

ZSOLT ASZTALOS

**FIRED
BUT
UNEXPLODED**

Hungarian Pavilion

55th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia

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INTRODUCTION

Gábor Gulyás
GRACE

Several among the public works of art that commemorate the events of the Second World War are entitled *Monument to the Unknown Soldier*. Politicians have a predilection for laying a wreath on this or that tomb of the unknown soldier as part of an official ceremony — not only because this enables them to bow their heads to the victims *in general*, but also because it is difficult (particularly in East Central Europe, which suffered much under totalitarian dictatorships) to find a *familiar* war hero whose person would have a positive moral message for the majority of society. American war lore has it that the allied soldiers who were trained in bombing often gave a name to their devices of mass destruction, sometimes inscribing messages on them for the enemy, even though they had no intention to communicate in this manner. They made their bombs individual, personified them. We Hungarians do not have a lore like that. We were defeated in both large wars of the 20th century (according to the historical memory established in schools: we were on the wrong side), and instead of familiar explosive devices, we only have horrible unfamiliar ones, which were once used to bomb our cities. The sufferings we would remember, if we could, were caused by unfamiliar bombs. But for the most part we cannot.

I was a small child when my grandfather told me about the bombing of Kassa (Košice, Slovakia), of which he had a first-hand experience as the soldier of the Hungarian Royal Army. It was a horrific sight, my grandfather said, followed by a terrible doubt, because soon a rumour started to circulate that the airplanes with the Soviet roundel were in fact German: our ally was said to bomb us so as to dupe Hungary into the war. My grandfather did not believe this; nor could he believe its opposite. He did not know who the bombers were, or what they wanted to achieve with the destruction. In any event, there was a war from then on, with misery and suffering to last for a lifetime, which in his case abated only seven years later, when he was released from the Soviet POW camp.

My third son was about to be born when NATO, led by the USA, started to bomb Yugoslavia.

It became a habit with me to go outdoors and wait for the planes to pass overhead on their way to their mission. I watched them go, I watched them return. I knew they were dropping a large number of bombs: the 2300 air strikes on Serbian settlements took more than two months. I could not help thinking thousands were dying, including children, maybe infants like my third son, who was soon born. Somewhat hesitantly, I looked upon this as a certain wise reparation by fate or God: deaths over there, a birth here. It was predestined that way. What Zsolt Asztalos's work evokes for me is, above all, this fatality.

He who evades death in the last moment (as in a non-fatal accident) is said to be born for a second time. Zsolt Asztalos's work is about them: people who were given one life more than the majority; targets who did not become victims. Behind the dropped or fired but unexploded bombs, there are the people who were saved and stayed alive, the buildings that were not damaged. An error in the system? Of course it is: this work is about so many errors. Whose faults were they? The faults of those people who assembled the bombs incorrectly, or the fault of blind fate, which averted the murderous intent? Whose fault was it? Who was responsible? This exhibit is also about responsibility. Not about responsibility for actions we perform out of our own free will or neglect to perform, but about absolute responsibility. Not in the general, but in (what Kant called) the universal sense: while the former is some sort of a rule, the latter is law in the original sense, applicable to everything and everyone. Even to God.

On the model of Darwin's theory, which implies the essential law of life is a merciless struggle for survival, influential modern thinkers posed the question whether the engine of society is not a certain deadly struggle for the will to power. In this vein, war would be the ultimate truth of life, even at the time of peace, because, proposed one of them, politics is the continuation of war by other means. According to this totalitarian idea, peace is impossible until the other side, be what it may, is destroyed. *It is necessary to kill*. The much-craved happiness of society requires sacrifices. This is what Zsolt Asztalos's project is about: the necessity of making sacrifices. About the death of God and the people destroyed in the shadow of a dead God.

The bombs on view at this exhibit are obvious examples of the perverse beauty of massacre.

They are designer objects with a harmonic beauty. Zhdanov, the number one ideologist of Soviet art declared it a particular mission of the state to counter what he called "formalism", embodied in such and similar formal solutions whose beauty was "an end in itself". As the Nazis persecuted "degenerate art", so the Soviets victimized formalism. Artists who were branded as formalists were harassed, or tried on trumped-up charges; some were sent to the Gulag, several of them were killed. The bombs make this heritage of the post-Soviet era, which also provides a particular perspective on the design, stand out with a revelatory force.

With the old explosive devices, it is the past that calls attention to itself: unfinished history. The threat they carry is related to historical traumas. What is laid bare are the old grievances of society, left undiscussed, sometimes covered up, but always threatening with an explosion. To be more precise, what emerges is the concern, or even anxiety about the loss of a "beneficial" amnesia, the appearance of dark memories and conflicts that threaten with a tragedy. Of course, we all know that we are not completely free to shape our own history, and we do not choose but inherit the circumstances, yet the sudden sensation of the weight of historical burdens is an experience which can be traumatic in our world — a world built on the idea of freedom. Zsolt Asztalos's work is about this effect.

The way it is done is indirect: the bombs appear on the screens of clumsy old-fashioned television sets. This is not the real world, we could say, where it not that almost everything that surrounds us appears — our own life wears away — in this same virtual world. Today, wars unfold on television and the internet; we know and see everything, and whatever is left out of this space of communication does not even exist. The very relationship of *real* and *virtual* seems to be reversing. The virtualization of violence usually takes place by means of objects — objects, which in this case are bombs. We know they did not explode because it can be known in this virtual space, where an enormous amount of information is available when needed. Nor can it remain a secret what technical reasons there were or may have been for their failure. There is only one secret left: how could man, who considers God dead, or turns away from him and thus becomes incapable of good, could have escaped the devastation inherent in the bombs? How is grace available for a guilty man? Instead of trying to solve this mystery, Zsolt Asztalos's work is content with showing it. Grace does exist. How is that even possible?

THREATENED



Gabriella Uhl

GRACE – TERROR – THREAT

Fired but unexploded – A video installation by Zsolt Asztalos

torn bodies thrown into history

Each bomb has its own story. Which is essentially one of two kinds. Bombs may explode and thus fulfil their role as objects made specifically for the purpose of destruction, entering history books and the personal histories that families maintain.

Zsolt Asztalos in his turn looks into the other possible story in his installation: the story of the malfunctioning device which stays with us, and generates, interprets and symbolizes conflicts among humans. He drives the invisible towards visibility, the indecipherable towards legibility. Rather than saving the world, he merely pushes the paradox of life and death to its extreme, magnifies and concentrates the moment.

Turned out by the plough, hidden in the depths of waters or found at construction sites, in what semantic fields can these objects, these relics of wars waged and raging, these latent carriers of a constant threat, be interpreted? This is the question Asztalos asks with an installation that conjures up contemporary conflicts by combining several unexploded bombs with today's sounds and noises. Yet this is an installation that explicitly tries to avoid a strict interpretation, and the destructive weapons that hover in an indefinable, homogeneous space, together with the sounds that filter through from afar, have a universal message of humaneness, creating the possibility of a new narrative. The unexploded bombs are manifestations of a state of grace, as their technical dysfunction allows personal and human history to be written on. Their story is a real morality play, a danse macabre; the destructive device creates an opportunity for us to think about life, to reckon with it. This transformation, whereby the gaze directed at the object slips, and turns from death to life, is a rare and unique moment. An unexploded bomb makes a statement. It thinks. Motionless. Mathematically. The process frozen by chance devours time.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded I.
Audio: Having a shower
video 4 min loop
2013

Type:
10 cm 33M high explosive (HE)
artillery projectile

Product of:
Hungary

Time of production:
Before World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded II.

Audio: Washing up
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
8 cm WGr 34 high explosive (HE)
mortar shell

Product of:
Germany

Time of production:
Before and during World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded III.

Audio: Supporters in football stadium
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
8 cm WGr 34 high explosive (HE)
mortar shell

Product of:
Germany

Time of production:
Before and during World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded IV.

Audio: Living city
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
Faustpatrone 2 shoulder fired high
explosive anti-tank (HEAT) grenade

Product of:
Germany

Time of production:
During World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded V.

Audio: Disco music in gym
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
8 cm 8M shrapnel artillery projectile

Product of:
Austria-Hungary

Time of production:
Until the end of World War I.



Released but unexploded.

Released but Unexploded VI.
Audio: Praying in Church
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
FAB-50 50 kg demolition bomb

Product of:
Soviet Union (USSR)

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded VII.
Audio: Laughing
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
37 mm 42M high explosive
anti-tank (HEAT) artillery projectile

Product of:
Hungary

Time of production:
During World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded VIII.

Audio: Rioting
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
SD-4 HI high explosive
anti-tank (HEAT) bomb

Product of:
Germany

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.



Released but unexploded.

Released but Unexploded IX.

Audio: Surfing TV channels
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
AF-32 32 kg demolition bomb

Product of:
Soviet Union (USSR)

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded X.
Audio: Travelling on train
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
7,5 cm PzGr 39 armour
piercing artillery projectile

Product of:
Germany

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XI.
Audio: Snuffle
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
SD-50 50 kg fragmentation bomb

Product of:
Germany

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XII.

Audio: Applause
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
1931M 15 kg demolition bomb

Product of:
Hungary

Time of production:
Before World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XIII.

Audio: Atmosphere in a bar
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
81 mm Mod 36 high explosive (HE)
mortar shell

Product of:
Italy

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XIV.

Audio: Magic box
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
58 mm high explosive (HE) mortar shell

Product of:
France

Time of production:
Before World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XV.

Audio: Restaurant
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
122 mm S-463 illuminating
artillery projectile

Product of:
Soviet Union (USSR)

Time of production:
During and after World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XVI.

Audio: Building recovery
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
AO-10 10 kg fragmentation bomb

Product of:
Soviet Union (USSR)

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XVII.

Audio: Typing and printing on computer
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
FRAG-20lb 20 pound
fragmentation bomb

Product of:
USA

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XVIII.

Audio: Knocking in rain
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
120 mm PM 480 illuminating
mortar shell

Product of:
USA

Time of production:
After World War II, until today



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XIX.

Audio: Atmosphere of forest
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
20 kg fragmentation bomb

Product of:
Czechoslovakia

Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.

preparations

Zsolt Asztalos's interest in the mystical interpretation of a destructive device whose technology has been polished to perfection is not without its precedents. Throughout his oeuvre, he has made a number of attempts at the artistic representation of scientific achievements. Take these preparations as an introduction, an initiation, called for not by a whim, but by necessity. These things are real, disputed and magical at the same time, yet perfectly fit the themes that resonate in the installation: these are the secret doors and stairs.

The type of picture that presented the latest achievements of science and technology emerged in the art of the Renaissance, which was interested in classification and was dedicated to science, as well as in the Flemish painting of the Golden Age, which imbued its "truthful" representations¹ with the mysticism of the Baroque. The picture that peeked in the mysterious laboratory, took a look at a human body prepared for dissection, or reported on special measuring instruments and machines, both performed an act of documentation and represented unique men who grasped the mystery of life with the help of science. Encyclopaedic as these works of art are, the representation of the victory of science is always coupled with a transcendental view: they are informed by the dichotomy of knowledge, its concurrent rationality and irrationality. However, the age of dense, lexicon entry-like pictures is over. Zsolt Asztalos does not aim at the detailed representation that was needed by the masters of old. In this respect, his works are lean, bare, focussed. His first experiment was the *Microscope series* (2006), where the common tool itself of scientific investigation is the instrument of the installation. The "graphical frame" – the microscope – implies that a different mindset is required for these drawings. It sets and defines the attitude of the recipient, both practically and by compelling the viewer to apply a new, different thinking mechanism when approaching the picture. The installation itself applies scientific thinking to the field of humanities in an unusual and consistent manner, while insisting on exactitude.²



Fired but unexploded.

