

'Playful Measures'  
ASA Conference 2022  
Studio 1  
8.4.2022

# Research Questions

- What might anthropology as education/art as education learn from cultural forms of creativity that consciously construct the absurd or nonsensical?
- What 'sense' might anthropology make of the function of the absurd in art, culture and society?

**Thinking about** the words we use to measure in the world:

'feet', 'inches', 'hands', 'strides', 'cow's grass', 'miner's inch', 'fistful', 'earful',  
'nanosecond', 'shake of a cow's whisker', 'two shakes of a cow's tail', 'the blink of an  
eye', 'a dram',

**Thinking about** related metaphors or turns of phrase: "for good measure",  
"unmeasured", 'non measurable'

**Thinking about** the vocabulary we use to draw:

" an active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal...

The same line accompanied by complementary forms ...

The same line, circumscribing itself

Two secondary lines, moving around an imaginary main line

...

An active line, limited in its movement by fixed points...

A medial line which is both point progression and planar effect "

Klee, Paul *Pedagogical Sketchbook* 1925

**Thinking about** Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and his love of absurdity, in particular his work *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913 -14) that casts a pataphysical doubt on the concept of a straight edge as being the shortest route from one point to another...' "For me the *Three Stoppages* was a first gesture liberating me from the past." (Duchamp 1913). It was made at a time of widespread contemporary scepticism concerning the objectivity of scientific knowledge.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-3-stoppages-etalon-3-standard-stoppages-t07507>.



*3 Standard Stoppages* (1913 -14) Moma

# Score 1

Take three different materials (e.g. thread/ string/ribbon/rope) and cut a metre length in each. Drop each one from a metre height such as from a raised arm or by standing on a chair. Ask the question: Where is the metre? Write or draw notes on your reflections.

Variations can include choice of materials, indoor/outdoor spaces ...

# Score 2

Take a straight edge such as a 12" or metre ruler.

Saw a found branch to exactly the same length.

Using simple lines, draw both objects, straight edge/tree branch, exploring similarity and difference.

# Score 3

Take three strides and mark and measure the distance you have covered on the ground or floor as a straight line between A (starting point) and B (end point).

Walk this interval a number of times, each time exploring a variation – heel to toe, sideways, short steps, hopping, imagining you are rolling Planet Earth beneath your feet and so on.

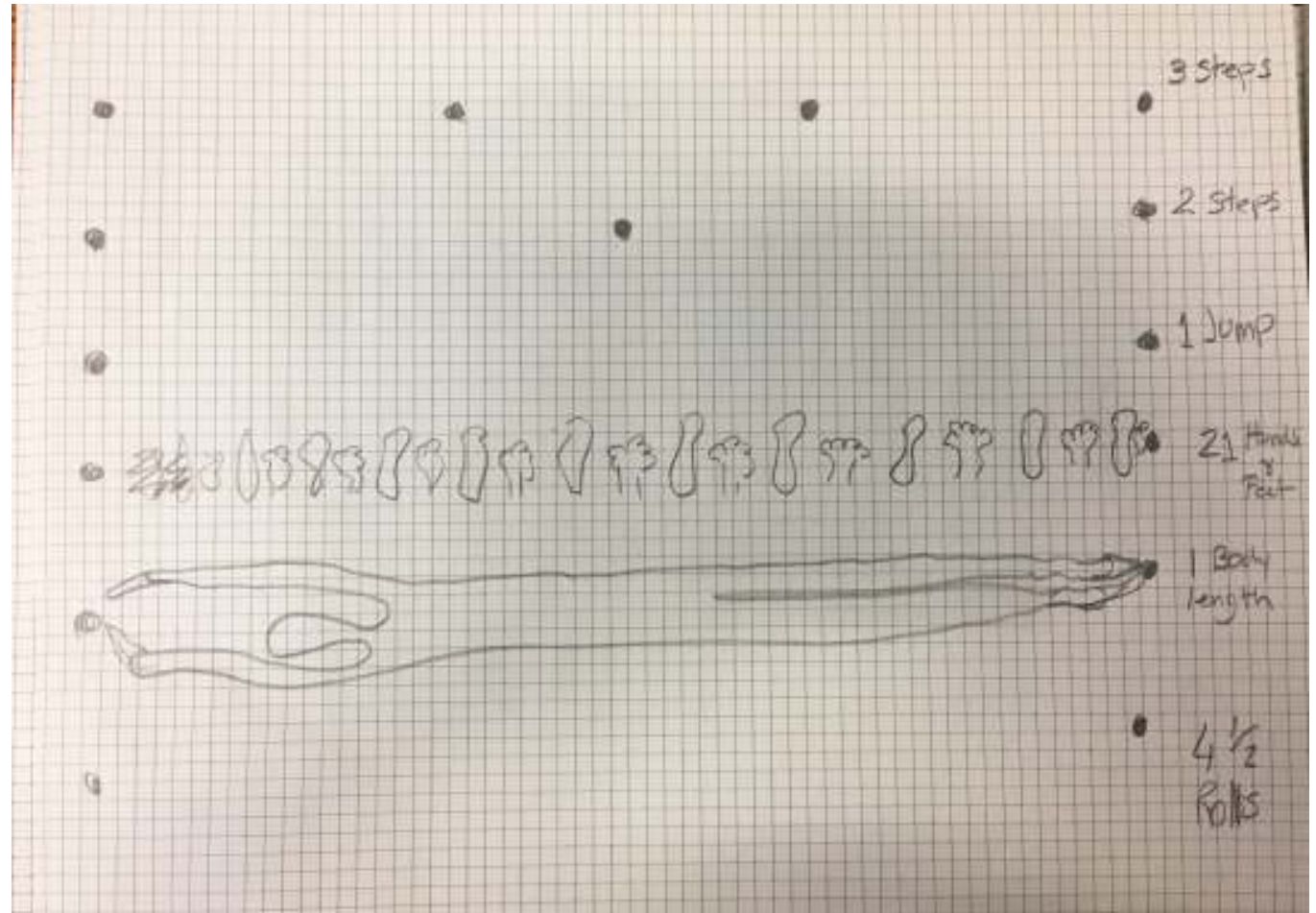
Draw the pattern of your movement on a piece of paper, imagining this as a score or visual instruction to another person who is out of sight of your activity.

