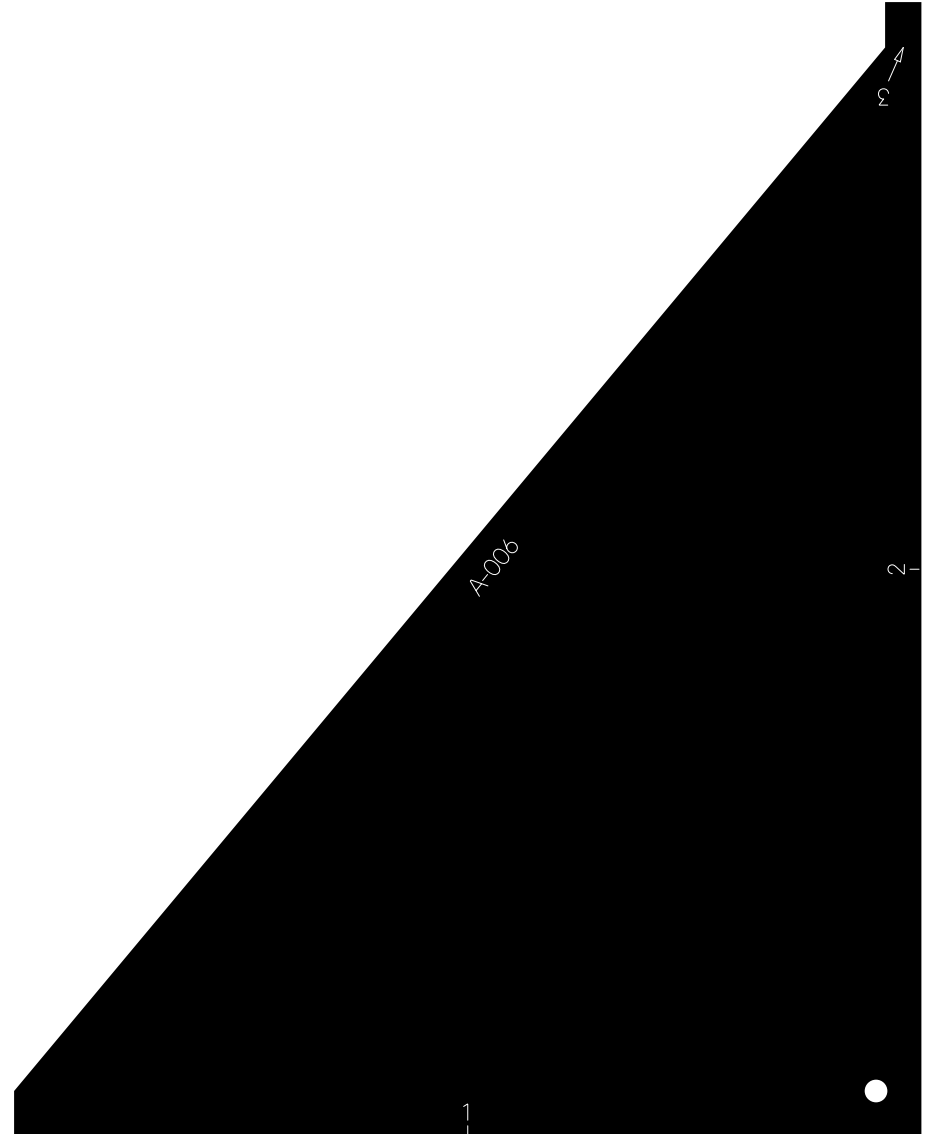




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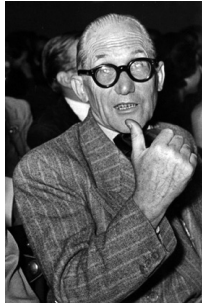
Le Corbusier was troubled by the metre. He made buildings for human beings, so why would these buildings have to stick to an utterly non-human measurement system? He wrote: “there is no such a thing as a one-metre man or a two-metre man.” There is instead a forty-millionth part of the meridian of the earth, that is a metre. Buildings made for people are now proportioned to a line crossing the earth nobody can even see. It is troubling.

