Missing the Modern Gun
Object Ethics in Collections of Design

By Barbara Eldredge

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Thesis Abstract

Firearms are absent from all American collections of contemporary design, in spite of their importance to design history and their enduring significance in the culture at large. Even when they are discussed in a design-historical context, it is all too easy to ignore the moral implications that color our perception of guns. Why can firearms be displayed in art, history, and military museums but not design museums? What does moral good have to do with the Museum of Modern Art?

To answer these questions, I met with dozens of design historians, curators, product designers, and firearms industry professionals and explored the writings of theorists interested in museums, ethics, and design. My research revealed a wide range of (sometimes divergent) perspectives on the ethical implications of objects, the unique characteristics of design museums, and the role guns play in American society.

A gun is much more than its capacity to consistently and accurately expel a projectile in the desired direction. Firearms in civilian American culture are more often used as symbols and physical metaphors than utilitarian tools for killing. Whether one is a gun control advocate or a shotgun-toting member of the National Rifle Association, Americans are encouraged to perform their ethical values through a relationship with firearms. When the Museum of Modern Art or any design collection excludes firearms and designed weapons, it is symbolically excluding violence from the world of design; though an understandable aspiration, the result is not an accurate representation of contemporary reality.

Designers don’t just make elegant chairs and toasters and iPhone apps, they also make elegant bombs and landmines and guns. In battle, these weapons separate the user from the dangers of physical and emotional proximity. However, there are hazards to not being confronted with the implications of our actions and our objects. Museums are traditionally institutions of education and contemplation, illustrating social values through historical artifacts or art. Today, many design collections effectively serve as object-based ethical codes revealing how to live a “good” life. Nonetheless, exhibition of a firearm within a design museum would provide the physical and mental space to think about the implications of firearms as designed objects, catalyzing new discussions of guns, design, and morality.
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Introduction: A Moral Puzzle

In early 1994, Paola Antonelli walked into a curatorial meeting at the Museum of Modern Art. She had only recently joined the MoMA as an associate curator in the Architecture and Design Department and, for the first time, she would be proffering her ideas on what objects she’d like the museum to acquire. It was an opportunity to set the tone for the direction the design collection would take under her tenure and she intended to begin with a bang. What did she propose? A Beretta handgun.

Antonelli thought the Italian-made pistol was a beautiful and functional object, a powerful example of good design. “And I was told ‘no, no weapons.’” she said recently in her darkened office within MoMA’s education building. “Nobody ever explained to me why, but I kind of understood why.”

The gun was considered immoral. In 1984, just before his retirement from heading MoMA’s Architecture and Design Department, Arthur Drexler wrote:

“Deadly weapons are among the most fascinating and well-designed artifacts of our time, but their beauty can be cherished only by those for whom aesthetic pleasure is divorced from the value of life—a mode of perception the arts are not meant to encourage.”

MoMA is not alone in its morally-oriented acquisitions criteria. There are no firearms in any American collection of contemporary design and until December 2011, there were no firearms in any design collection in the world. This absence is not because guns aren’t well-designed objects but because of their negative emotional and moral associations. Dorothy Globus, curator at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, concisely summed up the way many design curators feel towards guns: “they have bad karma.”

There is no denying, however, that firearms in America are consumer products, and popular products at that. The most recent Black Friday, November 25, 2011, marked the largest number of firearms background checks (and purchases) since the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms began keeping

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4 As will be discussed in chapter 5, the Design Museum, London, UK, became the first design museum to acquire a contemporary firearm into its collection in December of 2011.
5 I use the terms “firearms” and “guns” interchangeably throughout the piece even though they are not strictly synonymous. A gun is a tool that uses pressure to expel a projectile; a firearm is a gunpowder-dependent gun. Few people make this distinction in popular parlance and, for reasons of readability, neither do I.
6 Dorothy Globus, interview by Barbara Eldredge, 6 December, 2011, Museum of Arts and Design, New York City, NY.
track—129,166—nearly one-third higher than the previous record. In October 2011, Gallup revealed that 1 in 3 Americans owns a gun, and that self-reported gun ownership is the highest it has been in nearly two decades. Guns fulfill several of the ideal criteria for inclusion in a design exhibition; they are pervasive, culturally significant, mass-produced objects. Yet one is hard pressed to find any modern, non-obsolete firearm displayed in a museum outside of the context of military history. In spite of their present popularity and significance to the culture at large, in spite of the 300,000,000 guns currently in the hands of American civilians, firearms are all too easily overlooked in institutional discussions of design and material culture—out of sight, out of mind.

This thesis explores the reasons firearms are absent from collections of design and what this absence reveals about how we assign moral status to objects, how design museums are uniquely differentiated from museums of art or history, and how curatorial decisions help form object-based ethical codes.

A gun is much more than its capacity to consistently and accurately expel a projectile in the desired direction. My research identifies analytical approaches to firearms interpretation that move beyond discussions of antique embellishments and military history to reveal firearms as objects of cultural orientation and physical metaphor.

In the first stage of this investigation, “Guns, Design History, and Design Present,” I explore the historical relationship between firearms production, the development of industrial mass production, and current gun design practices. Arms production was the catalyst of America’s Industrial Revolution and an essential aspect of the development of interchangeable parts and mass production.

In the second chapter, “Guns and Museums,” I examine how firearms are interpreted by three non-design museums: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, and the National Firearms Museum. I explore how museums construct/convey an exhibit’s value and how museum collections are shaped by ideology and subjective perspectives.

“Thinking With Guns” explores the symbolic and mythic significance of firearms. The respective writings of Esther Pasztory and Norbert Elias reveal how people think with objects and use them to express

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moral systems of value. I argue that firearms in American culture are more often tools for thought and expressions of moral value than tools for violence.

In chapter four, “The Moral Modern,” I discuss several features of design museums that distinguish them from other cultural institutions: their utopianism, ethical orientation, and inextricable connection to the commodity marketplace. Combined, these characteristics create a museum environment that makes the display and interpretation of contemporary firearms problematic.

“Aiming Forward” identifies recent instances in which design collections break the mold of ethical modernism and effectively acknowledge the relationship between design and designed violence. This section also offers a glimpse into a potential new avenue of design discourse, a more nuanced, and morally multidimensional interpretation of objects. The exhibition of a firearm in this inquisitive context would have much to tell us about guns, museums, and morality.
Chapter 1: Guns, Design History, and Design Present

“The very first product in history was a Colt revolver.”

--Phil Schreier, Senior Curator at the National Firearms Museum, Fairfax, VA

On November 25, 1851, Samuel Colt stood confidently before the Institution of Civil Engineers in London. He’d journeyed to England to exhibit his revolvers in the Great Exhibition of All Nations housed in Prince Albert’s Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. As Nathan Rosenberg writes in his introduction to The American System of Manufactures, “It was at the Crystal Palace Exhibition that many Englishmen were first familiarized, through an examination of American products, with productive methods which seemed so novel and original that they were promptly dubbed ‘The American System of Manufacturing.’” None were so startlingly illustrative of this phenomenon as the revolver of Samuel Colt and the manufacturing processes of the American arms industry.

Beautiful and efficient weapons, Colt’s revolvers would be considered heavy by modern standards but the weight and curve of their carved wooden grips still feels satisfying to hold. The originality of Colt’s design was a mechanism that rotated a loaded cylinder when the hammer was drawn back so that six charges could be fired in rapid succession without the shooter pausing to reload.

It may have been this engineering feat that prompted the interest of the Institute of Civil Engineers but on that day in 1851, Samuel Colt’s talk soon progressed to a discussion of the process used to produce the gun, co-developed with Eli Whitney Jr., manufacturing guru and son of the creator of the cotton gin. Machines executed all but 20% of the gun’s construction process, enabling better uniformity of parts and the production of a greater number at a lower cost. Colt told the watchful engineers that, “when a new piece is required, a duplicate can be supplied with greater accuracy and less expense, than could be done by the most

10 Philip Schreier, interview by Barbara Eldredge, 8 November, 2011, National Firearms Museum, Fairfax, VA.
12 As quoted by David Hounshell, From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 16
13 Houze, Samuel Colt: Arms, Art, and Invention, 6
14 Samuel Colt, “On the application of Machinery to the manufacture of Rotating Chambered-Breech Fire-Arms, and the peculiarities of those Arms,” 10
skilful manual labour, or on active service a number of complete arms may be readily made up from portions of broken ones, picked up after an action.”

The advent of a machine-produced product with interchangeable parts was remarkable. Though several components still required hand fitting, it was a revolutionary improvement in terms of cost, time, and labor over the existing “workshop system” in which skilled craftsmen formed and assembled parts by hand.

At the time, manufacturing professionals questioned whether it was even technically feasible for a weapon to be produced by a machine. However, unskilled workers at the Springfield and Coltsville armories successfully operated “special-purpose machines arranged in sequence to shape large numbers of individual parts, checked during production against standardized gages.” By 1855, machines at the Coltsville Factory were steam-powered and more efficient than ever before. Armory production techniques quickly spread beyond “gun valley”—the Connecticut River valley in which over 90% of the country’s guns were manufactured—and into industry at large in America and abroad.

