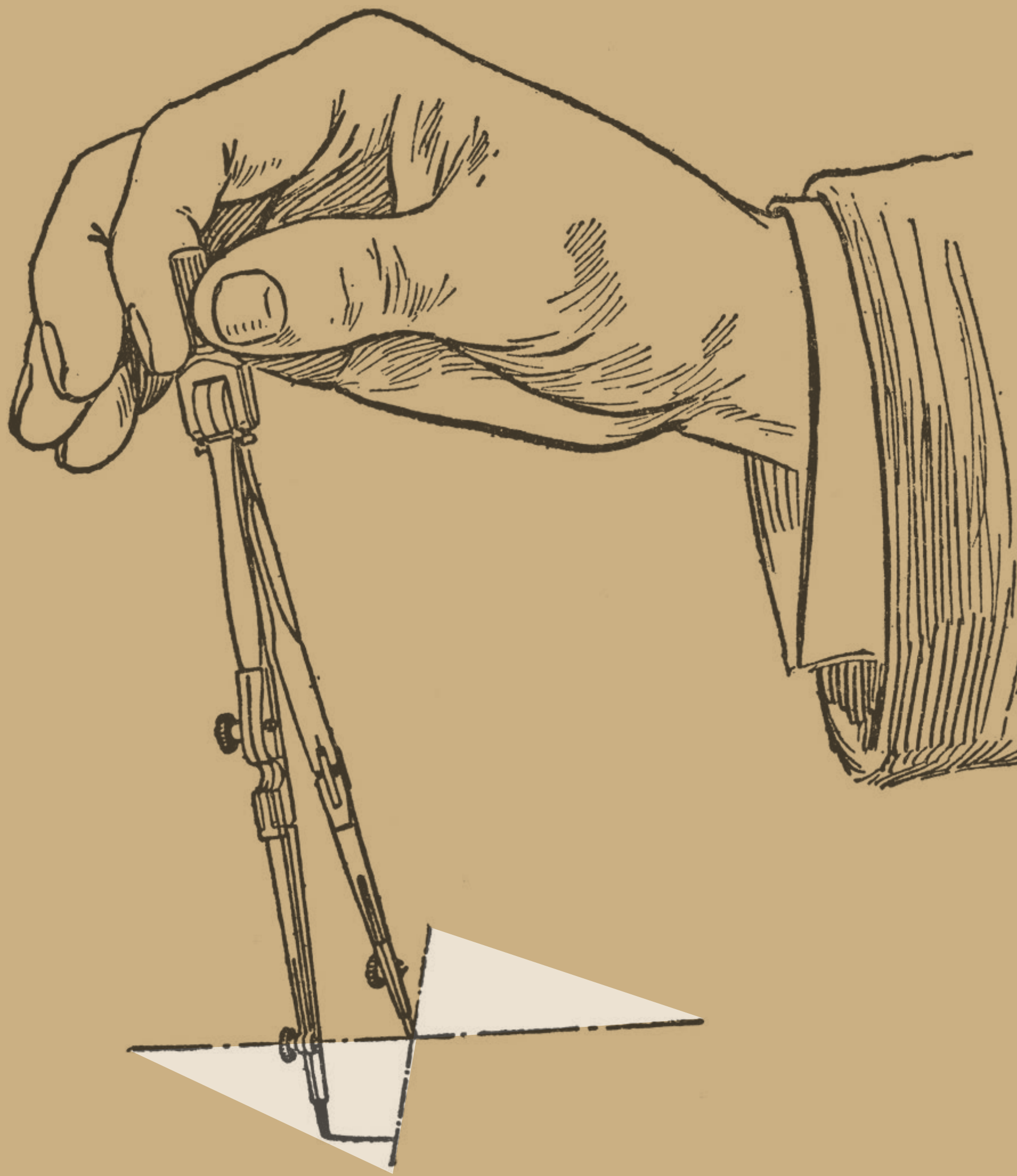
# GOOD MEASURE

1/3

JANUARY 2016



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MEASURE 1/3

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# LICENSIING

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ALISON COOLEY
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PAUL BUCKERMANN

*On The Cover*

MEHRNAZ ROHBAKHSH

*Map of the Known Universe*
Graphite on paper
9 x 12 inches
2015

*From the Artist:*

"Working primarily with graphite and paper, I focus upon the connections between music and physics, through their underpinnings of mathematics. I initially began reading books on quantum physics, having great trouble understanding the concepts of abstract calculus, which delve into spaces of negative infinity and parallel dimensions. Hence, I created graphs and maps as a way to comprehend the information, leading me to find great similarities between quantum theory and music theory, as I had been trained in classical piano from a young age. "

*prologue*

***Find the value of x***

*(no calculators allowed)*

05

*Provisional Index of Persistence of Status.*

HEATH BUNTING

07

*Back from Business*

On Commensuration, Construction, and Communication of a Global Art World in the Ranking Kunstkompass

