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“Visitors are enveloped by space, sound and sight” – Interview with Borbála Szalai and Szabolcs Vida

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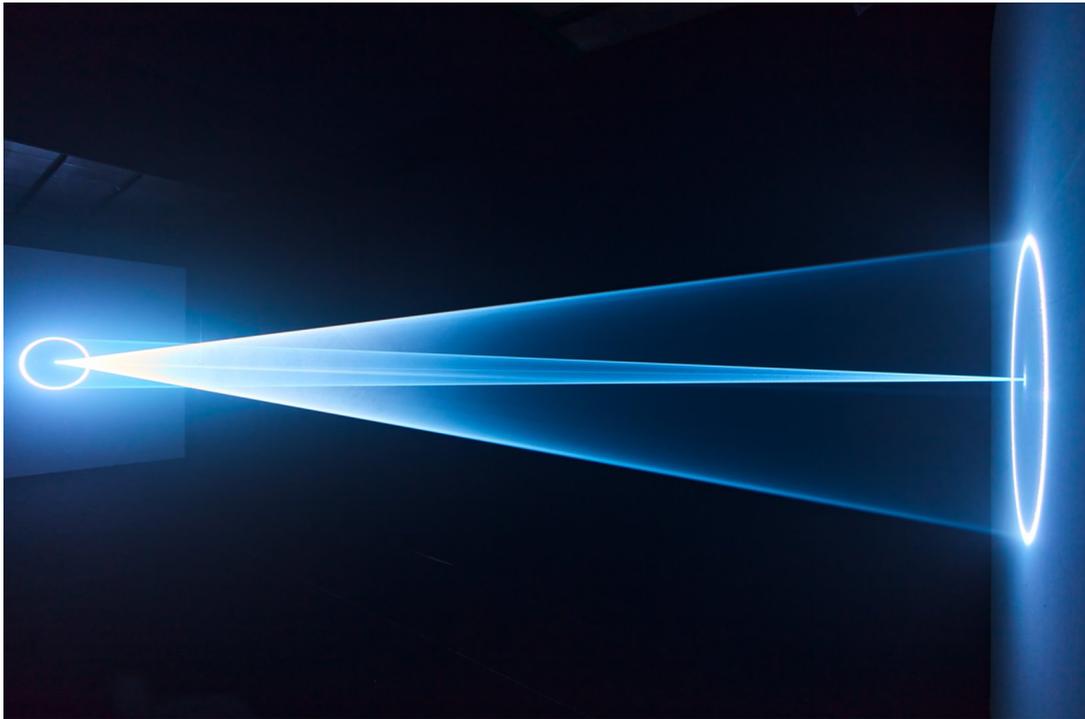


maotik: *SWARMFIELD*. Photo: Dávid Biró Dávid/Light Art Museum Budapest

The museum space transforms along with the artworks at the second exhibition of the **LAM – Light Art Museum**, just like visitors become part of some of the works. A live broadcast of wheat growing, the Northern Lights made audible, radioactive radiation and light cut up by propeller blades. We are let in on some of the secrets of LAM’s exhibition titled **Superluminal** with the help of arts director Szabolcs Vida and the exhibition’s co-curator Borbála Szalai.

Which areas of science have been included in the exhibition? I personally found it surprising that I saw several light art projects connected to biology.

