

Object lessons: Falke Pisano's diagrams of aesthetic experience

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a text by André Rottmann
on the work of Falke Pisano

“Object Lessons: Falke Pisano’s
Diagrams of Aesthetic Experience”

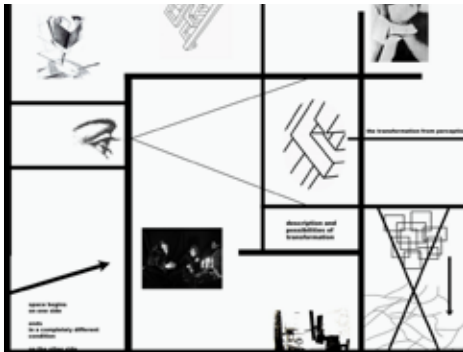
Language, in both its communicative and performative dimension, is at the core of Falke Pisano’s artistic practice. In encountering her lecture-performances and videos, we are constantly listening to the artist’s characteristic voice, whether she herself appears onscreen or remains entirely out of the beholder’s view, in these instances ephemerally present only as an audible phenomenon. In a sober, yet engaging tone and at a comparably unhasty pace, Pisano at any rate emerges as a figure incessantly reading from her highly elaborated manuscripts in most of her works; Pisano’s texts, often published in brochures accompanying the presentation of a given work, are to a large extent comprised of reflections about aesthetic objects, serving both as devices to rethink notions of authorship and to exemplify the convoluted process of reception, into which an artwork can entangle its beholder, and vice versa. Committing herself to unravelling this mutual relationship, Pisano has built a remarkably consistent and extensive body of work over the course of the last five years; hence all of her artworks circle around a number of interrelated concerns and recurring motifs. As I hopefully will be able to demonstrate tonight, considered in their entirety the multiple facets of her oeuvre amount to nothing less than a fundamental inquiry into the parameters establishing, securing and challenging the material as well as the discursive existence of objects. This interest, one should add from the outset, equally resonates in Pisano’s room-size installations and sculptures, in which her proper voice remains silent, even though traces of its utterances are included at times, addressing us in the form of written texts forming a part, as it were, of the work’s fabric.

By way of a preliminary approximation, we might define Pisano’s works as preoccupied with the effects communication and theoretical enunciation ultimately have on objects supposedly fixed in their artistic meaning, cultural value, social reach and historical significance; even more than this, one is inclined to argue that her practice persistently speculates how far it is language as a social factor and system of signification that actually constitutes objects of aesthetic contemplation in the first place. Pisano’s art is an art of speech. Language here figures as the privileged, inexhaustible medium to make artworks meaningful and significant. Yet Pisano is no disciple of a conceptualist or linguistic orthodoxy. For in her practice, artworks are conceived as equally dependant on their respective perception and evaluation on the part of the beholder—who consequently is likewise affected by the experience of encountering a given work—as is the artist reporting on her reactions and thoughts

vis-à-vis certain objects. It is thus these complex considerations of the contemporary artwork's elusive modes of being and ways of affecting their beholders that since its initial inception have come to consistently shape Pisano's ever-expanding body of work as a whole. What may at first appear as a second order discourse emerges as a primary site of "basic research" on what it means to truly make the experience of an artwork.

Far from a straightforward delivery of arguments, rather deliberately meandering and at times bordering on digression when nevertheless lucidly elaborating on the mutually destabilizing relationship between the subjects and objects of aesthetic experience, Pisano's monologues' listeners witness a recursive reflection about the physical and intellectual activities involved in the process of perception. This kind of reasoning is accompanied, or triggered, by visual material, mostly stemming from, or influenced by, the aesthetics of modernism. Despite the prominence given in her work to various models of abstraction it would be misleading, however, to conclude that Pisano's practice is mainly determined by the attempt to critically revisit the history of modernism and to reassess its promises and tenets (as so many contemporary artists—for better or worse—these days feel compelled to do); rather the persisting modernist notion of the art object—as a self-sufficient, autonomous entity existing beyond any considerations of context and viewers' responses—serves for Pisano, I would argue, as a point of departure to thoroughly reflect on the current state of art.

The video *A Sculpture turning into a Conversation* from 2006 is paradigmatic in many of these respects: On the left hand side of the projection screen we slowly follow the seemingly aimless movements of a camera panning across a collection of neatly arranged images, framed by the delineations of a diagram or chart. Despite the instant legibility traditionally associated with this austere type of pictorial representation, it here remains unclear what data, quantifications, plots or constructions this scheme might actually capture. Black and white images go by, upon closer and recurring inspection all sharing the common denominator of depicting sculptures, objects, things, commodities, or architectural structures. In some of these images human figures enter the plane of the diagram, shown as they are observing an object, interacting with it, handling it. We can discern Hans Haacke's famous *Condensation Cube* from 1963-65 as well as Picasso's etching of a studio scene of an artist with his muse, made in 1932 to illustrate Honoré de Balzac's "Le chef-oeuvre inconnu". Graphic renderings, for instance of an isolated eye gazing at an abstract structure, captions and arrows, at times pointing at each other, complete Pisano's diagram.



A Sculpture turning into a Conversation, 2006

During the approximately twenty-five minutes run of the video we simultaneously behold a series of still photographs on the right. A group of people is gathered in what seems to be a studio space, temporarily building a social community around a red sculpture, highly reminiscent of constructivist objects of the 1920s Soviet avant-garde. In most of the still images, this object partially blocks the view of the scene. The frames chosen by Pisano thereby repeatedly establish formal correspondences between the diagram's outlines as well as the image material on the left side of the projection and the contours of the sculptural device on the right part of the screen. It is only by looking past or through the modernist construction from various angles that we are able to see the group of people sitting

around a table with lit candles atop, watching them as they are drinking, interacting and talking. Despite the work's title, in this sequence the sculpture in question would, if anything, appear to be initiating a conversation among the interlocutors rather than turning into one itself.

