

GUN SHOW

[Transcript]

Text on screen

Baltimore, MD

David Hess (Voiceover)

My name's David Hess, and I'm a sculptor based outside of Baltimore, Maryland. For the past 30 years, I've been making a living doing large scale public arts projects and commissioned sculpture. In the days after the Sandy Hook shootings in 2012, I was thinking about how to react to the tragedy and the American obsession with guns, and particularly about how widely available assault rifles were. And I started making these facsimile guns out of junk and found objects.

Title screen

GUN SHOW

Hess (VO)

I really wanted to explore why they were so seductive and what attracted people to these kinds of weapons. I wanted the objects to be familiar but also kind of preposterous at the same time. And I was really interested to see where it was going to lead and what was going to happen with this work.

Text on screen

Asheville, NC

Hess (VO)

So after I made a few dozen guns, here I am at this campus arts festival, and I guess I just wanted to see if these guns, when you looked at them, you couldn't help but really kind of stare at them and take notice of them. They were caricatures in a way of the real thing.

- Well, we have a big gun culture and I'm a little worried, concerned that people might show up and be alarmed.
- Yeah, we didn't want that, that's for sure.

Hess (VO)

And I wanted to experiment with what it would be like to bring them out into the public and have people pick them up and handle them. And I felt there's like a strange kind of dangerousness about what I'm doing.

- The American South is where I'm from. Winston, Salem. Everybody has a gun. It's kind of odd if you don't have a gun. Like I got my first gun, and I was aiming at a bird, but I didn't think I was gonna hit it, you know. It was like a blue bird and I shot it out of a tree. And I cried after that.
- It's heavy, uh? Ha, ha, ha. Here comes a liberal. (Laughs) That's terrible. (Laughs again)
- You can pick them up if you want.
- My first husband was killed in Vietnam by machine gun fire. We'd just got married and he was a Marine Second Lieutenant and he went over to Vietnam and in two weeks he was gunned down. And so, the violence of guns has stuck with me my entire life. When I remarried and had children, the boys wanted to play army and, you know, have guns. I discouraged it but everyone can do this. (Points finger like a gun)
- That's actually so well made. Alright. I have my weapon. There's definitely a physical weight there, but also kind of the mental weight of holding a gun, because they can so easily hurt someone, or you can hurt yourself.
- It feels strong. It makes me feel strong. I feel like Patty Hearst.

Hess (VO)

Because of media and films, you know, the images of someone shooting a gun or holding a gun is completely normal for us. I'm not sure I was really ready for the image of kids playing with these guns. And I was kind of amazed by how parents were so uninvolved with their kids. And I found it pretty disturbing. But, I guess it's only logical. To them, they're just toys.

Hess (to child)

So this project is sort of trying to get art to make people to think about it in terms of like, something that we think is sort of important or worth talking about.

Text on screen

Raleigh, NC

Hess (VO)

This was the first time that I showed at a museum. The turnout was kind of amazing. We actually had to keep people waiting outside the door to come in. I think the novelty of the art gallery, where usually people aren't allowed to touch things in art galleries. So that's cool to see people picking them up, but also reacting so openly. It really hit me that these

objects were opening up a whole conversation with people. And they were able to talk about things purely because the objects were in their hands.

- I just wanted to ask, I noticed these guns had so many different daily life elements. Was that connected to how it affects people's daily lives?
- Yeah, I would say that a way to kind of give it some context, yeah.
- I've had friends who've been shot. Friends who shot people. It's important amidst all the racial tension around gun violence to not remove that conversation from the exhibit that you're doing. Art is supposed to be polarizing.
- This work is so masculine. What do you think? Looks good? Looks good. Dangerous? Dangerous but a little touch of domesticity still?
- I associate them with death and killing and anger. And wanting to hurt someone. I mean that's what I feel like they're intended for.
- I'd rather be in a community where someone open carries. I feel safe if I can see what they have.

Hess (VO)

Since I was originally motivated by mass shootings, it seemed appropriate to put the guns on the ground to look like bodies.

- They are, in a sense, a gun that makes you stop and think. I do believe that all art in any form does begin a dialogue about something.
- I mean I looked down the barrel of one of them and I had a very real like fear reaction. Yeah.

Hess (VO)

I'm striving to allow the pieces to be as neutral as possible. And not make them part of an advocacy campaign. I think their value is letting people have conversations on their own terms.

Text on screen

Leesport, PA

Hess (VO)

I really want to move beyond the conventional art world and my comfort zone. Reserving a table at a real gun show in a rural area seemed like a good way to do it. But I was

extremely nervous about it and I wasn't really sure how the art pieces were going to be received.

- Are you selling mainly as art?
- I'm not even selling them actually. I'm just showing them. This is sculpture.
- Sculpture? That's sculpture? Oh my, you've got an imagination.
- This is fantastic. I don't even know how to go about shooting this, but it's awesome.
- Maybe some sort of unusual shotgun or grenade launcher. Maybe one of those more interesting sorts of machineguns from the World Wars, or whatever. Oh yeah.
- That's a homemade rifle. But it doesn't work?
- It doesn't work.
- Oh, I just think it's too creative. I really admire that. Did you make them?
- Yeah I did.
- Congratulations.
- Thank you. Thanks a lot.