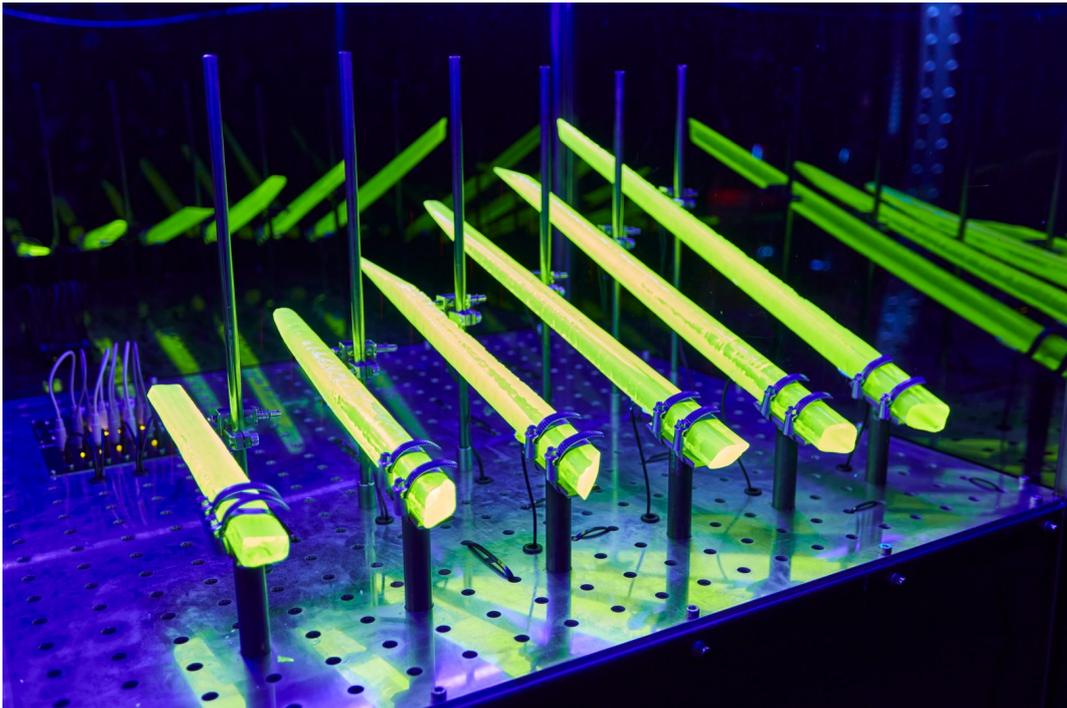
Borbála Szalai: Light is at the heart of all the works but in one way or another they all go beyond light and explore those ranges that are invisible or are beyond the visible, audible and perceptible. The works at the exhibition embrace a great deal of physical phenomena, ideas of light theory, colour theory, optics as well as those connected to light’s properties such as waves and particles. Other themes include the physiological effects of light, our approach to them and systems exploiting or even abusing them. Examples range from phenomena connected to Earth to those on a cosmic scale. They verge on speculative, theoretical approaches, which have a solid scientific-mathematical background.



Kit Webster: *Supernova*. Photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

Szabolcs Vida: There are indeed huge shifts in scale in astronomy, taking us from the visual image of a planet through solar flares all the way to the multiverse theory. The work created by [Loránd Szécsényi-Nagy](#) rests on a more practical foundation: it processes data collected by NASA's solar probe and transforms it into sound, so we can encounter the Sun and solar flares with our other senses, while, through another process, this information is transformed into a light play that engulfs one of the museum's large spaces in its entirety and makes solar flares perceptible, but very differently. It is true of this project too that it takes a very sensitive approach to a phenomenon, while being based on sound science.

An especially exciting exhibit is that by [Sárgany \(Bence Barta and János Borsos\)](#), in which the artists transform radioactive radiation into audible sound. We examine those spheres of light that do not reveal themselves to visitors, especially for the first time.

