

Time and space differently

Recent medallic work by László Szlávics Jr

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LÁSZLÓ SZLÁVICS is not unknown to readers of *The Medal*, who became acquainted with his *Ritual Proto-Money* pieces in the Spring of 2000 and with his medals investigating issues of time and space in the autumn of 2007.¹ It is characteristic of his creativity that Szlávics had experience of all the historical techniques of medal-making before assuming a leading role in creating what may be termed borderline cases around the turn of the millennium. These works saw the gradual inclusion of novel materials and techniques and particularly the incorporation of *objets trouvés*. As one of the principal theoreticians of modern Hungarian art László Beke recently remarked, 'László Szlávics Jr, perhaps the most spectacular innovator of the Hungarian medal, has covered the historical path of redefining the art of the medal over the past decade.'²

Not all of the works of the past ten years are clear borderline cases – that is, art works that medallic literature defines as markedly removed from the classic medal – but some of them do break very explicitly with the genre. These include his constructivist planar sculptures from 2012, the pieces using damaged clocks and other measuring instruments from 2014, and the compositions of the following years using complete cameras rather than just their component parts.³ Although the latter meet the size specifications generally set for medal exhibitions, in their character and effect they are alien to the medal and therefore remain outside the purview of this article.

Over the past decade Szlávics has addressed innumerable sculptural questions, but outstanding among his works is a series celebrating the birthdays of István Harasztý between 2009 and 2016. Harasztý, a Hungarian kinetic sculptor born in 1934, creates works whose essential element is motion.⁴ His sculptures, made to move with just a tiny push, imply social and political criticism and are soaked in irony. As well as mutual respect, his friendship with Szlávics is rooted in the various traits that

their respective programmes have in common, though the paths they tread are not identical. Szlávics's series comprises ten medals along the lines of his interactive medals of around 1995 probing the measuring of time. These restate the issues raised by Harasztý. Each is a self-contained piece, for the artist, while always drawing the viewer into the space of the medals, devised individual solutions to render each of them mobile, the motion being made possible by the use of steel discs and magnetism.

For *Marking Time*, *Society* and *Cutting Edge*, all made in 2009, Szlávics followed his friend's practice in the titles he gave to his works. *Marking Time* (fig. 1) consists of two steel discs and a sphere. When the upper disc is rotated, the ball also spins, but appears to stay in place. *Cutting Edge*, which repeats the basic idea of a sculpture with an identical title by Harasztý, has the ball running around the edge of a moving disc. The celebrated artist has remarked: 'I could have made it myself'.

From then onward a new piece was added to the series every year, but the mobilising mechanism changed. The medals now had to be touched underneath rather than at the edge to make them move. Since there was now no division at the edge, the medals can be regarded as subtler. There is a great diversity in the manner of their magnetic motion, and, although none has an exact forerunner in Harasztý's oeuvre, they rework certain ideas that have long preoccupied him. In *Scope of Motion* (2010) the shifting of the magnets of the lower disc causes the tiny balls to stir and writhe in their narrow nests. The small ball of *Passage* (2011) continually passes through a gate comprised of two figure 7s face-to-face, for this was the year in which Harasztý turned seventy-seven. *By-pass* (2012) incorporates a brass disc, and, although the ball when put in motion hits against it, still it continues along its path. In *Roving* (2013) two steel balls – one smaller and one larger – and a precious stone chase one another, circling around and occasionally colliding.

1. Szlávic: *István Harasztj*
– *Marking Time*, 2009,
chromium steel and mixed
media, 68mm.



2. Szlávic: *István Harasztj*
– *Sweetie 80*, 2014,
chromium steel, steel,
bronze and mixed media,
68mm.



When Harasztj, who is nicknamed *Édeske* (Sweetie), turned eighty in 2014, Szlávic created a medal, *Édeske 80*, in which a sizeable bronze ring resting on a steel disc contains steel balls of two different sizes, which, when jolted, roll randomly (fig. 2). *Steering Clear* of 2015 also includes steel balls, but with a dark Bakelite cone, which, when made to move, the balls steer clear of, one moving on the inside, the other on the outside. The last piece in the series is a variant of an earlier medal titled *Playing Tag – Variation* (2016). Here a larger ball and a group of small balls are involved in the chase, and while none is ever caught, the formation of the small balls changes constantly. These medals, which make use of, and further develop, the results of Szlávic's earlier interactive medals centred on chronometry, display an impressive range of inventiveness.

