

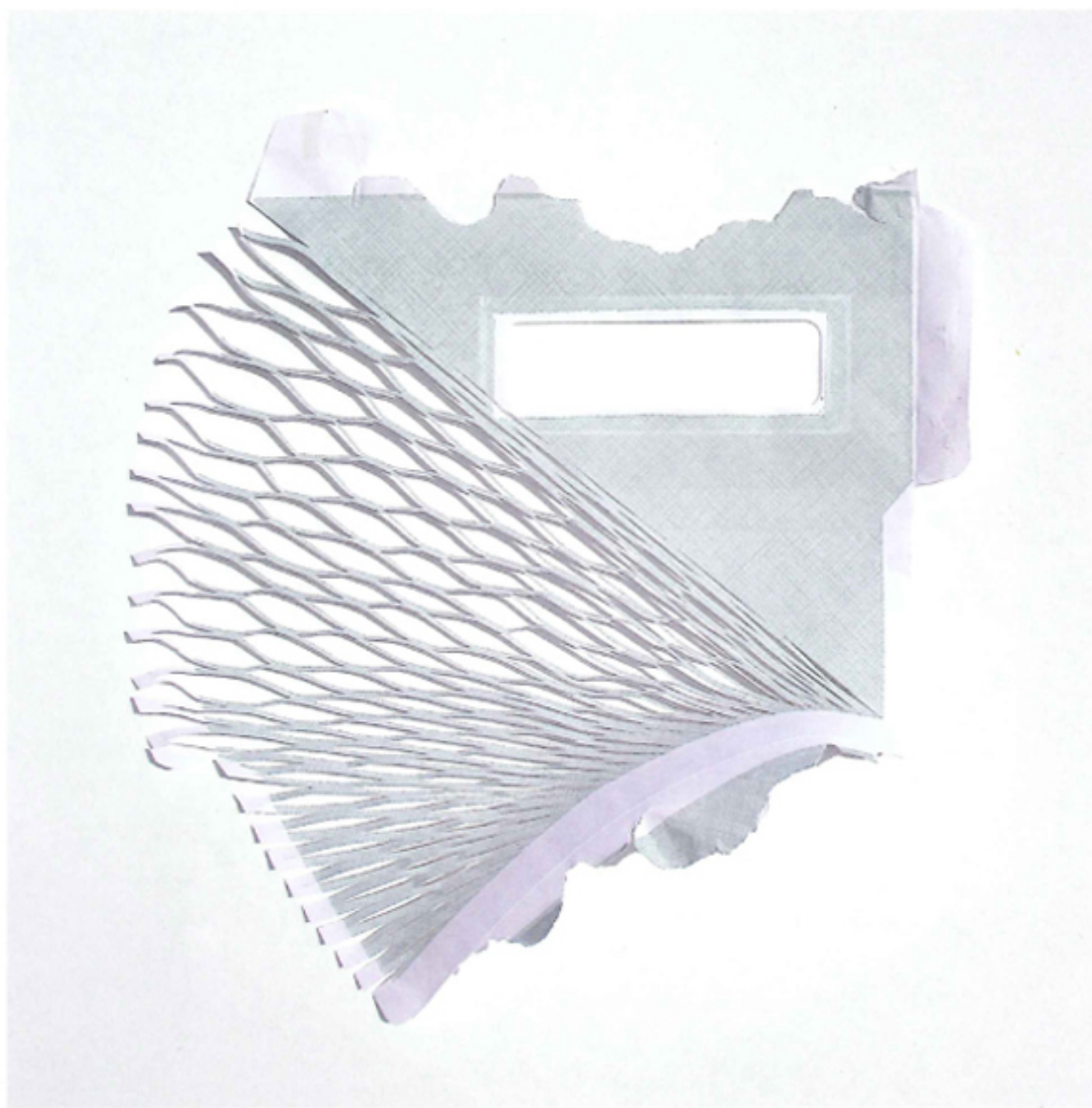


Beyond Measure: Systems of Chance in the Art of Kristiina Lahde

by Kristin Campbell

Nothing is made to measure in Kristiina Lahde's art. For more than a decade, the Toronto-based conceptualist has rigorously questioned our assumptions about what it means to measure and classify, and has often done so with a great deal of wit and charm, particularly when considering aging technologies and systems.¹