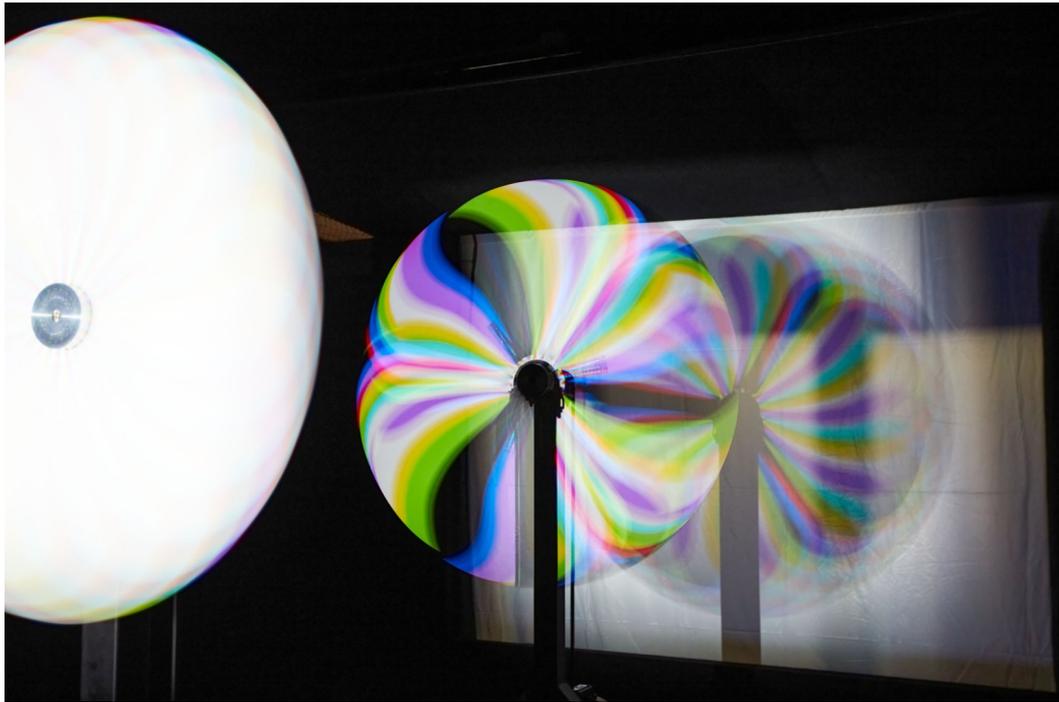


Sárgany: *Uranopatia*. Photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

Borbála Szalai: the work created by [Sébastien Robert](#) about the Northern Lights has another modus operandi but it also makes light audible through a transformation. A half-factual and half-mythological story collected by the artist belongs to this project: several people gave accounts of not only seeing but also hearing the Northern Lights. The artist not only preserves these vanishing stories and experiences them but also makes them perceptible. We are talking about very specific phenomena, wavelengths, sound and light effects, which can also be found in nature but the underlying theme is the relationship between man and nature and its consequences.

The exhibition itself is spectacular but I think this is the place where it's worth asking for a guided tour or finding the time to read the descriptions because they will add a lot to understanding the background to what you actually see.

Szabolcs Vida: That's right. We also think that this will reveal extra layers of the displayed works. It is important and also fortunate that light art affects our senses in such a way that it makes its appreciation very easy for all, from the youngest visitors to the oldest, regardless of their background knowledge. Everyone can find an aspect and depth that they can relate to. And that is the strength of this exhibition: it is contemporary fine art but rendered in a language that helps everyone to take a lot home.



Philip Vermeulen: *Wether Weather*. Photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

These are artworks that incorporate serious research and complex ideas worth exploring besides having their instantly visible, aesthetic value.

For those who do not come here on a guided tour, the texts on the wall displays contextualise the given artwork, helping them to understand it in more layers and from several perspectives. At the same time, you can walk through the exhibition and be immersed in them even if you do not know all the extra information. So I encourage everyone to come; you don't need to be an art historian, a physicist or a biologist.

So are you saying that we don't need to brush up on our knowledge on optics and black holes?

Szabolcs Vida: On the contrary, I think it's really exciting if you come here with some anticipation of what you will see and after actually seeing the artworks, they will arouse questions in you. Sometimes the texts will help you to find the answers, while at other times reading them will provoke further questions.

Borbála Szalai: Visitors will encounter a plethora of exciting things here, phenomena that they might not be familiar with. It might be inspiring that they can witness artistic approaches that are very concrete through being linked to specific physical and optical phenomena but there is a shift in scale in every artwork something that moves it beyond the realm of the visible and the perceptible. This exhibition massively affects your senses but also gives you the opportunity to think about what lies beyond what we are able to perceive from the reality around us.



Zilvinas Kempinas: *White Noise*. Photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

So it's worth questioning everything and taking a thorough look at what we actually see. For example, there is a screen the size of a wall that, on closer inspection, turns out to be made of filmstrips.

Szabolcs Vida: *White Noise* is not only monumental in its visuality but building it also took monumental effort. A whole team worked for weeks to construct the supporting structure, and then the space was inhabited by the artist, for an entire week. The last finishes, the threading of more than ten kilometres of VHS tape, was done by the artist. There are many artworks here, including this one, whose implementation required a major effort from the museum and the artists alike.

And, as I've found out, there are some that still require work. The wheat, for example, is growing more dynamically than it was expected, so the lights needed to be put higher up.

Szabolcs Vida: Actually, the growing wheat can be [streamed live](#).



Disnovation: *Life Support System*. Photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

With your [first exhibition](#) you inhabited this space and tried out this venue, which was originally not built as a museum. What experiences did you have, which you were able to build on here?

Szabolcs Vida: Creating an atmosphere, a good atmosphere, is very important, and, unlike in other exhibitions, sounds play an extremely important role here. There are works that operate with smoke and fog so it was important to create an overall ambiance in the entire space, which was perhaps even more complex a challenge than what we had to deal with in exhibits that only affect one of our senses.

