Zero Sum: Kristiina Lahde's Systems of Objects

Ruth Jones

We once lived in a world in which information was material. A world of cross-referenced card catalogues, metal metres, thick-bound databases, ledgers, almanacs, and abacus calculators. Much of this information has now been digitized, its forms vanishing from the world we live in; things that used to go hand in hand have been decoupled. The objects left behind feel bereft of value, no longer useful or precise. For Toronto artist Kristiina Lahde, however, they are the substance and genesis of an art practice that reconfigures familiar things (white printer paper, yardsticks, telephone books, zeros clipped from advertisements and magazines) into shapes that stretch our understanding of how they still fit into, and even order, worlds that are profound in their ordinariness. They are the things that make systems of knowledge familiar, from measurement and geometry to vast organizational networks such as a museum's catalogue of objects, to the utility of counting in sets of ten. Lahde explores the nature of that familiarity, becoming intimate with it and unsettling it, expanding the material reality of objects and making them agents in the abstracted systems that they might otherwise seem to merely represent.

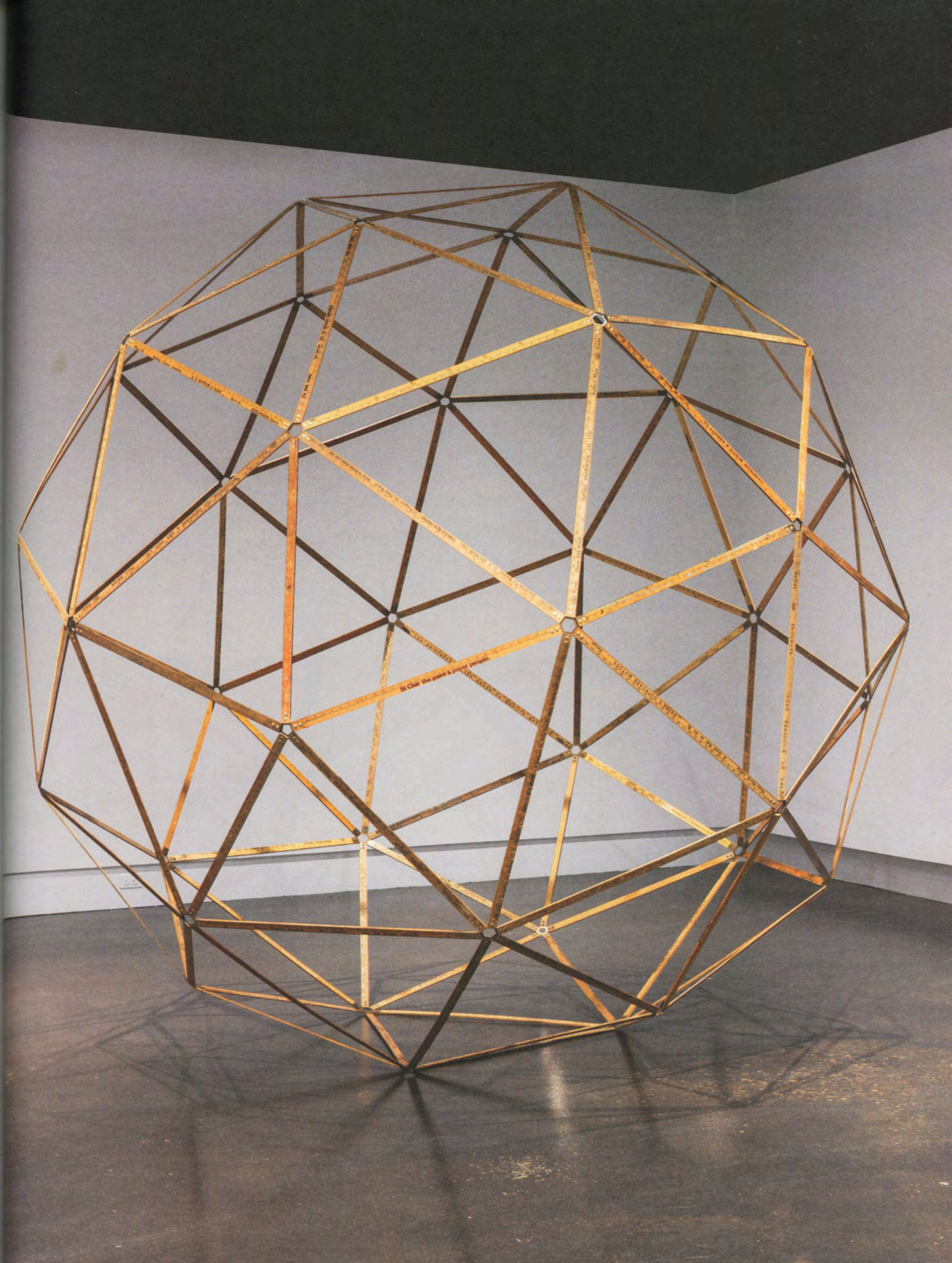
In *From a Straight Line to a Curve* (2014), Lahde builds a geodesic sphere from a collection of yardsticks, linked together by hexagonal joints. Set in the centre of a gallery space, it forms a delicate almost-sphere, towering over visitors, the yardsticks it's made of so thin that the construction looks impossible, like something that should collapse in on itself with the slightest breath. Made of once-ordinary objects—Lahde sources her yardsticks from Ontario antique stores, where they often turn up as defunct school supplies—the work defies expectations about the materials needed to create geometric spaces of such scale and wonder. It marries the utopian ideals of Buckminster Fuller's architecture with those of the classroom, of student citizens being formed into the inhabitants of a better world. The description from the 2019 exhibition *Extraordinary Measures* that included the work describes Lahde as disrupting the function of the measuring device: "By breaking these empirical conventions, the artist invites us to imagine data, space, and distance differently."[1] But what counts as different here? The yardsticks are still yardsticks. They still measure three feet into space, and although it would be awkward to try and measure anything against them in their geodesic configuration it's not impossible. The empirical convention that Lahde is breaking seems at first to be a very utilitarian one, in which a yard is a way to mete out distance over land. It's a surveyor's tool, or a track star's, a thing with a clear, almost static use—to govern distance by turning it into a line.