PAUL BUCKERMANN

12

*AlongsideInterpretation*

The First Instalment of Many

ALISON COOLEY

# PROLOGUE

## FIND THE VALUE OF X

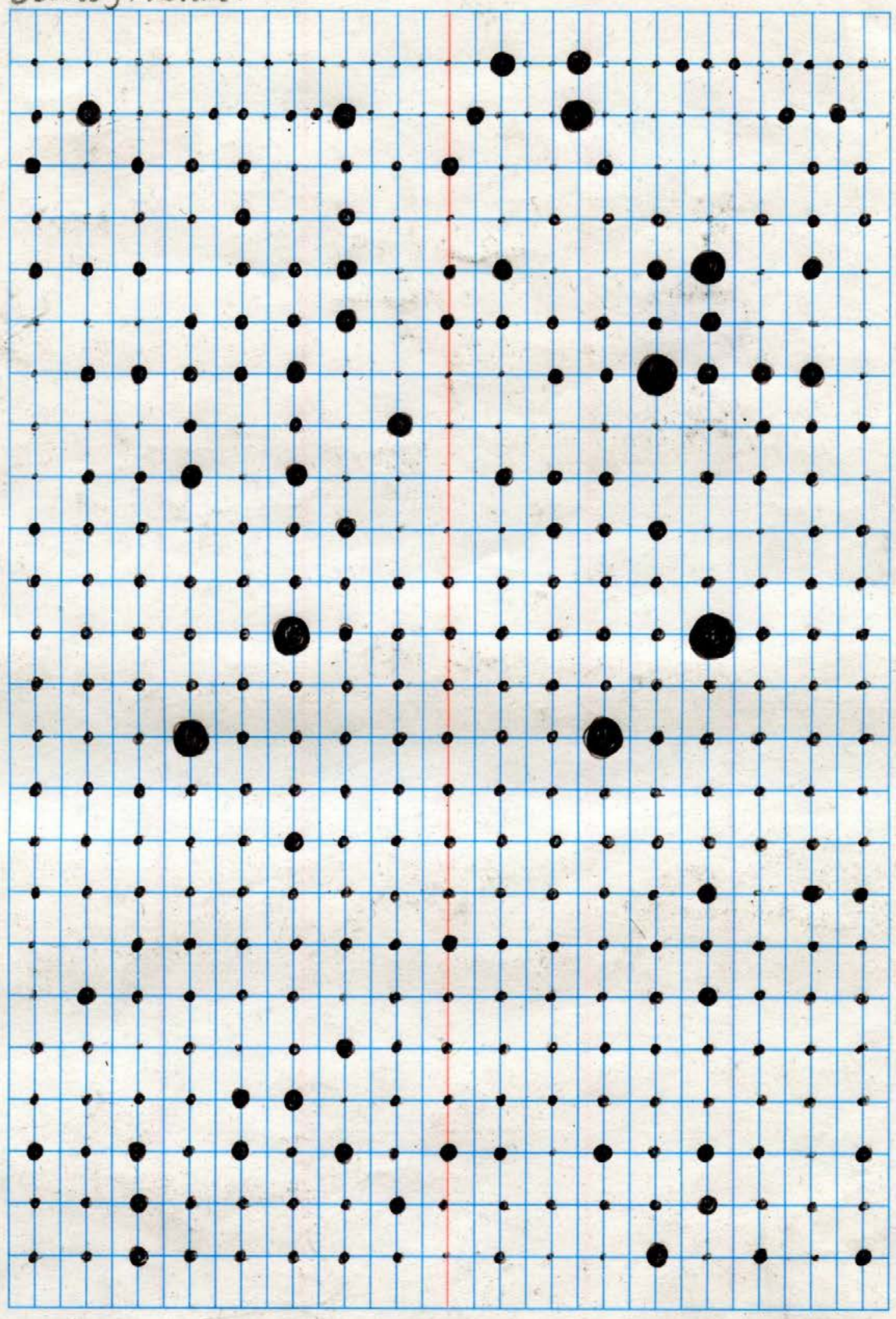
### (no calculators allowed)

This first issue of GOOD MEASURE looks at, on the one hand, numerical systems designed to process complex, networked information into a globally valued commodity: raw data. On the other hand, we look at how the same information gets interpreted in both its complex and simplified states. Of course, good measure refers to excess, just a little extra to make sure there will be enough—but also, in a literal translation, to the accurate application and reading of tools. So we've got restraint, and excess, precision and wiggle room. Here, the almost paradoxical semantics of good measure are illustrated in the different ways that data has infiltrated the contemporary art world. Undoubtedly, data can be used toward highly subjective ends, and art practices that employ data systems tend to reveal something unexpectedly human in numbers. But perhaps this is not so unexpected—numerals are subject to interpretation, investigation, and analysis, much like everything you're about to read.

But then there's the supposedly objective applications of data in contemporary art, and these are less embedded in practice, often choosing to remain the prudent observer, sitting on the outside looking in. In all the top tens and auction reports circulating arts journalism (sometimes seeming the most permanent element of the genre) information about artists and their works can get lost. However, we don't want to be too quick in dismissing the potential insights from this type of "datafication," especially without asking about what will be replacing that lost information. Because we must know by now that it's never as simple as $1-1=0$. There's always a variable in the equation to determine if the product will be positive, or negative. Speaking in art-world terms, this means that there might be something to those top-ten lists—but we don't want to get ahead of ourselves.