**Bring your experiences of scores 1, 2 and/or 3** to the virtual workshop as the basis for our exploration of anthropology as education in challenging times.

We began the workshop by realizing **Score 3** and sharing the outcomes

Caroline Gatt :

“...covering the distance in first 3, then 2 then 1 ‘leap’; covering the distance alternating hands and feet, then the discovery that three strides represents the length of my body!”

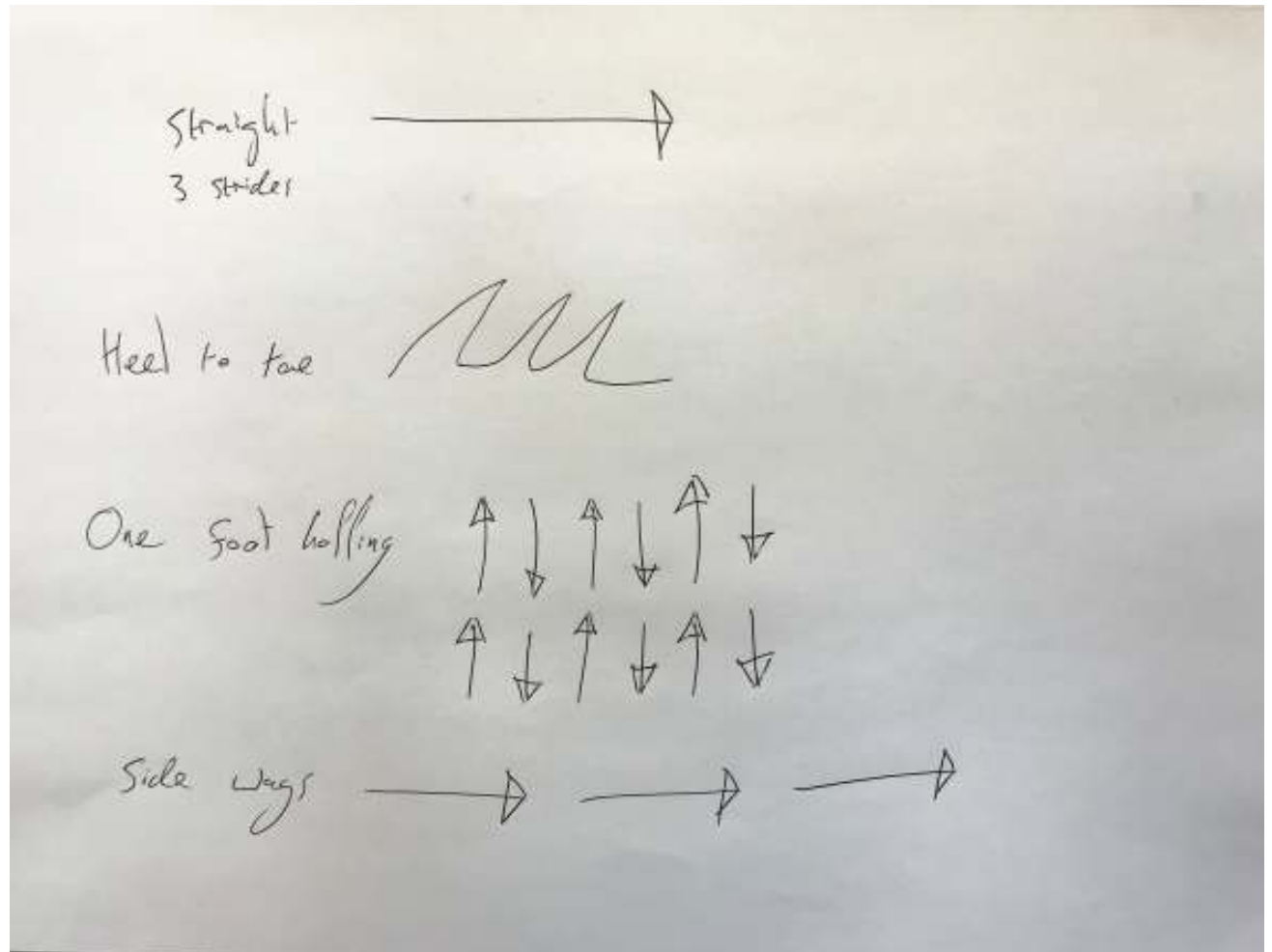




# Score 3

Deborah Pinniger

*“living in the immediate consequence* of your decisions and actions ...a complete acceptance and responsibility for the outcome of decisions made, together with what may come to pass: posture of responsibility “