The “American System” of making weapons by machine was a significant innovation. It allowed for mass production and increased efficiency, but it also raised questions about the role of skilled labor. The system was implemented in various gun manufacturing facilities across the United States and abroad, leading to a shift in the production of firearms.

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15 Ibid.
16 Houze, Samuel Colt: Arms, Art, and Invention, 6
17 The British government created a committee in 1853 to investigate “(1) whether small arms could be produced by machines; (2) whether mechanics and machine tool builders could produce a weapon; (3) what effect mechanized production would have; (4) whether arms made by machines would contain interchangeable parts…; and (5) whether the American indeed had pioneered in this approach to production.” Houndshell, From the American System to Mass Production, 6
18 Houze, Samuel Colt: Arms, Art, and Invention, 6
products with machine-produced interchangeable parts eventually blossomed into the mass production of sewing machines, typewriters, bikes, and cars.\textsuperscript{20} The process of mechanized systems became so universal that, almost a century after Colt's speech to the London engineers, factories producing typewriters and cars were able to revert back to manufacturing guns during World War II.\textsuperscript{21}

As theorist Paul Virilio writes in \textit{War and Cinema}, "Since Antiquity, military institutions have continued to revolutionize science and technology, and to solve the most complex and varied technical problems."\textsuperscript{22} There has always been technological promiscuity between mass culture and war. The wheel of a paddle steamer inspired the mechanism of the Gatling gun. The first electronic television was developed not as a method of mass communication but as a means of enhancing vision in battle. The use of balloons and camera-kites in war lead to the use of IBM-controlled photographic drones in Vietnam, which in turn lead to the unmanned aerial vehicles used in armed conflicts today.\textsuperscript{23} In a recent blog post, design writer Phil Patton wrote:

“Firearm manufacture of course was the first modern industrial enterprise because it pioneered the use of interchangeable parts—the so-called ‘American system’ that was applied to make sewing machines, typewriters, cash registers and ultimately all the machinery of modern life. The social implications of the gun world, from the Colt Peacemaker to the AK-47, touch on virtually every aspect of design—invention, marketing, cost, and maintainability.”\textsuperscript{24}

Guns are important in the world of designed objects, but even when discussed in the design-historical context, it is all too easy to ignore the moral implications that figure heavily in our perception of guns. Design historian Russell Flinchum has echoed the point that firearms have been the traditional approach for discussions of standardization in American design. But he admitted, “We’re not talking about what guns do. We’re talking about how guns are made.”\textsuperscript{25}

When reading the minutes of Samuel Colt’s presentation to the Institution of Engineers, one gets the sense that even then, some of those present were uncomfortable with what Colt revolvers do, uncomfortable

\textsuperscript{20} Hounshell. \textit{From the American System to Mass Production.}
\textsuperscript{21} Philip Schreier, interview by Barbara Eldredge, 8 November, 2011, National Firearms Museum, Fairfax, VA.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{25} Russell Flinchum, interview by Barbara Eldredge, 3 November, 2010, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY.
with the implicit support of designing a weapon. Towards the end of the meeting, several members spoke, apparently to justify Colt’s discussion of an object of war.

Commodore Sir Thomas Hastings, R.N. described the revolvers as objects of hope, saying that advancements in armaments would put an end to war and that “every step towards perfection in weapons of war, was a humane improvement.” 26 Abbott Lawrence, US Minister to Great Britain, outlined the revolvers’ merits and said that although they were discussing a “warlike subject,” the use of Colt’s revolvers in battle would create peace “for the most effective weapons were the most efficient peace-makers.” 27 He is paraphrased as saying, “Every improvement in fire-arms, therefore, reduced the cruelty of war, and tended to the perpetuation of peace, and hence he should be an advocate for any improvement, which would tend to diminish the ravages of war, whether between civilized nations, or against savage tribes, in the now inevitable spread of the white man, in his course of emigration.” 28

The idea that technological advancements in arms could bring an end to war has been the justification behind the design and development of every game-changing weapon from Colt’s revolver to the Gatling gun, to aerial bombardment, to the atomic bomb. 29 But as Mr. Lawrence’s comments show, the dream of peace is not necessarily a dream of human equality. With each successive conflict, it seems that war’s promise of peace grows less and less credible, and designer-engineers become less and less eager to publicly align themselves with its destructive means. 30 After all, design has moral implications.

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In 1961, George Nelson, champion of American Modernism and design director behind some of the most iconic furniture of the 20th century, criticized the moral distance designers put between themselves and the technologies of war. Nelson’s television episode “How to Kill People: A Problem of Design” aired nationally on CBS and, though no known copy of the special remains, a transcript was printed in the January 1961 edition of Industrial Design Magazine.


27 Nearly twenty years later, Colt would name one of his most popular revolvers the “Peacemaker.” The gun was recently named Arizona’s official state firearm.

28 Ibid.

29 George Nelson: “Ours is not the first period when designers thought they had produced the ultimate weapon. The marvelous missiles sleeping quietly in their cradles all over the world are indeed a triumph of design, but in many respects, they are still traditional, still reflecting the desire of the attacker to stay removed from his target.” George Nelson, “How to Kill People: A Problem of Design.” Industrial Design. 8, no.1 (January 1961): 46.

30 In 1704, the French engineer Chaumette, who invented the breech-loading rifle, engraved this into the barrel of his masterpiece: “La Chaumette has made this terrible gun. All its patrons will be blessed for it is the means of ending war and establishing the Golden Age.”
Nelson’s stance was ironic and slightly off-kilter, “There is a silly myth that generals win wars,” he began. “What the facts show is that designers do.” Over half an hour, Nelson recounted an inflammatory and informal history of weapons beginning with the rock, whose fatal impact is the basis of all projectile-emitting weaponry. The stone club, battle-axe, spear, bow and arrow, crossbow, catapult, revolver, and rocket were all identified as designed artifacts of human violence.

The tension is one of proximity and distance, said Nelson, for one must be close enough to inflict harm without being so close as to put oneself in danger. In this regard, weapons provide both physical and emotional safety. Theorist Paul Virilio underscored the emotional separation afforded by advanced weapons.

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32 Ibid, 45-53.
when he wrote, "Numerous veterans from the 1914-1918 war have said to me that although they killed enemy soldiers, at least they did not see whom they were killing, since others had now taken responsibility for seeing in their stead." There are obvious benefits and dangers to not seeing for oneself, not being confronted with the implications of our actions, our objects, and the emotional discomfort that may result. Is it this discomfort that makes one less inclined to associate design and war, design and violence?

A recent profile in the New York Times revealed that industrial design superstar Marc Newson has been engaged by the Italian arms manufacturer Beretta to design a shotgun. Though few other industrial designers would brag about their collaborations with gun companies, such relationships are not uncommon. Can a meaningful distinction exist between gun design and product design?

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Herb Belin is one of the most well-known gun designers working in America today. When I asked him to elucidate the mysterious world of gun design, he told me, “There’s a mystique to firearms. There is something people enjoy working with, an emotionality to firearms. Understanding that chemistry means more than functionality. That’s the black art to it.” Belin said that the most successful firearms elicit an emotional response in the user and prompt the formation of a relationship not unlike a romance between two people. This romance, he admitted, was difficult to design into his products.

This intangible, expressive element asserted itself when, in 2005, Belin launched the Model .500 S&W Magnum, the gun credited with creating the market for hunting-style handguns. He recalled, “My estimate of what we would do [sell] in the first year was maybe 2,500. I thought ‘who needs a handgun with that level of power? How many people would put up with the recoil?’ It’s not fun to shoot.” But Smith and Wesson sold more than 250,000 in the first year. “It’s ego-driven,” said Belin, “The most powerful handgun in the world—an intangible benefit for most people.”

His analysis of the firearms market was methodical and dispassionate. According to him, the two motivations for firearms purchases are both driven by emotion: want and fear. In times of economic growth, gun purchases are determined by want—particularly by individuals with multiple guns looking to add to their...

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33 Paul Virilio. War and Cinema, 14
35 Belin has worked for Smith & Wesson for over 30 years and designed some of their best-selling handguns.
36 Herb Belin, Phone Interview by Barbara Eldredge, 30 September, 2011.
37 When the .500 was launched in 2002, it was the most powerful handgun ever created and might be best know for its use in killing the 1,000lb, 9ft long “Monster Pig” in 2007. Bran Strickland, “Hog Heaven: Taxidermist Confirms Monster Pig,” Monsterpig.com (May 23, 2007). Accessed February 2012: http://www.monsterpig.com/news.
collection. “The multiple-gun owner is into something stylistically cool: right weight, look, feels good in your hand.” In times of economic hardship, the economy gets bad, crime rates go up, and criminal activity increases resulting in an increase in purchasing for personal protection. The most recent recession spurred the release of a number of new .380 caliber handguns, small pistols and revolvers that can easily fit in a pocket or purse.