Fired but Unexploded XX.

Audio: Beach
video 4 min loop
2011

Type:
RPzBGr-4322 high explosive anti-tank (HEAT) rocket for the 8,8 cm Panzerschreck rocket launcher

Product of:
Germany

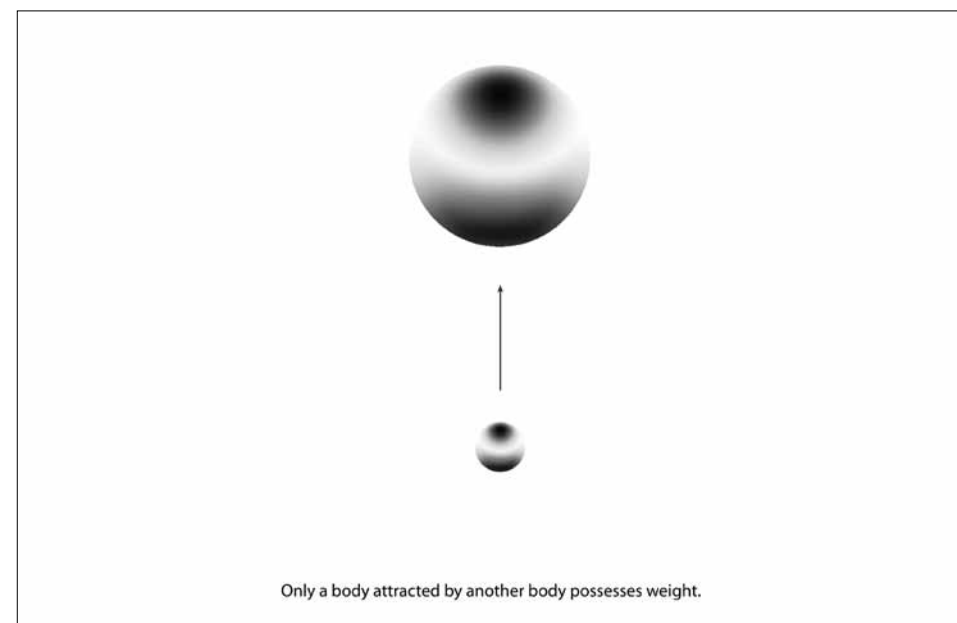
Time of production:
Until the end of World War II.

¹ Alpers, Svetlana: *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the 17th Century*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.

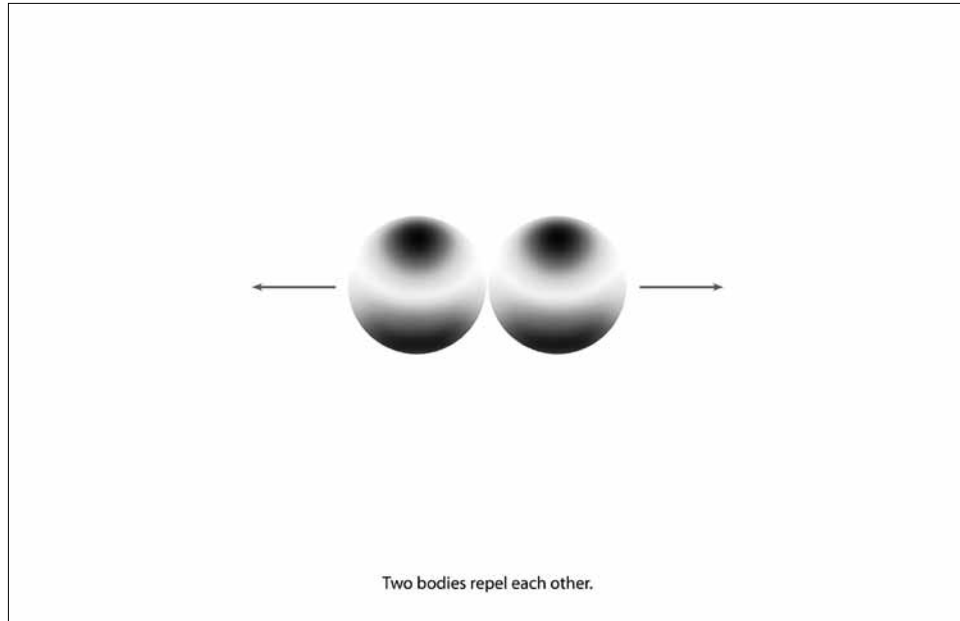
² Something that is in fact necessary, because since the Sokal Affair, the humanities have been wary of directly applying scientific theories. Sokal, Alan (1994-11-28, revised 1995-05-13, published May 1996). „Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity“. *Social Text* 46/47 (spring/summer 1996.) Duke University Press. pp. 217–252. Retrieved April 3, 2007.

In this work, the instrument of scientific inquiry delves into questions about the transcendental nature of art. What is the essence of a work of art? What is left of it when we try to get to its elementary parts with the help of precision devices? As we get closer and closer to the structure and components of matter, the spirit escapes unnoticed. Instead of knowledge, the investigation results in ignorance, uncertainty, doubt. It is, in other words, a source of tension.

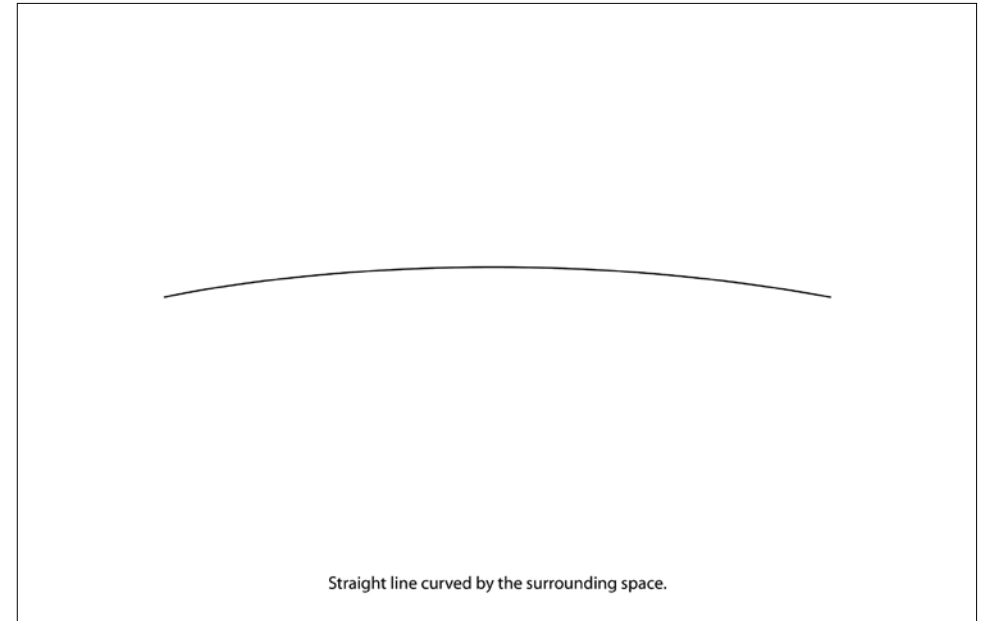
Asztalos, however, did not stop with his artistic research at this point, but continued to experiment with what can be removed. The *Physics* (2009), *Chemistry* (2009) and *Explosives* (2010) series are stages in this process, in which Asztalos employs a different device of cultural transformation, anthropomorphism. Formulae turned into iconic signs, and the definitions of physical phenomena, are completed with textual interpretations, which identify the phenomena with human relationships, by using verbal means of expression associated with the latter. A linguistic barrier or a tenacious form of self-reflection? It is an honest questioning of the objectivity of science, which, despite the astonishing simplicity of its instruments, is completely relevant. The linguistic experiment that seeks to get closer to the gods, and the anthropomorphic approach, aim to appropriate the transcendental. The science, in this case, is divinity. Asztalos's subtle irony pushes the envelope, and questions the seriousness of human cognition. Again, his humour leaves his audience in a state of uncertainty. The visible takes the place of the invisible, what can be imagined replaces what is intangible, and their tenuous relationship breeds anxiety. Asztalos's works always call for a critique of traditional modes of inquiry and approaches. They propagate a state of continuous doubt.



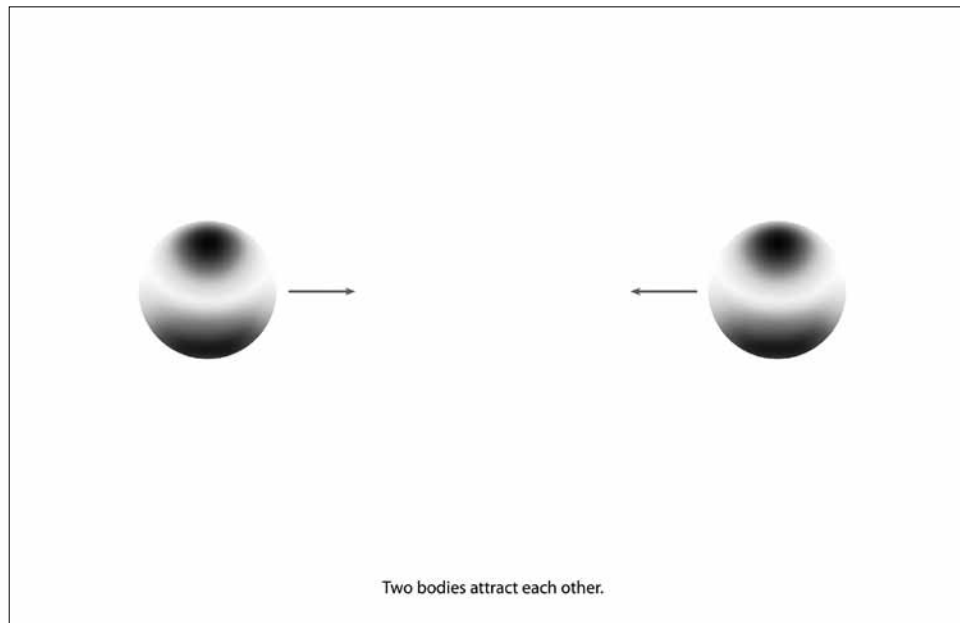
Physics – Only a body attracted by another body possesses weight.
C print, 50x40 cm
2010