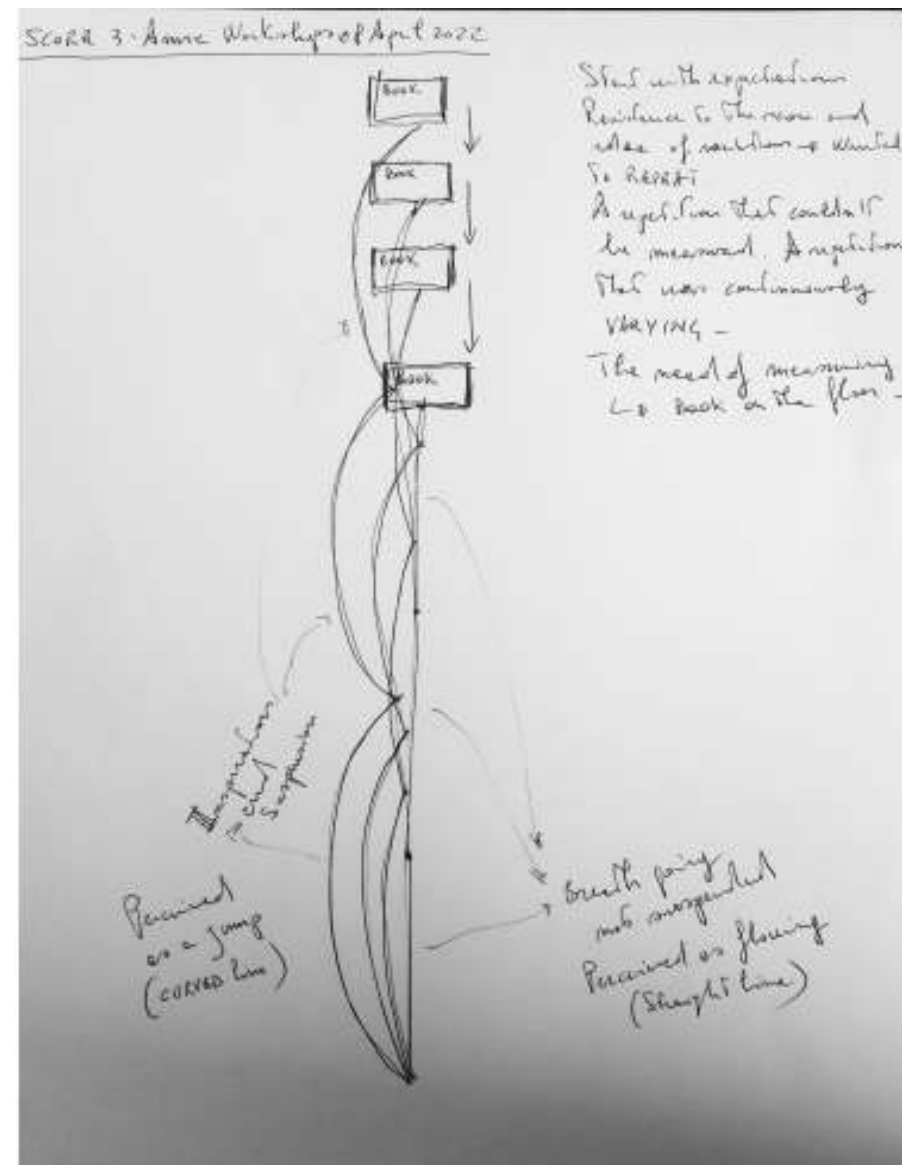
# Score 3

Paolo Maccagno

“Starting with expectations

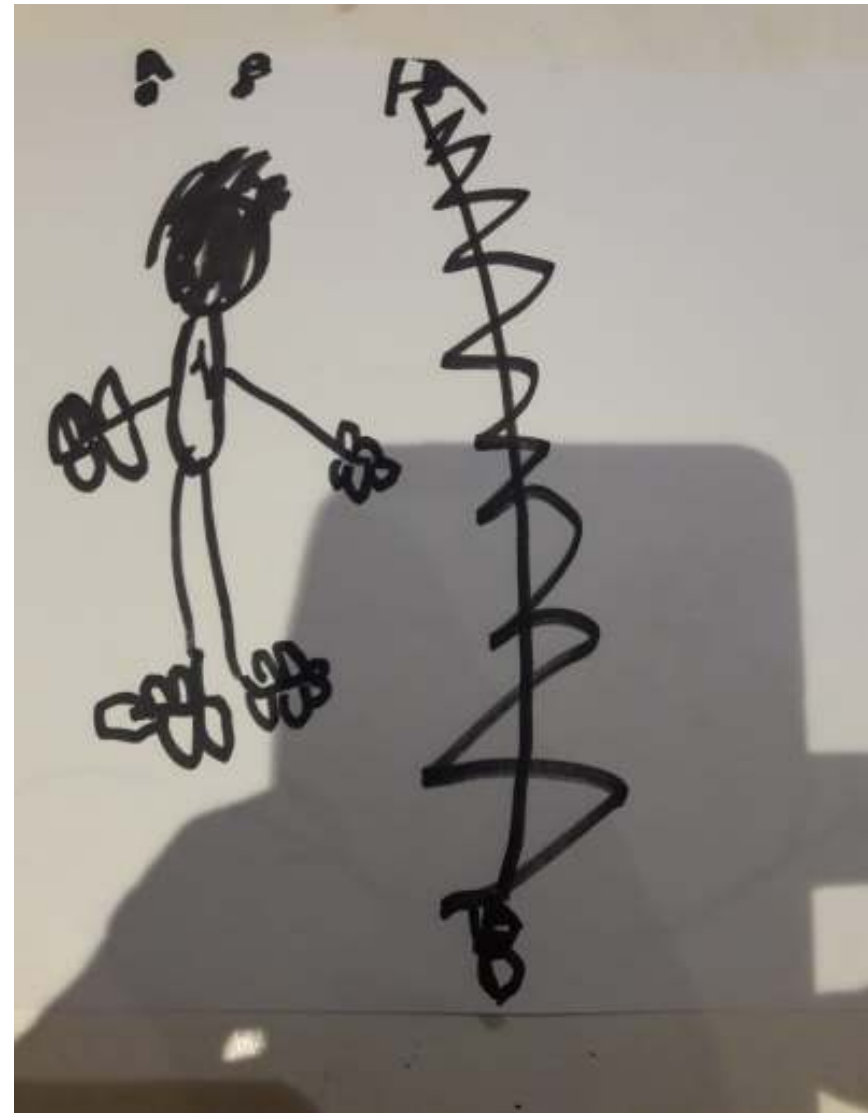
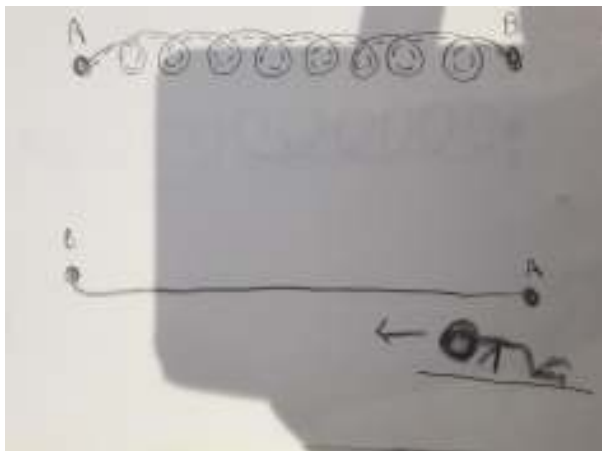
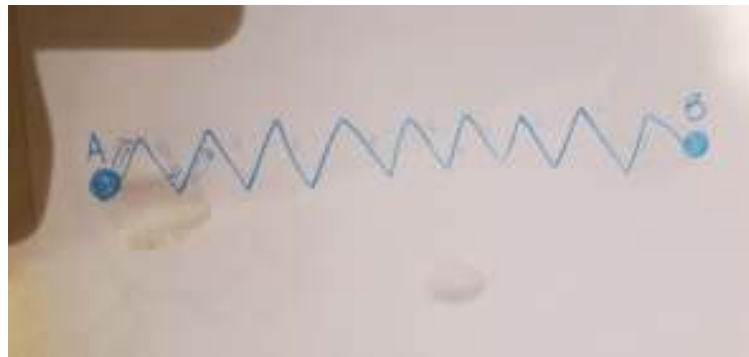
Resisting the score and the idea of measurement

Wanting to repeat- a repetition that could not be measured, but was continuously varying...”