Borbála Szalai: The building itself, the former market hall in Hold Street, is very special, and that provided the spatial setting that you cannot find in other museums or exhibition halls. One of these is that each artwork has its own space, which is practically like a black box. This allows every exhibit to have its own ambiance. This is a museum with a unique design, with

its interior making it possible for visitors to be immersed in the displayed works. You take away real experiences from here. I personally felt it important to exhibit works that carry this potential.



Zünc Studio: *Photosystem II*. Photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

It is generally true of the exhibition that every work draws in the visitors, exactly because they step inside the space of the given work. There are also several projects designed to create an immersive spatial experience, which means that visitors will be enveloped by the space, sound and sight around them.

There are works that interact with the presence and movements of the visitors.

Borbála Szalai: Yes, there are several projects based on interactivity, in which the movements of the visitors shape the projected image, and the visitors can become part of the artwork in various ways. There is also a work, whose operation is induced by the visitors stepping inside it.

Szabolcs Vida: And there are also works that we can call interactive but they do not interact with the visitors. Works whose change is not controlled by human action but, let's say, by artificial intelligence, which is built into it. It works with a given data package, which it transforms when it is processing it, so the final result is not pre-programmed but continuously changing. It is an important achievement of this exhibition that we incorporated AI. Although we did not make it a theme in every work but provided room for this kind of creative method.

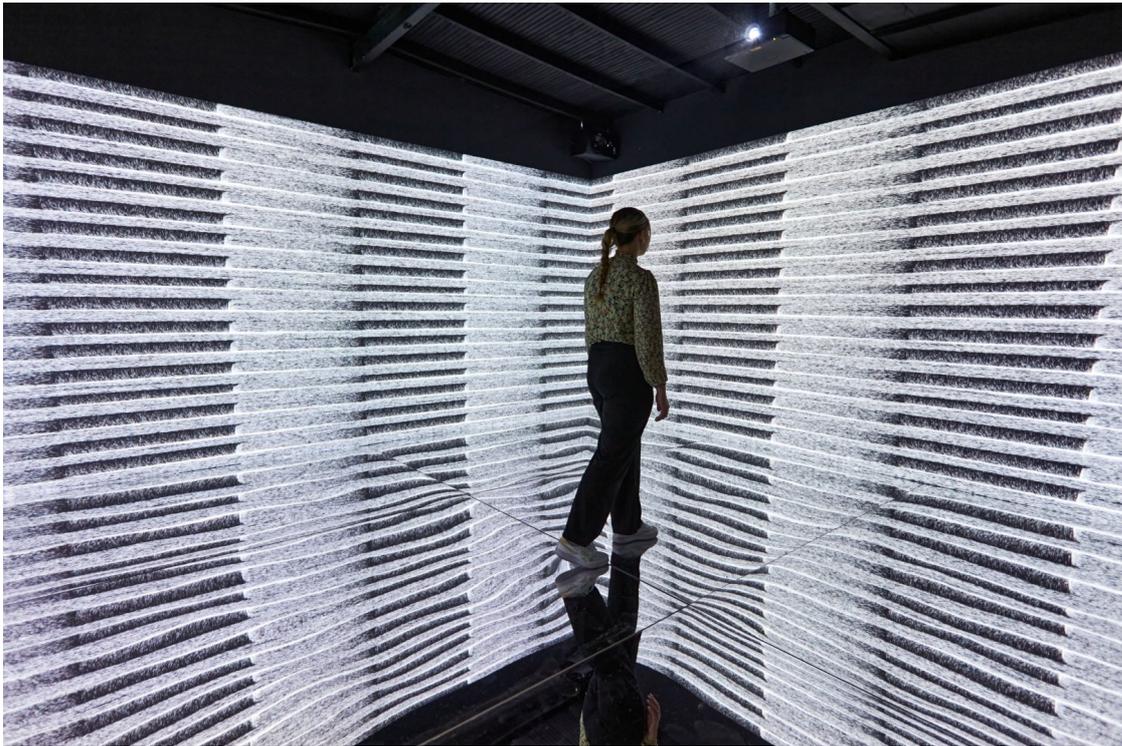


Justine Emard: *Supraorganism*. Photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

Borbála Szalai: Several works address the issue of artificial intelligence, naturalness, and the tension between AI and organic structures. For example, how a seemingly organic system can be created artificially. [Justine Emard's *Supraorganism*](#) does exactly this.