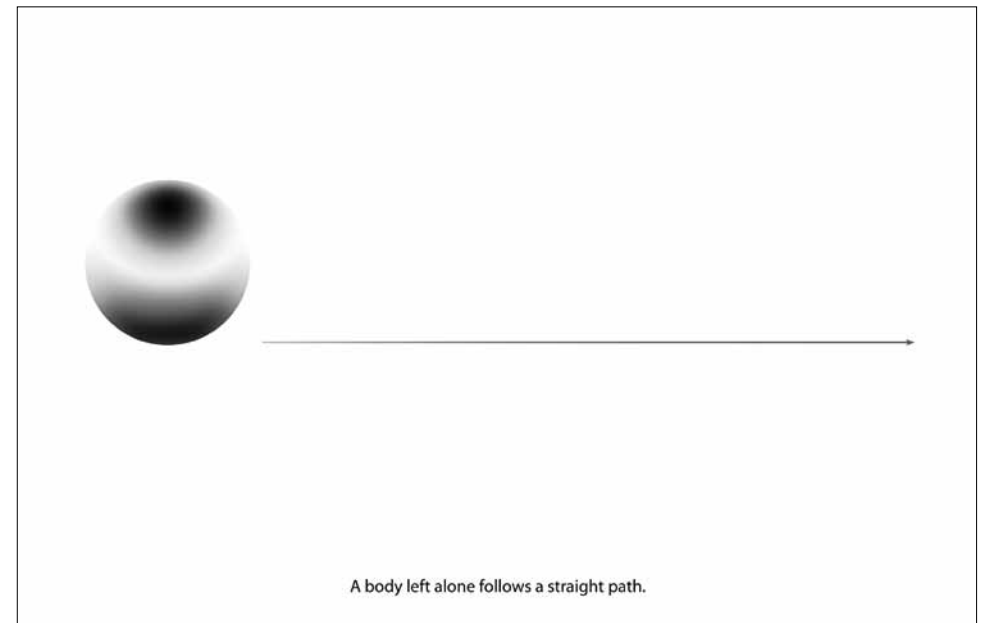
Physics – Two bodies repel each other
C print, 50x40 cm
2010



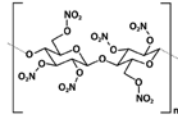
Physics – Straight line curved by the surrounding space
C print, 50x40 cm
2010



Physics – Two bodies attract each other
C print, 50x40 cm
2010

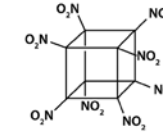


Physics – A body left alone follows a straight path
C print, 50x40 cm
2010



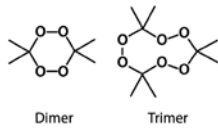
Cellulose-Nitrate
Highly inflammable

Explosive I.
C print, 50x35 cm
2012



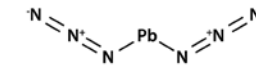
Octanitrocubane
Not responding to impacts

Explosive III.
C print, 50x35 cm
2012



Acetone-Peroxide
Extremely responsive

Explosive II.
C print, 50x35 cm
2012

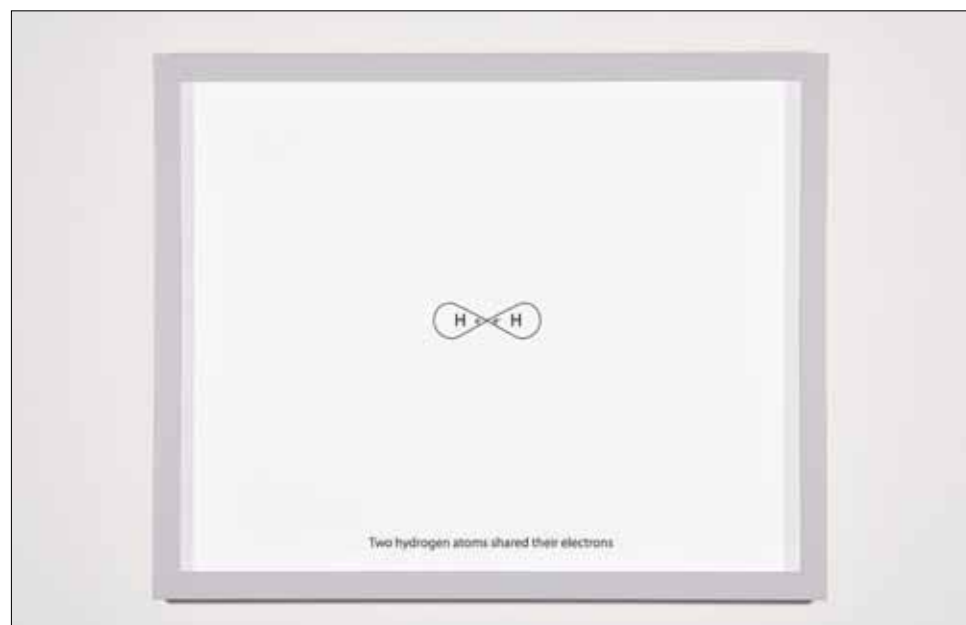


Lead azide
Set off even by a gentle touch

Explosive IV.
C print, 50x35 cm
2012



Chemistry – Sodium is already stable, having lost its unnecessary electron
C print, 50x40 cm
2009



Chemistry – Two hydrogen atoms shared their electrons
C print, 50x40 cm
2009

terror

A dysfunctional object creates tension, generates a constant state of fear. The arrested destructive process may at any time continue. The “inferior” object that choose another fate goes on to act as a reminder, a constant warning. Note how structural elements of folk tales appear in the interpretation of the abnormal functioning of explosive devices. In dangerous situations, it is the smallest, the weakest, the cast-out (i.e. unserviceable) individual who saves the village, the town, the world. In this case, it is the faulty product that enables humanity to live on. The interpretation covers a process that may not be anthropomorphic but is very similar to it. Apparently untamable and created to destroy humans, the murderous device can be approached with the well-known cognitive scheme of tales. It is only with the help of this cognitive frame, formed to make sense of the mythic tradition, that the uninterpretable, the inexplicable, can be described. The unexploded bombs hover like mementos in the indeterminate space, extending the web of interpretation to a universal dimension. They have a simple shape, by now a symbol globally used on the paraphernalia of street demonstrations. But the threat of these projectiles in empty space is also fed by the void these false players create around themselves.

The inscription of the past into the future takes place in a group of works that use different media, including videos of unexploded bombs which resemble stills but for their fine movements, and a video that employs a different perspective. The latter shows the present-day history or everyday functioning of places where unexploded bombs were once found. Built on places where danger is a physical reality, the present has transposed the unexpressed tensions and conflicts into the people who live there. The contradiction of groundedness and uncertainty induces terror, a sense of being threatened.











Location where
unexploded bomb was found
video 9 min loop
2013

(in) memory (of)

These bombs are dysfunctional. They are faulty products that give the lie to the meticulous workshops of technological society and to innovative investments, overwriting the splendour of victorious technological advancement, making defect (or call it chance) the author of history. All attempts at rigorous descriptions, the drive to knowledge, are questioned by this exhibition of dysfunctional found objects, and by the possible stories and situations that the installation associates with them.

As we delve into the meaning of the installation, further well-known genres of visual art will be found subverted, those of the battle scene and the memorial. The two are often combined in works of art: the scenes of victorious battles were carved on obelisks, triumphal arches or friezes already in antiquity, so as to make the memory of the victors everlasting, firm as marble. Humans created and erected these monuments so that thousands can rejoice over the losses and sufferings of thousands. Dynamic movements make these scenes vigorous, leaving no room for doubt as to the victory of human will and power. Dynamism, the representation of movement was to remain an indispensable element in the battle scenes of later ages, the representations of generals and the memorials of victories. Asztalos breaks with this tradition in his static videos. And how does the (modern) archaeological find, the unexploded bomb become a memorial? As a result of the tension encoded in it. Because it is a form of warning. Because it forces us to remember. We cannot ignore an explosive device designed and manufactured by humans but disturbed in its functioning; we cannot sweep aside the traces of former war conflicts, because any unwary motion may prove to be a fatal mistake, setting in motion the arrested process. The tension once smoothed away breaks to the surface and crushes the temporary harmony. A memorial warns of events past, presents their lesson, as do unexploded bombs; the latter do so by tying us up, forcing us to take a stand, to take action and summon all we know so that we can escape the captivity, the threat they represent. (Note that the knowledge of bombs is understood to be a part of historiography in the broader sense, the history of technology.) While the bomb as a memorial employs reduced means of artistic expression, it is also super-dense with meaning, and thus increases the tension.

grace

Their fault or “unnatural” behaviour extends the temporal dimensions of the conflicts, even reveal them as timeless. The machine that was created to destroy man left its original function, had mercy on its intended victims, and went on (may go on) to write the history of humanity on its own, creating personal myths and narratives which may make the inexplicable or irrational (miracle, luck, etc.), if not interpretable, at least relatable.

It is with its own disorders that the technicized society creates an opportunity for mystery/grace to work — while denying its very existence. Therefore the iconic sign not only opens the way to understanding conflicts, but also creates, by being an artistic instrument, a new universal language that is independent of space and time, which may reference both the future and the past.

This pared-down and reversed language may in turn help us to describe and (re)consider our inner and external conflicts. The installation seeks to highlight the (art historical) rivalry and interplay of verbalism and visuality because a conflict mediated by art serves not only the defusing of tension, or pacification, but the shaping of opinions as well.



Citylight
video 2:34 min loop
2011





threatened

“... a single moment of fright, that’s all, arriving for no explicable reason at all, departing for no explicable reason at all, and leaving behind nothing but a shadow [...], an unexpected, fierce, poignant vision: a couple of people running for life in timeless devastation and meanwhile taking stock of all that they have to say good-bye to.”³

Zsolt Asztalos’s “found objects” are multiple representations of conflict situations, open to simultaneous interpretations on personal, local, regional and global levels. He systematically develops his creative mechanism, which unites research, sensitivity, and a critical outlook, so that he can represent completeness in the micro-world he chooses to inspect.

Applying an art historical perspective, he rewrites and reinterprets frieze representations of combat, popular since antiquity, the noisy turmoil and exulting brutality of triumphant battle scenes, and such series that reveal the horrors of war. The structure of battle scenes, the contrasting of foreground figures and the crowd, is replicated in the videos, with the elements transforming and sublimating through visual and audio-visual effects. The visual representation of the ingloriousness and inhumane character of war conflicts in the broad sense is a central tenet of Zsolt Asztalos’s installation.

The theoretical approaches, as well as the research and installation praxes of the visual arts have been instrumental in processing the brutal traumas of the late 20th and 21th centuries.⁴ Vigorously and consciously, visual art returned to help man to learn about the world. It shows that bloody genocides occur in the name and shadow of false slogans about democracy, mediation and humanism, just as massacre and torture continues with ever more professional means. While our (visual) knowledge of the horrors of war keeps increasing, the planet invests its energies in generating it again and again.

³ László Krasznahorkai: *War and War*. Trans.: George Szirtes. New Directions Publishing, 2006.

⁴ Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, www.hiik.de/en/methodik/index.html

The works of individuals and groups who undertake to process this mountain of lies with the means of art make an ever more powerful – tendentious, if you like –, dense and noisy presence on the theoretical scene⁵ and in the exhibition halls.⁶ These works of art are related not through any characteristics of expression, but through their imitation of the strategy of war. Constructed with tactics in mind, they rewrite and overwrite the means of simulation developed for warfare, use the methods of observation and intelligence both in the work and the creative process, turning strategies surrounded with the mystery of secrecy into “artistic instruments,” and hence into something that can be learned.

They were dropped but did not explode. What has become of them? How did they determine the future, our future? These are the questions that Asztalos’s installation makes us ponder on, rigorously, in all its ramifications.