Hess (VO)

It turns out I had nothing to fear. Here I was perceived as an artist celebrating gun culture.

- I would buy that and hang it on my wall right next to my Fallout posters and stuff. Absolutely. It's great.
- Where do you get your materials?
- So I'm getting stuff from the junk yard. And from my basement and my back yard and I'm kind of a collector. And definitely finding things. People give me stuff.
- Old microscope?
- Yeah. This is actually an exhaust pipe... It's from a table saw... Grease gun... A push lawn mower.
- A paint sprayer. (Laughs)

- This is a good one. Try this one.

Hess (VO)

Nobody at a gun show like this breathes a word about policy or the dangers of guns.

- It's cool.
- Go ahead punk, make my day.
- Art.
- It's something right out of Flash Gordon. (Laughs)

Hess (VO)

To them I was just making totems or trophies.

Text on screen

Baltimore, MD

Hess (VO)

I got invited to this amazing place in Baltimore city called WombWorks, a support center for at risk youth, to come and do workshops. This is a community that's plagued by gun violence on a daily basis. These kids didn't want to touch the guns whatsoever. They weren't seen as toys. They were somber and serious. I feel very awkward about being a privileged white man in the middle of this community of young black people.

Hess (to WombWorks support center)

I was seeing how I could get people's attention a little bit. You know, I don't even know anybody personally who's died from being shot.

- I can say three times this month I have seen places that I have walked, and I've seen where people, where the yellow tape was laid out. I've seen where people used to live and where people died.
- These sculptures represent to me how we fetishize the things that destroy us. We take the things that are detrimental to our spirit and our community and we uplift those things, so it's a sick fascination.
- Everybody knows that it's a lot of killing in Baltimore city. I mean, your family member just got killed. Like, your uncle, your father, somebody in your family just got killed. And...

- Right here in Baltimore city it's the anger behind the gun. It's the fact that I need a gun to make me feel important or to have some level of power. An installation like this brings attention to the fact that they are tools of mass destruction that are flowing everywhere.
- When I was five years old, my father was murdered right in front of my face. And it was, it was, it was the worse thing ever. Because, like, he was always there.

Hess (VO)

Experiencing real people dying from gun violence, these guns represent so a huge loss of life to them.

I was asked to be part of a weekend sidewalk art festival in New York City.

Text on screen

New York City

Hess (VO)

And despite some complicated logistics, I decided to give it a go.

- Ready, one, two, three.
- Let's just flip this this way. Let's do it the other way. Here we go.

Hess (VO)

It seemed to be a chance to expose the work to a busy cross section of people, with no shortage of opinions.

- This is sort of a statement, isn't it?
- It's a statement about the prevalence of guns and violence in our country. It's just trying to really create some dialogue between people on different sides of the spectrum.
- Just to see them laid out on the cloth like that, I know this sounds weird but it makes me proud to be an American.
- This would never be okay on 14th and 5th if it wasn't art.
- One of the hats I wear is as a gun violence prevention advocate. Which I've been involved in since the shootings at the Sandy Hook school in 2012. I'm a mom and a teacher and American. So I'm for the constitution. I understand the basics of the

second amendment. But I don't think that that necessarily means that everyone should have a weapon at all times. Or of any kind.

- I know it's art, but I'm kind of feeling it. I can play the guitar and shoot things. I'm kidding. I'm kidding. I'm so kidding.
- This is only going to do what I want it to do. So if I'm a bad person, it's going to do bad things. So. If I'm a good person, then, it's going to protect a lot of people. So it depends on the individual.
- You have such a huge collection here. Huge collection. What you got here, like 28 guns?
- 30.
- Is any of these for sale?
- No, not for sale.
- So you just personally make these and stock them as your own art exhibit, and then you just bring them around and showcase them?
- Yeah, exactly.

Hess (VO)

From the start, I decided these pieces would definitely not be for sale. I felt strongly that selling them would distort my role and the meaning of the objects. I also think they have more power as a collection and as objects for discussion. I was impressed by conversations that popped up. Sometimes between strangers.

- Let me ask you a safety question. NYPD know that you put this...?"
- NYPD walked by about three times. They've been around.
- And they gave a look, right? Cool.
- They're cool with it. (Siren sounds)

Text on screen

University of Maryland | Baltimore County

Hess (VO)

After four years of making guns, I finally had over 100 of them. And I was able to show them all at UMBC. What started as this small experiment in the studio had really kind of grown into this much bigger version of itself. And it sort of has a life of its own. One of the reasons I wanted to make large quantities of the guns was to really suggest the enormity of how many guns are actually in our country. It might look like this is fun to do this work, but it's actually really sobering. And it also, it's kind of sad too. It felt more like it was the opening night of a play, or a sense of finishing the building of a large project. The honor of it, it's nice. But it didn't feel like that was the most important thing for me.