It apparently is the task of a female voice, that of Falke Pisano, —or more precisely, the task of a text, divided up in five chapters, written and read aloud by the artist who here, as in all of her works, figures as the “subject of the enunciation”—to bring about the transformation implied by the video's title. Even if the source of all utterances remains physically absent from this short film while the split screen projection evolves, the female voice speaking to us is all the more present, albeit elusively. Or might this person be speaking to itself? For Pisano, as often, does not address us directly, but rather puts us in the position of listening to her while she seems to be reading to herself. At the outset we hear her engaging in what may most suitably be called “prolegomena” to a sculpture's potential “disintegration”, trying to most adequately describe what the parameters of a three-dimensional, non-figurative object exactly are. This description, as Pisano has noted, sets the ground for the wished for situation; a situation in which a modernist sculpture subsequently dissolves into an interactive matter of communication¹ and in which one eventually “finds a way to crack open the object”.

There is no direct relation established between the imagery charted within the left side diagram and the sculptural object in question during the lecture. Necessarily, Pisano's lecture-video must remain an experiment, a speculative investigation of the potential metamorphosis of a generic entity by means of language and its ability to alter our view of material objects, in tandem with our faculties of imagination, memory, phenomenological perception and interpretation. Consequently, despite the logical nature of Pisano's inquiry—insinuated, as it is, both by the succession of seemingly mandatory steps to be taken in order to achieve the goal of “transformation” and the terminology employed therein—we are confronted with a deliberately idiosyncratic artistic discourse. Nevertheless, the argument put forward in *A Sculpture turning into a Conversation* can, I believe, claim a validity that by far exceeds the limits of a singular artwork. In decidedly general terms Pisano here imagines

1 Falke Pisano: *A Sculpture turning into a Conversation*, brochure, s.p. The passage in question has been reprinted as an “Excerpt from the manuscript “A Sculpture turning into a Conversation” [2006]”, in: *Modernologies. Contemporary Artists Researching Modernity and Modernism*, exh. cat. Museu d' Arte Contemporani de Barcelona, MACBA, ed. Sabine Breitwieser, Barcelona: MACBA 2009, p. 177.



The Complex Object (Affecting Abstraction 3), 2007

an object that is fragmented by way of its minute description and ultimately—if it ever was a self-sufficient object of contemplation to begin with—can never be reassembled, even to an imaginary unity, because once its defining parameters are articulated it irreversibly only exists as “a combination of perception and experience, of interpretation and association, of pre-logical structures and pragmatic argumentation”². The permutation of an object into a fictitious catalyst of continuous thought, debate and conversation, allegorized as it were by the series of images on the right side of the screen, has thus really taken place at the conclusion of the video. It is in this sense that words are deemed “proactive” in Pisano’s monologue and that the spectator is said to instigate—ever anew, one might add—the event of a “transformation”.

For the art of Falke Pisano, the notion of transformation is as crucial as it does literally come with a *double entendre*: In all of the artist’s lectures, performances and videos, the transformation of a supposedly immutable object is not only linguistically enacted in conjunction with images, diagrams and graphics, but also time and again implicitly brought to bear on Pisano’s respective work itself. In other words, the artist’s procedures of questioning the aesthetic object’s integrity, thus continually gauging the effects of discourses, contexts and modes of perception on any artwork’s identity cannot but fundamentally

2 Cf. Falke Pisano: A Sculpture turning into a Conversation, op.cit.

affect her own practice and its various registers in return. Consequently, her mode of working may best be described as an autopoietic system that is implemented and driven by a methodological self-reflection mirroring historical precursors in a conceptually minded contemporary practice. Her works hence neither follow a traditional logic of artistic progress nor one of formal or content-wise ruptures. Rather, her works set into motion and simultaneously form an intrinsic part of a process of investigation that can never come to a definite closure. Notions such as “transmutation”, “permutation” and “translation” are key terms in this endeavor since they not only relate to the fate of the modernist objects preeminently under scrutiny, but also determine Pisano’s very own approach as it manifests itself in various venues, materials and media. A diagram charting the consecutive evolutions, transpositions or re-articulations within a work series such as *Figures of Speech* (2008-2009), an aspect to which I shall briefly return later, is a case in point.

It is one aim of my lecture tonight to further speculate about the art-historical preconditions and epistemological repercussions of what, for the time being, I propose to call Falke Pisano’s “object lessons”. Taking a cue from Lorraine Daston, we might be able to better grasp what is at stake in Pisano’s work. In her introduction to a volume entitled *Things That Talk* the historian of science muses about the possibility for the academic to make

Figures of Speech (diagrammed), 2009



things eloquent, to consider them as talkative by scrutinizing them more closely in shifting settings until the significance they are saturated with threatens “to overflow their [sharp, neatly circumscribed] outlines”. Attending to “how things helpfully epitomize and concentrate complex relationships that cohere without being logical in the strict sense”³ may thus not only provide us with a critical model particularly attuned to the methodologies employed in Pisano’s lectures, videos and perfor-



Figures of Speech (diagrammed), 2009

mance; moreover, it may allow us to speak about this artistic practice without merely “parroting” its proper discourse—a possible impasse Pisano seems to be highly aware of vis-à-vis her own practice, at least if one is judging it on the allegorical photograph of a parrot which is a part of a work altogether consisting of five framed photographs and four book pages entitled *The point of view for my work (non-understanding within understanding)* (2008).

