

Measure for Leisure



Kaya Barry playfully interrupts practices of measurement and surveying space.

[Who is writing? Georgia Symons. 175cm; 62kg; 24 years, 11 months & 20 days old. Prides herself on sense of direction, but uses google maps almost every day.]

Kaya Barry told us that she has been exploring and thinking about mapping and surveying for about 10 years. I'm not sure what I can write that won't already have occurred to her in this time, but my experience of her seedpod brought to the surface a lot of unconscious assumptions for me about the nature of measurement and physical space. Here, I attempt to capture, measure and label these thoughts.

Human Maps

The body maps

The body is a map

The body is mapped

The map is embodied

In her first offering, Kaya split the attendees into two groups. One would come with her outside and use a theodolite (a surveying telescope/camera). The other would stay inside and, by overhearing walkie-talkie exchanges from the field in the team, they would map the territory being surveyed. I was on the mapping team at first. We were confused. We didn't know the rules. Are the surveyors meant to be relaying specific instructions to us, or is it our task to eavesdrop and garner what we can? And how should our map be represented? We negotiated our task through tentative suggestions, and reached a place of some limited confidence in our work. I'm not usually a perfectionist, and playful ambiguities are usually comfortable for me, but there was something slightly distressing in not being able to get this task "right", which I believe arose from not being given any indication of what "right" would look like. This was a very free-form experiment, with Kaya seemingly more interested in testing what could arise from the given scenario, rather than testing whether a specific set of instructions would yield an expected or interesting result.

We swapped places, and now I was one of the surveyors. Perhaps against the spirit of the exercise, my instructions into the walkie-talkies were thorough and precise, at first. But being out in the field gave me a much fuller understanding of Kaya's poetics and aesthetics. I was charged with carrying a measuring stick over the field and across a road. The rest of the team would stay behind and use the theodolite and other measuring equipment (classroom protractors and rulers clearly not designed for this kind of work) to measure the terrain. At first, the measurements (and scales of measurement) were quite conventional, if not necessarily accurate (how long is the distance, what is the angle of the incline etc.), but before long we were thinking in different measurements and scales. For example, I offered to count how many breaths it would take for me to cross the field. Here, my body was both measured and measuring; in both cases, no concrete results were sought or found. I could give the number of breaths (twenty-six), but the abstraction of this measure pointed to the abstraction inherent in all measurement.



Play and its trace

The second part of the experience involved us going out into the field with an eighteen-metre-long ruler, articulated in 1.8m folding sections, of Kaya's own making. The ruler was marked with seemingly precise red and black measures – Kaya explained that these markings represented indentations of footprints and other markings on walking tracks around the botanic gardens in Castlemaine. At first we played with the ruler indoors, holding it and moving it through different positions and measuring the angles between us with a protractor. Then we took the ruler outside, and arched it across the field to see how many lengths of the ruler the field would measure. Again, this work was defined by its imprecision and sense of play – we never straightened the ruler to its full length, preferring instead to enjoy the movement and architecture of the awkwardly graceful folding structure, working together to pass it through, under, over and past itself. Measurements were taken, and here the notation was at its most abstract – how many “evolutions” of the ruler could we make, and what were the processes by which this was achieved? When we had finished, there was a line faintly imprinted upon the grass, recalling a work that had inspired Kaya in her process – Richard Long's *A line made by walking*.

...when the science breaks down...

The whole experience made me think of Simon Armitage's poem “The Shout”, attached below. It's not the harrowing nature of the poem that was evoked, though, but the origin of the story behind it. Of his poem, Armitage explains:

“[in school] we had a very excitable science teacher and no equipment... one day he asked me and another kid to go outside and not come back into the school until we'd measured the size of the human voice without any equipment... we decided that we would keep moving further and further apart and shouting at each other until we couldn't hear each other any longer and that would be the size of the human voice. Unfortunately the village we lived in wasn't that big and there came this point when this other kid just fell off the edge into Lancashire... it's at that moment when the science breaks down that I try and get poetry to rush in and fill the gap.”

These children are not charged with measuring the size of their town, but rather the size of their own voices. Regardless, each of these measures could be used to inform the other. Similarly in Kaya's work, the measurement at times moves inwards – the body and self are measured both within themselves, and within their landscape. I'm also interested here in the idea of “when the science breaks down”. For me, the experience of Kaya's work was not in testing the limits of where the science breaks down, but rather breaking down the entire science. When I think about this, I think of the situationist international, specifically the ideas of psychogeography and the detournement, where a slogan, language or symbol is turned against itself and its original intentions or purposes. In talking with Kaya after the presentation of the works, she mentioned that the playful, representational documents that had emerged from the first exercise were surprising to her, and slightly outside of her regular area of practice or interest. She compared these with “social mapping” projects that have become increasingly popular in the last couple of decades. This distinction made by Kaya was revealing to me – her work is clearly playful, but in that play there seems to be a necessary degree of earnestness; “serious play,” perhaps. She spoke about being drawn to the amateur, and it's clear from other mapping and surveying works that she showed us that she is disciplined with her measuring practices. The sense of play, then, is in the philosophy and the form, but never in the details of the expression. To the casual observer, there is clear and exact meaning in Kaya's instruments of measurement, as serious and regimented as any of the standardised rulers or protractors she uses.



In Kaya's wider body of work there seems to be an exploration of poetics around the bodily and psychological rigour and discipline of measurement and mapping. Her work disrupts any concrete belief in the value and accuracy of standardised forms of measurement. In any system of measurement there is a degree of abstraction, so why is Kaya's ruler made from footprint markings any less valuable or precise than a ruler marked in millimetres or inches? And to answer or expand from this question – to what purpose do we measure and map? In what ways do we seek to “know” our physical world? Kaya made mention of colonial projects past and present, mapping and thereby claiming the known world through ever-more-precise measurement. But this, as we see through Kaya's work, is only one kind of knowledge. There are deep, textural and poetic things that I now know about the field in which we were working; things I may not have found by a precise survey of the same area by conventional means. These are the kinds of things that cannot be measured with conventional western maps and surveying.

Before I left Castlemaine that day, headed back to Melbourne, my phone died. Jude had to draw me a hand-drawn map of the way out of town to jog my memory, as I'd come in using GPS, which (as discussed with the group after the showing) can often take you where you need to go but leave you with no memory of how you got there. Jude's hand-drawn map reminds me of the maps I used to draw for myself in the days before GPS technology fit in our palms. What else fits in our palms? And how many of our palms would it take to span the road back to Melbourne? And who would each palm belong to? These are the kinds of playful questions that Kaya's work has left skipping around my head – we humans have invented these arbitrary measurements; where can the human be found and reclaimed within them?

THE SHOUT by Simon Armitage

We went out
into the school yard together, me and the boy
whose name and face

I don't remember. We were testing the range
of the human voice:
he had to shout for all he was worth

I had to raise an arm
from across the divide to signal back
that the sound had carried.

He called from over the park — I lifted an arm.
Out of bounds,
he yelled from the end of the road,

from the foot of the hill,
from beyond the look-out post of Fretwell's Farm —
I lifted an arm.

He left town, went on to be twenty years dead
with a gunshot hole
in the roof of his mouth, in Western Australia.

Boy with the name and face I don't remember,
you can stop shouting now, I can still hear you.

