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## МЕТАЛНИ НАХОДКИ КАТО ИЗСЛЕДОВАТЕЛСКИ ИНСТРУМЕНТАРИУМ ЗА ВИЗУАЛНИ ПРОЕКТИ. ПРИМЕРИ С АРТЕФАКТИ ОТ ПЪРВАТА СВЕТОВНА ВОЙНА, ОТКРИТИ В МЕСТНОСТТА ПРАХОВА, РУМЪНИЯ

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## METAL DETECTING AS A RESEARCH TOOL FOR VISUAL ARTS PROJECTS. CASE STUDY OF WORLD WAR 1 ARTIFACTS RECOVERED FROM PRAHOVA VALLEY, ROMANIA

**Abstract:** Metal detection is a controversial topic within the contemporary cultural environment, due to its complex and sensitive implications within national legislations, cultural policies and participative involvement of citizens in scientific data collection. However, this technology proved to have a huge potential for any research and investigations, especially for artistic research projects. The amount of data, archaeological context and artifacts is impressive and enables approach, development, progress and fair conclusions, at the scientific level, for artistic projects based on the study of modern history artifacts. The investigative project presented here is based on the last five years of research activity as Romanian artist practitioner of metal detecting, with comparative references to the main and trend setting Romanian artistic project of metal detecting R.A.P.I. – Romanian Archaeological Photography Index, developed by Michele Bressan and Bogdan Gorbovan, both professional photographers and graduates of National University of Arts, Bucharest. Our approach is oriented towards the potential sculptural value of artifacts detected and unearthed within the world war 1 sites from the specific area of Prahova Valley, the place of fierce mountain battles at the end of 1916. As in the R.A.P.I. project, we used the wide-ranging photographic documentation of detected and dig-out military artifacts, but in more creative approach, rather than documentary, following the sculptural potential of free composition of objects and artifacts. Over-designed and over-engineered, fabricated under high quality military standards or on the contrary, under industrial war effort ersatz regulations, these artifacts, wearing the centennial decay of underground and oblivion, express certain aesthetic qualities if composed in creative ways, as sculptural objects. The main objective of this study is the potential of metal detecting as a research tool to identify artifacts with sculptural readymade potential, composed and photographically investigated within creativity methods of contemporary sculpture. Used in the appropriate circumstances of legality, ethics, scientific rigor and also artistic creativity, metal detecting would acquire a major status within cultural environment through interdisciplinary artistic research projects combining art, archaeological survey, immersive history and participative citizen science.

**Key words:** *metal detecting; artistic research; military artifacts; sculptural objects.*

### Introduction

Metal detecting, detectors and detectorists, they always had a controversial reputation among traditional, old-school scientists and academics, especially in the areas of archaeology and cultural heritage, for reasons easy to understand. However, in the last decades, some of the younger scientists and academics have realized

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the tremendous potential of this contemporary research tool and instrument, constantly sustained by the passion invested in their outdoor hobby by straightforward, authorized metal detectorists. Although weakly involved in archaeological excavations, due to reasons of preserving and thoroughly study the context, metal detecting is mostly use to signalize points of interests within investigated area (red flags). When large surfaces need to be covered, as in battlefield sites, the metal detectors archeological survey and mapping is essential, the traditional method of shovel-testing being completely outdated and ineffective. Undoubtedly, the future belongs to interdisciplinary teams made of primarily metal detectorists, and an archaeologist; we have tested this configuration in September 2019 in Romania as a team of four members, archaeologist included, within activities for an European research project on antiques corridors of communication. While awaiting for the scientific synthesis of the results, we all reached the conclusion that collaboration is the perfect solution to fully integrate and maximize the research potential of metal detecting<sup>1</sup>.

