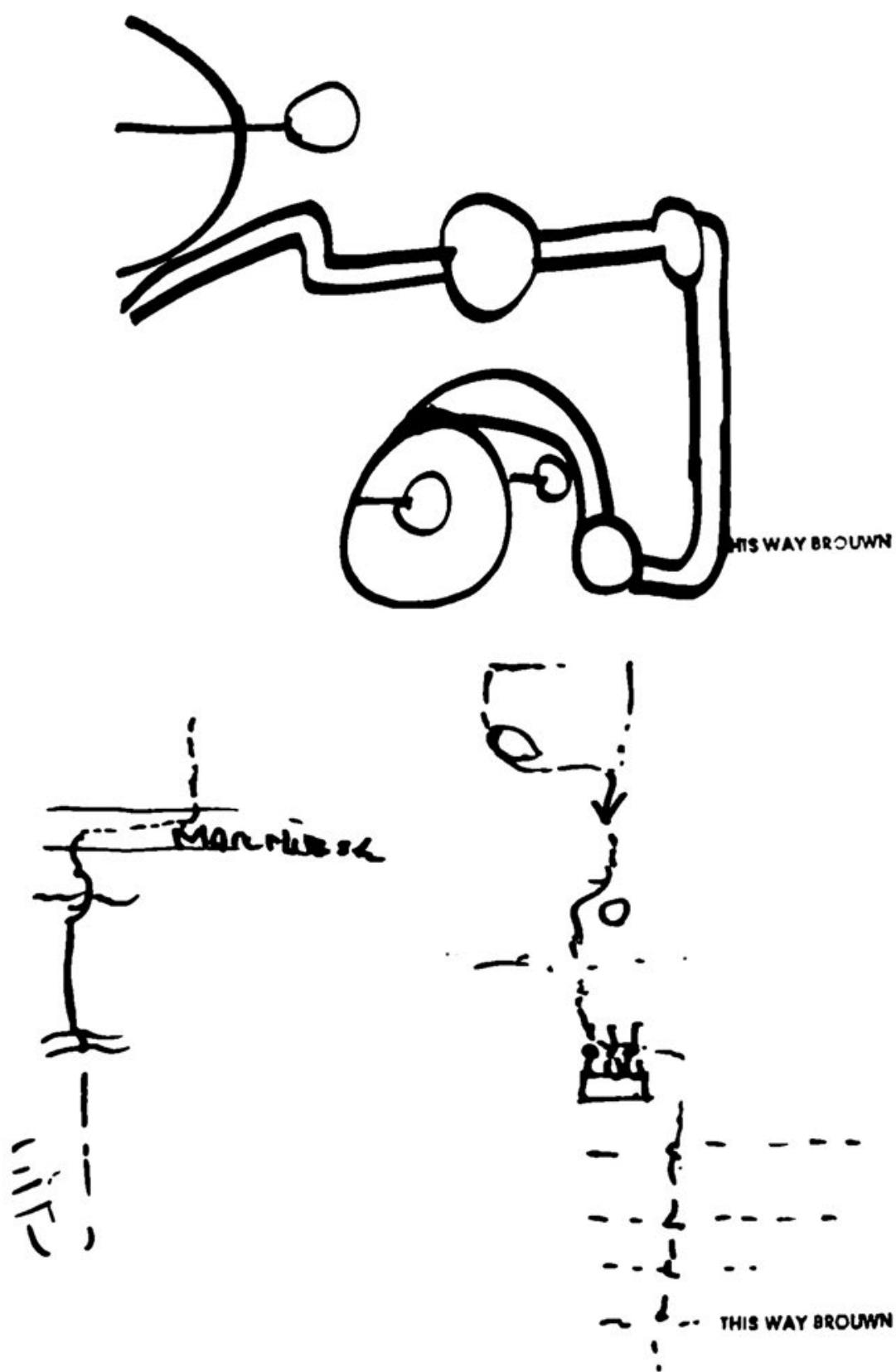


## Concepts of Distance

Photographs. In one, dating from Valentine's Day in 1964 and documenting a performance titled *I Have Hunger*, Stanley Brouwn stands before a small audience, wearing a suit, holding up a spoon and knife. Some kind of cord appears wrapped around his face, pinching and warping his features; a male onlooker looks disturbed, a woman amused. In another picture, taken the same day, the artist is clearly wearing wooden skis but otherwise his bent-over body is a blur. There are bottles on the ground and he's enacting, or making, something called *Brouwncocktail*. In a third image we see him in a crowd, over the shoulder of another man, a reel-to-reel tape recorder between them. Translating the image's Dutch caption clarifies that he's inviting guests at the opening of his exhibition at Galerie Patio, Neu-Isenburg, near Frankfurt, to speak into the machine, after which it'll be wrapped in clear plastic—as other photographs evidence—and their voices played back. In a fourth, a huge bunch of bananas appears to float before him while he holds an implement that looks, through the grainy monochrome murk, like a flyswatter. In a fifth he's on the ground, ringed by feet. There appears to be a magnifying glass at his side. He seems to be measuring something.

These photographs shouldn't exist. They were published in a slim book—a booklet, really—documenting the Dutch art scene of the period, a publication of whose every copy Brouwn apparently tried to destroy. (Outside of these and a handful of others in the same volume, only three or four images of him are in circulation.) Perhaps someone to whom I mentioned my interest in the artist shouldn't have skipped gleefully to the bookshelf, handing me something that had been kept hidden from Brouwn. Perhaps I shouldn't have taken out my iPhone like a microfilming spy. It's against the spirit of the work, which blurs with the life and professional decisions of a figure who virtually never consents to interviews and never, ever, to portraits; who has insisted since 1972 that no images of his work or biographical information be published (an exception, for documenta in that year, was laced with inaccuracies, misspelling his name and Paramaribo, his birthplace in Suriname); whose typical contribution to group



Stanley Broun, *This Way Broun*, 1960

exhibition catalogues is accordingly a blank page; and whose consummate vanishing into his art asks of his collaborators a "response" like that of his Berlin gallery, Konrad Fischer, when I first e-mailed to request that I might come in and look at their holdings of Brouwn's artist books. That is, pristine silence.