The wooden works discussed in the 2007

article were made from pieces of an old turning lathe. In 2008 the leftovers became the raw material for a new chapter in Szlávic's development.⁵ The largely wooden medals created in that year and the next continued the artist's enquiry into questions of time and space, questions that he always approaches from a different angle, thereby ensuring that the result is something new in material, technique and/or meaning. Although for a long time he had abided by the limits of the genre, his powerful inclination for innovation induced him to stretch them further. Still, these works would remain within the broad definition of the medal.

Compared to his earlier works in wood, the material now appeared in a different context. The themes still included houses, towers, interiors – edifices built by humans and captured through their atmosphere – but new ideas led

3. Szlávics: *Torii*, 2008,
wood and mixed media,
95 x 145mm.



to new processes. Szlávics began to cut up the raw material, using fragments of wood created by an old lathe and other pieces. This resulted in raw surfaces, which, as a freshly cut surface is always light, he felt had to be concealed. His solution was to clamp some of the pieces together and to burn others and then cool them down. Burning is a natural process, which produces peculiar colour effects of browns and blacks and interestingly textured surfaces, whilst cooling results in rich shades of white and grey.

The artist's choice of titles for the medals was governed by associations, and he also counted on what might be suggested in the viewer's mind. In this way realist and abstract motifs coalesced into a unified whole. The impact of these works lies in their compactness and in the effects of light. Ruddy browns can move through a gradient of colours to become lacerated black surfaces. His several renderings of traditional Japanese gates, as in *Torii* (fig. 3), use different hues to suggest their spiritual meaning: the gates are the bridge between this world and the life beyond. *In the Vineyard* (fig. 4) evokes both

wine cellars and hillsides planted with grapes: with the lighter hues the sun-soaked landscape is suggested, whilst a gloomy tenebrous mood is evoked through darker colours and solid forms. The pieces showing interiors often have literary or musical connections. Strong atmospheric elements characterise the medal *Bethlehem* (2008), which is now in the British Museum: the Biblical text is evoked by the sensitive rendering of a poor home. The medals entitled *Evening in Transylvania* of the same year reverberate with the reserved tone of Béla Bartók's subtle composition of the same title, which comprises folk song arrangements.

The artist's preoccupation with space also resulted in other series. The *House of the Rising Sun* (2008) consists of four almost square elements with door and window openings indicating houses. The surfaces are completely charred so as to be cracked and splintered, the colour of blackened walls. The reference is to a famous Anglo-American folk ballad known in many variants and still popular today, the best-known adaptation probably being that sung by the British group, the Animals, in 1964. The

4. Szlávics: *In the Vineyard*,
2008, wood, textile and
mixed media, 145 x
123mm.



story appears to centre on a brothel, and in some versions a man and in others a woman is the victim.

Lighter in tone is the series *Patras – Hommage à Agamemnon Makris* (fig. 5). Born in the harbour town of Patras in Greece, the sculptor Agamemnon Makris (1913-93), under whom Szlávics studied, lived for a long time in Hungary. The houses in the series are depicted with a good deal of realism, and, despite the low relief of their roofs, which hardly rise above the level of the walls, their three-dimensionality is emphatic, enhanced as it is by the blue and white paint and the greys left by the burning process, which together give a sense of place. When shown together, the different works in the series are arranged side by side as in a street.

Aware of the conventions governing medals and still intent on observing them, Szlávics has nevertheless in more recent years been propelled by his agile mind and virtuoso handling of materials to venture into further new paths. His preoccupation with time has led him to begin to use real clocks and clockwork parts for his medals. Though our senses do

not perceive time, we grasp it as a progression from the past through the present to the future. Interpreting time as both tradition and individual experience, Szlávics has created objects that embody the passage of time and also generate a particular atmosphere. At the same time these medals probe the relationship between time and humanity and, as symbols of life and death, warn of the transience of life. The once shining bright and moving parts have come to a halt, but they remind the viewer of the past and of his or her inner experience of time.

