REAL MATERIAL ETHEREAL

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Double Edged

Abstract:

There is something of a cautionary oxymoron with 'Double Edged'. The twelve-piece set poses as a museum collection, artefacts rescued from some medieval battlefield, but ironically fashioned from prosaic materials bought from the local DIY tool-shop. These weapons are pieces of bespoke craftsmanship and to hold one engenders conflicting thoughts of desire, luxury and socio-political warfare - ideas that hint at under-examined narratives around the purpose, need, and value of weapons in a contemporary setting. The work engages with a research/design context that considers the tension between 'permissible' and 'fetishised' weapon of today - and offer a method for examining the dangerous narratives and conceptualisations of a necessary and abundant violence. This is examined through the twin lenses of the 'armoury' and the 'laws of war' – with a focus on the material operations of these art/design objects.

Double Edged

"The bomb lives only as it is falling..."
-Ian M Banks, The Use of Weapons

In her widely cited 'Undoing War: War Ontologies and the Materiality of Drone Warfare', Caroline Holmqvist surveys and argues for the centrality of the body to the understanding of war.[1] This requires an ontology of war that focuses on the body and the vulnerabilities and friabilities of bodies; an exercise that recenters the body as a method for understanding war even as it becomes more discorporeal, subject to new technology, autonomous agents, and irreducibly complex systems. Likewise, this requires a focus on the *material* qualities of objects of war - what they are actually capable of.

The design work 'Double Edged' explores this relationship between the *material and the immaterial*, and suggests ways in which we might build off this approach to better understand the dangerous narratives and conceptualisations of a necessary and abundant violence.

Armouries:

Blood-red rust, or just blooded; gnarled and curled ribbons of iron and steel; cuirass and pauldron and vambrace both lonely and linked, complete courtly armours framing empty

figures with empty eyes. The scarred concavities of plate armour for the rank-and-file; pike and halberd and bastard-sword. Flintlock and arquebus in serried rows.

Armouries collapse practical and aesthetic functions. There are conflicting imperatives between the production of bespoke weaponry and armour - increasingly distanced from its performative role - and the prototypical production and mass provision of arms and armour for a levy army, or a professional soldier-class.

Armouries collapse operations. Alongside cabinets-of-curiosities / wunderkammer and menageries they form the nucleus of the cultural/social frameworks of national museums. Part of that is embedded in a salutary role; they set up narratives of power and strength, especially in relation to royal power and prerogative. As a consequence of that these are spaces that present some of the earliest public exhibitions and displays of works increasingly linked to emergent ideas of a nascent people, and of a state. But they also incorporate requirements to protect and defend - to structure a repertory of performative weaponry. These are spaces that are simultaneously public, and highly defended; spaces that frame weapons as aesthetic and cultural objects, and yet spaces that admit their fundamental challenge and danger.

Berlin's Deutsche Historische Museum (DHM) integrates these contradictions. As an arsenal - the Zeughaus - the building stored, maintained, and displayed artillery pieces owned and acquired by the Elector of Brandenburg. The state's relationship with Prussia - and the latter's subsequent rise - elevated the standing of the collection. It became, across the long 19th century, the destination of much of the spoils and depredations of Prussian, and later Imperial German, military excursions and excesses. It is in that capacity that collection of spoils, the ordering of weapons and military materiel, became, not just a method of articulating power, but a mechanism to "place the chaos of war into an orderly system," to make the scale and the scope of new, destructive, industrial scale weaponry apparent to a home-front audience.[2]

The museum's capacity to structure overarching narratives and to perform an idealised and aestheticised mode of combat continued in the confused and increasingly totalitarian modes leading into the Second World War. Here, it was reconfigured a site of public spectacle, of propaganda and of memorialisation. That it should prove so easy to reconfigure the material logics of the building and its collection speaks as much to Nazi ideology as it does to the latent threads that run through nationalist and militarist traditions. In this case the presence and arrangement of spoils - both the residual material from the First World War, and the

cultural and military elements looted in the early years of the Second World War - became a critical narrative crutch to rationalise and defend the ultimately indefensible.