In the images, Brouwn—dark skin, professorial spectacles, big guileless eyes, receding close-cropped hair—is around twenty-nine years old. Seven years earlier, in 1957, he emigrated from Suriname, the tiny South American country and, at the time, Dutch colony, where he was born in 1935. The year of his arrival in Amsterdam, he appears on the radar, contributing a drawing and poem to the journal *Spijtaal*, and features in the next four issues the following year. Somewhere around this time he makes his first (no longer extant) artwork, polyethylene bags filled with rubbish. Somewhere around this time, too, he connects—importantly, it would seem, for what he'll go on to do—to Nul, the Dutch cousin of the German ZERO group, which argued that art should be purged of color, feeling and individual expression. In 1960, as well as mailing out declarations that Amsterdam shoe stores are works of art by Stanley Brouwn, he initiates *This Way Brouwn* (1960–70). Still his best-known work and the first evidence of a will to displace authorship onto the audience, this is the start, too, of Brouwn's fascination with walking. For this project he asks passersby on the streets for directions and has them draw a map—each of these he stamps, like the refractory bureaucrat he has often been compared to, with the phrase "this way brouwn."

Two years later, Brouwn holds his first gallery show. A year after that, in 1963, he materializes on Dutch television in the arts program *View of a City in 24 Hours*, placing white paper sheets on the street for pedestrians to step on. Their footprints, their walking, make up the work—Brouwn lays the sheets, then returns later to gather them up. That same year he produces a different kind of focused defiling: a book, in an edition of one hundred, of pink silk tissue paper stained with lemon juice, the splotches only visible when heated. (Tragicomic apocrypha assert that, years later, a dealer trying to sell a rare copy is stymied when a cleaner, thinking it trash, throws it away.) Another book appears the following year, *Brouwnhairs* (1964)—seventy-six pages, a single hair of Brouwn's on each page—and a third, *BROUWNTOYS 4000 AD*, circa 1964. A 2014 photo spread for a feature by



novelist-playwright Oscar van den Boogaard in *frtze* magazine reproduces two pages from the latter. On one, in violet capitals around a circle, is this:

ENLARGE THE MICROBES AND VIRUSES IN  
THE CIRCLE 5000.000 TIMES.  
GIVE THEM TO YOUR CHILDREN TO PLAY WITH.