Kristiina Lahde, *Revolve*, 2007. Zeros from advertising flyers, 320 x 510 cm, installation view at Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop's University, Sherbrooke, QC. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

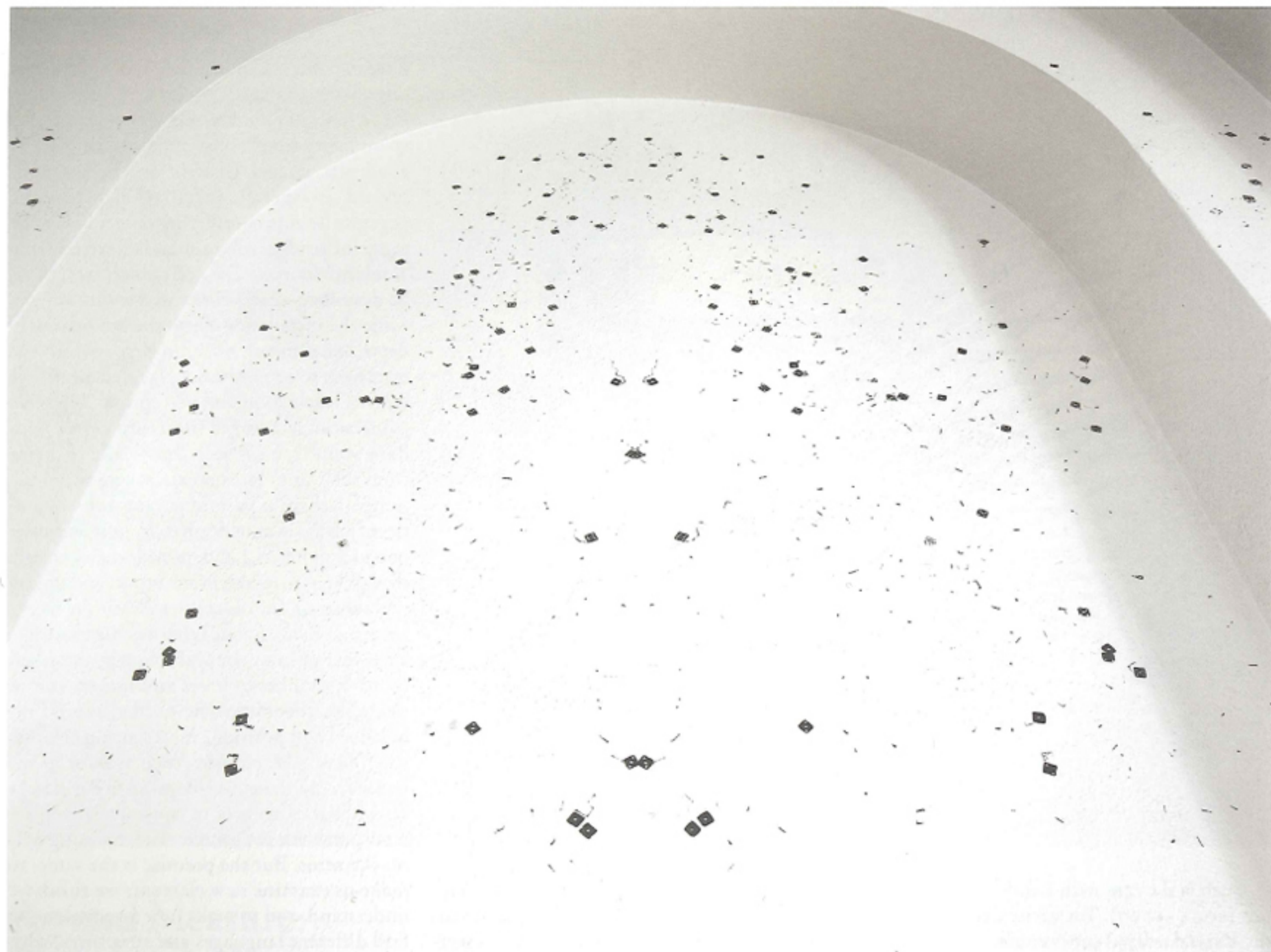


Such is the case with Lahde's *Envelopes* series (2004–2007). The artist deconstructed these standardized paper containers—oblong ones with cellophane windows where the addresses on our bank statements or utility bills appear—into delicate patterns and shapes. In creating lattices of positive and negative space that rendered the envelopes unfit for their intended purpose (i.e., circulation via the postal system, and efficient payment processing), she causes us to recognize the new potential in objects once their use-value has been disrupted or destroyed. Her envelope interventions also revealed readymade intricate security device patterns while imposing new patterns reminiscent of elaborate lacemaking or textile creation. In taking something that was once ubiquitous, but which is now sliding into obsolescence in the age of electronic billing, and making it unique with sensitive re-tooling by hand, Lahde marks the presence of encroaching outdatedness.

This is true, too, of her *Kaleidoscope* works (2008–2010). Using newspaper, which she cut cleanly and reassembled, Lahde resituates and recasts the random ephemera of printed news—the format in which many of us consume political triumphs and losses, tragedies, corporate mergers, as well as feel-good human-interest stories—all of the (non)events that may affect our lives or merely amuse us. However, by today's Internet-based standards, so much of this content is already out of date by the time it is printed, distributed to our doorsteps, and read. Numbers that structure and quantify, aspects of measurement, systems of classification—the

objects and tools that codify, regulate and help us give order to our lives, and which can even make or break our fortunes—intersect and overlap with chance and happenstance in Lahde's work in surprising ways. At the same time, she tries, in subtle and unconventional ways, to reconfigure systems of measurement by introducing chance procedures that signify chaos, randomness and luck. Indeed, Lahde stages delicately complex dialogues between chance and measurement that have to do with probing and dissecting existing systems—phenomena that are so prevalent in our lives from the time we are school-aged that we take them for granted—all the while making use of spontaneity and improvisation in her creative execution. Lahde hints at alternative systems, observed and perhaps imagined only for themselves, and only in the place and time in which we behold them. Lahde's work often seems to focus on mapping things that are extraordinarily resistant to such attempts at systemization—as in the case of rolling dice—as if she were trying to find the formula, or maybe “crack the code.” And then there is her preoccupation with reconfiguring measuring tools—such as a tailor's tape or a ruler—which we trust to regulate our lives, surroundings and even ourselves. Measurement, observation and documentation through repeated tests and trials: these processes and practices speak to how we make things “real” and “knowable,” and how we situate or locate objects in relation to others or ourselves. Lahde's detail-oriented practice incorporates spontaneity in order to question these standards of knowledge and truth.

