

the elastic ruler

Montreal session

Marie-Pier Boucher & Dominic Gagnon – July 10, 2026

• ruler • measurement • DIY • elasticity • universe • Fluxus • space-time

Measurement is always a fiction from the metaphysical point of view. (Stengers 2010, 100).

We do not have units (*unités*) of measure, only multiplicities or varieties of measurement. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8).

The *Elastic Ruler* is a do-it-yourself (DIY) tool conceived of by artist and filmmaker Dominic Gagnon¹. Reminiscent of Fluxus event scores, it requires a large rubber elastic band, a ruler, and a pen. The elastic band needs to be cut to make a strip and then the ruler's standardized units are printed onto its surface.

The *Elastic Ruler* was used to trigger the imagination of the participants of *Outer Space and the City* (MIT, 2019), a research-creation workshop whose objective was to sketch artistic propositions that creatively assess the complex entanglement and reciprocal tensions between space exploration and urbanization. While the calculation of the Earth's circumference—arrived at by extrapolating from the distance measured between two locations—gave rise to the nautical mile and the meter, the workshop used the ruler to pose a methodological question: What alternative regimes of measurement and ecologies of correspondences between the urban and the cosmic might emerge from the ruler's elasticity?

The *Montreal Session* traces the ruler's pathway for measuring the complex relationship between extraterrestrial space and the city (Graham 2016; Graham and Marvin, 1996 and 2001; Bischel, 2020). It maps a trajectory that extends from the ruler's making in the studio to its wandering in the city of Montreal, and up to its visit to the Planetarium in suburban Laval.

The visual strip diagrams an urban *dérive* (Debord 1958) that *performs* a relationship between the cosmic and the urban by means of elasticity. As the sequence shifts from image to imagination, the assemblage gives rise to a geography attuned to the expansion of the universe.

The *Elastic Ruler Montreal Session* makes it apparent that the distance between galaxies, planets, and stars is expanding, stretching like a rubber band. It generates affective correspondences between objects, temporalities, people, and locations. As a technique of critical measuring, it reinvests the etymology of method as "a traveling," fostering informal trajectories driven by situated (Haraway 1988) acts of measurement.

By shifting the focus from results to process, the *Elastic Ruler* exposes measurement as constructed, revealing and destabilizing its underlying structures (standards, scales, authority) while opening them up to experimentation. Building on measurement as an agential and performative practice rather than a neutral act of representation, it shows how "the object of measurement is not fixed" (Barad, 2007, 114), thereby positioning measurement as a world-making practice in which matter and meaning meet, insofar as "matter and meaning do not preexist, but rather are co-constituted via measurement" (2012, 6). By refusing calibration, the *Elastic Ruler* forces the measuring device itself to become an object of inquiry, echoing Barad's claim that "the measurement interaction can be accounted for only if the measuring device is itself treated as an object, defying its purpose as a measuring instrument" (2007, 114).

The *Elastic Ruler* is inscribed within the genealogy of critical making as a "means for projecting oneself into an abstraction" (Ratto 2011, 254), rather than as a tool for illustrating a concept. It is a "generative apparatus," a "mode of imaginative generalization ... infused with common sense" (Lamarre 2023, xiv) that formulates a methodological provocation: What might happen if all sizes and distances were considered equal?

The *Elastic Ruler* operationalizes this question as a technique (Manning and Massumi 2014) and a practice. While conventional measurement leads to determinations and comparisons, the *Elastic Ruler* introduces iterative variation, agency, and reflexivity into the act. Precisely because it is not calibrated to a 1:1 scale, it produces comical measurements, scales, and perspectives that are intentionally identical. By repeating the same measurement, it scrambles hierarchies to render measurement uncanny and obsolete, fun and weird. With the *Elastic Ruler*, each extension, each distortion reveals rather than conceals the conditions and purposes of measurement.

