

**TOWARDS**

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of

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**ART**

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and

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**LIFE**

**(IM) MEASURABILITY**

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Published by  
Archive Books

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Written and edited by  
Miya Yoshida

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# CONTENTS

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Acknowledgements 7

---

*Towards (Im)Measurability  
of Art and Life* 9  
Introduction by  
Miya Yoshida

---

*Exercises in Measurement* 37  
by Miya Yoshida

---

*Symbolic Engineering:  
Measurement, Aesthetics,  
and the Rules for Art* 183  
A Conversation with  
Helmut Draxler

---

Dialogues between  
an Artist and a Scientist

---

## AESTHETICS OF MEASUREMENT

---

*Who Feels the Most Pain?* 197  
by Matt Mullican

---

*The Calculative Aesthetic:  
Objects and Unconscious  
Desire in the Age of Big Data* 219  
by Patricia Ticineto Clough

---

Dialogue between 231  
Matt Mullican and  
Patricia Ticineto Clough

---

## EPISTEMOLOGY OF MEASUREMENT

---

*Notes on the Presentation* 243  
by Lucy Powell

---

*Unconscious Tendencies  
in Animal Epistemology* 247  
by Oxana Timofeeva

---

Dialogue between 269  
Lucy Powell and  
Oxana Timofeeva

---

## POLITICS OF MEASUREMENT

---

*Measuring the Measurer* 279  
Chihiro Minato

---

*What's in the Air?* 291  
*Or How We Get to Know*  
*What We Know About*  
*Invisible Things*  
Sophie Houdart

---

Dialogue between 307  
Chihiro Minato and  
Sophie Houdart

---

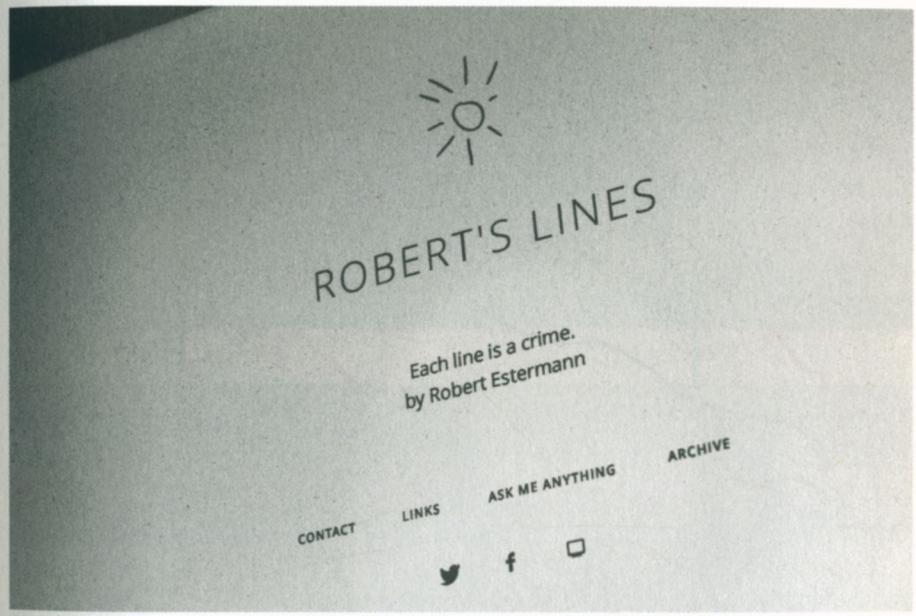
Artist and 316  
Author Biographies

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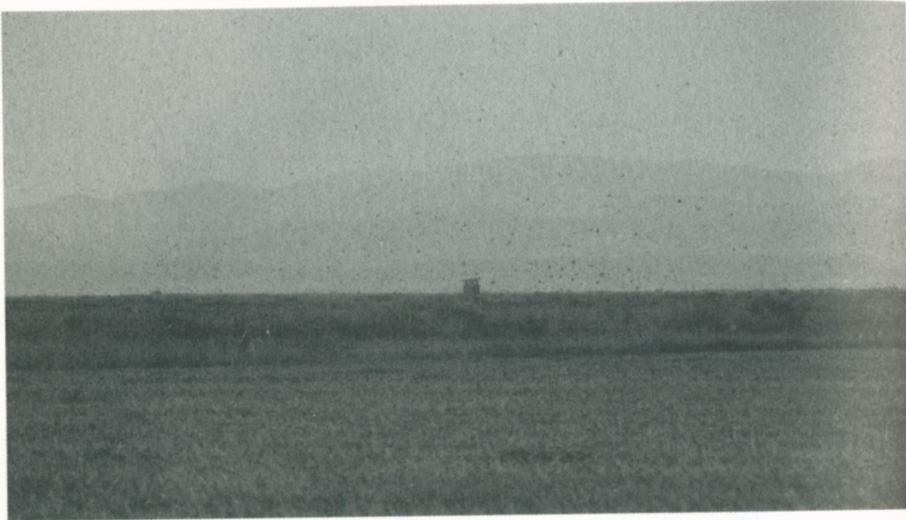
*Im/Measurability  
of Life*