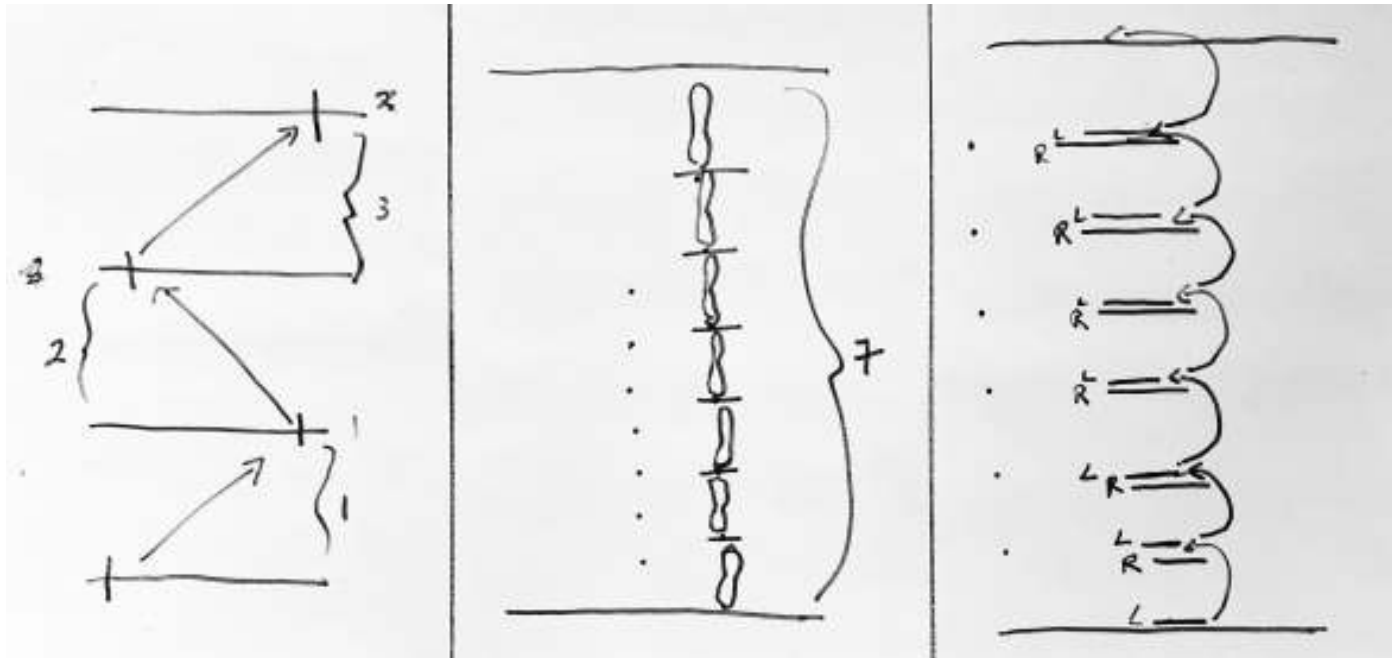
# Score 3

Paolo Maccagno and family



# Score 3

Anne Douglas



From the abstract:

Education is challenged to tread a delicate path between the reliable transmission of information, training in skill, and respect for the autonomy and creativity of the learner.

What matters is how these elements are mobilised in ways that allow participants (educator and learner) to think, to be clear and interested, to trust in creativity while also investing in good habits that do not become a form of servitude (Stengers 2011, Arendt 1961/2006, Ingold 2017, Maccagno 2021).

Effective education pivots on good communication if it is to renew a life in common (Dewey 1916/2011). It is important to set the student's mind in motion through ways of educating that are vivid rather than enforcing dead forms of indoctrination and passivity. Such mobility draws on imagination and experience, and it is perhaps in the arts that one might seek examples for how to mobilise both in ways that are vivid, effective and affective.

Abstract continued....

Education of this kind is closely aligned with democracy and freedom and focuses on making sense of the world. What happens if it can no longer be safely assumed that the values of freedom of thought and shared responsibility underpin education, or have become eroded to the point of being unrecognisable, nonsensical? David Graeber talks about bullshit jobs – jobs that have no purpose and meaning - based in an economics of debt, and how many of us would describe the current rituals of academe as ‘bullshit’ (Graeber 2012, 2018). This manifests in various ways: death by bureaucracy, the disruption brought about by warfare or environmental devastation.

What has art to say with the absurd?

The absurd in art reveals the absurd in life and can perhaps act as a counterpoint to the sense of control our cultures of measurement appear to offer. Might we think of the metre as blind faith in measurement?

As Jean Arp, the artist, put it at the height of Dada in WW1

Dada aimed to destroy the reasonable deceptions of man and recover the natural and unreasonable order. Dada wanted to replace the logical nonsense of the mean of today by the illogically senseless. That is why we pounded with all our might on the big drum of Dada and trumpeted the praises of unreason with all our might order....Dada is senseless like nature...Dada is direct like nature...

(Ades 1974, p.16).

The absurd make space for play in the midst of the deadly serious, perhaps has the potential to re-energise us, see things differently (Douglas 2021,2022)

The three scores here offer an experience of the absurd: one as a reconstruction of Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages* and the second and third are based in ideas that have come out of that work.

The following slides create an account of my own explorations of Score 1 in a studio context in advance of the workshop.



## Score 1

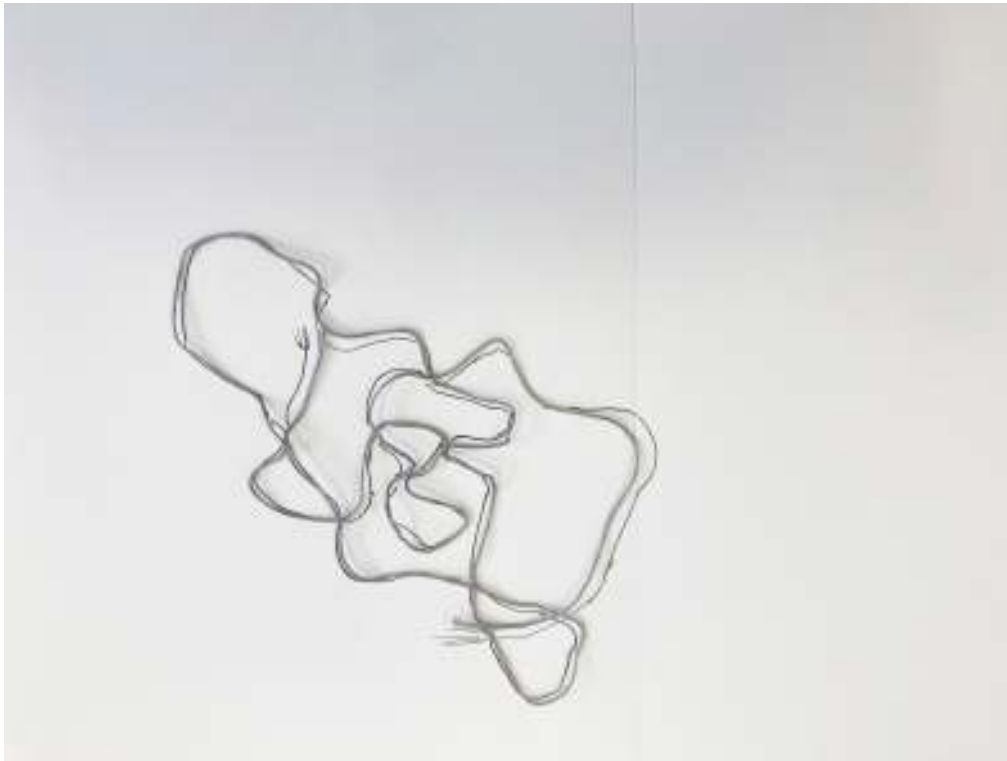
Thinking about a metre  
Thinking about a measure, but  
a measure of what exactly?  
Cutting a metre in different  
materials