⁵ Tom Holert, *Bildereignisse. Geschichte, Politik, Visualität*, in: *Regieren im Bildraum*, b_book, Berlin, 2008., Judit Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, verso, London, New York, 2010., W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2011., Georges Didi-Huberman, *Returning to the Image* (Harun Farocki művei kapcsán), In: *Image Counter Image*, Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2012.

⁶ A few examples: *Attack! Kunst und Krieg in den Zeiten der Medien*, Kunsthalle, Wien, 2003., *The Image in Question: War – Media – Art*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 2010., *Serious Games. Krieg – Medien – Kunst*, Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt, 2011., *Bild – Gegen Bild*, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2012.



Esperanto Nature Documentary
video 2:50 min loop
2011

GRACE

Mátyás Varga

THE MYSTERIOUS DARK VISITOR
Reflections on chance and “grace”

What philosophy and science call chance, religious discourse and praxis often categorizes under the heading of “grace”. The Biblical definition of what Christianity today understands under “grace” – the Greek *charis* and the Latin *gratia* – can be found in the Pauline Epistles and the Epistle to the Hebrews – but even so one will soon realize that the *charis* of the New Testament¹ has a semantic field whose complexity and breadth far exceed our initial expectations: it can simultaneously mean kindness, beauty, the human and moral value of a person, or God’s approval of man (cf. e.g. “highly favoured” as the epithet of Mary in Luke 1:28); just as *charis* is used when goodwill, benevolence or help (above all: goodwill, benevolence or help gained from God or Christ) are mentioned (e.g. Rom. 3:24; 5:15; 2Cor. 6:1; Heb. 12:15); it even means – in addition to a number of other things – supernatural capabilities granted to man. However, while the word *charis* is very unevenly distributed among the books of the New Testament (it appears frequently in the texts of Paul and Peter, while it can be found less often, or barely, elsewhere, as in the Synoptic Gospels), the way the different texts understand the word is very uniform in that redemption, the coming of the Redeemer is not something people have deserved – nor is it the obvious logical consequence of a historical, or even moral, situation. The actual historical realization can hardly be deduced from the precedents, and it essentially satisfied little, or none, of the relevant expectations. Whatever expectation there was, it had, above all, a political and moral character: the Saviour was to free the people from Roman oppression, and to make it evident that obeying the laws and keeping the religious practice both pleased God and could, thanks to the resulting moral perfection, make certain people superior to others. Jesus, however, showed very little interest in political issues, and seemed to transport reward and punishment, i.e. the acknowledgement and rejection of merits, into a completely different dimension; and by unambiguously re-

¹ While many think the concept of *charis* was introduced to Christianity by Hellenistic Judaism, this sense of “grace” does not exist in Biblical Hebrew. The most closely related concepts were probably *hen*, *hesed* and *emet*.

serving the right of judgement to himself, removed one man from under the judgement of another. Jesus’s parable about the vineyard owner who hired labourers at different times of the day and then gave them all the same pay (Mat. 20:1–16) is a key story in this regard. It is with considerable psychological accuracy that the Gospel of Matthew describes the scene at the end of the day, which is difficult to understand when applying a human – and business – logic²: “So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.” While the labourers who have been working since morning do get what they agreed upon with the landowner, they cannot accept – it is against their sense of justice – that those who worked for merely an hour get the same amount. They try to reason with the landowner: “These who were hired last worked only one hour”, they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” However, the landowner tells one of them: “I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” While the word “grace” (*charis*) does not occur in the fable, we need to postulate a different, non-human logic to find some sort of an explanation, a logic³ whose decision – which is unexpected and (in human terms certainly) unpredictable, but surprisingly advantageous for the weak – can practice grace. As elsewhere in the Bible, behind the apparently irrational gesture is the disregard for the question whether people deserve what God grants them. Grace is unpredictable, as is the failure of a bomb to explode... While we may often provide a rational explanation after the fact, there is nonetheless something in it for the person who has the experience to suggest the presence of a different kind of force field. And while the discussion and interpretation of grace was to become (with Augustine) an important part of Christian dogmatics – Thomas Aquinas’s theology of grace, for instance, is marked by a fascinating thoroughness and precision in its definitions of those axioms and fine distinctions that are to this day the points of reference for the Christian interpretation of grace. The desire for clarification (so many proofs of the

² The quotes are from the New International Version of the Bible.

³ Cf. Paul Ricoeur: *Le conflit des interpretations*. Paris:Seuil, p. 361.

inadequacy of concepts) made theologians return, again and again, to the need to pinpoint the understanding of “grace”. This was the case with Martin Luther, the Council of Trent, Jansenist theology (which examined the relationship of “grace” and freedom), and later with Karl Barth.

The purely theoretical debates, however, usually found it difficult to depart from the basic problems of the labourers in the Biblical parable: Does *everyone* deserve grace? Does not an injustice happen to *others* at the same time? Does the person who receives grace remain *free*? *When* is it decided who will be granted mercy? What does it mean it is free? Why is there nonetheless evil in the world, or, why is grace not evident to *everyone*?

Though these questions articulated a great deal of sober curiosity and genial thirst for knowledge, it became increasingly obvious that the recognition and acknowledgement of what is denoted by the concept of “grace” – a phenomenon already complex enough in itself – does *not* take place on a cognitive level, but, above all, as part of the immersion in faith — often in borderline situations, the torments and doubts of life. As if in such cases one would always have a new kind of experience (compared to sensible and practical religious praxis), one which considers its own critique critically, to borrow Paul Ricoeur’s notion on the reception of *poetic* texts in a special sense (e.g. metaphors, narratives). In other words, this kind of hermeneutics simply leaves behind the indignation provoked by secularization, and becomes capable of creating a certain post-critical attitude, a “*seconde naïveté*” or “*seconde innocence*.”⁴ From this perspective, the labourers in Jesus’s parable also seem to consider the events from a certain secularized and critical standpoint. At the same time, here the Ricoeurian “second naivety” or “second innocence” is more like the activation of a primeval capacity⁵ that has survived even the Babelian confusion of the languages, than the firm certainty of a new kind of knowledge.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur: *Philosophie de la volonté 2*, Finitude et culpabilité 2, La symbolique du mal. Paris: Aubier, 1960, pp. 482–484.

⁵ Ricoeur, op. cit., p. 483

Jürgen Moltmann, one of the most important Protestant theologians of the second half of the 20th century, starts the first chapter of the book *In the End – the Beginning*⁶, with a stirring recollection of the Second World War. “I am not only a theologian who is concerned with the hopes and fears of humanity on the scholarly level. I am also a survivor of ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’.” To say, this is not poetic license in the religious sense. It is painful fact. Whenever I call up that catastrophe and descend into the dark pit of remembrance, I am overwhelmed again by fear and trembling. I am talking here about the destruction of my home city of Hamburg in the last week of July 1943. Night after night, about a thousand Royal Air Force bombers appeared over the city, and with explosive and incendiary bombs kindled a storm of fire [which in the eastern part of the city] burnt everything living and reduced every home to rubble. In that fire 40,000 people died. Ironically, the code name given to this destruction by the RAF was Operation Gomorrah. Together with others belonging to my school class, I was an air force auxiliary in an anti-aircraft battery in the inner city. The battery was stationed on the Outer Alster, easily visible for aircraft, and it was completely wiped out in a hailstorm of bombs. But for some incomprehensible reason, the bomb which blew to pieces the school friend who stood beside me at the firing platform left me unscathed. I found myself in the water, clinging to a plank of wood, and was saved.

Things had begun when radar reported huge swarms of bombers approaching over the North Sea. When the bombers were over us, they dropped strips of aluminium foil, which blinded and jammed the radar devices. No more counter-action was possible, and no defence. In the end, those of us who had survived made our way through the wreckage of the streets, climbing over charred bodies. We were convinced that this was indeed ‘the end’, and that the war would be over in a few days. But this terrible end was followed by two other years of unending terror which destroyed the lives of millions. There is no need to describe it any further. But for the description of Hamburg as Sodom and Gomorrah, I should only like to add that during the Nazi dictatorship about 40,000 people were murdered in the Neuengamme concentration

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann: *In the End – the Beginning : the Life of Hope*. Trans.: Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004, pp. 33–34.

camp near the city, and about 50,000 Hamburg Jews in White Russia. That too is part of the catastrophe which I escaped.” He goes on to ask: “At that time I was 17 years old. What effect did this catastrophe have on me?” Moltmann tells about his background, a secular family of teachers, with a father who was the Grand Master of a Freemason’s Lodge in Hamburg, and had left the church. The young man was reading Goethe and Nietzsche, considered Max Planck and Albert Einstein his secret heroes, and prepared for a career in the natural sciences. “But in that catastrophic night, for the first time in my life I cried out to God: ‘God, where are you?’ That was my question in the face of death. It was not the theodicy question we are all familiar with – the question, how can God allow this to happen? That always seems to me like an on-looker’s question. The person who is in the grip of a catastrophe, or is already in the jaws of a mass death, asks differently about God. And then came the other question, the one which has haunted me all my life ever since: why am I still alive and not dead like the rest?” The war also provided time for thinking: “Three years as a prisoner of war, from 1945 to 1948, gave me time enough to search for answers to these two questions. In the first year particularly it was for me a struggle with the question about God. Like Jacob, wrestling at the brook Jabbok with a dark and mysterious angel, I tormented myself with God’s dark and mysterious side, with his hidden face and his deadly ‘no’ which had put me in misery behind barbed wire. At the end of 1945 a well-meaning army chaplain gave me a Bible. I must have looked at him somewhat uncomprehendingly: a Bible of all things! I then went on to read it without much understanding until I came to Israel’s psalms of lament. Psalm 39 caught my attention: ‘I am dumb and must eat up my suffering within myself. ... My life is nothing before you. ... I am a stranger as all my fathers were.’ These were words that echoed what was in my own heart [...].

The kindness which Scottish miners and English neighbours showed the German prisoners of war who were at that time their enemies shamed us profoundly. We were accepted as people, even though we were only numbers and wore the prisoner’s patch on our backs. But that made it possible for us to live with the guilt of our own people, the catastrophes we had brought about and the long shadows of Auschwitz, without repressing them and without becoming callous.”⁷

⁷ Moltmann, *op.cit.*, pp. 34-35.

Moltmann’s story also suggests that in a purely phenomenological sense, “grace” is probably but a low (or negligibly small) probability (which nonetheless cannot be ruled out scientifically) becoming reality. Nonetheless, it is this phenomenological foundation that serves as the starting point of the critical hermeneutics that concerns us and makes us ask questions like “why me?”, “why now?”, “why this way?”... “Grace”, in other words, is in this case not simply a kind of “hacked” reality, which, as the result of a double-barrelled logic, brings a result that is (more) beneficial to us (and maybe surprising for the outside world), but a field of doubts and contradictions, competing and mutually exclusive interpretations. All this appears strongly and spectacularly in Jesus’s story, whether we consider the events, the words or the actions. With all their uncertainties, improbability, and of course what rises above these, their obviousness, the events of the incarnation and the resurrection – the two endpoints of the New Testament – provide a powerful frame for the diverse contradictions of miraculous deeds, healings and extraordinary words. However, those who become involved in this story to some degree are transported by these events to the Ricoeurian state of “second naivety” or “second innocence”.

