

KRISTIINA LAHDE: ULTRA-PARALLEL

Measurement patterns most human activity. As bodies in space, we constantly negotiate scale and distance through perceptual assessment. Increasingly, we also measure our footsteps, heartbeats and sleep cycles through electronic means, and map our course across the city by GPS. Notwithstanding all attempts at standardization, a discrepancy often exists between the aspiration to accuracy in measurement and the messier reality of quantifying. Whether portioning out ingredients for a loaf of bread, squaring a door, or cutting out a pattern, we often struggle with a shortfall or excess outside the ideal. When it comes to counting time, we rely on the leap year to keep the calendar synchronized with the astronomical year and, in fact, most systems require corrective measures to align with the life cycles of the natural world. Artists who strive to make sense of their physical surroundings are keenly aware of these types of gaps, of the slippages between the ideal of order and the lived experience of proliferating elements in the material world. Kristiina Lahde's work is governed by a compulsion to establish balance out of found matter, and she lends her particular focus to instruments of measurement on the verge of obsolescence.

Lahde, like all artists engaged in the physical construction of objects, has to make measurements to render her works. In her exhibition *ULTRA-PARALLEL* at the Koffler Gallery, hand tools that normally serve as behind-the-scenes aids to sculpture or drawing have become the primary subject of a new series of artworks that come off the wall, rest on the ground, or otherwise demarcate the gallery space. Following on the precedent of previous works employing salvaged materials, including security envelopes, newspapers and telephone books, Lahde has adopted used yardsticks as rigid supports for large three-dimensional assembly. Once promotional tools for shops and suppliers, the wood is inscribed with various trademarks, slogans and pitches. Their roughhewn forms designate them as artifacts of a former age of manufacturing. These are brought into a new structural function in *From a Straight Line to a Curve* (2014), where they serve as struts in a monumental geodesic sphere. The form relies on alternating hexagons and pentagons composed of both 32- and 36-inch rulers – a subtle yet playful reminder of an inconsistency within the standard that is nevertheless necessary to harmonize Lahde's larger pattern. The form evokes the construction popularized in the 1960s by inventor R. Buckminster Fuller who envisioned shelter for the world's population through the economical, easy and lightweight assembly of geodesic domes. Fuller's interest in space was echoed in minimal, conceptual and land art. Artists across these movements were interested in the interaction between the body and site, and often adopted primary geometry as a mode of investigation. Lahde's training in art was strongly informed by these ideologies during her time at NSCAD University, a school historically linked with the emergence of conceptual art. A key distinction of Lahde's approach is that it foregrounds material questions that

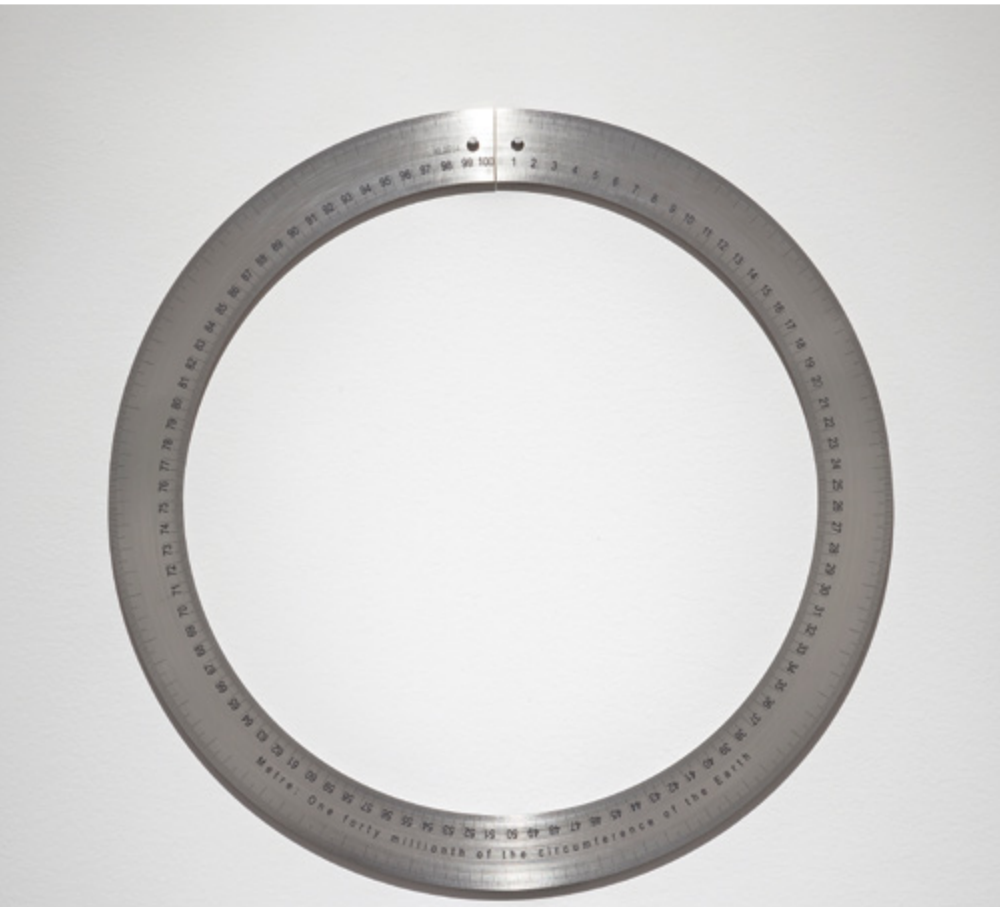
were formerly suppressed under conceptual art's privileging of ideas over formal resolution. Lahde, by contrast, embraces the patina of the objects she selects, never shying away from the visual pleasure of materiality and formalism.