The *Elastic Ruler* can be practiced by anyone in any location. Make yourself a "ruler," and instead of simply reproducing inherited standards, subject them to interrogation, and perhaps even humour!

Materials: Large rubber elastic band, ruler, pen.

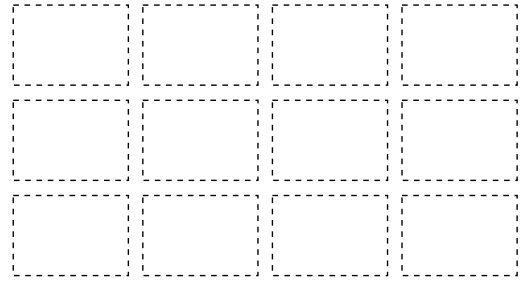
Directions: Cut the elastic band to make one strip, imprint the ruler's standardized units onto its surface. You're good to go!

1. The *Elastic Ruler* was originally a gift from Dominic Gagnon to his friend, Fluxus artist Jean Dupuy.

This contribution was published on www.able-journal.org in a story.able format:

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credits

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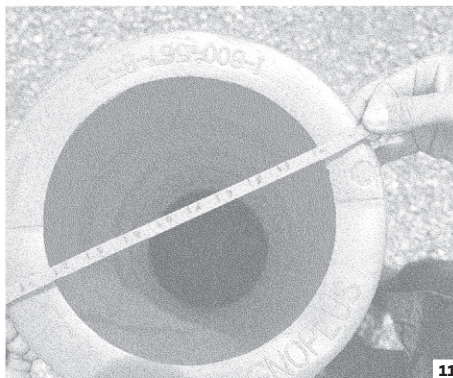
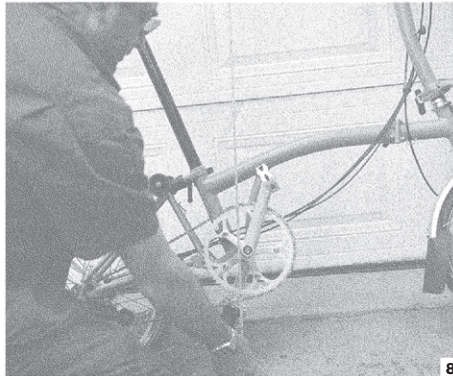
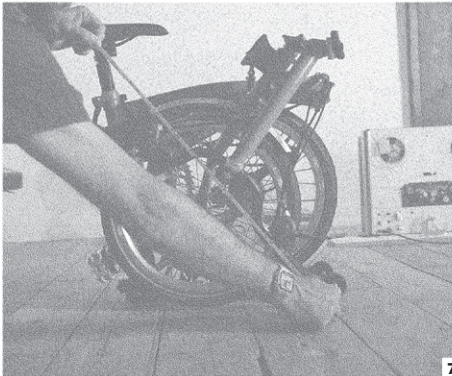
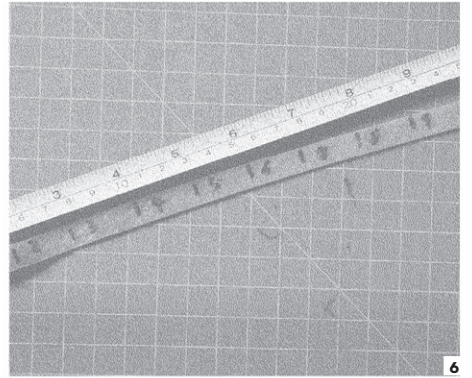
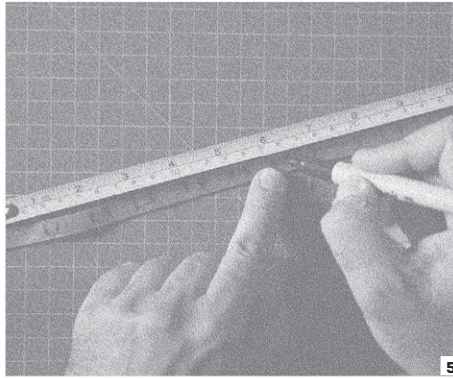
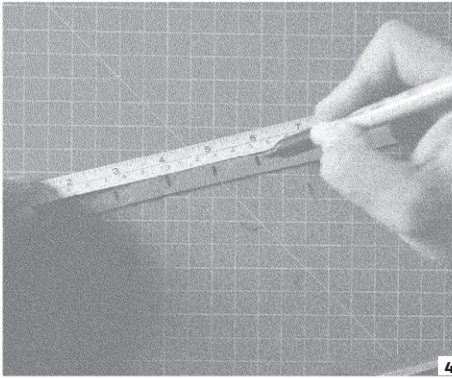
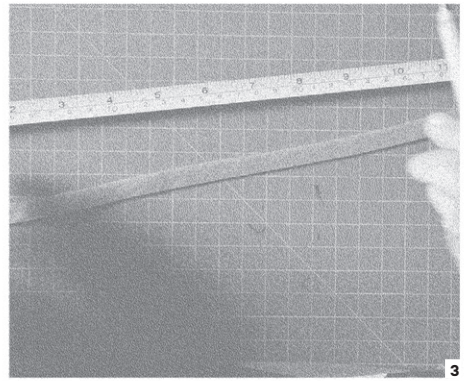
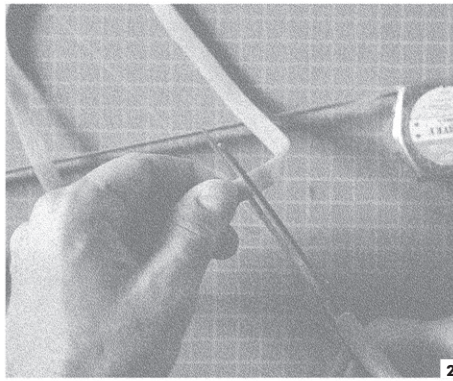
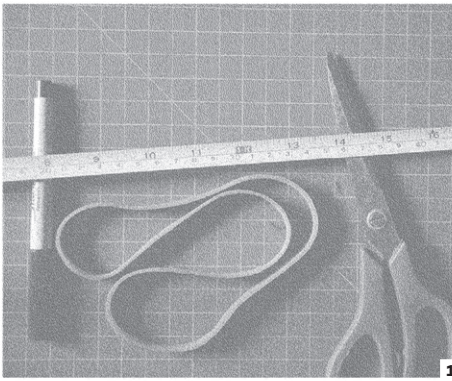
financial support: University of Toronto