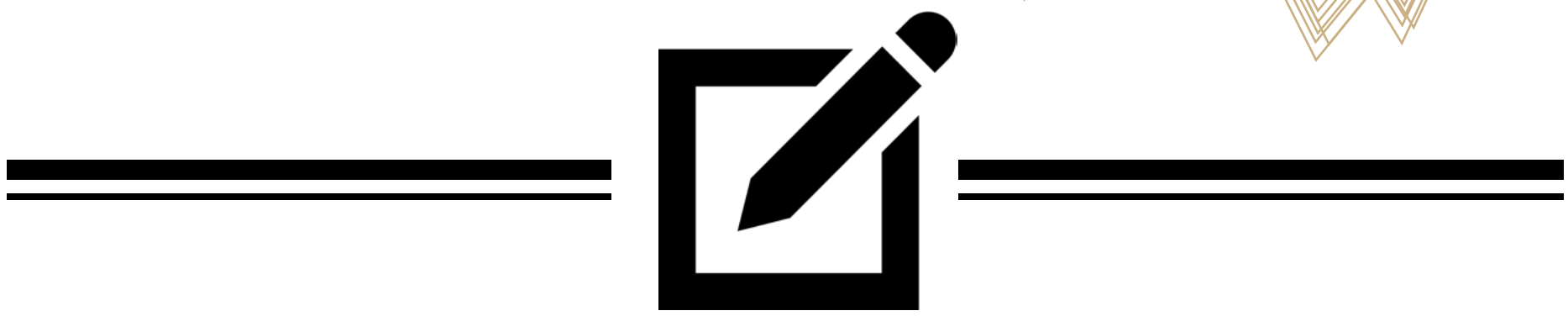
Though we're not usually prone to reporting news items in the prologue, we make an exception today to acknowledge a new format to appear in each of KAPSULA's monthly issues, starting with this one. "Alongside Interpretation", a re-occurring column written by Toronto-based critic Alison Cooley, closes our first issue of GOOD MEASURE by reminding us that no matter the accuracy of the equation or the sophistication of the algorithm, interpretation forms the basis for all types of analysis. There's no better time to begin publishing a column like this than under our GOOD MEASURE theme, complementing an interest in quantified information with an impulse to understand symbols—because what is a number, anyway? Cooley, along with fellow contributors Heath Bunting and Paul Buckermann, lead us into a conversation about what big data means to contemporary art and criticism. Maybe by the end of issue three, we'll have figured out the reason for taking that high school Calculus class.

Debussy, Reverie.



HEATH BUNTING

# Provisional Index of Persistence of Status.



This provisional index of persistence of status was calculated as a measure of the self-sustaining nature of status within the United Kingdom System (UK), framed within a Global system.

This index is the result of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithm searching for Artificial Life (self sustaining systems) in British everyday life.

This index is an indicator of both the ease of maintaining an acquired status and also the difficulty to lose this status.

For example, once you acquire the legal status of child of a man (Patriarchy), then its very difficult to abandon this, but requires almost no effort to maintain (conformity through ease)

If freedom is defined as the ability to change one’s life, then the first statuses of the ascending index of persistence of status should be top priority for revocation for people feeling trapped.

**Suggested actions for freedom:**

- Rebel against your parents (especially your father)

eg: adult adoption by a female same-sex married couple in spain, sweden, austria, denmark or finland (adult adoption is not lawful in uk, but the uk recognises decisions from other jurisdictions) would remove your legal father.

- Leave home and travel (virtualise residence)
- Divorce your partner
- If famous, become anonymous (start an anonymous corporation to hide within)
- Leave your children (Legally)

eg: registry yourself and your daughter as corporations, whereby your corporation is the daughter corporation of your daughter's parent corporation, thus making you legally the daughter and her legally the parent

- If a convicted criminal, hide from penal system
- Stop grieving for a dead partner
- Leave work
- Dis-enfranchise from corporate structures
- Sell your house
- Lapse your family religion

Conversely, if insecurity is defined as the inability to form habits, then the first statuses of the ascending index of persistence should be top priority for adoption for people feeling lost.

**Suggested actions for security:**

- Obey your parents (especially your father)
- Become resident
- Get a partner
- Become a celebrity
- Have children
- Break the law and be prosecuted
- Become a widow(er)
- Get a job
- Obtain a business franchise
- Buy a house
- Devote yourself to the family religion

# ACCORDING INDEX OF PERSISTENCE

Back Contact Co-ownership orders and minutes Help; Status name and codes of

Code Description

1A0000 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of an artificial person parent limited

1A0001 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of an artificial person parent unlimited

1A0002 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a sole trader

1A0003 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a natural person parent limited by guarantee

1A0004 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a natural person parent limited by shares

1A0005 A human being in possession of a natural person parent recorded in a natural person parent limited by guarantee

1A0006 A human being in possession of a natural person parent recorded in a natural person parent limited by shares

1A0007 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a limited partnership

1A0008 A human being in possession of a natural person parent recorded in a limited partnership

1A0009 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of an incorporated society

1A0010 A human being in possession of a natural person parent recorded in a natural person parent incorporated society

1A0011 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a natural person parent of a limited partnership

1A0012 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a natural person parent of an incorporated society

1A0013 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a natural person parent of a limited partnership

1A0014 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a natural person parent of an incorporated society

1A0015 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of an unlimited company

1A0016 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a natural person parent of an unlimited company

1A0017 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a limited liability company

1A0018 A human being in possession of a natural person in connect of a natural person parent of a limited liability company