It is not without a reason that Moltmann compares his own inner struggles to Jacob’s fight with the angel. The story (Gen. 32:24–32) begins with a wrestle, the struggle of two men in the night: “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.” Though his opponent cannot overpower him, Jacob realizes that the other is not a human: “Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob’, he answered. Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.’ Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.’ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.”

Any survivor's effort to understand the meaning of "grace" will no doubt resemble Jacob's wakeful night of the fight.⁸ An old friend comes to mind, who on the excursion day of a conference missed the car assigned to him. A colleague took his seat, and my friend got in another car. The car he was originally meant to take suffered an accident, and the colleague who took his place died. For months, my friend could barely concentrate on a problem other than finding the meaning of this event ("why him, why not me?", "did he die instead of me?", "am I living instead of him?"). He struggled, as did Jacob with the mysterious dark visitor, the angel of God, or God himself.

⁸ For a poignant record, see Steven T. Katz (ed.): *Wrestling with God – Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

PROBABILITY

Chance: tenuous and difficult to grasp, the notion has intrigued man for thousands of years. For a proof, may I offer something even older than the goddess Fortuna, or her Greek predecessor, Tyche: insurance. In ancient Babylon it was already possible to take out an insurance policy.

The *modus operandi* of those ancient companies was very similar to what we see today. They were not interested in why a disaster may strike, but wanted to know how many ships were to set sail, how many of them would return safely, and after how many were damages payable. After all, they reasoned, a captain would do all in his might to escape trouble: it was his life that was at risk, not that of the clerks sitting in the offices of the insurance company. When the captain has done all that is humanly possible to avert danger, his fate will be in the hands of higher powers, which humans can no longer influence. Such a thing is thus best handled as a chance occurrence. The very point of insurance is not to be completely defenceless in the face of events we cannot influence.

Babylon's insurers already offered policies for a wide variety of risks, and today you can be insured against practically anything. Anything but the chance of a released bomb not exploding. Which is odd, because it is an incident that causes damages to those who release the bomb: they have made a considerable effort to prepare the bomb and get it to its target — only to see the effort wasted. Yet, it is against the philosophy of insurance to pay damages after the absence of damages. Insurers would consider such a claim an abuse of their function, and hence a fraud. Then again, they do encounter more direct forms of fraud from time to time.

In the 18th century BC, Hammurabi already provided serious punishments for insurance fraud in his Code, which has survived on a number of clay tablets. Some of these went missing during the war in Iraq (and will hopefully resurface again in time), but some can still be seen, though rather far from their

birthplace, in the British Museum in London. Like almost 4000 years ago, law today has severe provisions in place to discourage insurance frauds from making such events look accidental which are in fact the result of their manipulative actions. Other abuses of chance are also punished, such as lottery fraud, or, to cite a contemporary example, insider trading at the stock exchange, i.e. taking advantage of non-public information. And rightly so: the insiders are able to distinguish non-accidental events, which to others will seem to belong among those chance occurrences that influence the prices, apparently randomly.

Chance can thus be defined as an event whose odds cannot be calculated. The reason is usually the deficiency of our knowledge, but sometimes the details are hidden from us by higher powers: God, nature, or a profane thing, like a business secret. This understanding of chance persisted without much change for more than three thousand years. In this understanding of chance the failure of intentional damage to occur is a chance occurrence the same way as the occurrence of a natural disaster: it is impossible to calculate its odds. This notion came to be challenged only in the 17th century, and then from two angles at the same time.

We owe one of the new approaches to the English Isaac Newton (1643–1717), who thought the only thing to hide anything from us was our own ignorance. He suggested that accurately knowing the current position and motion of all objects would allow us to calculate all past and future events — provided we know the laws of nature, to which all motions are subject. He set about uncovering these laws, formulating the eponymous set on the basis of which we are still able to design great machines and structures, or can calculate with great accuracy the orbits of planets and the trajectories of projectiles.

The other important breakthrough was brought about by a Frenchman, Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). He thought higher powers did hide certain things from us, but only individual, particular things, like how a person's fate would turn out. However, this does not prevent us from calculating the shared fate of a large number of things, provided we know the relevant laws of mathematics. Pascal thus began to study what he called the mathematics of chance and what is today known as probability theory. Ever since their Babylonian inception, insurance companies have relied on Pascal's tenet, though

they had to wait for three thousand years to gain a better understanding of chance. Thanks to Pascal and other mathematicians who followed him in the next centuries, today's insurers have highly sophisticated mathematical tools to work with.

Their importance notwithstanding, Pascal's ideas proved less influential for popular and scientific thinking in the next two or three centuries than Newton's, probably because man was more comfortable with the idea of inhabiting a world that is completely deterministic — one in which everything can be calculated, at least in theory, if one is smart enough and can measure things with the required accuracy.

Then again, Newton himself had to acknowledge the limitations of his knowledge when in the early 1700s he lost 20,000 pounds on the London stock exchange. A considerable sum even today, it was a vast fortune at the time. Newton commented on the disaster in his journal: "I can calculate the motion of heavenly bodies, but not the madness of people." There was thus still much left for the mathematics of chance to explore even after Newton's findings, and indeed, a few decades later Jakob Bernoulli (1654 or 1656 – 1705), probably the most talented member of the famous dynasty of Swiss scientists, discovered the law of large numbers.

Though it is a purely mathematical theorem, the law is widely known, and though most people could not give a mathematically sound description, it has become a common turn of phrase. It is typically interpreted to be an expression of some kind of common-sense wisdom, like "playing frequently will ensure winning in time," or "if something is possible, it will occur somewhere." It is a confusing concept — but to be fair, it was confusing mathematicians three hundred years ago. Like all geniuses, Bernoulli suddenly identified a hidden order in what at the time appeared to be chaos.

In a manner of speaking, the same sudden turn happened to Zsolt Asztalos, who has discerned an unexpected, hidden order — and he is an artist, not a mathematician, so it is an artistic order — in the multitude of unexploded bombs. For him, the medium to express his ideas is not mathematical theorems, but an installation, the means of artistic expression.

But let us return to science, and as we do so, let us not forget that parallel structures in the respective approaches of art and mathematics are not the matter of chance, but another manifestation of the fact that the laws of our world can be grasped and expressed with a wide variety of means, from mathematics through physics to art.

In the 20th century physicists were obliged to acknowledge that Newton's physics did not apply to subatomic particles, and the theory proposed instead, quantum mechanics, was based on the completely random motion of elementary particles. Quantum physics posits a completely random dance of particles behind what seem to be ordered, rule-based phenomena in the world; Newton's own laws are a result of this dance. The electron is consequently no longer modelled as a small cannon ball, but as a particle that may appear anywhere and occupies positions in space with different probabilities. An electron, in other words, is but the sum of probabilities.

The first development to rock the Newtonian world view took place not in probability theory, or even physics, but in biology. The experiments of the Moravia-born Austrian biologist, Gregor Mendel (1822–1884) showed that the rules of heredity were governed by the laws of chance. The discipline set in motion by Pascal not only opened an essentially new direction in the development of mathematics, but also paved the way to a new biology and physics. So let us return to what Bernoulli discovered with the law of large numbers, and see why the idea could have such influence.

If we flip a coin many times, the quantity of heads and tails will doubtless be balanced. We might prevent this from happening by introducing an unbalanced (unfair) coin, but that is considered cheating, as is insurance fraud or insider trading. If the coin has not been tampered with, the respective numbers of heads and tails should get closer and closer in the long run. This is something we tend to have a strong faith in.

To ensure that this was not a question of faith, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) tossed a coin 40,000 times to see how the ratio of heads and tails would turn out. He found that following the initial high variation, the ratio got closer and closer to 1/2, as one would expect it to do. It may be our expectation, but in

true scientific fashion, Bacon wanted to believe empirical facts, rather than his expectations. This was why he devoted weeks of his life to the experiment, flipping the coin for days on end and recording the results. In other words, the belief that the respective numbers of heads and tails will be balanced in the long run already had a strong foundation 400 years ago; a 100 years before Bernoulli, “the law of large numbers” was already cited.

However, at least as solidly founded is the belief that a coin has no memory. Though no comparable massive empirical methods have been applied to prove this, there was already a strong belief in this centuries ago, and we still prefer to persist in this belief. The question is: how can the ratio of heads and tails be balanced in the long run if coins have no memory? Everyone will have had an experience of getting heads for three or four (or even more) times in a row before getting tails. If, thanks to the whim of chance, the results of the first few flips are all heads, the probability of tails should later be over 50 per cent, or the balancing would not happen. How does the coin know it has to balance something if it has no memory?

In an act unbecoming of a mathematician, I have just offered a sloppy interpretation of Bacon’s findings when saying the respective numbers of heads and tails will be balanced in the long run. Bacon not only observed that the ratio of heads and tails will converge to $1/2$, but also pointed out that the difference between the numbers of heads and tails becomes ever larger, produces waves of an ever larger size. The two things are thus not mutually exclusive. Which is to say, Bacon already provided an answer to how the balancing can take place in the long run without the coin remembering a thing. As we can see, the balancing can take place — we only need to state precisely what is balanced. It is not the respective numbers of heads and tails, but the ratio of these two numbers.

Consider a numeric example. If after 100 flips heads have a lead of 10, you have 55 heads and 45 tails, and a 55 per cent proportion of heads. If by the 1000th flip the lead of heads grows to 20, you have 510 heads and 490 tails, i.e. a 51 per cent proportion of heads. The proportion of heads got considerably closer to 50 per cent, even though the lead of the heads doubled, from 10 to 20.

What Bernoulli proved was that this was not a contingent numeric example but quite a typical scenario. We should expect similar observations if we use dice instead of coins, just as in any other case when chance has a function. This is in the nature of chance: from a certain perspective, the waves keep growing (as the difference of heads and tails), while from another angle, the waves of chance tend to flatten out (as the ratio of heads and tails). The two phenomena are concurrent, both are inevitably present all the time, and their relative importance depends on what real-life phenomenon we want to examine with their help. Bernoulli’s theorem provides exact mathematical formulae for the properties of both types of waves, and this is what in technical terms is called the laws of large numbers — in the plural, because over time other theorems were also formulated to describe the properties of a number of different “waves of chance.”

Random walks provide a good illustration of the law of large numbers. Imagine a man taking steps: each step is the result of a random choice between left and right. The question is whether he will eventually reach his home, assuming he lives in the street in which he lurches about. One would innocently think that, provided he is far enough from home, he will probably never reach his door, and will continue to stagger around the starting point, with his distance from this point constantly fluctuating. We would be wrong to think so. If the laws we apply are strictly mathematical, he will get back to his home in time — and this is true even if our man is not confined to lurching left and right along a single line. If there are cross streets, and he is allowed to take turns, if, in other words, his walk is not one-, but two-dimensional, even then he will certainly reach home. If, however, we introduce multi-storey buildings, i.e. a three-dimensional walk, it will be far from certain that our intoxicated gentleman can ever sleep in his own bed. The law of large numbers that is applicable to this scenario — a different law — tells us that even if our man lives on the first floor of the next building, the probability of his never reaching home is higher than $1/3$.

The same laws were applied by British mathematicians in a real-life scenario, when asked to determine whether the Germans were targeting particular areas with the V-bombs that fell on London in the Second World War, or were simply pursuing a terror bombing.

