GALILEO'S FINGER

BY JEN HUTTON

☞ In a freestanding vitrine in the Museum of the History of Science in Florence, Italy, past the assembled collections of scientific curiosities from the Medici and Lorraine dynasties, a finger that was once attached to the hand of the renowned astronomer and scientist now stands in an egg-shaped glass container, shriveled and upright like a perverse swizzle stick.

☞ Before he was deemed a heretic for supporting heliocentrism, and sentenced to house arrest in 1633 (I envision the Inquisitor's pointed finger, emphatically gesturing towards the door), Galileo Galilei traced this finger across the night sky, chasing comets.

☞ Through his telescope, the universe slid in and out of focus.

☞ When he pointed it skyward, he revealed stars that were seemingly not there before, mountains on the moon, the phases of Venus, and little dots on the surface of the sun.

☞ In 1737, ninety-five years after his death, and after the Catholic Church made peace and moved on, Galileo's body was exhumed and moved to a more venerated burial site within Florence's Basilica of Santa Croce—less two fingers, a thumb, and the last remaining tooth in his jaw.

☞ The practice of removing body parts from the recently martyred or famously dead wasn't unusual in 18th century Italy, or prior. To the museum today, that sole finger beckons the crowds through the entrance: geeks, gawkers, and necrotourists alike.

☞ You could say that the task of observational astronomy, the field that Galileo is credited with establishing, still involves a lot of pointing.

☞ Given to the first finger of the hand, the word for "pointing" in Latin is "index."

☞ Relatedly, an index, or manicule, is a nearly archaic typographic mark used in the margin of a text to indicate a line or paragraph of importance. I admit that its appearance here is a blatant gimmick, but a bulleted list preserves a sense of order.

☞ Brian Groombridge's work leans towards a similar sense of order. His sculptures, installations, and wall works employ a strict rationality: hard edges, cool metals, and bright, smooth finishes. If there is decoration, it is austere. If there is text, it is extremely concise or merely a label. It's as if every idea Groombridge materializes first goes through a Bauhausian filter and then distills into a mute thing that vibrates in place.

☞ Despite their reductive appearances, Groombridge's work holds an indexicality or reference to the real. The forms are not entirely arbitrary; they are rooted in sources—facts, data, measurements; some common, some not—or a system of his own devising. There's a *there* there—you just need to look harder to see it.

☞ On a rectangular aluminum panel slicked with black paint, a sequence of words repeats vertically in stark, white letters. Coincidentally or not, OBSERVE and DESCRIBE, from Groombridge's untitled 1993 work, are the carrying principles of observational astronomy, or an abridged version of how one might conduct empirical research. Or visit an art gallery. We look; we name it. Even to a stationary

viewer, the verbs' repetition, mantra-like, suggest a sense of motion, perhaps a pan or visual sweep, but for this writer, they connote a zoom that examines successive levels of magnification. Much like how Galileo's telescope opened up the heavens, as we look closer, there's more to see.

☞ After hearing about the distance-viewing apparatuses that had been developed and patented in the Netherlands a year earlier, Galileo fashioned his own over several days in 1609 using a tube of lead and hand-ground lenses. Over the next few months, he quickly improved on his design. One such model, in the Museum's collection, is fabricated from thin strips of wood and covered with red leather and gold tooling. The narrow instrument has an optical power of twenty times beyond normal vision—a vast improvement over the work of the Dutch— and is almost one metre in length.

☞ You might be interested to know that until very recently, the metre was represented by a section of a torque-resistant bar milled from an alloy of platinum and iridium. The section's length is equal to one ten-millionth of the distance between the North Pole and the equator along the meridian line that runs through Paris, an undertaking that was painstakingly measured by two French surveyors over a six-year period in the late 18th century. The bar sits in a climate-controlled vault at the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (Bureau International des Poids et Mesures, or BIPM) in Sevres, France. The BIPM's official term for such an object is an "artifact."

☞ Relatedly, an artifact is defined as an object of particular anthropological significance.

☞ I suspect the artifacts of the BIPM—with their polished surfaces and reductive qua Minimalist shapes—could easily slide unnoticed into Groombridge's studio.

☞ Likewise, though they sit at another aesthetic extreme, the exquisite and highly crafted scientific marvels housed in the Museum of the History of Science—wooden armillary spheres and quadrants, brass astrolabes—would be equally at home, at least as a set of anachronisms whose purposes can be speculated upon.