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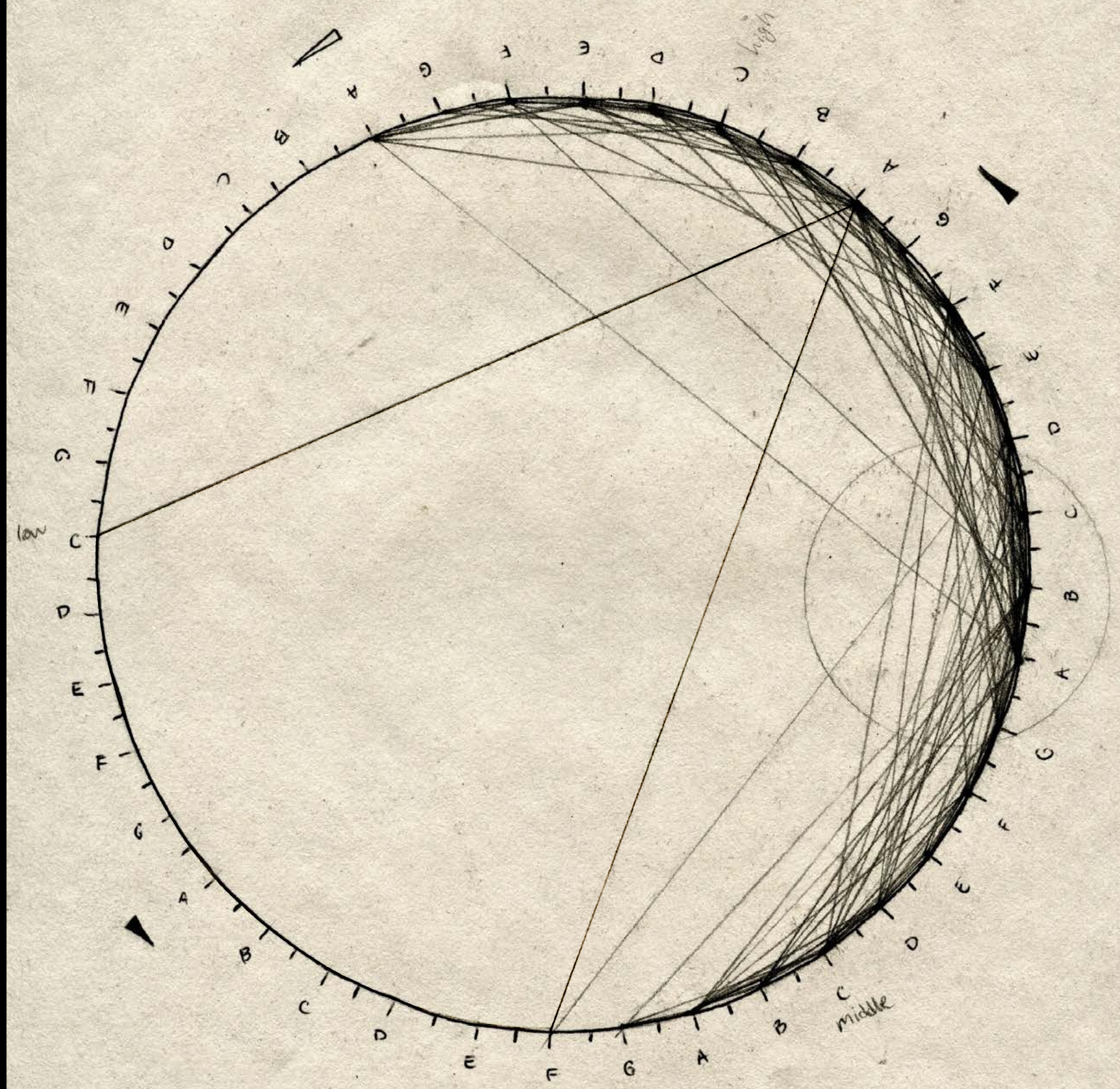
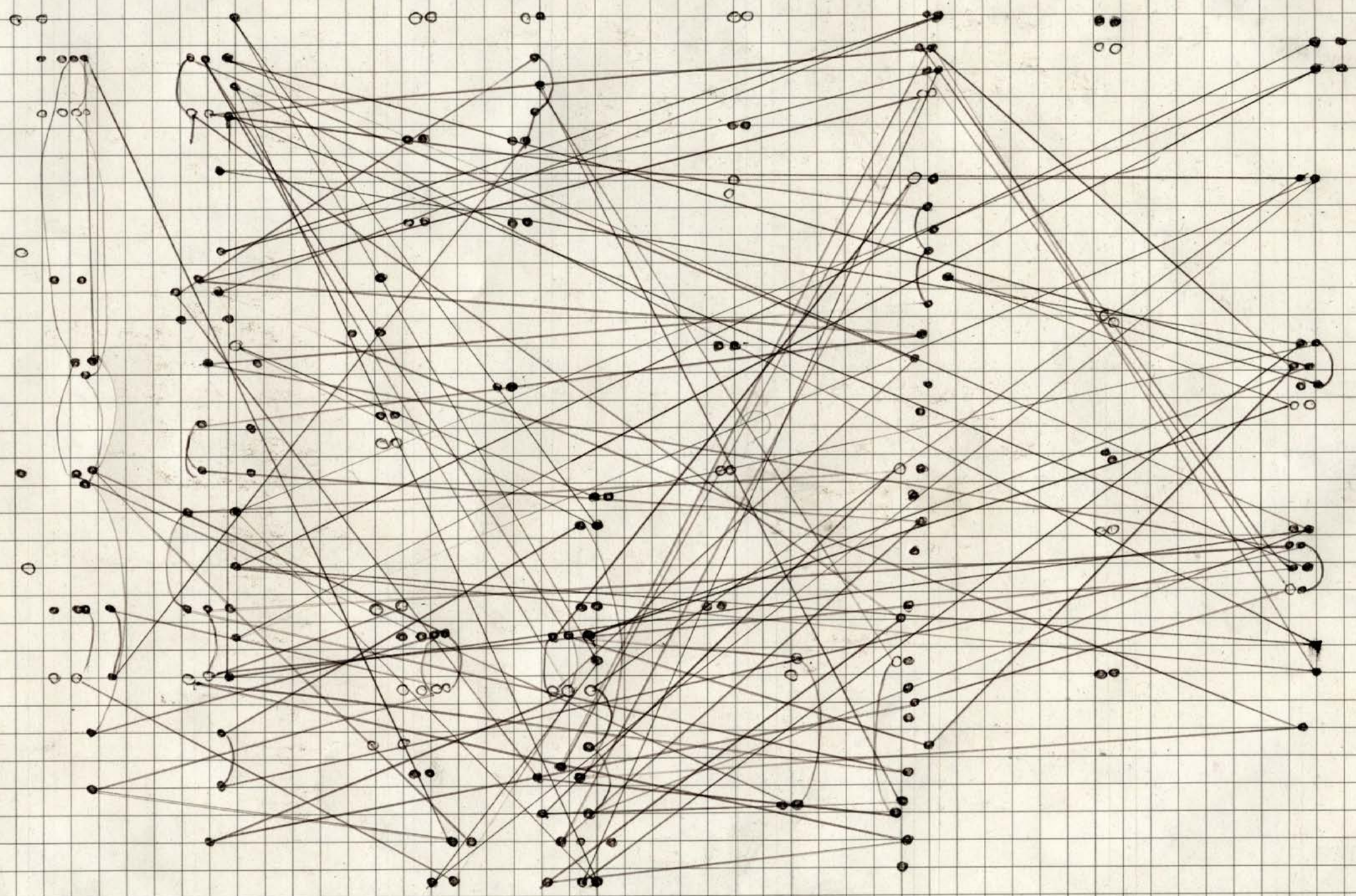

low
C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C D E F G A B C
high
middle