The old mechanisms of springs and cogwheels display a diversity of form, with the medals built up piece by piece – they certainly cannot be described as ready-mades. What lends these works their idiosyncratic character is that the artist has adapted the mechanisms with the punctiliousness of a technician or a goldsmith, while trying at the same time to conceal his interventions. He engenders or accelerates natural processes by physically damaging the mechanisms or by chemical treatments, or sometimes by burying the piece in the soil for a time. Although what we see is in



5. Szlávics: *Patras – Hommage à Agamemnon Makris IV*, 2009, painted wood and mixed media, 150 x 150mm.

reality the outcome of the artist's activity, these contraptions appear to have been changed by time.

Moment (2014) is a composition achieved through extraordinarily economical means. A fragment of a clock case, a cogwheel and a broken spring evoke a highly suggestive moment in a work that will have a different significance for everyone. In *Past I* (fig. 6) the clock mechanism is held together by rusty clamps suggestive of a distant past, but they can hardly be seen, for a cluster of old cogwheels covers them up. By contrast, in *Ancient Time* only a few cogwheels remain from the clock mechanism and the composition is dominated by the rusted iron pieces as an emphatic reference to the passing of time and the events of history. In the manner of their execution and the atmospheric effect they create, *Movie* and the three works in the *Music Box* series (all 2014) are all related to previous

works, although the link with time is now not so explicit. The forms of the clock parts, their colour and mood bring to mind the music box or the moving picture projector as the case may be, with the dense assemblages of mechanical parts suggesting the associations.

A similar, yet in a way very different, world is alluded to by medals that use clock parts along with a clock face. In the three works, *Oxford, A.D. – Made in the USSR* and *A.D. – Made in the USA* (all 2014) the dials enhance the steampunk character of the works. The use of old mechanical devices endowed with new meanings and elements drawn from the Victorian era (clockwork, cogwheels, and so on), along with their romanticised rendering, is again connected with the artist's perception of time. The piece titled *Oxford* – another work now in the British Museum – takes its name from the inscription on the clock face (fig. 7); it is harmonious and

