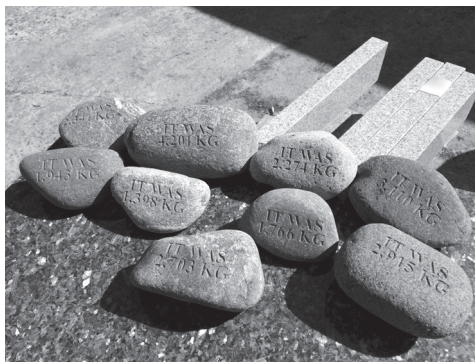


# *Unfinished Measurements* *I, II, and III*

MIKLOS ONUCSAN



MIKLOS ONUCSAN, *Unfinished Measurements I* (2014), engraved river stones, studio view.  
Credits: the artist and Plan B Gallery.

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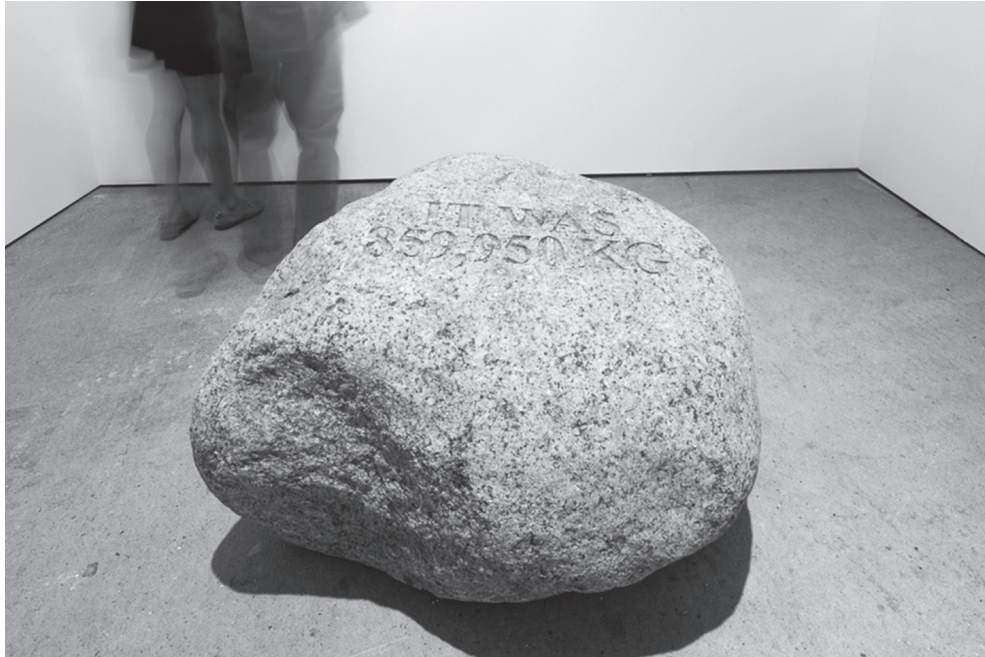
## **Introduction**

**A**LTHOUGH THE notion of artistic research is a relatively new one, entering the academic circuit, as an autonomous domain of research, only 10–15 years ago, it already enjoys a large and consistent debate in the international academic communities.<sup>1</sup> Artistic research consists, in the first place, of the research of the art practice, defining itself in this respect as a process oriented and founded on practice, assimilated into the vast entity called “contemporary culture.” The art practice is an open and inclusive one, one that avoids raising borders between the different means and methods of knowledge production. As such, the whole matter of artistic research clearly delimits itself from scientific research, as well as from other disciplines dealing with art—such as art history, sociology or the philosophy of art. Artistic research is concerned, instead, with the self-reflective and self-critical processes of the person which determines and takes part in the production of significations in contemporary art, and with the instruments specific to it.<sup>2</sup>

In order to be assimilated to the practice of artistic research, a project needs to begin with a question, with a problem or a doubt that it is able to express, and to try to offer an answer to it or to generate new questions through the creative process and/or the final product it comes to—the work of art. This way, the whole effort of the project is centered on the artwork, as the priority and goal of the entire process. The material of the research is given by the artistic process and by the experience of this process, with a focus on the ways in which this process is going to be transmitted and “packed” into the artwork. The methods of research and presentation, and the instruments used to communicate, are chosen and adapted with respect to the necessities and constraints of each particular case, keeping a special interest in the interpretative quality of the research. In the framework of this process, information is thought of as “raw material,” meaningless in itself, a material on which the research and the artistic process are built: the *conceptualized* information (the theoretization of phenomena) transforms the matter it deals with into a *question* that needs a *material* perception—a form, an object—which, in turn, creates *new questions*. It is a reflective process describing a circle of interpretation between the conceptual and the material elements of the research, or, in other words, not studying *something*, but studying *with something*, in a continuous reciprocity.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Artistic Research Project *Unfinished Measurements*: Presentation of the Map of Ideas and Processes**