# *Back from Business:*

## *On Commensuration, Construction, and Communication of a Global Art World in the Ranking* Kunstkompass

PAUL BUCKERMANN

### *Introduction*

The ranking *Kunstkompass* has computed the 100 "most famous living artists in the world" since 1970. The annual list had been published in business magazines for forty-five years until it migrated to a focused art magazine in 2015. Based in the business world, it tried to shed light on the opaque mechanisms of the art world for investment decisions. Now back from business, *Kunstkompass* still claims a stake in mapping a contemporary global art world. With its resettlement to an art publication, the ranking slightly but fundamentally changed its surface. Here I sketch the production of *Kunstkompass* to show how measurement and numerical communication are used to establish a highly contingent hierarchy of artists. Working within sociological discourse, I outline the specific mechanisms of commensuration that occur in the quantified design or appearance of objective order in complex worlds. In this sense, sociologies of commensuration and comparison show how the contingent production and communication of numbers latently shapes epistemic globalization.

Modern modes of quantified evaluation and the semantics of modern art seem contradictory, at first. Statistics and mathematical modeling are well known in the spheres of politics, economics, or sciences. These standardized methods illustrate a broad and developing interest toward objectivity and quantification throughout modernity (Porter 1995). Meanwhile, "autonomous art" fundamentally grounds itself on a semantics of authenticity, originality, a subject's creative "genius", individual aesthetical perception, or a single work's aura. Nevertheless, we continue to find assessments and hierarchies in the art world since the influence of modern discourse. Art's internal rules and structures favour competition and canonical exclusion watched over by influential institutions like museums, critics, or art history (Bourdieu 1996). In these evaluative processes, criteria are used—none of them based on objective or calculable measurement.

Rankings that depict financial success on the art market by taking numerical prices and sales into account are thus not surprising or unprecedented. Especially in the digital information age, there are several complex data banks and report services like *artnet*, *Artprice*, or *ArtFacts*, which offer and sell in-depth analyses of differentiated art markets (see Velthuis 2014). Less expected formats apply criteria, more common to the arts' shared semantics, to scale hierarchies, reputation, and success in the complex institutional settings of the art world. Everybody with Internet access can get an impression of the *"most influential people in the contemporary artworld"* by checking *Art Review*'s annual list called *Power 100*, which is produced by an international jury constituted by art world professionals. In this case, questions could be raised concerning the interrelations and comparability of the ranked (and ranking) museum directors, weblogs, gallery owners, critics, philosophical movements, artists, and others. The German ranking *Kunstkompass* is most interesting for its mapping of global structures by numerical communication, rather than through the opaque subjectivity that generates *Power 100*. *Kunstkompass* compares and lists artists by assigning numerical value to show their 'relevance' or 'fame' in the art world. How are these factors measured and computed? What communicative mechanismsare inherent in these numerical comparisons? And, how does this process contribute to the social construction of a highly contingent global art world?

## *Production of the Kunstkompass*

The *Kunstkompass* does not aim at measuring the quality of art or an individual artist. Linde Rohr-Bongard, who has been involved in its production since 1971 and responsible for its publication since 1985, recently wrote that this would be an impossible task anyway—instead, the list reflects the 'fame' of artists in as objective a way as possible (Rohr-Bongard 2015). Market success, though ignored mathematically, had played a crucial role in the presentation of the ranking until it migrated to an art publication. The *Kunstkompass* consists of three lists: the 100 most famous living artists; the newcomers; and all-time favourite dead artists. The different lists are generated using the same formulas and measurements. Based on an initial poll with 106 so-called art world experts from Germany and Switzerland in 1970, the most important art museums, biennales, art magazines, and galleries were defined (and have since been frequently revised). These handpicked institutions are ranked by relevance, and artists receive points for solo or group shows in particular spaces or exhibition formats. Points are added for reviews in 'influential' art magazines, receiving art awards, and acquisitions by specific institutions. These points are summed up and the result defines an artist's position in the ranking in relation to other artists.

The complexity of its production has grown since the beginning of *Kunstkompass*. In 1970, Willi Bongard decided to develop a ranking guided by objective means, in order to improve an individual's orientation in a confusing art market (Baumann 2001). Before founding *Kunstkompass*, Bongard was a journalist covering the art market for the German newspaper *ZEIT*. The ranking was published in the German business magazine *Capital* until it migrated to the German business monthly *manager magazin* in 2008. The datasets available on potentially every artist in the world has grown from 375 artists in 1970 to about 25,000 in 2015. In 1970, eighteen art museums were assessed in the ranking (Rohr-Bongard 2001); in 2015, it took over 250 into account (Rohr-Bongard 2015).