In the introduction to his 2011 book *World in the Balance: The Historic Quest for an Absolute System of Measurement*, philosopher Robert P. Crease describes two systems for translating the environment into measured quantities: something he calls "the almanac of the world"; and a system that focuses on embodiment.[2] "In the almanac of the world, we relate to a particular object in measuring—to your foot, a bird's life, a seed or collection of them—and connect it to the world," Crease writes. "When measures are embodied, we relate to a network, and it is not really the (replaceable and possibly flawed) specific measuring element that we put into play and connect with the world, but the entire network."[3] Measuring the world is a way of abstracting it, describing things through a system of numerical relationships, proportions, and standards. It turns an ontological environment into an epistemological system. But standard measures are relevant only if we can picture—if we have a real and practical sense of—what they *are*. A measuring object such as a yardstick has a life as an object, passed between schoolchildren, used to measure distances between desks, held up as a symbol of authority. It can be understood in terms of ontology as well as epistemology, and

1 — *Extraordinary Measures*, art exhibition, University of Waterloo, January 10—March 2, 2019, accessible online.

2 — Robert P. Crease, *World in the Balance: The Historic Quest for an Absolute System of Measurement* (New York, NY: Norton, 2011), 25.

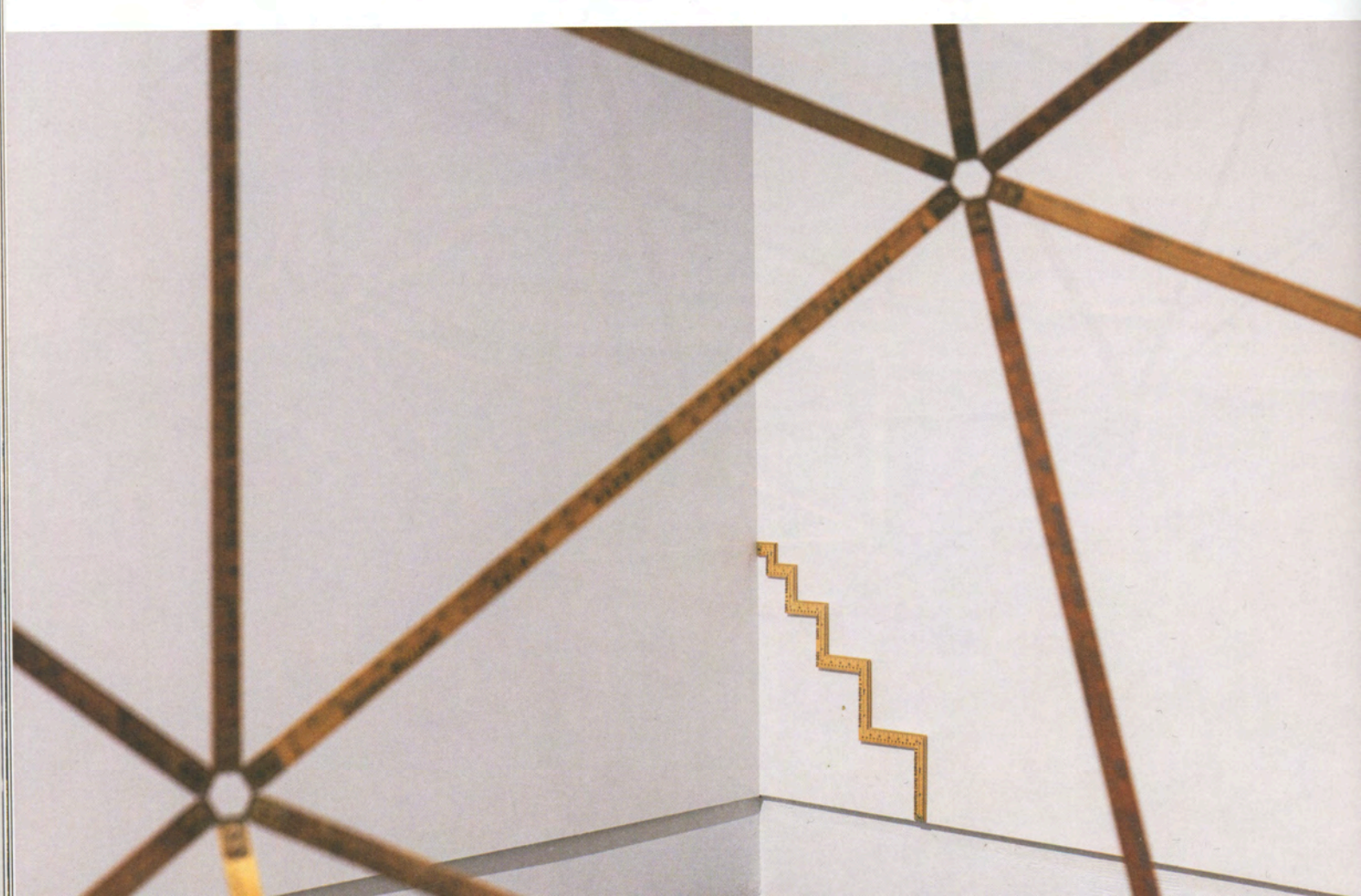
3 — Ibid., 30.