Still, is obvious that for a long time from now, the metal detecting public perception image will remain stained by the *myth of hidden treasure* and therefore by the shady activities of the *treasure hunting*, real but mostly undertaken by organized crime. The rest of discoveries covered by media from time to time are random and fortuitous or just urban legends compiled in the local pubs. It should be emphasized that all metal detectors have very clear technology limitations: most of those commercially available are effective for just 30 to 50 cm beneath the ground. More powerful detectors are very expensive, penetrate up to 1,5–2 m in the ground losing any ability to discriminate between metals – one will find and dig all the pipelines in their way. More realistic is the involvement of metal detecting within contemporary cultural environment, through the artistic research projects, where this technology and instrument of research has a tremendous potential, already proved. Such a trend setting project is **R.A.P.I.** (*Romanian Archaeological Photography Index*), by Michele Bressan and Bogdan Gîrbovan, active from 2014 onwards. **B.G.:** *The myth of hidden treasure...we were thinking neither of the objective, intrinsic value of the things we might dig up, nor their symbolic value. Above all, we were drawn by the gesture and its performative nature; it's truly fascinating to go out into the woods and to look at what lies underneath the earth. M.B.:* *We began this project with a clear plan in mind: we go to a specific place; we find an object; history is confirmed; we close the circle, and that's it! Along the way there were many moments of introspection and even doubt – from moral and spiritual problems to technical issues and issues of trust, even of money and resources.* (Gîrbovan, 2018: 109)

R.A.P.I. is also the first project of its kind that found it appropriate and necessary to specify about legal and ethical issues regarding its activities, procedures and approaches, inserting in any media presentation a note by the project' authors: *All the ammunition elements presented in this material are inert and safe. The elements of active ammunition discovered during the execution of the project were reported to the competent authorities. All the human remains found were reported to the local authorities, to be buried in the military cemeteries in each locality. The detection of metals was made outside the archaeological areas of interest, based on an authorization to own and use the device.* (Irina Tacu and Adrian Lungu)

**The artistic research context.** The artistic background of authors is essential to understand the motivation within contemporary cultural environment, exhausted by official festivism of 1914 Centennial, the remaining inertia of communism and the search for a real historic identity too often distorted by the obtuse state propaganda. The metal detector is just another tool, although essential for the project and also a game changer; in fact, two instruments of research build the entire project – the metal detector and photographic cameras, the rest is just creativity, thinking outside the box and passion, a lot of it. *Michele Bressan (36) and Bogdan Gîrbovan (34) started, at the end of 2014, a project called **Underground**, through which they explored, dug up, photographed and indexed objects from modern wars on the Romanian territory. The project tries to re-establish the connection between the historical identity of the places, the objects found and their artistic potential once removed from the ground.* (Irina Tacu and Adrian Lungu)

The artistic output of such a Visual Arts project is the most surprising, revealing unexpected results and opening new ways to follow and research. Although the project was mainly intended to carefully document

<sup>1</sup> We all agreed that the professional archaeologist should lead the team, also considering this activity as a master class or workshop dedicated to archaeology survey methods, procedures and techniques – an educational input for metal detecting practioners to upgrade our potential for scientific and educational output. All findings were collected and registered, GPS coordinates were provided for each artifacts. All locations were public, none of them being previously investigated or declared protected site or archaeological reservations. All artifacts are now undergoing cleaning and restoration procedures at National History Museum of Romania, together with scientific and context analysis.

each artifact, related to photographs of its originating landscape and dug outs performative process, the aesthetic qualities of artifacts, with or without cleaning, generated direct references to the word *sculpture*:

*All these objects, which they dug up after tens of hours of digging, are cleaned and photographed in the studio, and when you see them listed in a white-walled apartment in Bucharest, you get the impression that they are an exhibition of abstract sculptures. These photographs, which document the found objects, the landscapes in which they are hidden and the process by which they are recovered, are not just an index of images. It is also a new method of unraveling, literally and figuratively, a piece of history so cliché and so little known by the ordinary people of 2017. (Andra Matzal)*

Deeply unusual for the traditionalist and inertial Romanian cultural environment, the project is clearly a hybrid, being the first of its kind. From the Visual Arts point of view, photographic documentation has two levels, field and studio, both covering also the scientific rigor beyond the requirements of any archaeological survey. The metal detecting process of research, the *beep* sounds while wandering in the forests, are only interrupted by the *performative process* of dug outs, the moments charged with most emotions, creating the *payload* of the project. This historical perception could prove immersive to suffocation and cancels any official propaganda rhetoric. Individual experiences over such a project are deeply formative and influential for intellect. *For Romanian art, R.A.P.I. is a completely unusual hybrid of photography, military archeology, modern and contemporary history. It relies on a lot of research, field and studio work, documentation and the adrenaline rush that every performance of the digs gives them. While the official discourse around the heroes brings to the fore precisely abstract things like the nation, R.A.P.I. proposes a very direct and very personal knowledge of history: snooping through its underground warehouse, full of artifacts and war victims. Almost one hundred years of history are compacted to a depth of only half a meter below the ground. The artistic act, the photography, comes to close the circle of each particular discovery. Removed from their natural context and brought to a studio, all objects become abstract. They become strange shapes, which you look at as some extraterrestrial tools. (Andra Matzal)*

