

THE PROPELLER GROUP
A UNIVERSE OF COLLISIONS





ONLY COLLIDE

The Avtomat Kalashnikova combat weapon, adopted in 1947 by the Soviet military, has become one of the most successful designed objects in the history of mass production. Almost seven decades after its introduction, the AK-47 and its successor models have become “the undisputed firearm of choice for at least fifty legitimate standing armies,” not to mention countless other entities, from insurgent rebel groups to criminal gangs, writes Larry Kahaner in his 2007 book *AK-47: The Weapon that Changed the Face of War*. An estimated 80 to 100 million of these objects, named after their inventor, Mikhail Kalashnikov, have been made and distributed across the planet. “By now,” design writer Owen Edwards observed in 2014, “there have been more Kalashnikovs produced than all other military automatic arms combined.”¹

The history of the AK-47 entails a shadow history, that of its greatest rival: the American-made M16. High-profile rivalries can shape not only the directly involved contestants, but also culture in general — Beatles vs. Stones, Coke vs. Pepsi, Apple vs. Microsoft, The United States vs. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. And AK-47 vs. M16 was a profound contest. For *A Universe of Collisions*, The Propeller Group has taken up these arms to revisit the rivalry, and offer a transformative consideration of the deeper conflicts it speaks to, even now.

A three-man collective based primarily in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, but with ties to the United States, The Propeller Group formed in 2006. Through a series of multi-disciplinary projects since then, Phunam, Matt Lucero, and Tuan Andrew Nguyen have addressed, challenged, and reconsidered cultural boundaries. This subject matter has included the divisions, schisms, and collisions created by and resulting from the Cold War era — which have faded, morphed, or uncomfortably lingered, sometimes all at once. Its *Television Commercial for Communism (TVCC)*, for instance, involved working with an advertising agency to “rebrand” Communism for a Western audience. Separately, the group presented a series of Lenin portraits altered to reflect the hairstyles of Leonardo DiCaprio (rumored, on the Internet at least, to be a distant relative of the Communist icon). Past, current, and future projects have addressed American-style graffiti in contemporary Vietnam; neglected Soviet monuments; and the first two Vietnamese to travel to outer space (one through a Soviet-era program; the second by way of a commercial effort for a deodorant). The collective’s ongoing project *Viet Nam: The World Tour (VNTWT)* has facilitated collaboration with artists around the world, pursuing a distinctly post-national agenda — “a rogue anti-nation-rebranding campaign,” by their own description.

While The Propeller Group’s projects often show a sense of humor — or at least of the absurd — this tone always works in the service of more serious intent. In considering the contest between the AK-47 and M16, *A Universe of Collisions* confronts the ideological nation-state contest that defined the Cold War, and the ruinous violence that resulted. It was during the Vietnam War (or, as it is called in Vietnam, the American War) that these weapons first clashed — the result of a much larger collision.

For the creation of *A Universe of Collisions*, the two combat weapons were deployed, improbably, as expressive tools. In a carefully controlled setting devised with ballistics experts, the two guns were aimed squarely at

each other, set into custom rigs that allowed them to be fired remotely by engineers. Triggered simultaneously, the weapons discharged ammunition that collided mid-flight. This split-second moment of impact was captured within a block of clear, specially formulated gelatin: Developed to mimic the density of human tissue, the substance is normally used in the course of standard ballistics testing. These gel blocks have the capacity to extend a split-second — too fleeting for the unaided eye — into a moment made visible in its frozen, component parts: trajectory, impact, and a combination of fusion and splintering.

A Universe of Collisions presents a series of these remarkable objects, arranged on custom stands that allow the viewer to contemplate and interpret these unlikely creations from all angles. In once sense, they represent moments of intended violence, tamed for our visual convenience. But that reading is complicated by another element of the project. These same impacts were also documented with high-powered cameras; a resulting video, dramatically slowed down to reveal the spectacle of high-caliber impact, runs in a loop at one end of the gallery.