Since certain areas received more bombs than others, there seemed to be a pattern with special targets. However, the laws of chance showed that no such targets existed, and resources were best defended by dispersion, not relocation. The territorial distribution of such bombs that failed to explode also failed to be systematic: they were again proof of chance occurrences.

The laws of large numbers are very complex mathematical theorems. I would nonetheless hesitate to call the man-on-the-street's understanding of the law of large numbers completely foolish (though it is, when you put on your mathematical goggles). This is because the laws of large numbers do corroborate the intuition according to which playing long enough will ensure winning in time — though the losses will probably be higher than the earnings. It is also true that however strange can be occurrence, if it is possible, it will occur in time. We now see the world differently than when chance was understood to be a completely nebulous concept.

“The law of large numbers” was an example of how the findings of science find their way into everyday thinking: inaccurately, perhaps incorrectly, but always inspiringly. Few people could, for instance, offer a rigorous proof of the idea that it is the Earth that orbits the Sun, and not vice versa. Yet we have learnt to live with the idea that our Earth is not the centre of the universe. In a sense, the laws of large numbers only reinforce an ancient knowledge, that about blind chance. They merely add that though it may be blind, it can certainly be calculated or modelled.

Always have a lottery ticket, my grandfather used to say, so that when luck knocks on your door, it won't find it closed. You don't need to believe in it, or do more to gain its favour—nor is it worth doing more—but you should do as much. In their abstract manner, the laws of large numbers have told the same to his mathematician of a grandson.

Csaba Horváth

**THE LIFE OF BOMBS –
THROUGH THE EYES OF THE BOMB DISPOSAL EXPERT**



In a world where military conflict occurs all too often, explosive devices may be lurking anywhere: in the soil, in the waters, in the built environment. These hidden bombs are like so many mementos of our history. Discovering and professionally deactivating them may save lives again. (The following describes mostly the situation in Hungary, but its findings can be applied to the whole region, and are valid in technical terms everywhere.)

Most of the unexploded bombs found in Hungary date back to the Second World War, when the front ran through the country for six months. Some areas are of course more “contaminated”, like the places of major battles, and important industrial facilities targeted by the enemy air forces. These areas include the capital, Budapest, and certain parts of Fejér and Veszprém Counties. The largest defective explosive device to date, a 2-ton American aerial bomb, was also found in Budapest, in the Danube.

The bombs and projectiles found most frequently were manufactured by the parties who engaged in actual combat, i.e. the Soviets, the Hungarians and the Germans, but bomb disposal squads have already dealt with explosive ordnance from all the warring parties. Among the latter, American and British aerial bombs prevail, thanks to the air strikes of the allied forces. While most of the projectiles found were fired in the Second World War, there are some that originate from the First World War, and devices from the Austro–Hungarian Empire have also been encountered. These usually lie in areas that were formerly shooting ranges or drill grounds. Unexploded bombs or mortar shells from the time of the 1956 revolution, an important event of 20th century Hungarian history, have hardly been found. Most of the infantry ammunition recovered was actually hidden, in lofts, cellars or abandoned barns. Note, however, that it is impossible to determine exactly when a projectile was deployed, because in 1956 the Red Army was still using the same weapons as during the Second World War, with no significant developments taking place in the intervening period.

As regards the physical processes, every explosive device has a detonator, which is activated by an arming mechanism: this procedure must be completed after the device is fired or dropped so that it can explode upon impact or when hitting the target. There may be a number of physical or technical reasons why the explosion did not take place. The arming mechanism in the device may not have been started as designed, or it may have started but came to a halt, so the device did not explode upon impact or when hitting the target. The explosive device may also have missed the target, as in the case of an armour-piercing grenade that landed beside or behind the target, and did not receive the stimuli the detonator was designed for. Falling on soft soil or snow, or in water, the grenade did not meet with the resistance that was required to initiate the explosion. A manufacturing defect may also prevent the detonator from functioning. Since projectiles were mass-produced during the Second World War, defects were a natural occurrence. Manufacturing defects could disable the functioning of the detonator through a fault in the firing plug, the fuse or the explosive. Parts could also be left out, or assembled incorrectly. Further, an error may have occurred at the time of firing, because certain detonators could be adjusted for an immediate or delayed effect. Several types of explosive ordnance were fitted with saving mechanisms for transport, which the deploying personnel may have forgot-

ten to remove or reset before use. Other kinds of oversight at the time of firing or dropping may also have prevented the bomb from exploding. It is part of the lore of the Second World War that forced labourers and prisoners of war involved in the manufacturing of explosive ordnance sometimes sabotaged the production by leaving out or damaging components, but this was by no means a typical reason for the failure of bombs.

In recent years, 2200 to 2500 calls have been placed annually to the bomb disposal hotline in Hungary. 2012 was an extraordinary year, with a record high 2900 calls. The number of explosive devices found on such occasions may range from one to hundreds. As a consequence, the bomb disposal squads deactivated 22.000 devices on those 2900 occasions in 2012. The malfunctioning explosive devices that come to light are destroyed. Depending on their physical condition, this may take different forms. When they are unfit for transport, they are destroyed on site. If they can be removed, an area may be designated nearby for the destruction, or the devices may be transported to a central collection point, where they are destroyed at a pre-determined time. If the projectile is found in a built-up area and cannot be exploded on site, while its removal is also dangerous, a form of temporary deactivation needs to be applied. Usually the detonator is removed from the bomb, which is then transported from the site.

Hidden, unexploded devices pose a variety of threats, because any mechanical action may cause them to activate. When the arming mechanism is reactivated depends on the condition of the explosive device, as well as on the quality of the detonator built in. Some of these may explode under very little mechanical stress. Importantly, whether the arming mechanism can restart depends on whether the device was actually fired or dropped, or merely left behind — whether the process stopped accidentally, or was never even started. The latter may have been the case when a firing position was abandoned during combat, without the ammunition recovered. These situations are of course less dangerous, though bomb disposal experts work under a constant threat. When trying to deactivate explosive ordnance that had been fired, we must take into account where it landed, what damage the detonator sustained — and what cannot be established beforehand, at what point the arming mechanism stopped. The smallest impact may remove the obstruction, and the arming may be completed, resulting in an explosion.

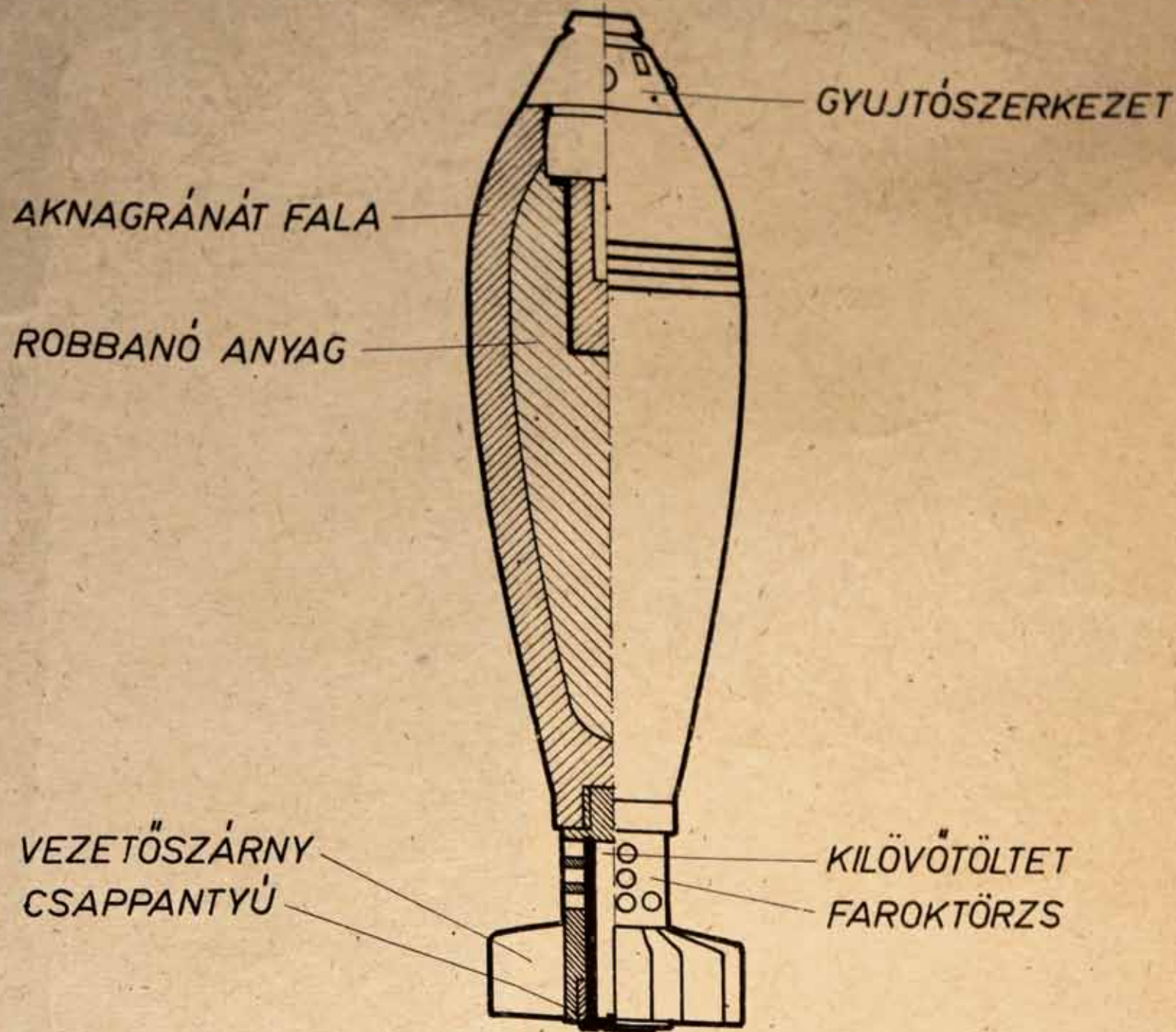
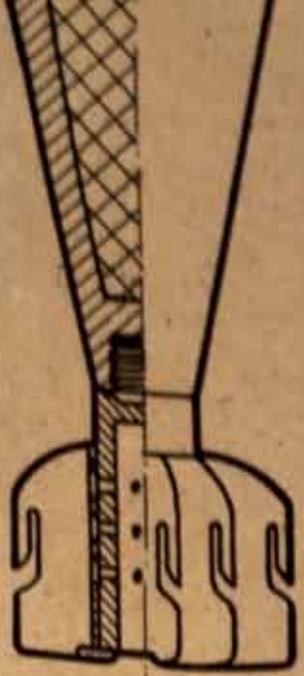
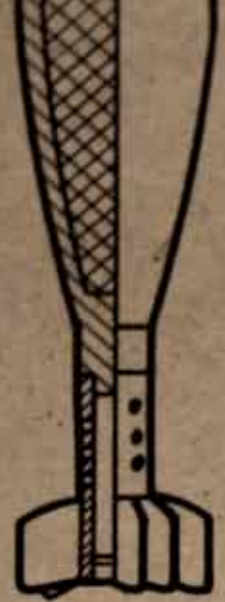
How resistant the obstruction is to external forces can only be determined if we know the device completely. With all this knowledge at hand, we can decide in favour of removing the device, or opt to destroy it on site. Unfortunately, fatal casualties are not unheard of in this line of work. In Hungary the last fatal accident occurred in 2006, when three experts died as they were preparing a Second World War Soviet high explosive mortar shell for on-site destruction.