**T**HE THEORETICAL matter from which this project began refers to the major influence played by numbers within the contemporary world: counting, accounting, measuring, numbering, are all of them instruments for statistics which, in turn, gathers all its results in databases that operate as referential (valorization) systems according to which we define our present and the reality of the world. All these referential systems based on numbers, on numerical values, are integrated into the collective perception as holders of an impartial and incontestable truth of the world. They are collectively assimilated as constitutive elements of the common reality and not just as simple *conventions* by means of which we’re trying to standardize our perception and communication with regard to some segments or aspects of that reality. Within this artistic research I wanted to explore, with the instruments of visual arts, the possibilities of working with these conventions and with the main coordinates of their standardized perceptions and, in these frames, to found ways of communicating a questioning of their pretended impartiality, of their “degree” of truth.



MIKLOS ONUCSAN, *Unfinished Measurements II*, detail (2014), engraved stone, exhibition view. Credits: the artist and Plan B Gallery.

The subject itself is nothing new, as it has already benefited from several remarkable approaches within the visual arts. One of the most recent, ample and renowned of them is the project *The Most Wanted and the Least Wanted Paintings* of the Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid. They worked with the instruments of statistics, seeking to obtain an image on what the contemporary art would look like if it were to follow the taste of the people.<sup>4</sup> Even if the aims of their project are completely different from mine, the way they're referring to numbers is in perfect consensus with the way I intended to work with them in the beginning of this project:

*In a way it was a traditional idea, because a faith in numbers is fundamental to people, starting with Plato's idea of a world which is based on numbers. In ancient Greece, when sculptors wanted to create an ideal human body, they measured the most beautiful men and women and then made an average measurement, and that's how they described the ideal of beauty and how the most beautiful sculpture was created. In a way, this is the same thing; in principle, it's nothing new. It's interesting: we believe in numbers, and numbers never lie. Numbers are innocent. It's absolutely true data. It doesn't say anything about personalities, but it says some-*

*thing more about ideals, and about how this world functions. That's really the truth, as much as we can get to the truth. Truth is a number.*<sup>5</sup>

Numbers are the expression of a system of conventions invented by humans to help them orient within nature and their world, and systemize what they understood from them. Languages are also systems of conventions—from the verbal and digital languages, to those of music or the visual arts. In time, though, some of these systems of conventions came to be not just simple instruments filtrating the surrounding reality, but became themselves reality. Usually, we disregard the fact that “measurement,” for example, in the terms of information theory, is just a set of observations that reduce uncertainty,<sup>6</sup> and we tend to perceive everything that is measured and expressed in numbers as the most certain feature of the image of reality. What I intended in the course of this project was to express these thoughts by means of several systems of conventions—numbers, statistics, verbal language, visual language—in order to test the possibility of communicating the fragility of these certainties, and to outline different points of view in regard to them.

The first practical stage of the project was assigned to measurement and its communication. What I needed for this stage was a set of natural, not man-made “samples,” and a system of measurements at hand, easy to find, and which uses accessible measurement instruments. Within these confines, I opted to work with river stones—objects with irregular shapes and variable dimensions that I gathered from different places. Considering the irregularity of the stones, they weren't fit to be measured in centimeters, and the most effective way to measure them was weighing. I weighed each of the stones separately, I took notes of their weight individually and within decimal points, thus achieving the result of applying the first conventional system upon the real object—that of measuring. Once the measurement was done for every one of the stones, its result became a feature of each of them: the measurement came to define the stone; accord-



MIKLOS ONUCSAN, *Unfinished Measurements II*, detail (2014), hourglass with stone dust, exhibition view.

Credits: the artist and Plan B Gallery.

ing to our perception of numbers it named its “identity,” its truth. The objects I was working with were not anonymous or insignificant any more, but turned into value-bearing stones, into stones possessing a truth suited to be expressed in numbers.

