

# To Scale

*Edited by Joan Kee and Emanuele Lugli*



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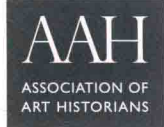
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# Chapter I

## Scale to Size: An Introduction

*Joan Kee and Emanuele Lugli*

Scale hides in plain sight. As much is made clear in Cildo Meireles's photograph of *Southern Cross*, the work made by the Brazilian artist between 1969 and 1970 (plate 1). Nine millimetres square, the wooden cube is so apparently tiny as to make it impossible not to think initially of its size. But its position on the tip of a finger calls specific attention to its scale, or rather to the experience that arises out of seeing the cube resting precariously on the tip of a finger, at the very point one expects it to succumb to gravity and fall away entirely.

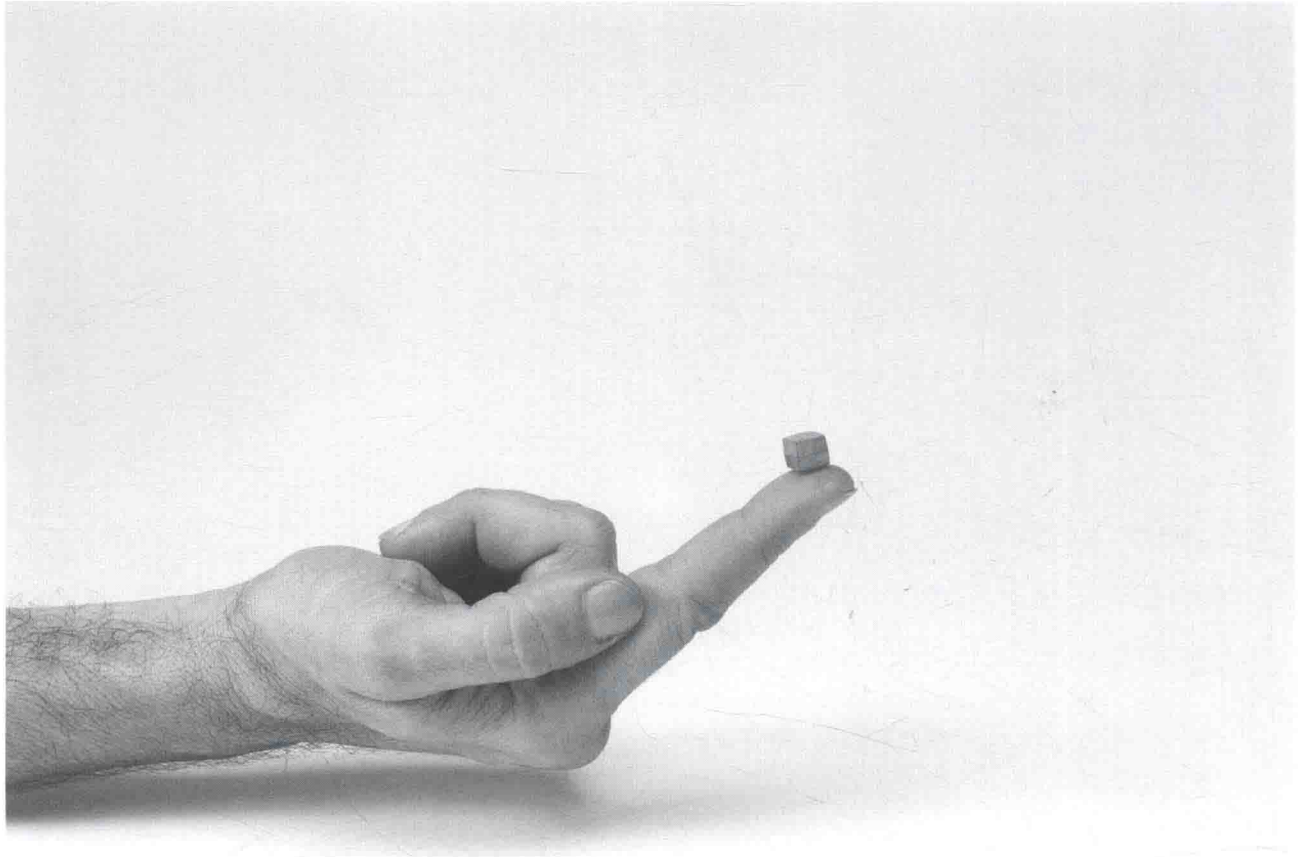
Of its proportions, Meireles claimed they were both an attempt to draw 'attention' to the 'oversimplification imposed by the proselytising missionaries – essentially the Jesuits – on the cosmogony of the Tupi Indians', and a desire to move towards disappearance.<sup>1</sup> *Southern Cross* is made of oak and pine according to the Tupi belief that rubbing these woods together would produce a divine, and thus scaleless, presence. But the extended index finger unfurls to project the wooden cube into space, doing exactly the opposite of what Meireles claims about its disappearance. The hand presents *Southern Cross* not as a specimen for observation, but as a singular presence worthy of specific attention.