Robert Estermann  
Life



Robert Estermann, photograph of a  
screen shot of his Tumblr page, 2017  
© Robert Estermann





Upper images from Greece, Birgit Auf der Lauer  
& Caspar Pauli, *Research for Grenzführservice*,  
*Grenzführservice III*, 2014–15 © Caspar Pauli

Lower images from the Berlin performance walk,  
Birgit Auf der Lauer & Caspar Pauli, *Research for*  
*Grenzführservice*, *Grenzführservice III*, 2014–15,  
performance, duration: 2.5 h © Paul Holdsworth  
& Daniela del Pomar

alphabet/

10 (j) June nights atom bombs

by Inger Christensen

atomic bombs exist  
Hiroshima, Nagasaki  
Hiroshima, August  
6th, 1945  
Nagasaki, August  
9th, 1945

140,000 dead and  
wounded in Hiroshima  
some 60,000 dead and  
wounded in Nagasaki

number standing still  
somewhere in a distant  
ordinary summer

since then the wounded  
have died, first many, most, then fewer, but  
all; finally  
the children of the wounded

stillborn, dying

many, forever a  
few, at last the  
last; I stand in

my kitchen peeling  
potatoes; the tap  
runs, almost  
drowning out the children in the yard;

the children shout,  
almost drowning out  
the birds in the  
trees; the birds  
sings, almost

drowning out the whisper  
of leaves in the wind;  
the leaves whisper,  
almost drowning  
the sky with silence,

the sky with its light  
and the light that almost  
since then has recalled  
atomic fire  
a bit



Installation view of the Xijing Men exhibition *Xijing Is Not Xijing, Therefore Xijing Is Xijing*, 29 April 2016 – 28 August 2016, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, photo Keizo Kioku, courtesy 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa; artworks depicted © the artists

*Xijing Men, Chapter 3: Welcome to Xijing – Xijing Immigration Service* (installation view), 2012, mixed media, dimensions variable, courtesy the artists

The Xijing Men is an artists' collective consisting of three members: Chen Shaoxiong (China), Gimhong-sok (Korea), and Tsuyoshi Ozawa (Japan). The Xijing Men are from the fictitious city of Xijing, an imagined political entity in East Asia, meaning "western capital". The wordplay has its roots in the names of real cities: Beijing (northern capital), Nanjing (southern capital), and Tokyo (eastern capital). The Xijing Men constantly face communication barriers amongst themselves, but nonetheless develop various practices in fields including performance, drawing, photography, et cetera. Their sceptical attitude towards the kinds of measurement enacted in drawing national, political, and other social borders is accompanied by pointed satire on existing norms, experiences, and perceptions.



*Xijing Men, Chapter 4: I Love Xijing – The Daily Life of Xijing Presidents* (installation view), 2009, mixed media, dimensions variable, video: 17 min., courtesy the artists



Xijing Men, Chapter 4: *I Love Xijing – The Daily Life of Xijing Presidents: The Urban Planning of Xijing*, 2009, video, courtesy the artists

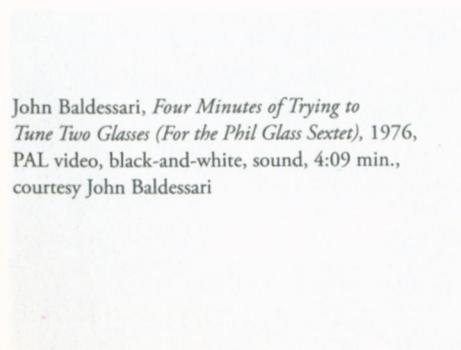
Imprecision as precision:

The first image with the watermelon is a still image from the video *I Love Xijing – The Daily Life of Xijing Presidents* (Chapter 4: “Urban Planning”). This video depicts each of the Xijing Men handling national policies as a president, for fourteen days each. To make Xijing a prosperous, fun nation, they employ unique methods of visualising and solving problems related to education, urban planning, economics, territory, defense, and food. The video concludes with the Xijing Men producing Xijing currency (XIP) printed on sheets of Kleenex.

