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Auction Catalogue Narrativised: Leanne Shapton's *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry*

ABSTRACT

This article aims to tease out multimodal and narrative affordances of an auction catalogue, adapted by Leanne Shapton for novelistic purposes in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry*. In doing so, Shapton develops a new form of realism, in which the presumed physicality of photographically represented objects appears to anchor the fictional storyworld in empirical reality. Hers is thus a truly hybrid project: combining verbalisation and visualisation, enumeration and narration, functionality and literariness, her book continually oscillates between the real and the fictional.

Keywords: Leanne Shapton, *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry*, auction catalogue, multimodality, narrativity

A book-length fictional inventory of “lots”, Leanne Shapton’s genre-defying *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry* exploits the semiotic potential of a form that has by and large remained outside the purview of narrative fiction – an auction catalogue. Far from mere enumeration, the format allows Shapton to represent the vicissitudes of a four-year relationship between the two eponymous figures in an innovative way, inspired by her encounter with the catalogue for an auction of Truman Capote’s personal effects: “It was in reading that catalog that it struck me that it was like reading a kind of autobiography of Capote’s later years” (Shapton, 2009, as cited in Kennedy, 2009). Not only does she appropriate and fictionalise a supposedly purely functional form, but she also turns it into a multimodal, verbovisual vehicle for a story whose mimetic power lies in the presumed authenticity of the objects listed in an auction catalogue.

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On the level of textual materiality Shapton's book displays all the trappings of an auction catalogue: as signalled by the title, it lists 332 lots, which belonged to the eponymous couple and which range from photographs and postcards through books and letters to pieces of clothing and miscellaneous accessories. With a few exceptions, the nature of which will be discussed below, each lot is represented by a photographic image and a supposedly factual verbal description, as befits the generic conventions of an auction catalogue.

Given that verbal sections refer directly to visual representations of particular items, *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* appears amenable to interpretation in terms of ekphrasis. In her analysis of Shapton's work Danuta Fjellestad reads it as an instance of ekphrastic assemblage, relying on a fairly broad understanding of these two categories. She refrains from subscribing to a single theoretical conceptualization of assemblage and uses this notion "to signal the process of verbal aggregation of visual objects, and the way they are brought together into a constellation without any single organizing principle" (Fjellestad, 2018, p. 341). By the same token, Fjellestad mentions selected definitions of ekphrasis highlighting its being verbal representation or imitation of a work of art and contends that Shapton's work can be construed in such terms even though the photographs do not depict works of art and the ekphrastic status of captions and titles remains debatable. Admittedly, at first sight the selection of items listed in the catalogue appears to follow the random logic of garage sale; however, a closer scrutiny reveals a much more nuanced composition, resting on visual rather than verbal accumulation of images on the level of a page and the whole book. The sequence in which lots are presented is anything but random, as it is determined by requirements of narrativity, which in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* is produced as much by images as by words.

To account for the presence of images in the ekphrastic assemblage that *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* constitutes, Fjellestad proposes the category of pictured ekphrasis, which she defines as "ekphrasis that is accompanied by an image, that is, the image-plus-word variety of ekphrasis" (p. 339) and argues that Shapton's novel tests the limits of ekphrasis by taking "to its extreme the ancient premise of ekphrasis as verbally ennobling the visual" (p. 344). Much as her analysis throws light on important aspects of the interplay between word and image in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property*, it also inadvertently reveals limits of ekphrasis as a critical tool. While the category of pictured ekphrasis pinpoints a peculiar type of word-image interactions, the very phrase suggests that Fjellestad's category should rather be applied to works in which "notional ekphrasis – that is, description of imagined art" (Brosch, 2018, p. 235) – is accompanied by a visual representation of this imagined art based on the ekphrastic description. More importantly, central to Fjellestad interpretation, seeking to transcend the classical notion of ekphrastic pause, is the assumption that in *Important*

Artifacts and Personal Property “narrative flow is punctuated twice: by ekphrasis and by a visually reproduced image” (Fjellestad, 2018, p. 340). However, the verbal strand in Shapton’s book consists of nothing but “factual” descriptions, transcriptions and notes, which Fjellestad classifies as ekphrasis, just as the visual one contains only photographs. Consequently, there is no verbal narration that would be punctuated by descriptions of art, as happens in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or by images, as is the case with W. G. Sebald’s novels. The only narrative flow attributable to *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* is paradoxically constituted by the photographic images and the verbal descriptions, which are inextricably interwoven in a manner that invites the reader to endow with narrativity what appears to be a mere inventory of items for sale.