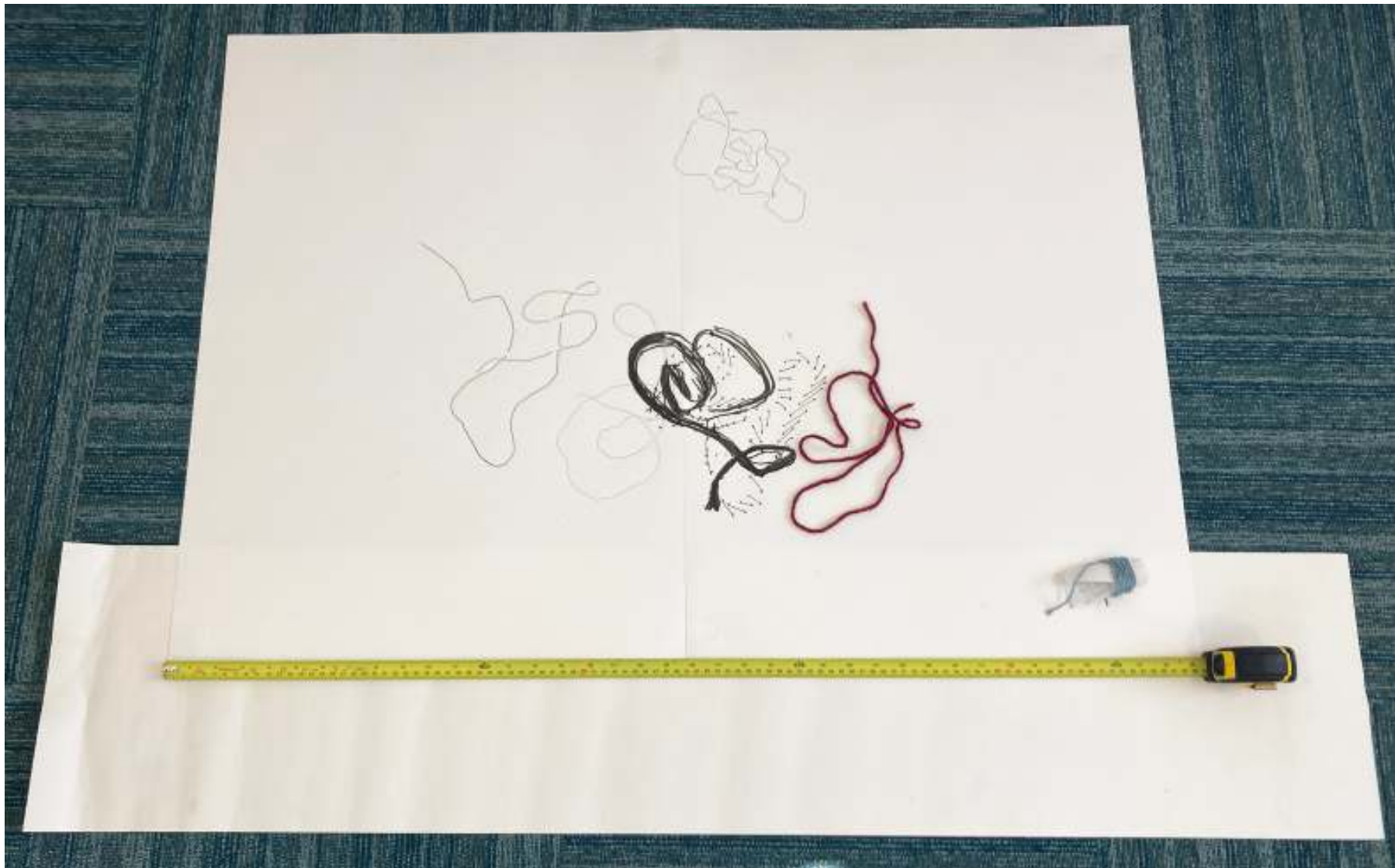
Dropping each (vertically) from a metre height



Experiencing the curling, twisting, circumscribing line that each material uniquely creates, differences of texture, structure, colour, of cotton, string, wool, or elastic.







