

The Etiquette of the Arms Trade

Dr Jill Gibbon *ISRF Early Career Fellow 2017-18*

NOTE: The Early Career Fellowship application form has been updated since this proposal was submitted.

Abstract

The UK and US governments regularly grant export licences for arms sales to unstable states and repressive regimes. How are these deals validated? This project uses a body of artworks that I have made undercover in arms fairs to address this problem. It aims to show how the arms industry is given an appearance of respectability through rituals of etiquette, and to challenge this veneer by juxtaposing the art with research about the impact of arms sales.

I am an artist using drawing and performance to research the arms trade. I have visited arms fairs covertly since 2008 by dressing up as an arms trader with a suit, paste pearls, and a sham business. Once inside, I draw the manners, hospitality and weapons, and collect complimentary gifts. A colleague has photographed my performance. Arms fairs are infrequent but having worked on the project for several years, I now have a substantial body of drawings, gifts, and photographs. I am seeking this fellowship to disseminate and contextualise this work through an exhibition at the Bradford Peace Museum, catalogue, website, articles, and a book pitch.

The project responds to calls for the use of aesthetic methods to study war (Bleiker, 2001; Sylvester, 2010) by using drawing and performance to bring new insights to research about the arms trade (Feinstein, 2012; Omega Foundation, 2017; Wright, 2008). It addresses ISRF goals by using an interdisciplinary methodology to tackle an urgent political problem - the international trade in weapons. It uses art to convey the micro-social processes that allow arms deals to authoritarian regimes, and challenges those processes with social science research.

The Research Idea *The innovative thesis of the project*

The US and UK are the world's largest arms exporters. Since 2010, the UK has sold weapons to 22 of the 33 countries that the Foreign Office has listed as having serious human rights concerns (Stone, 2016). It continues to sanction arms deals to Bahrain in spite of the regime's violent suppression of protests (Gallagher, 2016), and to Saudi

Arabia although the UN has warned of evidence of war crimes in the Saudi led conflict with Yemen (Lederer, 2016). How are such deals validated?

This project uses a body of artworks that I have produced undercover in arms fairs to explore this question. I have been visiting arms fairs, trade shows for military equipment, since 2008. Here, missiles, tanks and tear gas are displayed to an international clientele with wine and entertainment. I get inside by dressing up as an arms trader with a sham business, then draw, and collect complimentary gifts from the stalls. A colleague has photographed my cover; the suit and pearls a metaphor for the façade of respectability in the industry.

Arms fairs are infrequent. However, I have worked on the project for several years and now have a large number of sketchbooks, photographs and gifts giving unique insights into the arms industry. I am applying for a fellowship to disseminate this material alongside research about the impact of arms sales, to show how the industry is validated through rituals of etiquette, and the disjuncture between the polite veneer and its effects.

Background *Current research reference points and their limitations*

There is important research about the manufacture, trade, and use of military and security equipment (Omega Foundation, 2017; CAAT, 2017), the development of new weaponry (Wright, 2014), corruption in the arms trade (Feinstein, 2012; Gilby, 2014), and the impact of sales on global security (Amnesty International, 2015). However, this work does not address the manner in which arms are sold. This is perhaps because etiquette cannot be grasped by post-Cartesian logic, the dominant approach in the social sciences. Etiquette is sensuous - it is enacted, performed and displayed. It is an example of what Terry Eagleton (1990) calls 'the aesthetic', a form of experience and expression that lies outside reason. As such, etiquette is perhaps most effectively grasped by aesthetic methods such as drawing and performance.

Many artists explore the problem of war, for instance John Keane (2004) and Mahwish Chishty (2017) however, art is usually shown in galleries where the shadow of romanticism emphasises the artist over content.

Roland Bleiker (2001) and Christine Sylvester (2010) have called for the use of aesthetic, subjective methods in war studies, and some researchers have begun to include reflective writing or descriptions of art in their work, however these initiatives are limited by the constraints of social science publishing. For this reason, Sylvester and I (2017) argue that 'the aesthetic turn' (Bleiker, 2001) requires new forms of dissemination. This project responds by developing interdisciplinary outputs combining artworks and text.

The Focus *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

The project offers new insights into the arms trade by showing how it is validated through rituals of etiquette.

It uses a body of art that I have produced between 2008 and 2017 in three arms fairs, DSEI in London, Eurosatory in Paris, and IDEX in Abu Dhabi to convey the aesthetic processes that validate the arms trade.

Drawings document the etiquette of an arms fair - a tray of champagne offered next to a tank, a string quartet playing Mozart on the back of a military truck, a fashion show in front of a rack of missiles. They also highlight the manners and gestures of the industry - a tilted hand pointing out the features of a drone, a fraternal laugh, a handshake, as well as expressions of nausea and fear that disrupt the polite veneer. My cover as an arms trader mimics the performance of respectability in the industry, and demonstrates the authority of business dress.

