

The Washington Post

# Style

FRIDAY, AUGUST 17, 2012

---

## An exhibit triggers deeper thoughts

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

“Manifest: Armed,” at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, was in the works long before a dead-eyed young man with orange hair was charged with killing 12 and injuring 58 in a movie theater in Colorado, and before a white supremacist killed six, wounded three, and leveraged racial and religious fears in a Wisconsin Sikh temple. And since it opened on Aug. 8 there have been yet two more high-profile shootings, with three dead in Texas on Monday and a security guard wounded outside of a right-wing think tank in Washington on Wednesday.

In a culture besotted with guns, any exhibition about firearms is likely to become horribly, accidentally, surreally topical. And so “Manifest: Armed,” dominated visually by a display of meticulously crafted paper guns, hanging from the ceiling and arrayed on the floor like a spectral arsenal, arrives at yet another moment when much of the country is outraged: about the ubiquity of guns, or the ritual but impotent calls for gun control.

Yet the Corcoran’s director of college exhibitions, Joseph Hale, who helped organize the cogent and provocative one-room show, insists that it is not about guns. Rather, guns are a prism for looking at ideas about how information circulates; how facts are disseminated, stored and gathered on the Internet to create new things in the real world; and how communities are formed through our complex and interconnected world. Guns turn out to be a good way of exploring these issues, because they are icons and instruments of power. Gun fetishes and pornography circulate on the Web because they are fueled by pure, libidinal energies in the flesh-and-blood world.

The three projects on display have a cu-



BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

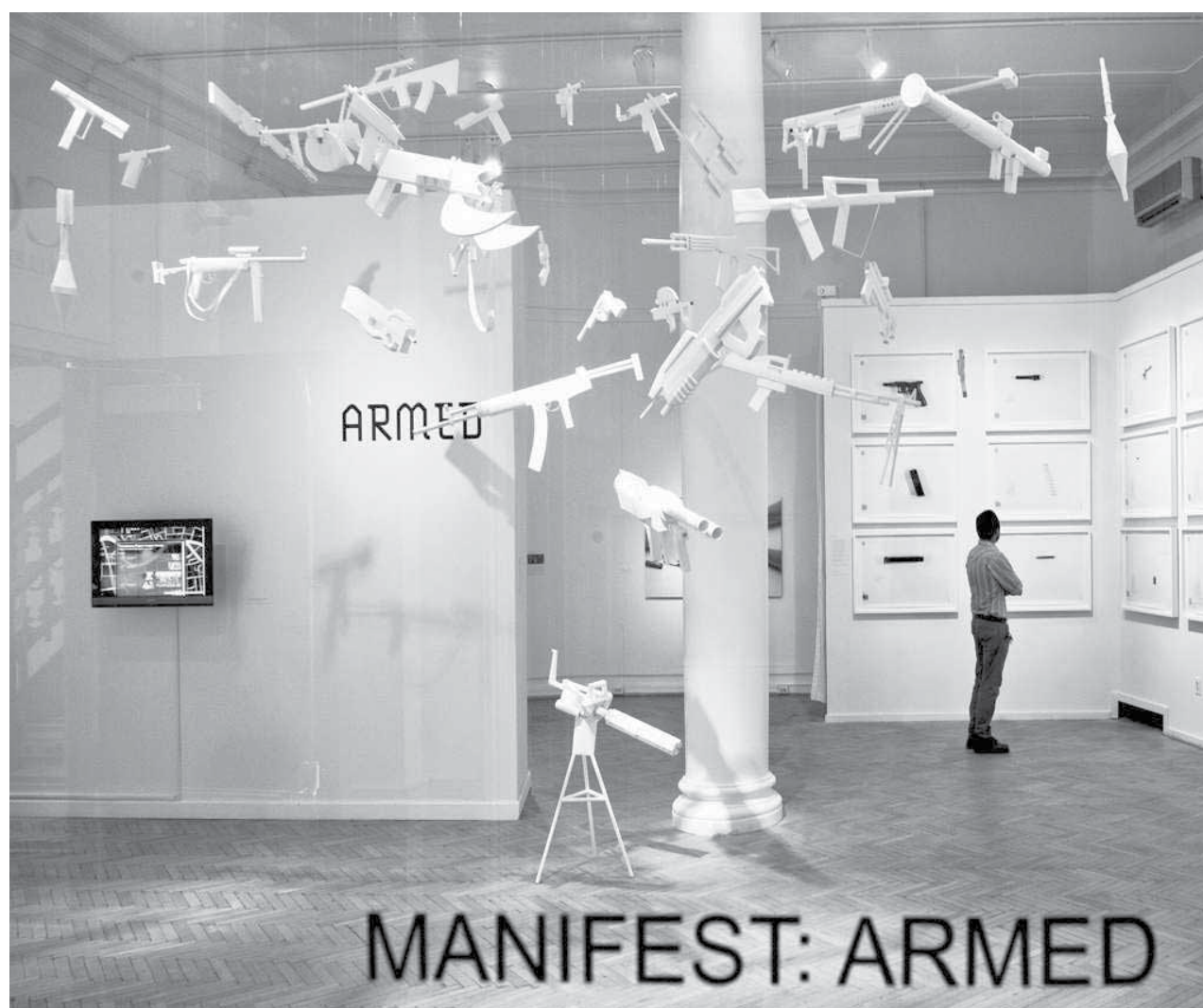
**TAKING AIM:** “Manifest: Armed” is dominated by a paper arsenal of guns.

riously utopian element, a second or third thought they spark about humanity that makes one feel almost sentimental about the prospects for our species. That’s remarkable, given how dark and depressing is the main idea they each embody. Artist Sarah Frost, the creator of the ghostly paper guns, has gathered online instructional videos from YouTube in which boys teach viewers how to make elaborate and detailed models from white paper and tape. The community of boys is far-flung, passionate and dedicated to craftsmanship.