Case in point is Lahde's *Zeros* series of collages on paper begun in 2003, which feature a colourful plethora of found zeros, taken with seeming spontaneity from a host of newspaper and flyer advertisements. In addition, she has made several site-specific installations where she curates the zeros—exerting control over the range of readymade numerals derived from “random” sources. The collages on paper may be described as self-contained environments, while the installations push the boundaries of depth and dimension within larger public spaces, playing more provocatively with habitual systems of association and perception. The zeros, painstakingly salvaged from throwaway, mundane sources, have been drastically removed from their original contexts, where they functioned perhaps as parts of pricing units, quantities of job losses or of death tolls, store addresses or phone numbers. Lahde provides new contexts that allow us to reflect, in an abstract and conceptual sense, on the older ones. With the works related to *Zeros*, Lahde is harnessing chance in a manner akin to the Cubists, who “randomly” took numbers, letters and images and reassembled them into a new order, as carefully balanced compositions representing an amalgam of everyday cultures, such as those identified with spontaneous goings-on in Parisian cafés and bars. Lahde is, of course, relatively circumspect with her sources here, focusing only on the zeros. But the premise is the same: to make us examine new elements we think we understand, and to make new associations, or find different languages and structures, within those reassembled elements. With the *Zeros*, something arresting and spatially challenging is created when Lahde expresses her subject—the numerical nothing—on an architectural scale, shifting away from the contained environment of the picture plane. Arranged as a continuous line, *Graph* (2004, installed at the Khyber Centre for the Arts in Halifax, Nova Scotia) traversed walls and doorways, spreading across doors, walls, wainscoting and jambs, while invoking the language and visual formulas of statistical measurement. The line resembled the measurement of stock market activity, writ large in spikes and dips, but there were associations with different kinds of measurement, too, including polygraph printouts—which jump according to the subject's pulse rate as anxiety is registered—medical charts and the registering of seismic activity. It is hard to make sense of these configurations, though the impulse is to try. Why do zeros punctuate the peaks and valleys? Can the graph be “read,” and its data interpreted somehow, even if we don't know the system, even if we don't know the subject? What tool registered these fluctuations? In the end, we are compelled to consider such activities on conceptual and philosophical levels. *Revolve* (2007), an installation exhibited at Bishops University in Lennoxville, Quebec, presents the zeros in a pinwheel formation that seems to have erupted or exploded across a glass-panelled door. In its centre is a dense, tightly focused, candy-coloured swirl—



at first resembling a whimsical confetti-like vortex, which then disperses over the gallery's sizable entranceway. This site-specific spiral gives the impression of a still from a film, documenting the process of something—perhaps the universe, or maybe something closer to home, like our systems of numbers—becoming reduced to its component particles, but also spinning apart and dispersing into the delicate and almost cosmic spray of “Os” dotting the periphery. Or perhaps they are coming together, and being drawn in as if by vacuum. The particulate Os may be read as mimicking the spiral structure, being as they are the same species of star (or system). In a poetic way, *Revolve* also dealt with the notions of interior space and dimensionality, sited as it was on the threshold of a room, and spread across the opening panels on the doors and the triptych windows above. Both *Graph* and *Revolve* randomly draw upon a pile of Os, carefully culled from advertisements and flyers. It is indeed an exercise in controlled chance and perhaps even chaos—and an intuitive response to surface and space, light and shadow within a specific architectural environment. Lahde's approach even seems to take into account how light and of course us, the spectators, move about these particular rooms. These works are aligned in some ways with Dada and Futurist collages, in their simple presentation of juxtaposed things that would not normally appear together, or through their