The metre was invented in France. That Meridian of which the metre is a fraction is the Meridian passing through Paris. This is the case even according to those inventors who were nonetheless aware that all Meridians measure exactly the same. If the French revolution had failed or Napoleon had not wished to conquer the world, we would have differently proportioned buildings today. Let’s all agree that the world of measures owes it to contingencies beyond our control, unless you feel heroic.

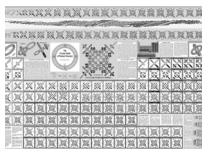
Buckle up for a sacrilegious thought: Le Corbusier was an outsider artist. Think about it. Nobody in 1950s Western Europe would think of creating their own measuring system. Standardizing was the clause of Modernism, not free-riding. Extreme mental states, unconventional ideas, elaborate fantasy worlds: some insanity was necessary to embark on the adventure of changing the very standards of life from the armchair. “From the metre to my calf!” Le Corbusier might have thought.

Indeed, this is humbleness compared to outsider artists like the pseudoscientist and author of the book *Gravity Does Not Exist* James Carter, whose self-appointed duty was to change the entire world of science from his garage. In the quest for his own physics, he drew a new periodic table and created new measures according to his theory of “circolons.”

If Le Corbusier and Carter had their own systems, which measuring tools would they use? Surely the Swiss-French architect would not purchase his rulers at the corner store, risking to bump into that hated metre again. Likewise, Carter’s instruments must have fitted the circolons rather than atoms and molecules. A material medium between theory and practice is necessary, even for the most abstract thinkers.



Le Corbusier

James Carter's
new periodic table

Within this theory of theories, we must mention Valerian Goalec. His work *From their Desk* with stencils and measuring tools heats the debate of history vs the individual. From measurements of random objects on the desk of his friends, he creates standard-like tools, turning chance into rules. However, his intentions seem less quixotic than those of the two characters mentioned before. He is not an outsider artist for at least four reasons, none of which are standard.

IRONY

There are many ways of being funny, and one of them is repetition. In one of his shows, the formerly popular comedian Louis CK asked the “why” question so many times—actually mocking his own daughter—that the audience started to find it funny. Among other things, irony exploits the unexpected. Nobody would expect a person to ask “why” 10 times in 1 minute. There is a catch though: repetition should not be abused. The inability to stop draws you close to obsession and that awkward feeling of piety in your audience. Is this person asking the “why” question 1000 times in 100 minutes funny or scary? Should we really laugh? Knowing when that’s enough is necessary here, and outsider artists rarely know it.

The elements in *From their Desk* repeat just about the right amount of times. Not once, not one million. The artist is conscious of the proper numbers, allowing those works to be ironic with their finely tuned multiplication. In fact, the first jokes of this very text stem from the controlled repetition of arbitrary events, the willingness to impose standards from randomness a few times. The smile was with the artist, not about him. Comedy didn’t turn into tragedy.

CONSCIOUSNESS

As mentioned, self consciousness is part of irony. Getting a good grasp of your expressive medium requires stepping out of yourself, being able to imagine reactions when you are in someone else’s shoes. The outsider artist can rarely do that. The individual fighting history cannot make compromises with the enemy, and other people are history’s ambassadors. For better or worse, self-obsession is the outsider’s signature mark.

From their Desk is not so much an artwork made of the fight between the standard and the random, as it is about this fight. One needs to see the fight from without to avoid being hit from within. The elements of *From their Desk* are somewhat works of fiction, emptied of their possible measuring purpose by the artist, unlike the intended use of the rulers of Le Corbusier or the tables of Carter. In order to do so, the artist needs to abandon self-obsession and embrace self-consciousness.

VISUALS

To use a very formulaic expression: self-obsession is a subset of obsession, which equals exaggeration. This self-made conceptual math applies to the outsider artist too. We have mentioned exaggerated repetition before, here let’s focus on exaggerated forms. Creating a world must include many visual elements, even if you do it from your desk. Outsider art tends to explode with forms, leaving minimalist aesthetics to others.