Just as in the world of industrial design, stylistic changes must be balanced with purely functional innovation. “You can take a gun with a superb trigger pull, accurate, does everything you want a gun to do and make it as ugly as a mud fence and no one is going to buy it.” Belin continued, “Make it beautiful and it’s a functioning nightmare and you may sell a number initially but soon the chat rooms start to buzz and you won’t sell it for long.”

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Many people believe that guns embody a promise of status, safety, and even world peace. They are designed objects whose historical means of production has been incredibly influential today. Firearms are unquestionably consumer products purchased for more than ostensible function. The world of mass product design would arguably not exist without the pioneering technologies of the American armory system. 38

The year after Samuel Colt spoke in London, the Institute of Civil Engineers awarded him the Telford Premium Medal, an honor that even today is considered the “highest accolade an engineer or inventor could receive, signifying recognition of the recipient’s contributions to industry or design.” 39 In both battle and production, the revolvers were truly revolutionary objects. Attendees of the Crystal Palace felt some inkling of the gun’s importance even then. Today, however, firearms including Colt’s impressive invention are left out of design museums, excluded from the canon.

38 Paul Virilio writes, “The industrial production of repeating guns and automatic weapons was thus followed by the innovation of repeating images, with the photogram providing the occasion.” (Virilio, War and Cinema, 4) In his landmark essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” cultural theorist Walter Benjamin argued that the advent of cinema was the necessary extrapolation of the very first camera obscura. But even before the development of the camera, mass produced images and the mass culture that grew from them were latent within the American System of manufacturing.
Chapter 2: Guns and Museums

“Guns after 1900 just have no aesthetic value.”

--Jonathan Tavares, Collections Assistant, Arms & Armor, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

“Nowhere do you have a more in-depth connection between design and art than with arms and weapons,” said curator Dirk Brieding as we walked through the basement hallways of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I’d sought an interview at the Met after discovering that, though most design curators are happy to talk about the objects and eras they are particularly interested in, few were interested in talking about guns. Still, I wanted to know why art and history museums have weapons in their collections and not a design museum like the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt. Are guns even worthy of being studied in a museum?

Accompanied by collections assistant Jonathan Tavares, Brieding and I soon reached the library of The Met’s Arms and Armor Department, deep within the bowels of the museum. Lined with heavy wooden shelves heaped with dusty books, the room was shabby and oddly bunker-like.

“The omission of guns [from a museum] is one step away from falsifying history,” Brieding told me. Both he and Tavares readily admitted their enthusiasm for weapons, agreeing with each other that guns have educational, scientific, and academic value. Artists deal with every aspect of life, they said, even weapons. Still, Tavares admitted that many curatorial decisions are simply based on the aesthetic preferences of the curator and neither Tavares nor Brieding could think of a curatorial body specializing in contemporary guns. Their own bases of knowledge and opinions of what qualified as a singular object were oriented to earlier periods in history. Of the roughly 200 firearms on display at the Met, only eight were made after 1860, a time of incredible innovation in firearms design and manufacture. Those eight are the youngest objects in the collection, which stops dead at 1900. “From a decorative perspective, guns get boring after 1900,” Tavares continued. “A modern shotgun is not all that different from a shotgun from 1900.” These curatorial biases are not unique but have stemmed from museum tradition.

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It is not insignificant that the clearest path to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection of Arms and Armor takes visitors through galleries of European Decorative Art, past masterpieces of inlaid wood and intricately woven tapestries of the Italian Renaissance. Like the lavish objects in neighboring galleries, the weapons and battle accoutrements on display reflect a preference for craftsmanship and applied decoration (what modernists would denigrate as “style”) rather than functional form.

Preserving one of the best-known arms collections in the world, the Met has more than 14,000 objects from Europe, America, India, Japan, as well as weapons from Islamic cultures of the Near and Middle East. The main arms gallery, with its iconic plumed suits of armor mounted on equestrian battle gear, evokes the romantic image of knights heading to battle or perhaps parading in victory.

Yet the objects are strangely separated from all intimations of violence, suggesting instead a genteel and bejeweled impression of power conflated with beauty. This is not an oversight or mistake but a part of the intention of the collection’s creators. The Met’s arms collection is the product of American upper classes and was formed not without politics, biases, and hidden agendas. As Carol Duncan writes in her exploration of the roles of museums in society, Civilizing Rituals, decorative art objects were often acquired by museums because they were “the things that most interested millionaire collectors in search of aristocratic identities—chairs and silver made for eighteenth century English noblemen, clocks and china made for French aristocrats, pieces of old castles, Renaissance arms and armor, and anything else that could associate one with a distinctive lineage.”43 Other museums including the Boston Museum of Art refused to acquire firearms because they did not consider guns to be high art. 44 Indeed, Calvin Tompkins in his Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, says that the Met collects and displays arms and armor as fine art not because their first curators thought it particularly culturally valuable but mostly because J.P. Morgan and other trustees liked it.45

The Met’s collection, like the collection of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum,46 is more of a reflection of private sentiments than is typically acknowledged. While “primitive”47 weapons are

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45 Ibid.
46 The personal preferences of the Cooper-Hewitt’s founders were eventually invoked to explain why firearms and weapons (other than two samurai swords) are absent from the museum. When I asked curator Sarah Coffin why she thought firearms were not represented, she replied: “In this case, I think the decision is more that the origins of the collection are with the Hewitt sisters. They are not likely to have taken an interest in firearms, nor perceived it safe to have
displayed in separate galleries as a way of underscoring the superiority of European arts. Mass-produced objects are often omitted altogether. Unlike the works of other cultures, there was no place in the museum for commodity objects owned by even the poorest classes, for they were not seen as having anything to contribute. They had no aura.

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In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin argues that the process of mechanical reproduction destroys the specialness of an object because it is no longer tied to something authentic, a particular time or place. Benjamin was specifically discussing photographs and films but his theories just as easily apply to the production of guns. Could it be that the mechanical production of firearms similarly severed the connection between those objects and subjective culture? Benjamin refers to an object’s specialness as its “aura.” To the curators at the Met, embellished arms have an aura and modern, mass produced guns do not.

Working within the Benjaminian tradition, anthropologist and cultural theorist Igor Kopytoff delves into museum theory to further explore the distinctions between things with an aura and things without. The aura-saturated ornamented armor and embellished arms would be described by Kopytoff as “singular objects,” that is, items imbued with an aura of value above and beyond mere common things. On the other hand, Kopytoff identifies practical items of no transcendent value as “commodities.” According to him, "commodities are singularized [that is, given this aura of value] by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere." The fact that these arms were owned by kings, knights, and samurai—the upper-crust of highly accessible on display to the public with close access. This has remained a predominantly male area of collecting, and I think the Hewitt sisters would not have interested themselves in this area. I think it would be interesting to check with the Met, as they clearly do have an arms and armour [sic] collection, and I am almost sure that all the original donors and almost all the subsequent ones have been men.”

-- Sarah Coffin, email to author, March 8, 2011.

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47 At the time of the Met’s founding in the mid-late 19th century, many non-western cultures were considered inferior to European civilization (hence Abbot Lawrence’s casual comment regarding the “inevitable spread of the white man” during Samuel Colt’s presentation to the Institute of Engineers). The art and artifacts of these societies were even labeled “primitive art” as though aesthetic sense developed in a chronological and linear manner eventually culminating in European-style paintings. Denigration of non-European, “low art” was, consciously or unconsciously, a way for European aristocrats and intellectuals to assert superiority and cultural control. James Clifford. “Of Other Peoples: Beyond the “Salvage Paradigm.”” in Hal Foster (ed.),Discussions in Contemporary Culture, (Seattle, Bay Area Press: 1987), 121-150.


stratified societies—and then placed in the museum, a space of value, means that they are seen as singular objects above the world of commerce. Indeed, the entire classificatory organization of the Met’s exhibits—separating objects into like categories—is reflected in Kopytoff’s theory. He writes, “Culture achieves order by carving out, through discrimination and classification, distinct areas of homogeneity within the overall heterogeneity.”  

Museums are not objective arbiters of taste or dispassionate keepers of knowledge, they are themselves informed by all of the influences and biases of people. The Met’s founders saw mass-produced firearms like the Colt revolver as commodities, tools with no value outside of practical use and monetary price. The guns were heralded as an everyman’s pistol but the gentleman at The Met took pains to appear above the common man. The swords of kings and heavily embellished arms, however, possessed an aura that transcended price point and were therefore singularities, objects with a higher symbolic worth.

As Tavares gave me a tour of the firearms exhibits, he mooned over embellished guns and a sword decorated with Wedgwood jasperware cameos. When we came to the case of Colts and Smith & Wessons, I drank in the smooth lines and simple form of the Colt 1860, a visual break after the chaotic foliate swirls and whorls of antique engraved steel. But Tavares didn’t seem to share my sentiments. “Guns after 1900 just have no aesthetic value,” he said, quickly qualifying this statement after seeing my shocked facial reaction. “Well, I mean, to me, anyway.” Both Breiding and Tavares were accustomed to considering embellished arms in terms of art, not design or technology. And of course, they weren’t particularly interested in contemporary

51 Ibid.
weapons, the sort of firearms that would presumably best fit into a collection of modern design. For that, one must look to curators of military and history museums.