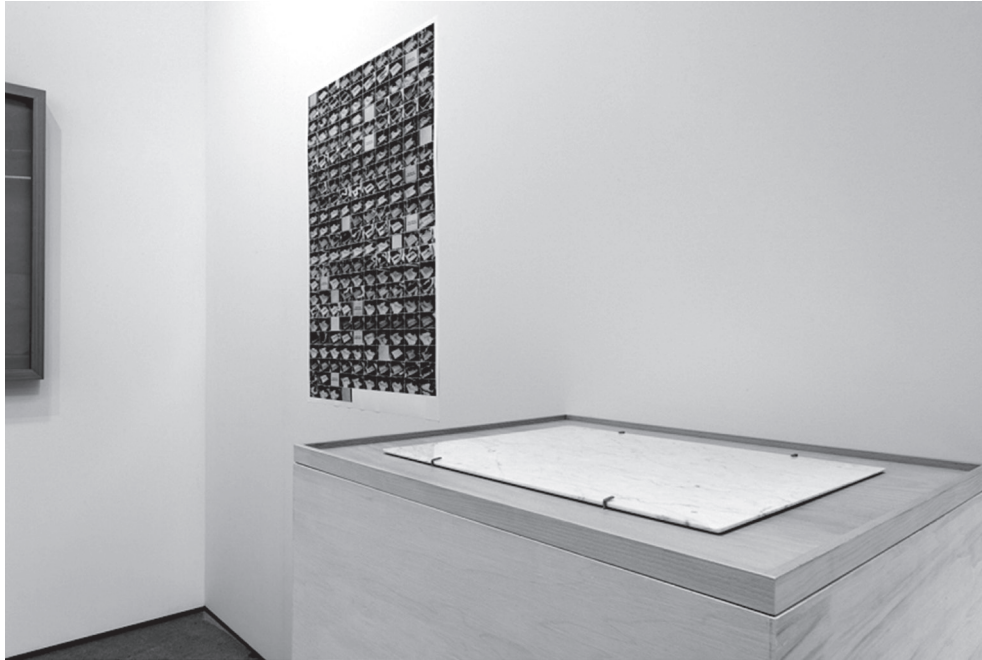
One of the most ancient and practiced ways in which humans recorded their values throughout their history was writing, at its very beginning in the form of engraved writing. Today the only values that are recorded by engraving are only those considered to be general for a society, a nation, or an era. Following this reasoning, I considered it justified to engrave on each river stone its measured weight, to note in its own material that value which defines it according to our system of conventions, which makes it a “known reality.” But the process stumbled, at this point, on a problem: by engraving into the stone the number of its weight, an amount of material is lost with the engraving and the weight becomes implicitly smaller. Immediately after one “labels” the named thing with its value, one loses the accuracy of that value. (In certain respects, this was a different illustration of the famous quote from Niels Bohr according to which the instrument you choose for a measurement will always influence that which you’re trying to measure.) As such, the only correct proposition that I was allowed to engrave had to be in the past tense: “It was 2,345 kg” was the most accurate numerical truth I could write down. If I were to find out what the present value of the stone was, this would have meant to weigh it again, and after that to engrave it again, and to get caught in a process that, followed up to its end, would finally destroy the object of investigation. But this stage of the project has led to a result relevant for the course of my research and I kept that sample of the nine engraved stones I worked with in this form, with their sentences in the past tense, and I exhibited them as an installation under the title *Unfinished Measurements I*.

At this point in the investigation, I searched for a way to take the idea forward or in a different direction. First of all, I considered the expansion of the idea—expansion in a geographical sense—imagining a systematization of this type applied to a whole geographical area: to measure all the natural stones, small or huge, and to engrave them with what their weight used to be. I imagined a project of a hyper-dimensioned installation aiming to provide some statistical data on the variations of stones and their weight in different areas, an evaluation supposed to remain embedded in the natural landscape of that area as a collection of precise data of a known reality. Not having the possibility to build an installation at such a scale, I had to find other ways to continue the research. The expansion of the first stage of the process could mean not just the increase in the number of stones to work with, but also choosing to work with a single stone of larger dimensions. If the same process is to be applied to a much big-



ger stone, its “labeling” has to grow proportionally with the dimensions of the stone, and, as such, the quantity of the material (dust) carved out of the stone through engraving is a significant one. I stopped upon this possible resultant of the process: that quantity of dust carved out from the stone is precisely the reason why it was possible to engrave an accurate statement about the weight of that stone only in the past tense. That dusty material had, in this sense, an implicit temporal dimension: it represented the mathematical difference between the truth of the past time and the truth of the present time. Following these thoughts, I engraved a stone of 859,950 kg, I carefully gathered all the dust carved out of it during engraving and I used it to fill an hourglass—an instrument belonging to one of the conventional systems of time measurement. This way, *the weight* missing from the stone on account of the engraving became *time*, and the material/matter was transferred to a different system of measurement: it is no longer characterized by weighting, but it measures minutes. The hourglass filled with the dust carved out of the letters and numbers engraved on the stone measures 3 minutes and 4 seconds. If I were to apply this process to several large stones, then every single stone I would engrave with the numbers of its weight would result in a different interval of time measured by its own hourglass. Through this process, I would be able to obtain a collection of matter systematized according to its material value (expressed in weight) and according to time: an archive. This is the installation titled *Unfinished Measurements II (Towards an Archive)*, where the archive is understood in its broad outlines, as a place where things are saved, gathered, indexed, and buried, but also as a place where things gain new meanings.

