

Diana*

Auras and Accessories

by Graham Harman

My first discussion with Ceidra Moon Murphy about the present work began when she wrote as follows: “The show comprises 22 used gun cleaners from the British army, acquired through a contractor of the UK’s Ministry of Defence, alongside a bundle of 4 rods to which the cleaners were once attached.” This straightforward description provides enough material for a serious discussion of the ontology of artworks. In the first place, we have fifty-three objects (forty-six brushes, mops, and jags along with seven rods), almost all of which are spread out on a blanket, cut off from their primary context of use. Yet we are also aware of that context: it is hard to forget the military origin of these items, which lures us toward a quick political interpretation. Surely there must be some critical intent here, some sort of oblique statement about the hypocrisy of the liberal war machine, which artists and intellectuals are expected to denounce upon request. But the simplicity of these objects and their arrangement provides no obvious foothold for the typical political theorist or activist, and thus we feel our mind turning in a different direction.

The next thing that comes to mind is that Murphy is perhaps trying yet another variant of Duchamp’s readymades: an old joke by now, though one that continues to be told and retold by new generations of artists as the decades roll by. Although any artwork consisting of originally utilitarian objects must contain at least a trace of Duchampian DNA, that is not what seems to be going on here. For one thing, the objects are not arranged in the name of Dadaist shock value; nor is it clear what might be added to produce such a shock. More importantly, Murphy’s piece takes the form of a collection, something foreign to Duchamp except in the case of *La Boîte-en-valise*, the famous suitcase filled with miniature replicas of his own works. But the self-reflexive spirit of that piece is nowhere to be found in the work under discussion; thus, our search for understanding continues.

The gun cleaners in the piece seem fairly standardized, and were surely machine-made rather than crafted by hand. Does this not immediately require the usual reference to Walter Benjamin and his key term “aura”? Yet Benjamin’s famous essay has long been overexposed. Even worse, it seems to me that he gets it backwards when he refers to the aura as something that has disappeared, rather than something with which the present and future are and will be fully stuffed. Consider a case such as Martin Heidegger gushing over a pair of peasant shoes, as opposed to the mass-produced Nikes or Birkenstocks he would surely condemn.

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A hand-carved shoe has numerous features that might command respect, and under the right circumstances this object could even trigger an aesthetic experience. But in no way does a pre-modern object have the sort of halo or glow that the word “aura” implies. Auras arise more directly from mass production itself, where the near identity of thousands or tens of thousands of objects shifts our attention from their surface details to their shared underlying structural features.

Coca-Cola cans are cylindrical, smooth, and mostly red. To encounter millions of them in a gigantic warehouse drives us away from the individual details of each can; other than random dents, there are scarcely any local quirks anyway. Much like Plato, we are redirected instead to the “perfect forms,” or at least the reliably encountered ones, of cylindrical, smooth, and red. This takes us beyond the literalism of the empiricist philosophers –David Hume above all– who treat objects as nothing more than bundles of qualities. On this view a lemon is merely the sum total of its shape, color, sourness, juiciness, and so forth; a person’s name is simply an abbreviation for all of the true facts about them. When all the properties of a thing are legible on its surface, we have entered the world of literalism.

Duchamp’s readymades notwithstanding, literalism can never yield aesthetic experience. At its best, literalism aims at producing *knowledge*. But knowledge comes in two and only two basic kinds: we can say what a thing is made of, or we can say what it does. Neither form of knowledge does justice to things, since a thing is always more than what it is made of and capable of more actions than the ones in which it is currently involved. In fact, an object exists in tension *both* with its components down below and its effects up above. Another way of making the point, one that covers both the downward and upward cases, is to say that an object exists in tension with its own properties. It both has and does not have its qualities simultaneously. As important as this proves to be for art, it was also an early insight of ancient Greek philosophy, as when Aristotle tells us that Socrates seated and Socrates standing are equally Socrates. The difference with artworks is that the gap between the object and its qualities is deployed in more intense form. The philosopher may think vaguely that they know what Socrates is, just as they know what happy and sad are. By contrast, the artist is less likely to believe that they know what their works really are; in cases where they do believe this, they are most often wrong, as the work outruns its creator in the manner of Viktor Frankenstein’s monster.

Along with this gap between objects and their qualities, it is equally important that an artwork should command our attention in a way that literal facts do not. If a certain degree of fascination on the beholder’s part is absent, then aesthetic experience has not occurred. The proper twentieth-century reference here is not Benjamin, but Jean Baudrillard. Too much attention has been paid to the side of Baudrillard that is linked with a denial of reality: “everything is a simulation, nothing is real.” It is a debatable point, and even a boring one in the wake of thousands of *Matrix*-like plots in literature and film.