In this sense, for any art historian invited to speak or write about Pisano’s work, one rather troubling question emerges: “But how will one speak about an art about speaking? An art of speech? What discourse can be produced about an art of discourse?”⁴ How does one aptly talk about the practice of an artist who is notable for lecturing herself in almost all of her works, having us witness and follow her deliberations which take their sources

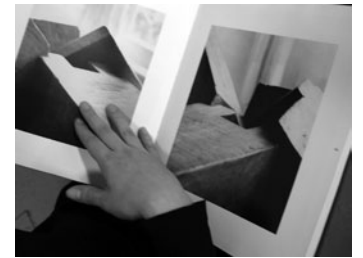
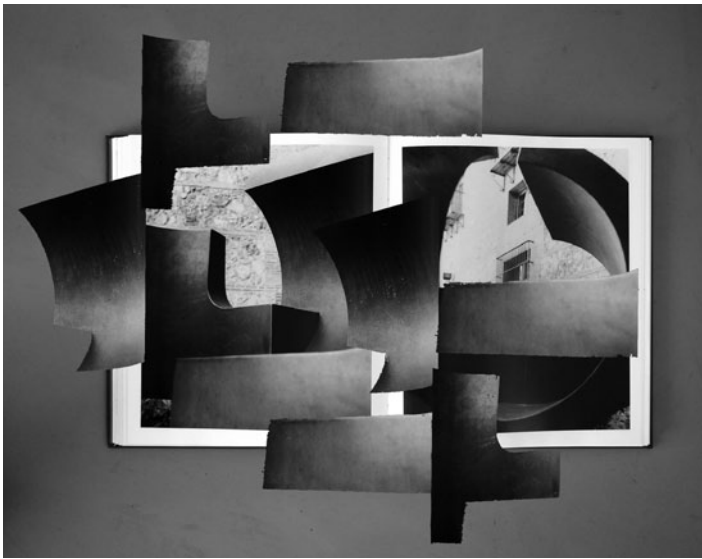
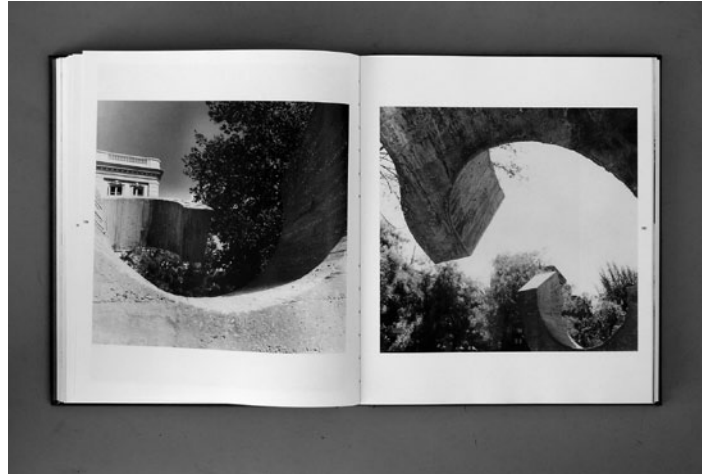
3 Cf. Lorraine Daston: “Introduction”, in: Lorraine Daston (ed.): *Things That Talk. Object Lessons from Art and Science*, New York: Zone Books, 2008, pp. 7-24, here pp. 20ff.

4 George Baker: “Fraser’s Form”, in: Andrea Fraser. *Works: 1984-2003*, exh. cat. Kunstverein in Hamburg, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior, Cologne: DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag: 2003, pp. 50-77, here p. 50.

from disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics and art history and at times even feels inclined to use the very same references? How to theorize the practice of an artist whose books contain glossaries with entries ranging from definitions of “object”, “subject” and “speech” to specific concepts developed by Deleuze/Guattari, Foucault and John L. Austin, and who uses PowerPoint to illustrate the arguments of her own video lectures or performances? Is there anything substantial to be added?

While all of these deliberate emulations of academic conventions and their artistic repercussions surely deserve critical attention, I would like to propose two trajectories — aspects of which I have already hinted at — to approach Pisano’s work and to ground it in terms of art-historical precursors. In talking about a few more exemplary works it on the one hand seems rather obvious to focus on the ways in which Pisano’s practice relates back to the expansion of the field of sculpture beyond the constrictions of the aesthetic ideology of modernism; it is against this backdrop that we can assess in how far her works take the notion of “boundary-crossing” (that is prevalent in the discussion of advanced contemporary art since the sixties at the latest) as a starting point to reflect on what constitutes an “aesthetic experience”; in this regard, it also will be necessary to at least briefly voice some thoughts on the notion of the artwork as “speech act” as it has recently entered art-historical debates around notions of “agency”. On the other hand it seems worthwhile and promising to revisit the debates around the notoriously “dematerialized” object of conceptual art when faced with Pisano’s practice; it is my contention that the topicality of her works cannot be adequately understood unless we reconsider the shift from self-referentiality to self-reflexivity performed within the conceptualist paradigm of the late sixties, characterized — as is well-known — by notions of communication, the use of diagrammatic forms of representation, the critique of the pictorial as the visual arts’ alleged epitome, and the rise of both artist and beholder to new cognitive competences. Only then, I think, could we be able to situate the critical potential of Pisano’s work in the framework of contemporary forms of so-called immaterial or “virtuosic” labor, based on the production of knowledge for a receptive audience rather than on the dissemination of material goods and products.

Let us take a closer look at yet another work. Pisano’s projection *Chillida (Forms & Feelings)* from 2006 surely attests to the aforementioned consistency her practice early on has achieved to establish due to the recurrence of themes, formats and motifs. Again split in two screens and combining a slide show of images with a monologue written and read aloud by the artist, from



Chillida (Forms & Feelings), 2006

anew it is the “processuality” of the perception of abstract sculptures that is taken into critical consideration and determines the rigorously self-reflexive course of this work. Over the approximately thirteen minute run of her lecture-video, Pisano has us follow the turns, reversals and shifts in perspective that her initially affective relation to the public sculptures of Chillida has undergone, sparked through the mediation of black and white photographs taken by the Public Relations executive David Finn. Finn—as we are told right at the beginning, while looking at a portrait shot of his on the right side of the screen—has not only, alongside Bill Ruder, founded the renowned New York-based agency “Ruderfinn Inc.,” but has also published a series of books with photographs of sculptures dating from Antiquity to 20th century abstract monuments. Apparently, Pisano had been particularly drawn to a volume by Finn from 1999 containing pictures he while traveling took of the Basque sculptor’s oeuvres at various sites, details of which are passing by on the left hand side; at times we are made to read selected passages in which Finn recounts his initial reactions to seeing these works

in squares or at remote locations by the seashore, emphasizing the way their abstract forms nevertheless do relate to the re-spective urban or natural surroundings. Already in these sequences,—as well as in those citing captions written by Finn's daughter—the sculptures by Chillida are regarded less in the traditional modernist terms of autonomy and self-sufficiency, but rather in terms of the relations actually established between the sites of their installation, their formal specificities and any beholder entering into their field of validity.⁵