"Don't use the Brouwn toys before the year 4000 AD," Brouwn requests, or cautions. A half century on, as much as anything else, it is the idea, the cortical stretch achieved via language, of projecting a couple of millennia into the future that arrests me. For much of the rest of his career Brouwn will be beguiled by concepts of measure, by description as shorthand for extreme extension. He will use existing means of measurement, self-invented ones, arcane ones, and notions of travel, distance, and scale, as a way of increasing awareness of being in space, being with *others* in space, and, it would seem, communing with infinity. In Lucy R. Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 ...* (1973) we find a description of a 1969 piece from a photolithographed bulletin published by Amsterdam gallery Art & Project, *Art and Project Bulletin 11: Prospect '69*. Below another bare circle is the sentence, laid out with poetical line breaks: "Walk during a few moments very consciously in a certain direction; simultaneously an infinite number of living creatures in the universe are moving in an infinite number of directions."<sup>1</sup>

Two years prior to this, in a rare interview—quoted by Van den Boogaard—Brouwn apparently said of *This Way Brouwn*, speaking in the third person as if he were an agency of sorts: "Brouwn makes people discover the streets they use every day. A farewell from the city, the earth, before we make the great leap into space, before we discover outer space."<sup>2</sup> It was 1967, a year before *2001: A Space Odyssey* and two before "Space Odyssey" when space fever reigned, before governmental space programs closed down. Five years before that, the first human had risen into orbit. Two years before, the first spacewalk. One year before, the first unmanned landing on another celestial body. Two years later, man on the moon. In the year of *BROUWNTOYS 4000 AD*, Brouwn composed a manifesto for the *Institute of Contemporary Arts Bulletin*:

4000 A.D.

When science and art are entirely  
melted together to something new  
When the people will have lost their  
remembrance and thus will have  
no past, only future.

When they will have to discover everything  
every moment again and again  
When they will have lost their need for  
Contact with others ...

... Then they will live in a world of only  
Colour, light, space, time, sounds and movement  
Then colour light space time  
sounds and movement will be free

No music

No theatre

No art

No

There will be sound

Colour

Light

Space

Time

Movement<sup>3</sup>

This is travel too, of course. As was Brouwn's *The Total Number of My Steps* (1972), for which, Christophe Cherix has written, "the artist planned consecutive trips in twenty-one cities, among them Oslo, Addis Ababa, Tokyo, and Dublin, which would be solely defined by the number of footsteps taken in each location."<sup>4</sup> In the longer *afghanistan-zambia* (1971) he indexed alphabetically the countries he planned to visit, leaving syntactical voids (e.g., "the total number of my steps in      monaco.")

Later, Brouwn would record his movements in cities, using a hand counter to tabulate them on index cards to be stored in metal filing cabinets. Later, too—from 1976 onward—he would not only use preexisting and self-invented divisions of distance, such as the SB-el, the SB-foot, and the SB-footstep, but also the ancient Egyptian—dating from 2500 BC—measurement of the royal cubit. (See, for example, his 1999 book *1 x 1 Royal Cubit*.)

In *Portraits of Spaces* (2001), published for a show at the Strasbourg Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Brouwn's idea of a "portrait" is to list the dimensions of the museum's rooms. A great deal of leeway is factored in; it intersects with precision and control.



Draw, in your mind's eye, a capacious circle. That might be Brouwn's work: at once theoretic and defined and with abundant space—for you, for anyone—in the middle, because apparent emptiness is never really empty, not when circumscribed as carefully as this. Yes, there is the grounding conceit of re-enchanting physical experience, against its dissolution by technology: a handful of quotes accredited to Brouwn in publicity materials for his 2005 exhibition at MACBA, in Barcelona, include the statement: "Never before have distances been so meaningless as nowadays. Increasingly more people fly long distance several times a year. The validity of the concept of distance is being still further eroded. In my work distances are recharged again. They regain meaning."<sup>5</sup> But then there's the question of what it means for meaningfulness to be restored to distance. So here's me, in the open tracts of Brouwn's work, and here's what it makes me think of.

