

# *Back from Business:*

PAUL  
BUCKERMANN

*On Commensuration,  
Construction, and  
Communication  
of a Global  
Art World  
in the Ranking  
Kunstkompass*

## *Introduction*

The ranking *Kunstkompass* has computed the 100 “most famous living artists in the world” since 1970. The annual list had been published in business magazines for forty-five years until it migrated to a focused art magazine in 2015. Based in the business world, it tried to shed light on the opaque mechanisms of the art world for investment decisions. Now back from business, *Kunstkompass* still claims a stake in mapping a contemporary global art world. With its resettlement to an art publication, the ranking slightly but fundamentally changed its surface. Here I sketch the production of *Kunstkompass* to show how measurement and numerical communication are used to establish a highly contingent hierarchy of artists. Working within sociological discourse, I outline the specific mechanisms of commensuration that occur in the quantified design or appearance of objective order in complex worlds. In this sense, sociologies of commensuration and comparison show how the contingent production and communication of numbers latently shapes epistemic globalization.

Modern modes of quantified evaluation and the semantics of modern art seem contradictory, at first. Statistics and mathematical modeling are well known in the spheres of politics, economics, or sciences. These standardized methods illustrate a broad and developing interest toward objectivity and quantification throughout modernity (Porter 1995). Meanwhile, “autonomous art” fundamentally grounds itself on a semantics of authenticity, originality, a subject’s creative “genius”, individual aesthetical perception, or a single work’s aura. Nevertheless, we continue to find assessments and hierarchies in the art world since the influence of modern discourse. Art’s internal rules and structures favour competition and canonical exclusion watched over by influential institutions like museums, critics, or art history (Bourdieu 1996). In these evaluative processes, criteria are used — none of them based on objective or calculable measurement.

Rankings that depict financial success on the art market by taking numerical prices and sales into account are thus not surprising or unprecedented. Especially in the digital information age, there are several complex data banks and report services like [artnet](#), [Artprice](#), or [ArtFacts](#), which offer and sell in-depth analyses of differentiated art markets (see Velthuis 2014). Less expected formats apply criteria, more common to the arts’ shared semantics, to scale hierarchies, reputation, and success in the complex institutional settings of the art world. Everybody with Internet access can get an impression of the **“most influential people in the contemporary artworld”** by checking *Art Review*’s annual list called *Power 100*, which is produced by an international jury constituted by art world professionals. In this case, questions could be raised concerning the interrelations and comparability of the ranked (and ranking) museum directors, weblogs, gallery owners, critics, philosophical movements, artists, and others. The German ranking *Kunstkompass* is most interesting for its mapping of global structures by numerical communication, rather than through the opaque subjectivity that generates *Power 100*. *Kunstkompass* compares and lists artists by assigning numerical value to show their ‘relevance’ or ‘fame’ in the art world. How are these factors measured and computed? What communicative mechanisms are inherent in these numerical comparisons? And, how does this process contribute to the social construction of a highly contingent global art world?



## *Production of the Kunstkompass*

The *Kunstkompass* does not aim at measuring the quality of art or an individual artist. Linde Rohr-Bongard, who has been involved in its production since 1971 and responsible for its publication since 1985, recently wrote that this would be an impossible task anyway – instead, the list reflects the ‘fame’ of artists in as objective a way as possible (Rohr-Bongard 2015). Market success, though ignored mathematically, had played a crucial role in the presentation of the ranking until it migrated to an art publication. The *Kunstkompass* consists of three lists: the 100 most famous living artists; the newcomers; and all-time favourite dead artists. The different lists are generated using the same formulas and measurements. Based on an initial poll with 106 so-called art world experts from Germany and Switzerland in 1970, the most important art museums, biennales, art magazines, and galleries were defined (and have since been frequently revised). These handpicked institutions are ranked by relevance, and artists receive points for solo or group shows in particular spaces or exhibition formats. Points are added for reviews in ‘influential’ art magazines, receiving art awards, and acquisitions by specific institutions. These points are summed up and the result defines an artist’s position in the ranking in relation to other artists.

The complexity of its production has grown since the beginning of *Kunstkompass*. In 1970, Willi Bongard decided to develop a ranking guided by objective means, in order to improve an individual’s orientation in a confusing art market (Baumann 2001). Before founding *Kunstkompass*, Bongard was a journalist covering the art market for the German newspaper *ZEIT*. The ranking was published in the German business magazine *Capital* until it migrated to the German business monthly *manager magazin* in 2008. The datasets available on potentially every artist in the world has grown from 375 artists in 1970 to about 25,000 in 2015. In 1970, eighteen art museums were assessed in the ranking (Rohr-Bongard 2001); in 2015, it took over 250 into account (Rohr-Bongard 2015).