The Xijing Men, Opening Performance at the Gwangju Biennale 9, 2012, photo © Miya Yoshida

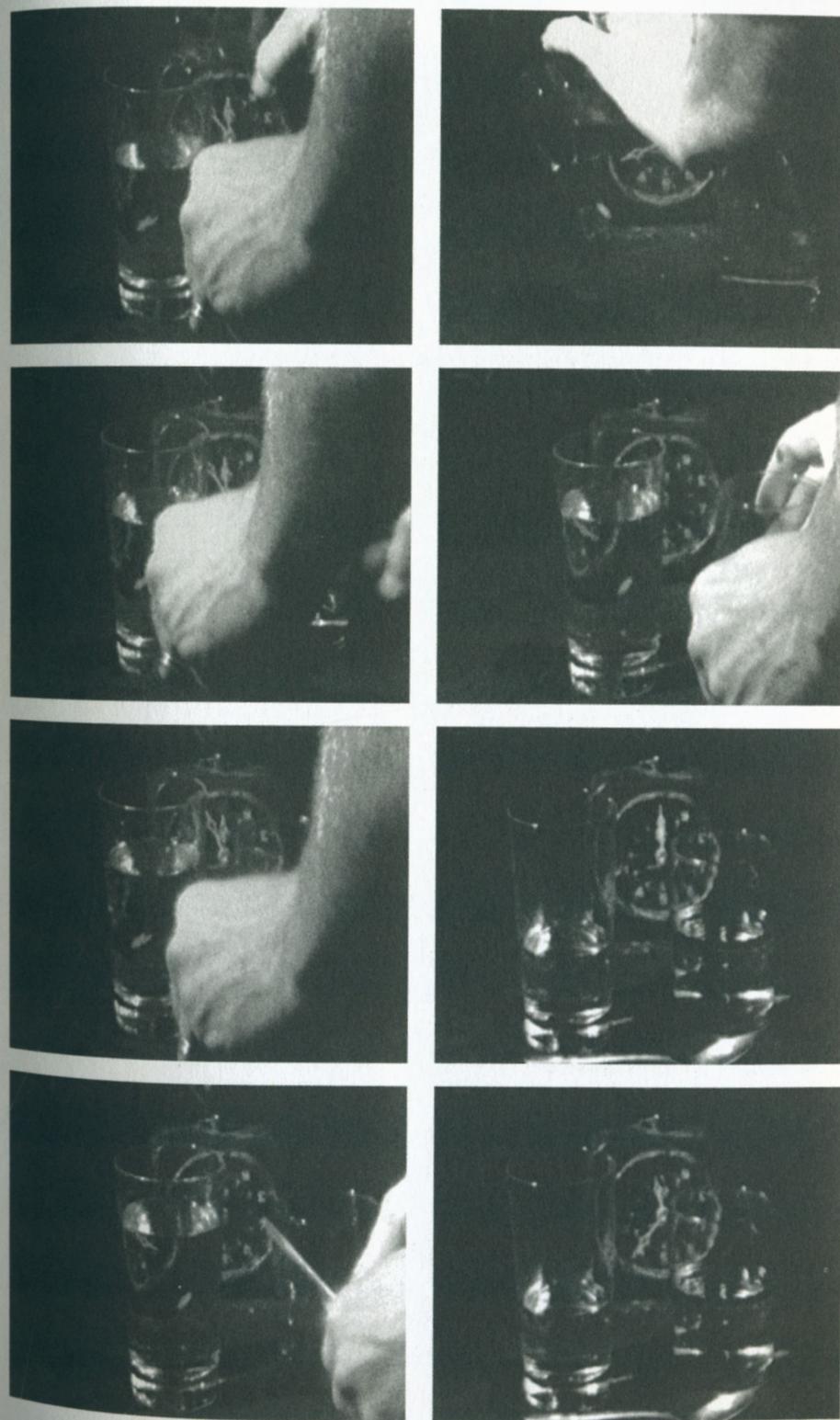


Another set of images shows a short performance offering a re-enactment of the Equality of Encouragement Act found in the video performance *Constitution of Xijing*. The members of the Xijing Men take turns pouring tea into three glasses. They measure the exact quantity of tea in one glass, check and add more to the two other glasses, make comparisons, and then continue adding more or less until they achieve an equal distribution of tea. After several trials, the three of them agree on an outcome and make a toast to drink up the tea in each glass. Using direct observation as a measuring device and keeping tabs on the levels of tea, the outcome is bound to centre on their relationship. Both works present processes of measurement produced in different relations; they demonstrate that the apparent imprecision of sensory measurement can eventually prove to produce a mutually agreed, negotiated precision.