However, the prerogative of attention in *Chillida (Forms & Feelings)* belongs to Pisano's own response to these sculptures, photographically captured for posterity by Finn. Looking over her shoulder, we follow the artist flipping through the pages of the book while listening to her account of an experiment in aesthetic introspection: Pisano starts off by stating that her original aim was to understand her genuinely emotional response to Chillida's sculptures, to comprehend why they were so appealing to her, and to do so beyond rationalizing considerations. Yet the attempt to fully grasp these works' power in the medium of language seems destined to fail. It turns out, we are told, that the effort to attest for the sculptures' impact by way of description inevitably results in the fading of their affective charge. Descriptive language, it would seem, in its generic nature hinders rather than facilitates an emotional response to artworks. But Pisano's monologue brings about a more crucial insight as it shifts from its initial emphasis on "forms and feelings" to the recognition that any sculpture once subjected to the perception of a keen observer begins to be just as much "beside itself"⁶ as the subject of aesthetic experience itself. In the course of reviewing Finn's images of Chillida's sculptures, Pisano tells us, she began to realize that they "mainly refer to what they were not", leading them to appear "on the border of disintegration" as they were "rearticulated in a dense web of references". Yet again a sculpture turns into a conversation.

Whereas Chillida's monuments at first appeared to be self-contained, self-evident and immobile, they now paradoxically seem utterly "reliant on what they are not" and "depending on men's reality". The sculptures' sharp, neatly circumscribed contours begin to look less rigid, "their outlines", as Lorraine

5 This formulation is indebted to the short mentioning of Falke Pisano's work in Diedrich Diederichsen's review of the 2009 Venice Biennial "When Worlds Elide", in: *Artforum International*, Vol. XLVIII, No 1. September 2009, pp. 240-245, p. 243.

6 I here refer to David Joselit's much quoted essay "Painting Beside Itself", in: *October* 130, Fall 2009, pp. 125-134, putting forward the related argument of a disintegration of the modernist notion of an artistic medium's self-referentiality and specificity due to the networks of references it ultimately and inevitably is caught up in.



Chillida (Forms & Feelings), 2006

Daston had put it, are “threaten[ed] to overflow”⁷ once the beholder’s perception has converted them into “talkative things”. As if to allegorize this, Pisano at the end of her video has diagrammatic lines come into the field of vision that fragment the black and white images of Chillida’s works like in the spectrums of a crystal (so dear to abstract art at the turn to the twentieth century), before portraits of the Basque artist posing in front of his sculptures are orderly assembled on the right screen. Simultaneously, a Mondrian-like composition of black lines and primary colors suddenly emerges on the left side, its dynamic pulse abstractly charting, as it were, the spatio-temporal expansion of a modernist sculpture in the moment of its perception.

Hence, this diagram of aesthetic experience always already entails that there are two sides at play in the equation of any “object lesson” of this kind: In the encounter between subject and object, on the one hand the latter’s properties and layers of meaning commence to emerge more clearly and multiply once one becomes aware of what art historian Rosalind Krauss has famously defined as sculpture’s expanded field⁸; the former on the other hand finds itself in a self-reflexive process of

7 Daston, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

8 Cf. Rosalind E. Krauss: “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” [1978], in: Rosalind E. Krauss: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1985, pp. 276-290.

engaging with an artwork, faced—as the philosopher Juliane Rebentisch has put it—with the “open question as to what the work really includes on the levels of form and content”⁹. This correlation deserves to be further elaborated, as in my view it is crucial to Pisano’s practice. In her seminal 1978 essay, Krauss revisits the history of sculpture in modernity, devising it into three distinctive periods whose progression may be summarized, in Pisano’s parlance, as the transformation and disintegration of the objects in question: whereas sculpture in the modern period first was ruled by logic of the monument, bound to a particular place speaking about its meaning in a symbolic tongue¹⁰, modernism (or its fictions) led to a “kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place”¹¹. Sculpture, in other words, became abstract, self-referential, its “spatial and temporal determinants conceived in idealist terms”¹². Ever the since the late sixties, this paradigm’s validity was challenged both in theory and practice. Following Minimalism’s decision to no longer think of its “Specific Objects” (à la Donald Judd) as contained in themselves, but rather in relation to its context, in this moment still limited to the particularities of physical space, sculptures began to be perceived and conceived “vis-à-vis the exploration of the limits of the medium in relation to architecture and landscape”¹³. The outlines of things are yet again threatened to overflow due to their inherently relational nature. As the talkative objects they necessarily are in order to pass as aesthetic objects, sculptures, to again quote Pisano from *Chillida (Forms & Feelings)*, turned out to be “reliant on whatever they were not”. Finn’s images of Chillida’s monuments both in front of corporate architecture and situated in remote landscapes seem to inadvertently document this paradigm shift. Moreover, Krauss’s decision to illustrate the sculpture’s new modes of operation in her essay through the axiomatic structure of a diagram, charting it as determined by a system of negations, speaks to Pisano’s acute

9 Juliane Rebentisch: Response to a Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”, in: *October* 130, Fall 2009, pp. 100-103, p. 101. Rebentisch’s argument herein is derived from her study *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003, whose English translation still awaits its publication. If I, in what follows, will refer to Rebentisch’s conception of aesthetic experience, it is my aim to explicate the dynamics at the centre of Pisano’s works; however, it should be noted, I do not share Rebentisch’s conviction that aesthetic experience necessarily provides the normative model to define contemporary art as such, a further theoretical elaboration of which will have to be deferred until another essay.

