design and engineering. CS gas cannisters are promoted as 'moral effect grenades.' A young woman in a short skirt leans against a tank, while businessmen take selfies alongside her. A Brimstone missile is suspended against an image of the London skyline under changing coloured lights. The promotional literature calls it, 'the most accurate precision strike missile on the market. When you have to hit a target, stay within budget and don't have time to waste, Brimstone is your answer' (MBDA, 2017). The Brimstone missile is currently being used by Saudi Arabia in airstrikes on Yemen, yet here, ballistics is presented as the key to efficiency in business. A wine reception is held around a case of bullets, the glasses leaving red stains on the display glass, while hostesses offer refills. On a nearby stand 'Team UK' offers advice on export licenses with the slogans, 'government and industry working together' and 'international co-operation and partnerships'. Weapons are presented as facilitating success, power and collaboration.

The bomb-shaped stress-ball that is not a bomb embodies these shifting meanings. Soft and pliable, it is first and foremost a gift, a token of contacts and good will. Its secondary function as a stress-ball points to the challenges of business, flattering the hand that squeezes it that they are equal to the task. Other gifts suggest additional meanings. A gas mask manufacturer gives away condoms with the pun, 'the ultimate protection'. Here, military equipment is presented as a sign of patriarchal virility, reflecting the ways that weapons are sexualized in arms fairs, while punning on the claim that weapons offer 'defence'. Bofors, a subsidiary of BAE Systems, offers toffees with the slogan 'welcome to hell' as part of a promotion for a weapons testing facility in Sweden. The typeface mimics the military stenciling traditionally used on boxes of explosives, while the caption echoes computer games where hell is a byword for entertainment. On a video screen, a military vehicle explodes alongside the slogan, 'hell for your product, heaven for your investment'. The impact of weapons outside the test-site is never shown.

¹ I have twice been asked to leave DSEI when security guards saw through my cover, and then had to change my name and passport to get in again. A colleague was asked to leave because he took a sympathetic interest in a protest at the door.

The Bofors slogan suggests that weapons are significant in the arms industry primarily as ‘your investment’. This was evident at the 2018 AGM of BAE Systems when the chair, Roger Carr, welcomed investors with news about the share price, ‘There is no doubt that 2017 was a successful year as reflected in our sales, profits and cash flow’ (Carr, 2018). The year was ‘successful’ partly due to sales to Saudi Arabia during the war in Yemen. Saudi-led airstrikes have destroyed civilian sites including infrastructure for water, health care, food and transport (Mundy, 2018). Monitors allege that weapons and aircraft produced by BAE Systems have been involved in some of these attacks (Dearden, 2018). But, when questioned about this, Carr explained, ‘We separate ourselves from the war itself... we’re not involved in any part of prosecuting, planning or executing the war.’ He continued that the company provides equipment, servicing, maintenance and training but ‘the use of that equipment is for others’ (Dearden, 2018). Here, Carr deftly separates the meaning of weapons as products, from their use and material impact on people, homes, and communities.

Critical Spaces

I have shown the gifts in several exhibitions critical of war: *Art the Arms Fair*, Maverick Project Space, 2019; *The Etiquette of the Arms Trade*, The Bradford Peace Museum, 2018- 2019; *And This Too*, Platform Gallery, Belfast, 2017; and *Shock and Awe*, Royal West Academy, Bristol, 2014. In each case, the gifts were shown on plinths behind glass or perspex, with a label explaining where they had come from. Clearly there are many factors influencing the meaning of the gifts in these settings, including the historical and social context of each gallery, and the other work on show. However, I want to focus on the specific impact of removing the gifts from their original context in arms fairs, and placing them on a plinth in a gallery or museum.

The method draws on the tradition of the Dada ‘Readymade’, as referred to earlier. Perhaps the most notorious example is Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, a urinal signed with the pseudonym R. Mutt and submitted to the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. The submission was refused, lost, and then reproduced as a series of replicas in the 1950s and 60s that are now displayed on plinths in major galleries around the world. The disjuncture between the gallery setting and the apparently pedestrian object on display, along with the history of its refusal and subsequent celebration, raises questions about art, aesthetics and value. And there is something else. In addition to presenting a urinal as art, the installation shows how art works by removing an object from its usual location, and interrupting its everyday function. Confronted with a urinal that can’t be used, the viewer perceives the object differently, noticing a form with particular qualities, as well as being confronted by their own likely feelings of unease at its displacement.

Tyson Lewis argues that art opens up a space where objects can address us. He suggests that things ‘have pedagogical power’ (2018: 123) that is often overlooked in everyday life. Guided by phenomenology, he suggests that our perception of a thing is framed by our habitual uses of it. ‘Normal everyday perception is structurally set up in a way to censor any attentiveness to such thing-power’ (Lewis, 2018: 126). But, if we interrupt habitual processes of perception, we can ‘become attentive to the call of things’ (Lewis, 2018: 127). Lewis suggests that art offers this kind of disruption. His examples are paintings, however the simple act of placing an object on a plinth interrupts its usual function. Encountered on a pedestal, the urinal cannot be understood through habitual use. A museum setting also implies that an exhibit should be encountered in a particular way. Helen Rees Leahy (2012) describes a set of expectations that developed about visitors’ behavior in museums in the mid-19th century - walking at a certain pace, viewing artefacts from a particular distance, not touching, talking in hushed tones - all of

which contributes to the presentation of exhibits as objects of contemplation. Similar expectations have arisen in relation to galleries.