Kristiina Lahde
← *From a Straight Line to a Curve*, 2014, commande de | commissioned by The Koffler Gallery, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2019.
Photo : Scott Lee, permission de | courtesy of the artist & MKG127, Toronto

Kristiina Lahde
↓ *From a Straight Line to a Curve*, 2014, détail | detail, commande de | commissioned by The Koffler Gallery, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2019.
Photo : Scott Lee, permission de | courtesy of the artist & MKG127, Toronto

Kristiina Lahde
→ *Spiral Study (Archimedian)*, 2018.
Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, permission de | courtesy of the artist & MKG127, Toronto



Goldston, Edward, ltd.
Goldston, Edward, ltd. n.d.
An illustrated catalogue of
objects of art offered for sale
by Edward Goldston ltd.

it is the yardstick's material reality that makes the epistemological system that it's part of familiar. The complicated geometry of a geodesic dome—circles and triangles, and spheres and planes; a model of how flat and round can be made to work together—gets familiarized through Lahde's choice of materials. Meanwhile, the shape that she constructs from them tricks our eyes into turning the straight lines of her yardsticks into sections of an arching curve. Her manipulations of an object employed both ontologically and epistemologically start to unsettle our understanding of both the yardstick and the yard. The network that Crease describes gets pulled off kilter—a straight line arcs into a curve.

Lahde doesn't always let her materials remain intact. In *From Point A to Point B* (2018), she cuts up metre sticks and puts them back together so they zig-zag down a wall, none of them reaching a full metre from brass-bound tip to brass-bound tip. What was a base measure, the anchor in a system, becomes a problem of addition and transforms the wall behind it. What was a flat plane, something to be measured in terms of dimension (height, length, surface area), is now a surface over which infinite, meandering routes might be charted. How many metres high is it, when a metre no longer has to run in a straight line? The metre, an Enlightenment push of measurement into further abstractions (in this case a proportion, one forty-millionth of Earth's circumference), has only been further distanced from earlier, bodily measures such as the yard in its most recent definition, which sets the standard in terms not of Earth but of the speed of light, the distance travelled by a photon in 1/299,792,458 of a second. This movement away from things and toward mathematical constants—from perceptible material experiences like the width of a hand or the length of a foot to a material reality beyond the realm of human perception—draws us further and further from material immediacy, yet Lahde's interventions on increasingly distant and abstracted systems and measures snap into focus. They become material again.

There's something utopian in these interventions in measured space, a love of pattern, an ordered play. Describing Jacques Derrida's nondialectical materialism, theorist Pheng Cheah notes, "Because it refers us to the radically other, materiality is also the opening to an unforeseeable future, an *à-venir* (to come) that cannot be anticipated as a form of presence."[4] Viewed this way—as a reminder of all that is outside our selves—material becomes not only familiar and potentially useful, but hopeful and ethically necessary. And Lahde's materialist practice takes on more than alternative geometries. She reveals the material agency of the abstract, epistemological world through her attention, revealing how intimately the two are connected. When systems reveal their material, they reveal the possibility of the unforeseeable where previously there were only fixed signs.