Two major concepts running the project are *image* and *gravity*, both implying the appropriate research instrument, the photographic camera and metal detector. The camera documents the landscape container and its dug outs artifacts, which evolves into iconic cultural images setting the trends and references for artistic research during decades to come; the metal detector is the perfect tool to investigate and visualize the gravity and therefore remnant underground littered with archaeological artifacts never before widely documented, explored and indexed. Although scientifically documented, is the artistic and aesthetic value, open to future interpretations, which is the major accomplishment of this project. The *inherent voyeurism* referred to is considered to be an *inertial* ethical issue, due to practical impossibility to attach any visual identity or name to artifacts, inscribed trench art pieces or even human remains and identification tags. Even when this extremely rare events fortuitously happens, the informations, artifacts and remains brings a closure, honour and dignity to the missing individual and its descendants. *The intention is to generate new landmarks, which in turn establish a connection between the natural environment and the historical space. The project explores this relation by studying how the remains of civilization are periodically absorbed and integrated in nature. In the same time, the approach functions as a reminder of the inescapable gravity, highlighting how, at some point, everything ends up in the ground. The use of the metal detector creates a visual bridge between spaces and objects. The project forms around two layers. First, the landscape - working perimeter - is presented. Then the objects are separated from their medium, decontextualised and photographed in a controlled setup, so that the objective representation of their form becomes a showcase, almost abstract, and hints to other interpretations. (...) The voyeurism inherent to resurfacing objects that are lost in the ground and in time proposes a new historical mapping that complements the existing one, suggesting that both our past and future can be found underground. (Michele Bressan)*

Apparently, the project is still active. Once the fever of the 1914 *Centennial* fades away, anticipating the burst of the 1939 *Centennial* for the next generation of researchers, emotions diminish, things tend to become more objective and the areas of artistic interest are diversified. Once isolated from their landscape container environment, cleaned and documented in a studio, the war artifacts reveal new opportunities for artistic interpretation, unexpected aesthetic qualities which deserves to be studied from an anthropological perspective. Also the *artefactual histories* can be taken into account, involving elements of design, use, technologies and industrial fabrication processes, *ersatz* variants. *Finally, they are separated from the environment where they have been found photographed in a controlled environment. Through this last*

*objective representation of the form, they receive an abstract evidence, which suggests also other possibilities of reading. (Cosmin Năsui)*

**The case of Zsolt Asztalos and his *Fired but unexploded video installation*** is extremely relevant for our topic, although the artifacts involved have a slightly different historical context, as part of a professional collection and inventory of *Hungarian Unexploded Bomb Disposal Department*. However, the similarities are amazing about the narratives of artifacts presented within the artwork: all the projectiles were found, reported and defused in Hungarian World War 2 former sites, including in Budapest, the scene of fierce fights at the end of war. Technically, they are very diverse, aviation bombs, projectiles, mortar grenades, rocket propelled anti-tank grenades, etc., and were obviously chosen by the artist according to aesthetic qualities and probably some other sets of data, like provenance and place of recovery. *Fired but unexploded* by Zsolt Asztalos also represented the Hungarian Pavilion at the 55<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, *La Biennale di Venezia*, in 2013. *Each bomb has its own story. Which is essentially one of two kinds. Bombs may explode and thus fulfill their role as objects made specifically for the purpose of destruction, and then enter history books and the personal histories that families maintain. (...) Zsolt Asztalos HOLD's objects trouvés are multiple representations of conflict situations, open to simultaneous interpretations on personal, local, regional and global levels. This brave and thought-provoking installation belongs to the praxis of visual art that has been instrumental, through research and exhibition, in processing the brutal traumas of the late 20th and 21st centuries. (Roberto Alborghetti)*