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David Miller is middle aged and good looking with an air of boyish mischief; it is not difficult to imagine him wearing a brown fedora and chasing Nazis in the desert. This image isn’t hurt by the location of his office: an expansive storage room reminiscent of the warehouse at the conclusion of the film Raiders of the Lost Ark. Except this government facility is on the upper floors of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and is filled with racks upon racks of guns.

Miller is an Associate Curator in the Smithsonian Museum’s Division of Armed Forces History, the only Smithsonian department that actively collects firearms. His specialties are the Revolutionary War, early national period, and guns. The collection contains around 6,800 weapons in addition to armor, military uniforms, and firearms accessories/accoutrement. In a history museum, the criteria for achieving singularity has less to do with aesthetic taste and more to do with the people and time periods which the object can connect us to. Miller mentioned the undeniable magnetism emitted by the sword that George Washington carried in the Revolutionary War, how museum visitors of all backgrounds revered it. The object’s contact with Washington renders it enchanting, gives it a unique Benjaminian aura.

In the fall of 2011, there was only one exhibition at the Smithsonian in which firearms were displayed. Occupying a quarter of the museum’s third floor, “The Price of Freedom: Americans at War” addresses military conflicts as defining moments in US history from pre-Revolutionary scuffles through 9/11 and the war in Iraq. There are 72 guns in the exhibition displayed alongside furniture, uniforms, tools, photographs and illustrations. The exhibition overall is visually stimulating, peppered with wall-sized images and a wide range of display techniques. It couldn’t be further from the spare white walls of the Museum of Modern Art or the Met’s velvet-lined cases. Amidst the collage of objects and images, the weapons are not given the same fetishistic weight and room for meditation as exhibits in MoMA or the armaments at the Met. But the careful observer may note that as the exhibition progresses, there are fewer and fewer firearms. Seventeen out of the seventy-two guns on display were manufactured after 1900. The Vietnam gallery contains three guns: an M-16, an AK-47 and a rifle fired at the Kent State demonstration. There are no guns in the gallery on Iraq. This is not because fewer guns were used in each successive conflict. But neither is it necessarily a curatorial choice. Miller told me “The last time I tried to collect anything from Iraq, what’s his
name—Rumsfeld—was in charge and he said, ‘Nothing’s leaving the country.’”\(^{52}\) David Miller’s storage racks are filled with firearms from all eras including injection-molded prototypes still undergoing testing. But all military acquisitions must be transacted through the U.S. Army Center of Military History, an organization that reports to the Administrative Assistant to the Secretary of the Army. According to its website, this organization “is responsible for the appropriate use of history throughout the United States Army.”\(^{53}\)

The influence of governmental departments in this area would be less significant if the Smithsonian’s firearms were framed simply as general historical artifacts but, because the collection is located within the Smithsonian’s Division of Armed Forces History, a military perspective is often the default mode of interpretation. If the Smithsonian’s guns are used to tell the story of the U.S. Army and the Smithsonian can only get military guns from a department that thinks there might be an inappropriately use of military history, then the kinds of stories told are limited. Paul Virilio writes that “Even when weapons are not employed, they are active elements of ideological conquest.”\(^{54}\)

At the National Museum of American History, there were no firearms displayed as objects of personal use, only in the context of military engagement and certainly not in the context of aesthetic value. This can be attributed in part to tradition and the museum department as well as to Miller’s curatorial preferences. “I’m more of a military context person because when you get into hunting and sports it just drives me crazy,” he said. There are “too many bells and whistles. Someone could spend a lifetime working on shotguns and nothing else.” For an examination of guns owned by average citizens, I had to look elsewhere.

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Since its founding in 1871, a year after the New York State legislature incorporated the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Rifle Association has grown into one of the most powerful political lobbies in the United States. The NRA is a conservative nonprofit organization that advocates for firearms education and protection of the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.\(^{55}\) Their headquarters are located in an

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\(^{54}\) Virilio. War and Cinema 6.

\(^{55}\) The Second Amendment reads, “A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” In recent years, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled on two major cases related to the Second Amendment, the latter of which, in 2010, held state and local governments as equally bound
unexpectedly bland glass-sheathed office building outside of Washington D.C. The structure’s lower floors are bisected by a central drive that divides the building into two wings: one containing the NRA’s administrative offices, café, and firing range, and the other housing its collection of 6,000 guns: the National Firearms Museum (NFM).

NFM Senior Curator Phil Schreier is a plump gentleman about 5’10’’ tall with sandy colored hair, a NRA tie clip and Teddy Roosevelt spectacles. As the public face of one of the NRA’s less overtly political ventures, Schreier appears frequently on NRA News, American Rifleman television, the History Channel, and A&E. On TV, as in life, Schreier’s persona comes off as a deliberate mixture of authority and good-old-boy humility, his speech confident yet slightly slurred.

In response to the Arthur Drexler quote discussed earlier, Schreier pointed to an engraved gun in the central case of the wood-paneled Robert E. Peterson Gallery. “Here we have Bregoli recreating the bombing of Guernica on a shotgun— in such exacting beauty that it’s as good as the original Picasso.”

Guernica indeed. Spied through a magnifying glass positioned above the gleaming plating on the side of the gun was the bull, the screaming woman, the streetlight floating like a large disembodied eye. It was beautiful but unsettling. “The bombing of Guernica by Picasso is like the greatest anti-war statement of art ever made,” Schreier continued, both of us still staring. “And yet here we have it immortalized in steel. On a firearm.”

We walked through the museum past a gun carried on the Mayflower, past Gatlings and Berettas and a Colt Armory lathe used from 1857 to 1941. In addition to galleries on major military conflicts, there were portions of the museum set aside for civilian guns— hunting rifles and sporting arms. There was even the recreation of a child’s bedroom from the 1950’s, illustrating the craze for cowboy-themed products. “This goes beyond gun collecting,” said Schreier, leaning on a case of comic books and toy revolvers. “They [museum visitors] remember their childhood. They had a Hopalong Cassidy alarm clock as a kid or a paint-

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56 “Deadly weapons are among the most fascinating and well-designed artifacts of our time, but their beauty can be cherished only by those for whom aesthetic pleasure is divorced from the value of life—a mode of perception the arts are not meant to encourage.” Arthur Drexler. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Harry N. Abrams: 1984), 388.
57 Robert E. Peterson was a gun collector and magazine mogul whose publishing empire included Hot Rod Magazine, CARtoons, Guns & Ammo, Mountain Biker, Teen, Tiger Beat, and Sassy Magazine among others. After his death in 1997, Peterson’s wife donated several hundred of his embellished firearms to the NFM as well as Peterson’s Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum, the first handgun ever used to kill a polar bear in the wild.
by-numbers painting. If you just follow people around, this is the first point in the museum they relate to personally."

As a museum visitor, it can be a powerfully orienting experience to see something one owns inside of a museum, recognition of self within a system of cultural value. The National Firearms Museum came closer than any other I’d visited to singularizing the civilian life of guns and considering them as objects worthy of consideration. However, Schreier believes that the National Firearms Museum is still seen as a fringe institution—perhaps because it has yet to be accredited by the American Association of Museums (AAM). He admitted, “Technically you know, Lobster Dave’s House of Cracked Claws and Emporium in Portland, Maine, is no more or less a museum than we are.” The museum completed the accreditation process soon after its move to the current location but was denied. According to Schreier, the AAM said it was because the museum lacked a five-year plan. “And we have plenty of plans. I’m not sure exactly what the situation was. It might have to do with our governing body. People tend to see things through whatever glasses they wear so whether theirs were jaundiced or not, I don’t know.” The American Association of Museums does not disclose the details of its reviews, only dates of accreditation.

Schreier eventually lead me to the museum’s most popular exhibits, housed in a velvet-lined case in the William B. Ruger Gallery. Oddly enough, they aren’t guns: they’re the Star Wars light sabers. “I guess because they’re fantasies.” Schreier mused, watching a young family as they read labels and examined the movie props behind glass. “I can’t tell you how many people, children of all ages, I’ve placed the light saber in their hand and they want to know where the on switch was.”
The criteria for what objects warrant display as “singular objects” and what are mere “commodities” is, upon examination, highly subjective and influenced by museum donors and curatorial staff. In spite of Schreier’s statement that “there are no politics in the museum,” all museums are constructed, curated environments and by nature serve an ideological purpose, some more consciously than others.

These museums weave narratives through the guns they display and the ways they display them, advocating for a certain set of aesthetic and historical values. The most common narratives are of power and the pursuit of a morally weighted goal. Whether the goal is democracy, peace, or wealth, violence is always depicted under the controlled conditions of beauty or ideology. However, the majority of firearms in the United States today are not decorative art objects or even military tools. They’re consumer products. The stories that these consumer firearms are able to tell are just as valid as the stories of kings, soldiers, and cowboys. But what would such stories look like and where would they be found?