Given Shapton’s co-deployment of words and images to evoke the story of Doolan and Morris, the concept of multimodality, in its canonical sense of “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of semiotic product or event” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 20), appears better suited to an analysis of *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* than an inherently hierarchical notion of ekphrasis, which even in its broad understanding of “a literary response to a visual image or visual images” (Brosch, 2018, p. 227) presumes logical priority of the visual, underlying Fjellestad’s conceptualisation of ekphrastic assemblage as “verbal aggregation of visual objects” quoted above. In *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* the verbal and the visual complement rather than describe or illustrate each other. Consider, for instance, the verbovisual strategy whereby the protagonists are introduced in the opening pages of the novel. The multimodal composition allows Shapton to dispense with the description of their looks: the very first two lots (1001 and 1002) are photographs of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, which visually represent their appearance, while verbal captions provide such “factual” data as the name or the age. By the same token, one of the turning points in their relationship – the decision to move in together is represented by a photograph of a silver-plated cup (lot 1190), holding two toothbrushes in “the bathroom at 11A Sherman Street” (Shapton, 2009, p. 73), that is, in Morris’s apartment, as the reader learns from the verbal section.

It is through sequential organisation of their personal effects that Shapton presents the story of Lenore and Harold’s relationship. Having introduced the two of them in the first two lots, she uses the subsequent three items to represent the Halloween party at which they met. The growing intimacy between the two of them is presented through such objects as a photograph at a Thanksgiving party (lot 1014), handwritten letters (lot 1031), a copy of a novel entitled *Kinds of Love* with handwritten *I* at the beginning, *s* crossed out and *You* added at the end (lot 1049) and, finally, the above-mentioned silver-plated cup (lot 1190) holding two toothbrushes. The growing tension and problems in their relationship are, in turn, signalled by such items as handwritten notes (e.g., lot 1247 – “A double-sided

handwritten note from Morris to Doolan. Reads in part: *‘I want this to work, but there are sides to you I just can’t handle sometimes. When you raise your voice and throw things, I shut down and go cold’*” [Shapton, 2009, p. 96]) or a set of “self-help and relationship books” (Shapton, 2009, p. 99) included in lot 1258 and juxtaposed on the very same page of the novel with a group of business cards, on one of which a phone number of a couples therapist is noted, and a photo of Doolan sitting alone on the stairs of 11A Sherman Street. The breaking point is, in turn, represented by lot 1036 – an irreparably damaged white noise machine. Visually striking as it is in itself, its meaning becomes apparent only when it is juxtaposed with the preceding lot – Pamela Moore’s novel *Chocolates for Breakfast*, with a laid-in note from Doolan to Morris, in which she asks him to call her, as she thinks she might be pregnant. His response is written on the other side of the note and its beginning reads: *“Darling one, sorry to leave just a note in reply, but please understand I need some time to think too. Was not even going to stop home but forgot hard drive”* (Shapton, 2009, p. 120). As Fjellestad elucidates, apart from a verbal message itself, this item mobilises intertextuality as yet another signifying mechanism. *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* bears striking similarity to *Chocolates for Breakfast*: “Moore’s depiction of a love affair between a young woman and a much older man echoes Shapton’s, as do the themes of alcoholism, isolation, depression, suicidal thoughts, loneliness, secrets, and the difficulty of being a woman” (Fjellestad, 2018, p. 346). The novel ends with objects signifying Doolan’s and Morris’ separation, including letters on their becoming friends and respecting the other person’s need to keep the distance. The poignant two lots closing *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* include dried flower petals, kept by Morris, and pressed four-leaf clovers, kept by Doolan.