Mind you, the claim is not that *From their Desk* falls without the sphere of outsider art because it looks sleek. To say so would only scratch the surface. One needs to go deeper. The point is that *From their Desk*’s visual scarcity is a consequence of embracing standards instead of fighting them. For example, the restrained palette of the stencils and rulers is that of long established systems of industrial design. The work is being friendly with history, not wrestling it as a villain. Besides, the mimicking of conventional product presentation shows the artist’s awareness of his medium. Minimalistic aesthetic is necessary for the play between standards and chance. *From their Desk* is the thorn in the feet of those players.



Kingelez,
Étoile Rouge
Congolaise

RANDOMNESS

Lack of control drives most people mad. To better see this point, let’s imagine an immense cardboard maquette, a few worms, and a cabbage in the middle. The cardboard maquette—namely that of outsider artist Kingelez—represents total control. Finely cut shapes, miniaturized into replicas of entire cities and peoples, take a lot of mastery. Fantastic shapes and beautiful worlds come from this command and during this exercise you cannot let your hand slip.



Aude Pariset's
sculpture with
worms



Juan Sánchez
Cotán, *Quince,
Cabbage, Melon
and Cucumber*

On the opposite side, worms might create something alike, but only by chance. For example, Artist Aude Pariset lets some of those unpredictable animals do the job of designing part of her sculptures, embracing chaos and its consequences, whether nasty or tasty. The cabbage in the middle is the one painted by Juan Sánchez Cotán, a 16th century Spanish artist whose masterpiece owes a little bit to chance, as the unintended unfinishedness of the painting makes it look especially contemporary. It is a lucky accident, which has provided widespread aesthetic pleasure to future audiences.

In this weird mental mapping of cardboard cities and worms, *From their Desk* comes close to the cabbage. The stencils and rulers are conceived top-down, with the necessary virtuosity and command of the industrial designer. They are a little bit like the overly controlled craft of Kingelez. At the same time, the elements of *From their Desk* are the product of chance for they are modelled from random objects sent to the artist. They're a *little bit* like those sculptures of Aude Pariset, arbitrarily shaped by the hunger of worms. Being in between like the cabbage, they accept the uncontrollable, but discipline it too.

FINALE

Back to wild Le Corbusier and his personal quarrel with proportions and history. Let's imagine one of the elements of *From their Desk* succeeding in something they were not even asked to do: turning individual will into a standard. From one random desk, passing by the artist's work, one of those stencils or rulers might end up in everybody's toolbox. After all, previous examples of this successful journey exist.

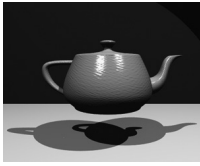
Let's not take the metre, which needed war and violence to establish itself, but a much more peaceful and recent standardization star: The Utah Teapot, a 3D test model that has become a standard reference object and an in-joke within the computer graphics community.

According to Wikipedia, during his work researcher Martin Newell needed a simple mathematical model of a familiar object. His wife, Sandra Newell, suggested modelling their tea service since they were

sitting down for tea at the time. He sketched the teapot free-hand using graph paper and a pencil. Eventually, the shape became such a standard model that in 1987 scientists James Arvo and David Kirk called the teapot the "sixth Platonic solid," though math books will claim "there are FIVE (and only five) Platonic solids."

One might wonder what Plato would think if he knew a random afternoon tea messed with the geometry named after him. Le Corbusier too would be rather upset if he heard this story. All that standardization effort with no success, and then a teapot... That's the outsider's nightmare.

We don't want to wish *From their Desk* any success in the measuring race, nor any failure. Seldom are artworks to be judged this way. No matter who gets lucky, no matter who deserves. Those measuring tools and stencils of *From their Desk* need not follow standards, nor become them. They're too contingent, and really well built.



A floating Utah
teapot