Gifts collected from arms stalls show how weapons are trivialized and sexualized. These include stress-balls in the shape of bombs and grenades; toy bulldozers given away next to the giant versions that clear houses in the Occupied Palestinian Territories; condoms labeled 'the ultimate protection'; and sweets stamped with arms company names.

Theoretical Novelty *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

The project is novel in drawing attention to the aesthetics of the arms trade, largely overlooked in social science research. Since the Enlightenment, academic enquiry has been dominated by reason – disengaged, logical argument. And although reason is extremely useful in forming relatively detached judgments, it leaves much out, particularly in studies of war. Anne Orford warns that 'reason cannot fully explain the violence unleashed by the state.' (2011, p 11)

Eagleton (1990) suggests that the word 'aesthetic' came into use in Europe in the C18th, borrowed from the Greek, to describe sensuous forms of experience ignored by post-Cartesian philosophy. Arms fairs are aesthetic events - they seduce through the senses, and this raises a problem for traditional methods. As Eagleton asks, 'How can reason, that most immaterial of faculties, grasp the grossly sensuous?' (1990, p15) This project uses art to research aesthetic aspects of arms fairs.

The project also develops a novel version of covert participant observation. I get inside the fairs by masquerading as an arms trader. This is not new in itself - the Omega Foundation (2017) has also set up a fake arms company to monitor military products. However, the Omega Foundation does objective research, using a cover primarily to access fairs. In contrast, I use a cover both for access and as a metaphor for deceptive guises of power in the industry. This brings a new approach to debates about the ethics of covert participant observation (Homan, 1980; Li, 2008; Spicker, 2011).

Methodology *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry – specific methodological examples are often helpful for non-specialist readers*

The meaning of art is notoriously unstable (Eagleton, 1990). Viewed in isolation, the drawings could be interpreted as reproducing the polite façade of an arms fair, and the gifts as trivializing weaponry. So, I am applying for a fellowship to develop interdisciplinary outputs that juxtapose the art and gifts with research about the arms trade. This will involve challenging the traditional separation of art from the social sciences, evident in many journals. Academic publishers tend to avoid images, while galleries use minimal text.

The main focus of the fellowship will be an exhibition at the Bradford Peace Museum in 2018. One of only a few of its kind in the world, the Peace Museum has an archive of campaign material about the arms trade, which will provide a critical context for the artworks. Using the archive and academic sources, I will summarise research about arms sales and their effects. I will also write reflectively about my experiences visiting arms fairs. Working with curators and a graphic designer, I will devise ways of showing the art and gifts alongside artifacts from the museum archive, and the summary of research. The website and catalogue will use similar combinations of images and text. I will use social media to link the project to current news about the arms trade.

I will write two articles about methodological innovations in the project with a literature review, aesthetic theory, reflective writing, and images.

Work Plan *How the work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended.*

I am applying for a year's award to curate an exhibition at the Bradford Peace Museum, with a catalogue and website. I will write two articles, and prepare a book pitch, and proposal for future exhibitions. This will be achieved in four phases:

1) September 1st - November 30th 2017

I will select artworks and artifacts for exhibition, and summarise research about the arms trade and its impact. I will write reflectively about visiting arms fairs. Working with curators and a graphic designer, I will begin to design the catalogue and website. I will contact potential speakers for the opening.

2) 1st December – 28th February 2018

This phase will involve finalising the text and design of the catalogue, website, and exhibition.

3) 1st March – 31st May 2018

The exhibition, catalogue, and website will be launched with an opening and speakers event, and promoted on social media. I will photograph the exhibition, and collect visitor feedback. I will write an article on my use of covert participant observation for Sociology Online, or a similar journal.

4) 1st June – 31st August 2018

I will write a book pitch with a sample chapter, using the catalogue as a prototype, and approach publishers such as Palgrave and Bloomsbury. I will approach possible venues for a future exhibition such as the Imperial War Museum. I will write an article on drawing and performance as interdisciplinary methods to submit to The Journal of Artistic Research.

Outcome *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged.*

Beyond the award, I plan to write and design a book about the etiquette of the arms trade, combining image and text in similar ways to the catalogue. The exhibition will provide an example for further shows.

The project works towards long-term outcomes inside and outside academia. The interdisciplinary approach brings methodological innovations to both of the fields from which the project borrows. It demonstrates the relevance of art to the social sciences in conveying aesthetic aspects of war overlooked by reason, and the value of academic methods to art by anchoring its insights with reasoned analysis.

The use of art also provides a bridge, taking research out of the university into public spaces. Here, the project aims to raise public awareness of the arms trade, showing how weapons are glamourized, sexualized, and trivialized through the manners, dress, and hospitality of trade shows. By disseminating these insights in visual forms juxtaposed with research, the project aims to challenge the façade of respectability that allows weapons to be sold to repressive regimes.