By imitating an auction catalogue in all its verbovisual multimodality, *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* reconfigures such basic elements of novelistic discourse as plot, narration, character construction or description of setting by renouncing narrative authority that would guarantee their coherence. The only narratorial agent attributable to Shapton’s novel is the figure labelled by Wolfgang Hallet in his discussion of the multimodal novel “a narrator-presenter”, that is, an agent who – instead of telling a story in words – is responsible for “the selection of texts and visual images” (Hallet, 2009, p. 150). In the note opening *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* this arranging function is explicitly assumed by the anonymous representatives of the fictitious auction house Strachan & Quinn, though it is naturally Shapton who has designed the overall composition of the book, including even its paratextual paraphernalia. The absence of traditionally understood narrator ties in with a much more active role of the reader, who “in the case of the multimodal novel [...] is engaged in constructing a holistic mental model of the textual world in which she/he incorporates data from different semiotic sources and modes” (Hallet, 2009, p. 150). He or she is as much guided

in this process by a consecutive arrangement of lots on the macro-level of their overall organisation, indicated by their numbers and inevitable sequentiality of book pages, as by the relational juxtapositions operating on the micro-level of a single page, bringing together items that reinforce, contrast with or oppose each other.

Significantly, it is not only the sequence of the lots but also their nature that have been determined by the needs of narrativity in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property*. Compared to a catalogue that inspired Shapton, *The Private World of Truman Capote*, her book contains many more photographs of the protagonists and many more handwritten notes, postcards and such like, frequently introduced for the sake of generic verisimilitude as materials left in books, clothes and other theoretically sellable items. The photographs not only visually introduce Lenore and Harold in the very first two lots, but also represent various activities they engaged in, either together or separately, as well as relations they had with other people. Page 53, for instance, contains two parallel sets of men's and women's sunglasses, which are accompanied by a photo of Morris "sitting next to an unidentified woman" (Shapton, 2009, p. 53) and a photo of Doolan posing on her own. The latter lot includes a Post-it note in Morris's script, reading: "*I'm sorry it upset you. I totally forgot! But they look better on you! Call me when you've calmed down!*" (p. 53). This note exemplifies, in turn, the primary function of handwritten materials included in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property*. Shapton uses them to convey the protagonists' mental states and experiences, feelings in particular, by means of a narrative technique of self-report, that is protagonists' own direct or indirect verbalisation. Again, these discursive manifestations of the inner life encompass a wide array of emotions, from initial infatuation (e.g., lot 1011: Doolan's note reading "*Thanksgiving / Croton Falls / Friday / [...] / Wine? / HIM / HIM / HIM / HIM / HAL*" [Shapton, 2009, p. 7]) through longing (lot 1020 including postcards sent by Morris to Doolan, with one of them reading, for instance, "[p]issing rain here, work boring, missing you and thinking of your face all the time / all the time / all the time ..." [Shapton, 2009, p. 10] and contrition ("*Lenore, I'm sorry we fought last night. I will give you a call from my hotel. Hx*" [Shapton, 2009, p. 24]) to anger and frustration (lot 1248 – a note in Doolan's script reading

JUST PLEASE Return my e-mails / Call when late / Show interest in food / Show interest in my friends / Acknowledge efforts I make to make you happy / Don't smirk at my stuff in your apt / Stop being so bossy / Don't take your stress out on me / GoDDAMit!" (Shapton, 2009, p. 97).

This is not to say that images are never used or able to convey the protagonists' emotions. A number of photographs depict Doolan and Morris as a happy couple enjoying each other's company on different occasions (e.g., lots 1014 and 1263) or indicate their loneliness by presenting them separately (e.g., lots 1303 and 1319).

By the same token, it is the interplay between the verbal and the visual that allows the reader to reconstruct the central characters and their traits. Books, newspaper clippings and assorted paraphernalia represent not only their interests but also personalities with all their peculiarities. One striking aspect of this multimodal construction of characters is Shapton's attention to detail, which instigates the reader's forensic desire to distill as much information as possible from the apparently insignificant mundane objects. Fjellestad notices, for instance, that lot 1079 – the contents of Lenore's cosmetic case – includes a small bottle of Heinz ketchup, reflecting Doolan's almost obsessive taste for eating cashews with ketchup. Harold's corresponding travel bag is dominated by medications for such conditions as stomach problems, motion sickness, insomnia or anxiety. Coupled with his handwritten note included in lot 1090 – "*Valium (blue) / Xanax (white) / Cylexa (small white) / Kath*" (Shapton, 2009, p. 35), it signifies a depressive and perhaps hypochondriac streak in his personality.