Postwar, the arsenal is reconfigured once more - reframed by the Socialist Unity Party as a museum of the people; a necessary conduit for the restating of the East German state as the natural inheritor of the German people and their radical potential. The choice of the Zeuhaus was fundamental, an almost ironical re-occupation of a site of the "military might of the princes, kings, capitalists, and later the National Socialists."[3] The collections of weapons and instruments of war are similarly reconfigured - with "modern weaponry, sandbags, and huge, unexploded shells [now] surrounded by photographs, documents, statistics, and newspapers illustrating the ruthless and antipopular policies" of the German war-drive.[4] But weapons, ruined or otherwise, are still presented as key components of larger narratives - a stand-in for deep forces and historic tendencies.

Post re-unification - post the fall-of-the-wall and the strange and ungainly and still ongoing process of a reconstitution of the two Germanies - the building and its contents are, once more, restructured - this time in the service of a reconceptualised German identity, and in an answering and 'ambiguous pride and shame in their heritage.'[5] Arms and weaponry - now part of a collection that spans early Roman incursions across the Danube, the rise and collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, the internecine wars of the Hapsburg and Hohenzollern, and the early-modern European wars leading into the First World War - remain a key component of the overarching presentation of a German narrative. Indeed, the museum itself argues that;

"The concept of the collection has not changed appreciably since the late 19th century. Weapons and equipment of the German armed forces, technological military innovations, objects related to historical persons, and cultural-historically relevant products of military technology continue to form the core of the collecting activities."[6]

This remit - the collection of militaria, is a subset of the DHM's overarching mission to 'Europeanize' German history - to integrate it into a network of European events.[7] Given the inescapable presence and register of war, and given the framing device of the Zeughaus as armoury and arsenal, the presence of weapons - their arrangement and contextualisation - seems inevitable. Nevertheless, there is a particular, malevonant ambiguity in their presence - ornate baroque armour and halberds frame a discussion of civic identity and cultural emergence amongst the princely states, while ranks of machineguns and heavy ordinance bracket global war and a military-industrial application of genocide. Nothing differentiates

their function; their approach, their purpose - they are all representative 'products of military technology' with all of their attendant terror. And that, at heart illustrates the essential ambivalence of the weapon as object - and indeed, the *collection* of weapons for narrative purposes. Weapons are not exceptional but are everyday objects - and the stories and registers they contain are myriad. There is, then, a dis-satisfyingly bleak recusal and a stepping away from a positioning as design objects; an implied exhortation to evaluate and decide for oneself - a task that seems even harder when our own capacity to locate and understand the impacts of such weapons has been compromised by twinned energies of distance and fatigue. There is the notion, here, that a critical responsibility has been dodged and avoided. Or, rather, that this avoidance is a key component of such arrangements.

This move represents a larger trend in the avoidant display of weapons. The Museum Altes Zeughaus in Solothurn, Switzerland, presents a similar frame. It's collection of Swiss militaria is both contextualised and de-contextualised in its reframed exhibition. The museum's own explication;

"We have a military-historical collection that we intend to display in the future as well without overdoing the aesthetics and glorifying Swiss battles as it has been done in the past. We want to encourage visitors to think about conflicts, violence and warfare's general problem through direct "confrontations" with weapons. We hope that visitors will be forced to reflect upon themselves and their attitudes."[8]

But this avoids a very critical question - what are the attitudes that can be loaded into and around weapons? Distant in time, and distant in impact - we remap ideas of weapons with material extracted from contemporary war narratives, from film, from ludic media, and from the lurid violence that is filtered through cable-television/social-media hybrids.

Rules of War:

Armouries and arsenals once served as spaces that 'ordered' war - set it into national or social contexts, but also aspiring to make apparent the structures, patterns and operations of the day-to-day. This approach has an answering movement in the desire to structure and order the operations of war; to legislate proscribed and permissible behaviours. This can be seen as both an exercise in establishing international laws around the person and the treatment of people within a war-zone (the Geneva Conventions) as well as more prescriptive laws and rules about the use of weapons (the Hague conventions, and later weapons treaties.)

It is the second container that is most relevant; while the first sets up discussion around bodies and what can be done to them, the latter discusses the 'how' - the actual rules and strictures and in a perverse consideration, the 'design principles' that apply to weapons.