10 Cf. Krauss, op. cit., p. 279.

11 Ibid., p. 280.

12 I here follow Miwon Kwon’s lucid reading of Krauss’s essay in: „Unfixing Values“, in: Christian Philipp Müller, ex.cat. *Kunstmuseum Basel – Museum für Gegenwartskunst*, ed. by Philipp Kaiser, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007, pp. 15-28, here p. 21.

13 Ibid., p. 24.

awareness of contemporary art's "state of material [the Adornian *Materialstand*]" or as Rebentisch names it, "aesthetic consciousness"¹⁴.

This consciousness does not only entail the recognition that modernist categories such as the "objective unity of the artwork"¹⁵ have long collapsed, but also obliges us to account for its current implications. The ideology of modernism has been debunked for nearly four decades now; by the same token, it has—for very good and still valid reasons—become almost mandatory that advanced artworks reflect on the concrete viewer as a constitutive part of their conception, and that the viewer is made to reflect on him- or herself. As Pisano's practice—in its emphasis on notions of recurrence and transformation—demonstrates, however, the task at hand is not to reiterate the well-established critique of modernism, but rather to reflect on the paradigm of reflection itself.¹⁶ In this sense, the notion of aesthetic experience, as recently theorized—in terms of its relevance for contemporary art since the late sixties—by Rebentisch, allows for a more concise consideration of the relationships created within and by Pisano's art. For experience, understood as the "viewer's reflective engagement with the work", is not restricted to matters of subjective response. In aesthetics, it rather "refers to a process between subject and object that transforms both—the object insofar as it is only in and through the dynamic of its experience that it is brought to life as a work of art, and the subject insofar as it takes on a self-reflective form, its own performativity recurring in a structurally uncanny [...] way in the mode of the object's appearance. For how the object appears to us at any given moment is something we do not make and is yet inconceivable without the performative force of our imagination. [...] [T]he subject that is engaged in such an experience is obviously not an abstract viewer but in each case a concrete one [...] potentially confronted with its own social and cultural assumptions."¹⁷ In staging the very process of aesthetic experience, emphasizing its inherent moments of ambiguity and openness and the way in which the object's status as art depends on the specific viewer's performative engagement with it, just as much as the viewer in return is transformed through a self-reflectivity that is provoked by the relation established with the object, Pisano is both enacting and reflecting what it means to make an aesthetic

14 Rebentisch, op. cit., p. 103.

15 Ibid., p. 101.

16 In this regard also see Juliane Rebentisch's review of the 5th Berlin Biennial 2008, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, Vol. 18, Issue 70, pp. 231-233, here p. 239.

17 Rebentisch, op. cit., p. 101.

experience today, after decades of “boundary-crossing” within the arts have shattered the unity and integrity of categories and media and opened up an expanded field of investigation.

In this respect, the first sentence uttered by Pisano in her *The Complex Object (Affecting Abstraction 3)* (2007) is programmatic as it puts into relief the specificity of her practice in terms of its reliance and emphasis on language; while we are looking at a monochrome white screen we hear the artist stating: “The object of which this is the first sentence doesn’t yet exist.” As we are furthermore told that “It needs to be constructed”, red lines emerge establishing the framework of the creation of the “Complex Object” the title is referring to.

We are witnessing its coming into existence as a geometric body, delineated in black contours over the course of the following, approximately twenty minutes. Ideas, the artist keeps on reading, and how they are conceived in relation to “concrete abstract objects” fuel this construction process in the confrontation between “text and matter”, both of which “affect each other in existence and form”.¹⁸ However, we are cautioned right from the beginning, “the implications of [the object’s, AR] [...] possible reality will derive from the associations and meanings that are projected on its imminent existence as well as the structures within which it is thought out and made.”¹⁹ Abstraction certainly is not conceived as a self-referential closed-off system of straightforward formalization, although the result of the construction process on a purely visual level results in a familiar mode of non-figurative representation. In this work, that can be said to not turn a sculpture into a conversation, but more proactively is trying to construct it in and through language, Pisano seems to stress her function as an author mainly preoccupied with “objects and language”, less than playing the part of an exemplary viewer. Even though aspects of both the boundary-crossing tendencies of postwar art and its correlation with the notion of aesthetic experience remain prominent in *The Complex Object*, this slight shift in perspective allows, maybe even asks, for a brief reconsideration of the notion of “speech act” and its use in contemporary art theory.

Pisano’s already mentioned opening line, “The object of which this is the first sentence doesn’t yet exist”, certainly qualifies as an “illocutionary” speech act after Austin whose definition also finds itself included in the glossary issued with the artist’s

18 Cf. Falke Pisano: *The Complex Object & Object and Disintegration*, brochure, s.p.

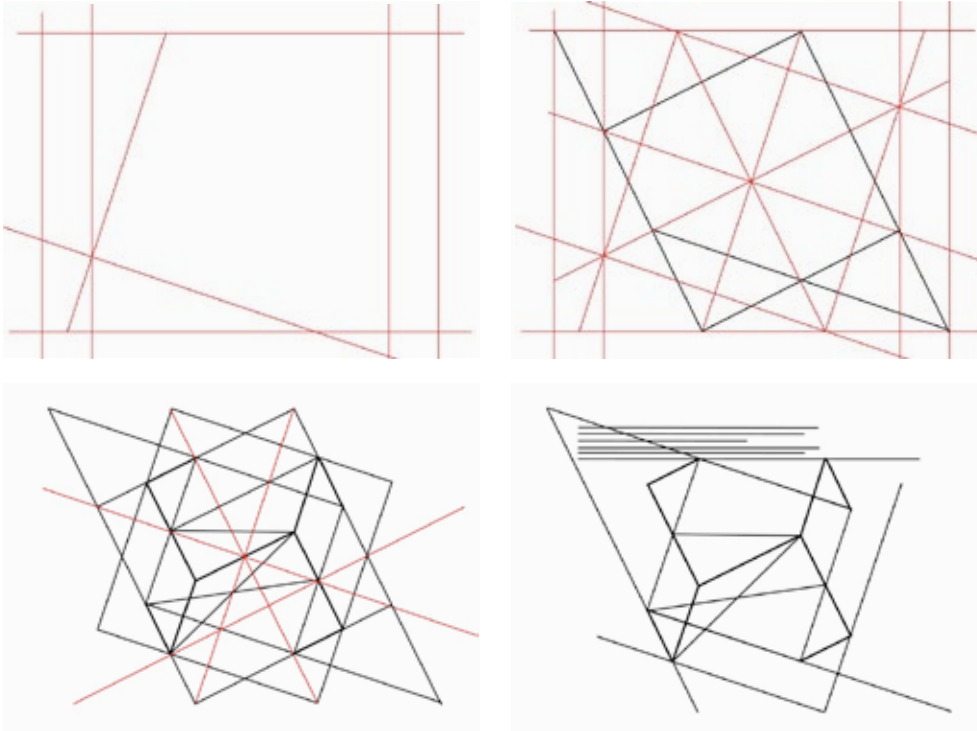
19 Ibid.