John Baldessari, *Four Minutes of Trying to Tune Two Glasses (For the Phil Glass Sextet)*, 1976, PAL video, black-and-white, sound, 4:09 min., courtesy John Baldessari

Using nothing but his own senses, American conceptual artist John Baldessari tunes two glasses (in other words, a unit of measurement for the volume of water) by touching the glasses with a thin stick, while also performing a random action, as can be seen in this short video. His action shows the significance of a subjective understanding of measurement, and places the focus on using our own bodies as a means of experiencing and measuring the world around us.



## Numbers

By Sion Sono

First I needed to have something counted – precisely.  
So I might as well make it the number of weeds.  
Count everything!  
Blossoms.  
Why not blossoms.  
Count the number of cherry blossom petals!  
Actually, that kind of thing never ends up as a waste.  
First, you set the range, like, 1 centimeter.  
Then, you need to thoroughly count inside that range.

Let's say, a primary school  
In a playing field in that school  
How many cherry blossoms  
How many cherry blossom petals  
We checked the range, and we checked their numbers,  
to come closer to the scent  
When we find the precise numbers there,  
we can align ourselves with that scent  
Probably our sense of smell already knows the numbers  
Scents always have numbers inside.

The town population, the number of pupils there in elementary school, ...  
On that day, at that time ...  
How many insects, how many butterflies, how many ants,  
how many green caterpillars were there.  
We need to count them – precisely.  
The scent I smell is poetry.  
The Government must use poetry in order to create precise numbers.

How many teardrops fell.  
Count that number.  
The school poster said we will return some day.  
When is that day.  
Need to count the days from now on.  
Count precisely when that day will be.  
I mean, somebody has to live to tell.

Count.  
At least, as in old stories that used to get passed on,  
With just the right amount of truthfulness,  
It might be just once, one time, one day, one second  
– or anytime.  
In that place, at that position, that latitude,  
whatever comes up will do.  
Whatever you count, count it in that very instant.  
The numbers need be told.  
The numbers need be taught.  
Or, you count yourself.  
Or, count your lined up hungry teeth.  
Count yourself.  
You are the number one you need to start with.

Or, you have to tell about the redness of your gums.  
Or, you have to tell the sadness of it.  
Don't let politicians claim they can't explain in numbers.  
You need to force them to express these things numerically.  
Go on, tell them – they need to count everything.  
Demand of them to express everything in numbers.  
What is "literature" good for  
If it cannot express the deaths, the teardrops, all the suffering  
they half express as "an enormous number"  
– with a precise number.  
If politicians complain they cannot count something so ephemeral,  
fading with the seasons.  
Art should do that.  
Try to precisely count at least the "one",  
even if only once.

In Sion Sono, *Land of Hope*, Tokyo: Little More, 2012.  
Translation by Miya Yoshida.



Toshie Kusamoto, *Untitled*, 2011,  
photograph ©Toshie Kusamoto



## Tap-Tap

Nobuaki Date

Those who want to get things done – can't deal with a tap-tap attitude  
It'd just make them look half-assed.

Those who like to get others to do things – can't deal with a tap-tap attitude either.  
It makes them appear as sluggish do-nothings.

Those who won't do without their merry banter – they can't deal with tap-tap.  
It just disturbs their natural back-and-forth

Those seeking out the secret of youth – tap-tap just isn't their way  
How could they accept their bodies' limit like that?

Between a past unresolved and a future not grasped  
There's the image of a present only sketchable in dots  
The sound of those who try to draw it: tap-tap.

Translation by Miya Yoshida

## Tap-tap

Nobuaki Date

Wer weiterkommen will, kann sich mit tap-tap nicht begnügen,  
Allzu leicht wirkt das unfertig!