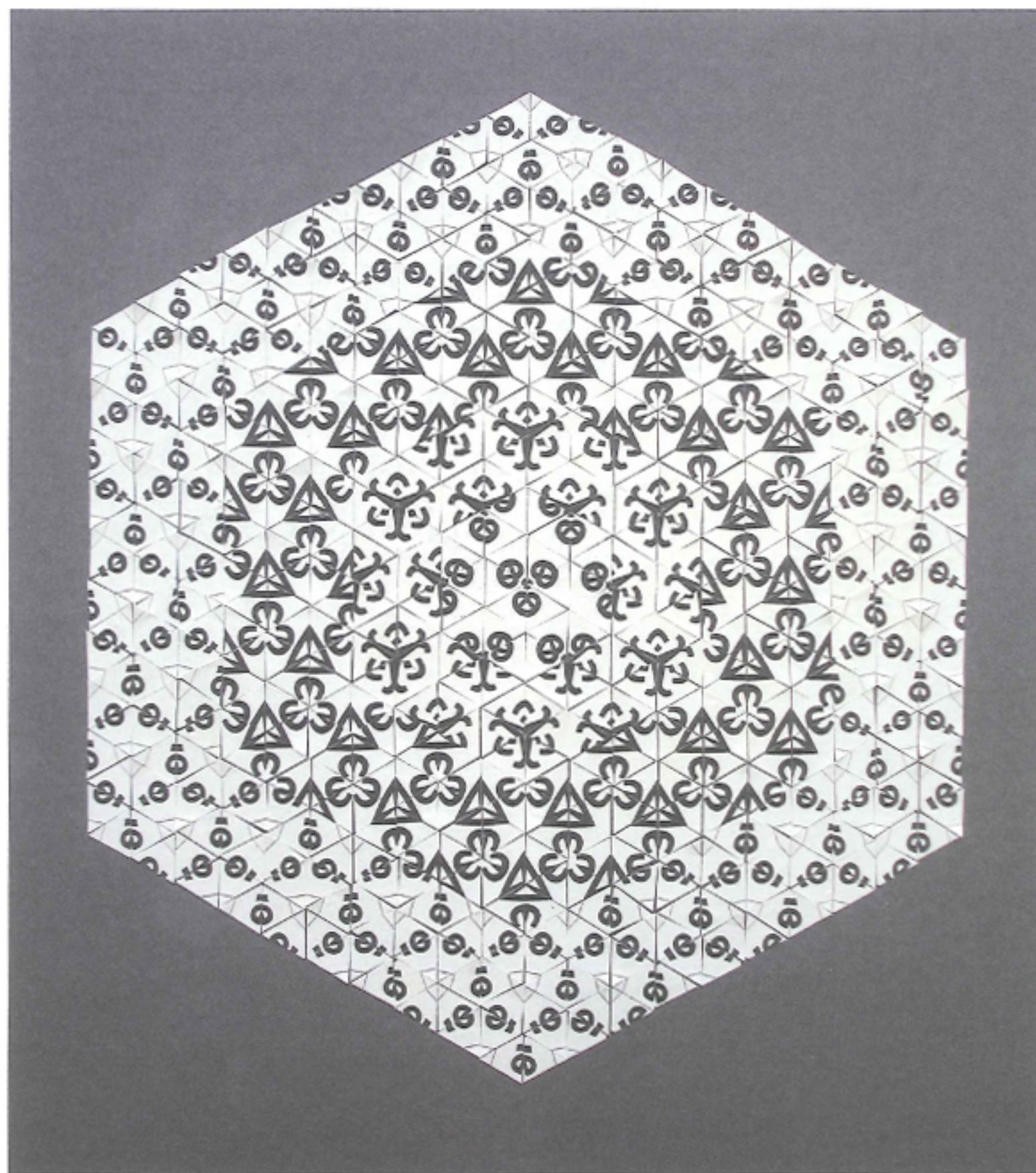
presentation in new contexts. However, Lahde makes use of things that are already quite familiar to us—numbers that we are conditioned to try to arrange as a sequence that would make sense of them. But as it happens with her work, we often cannot do so. We are instead left with the forms of the numbers themselves—and the pattern created. It keeps us, in this way, at a superficial level, admiring the formal qualities of numerical components recast as shapes and patterns, even as our visual and cognitive perceptions are challenged.



With their focus on new systems of order and measurement, the *Zeros* series relates closely to Lahde's contribution to Thom Sokoloski's *Dada Reboot!* project for Nuit Blanche in 2012, which was exhibited in Toronto's Distillery District. There, Lahde employed found images of the numbers zero through nine, and then standardized them: she made photocopies of them in black and white, on standard letter-sized paper. The idea was to cover a stretch of wooden wall with hundreds of numbers as the mood struck; no planned application or installation was imagined before the time of installation. Lahde's dialogue with the random took on a new dimension with the *Dada Reboot!* project by giving up control of her hundreds of readymade numbers by equipping other participants with staple guns and instructing them

Kristiina Lahde, *Echo*, 2011, installation view at the Biennale de Montreal, Montreal, QC.
PHOTO: PAUL LITHERLAND

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to cover the available space. As a precedent, one thinks of Jean Arp’s relatively abstract but similarly low-tech *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance)* (1916–1917) in which the artist tore up coloured pieces of paper, dropped them from a height above the picture plane, and permanently fixed the pieces in the arrangement in which they landed.