What exactly is the scale of *Southern Cross*? Perched on a finger or hand, *Southern Cross* appears so magnified and detached from any contextual reference as to invoke the divine presence to which Meireles's use of oak and pine alludes. The image reinforces the anthropocentric bias present in discussions of size and scale in visual art. 'Yes, the actual cube is really too small to be seen, and so we are blown up to help you forget that fact', the photographs seem to say.<sup>2</sup> When *Southern Cross* is photographed on an exhibition floor, the perspective from above merely confirms our own uprightness looking down at the world resting literally at our feet.

Another photograph has us look at the work as it sits on the floor, but from an obliquely lateral perspective, so that we seem to look with, and not upon, it (plate 2). A man's shoe and part of his lower leg appear enormous, but blurred and in the background. *Southern Cross* appears to bear out the truth of its name; its smallness ironically enables it to command its own area in a seemingly vast space. The suggestion recalls how Land Art was celebrated in 1960s America; works by artists like Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson appeared to demonstrate supreme 'indifference' toward 'one of the oldest and most solid notions – that of the human body as the point of reference for all measure'.<sup>3</sup> Viewers who encounter *Southern Cross* may well step away from it, not only because they recognize the object as an artwork, but because they intuit how the scale to which *Southern Cross* refers fundamentally

**Detail from Michelangelo  
Buonarroti, *Madonna of the  
Staircase*, c. 1490 (plate 3).**

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**I Cildo Meireles, *Cruzeiro de Sul* [Southern Cross], 1969–70. Wooden cube, one section pine, one section oak, 0.9 × 0.9 × 0.9 cm. Rio de Janeiro: Collection of the artist. © Cildo Meireles. Photo: Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.**

diverges from the measures according to which human scale is generally considered. The cube is somehow incongruent with a viewer's arm span, eye level, height, or even outstretched fingers.

As these examples briefly illustrate, scale has a way of displacing the viewer. Its ability to do so further depends on the medium of expression, an issue central to this special issue whose title raises questions about what it means to create an object 'to scale'. Broadly defined as the relationship between the actual physical magnitude of a thing and the way that magnitude is represented, scale requires that we think of how size enables a material and physical entity to function convincingly as an artwork. Although the need to distinguish clearly between size (absolute dimensions) and scale (proportions) has been emphasized on more than one occasion, the production of scale often depends on various articulations of size which themselves are far from stable.<sup>4</sup> As Anne Wagner observes, enlarging or reducing the dimensions of an object can take place according to the most rigorously observed standards, 'yet the effects of these alterations are not necessarily either stable or predictable'.<sup>5</sup> Further complicating the discussion is the distinction between absolute dimensions, or what might be called explicit size, and implicit size, or what the arrangement of parts in a given artwork suggests to a viewer about its proportions.

Scale therefore opens up onto an almost algorithmic process of recognizing not only how things and people occupy a given space in relation to one another, but also how artworks mediate the relations between things and people. What kinds of assumptions are inherent, for instance, when an object is scaled according to the proportions of an adult viewer? Or to those of a child? Or even to those of an entity that may not be human at all? In this same vein, to whom are particular scales directed and what do such scales imply about their users?



The plurality of responses to these questions provides another reason why this issue is called 'To Scale', a title which should be read less as an infinitive than as a proposition of movement, one that recognizes scale as a dynamic concept which humans cannot always control.<sup>6</sup> Of particular importance are the ways in which scale transforms and is transformed in relation to the affective sphere, to the practical and social functions of objects, to the conceptualizations of measurements and other systems of ordering, and to techniques of imaging and reproduction. Consider, for example, the various photographs of *Southern Cross* that produce different, and often competing, viewing experiences. Olivier Ligon addresses the medium and formats of photography and their profound effects on scale in 'Photography and Scale: Projection, Exhibition, Collection', a survey of scale in art photography from its beginning to its widespread acceptance by the museum and gallery worlds of the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> He argues against reproducibility as the key paradigm for thinking about scale in photography, instead proposing what he terms a 'flexible reproducibility', one better equipped to account for how the medium of photography interrogated the very idea of a picture's scale.<sup>8</sup>

The vastness of these questions necessarily requires multiple approaches, a core assumption behind 'Size Matters: Questions of Scale in Art History', a conference held at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence in November 2012 and from which this special issue originates. It brought together specialists in Asian and African as well as European and American art who discussed a wide variety of topics, from the question of unmappable places such as the Garden of Eden to the relationship between artistic depictions of the built environment and their consequent impact on architecture in medieval Japan. The diversity of conference participants and attendees prompted considerable discussion over the instability of terms commonly used to refer to size and scale.

Yet the discussions also reflected the extent to which the issue of scale could join specialists working in and with different geographical and chronological areas. Indeed, the resulting agreements and disagreements regarding various approaches



2 Cildo Meireles, exhibition  
view of *Cruzeiro de Sul*, Mexico  
City: Museo Universitario  
Arte Contemporáneo  
(MUAC), 2009. Photo:  
Cristiano Oliveira.