book “Figures of Speech” published earlier this year. The performative dimension of language and its capacity to affect reality surely is a main concern in the work of Pisano who never limits her lectures—delivered with the “grain” of her own voice²⁰—to the level of “constative acts”, if that were ever possible. Given the centrality of language in written and spoken form in Pisano’s work, we might feel inclined to expand the concept of the speech act to become a master trope, suited to account for her particular practice and the state of contemporary art in general. With regard to the latter, art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann indeed has proposed to conceptualize art since the late sixties in terms of the performativity of speech acts in her appropriately titled book “How to Do Things with Art”²¹. Accordingly, it is von Hantelmann’s interest to accentuate how artworks at the most basic level of signification possess agency; she proposes that due to their fundamentally performative nature, all conventional artworks have effects both on the situation they are exhibited in and on the viewers that relate to them.²² I would argue, however, that though tempting, this methodological expansion of the speech act to define contemporary art *tout court* must literally fall short of the complexities of aesthetic experience as manifested in Pisano’s practice. For it is exactly the mutual dependency of subject and object that brings about the quintessentially aesthetic mode of performative self-reflexivity rather than the agency of the artwork alone. Seen from this vantage point, artworks do not only bring about reality after the model of the speech act, but are equally transformed and affected by it through the force of the viewer’s imagination. Furthermore, the notion of the speech act, to my mind, is too predicated on the idea of a transparency in communication (and the artist’s intentionality fully realizing itself by any means). In order to be effective, it presupposes an immediate intelligibility, hard to find either in contemporary art as a whole or in Pisano’s work alone. The perception of an artwork, as Pisano’s works demonstrate, entails a productive process ridden by uncertainties, dynamics and recurrences; thus it behooves us to theorize a process that necessarily implies the authoring artist as much as it is never to be contained within the temporal notion of a singular act.

20 Here I cannot but refer to Roland Barthes’s 1972 essay “The Grain of the Voice”, in: *Image Music Text*, transl. by Stephen Heath, New York: Hill & Wang, 1977, pp. 179-189.

21 Cf. Dorothea von Hantelmann: *How to Do Things with Art*, Berlin: diaphanes, 2007 [translated into English as *How to Do Things with Art*, Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010]

22 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

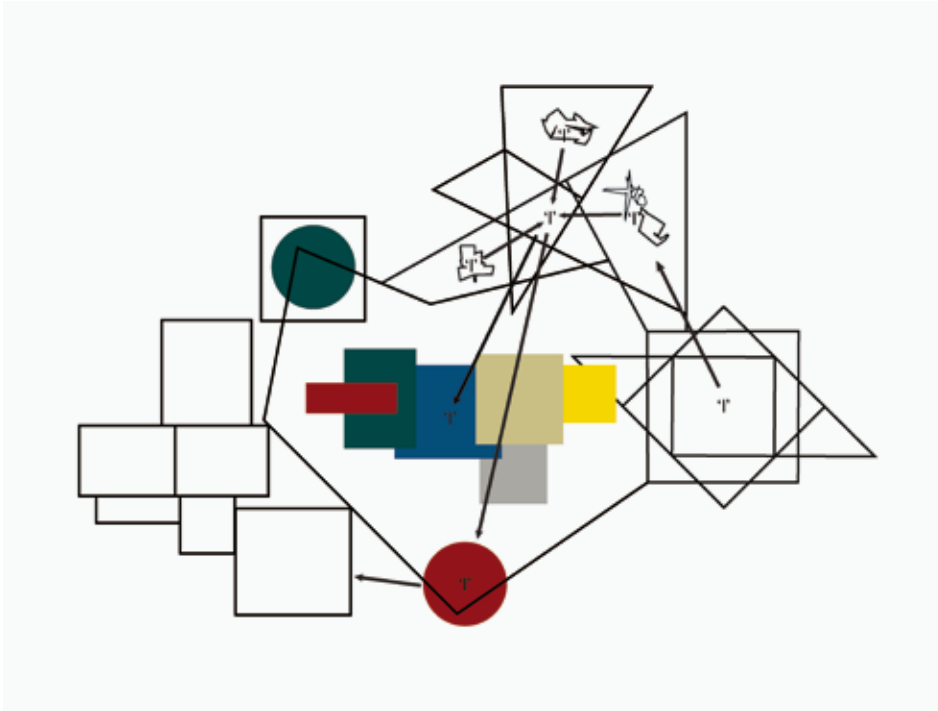


The Complex Object (Affecting Abstraction 3), 2007

As *The Complex Object* and many other examples can make clear, in her attempt to visualize the “gradual development of thoughts in the process of speaking”²³ and to actually have it result in the images of an object, Pisano oftentimes resorts to the formal logic of the “diagrammatic”. Art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has defined the diagrammatic as follows: “[O]ne variety of abstraction that recognizes externally existing and pre-given systems of spatio-temporal quantification or schemata of the statistical collection of data as necessarily and primarily determining a chosen pictorial order”²⁴. Obviously, Buchloh puts a strong emphasis on the constrictions imposed by the order of the diagrammatic in its utter determination by the rigid rule of administration, leaving hardly any subjective leeway within the execution of the individual chart. What is particularly worth noticing, however, is the critique of any notion of transcendence and artistic autonomy prevailing in the aesthetic ideology of modernism implied in this definition. So despite this rather disciplinary approach to what constitutes a diagram, Buchloh’s conception may serve as a starting point to further discuss the use of diagrammatic forms in the works of Falke Pisano in

23 Obviously, this is a reference to Heinrich von Kleist famous essay “On the gradual development of thoughts in the process of speaking” of 1805.