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58 You may have noticed each curator’s different perspective on shotguns.
59 for more on this topic, see: Carol Duncan, Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums (New York: Routledge, 1995) chapter 2.
Chapter 3: Thinking with Guns

“And he shall cast forth the guilty thing beyond the border…”60

--Plato, Laws

"That wouldn’t have happened if someone else on that island had had a gun," said Jim Horvath as he checked the empty magazine of a Ruger .22. It was two weeks after a man dressed as a police officer opened fire on a youth camp north of Oslo, Norway, killing 60 people and wounding another 70 before he was apprehended. Oslo is a long way from the dusty plains and concealed carry of northwestern Wyoming, where I’d enlisted Mr. Horvath to rid me of my fear of guns and teach me how to shoot. He pushed the magazine back into the Ruger’s handle with a satisfying metallic “click” and explained the three cardinal rules of gun use: “Always keep the gun pointed in a safe direction. Always keep your finger off the trigger until you are ready to shoot. And always keep the gun unloaded until you are ready to use it.”

Horvath is a gruff middle-aged gentleman with heavy, thick hands and thinning sandy-colored hair. I’d been warned about his conservative politics and was prepared for the hour-long speech about my Second Amendment rights, but not the abundance of bonsai trees on his back deck. Cultivating the trees is one of Horvath’s non-gun-related hobbies and his speech is an improbable mixture of right wing ideology and eastern philosophy. He provided me with a handout to accompany our lesson; following statements on the necessity of the 2nd Amendment as a “doomsday provision” is a section labeled “The ZEN of Pistol Shooting.”

By the time we headed for the shooting range, I was starting to think that he made some good points. “If your car breaks down between Cody and Gillette, you might as well be on the moon," Horvath said. “Don’t let yourself be a victim.” This is a common theme of the National Rifle Association that I heard over and over again: Don’t be a victim. Be prepared. If everyone has a gun, all are protected. Guns can mean the difference between being murdered, raped, or walking away unharmed. It feels like a rather pessimistic and grim picture of humanity.

Holding the loaded .22, I better understood. I felt the weapon’s seductive potential. I felt strong, competent, and powerful. I felt like I was demonstrating my own responsibility to be safe and good,

performing my morality. It seems strange to admit now, but firing at a paper plate stapled to a support on the range felt great.

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Because a gun is also a symbol, it affects people in more ways than one. The context in which the gun appears—how it is held and how it is used—plays off of the violent potential it contains without necessarily actualizing that violence. Herb Belin’s efforts to design an emotional response into firearms and the attention paid to the movie props in the National Firearms Museum, reveal that many guns in the United States are really fantasy objects. Even in museums, we can see that different types of arms act as conceptual shorthand for different types of people in different times. The Met has Samurai (samurai swords), medieval knights (jousting spears), and landed gentry (embellished arms). The NMAH has American soldiers (Musket, M-16, Ak-47). The NFM has law enforcers (Browning 1911), cowboys (Colt Walker), and ‘20s gangsters (Tommy gun). Outside of museums and especially in popular entertainment, the gun is a means to externalize power dynamics and ideological conflict.61

Just seeing a gun changes power dynamics: it can induce fear in one’s opponent. Paul Virilio wrote that for all the technological innovation and science afforded by military forces, “War can never break free from the magical spectacle because its very purpose is to produce that spectacle: to fell the enemy is not so much to capture as to ‘captivate’ him, to instill the fear of death before he actually dies.”62

The gun can be more about inducing feelings of threat, the perception that one has the capacity to kill rather than the act of killing itself. Because of what a gun does—propel a projectile at high speed in a desired direction, often with the intent to pierce or inflict harm—and the associations that attend it, it is necessarily an object of power. The way that a handgun fits into the palm of one’s hand like an extension of the body and the directionality implied by the point of the barrel combine to imply intentionality and dominance. The gun’s force is directed, controlled, seemingly integrated into the body itself. When someone holds a firearm, there is immediately a spatial change in power: those behind the gun are more powerful than those in front of it (unless, of course, the person standing in front of the gun is holding a bigger, more

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61 Mark Stout, former CIA analyst and resident historian at the International Spy Museum in Washington D.C. told me that firearms aren’t actually used by spies very often, that the fantasy does not quite translate into reality. He recognized that guns are an important part of American culture but not so important in spy culture. He said, “Through most of the second half of the 19th and through the 20th century, very little authentic [information] has been known about the world of intelligence and espionage. So people creating fiction—whether written or filmed or whatever—filled this up with their imagination. And guns are great things if you are trying to create conflict and drama.” Mark Stout, interview by Barbara Eldredge, 7 November, 2011, International Spy Museum, Washington D.C.

62 Virilio, War and Cinema. 5
powerful gun). The Colt revolver may have been called a great equalizer, but there is really nothing equalizing about it. The gun produces a psychological effect in both the user and the people around them. Hold a gun in your hand and, like a magic talisman, it grants you superiority rather than equality.

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In her book *Thinking With Things*, Esther Pasztory writes, that though we often consider thought to reside solely in the realm of language, we think no less with objects than we do with words. “Masks and figures that are believed to have spirit power are interpreted as agents as active in their societies as microwaves or Walkmans are in ours,” she writes. The ritual objects of the past were seen as functional in the magic/symbolic benefits they brought. The seemingly non-utilitarian ritual objects of today serve a similar purpose. Pasztory herself offers the anecdote of needing to rearrange her apartment after spending time abroad, a literal and conceptual reorganization of her world.

The aestheticization of certain objects (such as toasters, chairs, or the works of non-Western peoples), Pasztory argues, occurs throughout the history of human making but is particularly potent when a valued object has achieved a degree of obsolescence. No longer essential for that society’s functioning, the semi-obsolete object is nonetheless celebrated as a representation of human endeavor and creativity. Contemporary design objects are perfect examples of this phenomenon.

Born as commodity objects with market-driven visual and technological features, they are sent out into the world to function. After enough time has passed for them to transform from mere accoutrements into symbols loaded with socio-aesthetic implication, they make their way into the design museum. Objects in design museums are mature objects, ones that have outlived the commercial life cycle or typify it. Pasztory invokes Hegel’s belief that “art is a thing of the past,” that our appreciation of it is always something of nostalgia for the idealized conditions under which it was created.

While I agree that museum objects have often reached a kind of cultural maturity by the time they are acquired and displayed in a museum, I disagree with Pasztory that they must therefore be culturally dead. If museums are places of thought and contemplation then the contents inside museums are still things that we use to think. In this respect, museums function as dictionaries of thought objects and lessons in the material

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63 There is a popular apocryphal saying that goes something like: “God made man, but Mr. Colt made men equal.”
64 “It would seem that the thinking process needs projections on and manipulations of things to work itself through to consciousness or to demonstrate itself to itself.” Pasztory, *Thinking With Things*, 21.
vocabulary of the self and the world. The majority of museum exhibitions are morality tales, that is, the museum uses objects to tell us how to live a good life, a beautiful life.

What might the exclusion of firearms from the design object-vocabulary indicate? Like the soldier who does not need to see his victim on the field of war, if we do not see firearms in the context of a design collection, we do not need to think about the implications of firearms as designed objects. Guns in civilian hands are more talismanic objects than practical ones; their function is largely symbolic. They can be talismans against harm, emblems of power, and physical manifestations of the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution.

Because the vast majority of civilian firearms in America are not objects essential to survival, and because of their strong symbolic roles, attitudes about firearms are just as likely to indicate cultural/moral attitudes as our predilections or antipathies for anything else. In The Civilizing Process Norbert Elias explores the “civilizing” construction of manners through European history. These rituals often have moralistic implications reflected in the prescribed use of objects. The section of Elias’ book titled “On the Use of the Knife at Table” seems to be particularly relevant in regards to objects with a negative, violent symbolism. Elias could just as easily be talking about firearms when he says of the table knife:

… it is the general memory of and association with death and danger, it is the symbolic meaning of the instrument that leads, with the advancing internal pacification of society, to the preponderance of feelings of displeasure at the sight of it, and to the limitation and final exclusion of its use in society.

Those who see a gun and react with disgust, who advocate for gun control or de-legalization, are expressing the same civilizing tendencies identified by Elias. They are using their relationship with firearms to acknowledge distaste for human violence. Our objects, particularly those with violent histories, acquire complex associations and moral implications.

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On one sunny day in 17th century England, the seven year old Joan Hide was playing in a Sussex street unseen by the driver of a passing cart. Struck by the cart’s rear wheel, she died. Though the incident was deemed an accident and the cart’s sixteen-year-old driver was freed from blame, the cart and even the

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66 Elias uses the term “civilizing” to refer to the effects of normative social forces present in every society, not the more loaded usage implying Euro-centric superiority.

dead leaves inside the cart were “held partially responsible for Hide’s death and consequently forfeit as deodand.”⁶⁸ That is, they were given over to the state for being murderous things.

