

'Principia'

Sara Morawetz

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i. principia:

noun, pl.

Latin, meaning: first principles; fundamental beginnings; elements

see also:

Isaac Newton's *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*

2653 *Principia*, an asteroid named after Newton's work, astronaut Tim Peake's mission as part of the Expedition 46 crew of the ISS

The word 'experiment' brings to mind a vision of bespectacled whitecoats in a laboratory, whereas 'experimentation' conjures an artist tipping over paint cans in a paroxysm of intuition. For the exhibition *Principia*, Sara Morawetz pushes against this binary, instead exposing the creativity inherent in scientific discovery, and the systems and metrics contained within artistic practice. Indeed, in choosing a title so often associated with mathematics, Sara signals her desire to bring the systems of science—the experiment, the hypothesis, the test—into the gallery space. The result is a body of work that sits *between* these two realms, a space where ideas are formulated, weighed, revisited, and reformulated again.

If you were to ask for a single word to describe Sara's practice, I would suggest *ongoingness*. The framing of the work is one that bends. Her works unfold as her practice unfolds. And although they are separate from one another, they also stem from the *same idea*—to test the principles of measurement. (In conducting these tests, Sara reveals how the units we take to be rigid and true are the opposite: they are movable, personal, and not without doubt.) Just as you can draw a timeline that charts the changing hypotheses from Galileo to Newton, so too can you draw a thread between each of Sara's iterations.

Know that each work has a multiple self, a sister, a cousin. Know that each has its own latitude and longitude on a larger map.

ii. practice + practise

Mistaking *practise* for *practice* is one of the most common grammatical mistakes. While most grammar enthusiasts remain committed, the different spelling is slowly being phased out in common usage. But to remove this difference is to discount a key, albeit slight, variance between the two. *Practice* is a noun, meaning 'the application of an idea or method of belief.' It is also a ubiquitous descriptor for an artist's body of work. On the other hand, *practise* is a verb, an action, that means 'to do something repeatedly'—to rehearse, to prepare, to refine. So, while practice might be a good way of describing what you are looking at, a better way of thinking about Sara's work would be to say that she is repeatedly *practising*. It is the act of doing, rather than resolving. That is, although they

appear fixed to the wall, these works are governed by activity and motion. Ghosting behind them is a performing body: measuring, recording, processing, and printing.

When you look at a familiar musical instrument, say a piano, the sound you expect it to make is evident, even if it remains silent. The same principle can be applied to Sara's actions: there is a latent feeling of the doing—the *practising*.

iii. time + scale

If Sara is exploring measurement as an arbitrary system, full of aberrations and mistakes, she is most often doing this in relation to time. She asks: why does your minute or hour or year feel different to mine? She asks: how can we think of time from the perspective of a planet? She asks: how can we see minuteness and expanse together, without placing them in opposition? How can we apprehend multiple timelines and chronologies all at once? And what to make, then, of those seconds between light hitting the moon and the earth and the photographic paper? Sara's answer to such questions is to go back to the system—to the ruler / the meter/ the clock / the changes in light from night and day—and to plot out a course.

What does this course look like? Sara will measure how much the distance has shifted between the earth and the moon since 1972, or she will consider how far Mt Everest has grown in height in a year, or she will make a note of the seconds added to the clock every leap year.

Because, as much as a measurement is used for fixing things in place, it also denotes what has changed. And applying such human systems on a geological and cosmic scale exposes our fallibility, and our smallness. To think in geological time is to recognise that the plates are shifting / the mountains are growing / the glaciers are retreating / the earth is spinning / the earth is warming. The ground beneath your feet is not static, for all that appears to be firm. And a change of an inch or a half degree on a planetary scale may seem small, but it could mark the difference between a world that will be inhabitable, and a world that will not.

Words by Naomi Riddle