Realising that Duchamp dropped his metres horizontally, not vertically.

Now hearing his 'instruction':

“If a straight horizontal thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane distorting itself *as it pleases*, it creates a new shape of the measure of length”

Marcel Duchamp *3 Standard Stoppages* 1913-14

Memorising the metre height in relation to my own body – it is just above my hip line — for ease of letting go — in case this made a difference to feeling, to experiencing “ a metre as measure”.



I wonder whether there is not just a little “cheating” in Duchamp’s realisation, the elegant, almost straight lines controlled for aesthetic effect? Materials have memory, histories of being rolled in a ball or curled in a roll. Even ‘thread’ embodies curls and twists, if only of its own form and rarely falls in a ‘straight-ish’ line for our convenience and sense of taste. Aesthetics are important to communicating the idea.

Understanding that Duchamp glued his lines and cut their three unique profiles in wood. He was questioning the metre as a measure of anything. He compiled all three 'measures' into a croquet box, presenting 'the joke' as a work of art.



3 Standard Stoppages (2013-14) Tate Modern



Score 1

A cut line is different from a drawn line that is different from a material line dropped from a height.

What do I really see and experience beyond 'getting the joke'?

How do I share this?

What responsibility do I hold towards what I share?



## **Remembering John Cage** and the experience of an experiment...

If you work with chance operations...you're basically shifting from the responsibility to choose to the responsibility to ask. People frequently ask me if I am faithful to the answers, or if I change them because I want to. I don't change them because I want to. When I find myself in the position of someone who *would* change something – at that point I don't change it. I change myself. It's for that reason I have said that instead of self-expression, I'm involved in self-alteration.

(Cage in Brown 2000, pp. 49-50)

**Remembering Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison**, ecology artists, on the experience of experiment...

One of the tenets of conceptual art, which strongly influenced our conceptual art-making, was to make a single decision and follow it relentlessly to its unknown, unknowable outcomes. The outcomes were simply the result of continuous creativity, investigation and enactment, referenced always to that initial single decision.

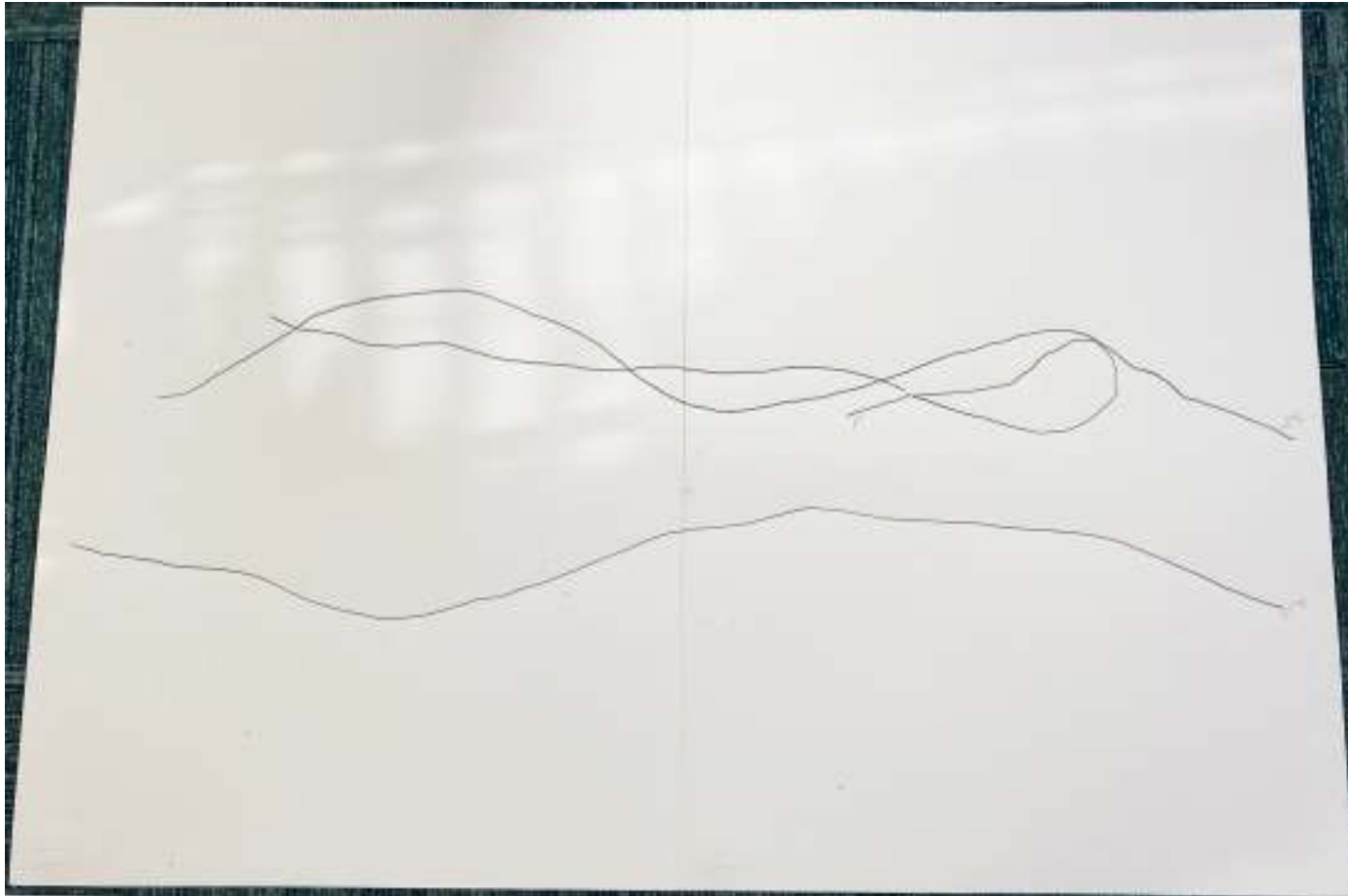
(Harrison and Harrison 2011, n.p.)