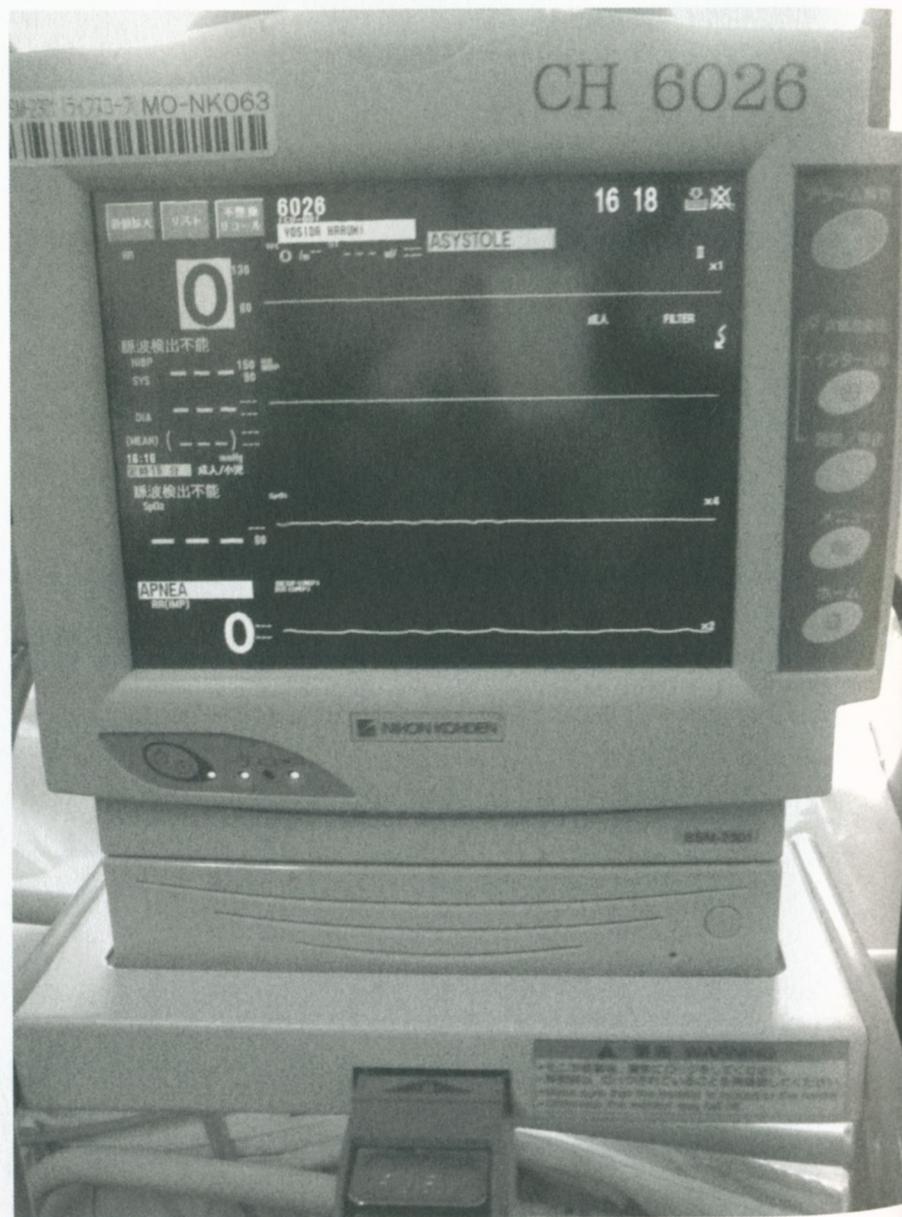
Wer was geschafft kriegen will, der sollte tap-tap vermeiden,  
Da sieht man schnell wie eine lahme Schnecke aus.

Wer ungern auf sein Geplänkel verzichtet, lässt die Finger vom tap-tap,  
Das stört nur den gewohnten Atemrhythmus.

Auch wer das Geheimnis ewiger Jugend sucht, kann mit tap-tap nichts anfangen,  
Das hieße ja, die eigenen Grenzen hinzunehmen.

Zwischen unbewältigter Vergangenheit und nur vage ertastbarer Zukunft  
Liegt das Bild einer Gegenwart, der man sich nur punktweise annähern kann.  
Wer so zeichnen will, macht: Tap-tap.

Translation by Clemens Krümmel



## Im/Measurability of Life

“Mind is a living measure which achieves its own capacity by measuring other things.”

