

# Le Grand Mètre

Av Alt Går Bra



There is an Ancient Greek myth we hear very little about. It was said that a king once desecrated a grove belonging to the goddess of harvest, growth, and nourishment. As the king balanced the blade of his axe at one of the oak trees in the grove, he thus spoke: “Even if this tree is the goddess herself, and not just one of her beloved oaks, now its leafy crown will meet the earth.”<sup>1</sup> The oak of Demeter trembled all over and grew pale after the slanting stroke. The tree was destined to build a banquet hall. Erysichthon, the offending king, had trespassed a limit. Demeter, the offended goddess, devised an infinite torment in return.

Last month, the art group Alt Går Bra showed *Le Grand Mètre (After Céjar)*, an installation reflecting upon the idea of meter. The piece occupied the entire length of the Tapestry Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum. A 34-meter-long print of an enlarged centimeter unfolded from the drums of an obsolete printing machine and run all along the wooden floor of the gallery. The work was surrounded by the nobility depicted on the *Devonshire Hunting Tapestries*, a remarkable piece from the 15th century made in Arras, France. Almost seamlessly mixing humans and animals, these monumental tapestries portray the universe of medieval lords through hunting scenes.

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<sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 8.755-56. The myth was told first by the Hellenistic poet Callimachus in the “Hymn to Demeter” and more extensively later by the Roman poet Ovid in *Metamorphoses*.

The installation was thought as a sort of remake in reverse of the copy art piece *Le Grand Mètre* (The Great Meter) that the French artist C  jar (Christian Rigal) showed at the Louvre Museum in the 1980s. As claimed by the artist, this was the largest copy art piece ever made, measuring 144 x 60 centimeters. C  jar printed his centimeter with an early Xerox machine. Xerox is the technology that came to replace our obsolete printing machine, the mimeograph.

The choice of a Greek myth to begin this text is not aleatory. The reader could have anticipated that this article would be about the meter, a concept central to ancient Greek civilization. As Hegel put it, the Greeks honored the finite.<sup>2</sup> Measurement played a key role in Greek philosophy, from Pythagoras's measurement of geometric proportions to Plato's Academy's famous frontispice motto: "Let none inapt to geometry enter." Measurement was also a central element in politics for the Greeks. From Solon to Cleisthenes, the idea of meter was instrumental for the building of Athenian democracy.

Measurement is inextricable from limitedness-unlimitedness and from the finite, or what can be measured, and the infinite, or what cannot be measured. But what was the purpose of measuring for the Greeks? It is likely that they were not interested in measuring only as a verification of natural phenomena, otherwise the pregnancy of their thoughts would not have lasted until today. The ideas of meter, limits, and finitud were probably rooted in a deeper need such as keeping the community together. At a time when poor Greek citizens were selling themselves into slavery to pay for their debts, an unrestrained accumulation of wealth needed to find a limit. In fidelity to the idea of meter, Greek society built democracy, a system of equality in face of the law and of equality in the right to speech. In Greek there were actual words to designate these two concepts of equality, *isonomia* for the law and *isegoria* for the speech.

Very brutally, in order to make all this a bit more contemporary, the idea of setting limits could be correlated with Rosa Parks performative statement in the United States from the all too recent 1950s. Parks famously stated: "I don't think I should have to stand up." As we know, this hero of the civil rights movement was responding to the bus driver who demanded that she had to give her seat up to a white person when she was already sitting in the segregated area and the section for whites was full.

In making our installation, we also asked about something that we usually take for granted. In most countries, we use the metric system to measure so many things in our everyday lives. We use the metric system that we take for granted to measure the kilogram of potatoes we buy at the supermarket, to measure the speed at which we drive, to know what the length of the art gallery is so that we know how our artwork will look in the space. We use the *idea* of meter or measurement to ensure that, for instance, workers get equal pay for equal work, that we all have the same access to education and health services, and so forth. One way to look at measurement would be as a tool that humanity has envisioned throughout history to enact fairness and justice.

Out of all events in history, it was actually the French Revolution from 1789 that brought about the metric system. That revolution that revolutionized almost everything, including prompting a nation of black people to enact the first modern State governed by black people themselves—and planted the seeds for many other changes still to be born. Three years before the Revolution, the notable scientist Antoine Lavoisier noted that just in one medium-size city there were seventeen different measuring systems and that among them the units had different sizes. The Diderot and d'Alembert *Encyclopedia* warned: "Not only establishing one standard of measurement for all nations is impossible, but making this happen in one single nation is