Beyond the outstanding value as an artistic research project, the video installation was such a success due to iconic status of objects captured on video and fascination of large audiences by explosive ammunition. Actually, in some areas overlapping World War 1 and 2 sites of heavy fightings, unexploded ammunition is still a major issue; in Germany, around 15 bombs are recovered every day, at Verdun, 900 tons of ammunition are collected yearly, chemical projectiles included. Belgium recovers around 200 tons each year. These huge quantities are managed by the local units in charge with unexploded ammunitions, as in this case the *Unexploded Bomb Disposal Department* of Hungary, with whom Zsolt Asztalos collaborated in the development of his amazing artistic project. *Hungary's Unexploded Bomb Disposal Department gave the artist access to some of the explosives. They might be 60 years old but these bombs still pose a risk of detonation. Asztalos sees in them a symbol of conflicts among humans: The unexploded bombs symbolize those places and situations that the sounds evoke, he told Funzine. They may symbolize political conflicts – in this case we hear the sound of street demonstrations; they may stand for the time bombs of consumer societies – then we hear someone going through TV channels; or they may represent issues in private life and partnership – then we hear someone doing the dishes without saying a word, and the tension in the air is almost palpable. We hear all these sounds and see this unexploded bomb. The question is only when it will explode. (we-make-money-not-art.com)*

*Fired but unexploded* and *La Biennale di Venezia, Hungarian Pavilion* was a match made in heaven, due to open-mindedness and objectivity of the national jury, which also anticipated the visual appeal of these artifacts overlaid with the deep meanings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century historical traumas and contemporary international context, also preparing for 1914 Centennial. *Since the proposed exhibit represents its concerns, both formal and philosophical, in a variety of manners, it makes its subject accessible for the general public of the Biennale. Luckily found since World War One, the various bombs, projectiles and grenades (which have an absurd visual appeal like so many designer objects) were rendered useless by some 'error', making them deny their own fate, as it were, wrote the jurors. As a result, they 'saved' people's lives, while their presence, their very existence, created a state of continuous threat, a condition of tension. (soundlikevenice.wordpress.com)*

In the same manner as military artifacts recovered through metal detecting by *R.A.P.I. Project* and World War 1 sites from *Prahova Valley*, Zsolt Asztalos works with World War 2 *objets trouvés/found objects* having already acquired the status of contemporary cultural icons and immersive narratives of conflict situations. The great difference and also original aspect is the state of suspension that generated these artifacts, the misfire, a technical error building a breach in reality, narratives, aesthetics, mystery and knowledge. The catalogue of this interdisciplinary project, as a research output, comprises texts by people who could hardly work together, according to traditional cultural and scientific standards: a bomb disposal expert, a mathematician and a Benedictine monk. And in the middle, a contemporary artist and his twenty videos installation of misfire

world war 2 ammunition. His *found objects* are multiple representations of conflict situations, open to simultaneous interpretations on personal, local, regional and global levels. An unexploded bomb makes a statement. It thinks. Motionless. Mathematically. The process frozen by chance devours time. They are manifestations of a state of grace. (soundslikevenice.wordpress.com)

Both case studies pursued here complement each other in the area of artistic research, although the differences are still significant. R.A.P.I. is a systematic photographic index based on metal detecting artifacts recovery procedures, while *Fired but unexploded* clearly deals with *objets trouvés/ found objects*, visual appealing and cultural icons, former military artifacts provided by the *Unexploded Bomb Disposal Department*, mostly discovered by chance and reported to authorities during construction and maintenance works. Both projects emphasizes the landscape container, entirely urban in the second case. *The vision of the destructive weapons, which hover in a homogeneous, indefinite space, is complemented with the sounds of the world around them, and thus the films open the way to new narratives. The latter, 9-minute film shows the present-day history or everyday functioning of the places where the 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.* (soundslikevenice.wordpress.com)