While no fatal accidents happened to civilians in recent times, serious injuries did occur when those who found a smaller projectile tried to defuse it themselves, attempted to extract the explosive from it, or wanted to make use of the “scrap metal”. The operator of an excavator was saved from injury by his own vehicle, when the bomb it unearthed exploded.

Interesting and alarming cases include that of a man who for years used an artillery shell for an anvil — a device still filled with live explosives. He was lucky enough to be hammering away on the end that did not contain the detonator. Unexploded bombs may be discovered in extraordinary places, as was the device that was found in the ceiling between two storeys of a building. It had been there since the war, with people living in the building unaware of the danger. Mortar shells have been found under the floors of residential buildings, and under the threshold of a bathroom. In Budapest, a large device was found in the ceiling of the St Stephen Basilica, which was being renovated, and from one of the towers of the cathedral in Szeged a mortar shell was retrieved.

All over the world, explosive ordnance may turn up in the most unexpected places, with people living, walking or working around or on top of them.

ÁKNAVETŐGRÁNÁT SZERKEZETI FELEPÍTÉSE



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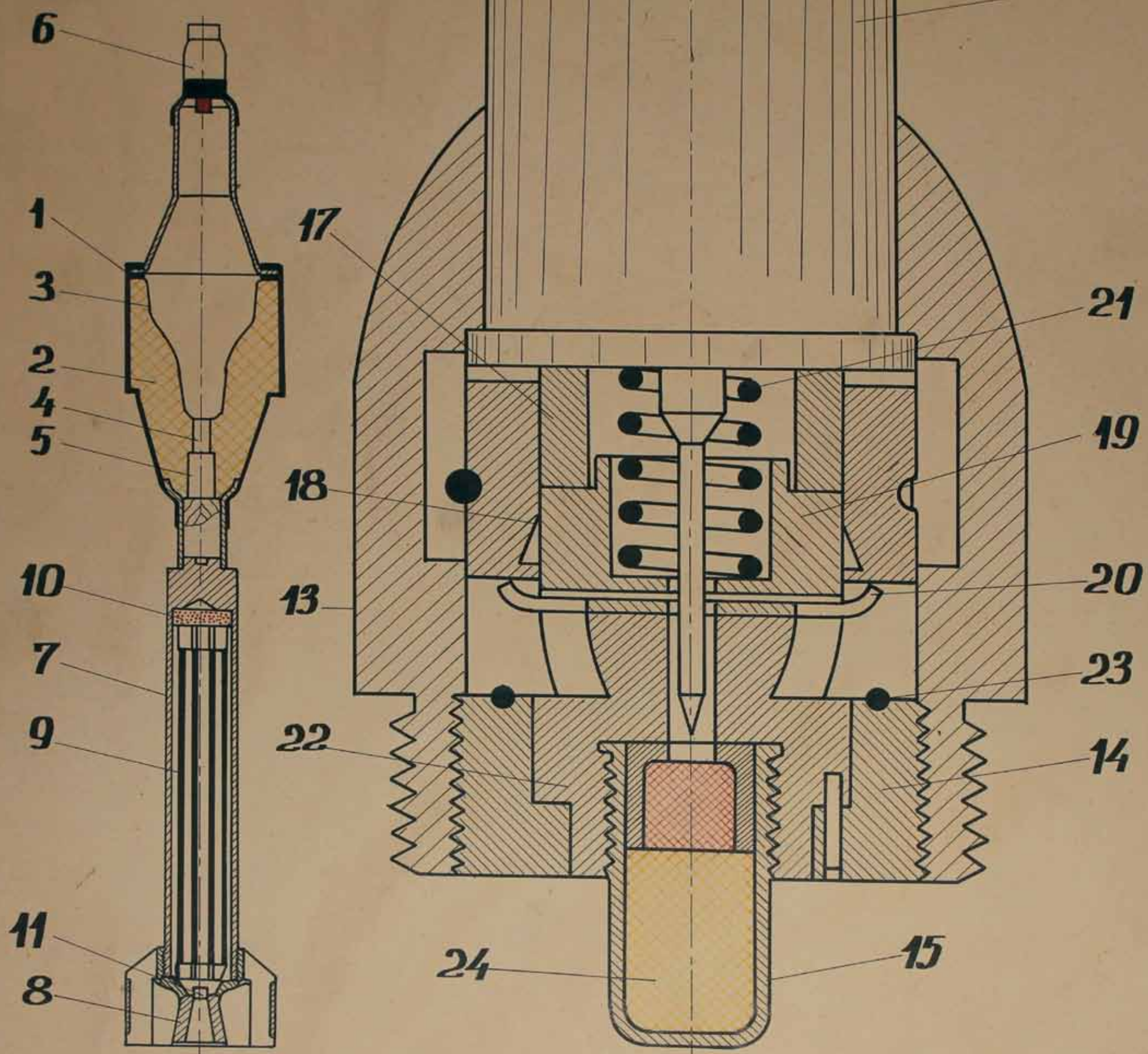
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HENGER

RÖGZÍTŐ GOLYÓCSKÁK

DETONÁTORCSAP-
PANTYÚ

DETONÁTOR



SHOOTING – HDF 1st „Honvéd” EOD and Warship Regiment



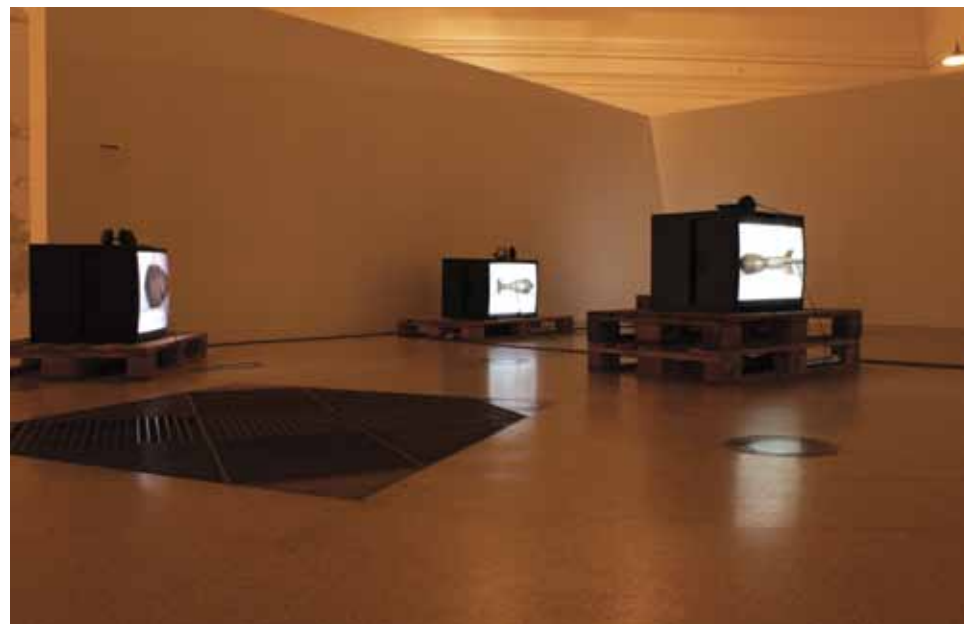
OUT OF ORDER

25 January–3 March 2012, Viltin Gallery



WHAT IS HUNGARIAN?

Contemporary Answers, 3 March–14 October 2012, Kunsthalle, Budapest



János Sturcz

TV SETS, BOMBS AND GRACE*

Zsolt Asztalos's conceptual works are marked by an intellectual sophistication, a minimalist aesthetic, a sensibility towards human relations and creation, a sacral symbolism under a guise of ordinariness, bravura technical solutions, and fascinating visual tricks that produce what by all appearance are miracles — only to be unmasked as illusionism. Not content with contemporary terrestrial dimensions, his imagination roams the widest regions of the universe, exploring spaces now cosmic, now microscopic. Nor does he restrict himself in his choice of medium, and he is happy to exploit all the possibilities of high technology. Working in the spirit of International Gothic, which discovered the Creator in the smallest detail of nature, he drew a hand pointing towards the sky onto a 0.2 mm drop of water. The conceptual illustrations of the *Chemistry* and *Physics* series follow up on Duchamp's "playful physics" as they expand the conceptual and emotional frame of science by personifying molecules and discovering characteristics in their reactions that resemble human behaviour. And in an act that deflated the heroism of the sacral landscapes of German Romanticism, he created endless landscapes using only a computer.

Yet he now turned to what at first sight seems a down-to-earth subject — even stuck-in-the-earth, because he deals with bombs found in the Hungarian soil which have failed to explode for decades. The primary metaphorical meaning of these strange, mysterious and dangerous objects is easy to decode. They invite associations to unresolved historical traumas, conflicts of home and foreign policy that keep defining public discourse and keep dividing the nation, disagreements that are not talked through and keep ticking like so many time bombs under the visible surface of our life. Zsolt Asztalos, however, disregards this layer of meaning, and focuses the attention on the object itself.

* The opening speech was presented on 25th January 2013 at Viltin Gallery

Fanatics aside, we barely accord much attention to the bombs themselves, these unlikeable things. It is the event, the explosion, that matters, not the object, and fear compels us to avoid facing them. Now here is a chance to get to know them better. We can discover their individual traits, how worn they are, how vulnerable, how frail. They are personified, and since they do not explode in the long video, they lose their terrifying aspect; probably already defused, they are no longer murderous objects, but historical documents. Asztalos, in other words, has tamed the bombs, like Orpheus tamed the beasts with his lyre.

Yet as we watch the video, we sense an ongoing tension, because a bomb may explode at any time. Also, the objectless fears that are implanted in our subconscious are more powerful than those caused by external threats. The constant fear Kierkegaard describes is an essential motif in how man "thrown into the world" has sensed the world since prehistory, when the beasts of the wild were to be feared. And currently, in the treadmill of the globalized consumer society, this sense of being threatened only intensifies, as do international conflicts. To maintain the tension, Asztalos draws on the visual strategy of those films of Warhol that do away with all forms of ornamentation, and record a single motif, like the Empire State Building, from a single, motionless viewpoint. What is new is the sound, which correlates the bomb with the present, while also generalizing it. Drawn from such environments as the home, the street, the sports arena, the church and the mass media, it further intensifies the tension. The noises of washing up, the canned titter of a comedy show, the roar of a raging crowd at a sports match, the thunderous applause, the agitated mixture that results from surfing American TV channels, the sound of a bell and the Lord's Prayer in English, extend the sphere of conflicts to include the private and personal sphere, pointing out tensions in the family, or the artificially generated antagonisms in sport, the mass media and the religions.

The white background removes and isolates the bombs from their original contexts, prevents the work itself from assuming a documentary character, and strips the projectiles of the sensationalism that surrounds them when they appear in the media. At first sight, the images of the bombs, placed in a sterile environment and turned into works of art, seem static; it is only later that we discover the small changes in illumination and focus.