24 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh: “Hesse’s Endgame: Facing the Diagram”, in: *Eva Hesse Drawing*, ex. cat. The Drawing Center, New York, ed. Catherine de Zegher, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2006, pp. 116-150, here p. 117.



Figures of Speech 1 (2008)

order to subsequently better grasp their relationship towards the legacy of conceptual art.

As earlier demonstrated, Pisano's practice is marked by modes of translating, transposing and recuperating. Figures of thought, motifs and references are reiterated, reemployed and rearticulated in the context of the artist's ongoing endeavor of self-reflection and self-questioning. The diagram, it occurs to me, is the matrix in which this aspect of her working method finds its most visible manifestation. Not only does it serve to trace the evolutions and recurrences within a group of works such as *Figures of Speech* (2008-2009), but it also allows us to better understand the implicit obstinacy of her work. To put it in the words of Rosalind Krauss, it may permit us to enter a "world of substitutions and transpositions nowhere legitimated by the revelations of a transcendental subject"²⁵.

The lecture-video *Figures of Speech I* (2008) starts out with a consideration of the linguistic "shifter" that is "I" between what in Lacanian parlance may be called "the subject of the enunciation" and the "subject of the enunciated", as the individual speaking or the grammatical first person through which we enter language as realm of the symbolic; all the while, the according

25 Rosalind E. Krauss: "LeWitt in Progress" [1977], in: Rosalind E. Krauss: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1985, pp. 244-258, here p. 258.

terms appear on the screen. Pisano continues to define various notions, such as one of the “concept” always being in flux, impacting what it seeks to account for while at the same time being modified by it. The “I-machine” designates, in the speaking subject’s system of thought, a “singularity” and as a proper name it is “given to changing forms of the artist’s agency within a practice”²⁶. At one point in Pisano’s lecture, which runs for approximately 14 minutes, we see her perform a reading of *The Complex Object* as well as installations views of other work, for instance “The I and the You” (2007). At the end of the PowerPoint projection, we witness a rather idiosyncratic diagram in the making, charting numerous “figures of speech” and their respective effects on the artist, viewer and object of aesthetic experience. In the shape of geometric abstract forms in which the diagrammatic traditionally enters into the realm of visibility, using arrows, squares and color fields reminiscent of Suprematist compositions, Pisano elaborates on how the “I-Machine” determines the context by speaking, but is transformed by that very context in return, reflects itself in the disintegrated object and splits up in several positions of speech and agency.



The point of view for my work (non-understanding within understanding), 2008

All this results in a diagram that seems to defy all expectations of traceability. At the 2009 Venice Biennale, Pisano—in staying true to her model of translation, transformation and transposition—created a re-articulation of this work, spatialized it as an installation and made it available for the viewers’ experience at the Arsenale, alongside *The Complex Object (Affecting Abstraction 3)*, *Object and Disintegration: The Object of Three* and *The I and the You*. Returning to the quote from Krauss with which I began my discussion of *Figures of Speech I*, to physically enter this diagram means to step into a system that (*pace* Buchloh) ultimately resists rational reasoning despite it being derived from pre-given schemata and a highly determined pictorial order. When discussing the early *Variations of Incomplete Cubes* by Sol LeWitt from the early seventies, Krauss argues against the by then common assumption that the US-American artist was involved in an “illustration of Mind”²⁷, transforming philosophical considerations into a formal language. Quite to the contrary Krauss stresses that whereas classic diagrammatic formulae are about the “capacity to abbreviate, to adumbrate, to condense, to be able to imply an expansion with only the first [...] terms”²⁸, LeWitt, in visualizing every single possibility within the variations of a self-generated system, cannot refrain from keeping the

26 Falke Pisano: *Figures of Speech*, Zurich: JRP Ringier 2010, p. 119.

27 Krauss, LeWitt, *op.cit.*, p. 246.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

“gears of a machine disconnected from reason”²⁹ spinning. The same holds true for Pisano. Her diagrams—respectively, the way they chart the various transformations of her works due to the reassembling of their components—to an equal measure attest to an intellectual activity and artistic sensibility hardly determined by verifiable procedures and strictly logical chains of arguments. Rather it too is marked by constantly recurring moments of digression, by open-ended mind games and ongoing revisions. Nevertheless all of these aspects are grounded in a conception of artistic practice as an investigation of the relations an object of aesthetic contemplation both presupposes and engenders beyond idealist notions of autonomy and transcendence. In the art of Falke Pisano, the diagram as a variety of abstract representation does therefore not as much figure as a disciplinary device but rather as part and parcel of an experimental and epistemological system.³⁰

This observation may also shed some light on the question as to how exactly Pisano’s practice might be related to the Conceptual Art of the mid-sixties. Obviously, her work would be inconceivable without those of its precursors that claimed to abolish—or dematerialize³¹—the object of art with recourse to logics and philosophical aesthetics. Surely, the way in which Conceptual Art practices questioned traditional notions of the aesthetic by recoding it in terms of linguistic propositions, everyday communication and scientific information systems resonate in Pisano’s lectures, installations and diagrams. By the same token, Pisano’s artworks, as has hopefully become clear, still partake in the shift from modernist self-referentiality to self-reflexivity enacted by Conceptualism’s attempt to create artistic meaning independent from traditional modes of pictorial or sculptural representation.³² Early on, however, artists such as Mel Bochner raised some doubt regarding conceptual art’s claim to total transparency. His wall piece “Language is Not Transparent” (1970) quite paradoxically proves the opposite of what its title states; nevertheless, it levels a pointed criticism towards the then rampant ideal of an artwork’s message reaching its viewer without any interference—and hints at the further

29 Ibid., p. 255.

30 Hereby I wish to point to the writings of historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, some of which are translated into English and collected in the volume *Towards a History of Epistemic Things. Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

31 Cf. Lucy Lippard: *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* [1973], Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.