**Case study of world war 1 artifacts recovered from Prahova Valley, Romania** – by the author, with acknowledgements to Florin Burlacu, Gerald Iustin and Dan Constantinescu from Predeal. The typology of artifacts presented here has its provenance from metal detecting dug-outs in Prahova Valley area, a mountain region located on one side and the other of the former border between Romania and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where heavy and bitter fighting took place at the end of 1916. Today an area of winter sports resorts, the high region is researched and investigated by local detectorists and from all over the country; a substantial amount of artifacts presented within R.A.P.I. Project were recovered here. Dug-outs war artifacts are obvious aesthetic readymade objects. From where did this completely unexpected qualities came from? Military artifacts have no marketing problems, although they should be solid and lightweight, always reliable, cost effective and eventually multitasking. A nightmare for any designer. They are perfect for industrial production, once the models tested and selected, being made with hundreds of thousands, even millions of them. Strangely, this cumulation of factors generates not only aesthetics, but even iconic, highly collectable and fascinating artifacts. Apparently, due to their provenance from dug-outs in war sites, those are archaeological artifacts, although most of them are decayed beyond recovery as collectible military items. Their value is strictly educational, mainly for historical immersive experience. However, within a Visual Arts and Artistic research Project they prove to be essential as generating aesthetics, working concepts and knowledge never before perceived by contemporary cultural environment. Our approach relate to sculptural potential of this typology of readymade artifacts, based on systematic, creative photographic investigation of composition schemes and permutations of objects. Sometimes neutral, modern elements were used, as *C clamps*, to fix the artifacts one to each other within sculptural composition. This creative process, inside the studio, implies joining of artifacts chose by their formal analogies, changing of the original context of use. Systematic post-processing of digital images is a mandatory creative stage, altering colours, exposures, contrasts and brightness. The state of decay, the layers of rust and verdigris on brass, copper and bronze elements, the patina of a century underground are perceived as a spiritual accumulation over the initial trauma of war and death. The typology of the military artifacts excavated from the world war 1 sites is fascinating, being the first global industrial war mirroring, on artefactual level, the complexity of a society very similar to our contemporary one. However, we were forced to invent and adapt our own artifacts typology based on creative needs of our approach to sculptural project. Combining them even in absurd, surrealist schemes proved to be highly productive in terms of creativity and opened new threads of sculptural narratives. Some artifacts appears in much more than one categories, for example a big chunk of shrapnel could be a *heavy iron* and also a piece of *ammunition*, use in a composition for the aesthetic qualities of its exploded shape and in another for the menace, curiosity and fascination that explosive projectiles induce to any audience. A bayonet and its scabbard is a *worn item* and also a weapon, sometimes fixed at the business end of the rifle. *Worn items* are also small trench shovels, with handles always broken or totally decayed and rusted beyond recovery, canteens and water canteens, remains of leather equipment, usually strongly degraded and heavily decayed, like bayonet frogs, ammunition pouches, military boots, equipment belts with deeply rusted buckles.. *Tools and field infrastructure* are larger shovels, heavy pickaxes and axe, to dig trenches in the mountain soil and cut the roots and forest trees

to organize defense, barbed wire rollers, pieces of barbed wire from the former obstacles in front of the trenches and the pliers for barbed wire. *Elements of ammunitions* are the exploded projectile fuses, remarkable and beautiful pieces of engineering, made from bronze, brass and copper. The artifacts described here are just a fraction from the items found on sites – there are many more, discarded, ignored or degraded beyond recognition.

**Conclusions.** There is an obvious cultural trend of immersive history, within emerging east-european countries trying to structure a new cultural identity, in a post-communist area still uncertain about its cultural and ideological options; this cultural trend helps avoid the gloomy perspective of populist and nationalist tendencies, while maintaining deep cultural liaison with the people, their traditional perspective and collective imagination. More than pop-culture, these Visual Arts and artistic research projects are a humanistic, non-ideological approach and vision on recent past, also dealing with consequences and present implications.

The artistic research projects could represent a training and a stage to access the democratic dimension of citizen science, participative involvement in research through the more scientific permissive area of artistic research, although the empirical levels backed by good intentions, *bona fide* and passion, remains a liability. Also participative involvement by democratic and rightful access to affordable cutting edge research technology, in this case commercially available metal detectors, while taking advantage of its endless interdisciplinary applications.

While budget cuttings and financial restrictions narrow the field of archaeology, well organized teams of volunteers metal detectorist could supply the means of research, coordinated by professional archaeologists.

Special mentions should be emphasized about Paul Virilio<sup>2</sup> and Jean-Louis Cohen<sup>3</sup>, as authors who highlighted, within their already famous works, the unexpected and sometimes strange aesthetics of military artifacts, mostly on architectural dimensions: the bunkers of *Atlantic Wall* and the urban *flak towers*.

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