In 1972, when the artist—who, to reiterate, hails from a former Dutch colony, one whose economy was founded on the slavery of Africans who were beaten, whipped, and starved, and that was hardly heavenly when Brouwn left in the 1950s—was planning his steps and thinking about space and (very probably) ancient Egypt, the African-American musician Sun Ra was making his film *Space Is the Place*. According to its plot, the sui generis jazz bandleader and his self-styled Arkestra left this planet in 1969 and settled on another one. Egyptology and sci-fi—here constituting a double movement away from a racist present, back to origins (however much the "black Egyptian" thesis has been questioned) and into the interstellar future—were a huge part of black nationalist culture in the 1960s and '70s, from Ra naming himself after the Egyptian god of the sun, to Earth Wind & Fire's populist takes on the same material, to funk bandleader George Clinton's regular invocations of space travel, the extraterrestrial mother ship as an upgraded low swinging sweet chariot.

Meanwhile, in one 1970 exhibition entitled "Walking through Cosmic Rays," at the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, Germany, Brouwn refused to exhibit any art objects at all, so that viewers could experience the "cosmic rays"—debatable, this, since cosmic rays are high-velocity subatomic particles, radiation striking from space, that are supposed to only exist in the earth's upper atmosphere—in the building. (Sun Ra's own first band was called the Cosmic Rays.) A wall text read:

how empty is this space?  
all the planets, thus including planet earth,  
constantly find themselves in a "shower" of cosmic rays  
in this space, as in every building on earth, it is also  
"raining cosmic rays"  
walking consciously through the invisible cosmic rays  
in this space confirms, intensifies  
the presence of this space

Brouwn has, so far as I know, never talked about these overlaps—again, for decades he has almost never spelled anything out—and it's purely a hypothesis, though with a certain amount of evidential propulsion. Consider *I Have Hunger*, which the artist would evidently rather we forgot; consider Cherix's neat summation that Brouwn's work conveys "a sense of inner travel that keeps the outside world at bay,"<sup>6</sup> or Van den Boogaard's "Brouwn is a space traveller and wants the viewers to become space travellers too."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps ask why the African-American artist David Hammons—whose work, as we'll see in the next chapter, is explicitly charged with racial issues while the artist himself determinedly remains, in many ways, removed from the art world—counts himself an admirer of Brouwn. Think of black and white: Brouwn diminishing himself in catalogues to the white page, or his acts that involve darkening something white—laying a brown hair on a white page in an artist's book; leaving white paper to be darkened with dirt. Think of Hammons's works involving darkening white sheets of paper with Harlem dirt from the surface of a thrown basketball. Think of Brouwn's identification with brown, both in a work like *Brouwnhairs* and elsewhere. (A video fragment reportedly