After being published in *Capital* and *manager magazin*, the *Kunstkompass* migrated to the magazine **WELT-KUNST** (World Art), published by the *ZEIT Kunstverlag*, and proceeded to slightly change its components. Why or how does a disciplinarily focused art magazine, dedicated to art history, contemporary art, and antiques, cover this ranking in 2015? The ranking itself has become a brand over the decades and attracted some attention to the magazine, of course. Bongard and Rohr-Bongard had always left market prices out of their calculation, but added them to the ranking’s visualization. Rohr-Bongard remembers that discrepancies between an artist’s ranking and market value were the most interesting insights enabled by the *Kunstkompass*. Bongard added a figure for the relation between *Kunstkompass* points and average market value called price-point-relation (PPR) to better illustrate these discrepancies. From 1971, the PPR consisted of a decimal number, which was simplified into five to six categories ranging from ‘very cheap’ to ‘extremely expensive’. The next step was to reduce this information into a visual format (based on number of stars given) in 2001. The update in the *manager magazin* had only contained average prices and omitted the PPR. In the first version of the ranking published in **WELT-KUNST** in 2015, however, no prices are mentioned. The plain representation only indicates artists’ names, their media, overall *Kunstkompass* points, gallery affiliation, and their rank in 2014. Any market connections have dissolved in the ranking, although it is flanked by coverage about recent auction sales records in the magazine. The *Kunstkompass* conceals market factors by entering a publication sourced of the art world, and now concentrates on living artists’ ‘fame’. The ranking’s methods have stayed the same while its appearance has been fundamentally modified. Instead of tackling the ranking’s methodology or methodological bias concerning region and gender (e.g. Tabor 2010), I investigate the mechanisms implicit in the process of measuring, counting, and listing, which all lead to a powerful but immanently contingent perception of globalization.

## Numerical Communication and Commensuration

Sociological and historical scholars have broadly researched the rise of quantification, rankings, and statistics in modernity. The role of statistics and censuses for nation-building and state bureaucracies is well-documented (Desrosières 2002; Porter 1986) and this so-called “avalanche of printed numbers” (Hacking 1982) relates to broader bio-politics as well as specific racist, sexist, and colonial classifications. Quantification—“the production and communication of numbers” (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 402)—has also been used to shape and mobilize power structures, forms of acceptable knowledge, and expansive supra-regional coordination in sports (Werron 2005; 2007) as well as sciences (Porter 1995; Heintz and Werron 2011). There are several examples, but I want to emphasize one general insight about the sociology of quantification that applies to an analysis of the mechanisms of quantification in the art world. Selecting, measuring, or counting units are complex and socially embedded processes, which do not reflect a somehow natural appearance of units but radically constitute them, construct broader relational categories, and consolidate the metrics they are measured with (Espeland and Stevens 2008). Quantification in this sense is deeply interwoven with a historical matrix of scientific, political and economic knowledge, which can be analyzed in the case of art rankings as well.

The use of categories and standardized measures is especially manifest in contemporary processes of commensuration. Commensuration, a “transformation of different qualities into a common metric” (Espeland & Mitchell 1998, 314), is as ubiquitous today as it is contingent. In the *Kunstkompass*, we find the transformation of different individuals and their careers into one common metric. Contingency here is not defined by nature of *how* this metric is conceptualized and applied, but by questions of influence, approved knowledge, and power structures. Instead of learning *who* is successful, the *Kunst-*

*kompass* indicates contemporary and historical perceptions of fame that are favoured by specific institutional settings in the art world. So, instead of accusing the data or computation to be false, the basic mechanisms of commensuration can be problematized. But why is it so difficult to question statistics and numerical data? Why are quantified observations so persuasive and why are they everywhere? These questions highlight another significant aspect of commensuration: modes of further processing and re-producing numerical communications.

The *Kunstkompass* has recently been questioned and consulted by sociologists. These interpretations of the ranking in academic literature can help to shape an alternative perspective on commensuration in the art world. In one research trajectory, the *Kunstkompass* delivers data for analyzing structures and evolutions of a global art world. Alain Quemin (2006; 2012; 2015) uses the ranking’s data in “order to study the evolving positions of artists according to nationality over recent years” (2006, 531). Larissa Buchholz and Ulf Wuggenig (Buchholz & Wuggenig 2005; 2012; Buchholz 2008) extract data from the *Kunstkompass* to reflect Pierre Bourdieu’s findings about structural mechanisms in the art field on a global level. The authors assume that “[t]his procedure is the best available to differentiate the core of the art field [...] from the periphery and semi-periphery of artists” (Buchholz & Wuggenig 2005). Despite methodological questions, two observations gesture to the persuasiveness and capability of numerical information. First, there seemingly exists a lack of sophisticated quantified data concerning institutional structures of a global art world. This lack is displayed, on its surface, by recurrent work with the *Kunstkompass* system and the authors’ need for long-term observations. On the other hand, the recycling, crunching, and flipping of numerical data reveal its very communicative attractiveness. Even though the *Kunstkompass*’ methods and categories are highly contingent and problematic, the results can easily be reused for further sociological investigations.