original idea: Dominic Gagnon

about the authors

Marie-Pier Boucher (PhD) is Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto. She is co-editor of *Space Feminisms: People, Planets, Power* (Bloomsbury Press), *Being Material* (MIT Press), as well as co-editor of *Heteropolis* and *Adaptive Actions Madrid*. Her exhibitions include: the Canadian Cultural Center Paris, Ars Electronica, MUTEK, SAT, the Rotterdam Architecture Biennale, Centre George Pompidou, the Madrid Biennale, and Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen.

Dominic Gagnon is an artist and filmmaker. His films and artworks have been presented at: Visions du Réel, Rotterdam Film Festival, Sheffield Film Festival, CPH Docs, DocLisboa, Festival dei Popoli, Cinémathèque Québécoise, Flaherty Film Seminar, National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, HMKV, Centre George Pompidou, and Musée de Louvre. He is the founder of the Collective Au travail / At work.





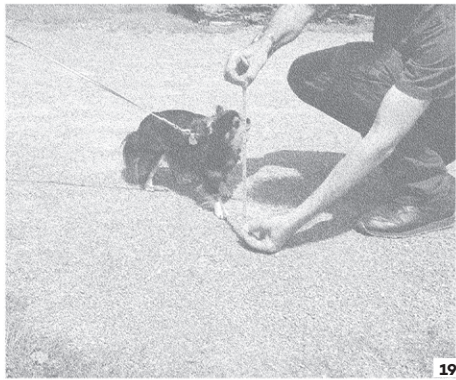
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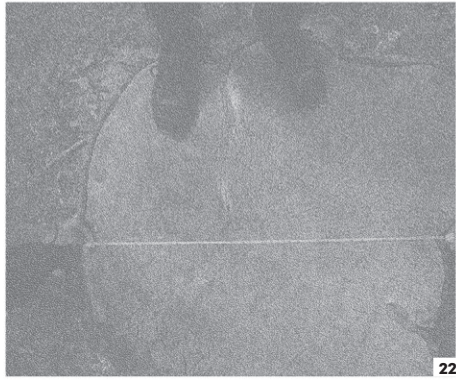
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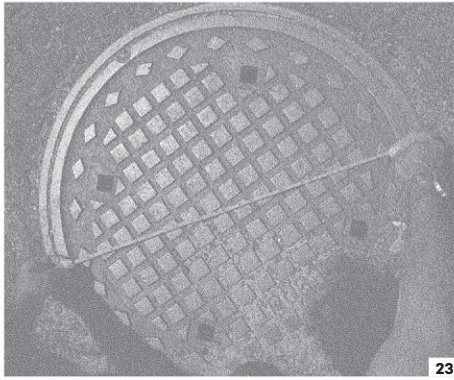
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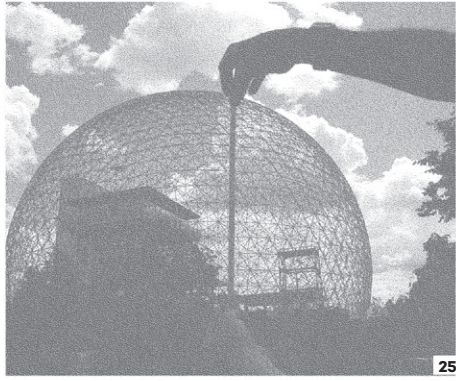
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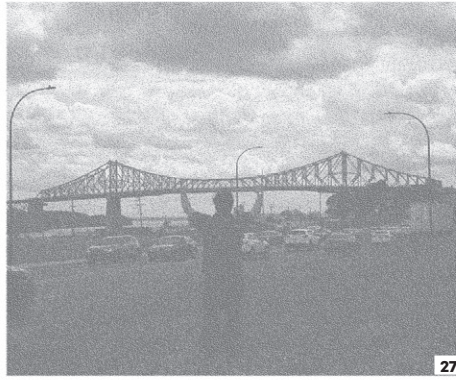
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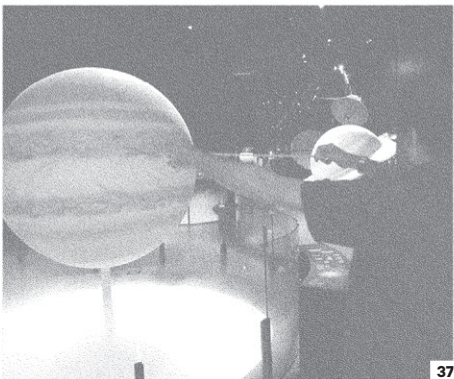
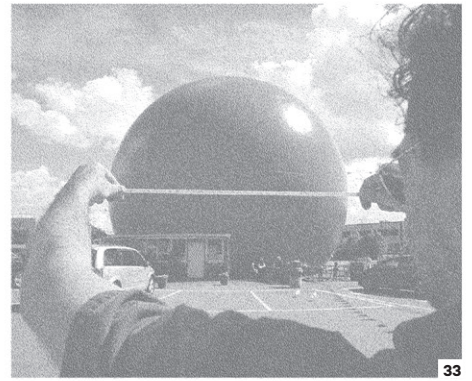
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