The passage of time evokes passing or mortality, while the metamorphosed objects demonstrate the possibility of survival, because the unexploded devices may even be understood as symbols of providence. The grenades will no longer be kamikaze-like carriers of death, but will be ruined slowly, in a senile decay of corrosion, saving people as they educate them. Removed from their original context, they reveal not only an industrial aesthetic, the beauty of functional forms and their connections, but their anthropomorphic qualities as well. One of them looks like a baby's rattle, the tip of another like a mother's breast, several of them like phalli; two American types resemble minimalist sculptures, while their Russian and German counterparts, thanks to their tear-like shape, perforated tubular parts and series of grooves, are reminiscent of an earlier, more sentimental industrial style, typical of the first half of the 20th century, which is well complemented by the pallets of the installation and the screens that remind one of outdated, discarded electric appliances.

Tamed, but still bombs deep inside, they may also indicate that today's wars are waged not with these old-fashioned toys but with more sophisticated, as well as more insidious and cruel, means. A country may now be laid to ruins more comfortably, from an armchair, with a few online financial manoeuvres, some speculation, credit rate downgrades, or a media hack. Not even the responsibility of aggression need to be assumed: one can stay out of the front line and remain anonymous. Bloody wars need to be started only where physical goods, raw materials, are to be had. Even then it is an investment worth making because the arsenal can be replaced, and "news" of distant wars can also double as a means of instilling fear in the consumer society.

Today's real weapon is not the bomb but the dehumanizing love of comfort and indifference that cement the consumer society, and which are propagated by the mass media, which serves up violence in such quantities that it no longer elicits compassion from the jaded flâneur. The same mass media that is referenced in Asztalos's work by the frame of the object of "tamed terror", the television set. At the same time, the defused bomb also refers to the hidden aggression and intimidation that is characteristic of the consumer society, where the threat, unlike in the case of the open violence that marks dictatorships, concerns the loss of possessions. One of the most important ways to arousing fear leads through the reinforcement of individualism, the elimination of protecting solidarity, through the isolation of one man from another.

In Zolt Asztalos's video installation this is symbolized by the television set which the lonely individual stares at passively, and the sterile white background that isolates the bombs.

Niall Ferguson thinks the 20th century was the "age of hatred", the bloodiest period in the history of humanity, "far more violent in relative as well as absolute terms than any previous era".¹ What is more, the war was mostly waged against innocent civilians, and often not against an external opponent but an "enemy within". All this at a time when "thanks to myriad technological advances and improvements in knowledge, human beings on average lived longer and better lives than at any time in history".²

The escalating war has by now become internalized, running as an undercurrent not only in the apparently peaceful and prosperous consumer society, but in all areas of life, from acts of terror through parliament, culture, and people's interactions, to what is probably the worst, our private lives.

Zolt Asztalos's explosive devices, defused and enclosed in the television set, seem to be the very emblems of the historical situation Ferguson described, the ambivalent fusion of prosperity and hatred. The TV set and the bomb: interchangeable symbols of comfort and violence, manipulation and power. Zolt Asztalos's work, which relies on these two symbols, is more than a historical survey. He cleans both objects with his devices. Rather than communicating misconceptions, his television is the fair means of disseminating visual information about the unexploded projectile as an object. His bomb is not a murderous tool or something the sensationalist media serves up to fill programming time. With his devices, the neutralizing, decontextualizing video, Zolt Asztalos manages to make the dangerous, aggressive object anthropomorphic, tame, even sacred. The unexploded projectile is thus a symbol not only of unresolved social and historical problems in East Central Europe, or of undiscussed conflicts between one man and another, but also of inscrutable divine providence. With a perspective that finds the sacral possibility of survival and love even in a weapon, Zolt Asztalos shows how to establish lasting peace, how to defuse bombs permanently.

¹ Niall Ferguson: *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred*. Allen Lane, 2006. Introduction. p. XXXIV.

² Op. cit., p. XXXV.

AUTHORS

ZSOLT ASZTALOS (1974)

Fine artist lives in Budapest

www.asztaloszolt.com

Education

1993–2000 Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Painting Department

Solo Exhibitor:

2001 Black and White – **Studio Gallery, Budapest**
2001 Cube – **Hungarian Cultural Institute, Prague**
2002 Black and White – **European Middle Gallery, Esztergom**
2004 Still Life – **Dinamo Gallery, Budapest**
2006 Your past is my Present – **Dorottya Gallery, Budapest**
2007 Hidden – **European Middle Gallery, Esztergom**
2007 Your past is my Present – **Opera House, Budapest**
2008 Inside – **Studio Gallery, Budapest**
2008 White – **Apropodium Gallery, Budapest**
2009 Common Exhibition with Zsolt Tibor – **Viltin Gallery, Budapest**
2009 We are in time – **Pintér Sonja Gallery, Budapest**
2010 Fragile – **King Saint Stephen Museum, Székesfehérvár**
2011 Three in One – **Pärnu, Estonia**
2012 Fired but Unexploded – **Viltin Gallery, Budapest**
2012 Two hydrogen atoms shared their electrons – **City Gallery, Miskolc**
2012 Image Bank – **Art9 Gallery, Budapest**
2013 Fired but Unexploded –
**Hungarian Pavilion at the 55th International Art Exhibition –
la Biennale di Venezia**

Group Exhibitor:

1999 Geo – **Hungarian Geological Institute, Budapest**
1999 Sanatorium – **ArtPool P60, Budapest**
1999 Maurer Class – **Hungarian Cultural Institute, Berlin**
2000 Warsaw-Budapest – **Polish Cultural Institute, Budapest**
2002 Green Flood – **Kieselbach Gallery, Budapest**
2004 Still Life – **Ernst Museum, Budapest**

2008 Metro project – **Metró Gallery, Budapest**
2008 Curator – **Budapest Gallery, Budapest**
2008 Derkovits Scholarship Exhibition – **Ernst Museum, Budapest**
2008 Reloaded – **Studio Gallery, Budapest**
2008 Collegium Budapest – **Wien**
2008 Genezis – **Viltin Gallery, Budapest**
2009 Pixels – **Ernst Museum, Budapest**
2009 Viltin Galley – **Viennafair**
2009 Agora – **Olof Palme House, Budapest**
2009 Derkovits Scholarship Exhibition – **Ernst Museum, Budapest**
2009 Conditional Present – **Hungarian Cultural Institute, Párizs**
2010 Derkovits Scholarship Exhibition – **Ernst Museum, Budapest**
2010 Everyday – **Contemporary Art Institute of Miskolc**
2010 Viennafair – **Viltin Gallery**
2010 Contemporary Art Ruhr – **Essen**
2010 Relations. Who? Whom? With what? – **City Gallery, Székesfehérvár**
2010 Szenyor – **Studio Gallery, Budapest**
2010 Platonic Lives – **(TINA-B Festival), Prague**
2010 Donumenta – **Regensburg, Germany**
2010 Budapest Art Fair – **Kunsthalle**
2011 Mega Pixel 2. – **Olof Palme House, Budapest**
2011 Nice past is waiting for us – **Csikász Gallery, Veszprém**
2011 Viltin Gallery – **ARCO Art Fair, Madrid**
2011 My God – **MODEM, Debrecen**
2011 3 in 1 – **Võru Gallery, Estonia**
2011 Mimetic Construction – **Contemporary Institute of Miskolc**
2011 Water – **Mizu, A38 ship, Budapest**
2011 Speaks for itself – **Hungarian National Gallery**
2012 ARCO – **Madrid**
2012 Quadratic Equations – **Kepes Institute, Eger**
2012 Telemeter – **Kepes Institute, Eger**
2012 Water – **Pintér Sonja Gallery, Budapest**
2012 What is Hungarian? – **Kunsthalle, Budapest**
2012 Drawing.OK – **Viltin Gallery, Budapest**
2013 10th Kunszt – **Torta, City Gallery, Miskolc**
2013 Concept nowadays – **Gallery in Paks**
2013 Light of Soul – **Hungarian Cultural Institute, Rome**

GÁBOR GULYÁS (1968)

Studied philosophy, aesthetics and literature in Hungary and Germany. Between 1992 and 1995 he worked as the editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Határ*, and later headed the publishing house Latin Betűk (1995–1998). In 1998 he was co-founder of the research group *Vulgus*, which explored the rhetorical and artistic features of the processes of vulgarisation, working in affiliation with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences between 1999 and 2006. During this period the group published the journal *Vulgo*, of which he was editor. In addition to three books, he has published more than fifty articles in various journals and volumes in Hungary and abroad. In 2004 he developed the concept of MODEM, a new arts centre in Debrecen, of which he was the first director between 2006 and 2011. He has been director of Múcsarnok, Budapest since 2011.

CSABA HORVÁTH (1978)

He is the chief bomb disposal expert of the HDF 1st „Honvéd” EOD and Warship Regiment in Budapest. Originally a civil engineer, he studied bomb disposal in Hungary and at the courses of NATO, in some of whose missions he has also participated. He is the specialist supervisor of the bomb disposal units, formulates training policy, provides consultancy, and engages in actual disposal.

LÁSZLÓ MÉRŐ (1949)

Is a mathematician, who initially studied artificial intelligence. For the past 30 years he has been active in the field of psychology: a professor of the Institute of Psychology of Eötvös Lóránd University, his main fields of interest are decision theory and games theory. In addition to science, he has successfully tried his hand at game software development, and for a time cooperated with Ernő Rubik. Over and above his scholarly publications, he is also keen to educate the general public, and has authored popular pieces which have been translated to a number of languages and have won international awards.

JÁNOS STURCZ (1958)

Art historian and art critic. Professor at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts (Budapest), since 2005 he is the Head of the Department of Art History. 1994 Fulbright scholar at the New York University. In 1999 national commissioner and curator of the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, in 2005 at the New-Delhi Triennale. In 2007 co-curator of the exhibition *European Attitude* (Shanghai, Doland Museum of Modern Art) and author of the catalogue text *Asia-Europe Mediations*. In 2013 curator of the exhibition *Light of the Soul* within the Hungarian Cultural Season in Italy. (Rome, Palazzo Falconieri) Latest books: *The Deconstruction of the Heroic Ego* (2005), *Imre Bukta* (2008), *Ilona Lovas* (2009). Cca. 150 essays in different books, catalogues, periodicals. His daughters: *Lili* (1998), *Maja and Emma* (2006).

GABRIELLA UHL (1970)

Is a literary and art historian, and a curator. She studied literature, history and art history, and also has a degree in economics. She was a researcher at the Institute of Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and later chief curator of Ernst Museum. In 2008–2011 she was a research fellow at the contemporary art centres of Tallinn and Riga, and worked as the Baltic States correspondent of the arts journal *Műértő*. She is currently an independent curator. She is a contributor for the Photo Month festival, and for Fuga – Budapest Centre of Architecture. She is an expert of marginal art and contemporary art in East and East Central Europe. She is the author of several volumes and numerous articles.

MÁTYÁS VARGA (1963)

Studied theology, literature and aesthetics. He is a Benedictine monk in Pannonhalma, where, among other responsibilities, he is the head of the monastery's publishing house, and director of the Arcus Temporum Arts Festival (arcustemporum.hu). He has published five collections of poetry, and two volumes of essays.

COLOPHON

FIREBUT UNEXPLODED – video installation by Zsolt Asztalos

55th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia, 2013

Hungarian Pavilion, Giardini di Castello, Venice

1st June–24th November 2013

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