

Plan.Measure.Point.Reason.

"All men by nature desire to know: an example is the delight we take in our senses, quite apart from their usefulness." Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*

Bruce Nauman made green neon tube templates of the left side of his body at ten-inch intervals in 1966. On Kawara makes a black and white date/month/year painting every day. Sol Lewitt employed mathematic ratios as the foundation to his white cube constructions. Here are three very different philosophical and methodological examples of late Twentieth-century artists grappling with the problem of knowledge. Yet, common to all three is the desire to know oneself and the world in which one lives.

In Western thought, knowledge begins with the powers of observation. According to the ancient Greeks, observation should ideally lead to universal laws and abstract concepts that represent absolute cosmic certainty. Yet over the centuries, humanity's search for the Universal and the Absolute has resulted in clamorous, misguided ends. So, perhaps wisdom itself is gleaned not from knowing but through the continual process of examining and measuring — both literally and metaphorically — one's own life. Socrates' precept that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and

Aristotle's "desire to know" set the stage for metaphysical reasoning and an empirical approach regarding the problem of knowledge over two millennia ago. But today, we still ask the same questions. And it is in the asking of these questions that we have come to recognize our humanity.

Christopher McNulty's work extols the virtues of process, measure, failure and task. The exercises he sets up for himself metaphorically illustrate Socrates' emphasis on an examined life. But McNulty also takes this principle further by asking, "what form should the examination take?" For the most part, McNulty enlists the tropes of measuring, counting and indexical mark making as a means to achieve absolute truth. But it is important to note that he measures by eye, utilizing no certified system of calibrated measuring.

McNulty is not a misguided idealist who thinks that, with enough practice, he can achieve classical perfection. Rather, he believes that, with enough practice and discipline, he will come to understand his true nature through his inability to achieve perfection. He states, "I am interested in the coexistence of my desire to achieve a specific goal and the contradictory knowledge that the goal is unachievable." This is clearly illustrated in his Measure series, a body of

conceptual sculptures that are as unique to McNulty as Nauman's neon body template. Each unit of measure recorded on each of these works appears standard but on closer inspection is imperfect and imprecise.

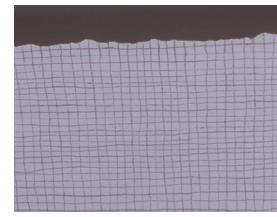
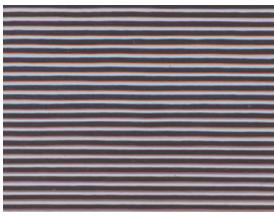
The materials and processes that McNulty employs are as limited in their ability to represent flawlessness as McNulty himself. As a living material with organic, changing properties, wood is beyond his control. In some cases, he allows it to swell, warp and bend. In other pieces, he sands the surface but leaves the grain visible. The cut marks, executed by both electric and handsaws, are vulnerable to irregularity based on the inconstancy of the material and McNulty's own dexterity and motor skills. With each new work he produces, these variables shift and present a new challenge to his desire for perfection.

If man is the measure of all things, McNulty measures, counts and divides as a means to learn the capacity of his being. He articulates this view by simply saying, "I literally create a measure of myself." But it is also significant that he engages in the coded language of standard measure, a tool of empirical truth. Science, math and engineering have come to rely on measuring systems to advance knowledge, but McNulty is advancing a type of knowledge, philosophy, that

does not employ these types of calibrated tools as a measure of progression. Is he then critiquing contemporary culture's privileging of scientific advancement over a philosophical one?

McNulty is also aware of his art historical predecessors. Like Duchamp's *Three standard Stoppages*, his work destabilizes the authority of measure by aligning it with chance, inconstancies and capriciousness. His interest in notions of work and repetitive activity as ethical undertakings expands the work of contemporary artist Tom Friedman, while his reductive, literal forms take their cue from Minimalism.

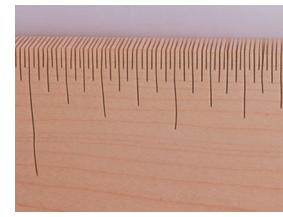
Today, at 383 West Broadway in downtown New York City, you can walk in off the street and see Walter DeMaria's, *The Broken Kilometer* (1979) permanently installed on the floor in an exhibition space owned by DIA Center for the Arts. Its mathematical preoccupation consists of 500 polished brass rods, each two meters in length. The rods are arranged precisely in five parallel rows of 100, and, when laid end-to-end, the whole piece measures exactly one kilometer. The beauty and absoluteness of this work parallels our desires for irreproachable perfection. But because we can never obtain this kind of ideal in our day-to-day life, I prefer my standards set by the modest integrity delineated by McNulty.



I+J - detail (1999), graphite on receipt paper, 52" x3" x2"

Straight IV - detail (2000), wood, 192" x102" x1"

Map - detail (2001), graphite on paper, 68" x19"



Measure X - detail (2001), wood, 68" x4" x1"



Untitled (square) - (2001), wood, 73" x4" x4"



Untitled (square) - detail (2001), wood, 73" x4" x4"

Michelle Grabner