

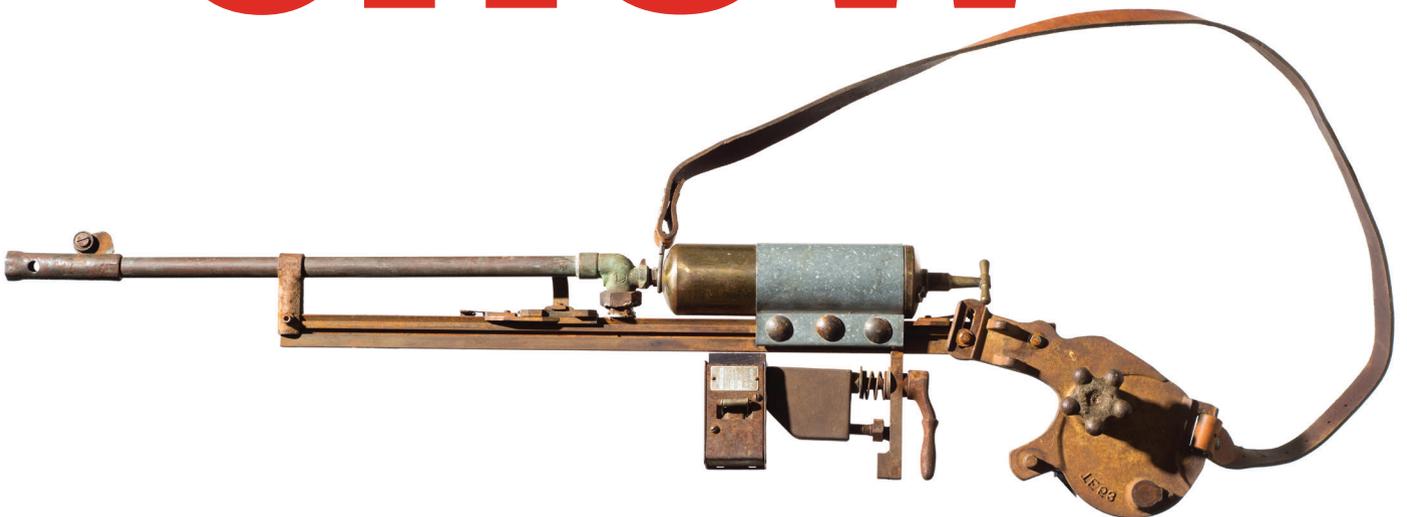


SEPTEMBER 4 -
OCTOBER 14, 2017

CADVC / CENTER FOR ART, DESIGN, AND VISUAL CULTURE

DAVID HESS

GUN SHOW



RIGHT

Gun Show
“Art in Odd Places”
14th Street & 5th Avenue
New York City
October 8, 2016
Photo: Kei Ito

BOTTOM

Gun Show
Kohl Gallery
Washington College
Chestertown, MD, 2015
Photo: Geoff Graham



How does it feel to hold a gun?

For Dan Baum, author of *Gun Guys*, to “manipulate a gun’s moving parts ... is deeply satisfying to hand and ear.” Guns, he adds, “are exquisitely designed and beautifully made, like clocks or cameras.” They are “machines elevated to high, lethal art.”¹

Although Baum invokes an aural experience (satisfying to the ear), his emphasis is on what a person sees (the design and fabrication) and feels (through manipulation) when interacting with firearms. On the basis of these visual and tactile experiences, he ascribes guns an aesthetic and labels it fatal.

David Hess assembles his life-size sculptures of assault rifles from what he calls “rescued” objects – hundreds of them, ranging from an old black sneaker and vintage turquoise sewing machine, to a raggedy crutch and stringless red guitar.² The constructions could hardly be considered high art, nor are they lethal. While their weight, the heaviest approximately 44 pounds and the lightest 8 pounds, could render them dangerous if wielded as clubbing weapons, they include no shooting mechanisms, and experiencing them is not a predominately aural experience. But they can be looked at and – in opposition to high art’s institutional prohibition on touching – picked up and held, as many viewers have done, with Hess’s encouragement and under certain circumstances. “I don’t know whether to smile,” one viewer commented, “because I’m holding something that looks like a gun, [but] I don’t like guns, so I don’t know whether to smile or to look sad.” Another pondered: “If it were real, I would feel ... delusions of grandeur, power.”³ Yet another was moved to contemplate connections between Hess’s conversion of found objects into guns and biblical metaphors of beating swords into





ABOVE - TOP TO BOTTOM

David Hess, 0028-0013-005, 2015

David Hess, 0097-0017-009, 2017

David Hess, 0029-0014-003, 2014

FRONT COVER - TOP TO BOTTOM

David Hess, 0081-0017-006, 2017

David Hess, 0095-0017-011, 2017

Photos: Geoff Graham

ploughshares.⁴ Through the haptic experiences of touching and holding, “feeling” these objects in a physical sense gives way to expressions of “feeling” in an emotional, psychological, and intellectual sense.