The notion of colliding bullets sounds so fanciful as to seem wholly contrived, but The Propeller Group was partly inspired by historic precedents. On a (small) number of occasions, shots fired by opposing soldiers on active battlefields of the past have in fact collided in mid-air, fusing into a new object: an involuntary, accidental collaboration between enemy forces. In willfully creating a new iteration of these freak occurrences, the artists transform chance events into poetic gestures — poignant statements about the futility of resolving difference through violence, and challenging questions about the persistence of conflict.

*

While *A Universe of Collisions* reaches beyond the particularities of the AK-47 and M16, and the specific context of the Vietnam War, each of these examples of conflict warrants pause.

Mikhail Kalashnikov began to devise the gun that would bear his name in the twilight of World War II, imagining a tool to “beat the fascists.”² But its triumph was realized decades later, in Vietnam. The United States had entered into and escalated conflict there on the theory that if the divided nation reunified under a Communist government, this rival ideology would spread through the wider region. Kalashnikovs manufactured in China and other Soviet Bloc nations proved to be formidable weapons in close-quarter jungle combat, remarkable for their high rate of automatic fire and durability; they took almost no training to master, and seemed to work even after being buried in mud for months. The US-made M16, while powerful, proved to be more persnickety when introduced as a response to the AK-47, initially prone to jamming and other problems. Indeed, even some American troops seemed to prefer using captured AKs to the weapons they’d been issued.³

This was certainly not the only factor in the American military failure in Vietnam that preceded its 1975 withdrawal from Southeast Asia and the fall of Saigon. Combat rifles aside, the United States had an enormous advantage in the sheer scale and sweep of its weaponry: for instance, it dropped an estimated 14 million tons of explosives, 11 million gallons of Agent Orange, and 400,000 tons of napalm on the region. “Against this the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese countered with a degree of organization and dedication that is quite simply without parallel in human history,” the writer Brian Fawcett observed from the vantage point of the mid-1980s, and ultimately “achieved political self-determination, decisively putting to an end the notion that direct political and economic imperialism can achieve its goals.”⁴

A few more decades on, it’s harder to be decisive about the legacy of this conflict and its aftermath. It resulted in the slaughter of millions of Southeast Asians, and created an immigrant diaspora of millions more — one seldom addressed in the United States in either official or pop culture reckonings with the era.⁵ More strikingly, the larger ideological rivalry that the AK-47 and M16 represented in this place and time has receded. Vietnam began to open up to the global marketplace in the 1980s; over a two-decade stretch beginning in 1990, it recorded among the highest growth-rates in

gross domestic product in the world; in 2007, it joined the World Trade Organization.⁶ The value of goods traded between the United States and Vietnam alone totaled about \$35 billion in 2014.⁷

Still a socialist regime, the modern Vietnamese government has been far slower to embrace free expression (routinely restricted online and off) than free trade.⁸ Its GDP per capita remains very low, and many business sectors are still dominated by state entities, some widely seen as corrupt.⁹ But, according to Pew Research Center polling conducted forty years after the fall of Saigon, the Vietnamese people consider the United States more of a “dependable ally” than any other country.¹⁰ The upshot is that, eventually, notions of concrete victory and loss begin to seem abstract.

At the height of the war, many observers in the United States began to refer to Vietnam as a “quagmire.” This vividly unstable image resonates in The Propeller Group’s ballistic-gel blocks, capturing moments of collision and rendering them eerily eternal. Another quality echoes in the video: this conflict (and nearly every violent cultural collision since) was most widely “seen” and judged through media images. The Propeller Group inverts the flickering and fleeting televisual image, creating never-ending, looped images of ammunition fusing and shattering.

Through these gestures, *A Universe of Collisions* suggests a broader reconsideration of the ways nation-states and ideologies and societies clash. A stalemate can be a victory, or a defeat, or both at once, or either in alternation, or, in the long run, neither one at all. Win some, lose some. Come together. Only collide.

*

In telling the story of the AK-47, Larry Kahaner points out that the rivalry between that weapon and the M16 persists to this day — among gun experts, at least. Many early flaws of the M16 were corrected, he writes; but to the broader world, “it was too late. Its main rival the AK was perceived by many as the world’s best infantry weapon, and the one that could beat the West’s best offering.” Even the reconstituted army of post-Saddam Iraq insisted on the AKs over M16s.