What was the guiding principle of **Superluminal**? What novelties does it have for those who visited the **previous exhibition**?

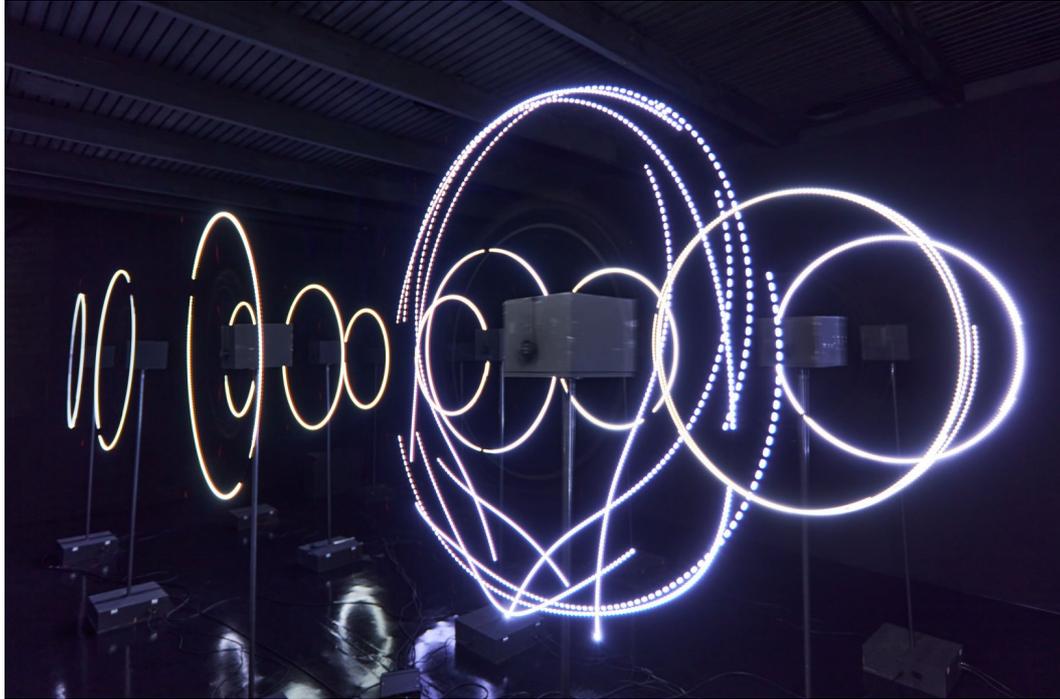
Szabolcs Vida: We explored every theme systematically. I would say that the essence of the first exhibition was to present various technological solutions implemented by Hungarian artists. In this, second exhibition we are asking the question if movement faster than the speed of light is possible, and what would perception be like if it was faster than light? So this exhibition is built on an entirely different curatorial concept.



fuse*: *multiverse.unfolded*. Photo: Dávid Bíró/Light Art Museum Budapest

Of course there are other, more obvious – less professional and rather pragmatic – differences too. We opened up new parts, thus enlarging the exhibition space. We've made an additional two hundred square metres available, and compared to the beginning of the first exhibition, we've built new display spaces on the upper level too. We've created a free-standing cube with a five-metre-high LED wall. We tried to include a larger number of fine art works and larger-scale projects, for which we've had to make some changes to the interiors.

Borbála Szalai: The greatest difference is that this exhibition showcases international artists too, which the previous one didn't. The previous show presented more of an overview of Hungarian light art, including works by important domestic masters of light art and young artists. Here, however, our focus was not even necessarily directed at light art as such but we started out from a basic theme, which is linked to light but takes it to a significantly new level.



Gabey Tjon a Tham: *Red Horizon*. Photo: Dávid Biró/Light Art Museum Budapest

Superluminal, which is also the title of the exhibition, refers to movement of bodies with a mass that is faster than the speed of light. The exhibition explores if it is possible to adopt an entirely different perspective. A perspective that is simultaneously based on physical laws and facts, which we regard as absolute and accepted, while opening up the possibility of shifting from these into a more speculative and poetic direction, which allows space for more abstract approaches, those of the fine arts.

Our starting point was that the basic units of measurement in physics always describe things relative to man. But what happens if we imagine that this perspective is a superluminal perspective, i.e. it is a structure, it can be interpreted in a system that is faster than light. So the starting point of the exhibition is a shift in perspective.