As with Arp’s chance collages, a kind of order still asserted itself in Lahde’s work, emerging from a cacophony of stapled pages: rational structures crept in, almost in spite of themselves. The application of numbers, which seemed at times to be frenzied and chaotic, became less so: because the pages had square edges, the participants sometimes fell back on patterns of familiarity, of expectation—number sequences learned in school, the patterns of phone numbers, and so on. A loosely composed grid gradually came into being as well, in spite of the absence of a conscious design or plan: the decision to use only black and white allowed participants to focus on the inherent rationality of the line—so long associated historically with measurement. The finished work yielded surprisingly unpredictable responses, often poetic in nature. For example, when viewing the finished work from a distance, there was a visual association to be made between the numbers in the piece and those designating the floors of a partially constructed condo site visible in the distance. The impression of spontaneity also created a

lively tension with the assertive directness of an accidentally emerging grid—dictated in part by the rectilinear sheets on which the numbers were printed. The results of this process of assembly and creation may have looked manic or obsessive to the passerby: *did one person do this in a flurry of harried activity?* Mania and obsession are considered pathological and abnormal, as they exceed the norms of rational behaviour. We are conditioned to think about highly repetitive activity, such as stapling many pieces of paper to a wall over many hours, as surrendering to the chaos of the mind. Norms of behaviour—that might usually be tempered by a rational purpose like posting posters promoting a concert or a rally, a bike for sale, or a lost cat—are exceeded. On some level, Lahde is in dialogue with those norms of social expectation, of the standards by which we are measured to be functioning (or non-functioning) members of society.



Lahde’s *Chance* series (2010–11) appears to address another set of behavioural norms and standards: the throwing of dice. Whether it is in the leisurely context of a board game, or a more pathological context of obsessive gambling in which the subject may literally become a slave to chance, dice-throwing reflects our hope of beating the odds and improving our lot in life. Lahde’s installation for the 2011

Kristiina Lahde, *Eye*, 2009, newspaper, collage, 45 × 40 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

“In reconfiguring the tapes, colours, lines and numbers become unhinged from their original purpose as they take on the appearance of cubes, pyramids and rhomboids, in some cases suggesting a third dimension.”