Bettina Heintz notes that numerical information can be easily transported, understood, and combined (Heintz 2010; 2012). Individual qualities are transformed into standardized quantities through the process of commensuration, and the reduced information can travel fast and at low costs. Contemporary communication and computer technologies accelerate this process even further. Information in numerical form can then be used for mathematical procedures—to be processed further, combined, and reassembled within the common and discrete metrics of numeral systems and mathematics. Numerical communication can be described as a highly globalized and standardized media framework because numeral systems and mathematics are globally less differentiated than languages and other writing systems. All these observations underline Theodor Porter's description of quantification as "a technology of distance" (Porter 1995, ix). The *Kunstkompass* has offered quantified data for more than four decades, reducing information so it can be understood all over the world and remain accessible or usable for other procedures.

These communicative mechanisms for numerical information facilitate the process of establishing highly selective order in a complex world. A global perspective on potentially every artist, every institution, and every art magazine can be shaped by the *Kunstkompass*. Commensuration, Wendy Espeland and Mitchell Stevens note, "is a way to reduce and simplify disparate information into numbers that can easily be compared. This transformation allows people to quickly grasp, represent, and compare differences" (Espeland and Stevens 1998, 316). Heintz and Tobias Werron recently reassessed the process of numerical comparison for considerations about globalization. The *Kunstkompass* is a good example of the authors' assumption that globalization is mainly realized by communicated comparisons (Heintz & Werron 2011, 361f.). Global interrelations, coherences and evaluations need comparable units and applicable criteria to establish instructive connections and interrelations between socially, historically or geographically distanced phenomena. The *Kunstkompass* has implemented a global

and abstract framework, which includes specific forms of creative production and an evaluation of these constructed units within its own metric. This comparison facilitates globalization in the sense that within the ranking, potentially every artist, every museum, every gallery etc. could be included and evaluated in an 'objective' manner. However, the ranking itself defines the potential units, ignores others, and selectively favours or discriminates alternative art worlds. Nevertheless, a quick grasp on a highly complex world is enabled by the *Kunstkompass*. This is obviously not a 'real' world represented by the ranking, but some aspect of reality is reflected in the complex and contingent production of it. The use of numbers, categories, and 'objective' measurement veils radical, multi-layered reduction in a very persuasive way. This discursive persuasiveness is linked to the powerful modes of evaluation introduced by modernity, and the basic mechanisms of commensuration central to their use.

## Conclusion

Rankings or statistics are often established to understand complex situations or to provide processable data; complexity is therefore radically reduced and reformulated in the capture of numerical data. Bruno Latour (1986) describes this transformation of data and its visual, numerical, or linguistic representations in science as cascades. Individual decisions, which pile up these cascades, must be unfolded in order to understand the production and selectivity of a result represented by a single number. The results of the *Kunstkompass* could be shown when someone evaluates a particular artist as more important than another. But this approach fails to criticize the fundamental contingency in our construction of the art world and tacitly confirms its general mode of comparison. Rankings such as the *Kunstkompass* are important elements in understanding the social construction of the art world because they add numerical values, quasi-objectivity,

and a socially powerful form of evidence to already existing narratives. These narratives always have existential influence on the production, distribution, and reception of what is currently called "art". Since the *Kunstkompass* has made it back from business and been published in a genuine art magazine, it denies its market references and aims more than ever at mapping a particular and nuanced vision of the global contemporary art world.

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## PAUL BUCKERMANN

is a Ph.D. candidate and research assistant at the research training group *Automatisms* at Paderborn University (DE). He received a B.A. in political science and a M.A. in sociology from Bielefeld University (DE). Buckermann is working on a Ph.D project about quantification and evaluation in contemporary art worlds. Forthcoming English publication: "#@Accelerate@ Cyberpolitics? Structural Limits of Socialist Cybernetic Computing in the Soviet Union and the Chilean Project Cybersyn." In *Evolution of Consciousness and the Post-human Society*, edited by Tekla Aslanishvili et al., 2016 (forthc).