After being published in *Capital* and *manager magazin*, the *Kunstkompass* migrated to the magazine ***WELT-KUNST*** (World Art), published by the *ZEIT Kunstverlag*, and proceeded to slightly change its components. Why or how does a disciplinarily focused art magazine, dedicated to art history, contemporary art, and antiques, cover this ranking in 2015? The ranking itself has become a brand over the decades and attracted some attention to the magazine, of course. Bongard and Rohr-Bongard had always left market prices out of their calculation, but added them to the ranking's visualization. Rohr-Bongard remembers that discrepancies between an artist's ranking and market value were the most interesting insights enabled by the *Kunstkompass*. Bongard added a figure for the relation between *Kunstkompass* points and average market value called price-point-relation (PPR) to better illustrate these discrepancies. From 1971, the PPR consisted of a decimal number, which was simplified into five to six categories ranging from 'very cheap' to 'extremely expensive'. The next was step was to reduce this information into a visual format (based on number of stars given) in 2001. The update in the *manager magazin* had only contained average prices and omitted the PPR. In the first version of the ranking published in *WELT-KUNST* in 2015, however, no prices are mentioned. The plain representation only indicates artists' names, their media, overall *Kunstkompass* points, gallery affiliation, and their rank in 2014. Any market connections have dissolved in the ranking, although it is flanked by coverage about recent auction sales records in the magazine. The *Kunstkompass* conceals market factors by entering a publication sourced of the art world, and now concentrates on living artists' 'fame'. The ranking's methods have stayed the same while its appearance has been fundamentally modified. Instead of tackling the ranking's methodology or methodological bias concerning region and gender (e.g. Tabor 2010), I investigate the mechanisms implicit in the process of measuring, counting, and listing, which all lead to a powerful but immanently contingent perception of globalization.

## *Numerical Communication and Commensuration*

Sociological and historical scholars have broadly researched the rise of quantification, rankings, and statistics in modernity. The role of statistics and censuses for nation-building and state bureaucracies is well-documented (Desrosières 2002; Porter 1986) and this so-called "avalanche of printed numbers" (Hacking 1982) relates to broader bio-politics as well as specific racist, sexist, and colonial classifications. Quantification—"the production and communication of numbers" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 402)—has also been used to shape and mobilize power structures, forms of acceptable knowledge, and expansive supra-regional coordination in sports (Werron 2005; 2007) as well as sciences (Porter 1995; Heintz and Werron 2011). There are several examples, but I want to emphasize one general insight about the sociology of quantification that applies to an analysis of the mechanisms of quantification in the art world. Selecting, measuring, or counting units are complex and socially embedded processes, which do not reflect a somehow natural appearance of units but radically constitute them, construct broader relational categories, and consolidate the metrics they are measured with (Espeland and Stevens 2008). Quantification in this sense is deeply interwoven with a historical matrix of scientific, political and economic knowledge, which can be analyzed in the case of art rankings as well.

The use of categories and standardized measures is especially manifest in contemporary processes of commensuration. Commensuration, a "transformation of different qualities into a common metric" (Espeland & Mitchell 1998, 314), is as ubiquitous today as it is contingent. In the *Kunstkompass*, we find the transformation of different individuals and their careers into one common metric. Contingency here is not defined by nature of *how* this metric is conceptualized and applied, but by questions of influence, approved knowledge, and power structures. Instead of learning *who* is successful, the *Kunstkompass* indicates contemporary and historical perceptions of fame that are favoured by specific institutional settings in the art world. So, instead of accusing the data or computation to be false, the basic mechanisms of commensuration can be problematized. But why is it so difficult to question statistics and numerical data? Why are quantified observations so persuasive and why are they everywhere? These questions highlight another significant aspect of commensuration: modes of further processing and re-producing numerical communications.

The *Kunstkompass* has recently been questioned and consulted by sociologists. These interpretations of the ranking in academic literature can help to shape an alternative perspective on commensuration in the art world. In one research trajectory, the *Kunstkompass* delivers data for analyzing structures and evolutions of a global art world. Alain Quemin (2006; 2012; 2015) uses the ranking's data in "order to study the evolving positions of artists according to nationality over recent years" (2006, 531). Larissa Buchholz and Ulf Wuggenig (Buchholz & Wuggenig 2005; 2012; Buchholz 2008) extract data from the *Kunstkompass* to reflect Pierre Bourdieu's findings about structural mechanisms in the art field on a global level. The authors assume that "[t]his procedure is the best available to differentiate the core of the art field […] from the periphery and semi-periphery of artists" (Buchholz & Wuggenig 2005). Despite methodological questions, two observations gesture to the persuasiveness and capability of numerical information. First, there seemingly exists a lack of sophisticated quantified data concerning institutional structures of a global art world. This lack is displayed, on its surface, by recurrent work with the *Kunstkompass* system and the authors' need for long-term observations. On the other hand, the recycling, crunching, and flipping of numerical data reveal its very communicative attractiveness. Even though the *Kunstkompass*' methods and categories are highly contingent and problematic, the results can easily be reused for further sociological investigations.

Bettina Heintz notes that numerical information can be easily transported, understood, and combined (Heintz 2010; 2012). Individual qualities are transformed into standardized quantities through the process of commensuration, and the reduced information can travel fast and at low costs. Contemporary communication and computer technologies accelerate this process even further. Information in numerical form can then be used for mathematical procedures—to be processed further, combined, and reassembled within the common and discrete metrics of numeral systems and mathematics. Numerical communication can be described as a highly globalized and standardized media framework because numeral systems and mathematics are globally less differentiated than languages and other writing systems. All these observations underline Theodor Porter's description of quantification as "a technology of distance" (Porter 1995, ix). The *Kunstkompass* has offered quantified data for more than four decades, reducing information so it can be understood all over the world and remain accessible or usable for other procedures.