Hess, who is most well known for his public art commissions, started making this very different – intimate, yet disquieting – series of works in the early 1990s, shelved the project after completing a few dozen guns, then resuscitated it following the 2012 tragedy that has come to be remembered as, simply, “Sandy Hook.” On December 14 of that year, a young man killed 20 children and 6 staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, after murdering his mother at home earlier in the morning and before killing himself at the school following the attack he had carried out – all with rifles.⁵ It was, Hess has said, “amid the daily headlines of mass shootings and gun violence” following this tragedy that he “began building an arsenal of 100 mock assault rifles. This body of work is my personal awakening to the American obsession with weaponry and the abstraction of violence.”⁶

Looking at the numbers, “obsession” is an apt term. According to a 2015 study, “for only 242 million adults living in the U.S., there are about 265 million guns,” of which “half ... belong to just 3% of the adult population.”⁷ While the single-digit percentage-point size of that group may seem low – “just 3%” – the power of the firearms is what worries many in the remaining 97%, no matter how much of an “abstraction” that power may seem to those who have not experienced it personally. For those who have, statistics are facts that cut close to the heart: “on an average day, 93 Americans are killed with guns,” and “black men are 14 times more

likely than white men to be shot and killed with guns,” and “in an average month 50 women are shot to death by intimate partners,” and “seven children and teens are killed with guns in the U.S. on an average day.”⁸ A white middle-class straight adult man, Hess is abundantly aware of the race, class, gender identity, and age issues that thread through any discussion of guns and gun violence. He is also aware that statistics can be gathered and then parsed in endless ways and for various purposes. Other statistics, for example, show that in the United Kingdom, where handguns are illegal, there were 2,034 violent crimes per 100,000 people in 2007, versus 466 for the same number of people in the United States.⁹ Reciting such an array of numbers smacks of obsession and can have dizzying effects, leading to the wish that there were an absolutely pure, incontrovertibly concrete pro-gun or anti-gun argument to hold onto. But there simply is not, a fact that quickly emerges in the open-ended exchanges that Hess’s displays of guns stimulate.

As Hess expanded the collection to over 100 sculptures – all of which will be presented for the first time at the Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture (CADVC) at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) in Fall 2017 – he has shown smaller groupings of the guns in a variety of venues for various lengths of time. There have been one-day displays on a New York City sidewalk, in a student space at a downtown Baltimore university, and on the lawn of a university in North Carolina; and there have been solo shows and participation in group shows in white-cube museum and gallery spaces that have lasted from a few weeks to months.¹⁰ Throughout this run of exhibitions and events leading up to *Gun Show* at UMBC, some

1. Dan Baum, *Gun Guys: A Road Trip* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 29.
2. Each sculpture bears a numerical title, suggestive of a serial number appearing on an actual gun. The sculptures’ titles consist of three sets of digits, each set representing, in order, the following: number on the exhibition checklist; year made; and number of parts.
3. Excerpts from “Gun Show,” video documentation of “Art in Odd Places 2016: RACE” outdoor exhibition, 14th Street & 5th Avenue, New York City, October 8, 2016. Filmed by Richard Chisolm. Edited by Cazre Thomas and Sreyashi Tinni Bhattacharayya.
4. Excerpt from audio documentation of an outdoor presentation of Hess’s sculptures at “Arts Fest: Arts for Social Change,” University of North Carolina Asheville, April 8, 2017. Hess’s exhibition “Gun Show: An Art Exhibit” was on view in the Second Floor Gallery, UNC Asheville, April 7-25, 2017. The metaphors of swords and ploughshares appear in numerous places in the *Hebrew Bible*, with the relationship between the two sometimes flipped from one instance to the next. For example, “Beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong” (Joel 3:10) versus: “And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Micah 4:3).
5. Adam Lanza shot his mother with a .22-caliber Savage MK II-F bolt action rifle and shot the children, staff, and himself with a Bushmaster XM15-E2S rifle.
6. David Hess, Artist’s Statement, “Guns, Violence & Justice” exhibition, Metal Museum, Memphis, Tennessee, January 15 – April 30, 2017.
7. Michael Addady, “A Tiny Percentage of U.S. Adults Own Half the Country’s Guns,” *Fortune*, September 19, 2016, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2016/09/19/us-gun-owner-ship/>. The study was conducted by researchers at Harvard and Northeastern Universities. See Greg St. Martin, “Study: 70M More Firearms Added to US Gun Stock Over Past 20 Years,” *News@ Northeastern*, September 26, 2016, <https://news.northeastern.edu/2016/09/study-70m-more-firearms-added-to-us-gun-stock-over-past-20-years/>, accessed April 19, 2017.
8. See “Gun Violence by the Numbers” infographics at: https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/#-foot_note_4, accessed April 18, 2017. The non-partisan, non-profit organization “Everytown for Gun Safety” culls its data largely from reports published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), http://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/?source=etno_ETHomePage&utm_source=et_n&utm_medium=_o&utm_campaign=ETHomePage.
9. See “A Factual Look at Guns in America” infographics at: <http://americanguufacts.com/#sources>, accessed April 19, 2017. This group culled its data from Eurostat, the European Commission’s database of statistics.
10. In the order of references in the text: “Gun Show” at “Art in Odd Places 2016: RACE,” 14th Street & 5th Avenue, New York, NY, October 8, 2016; “The Gun Show @ Johns Hopkins,” Glass Pavilion, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, April 10, 2017; “Arts Fest: Arts for Social Change,” Reynolds Green, University of North Carolina Asheville, April 8, 2017, part of “Gun Show: An Art Exhibit by David Hess,” Second Floor Gallery, UNC Asheville, April 7-25, 2017; “Gun Show,” Kohl Gallery, Washington College, Chestertown, MD, February 5-March 6, 2015; “Guns, Violence and Justice,” Metal Museum, Memphis, TN, January 15-April 30, 2017; “Gun Show: David Hess,” Contemporary Art Museum (CAM) Raleigh, NC, May 28-August 6, 2017.