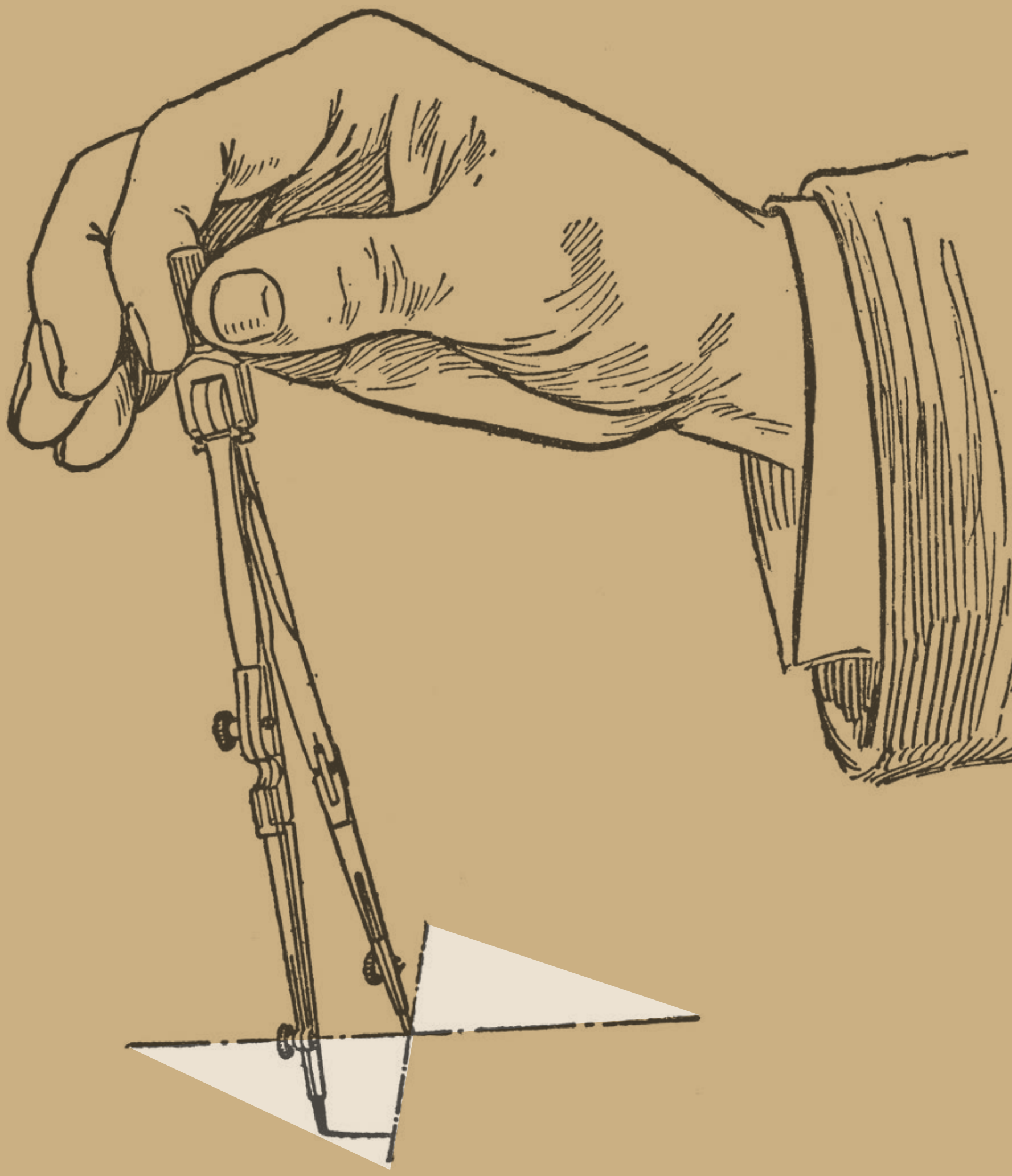
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CAOIMHE MORGAN-FEIR  
FRANCISCO-FERNANDO GRANADOS  
KATHERINE DENNIS

## CONTRIBUTORS

ALISON COOLEY  
HEATH BUNTING  
PAUL BUCKERMANN

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*From the Artist:*

“Working primarily with graphite and paper, I focus upon the connections between music and physics, through their underpinnings of mathematics. I initially began reading books on quantum physics, having great trouble understanding the concepts of abstract calculus, which delve into spaces of negative infinity and parallel dimensions. Hence, I created graphs and maps as a way to comprehend the information, leading me to find great similarities between quantum theory and music theory, as I had been trained in classical piano from a young age.”

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