In a similar vein, Shapton employs objects and photographs, to evoke rather than thoroughly represent various aspects of the setting: lot 1081 including three postcards of Venice with notes written by both Doolan and Morris indicates the location of their 2003 summer holiday; a theater playbill for *Dinner at Eight* locates their teasing exchange, handwritten in margins – "*Are you crying? / No, allergies / Crying!*" (Shapton, 2009, p. 9) – at Vivian Beaumont Theatre, while photographs of Morris and Doolan taken at Celadon House give the reader an idea of a place where the couple spent the summers of 2004 and 2005. As can be seen, despite the amenability of such components as apartments, rooms or even streets to photographic representation, *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* offers but glimpses into the spatial aspect of the storyworld and on certain occasions appears to be teasing the reader with images that preclude reconstruction of spatial particulars. This is, for instance, the case with lot 1018, which consists of two parallel photos of Doolan and Morris waiting outside each other's apartments. While the description gives the address of each apartment, in other words, precise geographical locations; the photographs themselves are a far cry from chorographic representation of their memorable peculiarities that would allow the reader to see rather than imagine where the protagonists live¹.

Despite the dominance of images over text in the visual composition of the novel, Fjellestad (2009, p. 347) claims that in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* "ultimately the verbal upstages the visual", for it provides much more information and ennobles the mundane:

¹ For an overview of geography and chorography as two major traditions in representation of the world going back to Ptolemy's *Geography*, see, e.g., Cosgrove (2001, pp. 102–105).

That banal everyday objects are worthy of attention at all, that they are important artifacts, that they have value is mediated by ekphrasis. Ekphrasis reanimates everyday detritus and turns it into something desirable and meaningful. More than that: to be narrativized, the images need words (Fjellestad, 2018, p. 349).

While indeed in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* images do need words, words need images as well, for it is only their co-deployment that allows Shapton to tell a love story by way of an auction catalogue. Shapton's reliance on words to convey important aspects of the relationship between Doolan and Morris reveals the limits of the story-telling potential of things, not images. A sequential organization of the latter may well be sufficient for narrativity, especially if it contains figures to whom agency can be attributed, as attested by silent movies, comic strips and photo-novels. However, a mere succession of admittedly mundane things would probably be too polysemous to constitute a story or reveal the inner life of protagonists. Verbal captions reduce this polysemy by enacting a semiotic mechanism that Roland Barthes (1977) has felicitously dubbed anchorage: "the text *directs* the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others" (p. 40). They imbed Doolan's and Morris's important artifacts and personal property in the context of their relationship, just as the photos of the protagonists interspersed throughout the book remind the reader of their central role. Shapton's novel appears to take a rather ironic stance towards their "actual" (i.e., attributable on the level of fictional universe) desirability. By providing value estimation for each lot (\$ 15-20, for instance, for a print-out of an e-mail from Doolan's ex-boyfriend; \$ 10-12 for a set of nine champagne and wine corks from different occasions) Shapton follows the law of the genre of an auction catalogue only to subvert it, as the value of all these mundane objects cannot possibly reside in the price they might fetch at a proper auction. The monetary estimations should rather be read as an ironic commentary on commodification of private lives in contemporary mass and social media. At the same time, the ordinariness and apparent randomness of all these objects make the whole set-up much closer to garage sale, in which the items that have lost their meaning or become unwanted reminders of the failed relationship are disposed of.² Ultimately, it would appear that Doolan's and Morris's personal effects have no other value than the one they derive from the function they perform in the story the novel tells through them.

Seen from the vantage of new materialism, the interplay between images and words in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* enacts the tension between

² I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for suggesting that *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* could be read as a quasi-catalogue for garage sale of the unwanted items connected with the past.

“the very semantic reducibility of things to objects [and] the semantic irreducibility of things to objects” (Brown, 2001, p. 3) Bill Brown explores in his thing theory:

You could imagine things [...] as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems (Brown, 2001, p. 5).

