

Essay by Claire Barliant

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“Made to Measure”

Math is “pure,” yes? It is a neutral, objective system of discovering solutions to problems. It is an “abstract science” involving numbers, quantities, space. But what happens when this “pure” discipline is applied toward dubious ends?

Suzanne McClelland has been making art for some three decades and, over that period, has returned to questioning the big concepts, such as “truth” and “purity,” but in a way that is satisfyingly down-to-earth, even a little bit street. She is an omnivorous, energetic thinker, gathering material from a wide range of unexpected sources, including pop music and the FBI’s website. She has a knack for arranging and putting unlike items together in a way that reveals not only how things may be connected but the way that we might *perceive* that things are connected, when in fact they are not. That is the striking and unique aspect of her work: its power not to reveal or inform us *what* to think, but instead to instruct us *how* to think. In other words, to think for ourselves.

So, when invited to do a yearlong residency at Dieu Donné, McClelland returned to one of her most important source images, Sigmar Polke’s work *Solutions V* from 1967, which the artist first saw at the Brooklyn Museum in 1991.¹ A minimal painting, consisting very simply of a list of false equations, such as one plus one equals three, two plus three equals six, and so on, in Courier font, painted in lacquer on a 60 x 50” canvas, *Solutions* is clearly frustrating—there is no order, no system within the disorder that reigns, just one arbitrary mistake after another. Does Polke’s title refer to the Nazis’ “final solution”? Or the crack science of phrenology, used by the Nazis to document “impurities” and justify their actions against Jews? Given that the artist grew up in postwar Germany, very possibly. Then again, who knows—the painting might be Polke’s absurdist take on minimalist repetition, a childish game, an illustration of the futile search for truth in art.

Whatever its purpose (if it has one at all), *Solutions* made McClelland think of the Commodores’ 1977 hit “Brick House,” of all things, which pays tribute to the curves of an “Amazon” woman: “36-24-36, what a winning hand.” Which then led her to look at the places in our culture where body measurements and statistics intersect, and where the body is judged on physique rather than physical potential. The world of competitive bodybuilding is based on notions of ideal, static forms—the pose, the transition between poses, and posture. This led her to an event at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1976 that featured bodybuilders, most prominently a rising young athlete by the name of Arnold Schwarzenegger, as well as Frank Zane and Ed Corney. The event, which included a performance and panel discussion run

¹ Sigmar Polke’s *Solutions I-IV* were sold at a Sotheby’s contemporary auction in May 2013.

by art critic and author Vicki Goldberg, and which was organized to raise funds for the movie *Pumping Iron*, was called “Articulate Muscle: The Body As Art.” Three strong men flexed and posed on a rotating table in front of a panel of art critics, who were brought together to discuss the beauty of the male figure.

These connections, so many unlikely leaps that somehow make complete sense in the end, resulted in McClelland’s series of paintings from 2013 titled *Ideal Proportions*, which incorporate lists of measurements pertaining to the circumferences of the arms, chests, thighs, and waists of bodybuilders. Although these paintings are eminently abstract, with swooping lines and curlicues, and the numbers are rendered in a highly gestural manner, they play off the idea of “figuration,” giving viewers ostensibly all they need—a list of measurements—to behold an “ideal” figure.

Dieu Donné gave McClelland a new medium—handmade paper—through which to explore these ideas. Over the course of the residency, she produced several series of collages in which figures or numbers appear to float on dense black or white grounds. One of these series, called *Articulate Muscle*, which McClelland turned into an animation, is based on the event at the Whitney and features cutouts of Schwarzenegger, Zane, and Corney. One might assume that these works were made by carefully placing the cutouts directly onto the pulp. But, in fact, she held pieces of Xerox copies and silk-screened text about yea high over the freshly pulled sheets of paper pulp, letting them fall where they may and stay there. Making paper is a messy, hands-on activity, and McClelland took advantage of the medium’s lack of control, allowing for and even encouraging “happy accidents.” Her technique recalls Marcel Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages* from 1913–14. According to the Museum of Modern Art’s website, Duchamp made the work by “dropping three threads, each one meter long, from a height of one meter onto three stretched canvases. He then adhered the threads to the canvases, preserving the curves they had assumed upon landing, and cut the canvases along the threads’ profiles, creating new units of measure, each in some sense a meter long yet all different and all with an element of the random.”²

Duchamp’s work calls our attention to the arbitrary nature of all systems of measurement. Greenwich Mean Time, the metric system, Celsius versus Fahrenheit—all are products of the Industrial Age. Duchamp’s made-up rulers remind us that the only true “norm” is our own body: a fistful of flour, two fingers of whiskey, and so on. When we put too much stock in the measurements imposed on the world from superior, indomitable forces, we lose sight of our own agency.

And agency is what McClelland is after. She is encouraging independent thinking via nonsensical strings of numbers that seem to refer to body parts, as in her *In the*

² Gallery label from *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925*, December 23, 2012–April 15, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/78990> on February 10, 2016.

Black series, where paper cutouts refer obliquely to sizes, such as “200 lbs” (257 – *In the Black*) or 5’9” (259 – *In the Black*). We are steered gently toward wondering what these numbers stir up: judgments like “overweight” or “tall,” relatively innocuous on the surface, but ultimately a form of calculation, of sizing ourselves up against some imagined body. And of assuming that there is a standard out there against which all bodies may be measured. Or else, she plays with three solid black circles, in a series of individually titled works in which 0 plus 0 equals another number, such as $0+0=7$, evoking Polke’s *Solutions*. The dots seem a whimsical flourish, until one looks closely at the title and realizes that the dots are also winking at the mathematical symbol for “therefore,” which consists of three dots in the form of an upright triangle and is used to represent the logical consequence of an equation. (If the dots are inverted, the symbol represents “because.”) McClelland, not surprisingly, is drawn to these symbols because of her own penchant and gift for making connections among seemingly random things. Therefore, McClelland seems to suggest, there is no “therefore,” there is no “because”; there is only what you discern, and what you do with the information at hand.