These communicative mechanisms for numerical information facilitate the process of establishing highly selective order in a complex world. A global perspective on potentially every artist, every institution, and every art magazine can be shaped by the *Kunstkompass*. Commensuration, Wendy Espeland and Mitchell Stevens note, "is a way to reduce and simplify disparate information into numbers that can easily be compared. This transformation allows people to quickly grasp, represent, and compare differences" (Espeland and Stevens 1998, 316). Heintz and Tobias Werron recently reassessed the process of numerical comparison for considerations about globalization. The *Kunstkompass* is a good example of the authors' assumption that globalization is mainly realized by communicated comparisons (Heintz & Werron 2011, 361f.). Global interrelations, coherences and evaluations need comparable units and applicable criteria to establish instructive connections and interrelations between socially, historically or geographically distanced phenomena. The *Kunstkompass* has implemented a global and abstract framework, which includes specific forms of creative production and an evaluation of these constructed units within its own metric. This comparison facilitates globalization in the sense that within the ranking, potentially every artist, every museum, every gallery etc. could be included and evaluated in an 'objective' manner. However, the ranking itself defines the potential units, ignores others, and selectively favours or discriminates alternative art worlds. Nevertheless, a quick grasp on a highly complex world is enabled by the *Kunstkompass*. This is obviously not a 'real' world represented by the ranking, but some aspect of reality is reflected in the complex and contingent production of it. The use of numbers, categories, and 'objective' measurement veils radical, multi-layered reduction in a very persuasive way. This discursive persuasiveness is linked to the powerful modes of evaluation introduced by modernity, and the basic mechanisms of commensuration central to their use.

## *Conclusion*

Rankings or statistics are often established to understand complex situations or to provide processable data; complexity is therefore radically reduced and reformulated in the capture of numerical data. Bruno Latour (1986) describes this transformation of data and its visual, numerical, or linguistic representations in science as cascades. Individual decisions, which pile up these cascades, must be unfolded in order to understand the production and selectivity of a result represented by a single number. The results of the *Kunstkompass* could be shown when someone evaluates a particular artist as more important than another. But this approach fails to criticize the fundamental contingency in our construction of the art world and tacitly confirms its general mode of comparison. Rankings such as the *Kunstkompass* are important elements in understanding the social construction of the art world because they add numerical values, quasi-objectivity,

and a socially powerful form of evidence to already existing narratives. These narratives always have existential influence on the production, distribution, and reception of what is currently called "art". Since the *Kunstkompass* has made it back from business and been published in a genuine art magazine, it denies its market references and aims more than ever at mapping a particular and nuanced vision of the global contemporary art world.

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# ALONGSIDE INTERPRETATION

## *The First Instalment of Many*

ALISON COOLEY

I'd like to tell you about my experiences with dream interpretation—not because I'd like to bore you with my dreams. But because, now, beginning a column in an art publication about interpretation and its discontents, it seems both the simplest and most important place to start.

Just over a year ago, I began having anxiety dreams about artworks. In some of these, I dreamed of works that were real, in some form or other (twisted though they were by my own involuntary, unconscious recollection of them). Other dreams about artworks were (predictably) totally inane. But the cogent theatricality of many of them lead me to think about the relationship between the impulse to interpret a dream and to interpret a work of art. Freudian schemas intended for dream interpretation have long been mapped onto artworks, and I wondered if the same could be done with formal analysis, iconography, or other socially- and politically-engaged interpretative schemas (given that many of my dreams pertained to the anxieties of arts worlds, to the culture of precarity, to unease about sex, gender, race, and the politics of images more broadly). I've tried, with various degrees of success, to evaluate these dreams as if they were artworks.

I fell into reading dream interpretation books, perusing the internet for herbal dream supplements, and listening to people tell me about their experiences lucid dreaming. I'm planning to map the nebulous frameworks for dream interpretation onto existing artworks; trying not to sound too boring when describing my project about dreams (which are notoriously boring, and I know it); but also slowly tracing the edges of a desire to interpret—naively gliding a careful finger along a colour illustration of the brain in *National Geographic*. I've brought the impulse—the tracing, the translating, the deciphering—to KAPSULA for this column on interpretation in the hopes of cataloguing the other circumstances where it helps us to generate useful and peculiar comparisons across disciplines and schemas. Put something next to art and feel things out. See if there's anything there.

It's hard to touch on interpretation without, as Zach Pearl described when we first discussed this column, "prodding the ghost of Susan Sontag." Something about the aggressive interpretation Sontag decries in "Against Interpretation" resonates with the impulse to measure, or (in her own words) to "make art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (Sontag, 1964). And while Sontag makes interpretation look downright ugly sometimes—a disservice to the artwork and its fullness of sensation—I've known interpretation to internalize a kind of understanding in me. Interpretation (measurement, analysis, thinking out loud with others) is a way of being close to something I hope to grasp.

One of the first of these art-anxiety-dreams I had was about a performance by Brooklyn-based artist Anya Liftig, probably best known for infiltrating Marina Ambramović's performance *The Artist is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art. Liftig sat across from Marina, dressed as Marina. Time-lapses and Google Images search results attest to

her temporary presence. Her full, agonizing day of sitting materializes itself as a blip at 0:07 seconds on MarinaAmbramovićWebcam. The performance I dreamed about is a face ballet, which I saw at 7a*11D last year. Liftig trained as a dancer, and re-appropriates the aesthetics of her early ballet career as facial gestures, which slide and scrunch and cast dribbles of saliva entropically across the lower half of her face. Liftig says her body is too old and weird to do actual ballet anymore.

I'm not thinking about this distinction between Liftig doing real ballet and face ballet when I bat off the covers at night. Instead, I dream each micro-action of Liftig's face is a trigger to my legs, pulling them along like a marionette. Liftig's widening eyes and raised eyebrows provoke twitches of the toes, wormings for the edge of the sheet. Her scrunched up mouth leads to bigger kicks, both feet. Pursed lips are prescient of waves of clumsy bucking. Liftig's cheeks are the flexing of my soles. How beautiful for performance to reenact itself in the body of a viewer, not in tears or barfing, or hands shaking, or moments of anxiety on the toilet, but in her fevered involuntary kicks at night. Performance that refuses to leave the body, that lingers, that comes to the surface without affectation, but with a literal knee-jerk.