things have remained consistent: Hess displays the guns on the ground or floor, establishes scenarios that encourage viewers to pick the guns up, asks visitors questions or answers theirs, has friends and people who work with him as a team* to spark and engage in these conversations, and records those exchanges – with participants’ consent – on film and in photographs. In other words, the artist’s intent has been to allow the sculptures to foster open discussion of one of the most volatile issues of our time – guns, who does or does not own them, who should or should not own them, whether or not to legislate them, safe ways to use them, ramifications of their use or misuse, and how issues of race, class, gender identity, and age impact every aspect of every one of these questions.

And the list goes on. Holding “real” discussion of these complicated issues begins, for Hess, with visitors holding – and feeling – “fake” guns. Such distinctions between real and fake, authentic and replicated, factual and fictional are critical to consider, whether in the context of popular video shooter games or of toy guns. The latter is especially important in many cities, including Baltimore, where the possession of “replica guns” has been banned in light of the increasing number of people (usually young men or boys and, in Baltimore, usually black) being shot by law enforcement mistaking toy guns for actual ones.¹¹

The exhibition at the CADVC – and locations to which it travels thereafter – differs from the shows leading up to it in two ways. First, all the guns made to date will be on hand: 99 of them on display in the gallery, laid out on tarpaulins on the floor, recalling the presentation of bodies awaiting identification following disasters, or the arrangement of confiscated weapons at police headquarters; and another 12, a “study set,” to be used for programs during the run of the exhibition when interactions and discussions among Hess, his team, gallery workers, and the public are scheduled. Second, the CADVC project highlights one of the things that institutions like UMBC do best – research. The many events in which Hess’s guns have appeared prior to September 2017, as well as all that takes place at and in conjunction with the CADVC, comprise “data,” if you will, that will be represented, along with analysis and critique, in a richly illustrated book, which will be published following the exhibition. The book will include transcripts of exchanges among participants at programs related to the show and commissioned essays situating Hess’s work in the context of other contemporary artists’ projects featuring guns, art historical uses of found objects, and theoretical explorations of the real and the fake.

Kathy O’Dell, Curator, *Gun Show* at UMBC

11. In Baltimore, due largely to the efforts of activists Dominic Nell and Juan Nance, the City Council enacted an ordinance in December 2016, banning replica guns. See: Alexis Taylor, “Baltimore Activists Target Toy Guns,” July 20, 2016, *Afro*, <https://www.afro.com/baltimore-activists-target-toy-guns/>; Luke Broadwater and Yvonne Wenger, “Baltimore OKs Ban of Replica Guns,”

Baltimore Sun, November 14, 2016, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-replica-guns-20161114-story.html>, accessed March 2, 2017; and Christen Smith, “Baltimore City Council Gives Final Approval to Replica Gun Ban,” *guns.com*, December 12, 2016, <http://www.guns.com/2016/12/12/baltimore-enacts-replica-gun-ban/>, accessed March 2, 2017.

*Team members who have traveled with David Hess and *Gun Show* to its various locations include Liz Faust (project director), Sreyashi Tinni Bhattacharyya (project director), Richard Chisolm (cinematographer), Geoff Graham (photographer), and Kei Ito (photographer). Those joining the team for *Gun Show* at UMBC and associated programing include the CADVC’s Symmes Gardner (director), Sandra Abbott (registrar/outreach), Aimi Bouillon (research assistant), and Michael Woodhouse (preparator); Coppin State University’s Zoey Howell-Brown (program coordinator); and the UMBC Department of Visual Arts’ Kathy O’Dell (art historian) and Guenet Abraham (designer).

RIGHT: TOP TO BOTTOM

Gun Show

Kohl Gallery

Washington College

Chestertown, MD, 2015

Photo: Geoff Graham

Guns, Violence, and Justice

Metal Museum

Memphis, TN, 2017

Photo: Kei Ito

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Gun Show, "Art in Odd Places"

14th Street & 5th Avenue

New York City

October 8, 2016

Photo: Kei Ito

"Arts Fest: Arts for Social Change"

Reynolds Green

University of North Carolina Asheville

April 8, 2017

Photo: Geoff Graham



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Also see the artist's website & Instagram:
<http://www.hessgunshow.com/>
[@hessgunshow](https://www.instagram.com/hessgunshow)

UMBC

AN HONORS UNIVERSITY IN MARYLAND