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The stronger idea in Baudrillard is *seduction*, in which objects have a mesmerizing effect that shifts our attention from the modern world's preoccupation with human thought to objects themselves. Given Baudrillard's supreme comfort with the mass incarnation of nearly identical cans, tables, hammers, superhighways, and pieces of cardboard bearing the faces of athletes, he imagines our simulated reality as focused less on the content than on the repetitive *forms* of things.

In the case of the hand-carved peasant shoes, for which Benjamin and Heidegger feel different but closely related forms of nostalgia, the object "shoe" is not at odds with itself. It is there before us in its woodenness, having certain unique properties that allow us to identify it by contrast with all other such shoes. Far from having some sort of aura, it is a dull, literal fact. To be sure, there are a number of ways for the peasant shoe to become aestheticized, though this requires more than the mere celebration of peasant authenticity. We can paint the shoes in an admirable style, in the manner of Vincent van Gogh (though we know from Meyer Schapiro that the shoes belonged to van Gogh himself, not to a peasant). We can let centuries pass before displaying them once more, at which point they will have gained a historical aura that, contra Benjamin, they never really had in the era of their production. In both cases, as in all instances of aestheticization, a cut is made between the immediately visible properties of the thing and the vague, underlying structure that animates these qualities with something like a soul. Since this soul is by nature elusive, we are required to invest a great deal of fascination in the art object, in a way that is generally untrue of such literalist documents as tax returns or autopsy reports.

What do we do with these reflections when faced with Murphy's *Accessories*? The objects are torn free from their contexts, with nary a gun nor a war machine in sight, which emphasizes the tension between the individual thing and its previous environment. In this piece the gun cleaners are frequently assembled in groups of three, a sufficient number to call attention to their shared underlying features rather than their immediately visible traits. Nonetheless, the various groups are different and thus play off against each other, giving rise to a strange mixed message about identity and difference, in an era like ours in which only difference is considered politically sanitary. Two tensions already: one between the background and foreground of any object, and another between the different *types* of gun cleaning instrument. The spirit of the work is not quite minimal, but neither is it overly busy. It is an aesthetic object, but one that comes ever so close to toppling into the literal world of guns and brushes; we would not be surprised to encounter a similar display in a military museum.

Murphy's implicit theme of the borderline between the literal and the aesthetic is emphasized further by the title of the work, *Accessories*. As mentioned, we might also imagine this word as a label on a museum case housing a similar collection of entities. Generally speaking, there is something automatically aesthetic about the title of a work, since it suggests the guiding presence of something beyond what is immediately visible, just as the name of a person or place points ever so vaguely to something in them beyond the sum total of features they possess and events in which they are involved.

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If the work were untitled, we would not have this extra dimension to guide us. In a subtly different case, if it were actually called *Untitled*, we would be dealing instead with an active negation of this added dimension. But what is the effect of a borderline literal title like *Accessories*? They *are* accessories, after all. Yet Murphy does not push literalism to the limit: she did not call the work *Gun Cleaners*, or *Gun Cleaners from Contractors Hired by the UK Ministry of Defence*, both of which would topple fully over the rail into the discourse of museums. Neither did she depart from literalism very much. She did not call the work *I Like the Defence Ministry and the Defence Ministry Likes Me*, or some less Beuyssian variant of amusingly surreal irrelevance. She did not give it the title *Dawn of Time* or *Heartbreak*, which would provoke a disorienting and perhaps fruitless search for some deeper meaning. Nor did she try *The World's Third Oldest Profession*, or *Britannia Rules the Waves*, or *Old World Order*, with their suggestions of political denunciation.

Instead, Murphy titled the work *Accessories*, which, as mentioned, is far less literal than *Gun Cleaners* but seemingly more so than the poetic fancies just listed. Furthermore, we are in an art gallery rather than a museum, which seemingly entails that the objects are not just being labelled as what they are. What path remains? Murphy seems to invite us to treat the gun cleaners as accessories not of guns, but of something less tangible and more elusive. The cleaning devices are placed in relation not with the usual system of equipment to which they belong in everyday life, but to some unknown object. They are accessories of some still unidentified X, an entity just as inscrutable as God, square circles, imaginary numbers, or the present King of France. To my mind, Murphy has skilfully zeroed in on the exact point where the literal crosses over into the aesthetic, with the title and work itself performing double duty to drive the point home.