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Allison Smith  
Notes on Trench Art, or The Promiscuity  
of Meaning that Characterizes a Heretofore  
Invisible Class of Objects

Picture the conflicted landscapes of industrialized slaughter exemplified by the killing fields of the First World War. Artillery fire rapaciously hammers the lush European countryside over and over, penetrating its fertile hills with shock waves of deadly force as it sculpts massive throbbing earth works of chaos and desolation. In these theatres of war, the landscape is not a static backdrop to military action, but a palimpsest of pornographic topographies, above and below ground. Shredded uniforms and mangled limbs hang from trees stripped bare, the artillery barrage fucking the soldier from behind without his ever once having seen the enemy. Dirty holes explosively ripped open alongside the soldier's ditch, his trench gutter serving as hidey-hole, sodden bed, and grave. The artillery shell, definitive weapon of the Great War, cuts across this wargasmic pandemonium, its empty casing ejected, hot and smoking, onto the ground as it explodes.

Imagine the munitions factory, its massive metal framework rhythmically pulsating as a forest of machine parts strikes and pounds, vibrates, shudders, and trembles. The screeching cry of the whistle, signaling the labor pains of artillery shells being passed through the hands of a new work force made up entirely of women. Called out to duty from the smoking hearth to the sooty cauldrons of industry, the munitionette in her pressed uniform is armed and ready for action. She packs each shell as it juts along, filling it with the explosive potential of her liberation as well as the sure death of someone she knows. It is the empty cavity of loss she feels for her

lover, her husband, brother, or son, there on the front or already fallen. It is the phallic icon she straps on, puts in and turns out. With ambivalent regard for her baby-making womb, she enlists in a metal-working society of her own, a blacksmith, forging the golden-tipped currency, shoved in pockets that suddenly appear at her waist. This is how she does her bit, praying to God that her sisters, the nurses, will be there in the field to help mend what she breaks. This is the war she wages, dodging accidental explosions on the job as the TNT dies her skin yellow and her hair orange. Marked by the adulterous scars she wears on her apron, she carries on this secret affair with the metals of war, pregnant with the fact of an empty aching vessel of objectification growing inside her. Nevertheless, she writes a note to an unknown Tommy, a tender unsigned love letter, stuffed into the packing shell as it moves along the assembly line like a bullet in a poisoned stream.

In a German trench there is a palette of matted bedding and a makeshift desk strewn with notes and sketches of the local wildlife. Careful descriptions detail the life a bird that hangs in a homemade cage. As it swings it sings the slave song of its own entrapment in the prison sticks plucked from the tree-lined trenches. A watercolor specter of gentle strokes, bobbing from the daydream of a quiet moment not spent killing or preparing to be killed. A small reminder of domestic tranquility, until with a thud, it falls, the sudden, silent, and intended alarm of a deadly gas attack.

Meanwhile, along the Western Front in France and Belgium, artillery gunners are stacking shells, loading each one dispassionately into the breech, but not before chalking a message to the enemy: 'To Willie with compliments,' or the equivalent of 'Die motherfucker, this one's from me.' Artful caricatures adorn the casings,

with their seeds of destruction cocked, loaded, and ready to blow. Back and forth, front to back, and top to bottom, bombs are lobbed as each side takes turns in the giving and receiving of the sick pleasures of war. Black smoke fills the air, obscuring the horizon in an infernal blaze of red-hot artillery fire.

Amidst this panoramic view of Hell, ground troops are dispatched to gather the expended shells that litter the smoldering fields. Their orders are to collect the shells into dumps and return them to the army so they can be recharged back at the munitions factory. Amidst mutilated branches and bodies, the storm of gunfire still raging, they swiftly and soberly collect them into their arms, like detectives pilfering some graveyard for the petrified prophylactics of wicked adolescents. If they are lucky they won't reach for the wrong one, for some of the shells are still fatally volatile, unexploded ordnance. It is a thankless task, one probably not worth the risk were it not for the resourceful soldier's ingenuity in desperate times like this. For he has something else in mind for these objects, an alternative use that is far more gratifying than their flaccid delivery like so many cucumbers in a crate to an expectant munitionette. In a brazenly illegal act of thievery, the soldier makes some of this government property his own, squirreling it away in the den of his trench.

What does a soldier do when he knows he is fucked? When reality stabs him so hard in the back that he chokes on his own bloody vomit? When depression and despair threaten to bury him in his sleep? When the denial of his humanity is so dizzyingly apparent, how does he pass for human? What does he do with his fear and insecurity, when he wants to cry but his survival rides on even the crudest mustering of bravery? How does he handle the loss of life around him, the moaning

cries of his dearest comrades – broken, dismantled, blown full of holes, soaked with blood, caked with dirt, gasping for breath, or laying limp in his arms? Not to mention his own wounds – how does he cope with his own oozing gashes, or a ghost limb? How does he fend off his homesickness, his estrangement from all that once seemed familiar? And how can he possibly express these things to the folks back at home? In the midst of all this, how does he calmly deliver some news from the front, and will he profess his love, or utter a final good-bye? In the course of a quiet day, or hour, or minute, what does he do to pass the time, or to relieve his lonely boredom?