—Nicholas de Cusa, *The Layman on Wisdom and the Mind*, 1450

For more than a year, the artist duo of Birgit Auf der Lauer and Casper Pauli engaged in a research project on human trafficking and produced a performative work titled *Grenzfährservice* (Border Ferry Service) II + III (2016), which was conducted in the form of a walk in the city of Berlin.<sup>25</sup> Pointing out the river Spree as a representational line of reference that demarcates borders both in nature and in politics, their walk takes participants through the centre of Berlin for a period of approximately two hours. In this walking performance in and around the Gorki Theater, two geographic situations are addressed: One refers to the border between Turkey and Greece, the relatively short voyage to cross the ocean from Turkey to Lesbos Samos, Chios, and other Greek islands, as it is considered by migrants today, the other to the former border between West and East German in the 1970s and 80s. The stories told during the walk gradually present the results of their examination of cases of people being smuggled from one country to the other. The schedule for the walk instructs participants to stop at several points in Berlin-Mitte such as the Bundeswehrkrankenhaus (Federal Army Hospital), where both German soldiers as well as soldiers and civilians from other countries are sent for medical treatment, the park at Invalidenfriedhof (Invaliden Cemetery) along the river Spree, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (Federal Intelligence Service), the main building of Humboldt University, et cetera. The walk gives the people who participate a narrative about the experiences of people who succeeded in crossing the border as well as of those who engage in smuggling professionally.

<sup>25</sup>The walk was hosted by the Berliner Herbstsalon and the Gorki Theater on 14/15, 21/22, 28/29 November 2015.

Each part of the narrative is closely connected to the site, but also to the economy of the particular time. Participants stand at the exact place where the smuggling of people from the East to the West began, and where secret information was exchanged. The narrative goes like this:

*A BStU (The Stasi Record Agency / Die Behörde des Bundesbeauftragten für die Stasi-Unterlagen) file on the "Westberliner Schleuser-Löwin" from the late 70s gives us some information on how prices were calculated. In the file, it says that the KMHB boss, the "Lioness" as she was called, was also connected with two diplomats (coloured gentlemen), who performed diplomatic service in the German Democratic Republic. They would demand a sum of fifteen to twenty thousand Deutschmarks for smuggling to take place.*

*Elsewhere in the BStU documents, there is evidence that makes it seem probable that there was a negotiation between her and a customer. A down payment of DM 12,500 was made. Since this was a "special price for friends amounting to 25,000 DM, the deposit was only half of the total sum."*

The river flowing right in front of the participants is where people actually swam across, where they drowned, and in some cases were shot. How did the soldiers measure the moment at which to fire? How do migrants measure the risk of stopping or actually crossing the border? Familiarity with the geographic situation and physical involvement with the site allows the power of the narrative to unfold even though a considerable amount of time has passed.

With the historical case of Berlin and current anecdotes about the border between Turkey and Greece taking turns in the narrative, there is a juxtaposition of two seemingly unrelated situations on one and the same platform. This reveals the shared, pivotal point of politics and life in both cases, but also shows the differences in geographic distance and scale. Approximately 1.8 million migrants crossed the borders to Europe by sea and on the land route via Turkey and Albania in 2015. The narrative gradually reveals economic details about the land route, the system of calculation that is used for those who want to cross the river – a river that is a political border between two worlds, and the measurement of life and death. While narrating the imagined situation of being smuggled in a truck while riding a subway train, details like the size of the truck are added associatively.

*"This is the price list: The cost for hiring a truck is 100,000 Turkish Lira. When you rent it, you want to put as many people as possible inside the truck. 200 people can fit into a big one. One daytrip from Istanbul to Athens, or to the islands, costs 5,000 Euros per person, and it is a guaranteed journey. If the first attempt fails, you can try to travel again at another time."*

*"The competition is tough, and people immediately know who offers good service and who does not. The 5,000 Euros are distributed amongst all the individuals who participate in the work: the boss, driver, boatman, guide, organisers, informers, and officials. We cannot do this for less than 5,000 Euros."*

These numbers share an important specificity, instead of the generalisations that one commonly hears about acts of fleeing. Concrete details about costs add a personal quality to the numbers and provide another kind of access to intersections that make it possible to learn about the realities of crossing borders in greater detail. The numbers are minuscule, at least compared to those published in official statistics concerning the effect that migration supposedly has on the economy. The regular, constantly updated survey asks: How many refugees have arrived this month? Which countries do most migrants come from? Where are they going? How do the migrants get to Europe? How dangerous is their journey? Which European countries are the most "affected"? Et cetera. The statistical numbers may allow us to obtain a general overview of refugee issues, however, these numbers are usually based on the interests of those who are on the other side of the fence. Auf der Lauer and Pauli say, "At the border control, as soon as a person is registered, she or he becomes data. If not, she or he becomes noise. No documentation means that a category of "no data" is created, which does not refer to any existence, or that the category itself does not exist."<sup>26</sup> This needs to be remembered as a basic principle with respect to the numbers in those statistics. In other words, format decides what (dis)appears, thereby, the series of numbers are the reflection of the structure and the system of formatting shaped by political, economical, bureaucratic, and ethical consequences.