Text on screen

Washington, DC

Hess (VO)

It made sense to end the journey in Washington, DC. It really emphasized the symbolic nature of what I was doing.

- So coming from England, it just is, it's so baffling what's going on here. I was in the police in Northern Ireland. I just find the whole thing about, about guns and what's happening to, to mainly young people in the states is just certainly abhorrent.
- I thought, are these real guns. Is this, ah, who am I going to meet here? Are you pro-gun or anti-gun? And I knew there's a big debate in the states about guns and whether they're right or wrong.
- I don't like it at all.
- I don't know what the statement is, but it's like, it kind of just represents you can make violence out of anything I guess. If you put it together right, you know?
- Well, I thought they were real, you know, I thought he had a collection of guns. You know I thought that's what, but then I saw some things and I thought, oh, he's put them together.
- I don't know if I should disclose this. I actually just bought an AR.
- The gun is the instrument of death, but it's the evil in the man's heart that pulls the trigger.
- I have a problem with people who have a problem with it. Frankly, I do. Because they don't understand it. They don't understand that it's a tool and you change the laws, it's the bad guys, they're going to get, they get the guns.

- Well, I born in Cambodia. But later the war and everything. Gun everywhere, so a lot of people get killed. Before, we didn't have guns. So nobody got killed by gun. And people say okay, gun don't kill. If no gun, no killing too.
- God has had his warriors out for years. You know David, in the bible. I mean, he sent them into battle. So, it's not a dirty word. It's not a dirty word. It's to take care of, it's to protect the innocent.
- First time that I see that they killed the children in Connecticut. I cried that day. Because the children. The children get killed by gun. So every day when I see people got killed like that, I just, I cry. I cry and cry.
- I was infantry. Served in Desert Storm. As a youth I was involved in Boy Scouts. Rifle shooting 22s, stuff like that. So, it seemed back in the 80's, it was definitely a different time. We went to high school with shotguns in the back of our truck and there wasn't school shootings. I think personally it has quite a bit to do with the lack of discipline with children, you know. The entitled generation.

Hess (VO)

Certain people say this is really funny. And certain people say this is really cool. And certain people say this is really scary. And some people say, this is horrible. I don't want to touch the work. Or they think I'm somehow promoting anti-gun perspective or pro-gun perspective, which I'm not. People always ask me, you know, do you own a gun? And I say yes. Or they say, do you want to take away all the guns in the country? And I say no. That's not what this is about.

- I'm a gun owner. Gun enthusiast. Lifetime member of the NRA. But I think they also have a little bit of culpability. They need to step up and invest some time and money in educating people, and educating parents to be aware of their kids, and what's going on. Maybe see what they're looking at. How they're dressed. Who they're talking to.
- So we were just passing through. Um, down here in DC doing some sightseeing today. And um, happened to pop by. And this is sort of a perfect moment here for the kids to stop and enjoy and kind of play and pretend. Right? With the guns? Right?
- Pretended to kill you.
- Pretended to kill me?
- Uh huh.

- Oh, that's not good. But I don't have a definitive like, totally anti-gun policy. I do advocate in certain ways for, you know, for more gun restrictions. You know. Better control, and permitting and back ground checks and things along those lines.
- I've held real guns and I've shot real guns too. I mean, I don't like them. But, you shouldn't have AK47s or assault rifles. And I'm not saying take away our rights. I'm not saying that. But we should limit it. The same way we limit hate speech. We have the first amendment for freedom of speech, but we also have a limit.
- I'm in the military. Shoot guns every day. I can't use the gun and peace in the same sentence. You know. It's kind of ironic, right?
- In Europe, it's much, much more control. I can have a gun in my country, but after two months of hard investigation. And they do not sell thousands of bullets.
- Too frightening. No there's, no, no, I don't want to have anything to, touch them at all.
- Well, I've never held a real gun, so I don't want to hold a fake gun. I mean I'm just totally pacifist. But they're interesting to look at. Scary.
- I've been sitting here talking for about 15 or 20 minutes now, and it's been really interesting. It's been fun, because we're both staying really level headed. And we have such a vast, like different point of view about weapons, about guns.
- So living in the south, you can go into a restaurant and there's people with guns, just strapped. It's open carry. Just strapped. I mean, old, young, just a gun strapped on there. It makes me very uncomfortable to see that.
- I'll be honest. I've never walked into a restaurant and seen somebody with a gun that they had on their hip and felt safer because of it. You know.

Hess (VO)

I've always wanted it to be, that people handle these objects and talk about things. But also listen to one another talking. And that it becomes less of a moment when people strap on their talking points and actually can hear one another speaking a little bit more authentically. I feel really good about having done this project. It's been a really interesting four years. But there's a weird sense of incompleteness to this whole thing for me. That I'm not done yet. We will have to live with weapons in our country forever.

[END]