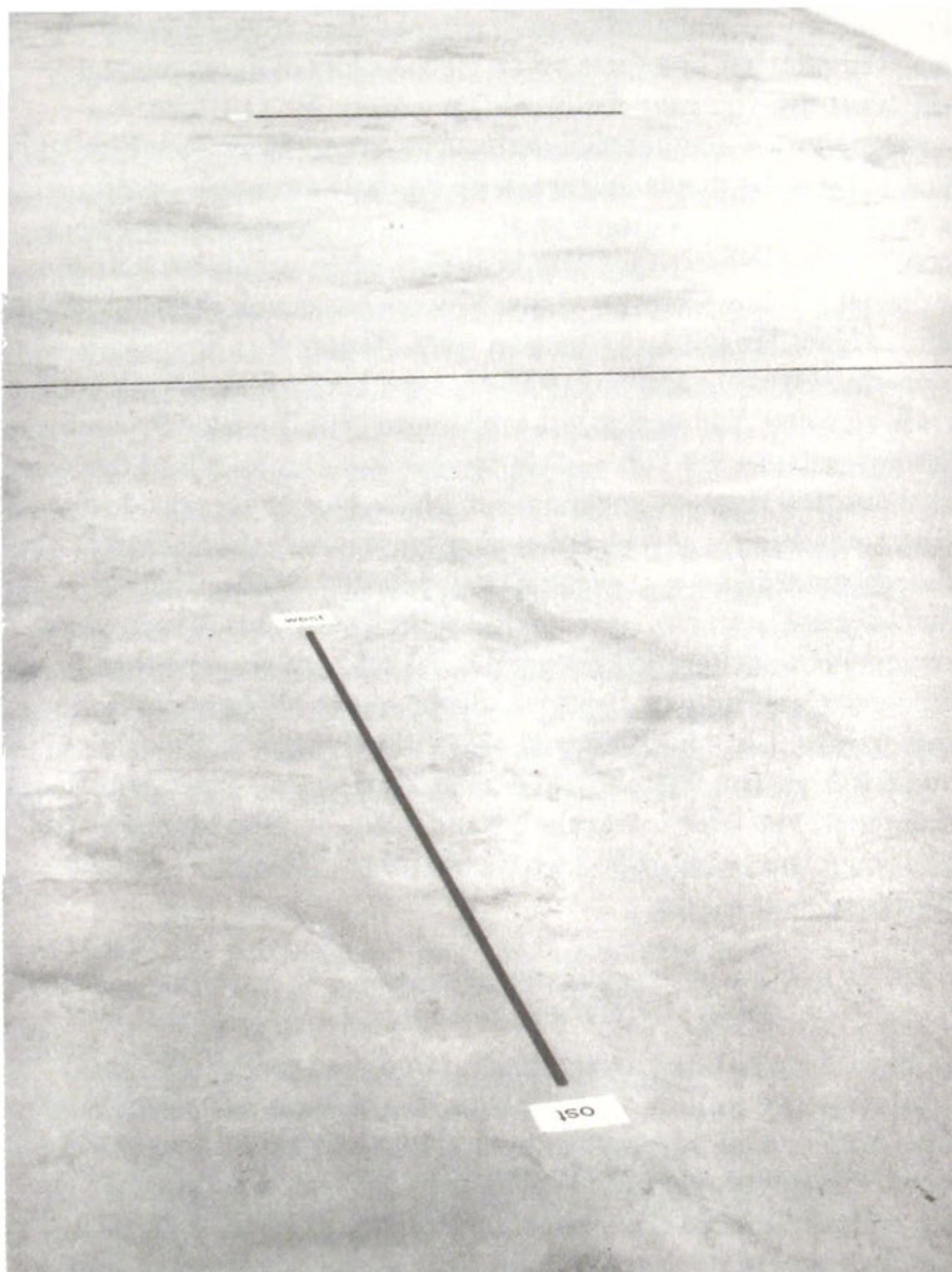


exists of Jan Hoet, at Brouwn's 2001 exhibition opening at the SMAK in Ghent, talking to someone (one strongly suspects it's the artist) behind a pointedly brown wooden wall. The only brown aspect of a white space.)

Or think what you like—that this angle is reductive and tendentious and could be subsumed within a larger, more abstract idea of freedom from earthly restrictions. Or that it is always better to show than to tell. Do as you will with the fact that Brouwn so frequently contrasts an ostensibly real world with an idiosyncratic inward one, an actual unit of measure with a concocted surrogate, the physical experience of distance with the imagined and subjective and, tirelessly, the possibility of free movement, self-measure, self-governance, self-determination. His early publication *100 this-way-brouwn-problems for computer I. B. M. 360 model 95* (1970) found him writing mobility-related questions too big for a computer to deal with: "Show brouwn the way in all cities, villages, etc, on earth from point x to all other points in that cities, villages, etc."<sup>8</sup> A later work, *1 x 1 Foot* (1998), exemplifies his insistence on himself—or you—being the measure, comprising as it does a square drafted on the wall, dimensioned on the length of Brouwn's own foot. Moreover, that Brouwn's art even tempts such conjecture—about who gets to define scales, where to go, and how to get there—strewing periodic clues, is part of the structural appeal and functional paradox of his working method. The last Brouwn solo exhibition I saw was in 2012, at Konrad Fischer. It featured some framed diagrammatic works and axial measurements on the floor. The sense of spaciousness, even by conceptual art criteria, was extraordinary: short texts envisioning immense distances, gargantuan numbers. (A parallel figure in this regard was, of course, On Kawara, whose ostensibly conceptual work has also been viewed as backed by large-scale trauma.) The work spurs as it withdraws, as its maker recedes.