Our world, even our measured world, is more than a place of static systems and the standards that give them authority. It is also a world of infinity and geometry, of relation and proportion, of curved and linear space. Lahde's work does more than simply engage with the objects that bring these mathematical concepts into familiar spaces such as a classroom or even an art gallery. It repositions us in relation to these concepts. We can trace the new path of her metre sticks, or try to calculate the yardage needed to make a geodesic dome, but only if we follow a logic that balances the thing with what it stands for. Critics such as Alison Snowball, who describes Lahde as converting "rational building blocks into irrational imaginaries,"[5] tend to focus on the way her use of materials seems to transform concepts, undermining them even, the artist becoming a kind of unscrupulous or devilish translator using the rules of one language (form, material) to crack open another, scrambling its grammar to create something separate and new. But Lahde's imaginaries are not, strictly speaking, irrational. A series of lines meandering across a wall *can* add up to a metre of distance. The straight-sided triangles of a geodesic dome *do* contain a geometry built on great circles and curved space. These works contain an understanding of the material world as something that is as flexible, astounding, and wholly rational as multiple infinities.

Reorienting our attention toward the material world means more than simply grappling with an increasingly complex understanding of the physical universe. As philosopher Elizabeth Grosz puts it, "Ontology has been increasingly directed toward explaining scientific and mathematical models, for which ethical considerations seem conceptually extrinsic. Yet an ontology entails a consideration of the future, not only of what we can guarantee or be certain but above all what virtualities in the present may enable in the future."[6] Lahde's work is intimately concerned with the discovery of virtualities, which she accesses by bridging the gap between ontology and epistemology, finding the places where they collapse into hyper-familiarity.

Lahde's most recent work focuses not on yardsticks or other distinct objects but on the ever-present zero. The artist finds them everywhere that things are printed: in books and magazines, in supermarket flyers and advertisements of every kind. Cutting out each one, she turns them into her latest material, tiny scraps of quantities liberated from the page by an Exacto knife. They swirled inward and outward in spiraling collages and were echoed in the circular objects that she'd stacked and ordered or linked together in chains that hung from the ceiling, the beginnings of as-yet-unnamed works. "If you look at zero you see nothing," Robert Kaplan writes at the beginning of his book *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero*. "But look through it and you will see the world."[7] Zero is, more than nothing, a place holder that allows counting to expand exponentially—ten to the *n*th degree. It is a place where Grosz's virtualities meet Cheah's reading of Derrida's material sense of difference, because zero is both the promise of every greater and smaller quantity and total absence, material's inverse, its ultimate other. Pulled from their contexts, Lahde's zeros were no longer meaningful because of their positions, nor could they add up to any greater whole. They were simply there in their zero-ness, materialized.

In a poem that is mostly about Iceland and monogamy (and therefore also about time and two-ness), Anne Carson describes a library for glaciers (Roni Horn's *Vatnasafn* project in Stykkishólmur), "As perfectly ordered as books would be. / But they are melted."[8] Moved into a library, the glaciers become book-like, ready to open their secrets, to be read. But the space transforms them: they melt and become less glacier-like, but also less book-like. Elsewhere in the same poem, Carson talks about knowing (she uses the French word, *savoir* and invokes Marcel Proust, guardian of material memory) as a form of desire. A longing that goes outwards, into the future. Her melted glaciers seem to defy this kind of knowing, since their change of state in the library, a place of knowledge, makes them, in a fundamental way, not glaciers anymore. They reveal a material secret about the states of matter and a metaphorical secret about the fragility of glaciers. Like Carson's glaciers, Lahde's work sees the world in terms of material that is both meaning and form, both the tragedy of the melting ice and the desire that brings it into the library, hoping to capture the past and change the future. In the interaction between ideas and things, ontology and epistemology, Lahde envisions a kind of harmony. In Grosz's view, this is the moment when materialism moves beyond causality. "As mutually implicated, ideality opens materiality up not just as the collectivity or totality of things but as a cohesive, meaningful world, a universe with a horizon of future possibilities."[9] All the numbers in the universe, positive and negative, add up not to nothing, but to zero. ●

---

4 — Pheng Cheah, "Nondialectical Materialism," *Diacritics* 38, no. 1/2 (2008): 148.

5 — Alison Snowball, "How to Follow Your Own Success: Kristiina Lahde at MKG127," review, *Momus*, October 14, 2015, accessible online.

6 — Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), 2.

7 — Robert Kaplan, *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1999), 1.

8 — Anne Carson, "Wildly Constant," in *Float* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2016), lines 98–99.

9 — Grosz, *The Incorporeal*, 15.