☞ All of these things—measuring one-quarter of the Earth's circumference, the prototypes, the astrolabes—seem to stem from a need to precisely quantify the world: to trace the real, see how everything fits together, and categorize it. A need to look, and then name it. Groombridge too, but his names are sometimes hard to pronounce.

☞ In Galileo's time, Jesuit scholars set scientific standards in accordance with scripture.

☞ Of course, as Groombridge and numerous existing examples indicate, the tools and standards of science, particularly measurement, are based on logical systems as well as completely arbitrary values.

☞ The breadth of a finger was, for a time, an accepted unit equal to about 3/4 of an inch. Two fingers' worth of whisky is a stiff drink. Hands, thumbs, feet, and stones, are still fundamental units of measurement, all derived from the visible, tangible world.

☞ As time goes on, science seems to be shifting its emphasis from the business of what we can see to what we can't. Scanning the skies has been trumped by more speculative, invisible reasons for celestial phenomena derived from quantum physics and strings of calculations.

☞ In 1983 it was determined that the length of a metre would be more accurately defined as the distance that light travels in a vacuum in a fraction of a second, mostly given the impracticalities of trying to uphold universal standards to a metal bar locked in a frigid vault in France.

☞ When Galileo discovered the four largest moons orbiting Jupiter, he ingratiated himself to the ruling head of the Medicis and his future patron, Cosimo II, by dedicating them to him and his brothers. The light from the largest, Jupiter III (which was later renamed Ganymede) had roughly traveled about one and a half billion kilometers by the time it filtered through Galileo's telescope.

☞ I do not know how to name the light if it already has a number.

☞ A possible rule of thumb is the narrower our standards are, the less we are able to see.

☞ And while Groombridge's pointing can sometimes lead us astray, it is never disingenuous. An onlooker might not notice that the eight wall panels comprising *Tati*, 2000,—all varying permutations of an L-shape—each occupy the same surface area because they are distracted by the playful yellow indicators dancing around their edges.

☞ Or sometimes the answer is right in front of us, but cloaked: on another wall, the three panels that make up Untitled, 1997, are pushed to the edges and along coordinates relative to the titles printed on their surfaces: INTERSECT (pushed into a corner), UNION (hung just below center height), and DIVIDE (settled at the bottom at the wall's midpoint).

☞ Sometimes his work is a semblance of elucidation, such as Untitled, 2002: a sharp rectangular recess in the wall that casually displays three wedge-shaped blocks labeled BOOKS, MAPS, and CHARTS, and nothing else, all stand-ins for other representations of the universe, as if they were placeholders for a library not yet filled.

☞ But maybe cracking their inner code isn't the point.

☞ Despite the semiotic lucidity of Groombridge's work, seemingly built upon a set of textbook Platonic universals, they remain elusive. Verging on conclusions, works like these merely pose another hypothesis.

☞ Perhaps all this explaining (and not explaining) is satisfying a curiosity, or a need to remain in a state of wonder.

YYZ's note: the author has deliberately omitted all sources.

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JEN HUTTON completed her BA in Studio Art at the University of Guelph in 2004. She currently resides outside Los Angeles where she is working towards her MFA at the California Institute of the Arts. She has exhibited her work at MKG127, Toronto (2011), Parker Branch, London, ON (2010), Harbourfront Centre, Toronto (2010), Access Gallery, Vancouver (2009), Blackwood Gallery, Mississauga (2009), and Truck, Calgary (2009). Her reviews and critical writing have appeared in *C Magazine*, *Border Crossings*, *Canadian Art*, and on *Artforum.com*.

BRIAN GROOMBRIDGE has been exhibiting since 1978, his first solo show being at YYZ in 1979. Groombridge attended both Sheridan College (1972) and the Ontario College of Art where he participated in the O.C.A. NY Off-Campus Study Program (1977). A selection of his recent exhibitions include, *Like-Minded*, Plug In ICA, Winnipeg (2012), *Model (interior) of Piet Munson House, Utrecht, 1922-24*, Convenience Gallery, Toronto (2010), Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto (2008), *Me and Them*, Kenderdine Art Gallery, Saskatoon (2007), and *The-Cold City Years*, The Power Plant, Toronto (2005). Groombridge is represented by Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.