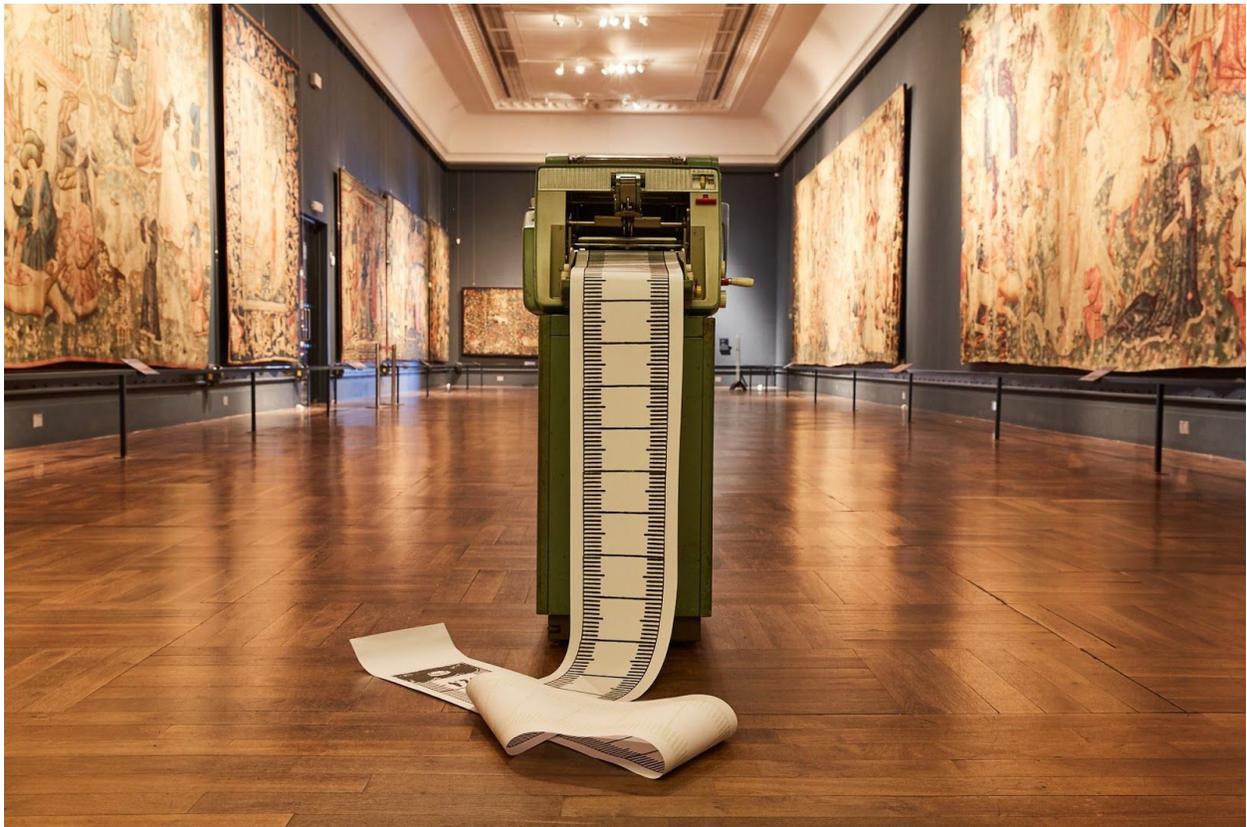
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<sup>2</sup> Georg W. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 393.

unattainable.”<sup>3</sup> Geometers and an international team of scientists were put to work to establish a measuring system based on nature that would be universal without favoring any particular nation. But beyond the ambition to universal fairness, the pressing reason to work on this project from year one of the Revolution was the domestic class struggle.

It is against the feudals lords that the French people were demanding an uniform measuring system and, above all, one that was invariable. The *Cahiers de doléances* or lists of grievances offer the evidence for it: “The lords should no longer have their own ways of measuring nor measurements that vary according to the land” and “The measure of the nobles augments every year.”<sup>4</sup> To which the King would issue the expected response, “There is an infinite range of measures among the lords; we ask them that they should be reduced to that of the King.”<sup>5</sup>

The Greek myth we used to begin this text has indeed a tragic and gruesome end. Erysichthon, who had smitten the tree to build his banquet hall, will now sit at the tables to no avail: the more he ate, the emptier he was. Having consumed everything he possessed, Erysichthon “began to tear at his limbs and gnaw them with his teeth, and the unhappy man fed, little by little, on his own body.”



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<sup>3</sup> Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *L'Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 12 (Paris: Libraires Associés, 1751-1772), 785.

<sup>4</sup> *Cdd.*, Angers, II, 259 and *Cdd.*, Quimper (Mellac), 218.

<sup>5</sup> Jacquet, avocat au Parlement de Paris, *Traité des justices de seigneur et des droits en dépendants, conforméments à la jurisprudence actuelle des différents tribunaux du Royaume, suivi des pièces justificatives qui ont trait à la matière*, à Lyon, chez J. Breguilliat . . . , à Paris, chez Luis Cellot . . . et les frères Estienne, 1764, avec approbation et privilège du Roy (Bibl. Mazarine, A. 10.051), 268, cited in Witold Kula, *Measures and Men* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 179.