And perhaps you're exhorted enough that you begin asking around, guiltily, despite yourself. How awkward and conflicted you feel about this might clarify, in turn, how far Brouwn operates in contradistinction to a mass-media and now social-media age of absolute transparency—how far you're watermarked by it. You discover that Brouwn, in person—for he's not exactly a recluse but also a parent who taught for many years at a postgraduate





Stanley Brouwn. *in diesem moment gehen x personen auf dem alexanderplatz in berlin in richtung norden. in diesem moment gehen x personen auf dem alexanderplatz in berlin in richtung süden.* 2012

art academy in Amsterdam and, prior to that, in Germany—is garrulous, but in a fitting way. He asks lots of questions, of the what-did-you-have-for-breakfast variety. He's curious, but seemingly in a manner that deflects attention away from him, just as does his displacing art, with its early attention—prefiguring a major shift in this direction in the 1990s—toward the viewer's constructive subjectivity. You hear that when venerable Italian gallerist Massimo Minini visits, Brouwn insists on meeting in one café in Amsterdam Centraal train station. You hear from someone else that that's very likely true, because Brouwn loves train stations. You decide, on a whim, to type "Stanley Brouwn interview" into YouTube—akin to searching for televised fireside chats with Thomas Pynchon—and you're highly surprised to find something, a seventy-second snippet of telephone chatter dated January 31, 2014, presumably recorded clandestinely and invasively and unseen/heard by Brouwn. (This, of course, connotes the difference between our world and the one that existed when Brouwn electively dropped out.) When you find this upload it has been viewed only fifty-five times. Brouwn's voice is high and friendly. He laughs. Half against your better judgment, you have it translated; and here—having surged across your own line, established what constitutes violation—you quit snooping, quit asking.



In 1970, a year after Kawara inaugurated his two-million-year spanning (one million into the past, one million into the future) *One Million Years* (1969), Brouwn published his first artist's book, the thirty-two page *Tatvan* (also known as *x-Tatwan*). He had ventured to the eponymous mountain town in eastern Turkey—where the railway ends, to avoid cutting through hilly terrain—to photograph the route of what could be a railway extension. Cast this in metaphorical terms. Brouwn seemingly wanted to photograph the idea of a journey that couldn't yet be made, but someday might. Instead he decided not to include the images in the book—while, it seems, making the refusal public—and recorded instead, on successive pages, the cumulative distance from various unknown locations (all listed as "x") to Tatvan, including:

x - Tatwan 1000 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 000  
000 000 000 000 000 000

One and fifty-one zeroes: a sexdecillion miles if the measurement is, indeed, in miles (the volume of the Milky Way has been estimated at a sexdecillion cubic miles). The x might be you, roaming ever further from the intolerable real. A journey of a thousand miles, Lao-tzu famously wrote, starts with the first step: Brouwn insists that the first step in whatever distance is always in your head, including the class of measure; and to expedite your own step, his own movement has been resolutely away from us. Try the thought experiment that Brouwn *doesn't* withdraw—that he accepts interviews, that he's asked why he uses the royal cubit, why distance, why this, why that. The refusals, care, and control feel indivisible from the work—are a performative aspect that never stopped but only slipped into the negative. At one end of the spectrum is Stanley Brouwn in 1964, in public, bound and hungry or crawling on the floor. At the other end, somewhere, is Stanley Brouwn today. Measure, if you please, the empty space between. How full it is.

1. Cited in Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 ...* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), 115.
2. Cited in Oscar van den Boogaard, "In Search of Stanley Brouwn," *frieze*, March 2014, 122.
3. Stanley Brouwn, "Manifesto 4000 A. D.," in *Bloomsday 1964* (Frankfurt: Galerie Loehr, 1964), unpaginated.
4. Christophe Cherix, *In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 21.
5. Cited in the press release for exhibition "Stanley Brouwn," MACBA, Barcelona, 2005.
6. Cherix, *In & Out of Amsterdam*, 20.
7. Van den Boogaard, "In Search of Stanley Brouwn," 122.
8. Stanley Brouwn, *100 this-way-brouwn-problems for computer I. B. M. 360 model 95* (Cologne: Verlag Gebr. König, 1970), unpaginated.