Centrally positioned in the gallery, *From a Straight Line to a Curve* functions as the axis around which the rest of the works in the exhibition orbit. As an open structure it is also a framing device, partitioning views of the other works held in tension. One of these is *Greater than, Less than* (2015), an installation in which a series of yellow sewing tapes are split along their lengths – one half is suspended by three fixed points to form a chevron, while the other half is allowed to billow out. As each progressive chevron moves through a rotation, its floppy twin traces various arcs and curved lines. If these draping forms appear to have a more chance derivation, even this behaviour is a patterned one, governed by the earth's gravitational pull. Splitting open the tape in this fashion suggests the classical divisions of the Apollonian and Dionysian, or the push and pull within Lahde's work between following rules and surrendering to outside forces. The interaction between the tensely held lines and the loose arcs echoes a disruption proposed by Marcel Duchamp with his *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913–14), which was made by dropping one-metre lengths of thread from a height of one metre, tracing the resulting randomized curves and making wooden tools confirming the form of each accident. In Duchamp's case, the work was a deliberate provocation aimed at scientific method, particularly the French metre.

Lahde's own play on the standard unit is found in the laser-etched steel arc titled *One Forty Millionth of the Circumference of the Earth* (2014). To depict the ideal of the metre and its aspiration, Lahde cast a new emblem, not a traditional horizontal prototype bar but a 360° circular path, one mirroring the spherical form of the earth. While many systems of measurement are derived from human proportions – the foot and the cup are examples – the metric system is based on scientific attempts to map the proportions of our planet. France's newly formed republic established the unit by measuring the length of the earth's meridian along a quadrant through Paris and dividing this length by ten million. Later it was demonstrated that the earth is not a perfect sphere but more of an oblate spheroid; it bulges around the equator, resulting in an irregular circumference. The history of the metre proves that the art of measuring strives for precision but often misses the mark. In a tragicomic illustration of this process, a monument erected in Ecuador in 1936 to mark the middle of the world turns out to be off by 240 metres according to current GPS coordinates.

All standards turn out to be temporary cultural conventions. When considering the various instruments that Lahde harnesses in the exhibition, we understand that their forms were all evolved to meet human needs. Sewing tapes are purpose-built to measure the body for clothing, surveyor's tapes quantify the open field, chalk reels square the structures we build around us. When selecting these devices, Lahde invokes their use value – they are essentially ethnographic





objects of a pre-digital era, hand tools based on the body's physical capacities. With the increased digitization of processes such as drafting, laser cutting and 3D printing, the relationship of the hand to materials is an interface undergoing dramatic transformation. Lahde's exhibition makes constant appeal to the body's role in understanding our surroundings. These connections are emphasized and stressed through various techniques invoking not only the human form, but also its relationships to larger physical systems such as gravity, orbit, optics.

In *String and a Box* (2015), Lahde has outlined a corner using a chalk reel strung in proportion to her own reach. This tool also doubles as a plumb bob, meaning that it carries a fixed relationship to gravity within it, giving the user the ability to trace parallel lines impossible by hand alone. Designed for use on flat surfaces, here the reel is used to delineate volume. Lahde directs and extends the string across one plane and then the intersecting one, snapping a blue imprint on the wall and then drawing it back out into a suspended arc anchored at two terminal points, a radial equivalent of the linear measure on the wall. This process is repeated in a series of parallel lines that form a fanned skirt enclosing the corner. Faint traces of chalk dust collect at the floor, an uncontrolled scatter of powder that runs counter to the extreme precision of the drawing action. The reel is left dangling at the finish, a remaining arsenal of blue dust. As with the sewing tapes in *Greater than, Less than*, the forms interlace both taught lines and drooping ones, and a precisely directed light source casts a set of shadowed lines that gather where the walls meet. These hard and soft lines create a modified cube, in which two faces appear to be escaping the rigid structure.