Originating as the punishment of an object for inflicting harm, deodand is a legal concept dating from 11th century England. Yet the law’s sentiment extends all the way from Athenian Greece when Draco, the first legislator of ancient Athens, made a law that anything that fell upon a man and killed him must be cast out of the Republic. Plato invoked this established practice when he wrote in his Laws:

> And if any lifeless thing deprive a man of life, except in the case of a thunderbolt or other fatal dart sent from the Gods—whether a man is killed by lifeless objects, falling upon him, or by his falling upon them, the nearest of kin shall appoint the nearest neighbour [sic] to be a judge, and thereby acquit himself and the whole family of guilt. And he shall cast forth the guilty thing beyond the border, as has been said about the animals.⁶⁹

Deodand is a symbolic absolution of violence and death. It may seem childish or naïve to attribute awareness and responsibility to mere things, or to punish an object for inflicting violence it could not have been aware of doing. But the mid-19th century Encyclopædia Americana identifies an interesting point:

> Perhaps we may think the judgment that a statue should be thrown into the sea for having fallen upon a man, less absurd, when we reflect that there is sound policy in teaching the mind to contemplate with horror the privation of human life, and that familiarity even with an insensible object, which has been the occasion of death, may lessen that sentiment.⁷⁰

In other words, living with an object that has caused human harm might make one more comfortable with the very concept of causing human harm. If merely keeping an object that has caused violence might make us morally inured to violence then what would it mean to put such an object in a museum?

Pasztory and Elias might argue that “deodand” is a way for us to think about violence and perform our moral disgust through the destruction of the object. When a gun-control advocate shakes her head in disgust at the appearance of a high-powered shotgun, it is the violence she is really disgusted by, not the shotgun itself and its legitimate uses.

The problem is then one of object-language. To those who use a firearm for anything other than killing humans, the gun might have a very different connotation than disgust-inducing object of violence. One cannot act in opposition to a concept or to past events or to the thoughts in another person’s head but we

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⁶⁹ Plato, Laws, Book IX, 832.
⁷⁰ Encyclopædia Americana: A popular dictionary of arts, sciences, literature, history, politics and biography, Volume 4, Edited by Francis Lieber and Edward Wigglesworth (Boston, B.B. Mussey & Co.: 1854) 193.
are fully capable of acting against the objects and materials associated with those concepts and events. This projection of life and sentience onto objects may also be a component for projecting onto them a moral responsibility. Can an object have intention? The directionality of firearms, their ergonomics—the way they mimic and fit into the human hand as an extension of the body—complicates their moral acceptability. Is it easier to think about and deal with violence and brutality when we imbue the object with agency? Destroying the object used to commit violence is a way of expressing the desire to destroy violence itself. Another means of expressing distaste towards violence is placing severe limitations on the use of violent objects, as illustrated by Norbert Elias and his table knife.

Objects in design museums are praised for acting on us and interacting with us in positive ways—ways that improve life. This was the dream of the modern design movement. This is why design museums were formed. The exclusion of firearms from this context is a symbolic exclusion of violence from the world of design. Placing an object in a design museum is something like the opposite of punishing a murderous knife—the exposure and upholding of the objects that improve lives. In this way, design collections turn commodity objects into singular objects. The dream of modernism was supposed to be equality but like the Colt revolver, these objects gave some people more power than others.

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71 Some of these objects show themselves in the design world: The Museum of Arts and Design has a work in its permanent collection made out of decommissioned firearms: Gonçalo Mabunda’s “The Hope Throne” (2008) is beautiful but terrifying. Fonderie47, launched by social entrepreneur Peter Thum and designer John Zapolski in 2011, sells high-end jewelry incorporating parts of decommissioned arms to finance the decommissioning of more arms. Both instances incorporate the deodand impulse in the process of art and design; the symbolic power of the gun is transformed through its destruction and reconstituted in a non-violent object.
Chapter 4: The Moral Modern

“The result of this collective, sometimes subjective, effort is not just an accumulation of objects but a collection of ideas supported by objects.”

--Paola Antonelli, Introduction to Objects of Design

In February of 2012 I visited an exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art’s second floor contemporary galleries: “1980-Now.” Past a life-sized cutout of Patty Hearst with her machine gun and a room covered in foil-wrapped candy, was a section on design, a mini re-mounting of objects from Antonelli’s exhibition “SAFE: Design Takes On Risk.” The labels emphasized the goodliness of these things, their humanitarian benefits, the ways in which they help people through a dangerous world. The wall panel accompanying the display concludes by saying: “Safety is a basic human need—as urgent now, in the twenty-first century, as it has ever been—and nothing comes as close to embodying the prime reason for design than objects such as these, which deal with self-preservation.”

How ironic, I thought, that the design objects on display were all reactions to war and violence but nowhere acknowledged that what they were protecting us from was also designed, also born from the impulse of self-preservation. There were two anti-mine devices but no mines; a bullet-resistant facemask but no bullets (and certainly no gun); a pillow shaped like an atomic cloud but no atomic bomb; an unmanned “photographic” drone but not its armed twin.

I wanted to yell out “Are weapons not designed objects? Can design not do anything bad?” But the gaze of a gallery guard quelled my impulse. I remained silently standing before these objects, marveling at their message. Why is it permissible to display Josef Hoffman’s flatware and not an atomic bomb? Which item do we think has had more impact on the culture of today? I thought again of the quote from Arthur Drexler:

“Deadly weapons are among the most fascinating and well-designed artifacts of our time, but their beauty can be cherished only by those for whom aesthetic pleasure is divorced from the value of life—a mode of perception the arts are not meant to encourage.”

Landmines, guns, and atomic missiles are also objects of design, artifacts of human ingenuity as legitimate as their exhibited counterparts. Why must the display of these objects read as encouragement? Why was Paola Antonelli told to not acquire the Beretta?

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Figure 5, Re-mounting of selected objects from "SAFE: Design Takes on Risk." February 2012, photograph taken by author.
“Don’t mind the cave,” joked assistant Shayna Gentiluomo as she led me past rows of cubicles in the Museum of Modern Art’s education building to Paola Antonelli’s office. Through the door, I saw a small pool of light issuing from a desk lamp, emphasizing the gloominess visible through the rain-splattered window beyond it. Antonelli was writing notes at her desk and greeted me as I entered.

Italian-born Paola Antonelli has worked at the Museum of Modern Art for nearly 20 years. She has curated influential exhibitions from her very first show, “Mutant Materials,” to her most recent, “Talk to Me.” More than anyone else in the design world, Antonelli is known for her efforts to make design accessible to the general population through innovative and playful exhibitions and her public promotion of design. I asked her why she hadn’t been allowed to acquire the Beretta.

“MoMA is about modern,” she replied. “Modern in its classical conception and understanding has always been about the betterment of society. It’s about progress. Positive force. Especially when it comes to design and architecture. When you show something at MoMA in the design collection, what you see is what you get.” Antonelli said that within the museum, art works are allowed a subtext that is not afforded design; a painting can be an accusation or commentary but design cannot. She said that because of these implications, she had been discouraged from acquiring the Beretta in 1994: “Showing a firearm meant endorsing the firearm, endorsing its lethal power, endorsing its violent potential. It’s about endorsing evil, in a way. That’s how I interpreted it.”

Over the course of our conversation, it became clear that to MoMA, modern is not a style or a historical period, but an ethical philosophy told through material objects. Each curator interprets this philosophy a little differently. In the iconic “Machine Art” exhibition, curator Philip Johnson invoked both St. Thomas Aquinas and the eternal forms of Plato. From its very inception, MoMA’s design collection has been an ethical treatise, a material instruction manual on how to live a good life. This ethical code is most often

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75 “By trial and error, over seven decades, the Museum’s curators have sought to distill a timeless ideal of beauty and meaning from different circumstances, all the while revising and perfecting the initial paradigm. They have searched widely, among inexpensive everyday objects and prohibitive one-off pieces alike, in catalogues, in hardware stores, and in private collections. They have reassessed their ideas to meet changing historical and technical conditions, and they have made discoveries and mistakes. Each curatorial team’s choices have been celebrated, amended, and revised. The result of this collective, sometimes subjective, effort is not just an accumulation of objects but a collection of ideas supported by objects.” Antonelli, Objects of Design, 13.
discussed in terms of the object’s method of manufacture, form, and physical existence in relation to its function. If something is beautiful and functional then it is presumed good. Morally good.

This interplay of form and function is the traditional approach to MoMA’s design collection. Streamline and Art Deco objects are excluded for having forms unrelated or unnecessary to their function. But the form/function interplay does not explain why something like the Glock pistol, considered the Colt revolver of our time (mass produced by machines, devoid of unnecessary decoration, and technologically innovative) is excluded. There is a criterion that precedes the question of form balanced with function: the morality of the function itself. Antonelli said that the collection was formed with “the idea that modern design was ethical— ethics really strongly connected to aesthetics and to function.”

In her essay at the beginning of Objects of Design, she writes that the essence of the MoMA’s design collection “lies not in a formalist criterion but, rather, in a deontological one.”76 Antonelli acknowledges the numerous considerations that must be made when proposing an acquisition: the form and meaning of the object, its method of manufacture, its impact, significance, and the designer’s intent must all be considered in addition to museum funding and curatorial collaboration. However, MoMA’s collection criteria go beyond whether an object is suitable for a particular function to examine the ethics of the function itself, the human actions performed with the objects. It is curious to note that while firearms are omitted for this reason other morally questionable objects are not. Why does the MoMA display a Swiss-designed crossbow, an unmanned drone,77 or any number of knives78 from their collection and not guns?