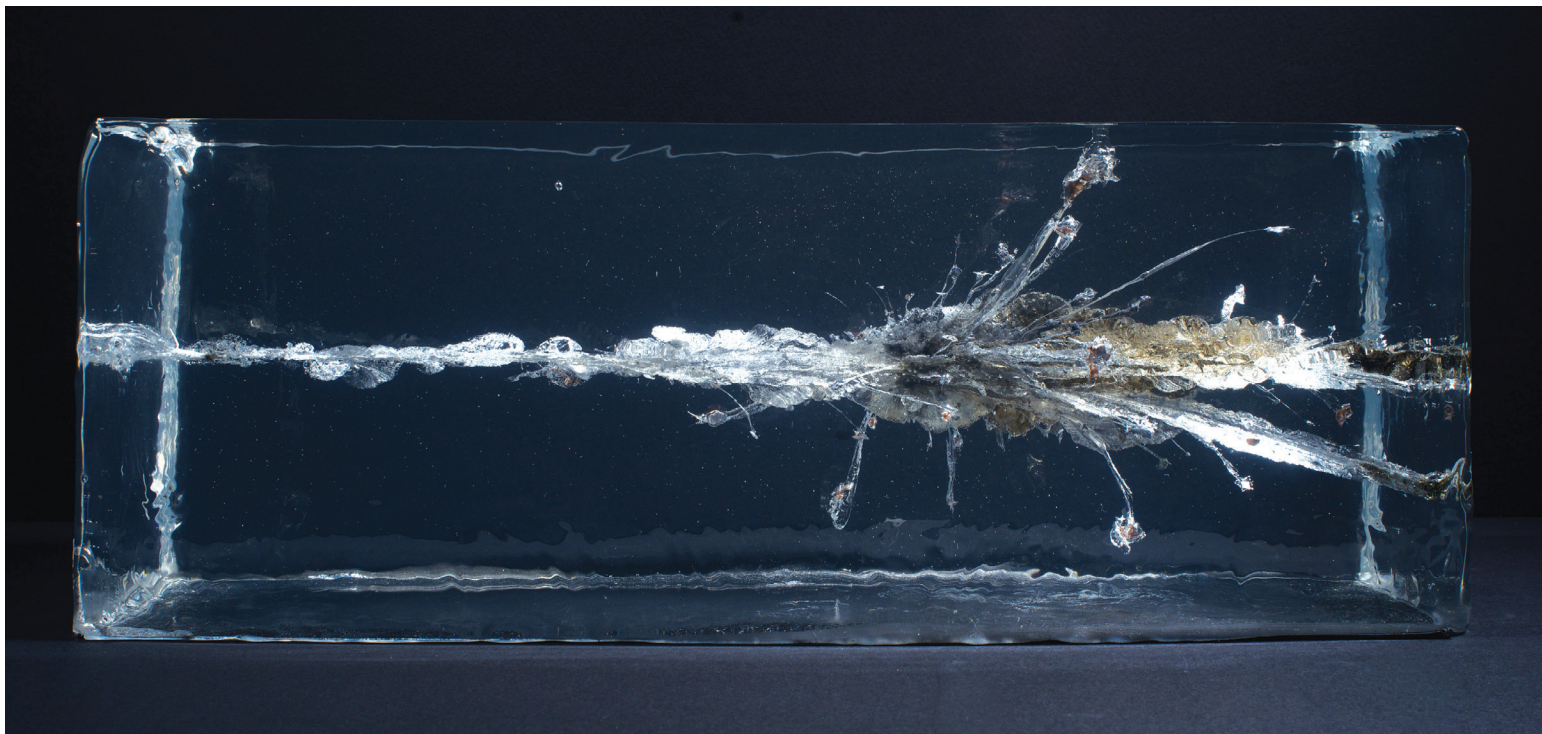
Whether empirically defensible or embellished, the perception is understandable. The Kalashnikov embodies the characteristics that define successful mass production: “simplicity, utility, and user-friendliness,” as one observer put it; a mechanical object “so simple even a child could use it.”¹¹ It is perhaps more than an ironic footnote to the Cold War that American efforts to innovate a better weapon were bogged down in military-industrial complex bureaucracy, while the Soviets nimbly tweaked and



streamlined Kalashnikov’s creation. The decision to allow China, Bulgaria, Poland, North Korea, and a variety of other “fraternal” nations to produce and even revise and improve the unpatented design anticipates the open-source strategies that have become familiar in our contemporary era — and is a decision that Russia may now regret, but that certainly facilitated the gun’s proliferation.