6. Szlávic: *Past I*, 2014, iron, clockparts and mixed media
150 x 100mm.



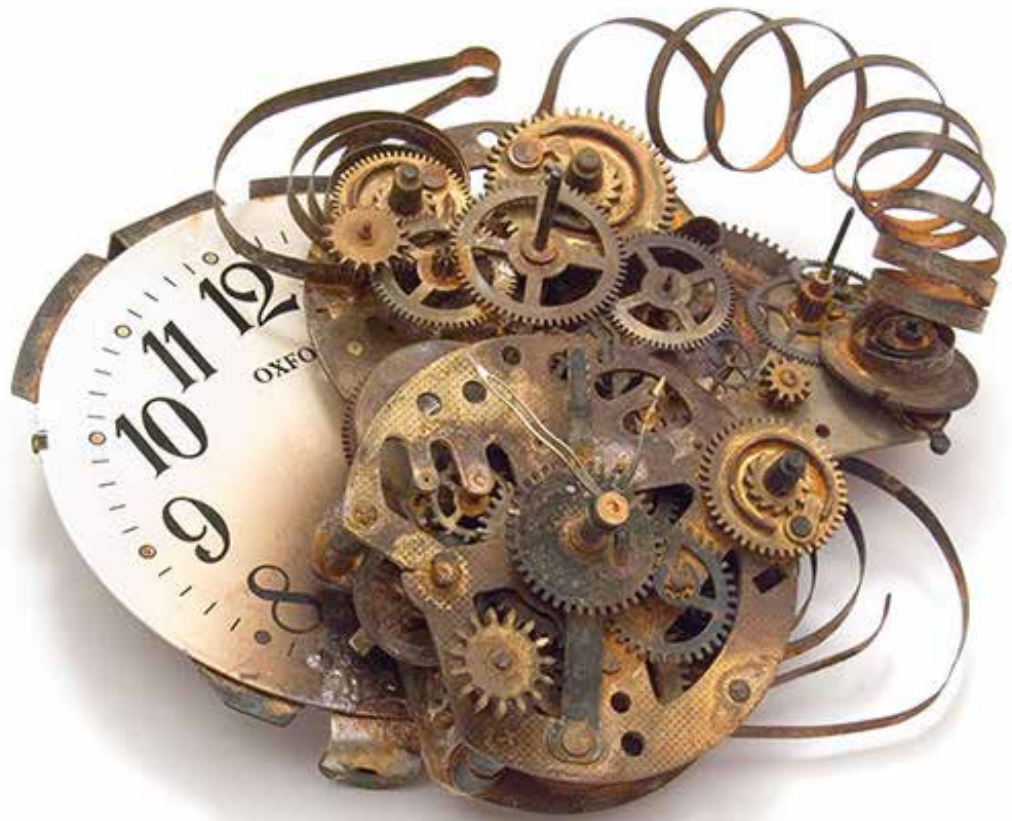
aesthetically pleasing despite the shattered nature of the clock mechanism. Each of the *A.D.* medals is self-sufficient, but as a pair they carry more complex connotations. *A.D.* refers to the process of history, but the references to the Soviet Union and the United States, whence, as the dials reveal, the clocks originated, extend the scope of their meaning, suggesting that the two great powers differed in their approach to time and to its place in their histories and by extension that all different societies experience time differently.

The nostalgic world of steampunk is evoked most strikingly in the *Hommage à Jules Verne* series of the same year (fig. 8). The popular nineteenth-century French novelist created a singular fictional world filled with fantastic events, all based on the natural sciences in which the writer was well versed. This world is evoked in this series through references to

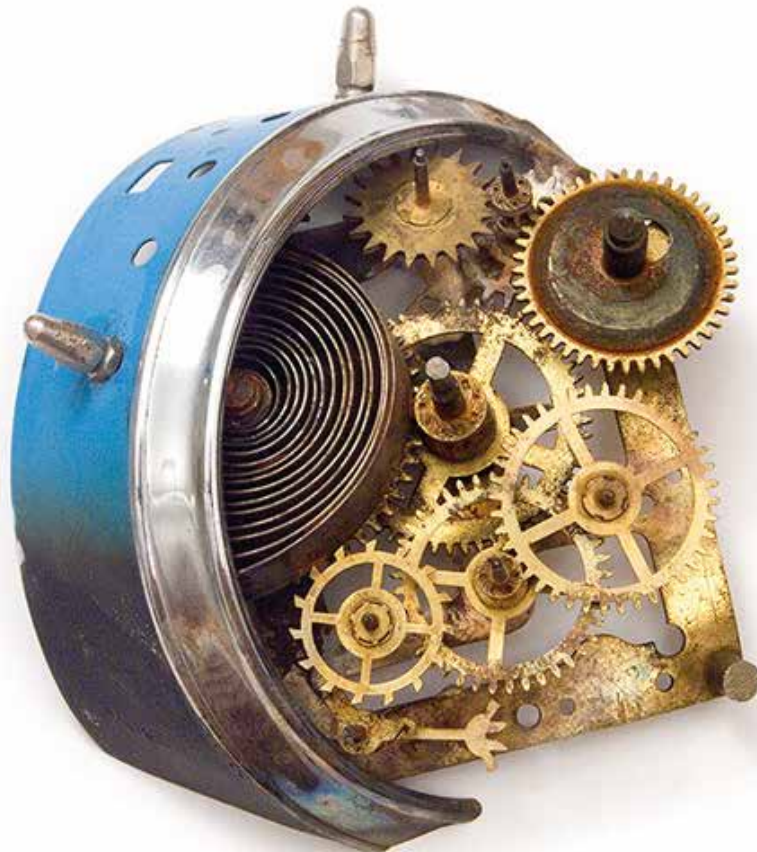
the Victorian period, with its ornate, decorative forms and vivid colour schemes. The brightly coloured clock cases house glittering wheels, levers and springs.

