

MEASURE TWICE, CUT ONCE: SARA MORAWETZ

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Measuring is a kind of assurance. It's knowing where the closest exit is on a plane, or how fast and far you can run if you need to. We measure in order to know the relationships between things, and to understand ourselves within the world. Measuring helps us anticipate scales of concrete and immaterial things, and these two are often related: measuring something material can help us anticipate the scale of more intangible things. We measure the time it might take us to walk between two points, and can then map the likely extent of our subsequent fatigue. We might use the length of a relationship as an index for the expected scope of heartbreak and recovery time. Without some sense of the measure of things, we're left hanging in uncertainty. Measuring provides comfort and certainty; or at least, the illusion of it.

'Measure twice, cut once' is a cautionary maxim. Commonly linked to carpentry, the idea is that you measure a length twice before making an irreversible cut. It also acts as a broader metaphor: plan thoroughly before taking action; consider deeply before doing or saying something you can't take back. These ideas ring true when thinking about Sara Morawetz's work. Each of her projects entails careful scoping and detailed planning. She develops thorough frameworks, protocols and plans – borrowed from the scientific method – to measure, track and document a process. Then, with everything in place, she takes the leap. Once a process begins, it takes on its own momentum: known and unknown unknowns come into play, time and place set their own demands and emotions make their irregular, beautiful tracks through it all. A lot of complexity is contained within Sara's frameworks. There is poetry, messiness and uncertainty, and there is space for these things to be held, examined and eventually analysed and learned from.

In Sara's work, the task of measuring is loaded. It is a practical and symbolic act, one that stems from genuine curiosity and a desire to explore and lay out the extent to which so much is, indeed, unpredictable and difficult to quantify. For example when it comes to distance, we generally have an internalised sense of what a centimetre, a metre (or an inch, a foot) looks and feels like. We might hold that sense in relation to our bodies – to our own height, hand, length of stride – or more externally, to a standard object like a 30cm ruler. As humans have found ways to propel ourselves across the earth and through the sky so much faster than our bodies can move unassisted, it would make sense that the measures we use become more alienated from our bodies, harder to feel into. We can't stretch out our arms to estimate the length of a kilometre or the scope of a hectare. There is an abstraction that happens here, a shift into the imagination. It's easy to forget that all these measures have their origin in human bodies.

The metre – a measure that seems so standardised, so neutral – is in fact based on measurements taken by bodies moving across space. It is the average of triangulations between the bodies of two French men, the moon and distance across the earth's surface. Between 1792–1798, Pierre Méchain and Jean-Baptiste Delambre travelled a tenth of one quarter of the earth's circumference in order to come up with a standardised measure. Did the commissioners of this mission think that by relating a measure to the earth's surface, they could arrive at something absolute, or unbiased? That they could somehow erase human specificity from the equation and achieve neutrality, objectivity? The idea that standardisation brings us closer to some imagined objectivity is very much a product of Western Enlightenment thinking. Which is to say, this idea carries with it a very specific set of values and a worldview that are worth challenging.

Méchain and Delambre started their journey three years after the French Revolution. Although originally commissioned by King Louis XVI, their venture became subsumed into the wider project of creating distance from the old regime, in this case literally one step at a time. The creation of this standardised unit of measure was employed as a tool to create symbolic distance. This measure was legislated, and a cast platinum bar – the official metre – actually exists in Paris, as does a marble version accessible to the general public. Physical monuments to certainty and accord. We all must agree on what a metre is; systems depend on it. Just like we all agree on the existence of an economy, and the value of gold and oil. These are mutually-held beliefs that the functioning of society as we know it is contingent upon. We hold to these agreements like a secular religion. Like any religion, it requires leaps of faith.

The cut in 'measure twice, cut once' is also a leap of faith, because there is never a complete absence of doubt. There are always other possibilities. We just choose, at a certain point, to ignore, or accept, or put aside the doubt and make a choice. The leap of faith comes in to bridge the gap, however small, between measurement and certainty. Certainty is not something fundamental or absolute. It's a fiction, or a decision: we decide that we've done enough measuring to eliminate as much error as possible. And so we cut.

In 2018, Sara walked the path that was used to determine the metre – all 2108.7 kilometres of it – with a rotating roster of companions. She took measurements using a surveying method derived and modernised from Méchain and Delambre: triangulations using self-made tools. She took the measure of her own metre, all the while photographing her progress and making daily reports tracking data including temperature, humidity, location to and from, observations, provisional metre length and emotional state. She was measuring her

metre, but in doing so, she measured her own limits and capabilities, mental and physical resilience and her ability to see a task through. Sara created a framework, protocol and plan, and in doing so she made space for feelings, uncertainty, pain and poetry to play out within it. She also quietly revealed that the universal measure is indeed subjective, highly personal, and indexed to specific bodies.

Sara's work has always used the scientific method as a framework for experience, duration and endurance. Not as some kind of self-flagellatory or nihilistic ritual, but in real, earnest, scientific and personal curiosity. One project saw her living in a gallery on Mars time, slowly falling out of sync with Earth days and nights. Another involves ceremonial acts to mark the introduction of each leap-second to the calendar. In *Acts of Inexactitude* (2023), Sara will attempt to mark out a metre by feel, and will repeat the action until she arrives at the correct measure. Until she feels it in her body so specifically, so precisely that she can do the work of a ruler without the tool as an appendage. But *Acts of Inexactitude* is also a dance, a game of chance, a ritual action to bring attention to the act of measuring using one's body in space. We are always doing this in some sense, whether it's triangulating ourselves within respectful distance of others in a crowd, judging the gap between a passing pedestrian and a building or the edge of the pavement. To become aware of these things is a kind of meditation: feeling the edges where we meet the world.

Measuring, for Sara, extends beyond the empirical. It is experiential, bodily, personal. By walking, we measure ourselves in relation to the world. We propel ourselves between places, building an understanding of what it means to be in a human body in space and time. There is knowledge held in these flawed, porous, idiosyncratic vessels that are the interface between our minds and the world.

Sara's work proposes that there is no true neutral or objective. There are things that we can come to know through our bodies that are true for us, but they're unlikely to hold up universally. A metric can be ceremonially cast in platinum and legislated as universal, but we can only ever understand the world from within our own bodies and minds. Each body could measure its own metre and come up with something slightly different. And this is not a failure, or even necessarily a limitation. It's a reminder that things are not absolute. That there are accords, agreed-upon fictions that become cemented into fact, but this doesn't mean they are true, or truly universal. Like Sara, we can keep turning ideas around, seek different perspectives, remain open to change. Arguably this is what the scientific method is for: a tool for testing new ideas against old, with the potential to overturn long-held absolutes with fresh understandings.

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IMAGE: Sara Morawetz *Measure Twice, Cut Once* 2022, courtesy the artist.

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