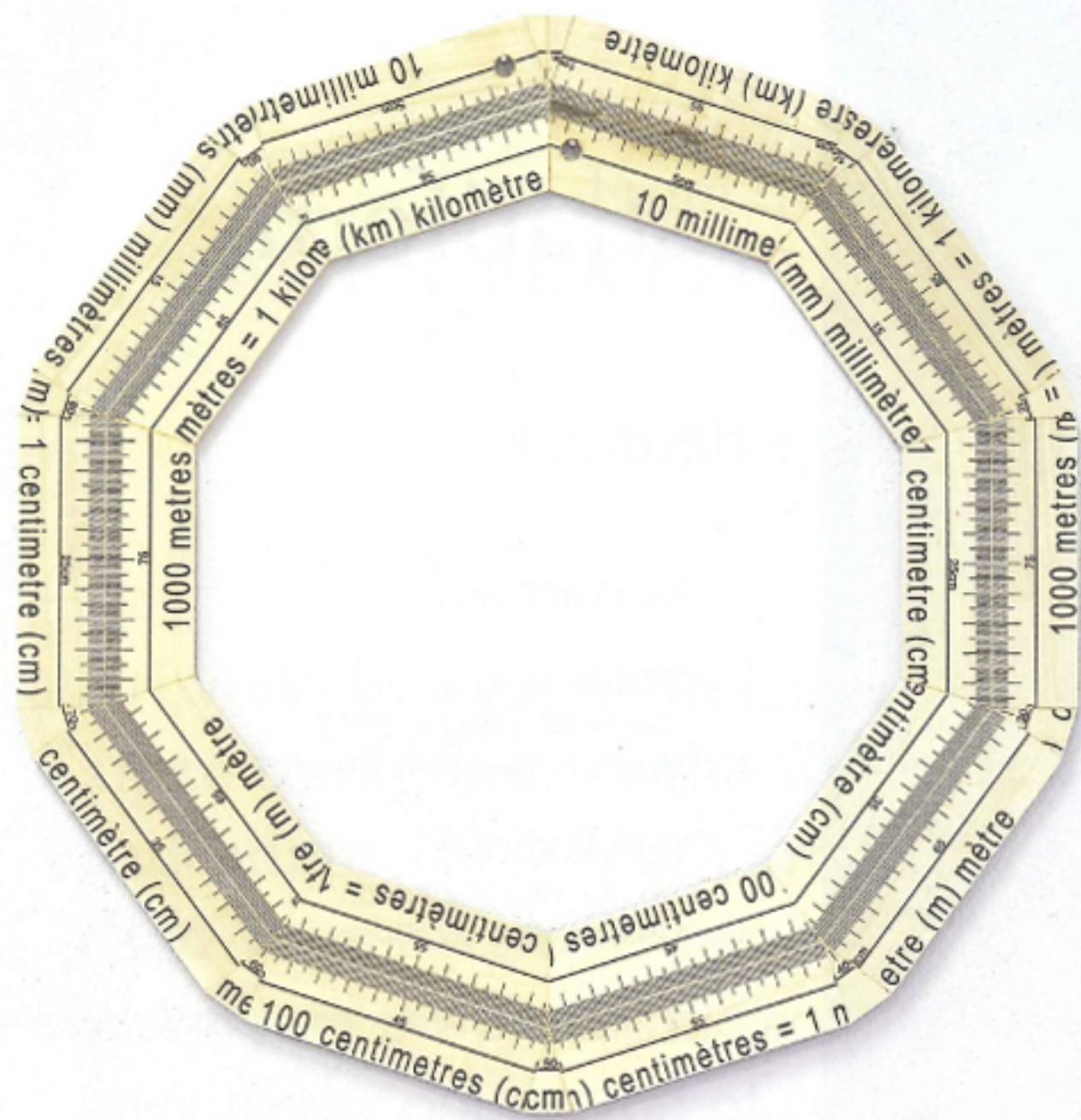
Montreal Biennale—a show devoted to the theme of “Elements of Chance” (derived from Mallarmé)—*Echo*, was made by carefully stamping die faces onto a barrel-vaulted stairway in the historical École des Beaux Arts building. The pattern, however, was derived from random rolls of the dice made by the artist when she arrived on site, the chance marks becoming the basis of the image above. The halves of the vault became mirror images of each other. The dozens of representations of die faces were not the result of the ramped-up, rushed action of frenzied gambling, but rather were a meticulously mapped out constellation of printed impressions, complete with the angular lines and dashes that suggest gravity- (and odds-) defying rolls. Arguably, in Montreal Lahde performed a deliberate enactment, translating the capricious and random results of testing luck through the roll of dice into a documentary

archive of tossing: She made a curious and careful record of each turn of the die. *Echo* may be read as analyzing the precise patterns or formulas of fortune, to measure the processes of its potential realization and the odds of it happening again. It challenges us to examine what we think we understand of the phenomena of chance—of its mercurial arrivals and departures—by presenting a slower, more deliberate system of internal order and record-keeping to what might otherwise be seen as obsessive risk-taking. Indeed, the work does not express obsession in a literal way—rather, it is suggestive of repetition in the act of creation, and it brushes up against the reality of being a slave to chance.