The large scale *Parallel Lines* (2015) takes these concerns to an architectural dimension, using surveyor's tape to delineate volume. Employing regular progression, the tape moves between points in a decreasing projection of right triangles that starts at the full height of the wall and ends at the floor. The casing apparatus is left attached to the end of the tape, keeping the instrument unbroken despite its artistic application. This gesture is consistent in Lahde's works, where she diverts the normal use of a tool, while still leaving its function intact, never editing off the tails. The preserve of the whole unit exemplifies either a salvage ethos or a commitment to truth in materials. The specific usages of the measuring tools she selects add further cultural connotations. Putting sewing into conversation with surveying equipment creates an interesting transposition of types of labour. If sewing is about encasing the body, surveying is often about establishing boundaries of ownership within larger territories. Through both actions, geometric lines impose order on the unruly reality of organic matter. Though most of Lahde's works seem to accord with the harmonies of Euclidean geometry, *Slide Rule* (2014) seems to bridge into the wilds of fractal geometry to achieve its escalated form. A series of closely positioned and supported yardsticks descend the wall, creating the outline of a twisting plane. Compared to her other works, this form seems to bear the most direct relationship to patterns observed in nature – the slope of a hill, or the curve of a shell.

The works assembled in the exhibition evidence Lahde's long-term involvement and expert handling of pattern making. In this regard, *Tool for Making* (2014) offers a key to her overall production. A grid mat traditionally reserved for cutting out templates occupies the vertical plane of the wall, staging a scene that evokes the artist's worktable. On this substrate, Lahde has affixed a sequence of repeating vellum parallelograms that are hinged together and stacked such that their arrangement creates the illusion of a translucent vertical column. From this simple design, she generates something of the order of architecture.

In all her work, Lahde arrives at the elegance of her solutions not as the result of detailed theoretical computation but rather out of the complex embodied knowledge she has intuited from hands-on figuration. Her forms are precisely conceived and meticulously constructed. Her drive to exactitude creates comprehensive systems that confirm our experience as beings tethered to finite measures of time and space. Since infinity is beyond comprehension and its limitlessness in disaccord with what we can know, we may find particular satisfaction in the boundaries of Lahde's forms, their resolve. Her artworks rigidly adhere to the known, the specific and the measurable, in contrast to the possibility of indeterminacy and endlessness. All lines in the exhibition come to a terminus, reinforcing our sense of finitude.

Sarah Robayo Sheridan

Kristiina Lahde is from Toronto and received her BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in 1999. She was a long list nominee for the Sobey Art Award in 2013, and has been featured on the covers of *C Magazine* (Spring 2013) and *ARC POETRY MAGAZINE* (Winter 2014). Lahde is the recipient of numerous grants, recently a TAC and an OAC Mid-Career grant. Her work is in the collection of the Canada Council Art Bank and has been exhibited at The Power Plant, Toronto, La Biennale de Montréal, and La Taller, Bilbao, Spain, with an upcoming exhibition at OBORO in Montréal. Lahde is represented by MKG127, Toronto.

Sarah Robayo Sheridan is an independent writer and curator specialized in the dissemination of contemporary art. She has worked in non-profit galleries, museums and festivals, and taught curatorial studies at the University of Toronto. Her writing has appeared in magazines, anthologies and artists' monographs, and her independent research has received recognition from the Canada Council for the Arts. She holds an MA in Curatorial Practice from the California College of the Arts.

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Kristiina Lahde: *ULTRA-PARALLEL* is generously supported by



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Image credits Cover: Kristiina Lahde, *String and a Box* (detail), 2015, chalk line reel, nails | Inside cover: *Slide Rule*, 2014, yardsticks, nails | Page 3, top: *From a Straight Line to a Curve*, 2014, yardsticks, hardware | Page 3, bottom: *Greater than, Less than*, 2015, altered measuring tapes, nails | Page 4: *Tool for Making*, 2014, vellum, cutting mat, tape and screws | Page 5, top: *Parallel Lines*, 2015, surveyors tape measure, hardware | Page 5, bottom: *One Forty Millionth of the Circumference of the Earth*, 2014, laser etched steel | All photos: Toni Hafkenschheid.

Design: Tony Hewer | Printing: Incredible Printing | Editing: Shannon Anderson
Publication to the exhibition Kristiina Lahde: *ULTRA-PARALLEL*
Presented by the Koffler Gallery | January 22 to March 29, 2015

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KRISTIINA LAHDE ULTRA-PARALLEL



January 22 to March 29, 2015
Koffler Gallery
Curator: Mona Filip