Without words, the photographs of mundane items foreground their thingness, as they arrest the reader’s attention by their sole visual presence outside the utilitarian context. Descriptions coupled with sequential organization reduce them to objects within a narrative, not only related to Doolan and Morris but often endowed with the function of a bearer of a verbally rendered expression of their inner life, as happens in the case of all the items containing their handwritten notes. The reduction of some items to a mere pretext for a verbal passage is thrown into sharp relief by recurring verbal references to lots that are not illustrated, such as “an email exchange between Morris in Peru and Doolan in New York” (Shapton, 2009, p. 25) or “a card table covered in visitor’s pass stickers” (p. 81) routinely attached by Morris after returning from business meetings.

By embedding Doolan’s and Morris’s relationship in a larger network of relations between people and things as/and objects, Shapton reveals the inevitable dependence of the human on the inhuman. As Zuzanna Jakubowski argues, she thus paves the way for “the relational realism of things in literature” (Jakubowski, 2013, p. 132). The critic conceptualises it in terms derived from Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, in which reality, neither purely empirical nor exclusively discursive, is articulated through multiple relations between human and non-human actants, things and concepts, signs and referents.

Furthermore, photographic images representing both characters and their objects produce the form of realism that goes beyond the Barthesian reality effect of referential illusion: their physicality appears to anchor the world depicted in the novel directly in the empirical reality. Construed in terms of Peircean semiotics, photographs are iconic and indexical two-dimensional signs standing for actual physical items. Their iconicity stems from their similarity to the objects they represent; indexicality results, in turn, from contiguity: without the objects the photographs would not have come into being. It is on account of its being a result of photochemical process that analogue photography is often construed as a physical impression of the real world and described as “a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint of a death mask” (Sontag, 1977, p. 154) in Susan Sontag’s canonical *On Photography*. Even though the amenability of digital media to image manipulation is often evoked to denounce this “myth of photographic truth” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 17), the functional nature of

an auction catalogue guarantees referentiality of photographic image it contains: barring the cases of fraud, their existence can be confirmed at the auction proper. Consequently, both Barthes' concept of anchorage, mentioned above and Sontag's tropes can be extended and applied to the objects in photographs. In *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* they acquire mimetic power, which rests on the rule of contiguity. Having supposedly belonged once to the protagonists and bearing in many cases their handwritten marks, they become their traces in Shapton's book and thus confirm their existence. As Sonja Neef and José van Dijck note, "handwriting is traditionally regarded as an autography, as an un-exchangeable, unique and authentic 'signature' that claims to guarantee the presence of an individual writer during a historically unique moment of writing" (p. 9). Furthermore, the apparently unmediated way in which these personal belongings are presented to the reader in their raw ordinariness, as it were, endows them – and by extension Doolan and Morris – with authenticity. It is only thanks to intratextual and extratextual markers of fictionality, such as non-existence of the auction house Strachan & Quinn, the presence of epigraphs opening the text proper or simply the location of the book in the fiction section at a bookstore/library that the reader realises that characters must be impersonated by actors or some other people, who are not Doolan or Morris, and that all the lots are but props in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property*.

In its blurring of the borderline between reality and fiction by incorporating what seems to be fragments of the former in the latter Shapton's fictional auction catalogue simultaneously enacts, exploits and transcends what David Shields has identified as the desire for the real in contemporary culture. Published a year before his famous manifesto *Reality Hunger*, *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* appropriates the supposedly non-fictional form of an auction catalogue for novelistic purposes and apparently dispenses with such conventional, verbally rendered components as narration, plot, characters and setting. Instead, it offers its readers qualities that Shields champions as the markers of new authenticity – "a deliberate unartiness: 'raw' material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional" (Shields, 2010, p. 3). Its assemblagistic composition is not unlike Shields' preferred form, collage, though its content avoids the narcissistic pitfalls of autobiographical self-reflexivity he advocates. A seemingly silent and invisible author-designer, Shapton refrains from direct representation of her own experiences, predilections or reflections in *Important Artifacts and Personal Property* and offers the reader a catalogue of mundane objects, whose visual materiality appeals to the contemporary nostalgia for authenticity attributable to physical objects, whose tactility is often cherished over the elusive and deceptive characteristics of the virtual. At the same time, through the interplay between words and images, sequentiality and contiguity she endows her own work with

narrativity and fictionality, two key components of the novelistic discourse, and thus re-asserts the capability of the novel as genre to exploit non-literary multimodal forms for mimetic purposes.

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