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“It’s funny because to me a knife is a knife is a knife.” Antonelli said, laughing. “It always is. I can acquire knives [into the MoMA’s collection]. No problem.”79 She told me that in Italy, where she grew up, knives were the more controversial weapons and that it was bad luck to receive a knife as a gift.

In light of Norbert Elias’ revelations about the role objects play in a culture’s process of civilization, I wonder if tighter civilian gun control in Europe and a longer tradition of knife-violence has, in certain areas,

76 A deontology is a normative ethical code. Antonelli, Objects of Design, 14.
77 It is interesting to know that the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum’s exhibition of six unmanned military drones incited a protest in early October 2011. 200 protesters attempted to enter the museum resulting in one arrest, the use of pepper spray, and an early closing. If the exhibition is anything like the website, I’d guess that the animosity was in part due to inadequate interpretation. The website failed to address the emotional and moral implications of the use of such drones for observation and combat. Rather, it read like a catalogue of airplane toys.
78 The MoMA has at least 60 knives in its collection ranging from tableware to an “Attack-Survival Knife.”
undermined the gun’s status as the prime object-symbol of violence. The superstitions and rituals surrounding knives in Italy, for instance, might be a way for Italians to use their relationship with an object to perform their distaste for violent behavior. This performative relationship, motivated by the same impulse as the punishment of deodands, is an equivalent to the fear and repulsion expressed by gun-control advocates in the U.S. Here, firearms have a stronger negative moral status because they are the prime conceptual shorthand for the unacceptability of human brutality against humans. Other objects with ostensibly similar functions are not.

Antonelli pointed out that Dunne and Raby’s “Priscilla Huggable Atomic Mushroom,” a pillow shaped like a mushroom cloud and acquired after the exhibition “SAFE: Design Takes on Risk,” undermined Drexler’s idea that design cannot contain commentary. “It’s not a Beretta but it’s a symbol,” she said, spreading her hands. It enabled performance too, providing an opportunity for people to symbolically embrace their fears. She commented on how funny it was that the objects hadn’t changed since Drexler’s

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80 In our interview, Antonelli said of her own experience: “Where I grew up in Italy, there were so many weapons around me. Well, it was the 70’s—during terrorism. To me it’s totally normal to see police with automatic rifles. It doesn’t faze me but somehow there is much better gun control in Europe. The police are more armed and more visibly so but…you were more likely to be knifed than to be gunned down.” She laughed, “I’m so sorry to say such terrible things but it’s true.” Paola Antonelli, interview by Barbara Eldredge, 29 November, 2012, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

81 I asked Antonelli about the Swiss crossbow on permanent display in the design gallery on the third floor of the museum. How did it make its way into the collection? Why was it exempt from the weapons ban? She replied that previous curators all had their own tastes, “I mean we’re not supposed to acquire jewelry but there are some jewels and then there are 20 exemplars of the same wooden bowls. I don’t know how the crossbow came into play. I cannot justify it, frankly.” But she did think it was beautiful.

82 “SAFE” was conceived in 1999 under the working title “Emergency.” The initial exhibition was all about the emergency response after trauma or attack. Antonelli told me, “When 9/11 happened, I could not go down that route anymore, I was psychologically disabled. That is when it became SAFE. Proactive instead of reactive.” Paola Antonelli, email to author, 16 April 2012.
time but that design had, “I mean, today you have forms like critical design that take a little more of art’s freedom of expression and habit with subtext in order to highlight—almost homeopathically—the possible negative consequences of new technologies, in the hope that society will be able to prevent them.”

Antonelli admitted that other objects in the collection, seemingly innocuous everyday objects, could turn malignant—cars, for instance. Arthur Drexler’s first exhibition when he joined the MoMA in 1951 was “Eight Automobiles.” In his forward to the exhibition catalogue, Drexler wrote, “Automobiles are hollow, rolling sculpture.” He did not mention the thousands of rolling sculpture-related deaths each year.

It is important to recognize that the message conveyed through MoMA’s collection—any museum’s collection—is subjectively assembled by its curators and is influenced by the shifting meanings of its objects. Like the appropriate uses of the table knife described in Elias’ Civilizing Process, cultural/moral perspectives on material objects are ever evolving. As wonderful as it would be, we clearly don’t live in a Bauhaus utopia, and contemporary design collections should not only provide a space for the celebration of design but also a space for criticism and exploration of design’s darker side. It is only a matter of time before our design exhibitions more accurately reflect the truth: regardless of elegance, designed objects harm as often as they help.

83 Antonelli, Objects of Design, 16.
Chapter 5: Aiming Forward

“Design has had a part to play in every single object around us and some of those have a positive influence on the world and some of those have a very negative influence on the world.”

--Alex Newson, curator at Design Museum, UK

On December 1st, 2011, the Design Museum in London, UK, announced its acquisition of (among 13 other objects) an AK-47 automatic rifle, becoming the first contemporary design collection in the world to include a modern firearm. The press release read like a surreal series of catalogue blurbs: “The Kalashnikov AK-47 Rifle was one of the first assault rifles to be manufactured. Developed in the mid 1940s by the Soviet Union for ease of use in arctic conditions, it’s [sic] cheap production and durability have made it one of the most widely used weapons in the world.”

I found it curious that their announcement did not address the strangeness of the acquisition, did not make any attempts contextualize it within modernism other than to mention its materiality, its modern thingness and its ubiquity, as though it were an innovative toaster or an Eames chair. A few days later, Paola Antonelli commented that though the AK-47 was an important artifact, a historical icon, a feat of engineering, it was a rather poor design, the equivalent of a Model T Ford. I wish that I could visit the Design Museum and see the object in context but a phone call was more manageable.

Design Museum curator Alex Newson, the staff member responsible for the acquisition of the AK-47, soon nullified my misgivings. He acknowledged some internal resistance to the idea of displaying the firearm and much discussion within the institution about whether it was the sort of thing the Design Museum should put on view. In a phone interview, Newson said, “I think one of the things that is important to get across in the interpretation of the object is that it’s of war and it’s been responsible for millions of deaths over the last many decades. I think it’s very important to tell that part of the story and not just putting it on

85 Alex Newson, phone interview by Barbara Eldredge, 15 December, 2011.
87 Paola Antonelli, 7 December 2011 at Design and Architecture Book Club and 1 February 2012 at the School of Visual Arts.
top of a pedestal and fetishizing it.”

The purpose of the overall exhibition was to provide a survey of objects in the permanent collection and show how design affects users and the world we live in. The AK-47 was chosen specifically to illustrate the concept of a design archetype—something so successful that subsequent designs must either imitate it or react to it. “We’ve got a picture of Philippe Starck’s AK-47 desk lamp next to it to kind of contextualize it,” said Newson. “And a number of museums have one of those in their collection which is using the form of the AK-47, perhaps, but none of its function.”

Newson took great consideration over how to display the firearm to limit fetishization and best convey his message. “I didn’t want it to be visible across the gallery from all places at all times so I made sure that it was placed in a recessed trough so you can only actually see it from above. I didn’t want it to, um—it is a very loaded object. Excuse the pun. — I didn’t want it to have an impact and an influence over other exhibits and different stories.” Newson made the point that while the gun wasn’t in any way ghettoized since other objects are displayed in similar troughs in the gallery, a special effort was made to prevent the AK-47 from manipulating how a visitor perceived the exhibits around it.

Throughout our discussion, Newson never used the morally weighted term “good” when referring

88 Alex Newson, phone interview by Barbara Eldredge, 15 December, 2011.
89 Alex Newson, phone interview by Barbara Eldredge, 15 December, 2011.
90 Ibid.
to an object. The one time he did say “good design,” he immediately corrected himself: “successful design.” He continued, the AK-47:

...is successful and it does become an archetype that does influence those that follow. I don’t think a museum collection should only be viewed as things that you are telling people are things to own themselves. I think that museums and galleries can collect objects that tell multiple, dense, complicated stories, not necessarily positive stories or things that people should aspire to own. We tried to think that everything in the exhibition was about showing the impact of design. Not necessarily the beauty of design, not necessarily the construction, manufacture, or even process of design but the impact of design on the modern world and individuals and users.91

Newson said that the Design Museum has a different perspective on its collection than other design museums. "If you look at the V&A [the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, UK] and their design collection, they very much present it in terms of ideology and the development of arts and crafts and design movements.” He went on to say, "Design is in every object that we use. The fact that you might pretend it isn’t is not the way that I look at design. Design has had a part to play in every single object around us and some of those have a positive influence on the world and some of those have a very negative influence on the world."