Following on from this, the shattered clocks gave way to component parts taken from broken cameras. The sculptural antecedent to these are the small medal-like sculptures Szlávic created as tributes to the famous Hungarian war photographer Robert Capa (1913-54), in which the devastations of war are depicted allegorically, with cameras sinking into soil. The *Big Brother* series (fig. 9) uses camera parts to examine the reality of our times from the angle of fiction, taking inspiration from the all-seeing big brother of George Orwell's dystopic novel *1984*. This figure from a vision of the future personifies the violation of privacy, with the state persecuting any manifestation of individuality by having everyone

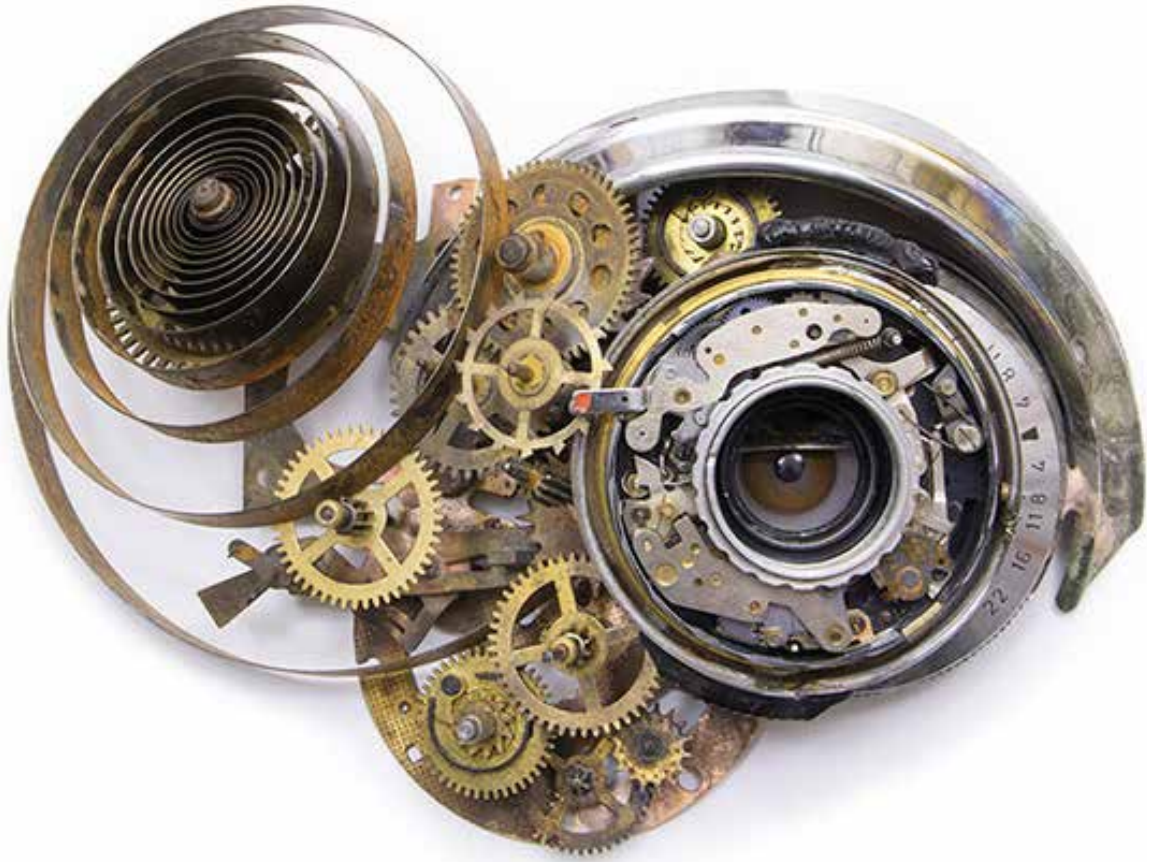
7. Szlávic: *Oxford*, 2014, iron, brass, clockparts and mixed media, 120 x 130mm., British Museum.