The Fukushima catastrophe and its aftermath have provided us with a bitter object lesson on the specificity and usability of numbers. In his poem *Numbers*, the film director and writer Sion Sono addresses the shared experience after the catastrophic events in Fukushima, which are also represented and expressed in numbers. A great deal of measurement has been done in order to learn about the probable effects of the invisible doses of radioactivity.

<sup>26</sup> Conversation with the artists at their studio on 15 February 2016.

INTERESTS, IS NOISE & DATA A DICHOTOMY? WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTEREST & CONSEQUENCE?

Responding to these numbers, the poem playfully works with the logics of counting. It voices the poetic postulation of counting every last detail in this “new world”, with the intention of expressing the numerical aspect of the events hyperbolically, in the sense of an exaggerated or even ironic counter-action. This reveals the absurdity of the idea of reducing the immeasurability of realities, including life and death, to numbers. At the same time, it also re-directs the facts from passive measurement to an active kind of measurement. Counting does not remain a mere depiction; it is the condition for remembering. By insisting on acts of counting in every imaginable instance, the self is ultimately saved from being measured (from being passive), since it takes charge of acts of measurement (of being active) itself. Active counting produces a situation in which one is able to regain control, since it is a tool that does not permit any imprecise decisions to be made. The poem makes *imagination* start to count, but not in the sense in which oppressive power systems do so.

The fact that Auf der Lauer and Pauli utilise numbers in a similar way is one aspect; it also becomes evident that the invisibility of the protagonist in the format of the “walk” is very meaningful for them. Quite a number of artworks deal with similar, contemporary political and ethical issues using some kind of visual representation. However, the walk in *Grenzfährservice* makes its protagonists completely invisible – these protagonists include the individuals that the artists interviewed as well as those who are referred to in their field research. Only the artists and the participants in the walk are visible. The absence of protagonists is the most characteristic trait of this work. It maintains a certain distance to the topic and directs the focus of the project to an attitude towards the political and ethical issues at stake that is not primarily informative, but rather imaginary and self-reflective. The artistic intention behind the walk is to add each person’s own opinion on the questions that arise during it, just as active counting works. The walk attempts to link the measurement of life un/registered and death un/documented to the lives of the participants.

In her poem *alphabet*, the Danish poet Inger Christensen asks if the meaning of death could remain unchanged after Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, and after the countless bombings and endless wars that continue to occur until today. The poet sees the present issues as essentially being part of a continuum that originates from all these past tragedies, and asks the reader to reconsider the vulnerability of life in relation to his/her life. The American art historian Rosalyn Deutsche links the artistic depiction of the invasion of Iraq by the United States (around the time she wrote the text in 2009) with that of the historical tragedies created by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and other nuclear experiments. She observes

common attitudes – impatience and melancholy – in the politics around the time of the Iraq invasion as well as back in the 1940s, and incorporates psychoanalysis to highlight two attitudes: human beings’ “special capacity for regression” and a heroic masculinism that she understands as “an orientation towards ideals of wholeness that disavows vulnerability”<sup>27</sup>. Her insightful critique of political landscapes is quite relevant in contemplating the current situations in and around Europe, such as the on-going conflicts and bombings in Syria, the rise of and violent acts by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), the series of acts of terrorism in Paris, Brussels, Istanbul, and Berlin, on-going conflicts in Rwanda, Somalia, Angola, Sudan, Liberia, and Burundi, the situation in the Ukraine, et cetera. On all levels, politics are questioned regarding their capacity for patience and reflection, both in tracing the self and the other. Thereby, the ability to develop questions during the *Grenzfährservice* walk can be regarded as a strategy for measuring the level of regression within ourselves: How much are we able to confront, and to what extent can we regard both the self and others as vulnerable lives in a long-term perspective? This means that asking questions is not only the way to know the other, but also to understand the self – the ubiquitous regressions, aggressivity, and egoism that accumulate in us in society today.

Life and death are measured and institutionalised and become marketable at every decisive point in politics, the economy, ethics, and technology. Such contemporary realities constantly necessitate initiations of various ways of re-imagining numbers and their affects in order for them to retain their gravity even after an abstraction of realities into signs has occurred. Every act of crossing borders, facing catastrophes, being dragged into tragedies, and many other unconventional events, demands finding diverse approaches to and different modes of measurement, instead of fixing measurement to one singular approach. Acts of knowing, understanding, and thinking should not be limited to the operational level of signs. Acts of active measurements should instead circulate in all directions and on all levels so as to retain the “gravity” and “temperature” of diverse realities.