Weapons sit in a strange liminal space as design objects. They have users - and then they have bodies that they act upon. The structuring and organising of design tropes tells us a tremendous amount about the attitudes of the user, but also about the intellectual construction of, and attitudes towards, the people upon whom they are used.[9] An example is the 'Puckle Gun'[10] - an early, single-barrel 'volley gun' that delineated different barrel profiles and ammunition shapes for different subject/victims; with "...square bullets being used against Turks (sic) and the round against Christians."[11] Contemporary soldiers already understood the damage that elongated, oblong, or edged projectiles could cause[12] - primarily through tumbling; resulting in deeper, wider wounds than spherical shot. The square bullets are necessarily sinister and represent an attempt to selectively impart unequal and extensive damage a particular class of persons. But the square bullet also exists alongside its spherical counterpart - which is rendered as comparatively *humane.*

This frames a suite of problems - where the tool can be imagined as being used on an external other or on bodies *identical* to the person operating it. Thus there is an implied negation in the construction and limitation of excess in the use of weapons; the decisions are not motivated by an external generosity or a humanitarian concern, but the fear that the weapon might be inverted, turned back on the user.

In 1863, the Russian Empire developed an explosive bullet that would explode upon impact with 'soft tissue' - with the human body. With the disaster of the Crimean war a recent and chastening memory, the Russians suggested a broadly European agreement to outlaw, or at least limit, their use.[13] While this was presented as a 'humanitarian' concern there were immediate impetus resulting from this imaginative inversion of the weapon; "...there was a fear by some states, in particular Russia, which did not have a professional army at the highest level, that such bullets could severely affect the fighting morale of the troops."[14] The exploding or fulminating shell - some variants might remain partially intact and only exploded when they were being removed - existed at some kind of psychological break or threshold beyond which the 'normal' patterns of warfare seemed intolerable.

The resulting agreement, the St Petersburg Declaration, is seen as a cornerstone of international humanitarian law. Yet it is increasingly seen as a contested or 'janus faced'

document[15] - partly because of this inverted attitude towards the humanitarian; not as an extension of universality, but a return to a fear as to what can be done to the self.

This suggests a way in which the weapon becomes a very perverse conduit for a kind of empathy - a tool for a critical imagination of others. One must, at some level, be prepared to imagine, if not endure, the impacts and consequences of such weapons - especially in notions of mutual and proportional action, per, say, out-and-out Nuclear War.

John Forge argues that it is impossible for the designer of a weapon to be ignorant of its primary purpose. In the context of nuclear weapons, he suggests that; "It is highly implausible, beyond belief in fact, that a nuclear weapons designer would know that a fission 'device' liberated large amounts of blast, heat and radiation and yet not know that it was a weapon."[16] Its utility can only be divined if it is considered alongside a target - a city, full of buildings and social networks and living people. To this we add the idea that it is impossible to consider a weapon as a design object without, at some level, imagining ourselves as being subject to it. To build on the notion of a 'confrontation' with a weapon we suggest that this is an ongoing and inevitable consequence of engaging with weapons-as-design objects, and weapons as designs.

It is an essentially *double-edged* activity.

Double Edged:

Double Edged, therefore, presents a conceptual model for considering this dangerous duality. The twelve piece set poses as a museum collection, artefacts rescued from some medieval battlefield, but ironically fashioned from prosaic materials bought from the local DIY tool-shop. These weapons are pieces of bespoke craftsmanship and to hold one engenders conflicting thoughts of desire, luxury and socio-political warfare - ideas that hint at under-examined narratives around the purpose, need, and value of weapons in a contemporary setting.

As design objects and 'props' in Dunne and Raby's formulation[17], they materialise a tension between the enduring appeal and authority of tools of protection, power and threat. Early combat weapons were designed for both ritual and survival, their appearance a by-product of indigenous customs, available resources and technology. Likewise, their uses were sanctioned and circumscribed by myth and writ and convention - serving multiple roles in

multiple contexts. Ceremonial maces once stove-in heads. Parliamentarians once had to surrender their weapons at the doors of the debate-chambers.

International Humanitarian Law - framed around agreements like the St Petersburg Declaration - limits and circumscribes the position and presence of weaponry. This prescriptive governance, together with post-war military-industrial production, produced a new enigmatic kind of weaponry; the powerful political economy of weapons procurement, a trillion dollar global empire and the age of the superpowers mighty 'deterrent' arsenal. The general effect - barring a few exceptional contexts - has been to remove the tangible body of the weapon from civic space; to replace it with a far more rarefied and fetishised image, or with far more insidious and immediate violences.

In that manner the collection critiques the current era of the defendable self and the proliferation of 'impermissible' weapons for personal security and home defence - from the baseball bat to the unregistered pistol under the bed. There are also dialogues with the 'improvised' weapons used by terrorists and 'lone wolf' actors; the discreet consumer's resourcefulness, the age of the internet and the accessibility of illegal materials has given rise to unchecked weapons modification and a desperately lopsided balance between an actor and their destructive potential.