8. Szlávic: *Hommage à Jules Verne III*, 2014, brass, clock mechanism and mixed media, 110 x 100mm.



9. Szlávics: *Big Brother I*, 2015, brass, iron, clock mechanism and mixed media, 110 x 150mm.



10. Szlávics: *Minority Report*, 2015, iron, brass, lens and mixed media, 65 x 90mm.



11. Szlávic: *36 mm I*,
2015, sand, camera parts
and mixed media, 100 x
100mm., Sopron Museum.



watched day and night: there is no hiding from the eye. The medals are formed from camera parts, with the lens replaced by an artificial glass eye, which surveys the world around it. The first work in the series stands out from the rest because in addition to the camera parts a damaged clock mechanism is also incorporated into the composition, suggesting that the aim of these works is to present the phenomena that threaten the times in which we live.

Minority Report may be seen as part of this development (fig. 10). It takes its title from the Orwellian film of that name, directed by Steven Spielberg, concerning a totalitarian state of the future in which individuals lose their freedom. In a broader sense the question is whether the fate of an individual is predetermined or the individual has free will. Evoking the atmosphere of the film, Szlávic suggests the social and technological milieu of the future. The leaves of the shutter almost wholly cover the lens and a fragment of a clock case hangs over the lens like an eyelid.


Reverting to the works on Robert Capa, the series *36 mm* (fig. 11) also commemorates the life and work of the photo reporter, its title referring to the size of the film used in traditional cameras. The series consists of four works, each of which is a variation on the theme. With one exception they are roughly square, and they are all made from a special sand and produced using a technology unique to the artist, which he first used in 2003. Here diverse camera parts are placed in the soft material, with the dark sand and the black and metallic surfaces of the camera parts combining to create a peculiar effect.

A similar use of sand as a base against which smaller forms appear can also be found in subsequent works. The four-part *Roswell '47* series (fig. 12) refers to a UFO disaster in the United States, which is alleged to have taken place outside a small New Mexico town in 1947. Although it was widely reported that a spaceship carrying aliens had crashed on to a farm, the story is extremely doubtful, not least

12. Szlávics: *Roswell '47 III*,
2016, sand, chromium steel
and mixed media, 110 x
110mm.



because contradictory statements were made at the time. The dark sand of the four compositions suggests soil within a regular square, two broken and damaged squares, and finally an amorphous form; all have regularly shaped steel tablets stuck into them. On each of these tablets the artist has placed a set of imaginary characters, applied in patterns in the manner of a text. These suggest multiple associations, and the medals as a group raise further questions concerning time and space.

The medallic work of László Szlávics Jr's past ten years is rich and diverse. The medals represent novel attempts to address various issues, and they also suggest a glimpse into the future. Faced with the questions of our time, he has employed the domains of fiction and film to convey dystopias in medals that incorporate highly varied materials and techniques. 

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All photographs are courtesy of László Szlávics Jr.

NOTES

1. Viktória L. Kovásznai, 'A series of *Ritual Proto-Money* by László Szlávics Jr', *The Medal*, 36 (2000), pp. 75-81; Viktória L. Kovásznai, 'Time and space in recent works by László Szlávics Jr', *The Medal*, 50 (2007), pp. 53-63.
2. László Beke, 'Ifj. Szlávics László éremművész: kortárs (művészet) történeti lecke a nézőknek [Medal artist László Szlávics Jr: a lesson in contemporary (art) history for viewers]', *National Biennial of Medal Art Sopron*, xxi (2017), p. 15.
3. See Antal Tóth, 'A klaszszikus magyar konstruktivizmus felidézése más eszközökkel [Reviving classical Hungarian constructivism with new tools]', *Magyar Iparművészet* (2014), 3, pp. 11-16.
4. See Tibor Wehner, *Harasztý István* (Budapest, 2014).
5. See Viktória L. Kovásznai, *ifj. Szlávics László – László Szlávics Jr.* (Budapest, 2012), pp. 118-30.