Since Duchamp many artists have used the physical restrictions and cultural expectations of museums to present certain objects for consideration. In *Nonoq: Flat Out and Bluesome* the artists Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson (2006) identified every taxidermied polar bear in the UK, then exhibited ten of the specimens at Spike Island, Bristol, each in an individual glass case. In contrast to Duchamp's *Fountain*, the exhibits were not signed. They were not presented as art objects; rather the art space was used to turn scrutiny on the artefacts. The repetition of bears accentuated the awkwardness of their lifelessly lifelike poses, drawing attention to the disjuncture between the stuffed animals and their increasingly endangered living counterparts. Like a plinth, the glass cases prohibited any sensuous engagement with the bears except through observation.

Edwards, Gosden and Phillips are critical of the emphasis on vision in museums, linking this to 'pervasive colonial legacies' (2006: 1). Western museums have traditionally taken artefacts from their original cultures, and displayed them behind glass, positioning both the artefact and its culture as exotic objects of study. This has led to the development of 'sensory museology' where sensuous engagement is encouraged in an attempt to retrieve something of an object's original function (Howes, 2014: 261). In contrast, *Nonoq* retained the usual curatorial emphasis on vision, turning scrutiny on Western culture. The glass cases mirror the bears' sterile separation from each other and their natural habitat, and while this might seem to have exacerbated the Western disavowal of materiality, this is part of what was held up for consideration.

I attempt to use plinths in a similar way. The gifts have sensuous qualities redolent of their cultural function - the stress-balls are pliable, inviting a squeeze; the toffees are sugary for eating; the condoms' spermicide coated rubber facilitates sexual liaisons. Displayed on a pedestal, these qualities are out of reach. They cannot be used, they can only be observed. The method of display also parodies arms fairs, where shells, grenades and CS canisters are presented on plinths for viewing. Walter Benjamin argued that advertisements, seen slightly out of context, give a critical insight into capitalism, 'What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon says – but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt' (2007: 86). Reflected in a puddle, a neon advertisement shows distorted flashing lights without the detail of promises. Displayed on a pedestal, the Bofors sweet offers the hell of war as a confection without the explanatory detail of the advertising campaign.

The photographs in this book also present the gifts primarily as objects to be looked at, but here there is an additional factor. A photograph can be constructed to direct the gaze in specific ways. The photograph of the bomb has been lit and framed to accentuate the rubber seam that runs around the circumference, giving away its rubber construction. The photograph of the sweet emphasizes the shiny paper, the twists at either end, the possibility of unwrapping it. Yet, although this draws attention to the materiality of the objects, they remain out of reach. A photograph is smooth to the touch; the gifts can only be apprehended by vision. Michael Taussig suggests there is a tension in a photograph – it seems to be a faithful copy of its subject but it is not what is reproduced. A photograph makes an apparently exact image of something, and yet it is materially different from what is portrayed. As Taussig puts it, they are 'copies that are not copies' (1993: 115). 'Sliding between photographic fidelity and fantasy, between iconicity and arbitrariness, wholeness and fragmentation, we thus begin to sense how weird and complex the

notion of the copy becomes...’ (1993: 17). Like Magritte’s painting of a pipe that is not a pipe, the photograph of a bomb shaped stress-ball is not what it is an image of. And this perhaps points to the disjuncture between the gifts, and the material properties of weapons they are modelled on, and intended to promote.

Yet, whether encountered on a plinth or in a photograph, the first reaction of many viewers to the stress-ball bomb is to laugh. The spherical shape, colour and fuse evoke a century of cartoon conflicts. Shape shifting with a stress-ball, it also conveys the shared frustrations of work. The cultural references are so strong, that for many viewers they survive the relocation in a new context. The bomb elicits a laugh even from the distance of a plinth. Objects have agency, and not just through their physical impact. As Barad argues, matter and meaning are intertwined (2003: 822). Art can affect people in ways not intended by a curator. Christine Sylvester (2013) describes art in the Nazi Degenerate exhibition that attracted viewers in spite of the disapproving context, ‘The audience and the thing become dynamic’ (2013: 206). Benjamin Meiches argues that weapons seduce, they ‘enchant, glimmer, and terrify’ (2017: 15). The bomb shaped stress-ball seduces with humour rather than metal.

Conclusion

The globalized military industrial complex is largely invisible. It meets regularly in arms fairs, but behind lines of police and security guards. Inside, it is hidden again in a more subtle way by a façade of respectability, with suits, handshakes, and hospitality. The gifts are formed from this deceptive veneer. They beguile with humour, flatter with promises of career success and sexual conquest, and placate with sugar. They disassemble the material properties of weapons. Presented in a museum, gallery, or book, the gifts can be re-appropriated to give an insight into this secretive industry. Yet, they also have agency. Their sensuous qualities may be interrupted by a plinth or photograph, but they continue to perform their jokes. Whether we laugh in unease or complicity is an open question. As Freud suggested in relation to contentious jokes, ‘we do not in the strict sense know what we are laughing at’ (2002: 99).

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