Gathered together as components of a possible 'armoury' the works require engagement as both hypothetical designer (examining the evidence of the individual recognisable tools and hardware components) as well as the universalised subject of such weapons. This symbolically materialises a tension between 'permissible' and 'fetishised' weaponry - and offers a method for examining the dangerous narratives and conceptualisations of a necessary and abundant violence.

Figure 1. *Double Edged, 2019* (by author)

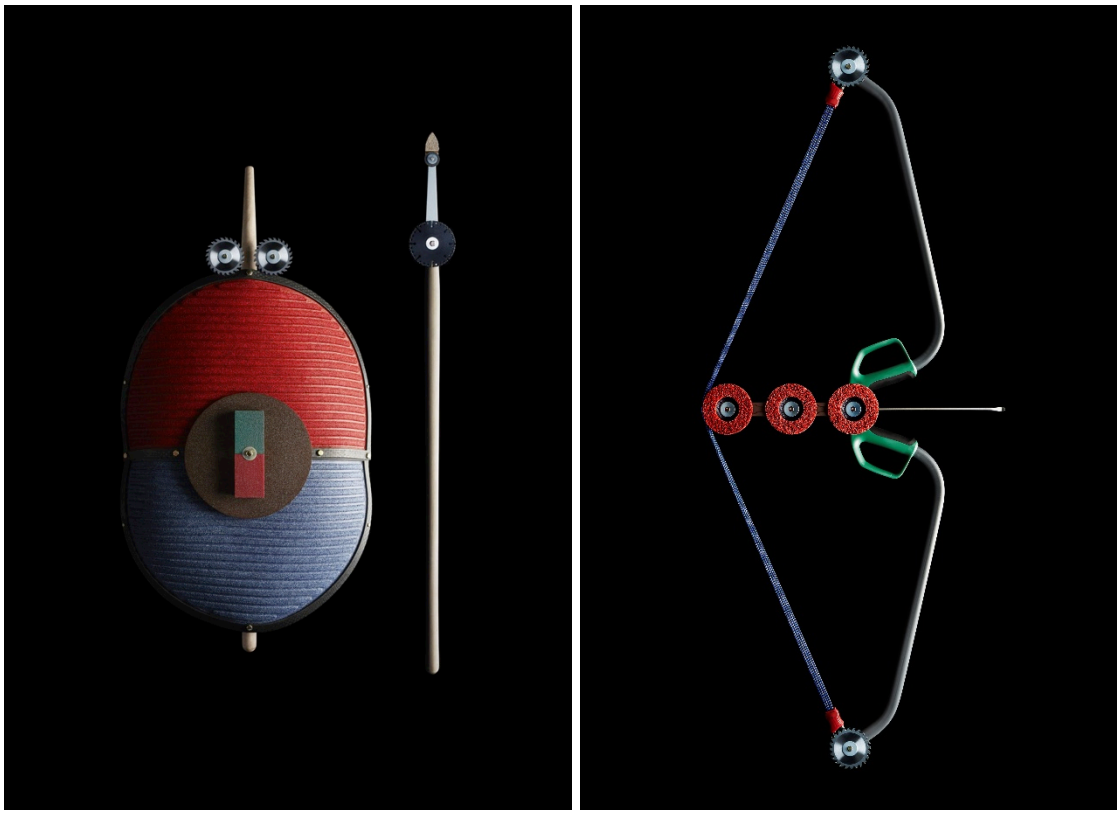

Figure 2. *Double Edged, 2019* (by author)

Figure 3. *Double Edged, 2019* (by author)

Figure 4. *Double Edged, 2019* (by author)

Endnotes

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[9] See: Perry Morrison & Stephen Little (1991) Technological cultures of weapons design, Science as Culture, 2:2, 227-258
[10] The Puckle Gun gains an additional notoriety as it is held up as a weapon that predates the passing of the US Second Amendment, and is used (farcically) as an example of the framing of the second amendment as prefiguring multiple shot, rapid fire, accurate firearms.
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[13] 518, Robert Kolb, Momchil Milanov (2019), The 1868 St Petersburg Declaration on Explosive Projectiles: A Reappraisal, Journal of the History of International Law / Revue d'histoire du droit international
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