“These kids are crazy committed,” Hale says.

The models range from precise reproductions of popular guns in circulation to fantasy weapons found in video games such as Halo and Mass Effect. The boys’ obsession with instruments of death and destruction, at least as old as the Iron Age, is mildly depressing — rather like it’s depressing to watch motorists rubberneck when passing an accident or shoppers trample each other to secure the best merchandise on Black Friday. It’s humanity, it’s flawed, and it’s a bit humiliating that we belong to this club.

But much of what these boys are doing



PHOTOS BY BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

**‘ARSENAL’:** Sarah Frost’s paper-gun installation is accompanied by instructional videos she gathered from YouTube.

resembles art, including the need to communicate with each other, the rendering of ideal objects based on things in the world and the craftsmanship with which they make the models. Frost’s paper guns — which look fragile and are mute in way that suggests both death and dispassionate detachment — are a poignant attempt to honor the things that resemble art in the strange, sweet but eerie world of online gun modeling. Titled simply “Arsenal,” Frost’s work is provocative, nonjudgmental and curiously moving.

Julian Oliver’s “Transparency Grenade” uses a small computer, wireless antenna and microphone — inside a translucent, grenade-shaped case — to capture (theoretically) anything that is floating around on wireless signals (and ambient noise) wherever it is “detonated.” The data are then to be uploaded to a server where they “can be mined for information,” according to a Corcoran description of the object. The implications for privacy are obvious, and for legal reasons, the “grenade” has only “detonated” once, in

Berlin, and then only provisionally so as not to gather information that could be legally problematic, according to Hale.

By packaging what is essentially a small cluster of computer pieces into something that looks like a hand grenade, Oliver is flirting with the incendiary playfulness that makes art either exciting and edgy or, all too often, cheap adolescent provocation. But the cleverness of Oliver’s piece and the questions it asks tip decisively in favor of the grenade having real substance. Again, it is the work’s tension between the better and worse angels of our collective nature that raises it above a knowing jape.

The “transparency” in “Transparency Grenade” is both an unwanted peeping into private communication and a powerful tool for accountability, and in many ways it raises issues similar to the debates about WikiLeaks, a grand online document dump that exposes the inner workings of powerful organizations while making it potentially impossible for those communities to func-

tion effectively, for good or ill. A grenade is not a surgical tool; it is a blunt, powerful and indiscriminately effective weapon, best thrown only in desperation. And yet, like the atom bomb, there is something curiously ennobling about not using it.

But what if such things fell into the hands of bad people? The answer to that is addressed in fascinating, elliptical ways by the most conceptually complicated project on display, “FireSale©TM,” by Colin Beatty and Craig Smith, who operate as the collective SmithBeatty. The project involves purchasing a gun, disassembling it and mailing its pieces to “33 stakeholders, including museum directors, art curators, artists, university professors, lawyers and a weapons manufacturer president.” The pieces are defined as shares in a corporation and beautifully packaged into sturdy cases. Recipients aren’t asked whether they want to participate, and when the collective issues a call on the shares — the gun pieces — the participants can ignore the whole thing or return the gun parts as asked, which are then reassembled.

The inevitable “missing” pieces are manufactured using a 3-D printer, a powerful technology that may at some point allow almost anything to be reproduced at home using digital design files readily found on the Internet. In the case of “FireSale©TM” — which includes extensive and beautifully rendered documentation of the project, a blog on which participants record their reactions, and the gun pieces (or their 3-D printer substitutes) — the missing gun elements, made from a fragile white plastic compound, are not functional.

But with apparently credible reports that 3-D hobbyists have managed to use more sophisticated iterations of the technology to create the essential operating element of an M16 — heralded by some observers as “the end of gun control” — the dark side of SmithBeatty’s work is obvious. If you have the right specifications, at some point you could “print” yourself enough firepower to topple governments. Perhaps.

The positive, practical elements of this technology are obvious: Surgical tools could be available in remote locations; easily ac-



**POTENTIALLY EXPLOSIVE:**  
Julian Oliver’s Transparency Grenade contains a mini-computer capable of “mining” data from its vicinity.

quired replacement parts might put an end to landfills stuffed with barely broken toasters. But there’s a deeper utopian element in how SmithBeatty conceived its game. By structuring the project as a corporation, the duo demonstrates how the complexity of human interaction may be the greatest brake on our collective suicide. The busy executive who tosses out his piece of this gun effectively stops the reassembly. Only complete participation — almost impossible to get in any project — can yield a functioning gun. At least for now, but perhaps not for long if 3-D technology is sufficiently advanced.

If nothing else, “FireSale©TM” makes us aware of how we are invested, wittingly or not, willingly or not, in our collective destiny. Technology drives us forward in a magnificent spectacle of human accomplishment, yet it propels us toward ever-more apocalyptic possibilities. The artist’s role — one role, at least — is to warn us about these dark possibilities, before Rubicons are breached that can never be uncrossed. If you don’t like a world filled with guns bought at gun shows, over the Internet or at mom-and-pop corner shops, imagine a world — what is being called the “Thingiverse” — in which almost anything can be replicated by anyone, anywhere. We will have democratized our world

all the way back to Thomas Hobbes's jungle of violence and despair.

And so technology, progress and enlightenment make and undo us. Rousseau has been warning us about the dangers since his 1750 "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts." Then, as now, it's tempting to retreat

into a shell, to focus on the self and feeling and the near-at-hand world, and hope the rest of this vast system takes care of itself. It won't, of course, which is why we need exhibitions such as "Manifest: Armed."

*kennicott@washpost.com*