He makes art.

He takes the empty artillery shell, he fills it with hot liquid lead, and he inserts a thick length of rod, the manoeuvring spindle that he then holds with calloused hands in his lap. Warming the brass casing and providing resistance, the molten metal begins to harden. With the loving devotion of a shell-shocked convert, he fingers its surface, remembering a rousing passage from the dog-eared Bible he keeps under his pillow, ‘... beat their swords into plow shares and their spears into pruning hooks.’ He wants to re-cultivate that which is spent, a temporary fulfilment of his desire to re-work the once fertile ground he found it on. The ultimate in libidinal sublimation, it is a masturbatory act for sure, but he sees in it a higher cause. He sheathes the shell with a drawing, something he had to barter for in the black market of trenches. It is a tracing from a ladies home journal, which he ties onto the shaft with twine.

His tools are salvaged from the wreckage of battle, bits of rescued shrapnel, a lowly bent nail, an improvised hammer, the rare pocketknife. He shares his special

hobby with mechanics, engineers, fitters, and farriers, but for once his level of skill is arbitrary. Tracing the lines in connect-the-dot fashion, he begins to score, to scar, hammer and bang. Substituting the usual instrument of death for a homespun art supply or two, his rifle lays sleeping by his side as he works the metal like a pro. An alchemical artisan going for gold, he forms the heavy thing into shape, imbuing it with new weight from its base to its rim. Images rise from this military scrimshaw, bringing tattooed immediacy to the surface of the shell. Floral motifs are by far his favorite, big blossoms with velvety petals, roses, poppies, lilies and pansies, orchids, narcissus, and forget-me-nots. Memories of the unsullied landscape of his youth, which only months before had remained intact. Decorative flourishes to appease a lady friend, things that you find on a greeting card or valentine. Dewey leaves, branches, and birds, the sinuous curves of a woman's body and other landmarks of the beauty of life. Whether consciously or not, his forms are unmistakably Art Nouveau, the movement historians would later say ended the year this war began. He takes the most common object of his daily existence, the horrific fruit of the Industrial Revolution's technological harvest, and the very symbol of modernism itself, and loads it with meaning. And with this self-determined antidote to centuries of sculptures being melted into cannonballs, he levels the battlefields of art with staggering precision.

Here it comes. He hammers at the base for what seems an eternity, slowly driving the metal into fluted channels, spiralling its circumference and fanning out at the top with a scalloped edge. Until and only when his concentration wanes and his blistering hands give out, does he reach the limits of his artistic capacity, breath-

ing life into matter as distant gunfire threatens to interrupt. He tosses the shell into the core of a fire pit, where it quickly changes to a glowing red and finally, triumphantly, spills the molten lead into a sizzling pool in the campfire. As soon as he can, he retrieves his empty sculpture, laying it out in the night air to cool down. In the morning he'll polish it, of course, as bright as a franc and as valuable, too. He'll use it to supplement his meagre wages, to buy some food, or the long-awaited cigarette. More often than not though, he will send it home as a souvenir, to be placed on his sweetheart's living room mantelpiece, filled with flowers and hopefully awaiting his return. For along with hundreds of other troops on hundreds of similar days at war, soldiers are beating artillery shells into flower vases.

Back on the home front, she busts through the door. Peeling off her uniform after a long day's work, she throws on her civilian nightclothes. With her feet up, she absent-mindedly flips through a tattered quarterly, then reaches into her sewing basket, searching for a needle in the hopes of finishing a bundle of embroidered postcards that are well past due. She follows the pattern of flowers, each one flagging the colors of nations still at war. As she stitches, her mind wanders. Suddenly irritated, she puts the needle down, piercing a heart-shaped pincushion beaded by a maimed soldier in the same camp. Distracted by the sad symbolism of a wilted flower, she lifts a heavy vase and dumps the fetid water on the ground. Noticing that it is tarnished, she takes a cloth and begins to polish it. Not gently, but vigorously, in a ritual act that after so many cleanings threatens to obliterate the designs on its surface. Slick and gleaming with her own reflection, she holds it in the dim lamp-light, shaking out the last drops of moisture and drying it off on the leg of her pants. She remembers the first

one she ever saw, coming down the assembly line. She was so beautiful. Could it be one of the scores that brushed beneath her fingertips? She wonders if he ever touched it himself, or if even perhaps it's the one that killed him. Her smooth curves were unforgettable, and her flower petals so soft to the touch. She recalls that long journey, the sunny day they stopped at the roadside, and how she paid for it with a whole week's wages. She'll take it to bed with her tonight, dreaming of the times she nailed so many like it.