The fallout remains astonishing. The name Kalashnikov has been compared in its global familiarity to Coca-Cola.¹² The AK-47’s unmistakable silhouette, translating the weapon’s striking aesthetic into a symbol of defiance, threat, or power, appears on flags and currency — a status not even the iPhone has (yet) achieved. In Mozambique and other African nations, children have been named Kalash in its honor. “It was like my mother,” China Keitetsi, a Ugandan author and activist and former child soldier, once said of the Kalashnikov she was forced to carry; it answered for her identity the same way her passport would today: “At that time, if [someone] had asked me who I was, I would have shown them my gun.”¹³

This combination of grim design success and raw cultural potency has attracted the attention of artists and other critical observers. The most typical response has involved working with “decommissioned” Kalashnikovs — guns disabled and withdrawn from circulation, voluntarily or otherwise. “Because it was the definitive icon of protracted, dirty warfare,” Kahaner writes, the resulting work often incorporates the AK-47, “both as an ironic accent and as a symbol of protest against conflict.” Examples include nongovernmental organizations and government programs in Mozambique, Cambodia, and elsewhere that facilitate the conversion of guns into functional objects such as plows or bicycles, or expressive sculptures. A company called Fonderie 47 makes and sells watches and jewelry using materials from decommissioned Kalashnikovs.¹⁴ (A pair of cufflinks is priced at \$9,000.¹⁵) Philippe Starck once showed





a series of table lamps incorporating AK and M16 replicas at the Milan Furniture Fair. Over and over, these projects capitalize on the weapon's form even as the object itself is defunctionalized.

In *A Universe of Collisions*, The Propeller Group takes a very different approach — one that is all about function and its consequences. Even the aesthetic dimensions here are essentially evidence of willful use. Like Deborah Bay's "Big Bang" series of photographed patterns resulting from bullet impacts in Plexiglas,¹⁶ both the gel blocks and impact videos possess beauty rendered uncanny or disturbing by knowledge of its violent origins. In its fundamental emphasis on exploring and exploiting the function of the AK-47 and M16, this work may seem more in the spirit Chris Burden's famous 1971 performance *Shoot*, in which a confederate fired a .22 bullet into the artist's left arm (a piece often considered, as it happens, in relation to the Vietnam War and the intense media coverage surrounding it). But here, weaponry and aesthetics aren't discrete; parallel functions collide to make unified form, and this is part of what we're asked to confront.

In a second video, The Propeller Group further complicates its own presentation of a brute-firepower standoff. The repeated gel blocks and collision videos, by design, leave aside the messy ideological particularities that caused these rival weapons to exist at all. But this additional video addresses, in a word, the *character* of these guns, shaped by (and reflecting) their makers and each other.

THANK YOU:

To the ballistics engineers at Chesapeake Testing, who were as equally surprised as we were and celebrated as much as we did when the first open-air collision was captured on camera. We couldn't have come this far without Mike Hinder at the helm, "BIG" Mike Murray loading each micro-grain of black powder, and Jason Siverd's steady hand at the trigger, all of it under the encouraging supervision of Kyle North. (As much inspiration as they provided, we aren't going to miss those Taylor Swift playlists in the testing room, Big Mike.) Our gratitude also goes to Jim Martin and Chris Schueler, members of Chesapeake's management team, who — in collaboration with Dwight Arn, general counsel for Grand Arts — aided our lawful navigation of the U.S. Department of State requirements. Here is to the continued pursuit of unknown possibilities.