Translated through the language of deep-REM thrashing, I've come to understand this experience as a manifestation of something I've found special and terrifying about performance art: a direct implication of the spectator's body, there with the performer. Perhaps it's not a revelation, but there we go.

Preparing for a later text in this series, I spoke to my friend Iain, a skilled computer scientist and compiler-developer (I was giddy to learn that this means his job is to develop programs that interpret code, translating it from one language to another. I felt his super technical, highly valued work had a majestic semblance to the project of an art critic, albeit much more clearly defined, much neater. A compiler-developer would know, for example, whether they were doing it right). I was excited when he clicked "view source" for each of the net art works we looked at together, evaluating them by the html's elegance alongside the artwork's content. His criteria for evaluation and understanding could intersect with my own, and yet include an alternative dimension to what I had initially understood as the work's form.

Sontag opens "Against Interpretation" writing about art's probable and magical first receptions in the world, how its incantatory properties were eroded by the search for art's value, its intrinsic meaning. As I begin this column, I am deep into the incantation brought about by interpretation, or the erotics of: the kicking-off the covers, the rhythm of brackets underneath the webpage, the litany of symbols in dream interpretation manuals. I'm not interested in digging for things that aren't there. But I sure am interested in turning the art over and shaking it to see what falls out.

## *Bibliography*

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. 1964. Accessed Jan 2015.
*http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54889e73e4b0a2c1f9891289/t/564b6702e4b022509140783b/1447782146111/Sontag-Against+Interpretation.pdf*

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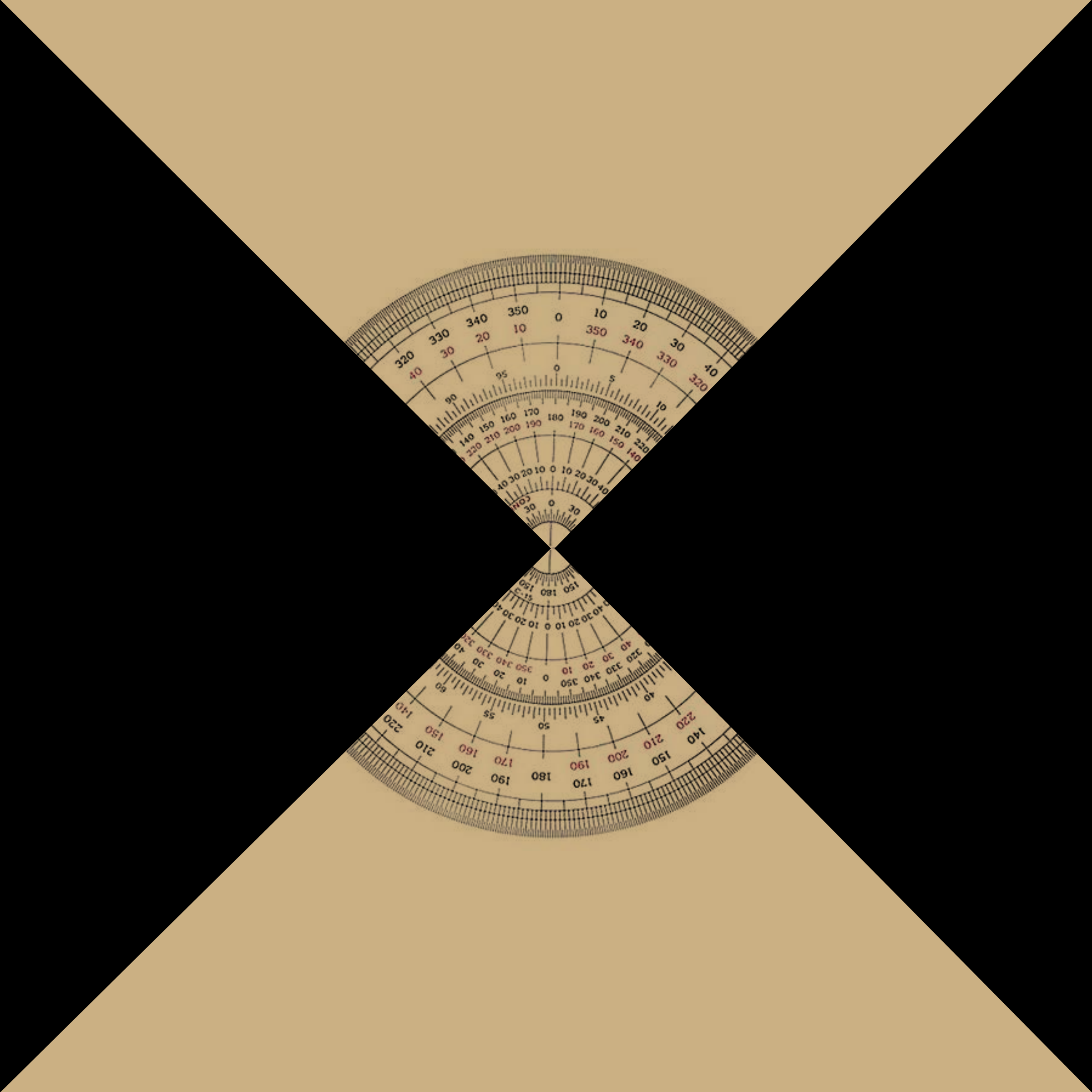
is a writer, curator, and educator based in Toronto. Her work deals with the intersection of natural history and visual culture, socially engaged artistic practice, craft histories, and experiential modes of art criticism. She is the 2014 co-recipient of the Middlebrook Prize for Young Curators, and her critical writing has recently appeared in FUSE, Canadian Art, and KAPSULA. She is also the host and producer of What It Looks Like, a podcast about art in Canada.