32 Cf. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh: “Conceptual Art 1962-1969. From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions”, in: *October* 55, Winter 1990, pp. 105-143.

implications of this endeavor. For if the meaning of a work is derived from such a model of communication, ultimately the artist's intention is inadvertently reinstated as the core of such a practice. The artist John Miller adequately described this asymmetrical situation established by the first generation of Conceptualists as part of an "intentionalist fallacy"³³. It would seem that Pisano's "object lessons" have incorporated these considerations, even though they are staying true to conceptual art's achievements in furthering a self-reflexive methodology that equally involves the voice of the artist-*cum*-author. Clearly, the model of communication advocated by Pisano's practice seems less indebted to an impulse of immediate clarification than to a kind of deliberate complication that encompasses incomprehension as an integral part. Another motif from *The point of view for my work (non-understanding within understanding)* (2008), in this case showing the interaction of two monkeys, the old symbols of art only mimicking nature, may suffice to accentuate this aspect of her work.

As I am closing, allow me to briefly expand this thought of the kernels of non-understanding within communication vis-à-vis the current conditions of immaterial labor that are characterized by an unprecedented emphasis on communication. Postfordism, as Paolo Virno has reminded us, not only demands the subject to put all of his or her individual capacities, including those at work in the process of aesthetic experience, at the service of production, but also provides the stage for a form of virtuosity of the sort the Italian philosopher has described as an "activity without end product."³⁴ Virtuosity occupies a prominent position in this type of economy, as it draws primarily on communicative skills and requires the presence of spectators in order to achieve realization. Speaking is at the basis of virtuosity in this sense, turning us all into the position of performers.³⁵ Pisano has repeatedly pointed to these passages from Virno's book *The Grammar of the Multitude* as they concisely capture crucial elements of her performance-based and communicative practice.³⁶ However, the artist, as far as I can see, does not go on to quote the further course of Virno's argument: As a consequence of the rise of services—in the guise of social interaction,

33 Cf. "Round Table. The Present Conditions of Art Criticism", in: *October* 100, Spring 2002, pp. 200-228, here p. 208.

34 Cf. Paolo Virno: *The Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, New York: Semiotexte, 2004, pp. 52ff.

35 Cf. Sven Lütticken: "Acts in the Age of Virtuoso Performance", in: *Texte zur Kunst*, Vol. 20, Issue 79, September 2010, pp. 124-133, here p. 130; and my "Evacuating the Site—John Knight's Virtuosity", in: *Utopia and Monument II. On Virtuosity and the Public Sphere*, exh. cat. Steirischer Herbst 2010, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (forthcoming).

36 Cf. Pisano: *Figures of Speech*, op. cit., p. 12.

bureaucracy, and “public relations”—to the status of key productive forces, Virno writes, virtuosity can develop a potential of disobedience that is capable of challenging the foundations of a dominant regime of control.³⁷ As we speak, language is at our command, and though it would be naïve to assume every utterance (of the subject of the enunciated) may contain the seed of a revolution yet to come, communication nevertheless can embark into uncharted territory, an area of incertitude and experimentation where things start to talk in spite of the immaterial mechanisms of control exerted by the current demand of transparency as prerequisite for performative labor (in part also advocated, it would seem, by the administrative rubric of “artistic research” in a host of European art education programs).

In reflecting on the transformative potential of aesthetic experience and charting its promise to reconsider the supposedly mute object of contemplation in terms of the mutual dependence of artwork and viewer, the conceptual practice of Falke Pisano faces the current regime of communication without ever completely succumbing to its rule: This may at least be one the insights to be gained from her “object lessons”.

André Rottmann

Extra City, Antwerp.
presented October 29, 2010

37 Cf. Virno, *op.cit.*, p. 69-70.

Biographies

Falke Pisano

Falke Pisano is an artist based in Berlin. She participated in the postgraduate program at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht. Over the last five years the Dutch artist has steadily developed a series of works brought together under the title *Figures of Speech*. The cycle of works can be described as the result of a detailed examination of processes that occur when 'objects' start shifting their form, materiality, meaning, description, understanding, role, and agency.

In Pisano's investigations, all pieces of art, whether objects, performances, texts, videos or interviews, are embedded in a continuous circulation, an ongoing exchange of ideas and forms through time and space – an exchange through which transformation occurs.

Like the playful shadows of a perpetuum mobile, in this process new figures, new constellations and new meanings are constantly being generated. Pisano, in turn, captures this in language and thereby generates new meaning and new works.

Recent exhibitions include among others: *Falke Pisano: (Conditions of Agency)*, Extra City, Antwerp (2010), *Figures of Speech (Formation of a Crystal)*, Hollybush Gardens, London, United Kingdom (2009), *For the blind man in the dark room looking for the black cat that isn't there*, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, USA and tour (2009), *Making Worlds*, 53rd Biennial of Venice, Italy (2009), *Modernologies*, MACBA, Barcelona, Spain (2009), *Manifesta 7*, Trentino, South Tyrol, Italy (2008), *Show Me, Don't Tell Me*, Brussels Biennial, Belgium (2008).

In 2010 the book *Figures of Speech* appeared; a publication of her work in collaboration with Will Holder.

André Rottmann

André Rottmann is an art historian and critic based in Berlin. A former editor and newly appointed advisory board member of *Texte zur Kunst*, he has published widely in the field of modern and contemporary art. Mainly focusing on the history and legacy of conceptual art and institutional critique, his essays, interviews and reviews have appeared in journals such as *Artforum International* as well as in numerous exhibition catalogues. A recipient of a *Gerda Henkel Foundation* grant, he is currently preparing a book-length study on the work of LA-based artist John Knight.

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