Lahde also plays with our understanding of measurement and standards with her recent *Beyond Measure* series (2012), using the tools

Kristiina Lahde, *Bent Ruler*, 2012, altered ruler, 76 × 25 cm
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED; INSTALLED IN *BEYOND MEASURE* AT MKG127, TORONTO



derived from primary schools and sewing rooms: the wooden ruler and tape measure, respectively. In her *Metric System* works (2012), Lahde exerts control over two-toned measuring tapes—each side representing a different system of measurement, imperial or metric—by painstakingly cutting apart and reconfiguring them into recognizable geometric forms and patterns that seem to present us with new units of regulation or systems of measurement. Procedurally, such efforts of course recall the tradition of the Duchampian readymade, when everyday objects are selected and placed outside the context of their customary use, providing them with a new context that allows us to speculate on unconventional uses (and meanings), as we struggle to shake off their previous associations. In reconfiguring the tapes, colours, lines and numbers become unhinged from their original purpose as they take on the appearance of cubes, pyramids and rhomboids, in some cases suggesting a third dimension. In some sense, Lahde's compositions are not out of step with traditional uses of measuring tapes—to measure forms in space—but here this notion is reconfigured (or literally twisted). With the tape measures in particular, Lahde may compel us to think about measuring bodies, reducing their parts to clothing sizes and numbers, “appropriate” to gender, age or periods of our personal histories, whether it be the length of hemlines in Catholic schools or the size of our feet as we grow. In many ways, numbers may exert control over our bodies, so it is sometimes helpful

to consider our physical selves as the product of chance, as subject to changes that we may not be aware of until we confront the numbers on the tape. Lahde's works with wooden rulers may also trigger vivid memories of formative experiences in school or elsewhere, as we strive (and perhaps fail) to measure up to pedagogical or behavioural expectations—maybe metaphorically (or literally) smacked on the hand with a yardstick when making an “out of line” comment. *Bent Ruler* (2012) and *Golden Rule* (2012) seem playful at first, in both name and form: Who hasn't bent a rule in their day, or wished that they could? The sculptural *Bent Ruler*, deriving from a metre stick, is positioned against a wall as if measuring a length. But it has been altered to curve gently away from the 90-degree angle where wall meets floor. Aside from rule-breaking and deviation, we may associate these works with the process of skills-based education, reflecting on the practice of learning to use the tool itself, and then making (in)appropriate (non)sense of the marks on (or with) it. This reflects a critical consciousness about the systems of knowledge and control that such tools may represent. In the case of *Golden Rule*, we may think not only of schoolyard truisms, but also of the potentially repressive idea of perfect proportions: *What does this mean when taken in conjunction with the manipulated but still regularized wreath-like piece?* Like a Renaissance *tondo*, it invokes a quiet inward-looking idealism of form and subject. But it invokes framing functions as well—as a mirror, a

picture or photograph—while still contained and complete in itself. Relevant here once again is Duchamp's legendary *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913–1914), which may similarly be read as a series of “jokes on the metre,” lampooning its regularity, its uniformity and its flexibility. With *3 Standard Stoppages*, Duchamp exploded the very notion of standard units of measurement. Not only was he questioning the nature of standardization, he was asserting his individual human and creative presence within those standards. In doing so, he revealed how flexible these systems really are, even as society relies on them to provide uncompromising and objective reliability in all contexts. Like Duchamp, Lahde denies the conventional use-value of measuring tools, and the systems and practices with which we might associate with, and also introduces an element of chance to something controlled. Another careful system is imposed on the initial object: Lahde refuses to leave scraps or slivers out and instead new curvilinear forms are created using every fragment of the original. Indeed, always with a great deal of care and craft, Lahde imaginatively restructures systems into new forms that are not yet codified. The remarkably methodical nature of her approach, often working in series, suggests that she is deliberate and delicate in her handling of materials, almost as if she were dealing with specimens in a lab. Ultimately, the importance of Lahde's art always lies within its playful and poetic resonances with things familiar but changed somehow—teasing apart standards and enabling us to find meaning and insight in her revealing alternatives. ×

BIO

Kristin Campbell is a writer based in Toronto. She currently teaches art history at the University of Guelph.

ENDNOTE

1 Many thanks to Kristiina Lahde for her comments.