One other thing about our conversation struck me. Newson was very careful to emphasize several times that the acquisition was a one-time event and not reflective of the institution’s policies:

I don’t think the Design Museum would like to be known as the museum that collects firearms just because it so happened that we did collect a firearm. ...I think it’s very much a single one-off case and I don’t think it’s something I’d like to be seen as a policy decision for the museum as a whole or the way we’re going forward. It was very much a single case and a one-off example.92

The Design Museum’s acquisition is an incredibly provocative move in the world of modernism, one on par with the demolition of the Corbusier-inspired Pruitt Igoe housing project—a moment made infamous by architect Charles Jenks as “the day Modern architecture died.”93 It cuts open the utopian myth of modernism in a very real way, undermining the MoMA’s progressive narrative. I wish that the Design Museum was more willing to admit the implications of its acquisition and celebrate the questions it raises. Even so, this is a landmark step towards unraveling the complex relationship between design, weapons, museums, and morality.

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91 Alex Newson, phone interview by Barbara Eldredge, 15 December, 2011.
92 Ibid.
When we met in her office at MoMA, Paola Antonelli seemed to agree that the omission of firearms was problematic but always justified their exclusion based upon what it would mean in the context of MoMA’s collection. Acquisition, however, is a very different thing from display. She speculated, “If I was to do a whole exhibition about violence then I could feature it because I would be able to set up a context, a thesis, tell people who are coming in, ‘we’re going to talk about violence—about subtle violence, overt violence, aggressive, psychological.’”

Antonelli revealed that she is planning on proposing an exhibition that presents a more nuanced view of design’s moral implications, specifically relating to design and violence. She had a brainstorm session only the day before with her “co-curator elect” on the project, Jamer Hunt, the Chair of Urban and Transdisciplinary Design at Parsons. They agreed that the as-yet-unproposed exhibition would examine design and violence including some less-obvious incarnations of designed brutality, “how seemingly routine everyday innocuous objects can be really violent.”

I met with Jamer Hunt a week after the Design Museum acquired its AK-47, and followed him through the lively warren of multi-use spaces to his office in the Transdisciplinary Design Department. Hunt’s career began not in design but cultural anthropology mixed with a heavy dose of critical theory and French post-structuralism. He has long been interested in exploring the unconscious and invisible structures embedded in objects and designed systems. Hunt hopes that the exhibition with Antonelli will provide an opportunity for more people to explore this under-discussed aspect. “Structured principles have a kind of violence in what they do,” Hunt said. “Violence is a strong word but they control, they contort and they discipline us in certain ways.”

Hunt told me that a critical examination of the outcomes of design, like the one he and Antonelli intend to take, could only make the design profession healthier. “I think that designers just live in fear that any negativity will knock them down the food chain,” he said. “I believe just the opposite, that it’s a process of

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94 Though, in an odd way, firearms have been in the MoMA for years—a picture from the ’40s shows armed guards escorting art in a touring show. With such a priceless collection on display, it is not difficult to think that some of the museum’s security guards are armed. The Met has armed guards. There is even a shooting range in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. I asked a MoMA staff member to confirm or deny the use of armed guards and was told that they couldn’t tell me for security reasons. Interestingly, during Antonelli’s latest exhibition, “Talk to Me,” the MTA employee restocking the show’s working metro card machine was armed.


96 Ibid.

97 Jamer Hunt, Interview by Barbara Eldredge. 9 December, 2011.
maturation of the discipline to be able to take itself seriously enough to ask the hard questions. There is a social and moral cost to the things that we produce and that needs to be a part of the conversation.”

This sophisticated perspective is an auspicious move towards the kind of multi-dimensional discourse that design museums can generate. Antonelli and Hunt will hopefully be able to fit their discussion of design and violence within the broader tradition of MoMA’s design department while still progressively pushing the limits of interpretation. If MoMA accepts their exhibition idea and moves forward, it will prove a watershed moment for the world of design.

As Antonelli reviewed her notes from the brainstorming session, I asked her if they would be including guns. She scanned the pages. “We don’t want to deal with fascism, Nazism… No torture devices… Then look,” she said, pointing to a hastily scrawled note. “Do we want weapons? No.”

However, their ideas are still developing, still treading the line between interpretive tradition and innovation. After another meeting with Hunt in February of 2012, Antonelli’s stance seemed to have shifted a bit, “we might have weapons in it [the exhibition], of various kinds, we have not decided, yet.” Although unlikely, given MoMA’s history and bureaucracy, it is perhaps possible that Antonelli and Hunt will include a firearm in the design/violence plan. Whether they do or not, I hope the public will have the opportunity to see their exhibition and find out.

98 Antonelli later clarified this comment saying, “The reason for our first exclusion was in this case not moral, but rather about the fact that they are so explicit as to, how can I say it? Rob the show of all subtleties. However we have today a diagram that genius Jamer came up with in which weapons might be featured as term of paragon.” Paola Antonelli, email to author 16 April 2012; Paola Antonelli, interview by Barbara Eldredge, 29 November, 2012, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

99 Paola Antonelli, email to author, 27 February, 2012.
Conclusion:

My aim with this exploration has never been to convince the Museum of Modern Art to acquire a gun. Rather, I aspired to use the gun-museum relationship as an entry point to a range of alternative perspectives on design, design collections, and the intersection of morality and material objects. Guns in America are very special objects embodying an incredible range of historical, aesthetic, and ethical connotations. I wanted to acknowledge the historical importance of firearms to the development of design, the continued significance of guns in current American culture, and also to unpack the possible hazards and benefits of displaying firearms within the context of a design collection.

We have examined how arms production in the mid-late 19th century was the catalyst of America’s Industrial Revolution; its influence on mass production is still evident today. Firearms design is product design. Gun designers like Herb Belin use the same techniques as more mainstream product designers to create an emotional appeal in their products.

We also looked at the ways three non-design museums—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Museum of American History, and the National Firearms Museum—interpret firearms. It is clear that art and history museums present a limited examination of a firearm’s story, such as the craftsmanship of its embellishments or its connection with a specific military battle, while design museums have traditionally excluded firearms altogether. All museum collections are shaped by ideology and the subjective perspectives of their donors, curators, and staff.

Firearms, particularly in a museum, are objects of physical metaphor. Like the exile of a deodand from ancient Athens, the conscious omission of firearms from a design collection is perhaps a symbolic repudiation of the darker meanings that attend them.

Design museums are distinguished from other cultural institutions by their utopianism, ethical orientation, and inextricable connection to the commodity marketplace. Combined, these characteristics create a museum environment that makes the display and interpretation of contemporary firearms problematic. Nevertheless, the barring of guns and other weapons from design museums contributes to the naïve view that design is an inherently positive force that can only help and never harm.

The idea of a morally progressive, utopian modernism has kept design curators from displaying firearms or even directly addressing the violent side of design. However, even if the Museum of Modern Art never acquires a weapon of war into its design collection or puts a gun on display, MoMA’s design philosophy
and the story it tells will continue to have a vital influence on design discourse. The MoMA’s exhibitions do much to raise the public’s awareness of design’s role in our lives. Antonelli and Hunt’s interest in exploring the darker moral implications of design enterprise is encouraging and perhaps indicative of future developments. In the same vein, hopefully, the Design Museum will allow its interpretation of the AK-47 to further mature and change in tandem with shifts in cultural meaning.

Designers don’t just make elegant chairs and toasters and iPhone apps, they also make elegant bombs and landmines and guns. Seeing these objects displayed and interpreted in the context of a design collection would provide much-needed mental and physical space to consider the implications of firearms as designed objects and to explore their cultural/symbolic connotations. No single cultural institution can tell the entire story of an object’s past, present, and future but that does not mean they shouldn’t make every attempt to do so.

Guns, like museums, have aims, and as Paul Virilio wrote, “The act of taking aim is a geometrification of looking, a way of technically aligning ocular perception along an imaginary axis.” In French, this axis was once called the ligne de foi or faith line but the connotation of faith has since eroded “and the semantic loss involves a new obliviousness to the element of interpretive subjectivity that is always in play in the act of looking.”

More than anything else, we need to recognize the subjectivity inherent in exhibition and interpretation, in addition to the subjectivity of our own personal perspectives. We need to remain critical of the ways firearms are censored and displayed but also examine the ways that we see them. Firearms may be loaded objects but willful ignorance is the more dangerous thing by far.

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100 Virilio, War and Cinema, 2-3.
List of Images:

Figure 1, Engraving of Samuel Colt’s display at the Crystal Palace Exhibition, published in Illustrated London News, November of 1851.

Figure 2, How To Kill People: A Problem of Design. From ID Magazine January 1961

Figure 3, Double-Barreled Wheellock Pistol Made for Emperor Charles V, about 1540-45, Arms and Armor collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 4, Homage to Picasso engraved by Bregoli, detail. Image courtesy of the National Firearms Museum.

Figure 5, Re-mounting of selected objects from “SAFE: Design Takes on Risk.” February 2012, photograph taken by author.

Figure 6, Three objects in MoMA’s design collection: “The Attack-Survival Knife” by W. D. Randall, “Priscilla Huggable Mushroom” by Dunne & Raby, and the “Guardian Angel Handbag” by Vieger & Vandam. Images courtesy of designers’ websites or moma.com.

Figure 7, AK-47 displayed at Design Museum, London

Figure 8, Phillippe Starck’s AK-47 desk lamp
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