NOTES:

1. Owen Edwards, "For Better or Worse, This Design Endures," *Design Observer*, January 2, 2014, <http://designobserver.com/feature/for-better-or-worse-this-design-endures/38283> | 2. Justin Peters, "On the Death of Mikhail Kalashnikov, Who Invented a Gun So Simple a Child Could Use It," *Slate*, December 13, 2013, http://www.slate.com/blogs/crime/2013/12/23/mikhail_kalashnikov_the_inventor_of_the_ak47_has_died.html | 3. Larry Kahaner, *AK-47: The Weapon that Changed the Face of War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2007). | 4. Brian Fawcett, *Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow* (New York: Collier, 1986). | 5. Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Our Vietnam War Never Ended," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2015. | 6. Tuong Lai, "What Vietnam Must Do Now," *The New York Times*, April

The video splices together appearances by the AK-47 and M16 in feature films, documentaries, and even YouTube clips, culled from decades of media cameos by each weapon. Revealed as more than props, the guns gradually assume a deeper role, becoming the de facto protagonists of a new media production. It is a barrage of images — and, more to the point, of visual fusions and collisions.

It seems fitting to bring the weapons into the discussion through mediated images — which still define the way the so-called Global Village bears witness to violent societal and cultural rivalries. (And perhaps those images convey misleading perceptions of how much those rivalries truly reflect our non-mediated world: in his recent book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker makes a data-driven argument that human violence has been on the decline for centuries.¹⁷) The decision to eschew a linear, narrative strategy in favor of a cut-together cavalcade adds another dimension to the notion — and potential — of collision. From Soviet "montage" filmmakers of the 1920s (Sergei Eisenstein advocated the form, and Dziga Vertov dubbed it "cine-eye") to the contemporary mashup or supercut makers whose videos spread virally throughout the Internet, skilled image-manipulators have learned to extract and project original meaning from these varieties of collision. When things are made to come together in unlikely ways, new things are created: This is a form of impact.

The unmediated impacts captured in the physical gel blocks at the center of *A Universe of Collisions* are thus even more complex than they first appear. They serve as plaintive monuments to the practice of resolving conflicts by way of wildly creative and sophisticated objects engineered to end human life. And, in making an ephemeral moment permanent, they imply a condition, rather than an event. But at the same time, they redeem this condition by appropriating its instruments to new ends: they reengineer both the function and symbolism of notorious objects we thought we knew. There is possibility in collision, potential in fusion. And maybe we would be wise to seek that out, or even make it happen against overwhelming odds. Because collision, finally, is all there is.

Rob Walker | Savannah, GA, 2015

7, 2015. | 7. Kat Devlin, "40 years after fall of Saigon, Vietnamese see U.S. as key ally," *The Pew Research Center FactTank*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/30/vietnamese-see-u-s-as-key-ally/> | 8. Mong Palatino, "How Social Media is Beating Vietnam's Crackdown on Free Speech," *The Daily Dot*, April 26, 2014, <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/vietnam-censorship-facebook-viet-tan-crackdown-outspoken/> | 9. Tuong Lai, "What Vietnam Must Do Now." | 10. Devlin, "40 years." | 11. Peters, "On the Death of Mikhail Kalashnikov." | 12. Peters, "On the Death Mikhail Kalashnikov." | 13. China Keitsi, "AK-47 (Mikhail Kalashnikov)," *Design and Violence*, October 29, 2014, <http://designandviolence.moma.org/ak-47-mikhail-kalashnikov/> | 14. Kate Torgovnick "AK-47s Transformed into Jewelry and Watches, Thanks to a Chance Meeting in a TED Hallway," *TedBlog*, May 1, 2015. <http://blog.ted.com/ak-47s-transformed-into-jewelry-and-watches/> | 15. <http://fonderie47.com/collections/crucible/products/cufflinks> | 16. <http://www.deborahbay.com/bigbang> | 17. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

IMAGES:

A. (Cover Image) Video still capturing the collision of a 7.62mm (AK-47) and a 5.56mm (M16), 2015 | B. AK-47 used during ballistics testing, 2015 | C. M16 used during ballistics testing, 2015 | D. *The AK-47 vs The M16: Gel Block 19 of 21*, in progress (fragments of AK-47 and M16 projectiles encased in ballistics gel), 2015 | E. *The AK-47 vs The M16: Gel Block 21 of 21*, video still, 2015 | All images courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan Gallery, New York / Shanghai