By working with the truths of numbers upon matter, with language, with writing and time, within the first two stages of the process I came to the idea of the archive—a particularly complex notion that bears multiple potential implications within any historical moment of any society. The archive holds the accumulation of the remnants of the past from which histories are discerned and instituted—histories rather than history, in the plural and in a variety of versions, depending on the socio-political needs for legitimizing each present moment that accesses them. Remaining at these issues, I sought to continue my series of “measurements” and to direct it towards history and towards finding a visual way of questioning the multiple re-writings and re-uses of it. History manifests itself visually in the public space by means of monuments—a wide range of forms of commemoration ranging from the figurative statuary to the simpler memorial plaques having various records engraved on them. I decided to work with this latter form of commemoration, being a quite common one and easily at hand. The problem I wanted to answer was how many times can one engrave, erase, and re-engrave a marble plaque of medium dimensions and having the



MIKLOS ONUCSAN, *Unfinished Measurements III* (2014),  
marble plaque, digital print, exhibition view. Credits: the artist and Plan B Gallery.

standard thickness of the memorial plaques usually exhibited in public spaces. I was going to engrave a text on such a plaque and then erase it thoroughly by polishing, preparing the surface to be inscribed again, and continue with this succession of actions until the plaque became so thin as to be impossible to engrave it again without perforating it. The whole succession of engravings and erasures had to be documented, in order to create a testimonial of the process. I considered photography to be better suited for such a task than filming: photography is less spectacular, it seems more “credible” as an objective witness, and it is easier to materialize into an image, being printable. What I needed was a succession of stills following all the stages of the process and testifying to it. As to the text to be engraved, it had to meet some criteria: to be able to follow closely the numbering of the plaque’s engravings and, at the same time, not to make any explicit comments on the theoretical phenomenon I aimed to investigate—i.e. the endurance of the material used for commemorations at the fluctuating uses of history. The textual formulation I found most adapted to these criteria was: “The first text has been engraved,” followed, after re-polishing the plaque, by “The second text has been engraved,” and so on. Once the process started, there were possible eight successive engravings and erasures of the marble plaque, un-

til the plaque came to be 2.5 mm thick, from an initial thickness of 2.5 cm. Not a single new engraving was possible without destroying the plaque, so the process stopped at this point. The work *Unfinished Measurements III* is exhibited with its two components: the commemorative marble plaque, thinned by excessive use, and the photos that document, step by step, all the stages of the research process the plaque was subjected to.

The series *Unfinished Measurements* materialized, until now, in these three stages of investigation, each of them finalized with a form of visual communication, offering some answers to the theoretical problem identified in the beginning of the research, but at the same time remaining open towards new questions and new possible points of view on this problem. In the economy of my artistic practice, the series of the *Unfinished Measurements* projects remains open, and I am working on expanding and diversifying it in the future.



(Translated by MĂDĂLINA BRAȘOVEANU)

## Notes

1. The autonomous domain of artistic research has special departments in some renowned universities: e.g. University of Amsterdam (Master Program of Artistic Research), University of California Berkeley (Center of Artistic Research), ELIA or the European League of Art Institutes (editor of several publications on artistic research), and the Art Academy in Helsinki (a department and a doctoral program of artistic research since 1997).
2. For a consistent debate on the theoretical problems linked to this new domain of research, as well as on its methodological specificities, see: Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research. Theories, Methods and Practices* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg/Art Monitor, 2005); Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten, eds., *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education* (Amsterdam–Dublin–Gothenburg, European League of Institutes of Arts, 2013); Henk Borgdorff, *The Debate on Research in the Arts* (Sensuous Knowledge 2., Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2006); Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager, eds., *Artistic Research* (Amsterdam: Lier en Boog, Series of Philosophy of Art and Art Theory, vol. 18, 2004).
3. See esp. Hannula et al.
4. Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, “Director’s Introduction to The Most Wanted Paintings on the Web,” <http://awp.diaart.org/km/intro.html> (accessed July 2015).
5. Ibid.
6. Measurement is defined as “A set of observations that reduce uncertainty where the result is expressed as a quantity.” See Douglas Hubbard, *How to Measure Anything* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 21.



**Abstract**

*Unfinished Measurements I, II, and III (2014)*

This article presents a detailed “map” of the ideas, the questioning, and the ongoing processes of an artistic research project (*Unfinished Measurements I, II, and III*) I engaged in recently. Starting from the theoretical problematization of the continuous and vivid faith that people in general have in numbers, I’ve searched for ways to question this faith and its implications with the means of research, expression, and communication specific to the visual arts. For now, the results of this artistic research project are materialized in three different works, exhibited as parts of the series *Unfinished Measurements*.

**Keywords**

artistic research, visual arts, numbers, statistics, history, truth, archive, installation