*Grenzfährservice* is an ephemeral work. It focuses on the importance of the particular, of specificity and individuals, rather than of groups or collectives. It is a fragile practice, but that is why it is strong – strong not like an energy explosion, but like the extended continuity of vibration and oscillation through time-space.

<sup>27</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima after Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

WHAT IS ACTIVE IN THIS CASE?  
YES, BUT NOT AS A WHOLE  
JUST ASPECTS OF EACH.  
WE EXPRESS OUR: HOW DO YOU EXPRESS? SIGNIFY WHO SIGNIFY?  
MAKE UNRESECURABILITY

## Concluding Remarks

This essay brings aesthetics into the "game" of measurement. It exemplifies different artistic practices as concrete intersections of concepts of "unlearning" existing concepts and norms of measurement – and of learning types of measurement that are located and enacted inside the body. While, in neoliberal capitalism, quantification is constructed and utilised as a "communicative objectivity" needed to perpetuate systems of speculation and excessive bureaucratisation, this text aims at positing the power of the imaginary as a practice that is of the essence today, and at highlighting an "active" kind of measuring in order to speculatively develop a different notion or interpretation of what is considered quantification. [Shifting the notion of "measurement" from measurement to "measurements", it sets out to diversify the means and meanings of measurement.]

Active measurement is neither humble, nor is it particularly naïve. It produces a situation in which one enables oneself to regain control. It creates new relationalities between images, objects, signs, and "the world". Wishing to present and to emphasise such a diversity of "measurements", I have included additional images of artworks – in addition to those art practices elaborated in the text: unexpected taxonomies used for indexing new parameters (Nam, Ondák); numbers capable of evoking a concrete gravity behind the abstraction and, used not as nouns but as verbs, to *imagine* in a new way (Eames, Sander, Sono); the rhetorical power of numbers and the absurdity of the expansion of mathematical thinking that is now still noticeable when it is encountered outside its "own" terrain (Schmalisch, César); format as a method for re-establishing a personal relation with the structured world of data (Yoshida, John, Arakawa); observance as measurement inside the body (Naruse and Koyamada, Krause, Lewis); and the reconfiguration of life as a conceptual challenge to all notions of measurement (Gins and Arakawa) – to name just these. Some practices can be regarded as conceptual devices, some are generators of "active" measurement, some show shifts in the nature of measuring, and some introduce new methodologies and new associations.

My thinking has developed along with and out of these practices. This is why this text cannot just be harmonious and unifying; its contradictions have instead been constitutive. In my understanding, it is important to retain some degree of discursiveness. The idea of a "unit situational", for instance, contradicts contemporary tendencies toward "ubiquitous" measuring, and this contradiction also penetrates equivalences anywhere, anytime. This, however, also refers to the urgent demand for plural concepts, processes,

DIVIDATION BY PERSONALIZATION

ATTITUDES, ALL OF WHICH ARE VALID → REQUIRE ACT. BUT MAY BE MEASUREMENT BEING MEASURED

A COMPLETE KNOWLEDGE CONSIDERS INTERSECTING

maybe the most ridiculous sentence ever

methodologies, and vocabularies when it comes to stimulating associative imaginaries of measurement. Like in the *NOTEBOOK* developed by Gins and Arakawa, this essay addresses ways of knowing, understanding, and (re)searching measurement – moving in a zigzag line. This is about active measuring and about being measured back. Active measurement itself, to be sure, will of course not suffice to redirect the apparent tendencies of neoliberal capitalism and the bureaucratisation of society. We need to invent new ways of understanding and using language – instead of abusing language in neo-Orwellian memes such as "alternative facts", "post-factual society," et cetera. In this regard, poetry as well as poetics is very important in conducting measurement. They show us potentials and essential perspectives of understanding through language, such as a "precise number in measurement to find the smell" (Sono, cf. p. 20). We need measurements that can "tell the smell". Together with active measurement and the invention of languages, what appeared as the "hype" of measurement can now be transformed from oppressive control to a "renaissance" of quantification that is based on measurement inside the body. Let the imaginary take more and better care of measurement!

↓  
SOCIETY IS SITUATED AROUND POWER DYNAMICS THAT ARE ENACTED ON THE BODY.

↓  
IF WE USE MEASUREMENT INSIDE THE BODY OR SELF

↓  
THEN WE CAN SHIFT THE FORMAT OF OUR FRAMEWORK FOR VALUE

→ THROUGH A QUANTIFICATION OF "MATTERS OF CONCERN"

↓  
AS OPPOSED TO "MATTERS OF FACT"

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