**Remembering Isabelle Stengers**, philosopher of science, on experiment as experience...

Unlike French, English does not allow the word “experiment” to be used for an experience that implies an active, open, and demanding attention.

(Stengers 2011, p.22)

Where does this leave us with 'metre as measure'? In the end opting for simplicity.







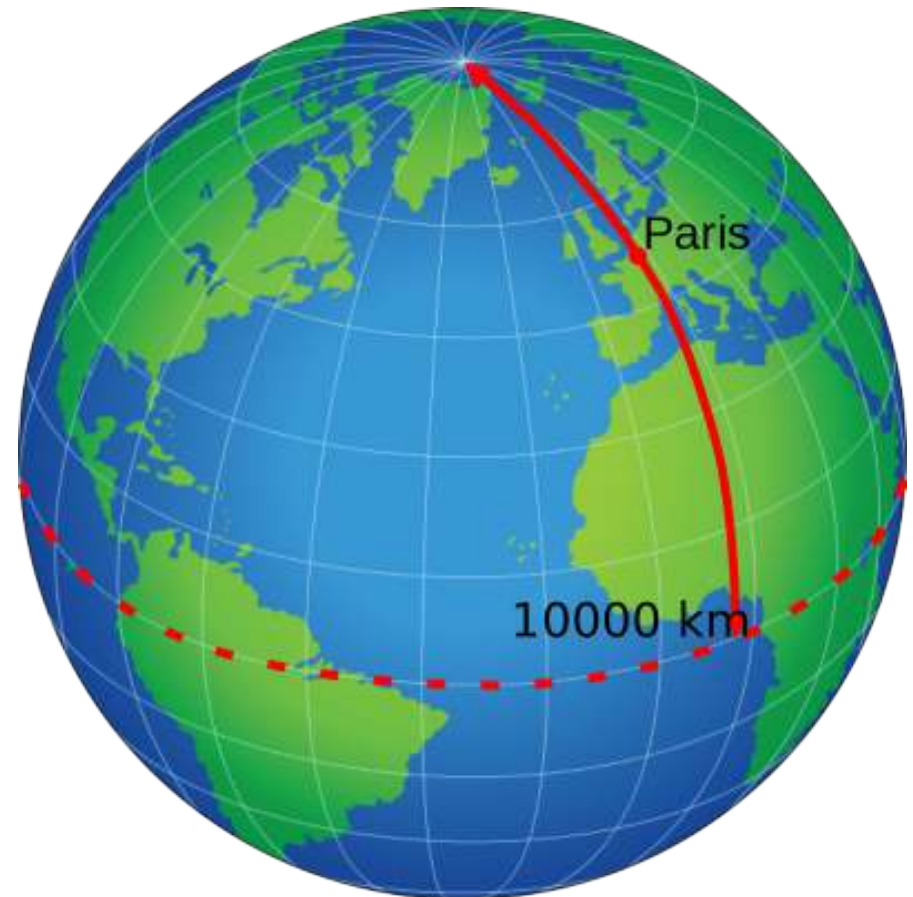




A metre is not exact. It is arbitrary and human centric.  
Our belief in it as a measure of anything may be absurd.

The French standard metre preserved in Paris in the form of a platinum-iridian bar kept in a deluxe tube in Sèvres, pretends to precision but is in fact based on a mistaken measurement of the globe itself. (Ades, Cox and Hopkins 1999, p 79)

The Standard Meter. The French originated the meter in the 1790s as **one/ten-millionth of the distance from the equator to the north pole along a meridian through Paris.**



A stoppage means

‘an invisible darn’ in French (Ades 1999, p.79)

Duchamp retained stoppage in the English title to uphold the sense of an unexpected unsolicited break in something, an unexpected interruption of a movement, activity or supply (of power of instance).



19<sup>th</sup> century darning sampler

## **Andre Breton on Dada**

...the marvellous faculty of attaining two widely separate realities without departing from the realm of our experience, of bringing them together and drawing a spark from their contact; of gathering within reach of our senses abstract figures endowed with the same intensity, the same relief as other figures; and of disorientating us in our own memory by depriving us of a frame of reference - it is this faculty which for the present sustains Dada. Can such a gift make the man who fills it something better than a poet? (Ades 1974, p.30)

Returning to education....

What is its meaning to us now in the crisis of environmental devastation heaped upon the disaster of war?

Can art and anthropology remain silent?

What is an education in/of the absurd and why would we pursue such a thing?

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