

## On Falke Pisano at Extra City, Antwerp



Language, be it spoken or written, is central to the conceptions on which Falke Pisano's works are based. The Dutch artist first drew attention with her filmic "Lecture-Performances": as the screen shows images of – usually abstract – works of classical modernist art, Pisano reflects from a variety of angles on the dissolution of the ostensibly firm boundaries between the art object, the beholder, and the context, as well as the question of how much power the artist subject actually wields. Not only does Pisano publish her manuscripts in artist's books; the texts also form the points of departure for ever new diagrams in which she seeks to record the process of aesthetic experience and the development of her own practice.

An exhibition in Antwerp now offered visitors the opportunity to see and hear a representative sample of Pisano's works from the past five year. The show on the factory floor at Extra City raised the question: at which point does a self-reflective artistic discourse meet material as well as theoretical resistance?

Falke Pisano's exhibition "(Conditions of Agency)" at Extra City in Antwerp might as well have been called "Three Video Lectures", for the institution's dark project space is dominated by three video pieces with voice-overs in which the artist presents major notions from her work of the past five years, work that she groups under the title "Figures of Speech: the disintegration of the object", "sculpture as conversation" and last but not least "agency". To a large extent, these monologues parallel the texts in the 2010 "Figures of

Speech” book, some pages of which are presented as a piece in this exhibition (“Untitled”, 2010). In some of Pisano’s earlier shows, the emphasis was more on the sculptural elements and the texts were shorter statements rather than lengthy lectures; ironically, because of a productive tension between objects and the accompanying sentences, the results may be said to have been *more* discursive than the present exhibition.

The large space is articulated by some hanging wall partitions, on which videos are projected and a few works on paper such as the book pages are shown, as well as by a few smallish, minimalist boxes in various colors. The videos, like many examples of Pisano’s work, contain diagrammatic elements, quasi-didactic figures not so much illustrating as complementing the conceptual scenarios in her texts. The most successful of the videos is the most elaborate and earliest piece, “A Sculpture Turning into a Conversation” (2006), a double projection combined with a smallish white, fragmented sculpture – a Cubo-Futurist explosion in a shingle factory, a three-dimensional diagram of a disintegrating solid object. The text meditates on alchemy; in a witty reversal of the standard modern interpretation of alchemy, according to which alchemy is not so much about the transmuting of metals as it is about spiritual transformation, Pisano notes that for her it was always the transformation of the object rather than the alchemist as subject that interested her. Ultimately, of course, her work is precisely about the interdependence of object and subject, of sculpture and viewer and about what is being presented as a quasi-alchemical dissolution of the material object into discourse.

If Pisano’s forms reference various moments from the history of abstract art with varying degrees of explicitness, her work problematizes such abstraction by relativizing and deconstructing form and the object. Thus she might be said to revisit problems from the 1960s, when abstract

art embraced its objecthood and objecthood itself was relativized by the rise of language, by the emergence of the conceptual paradigm. As in the aforementioned case, Pisano’s deconstruction of the object at times manifests itself in formal terms as oddly neo-Cubist sculptures, but her texts leave no doubt that such formal deconstructions reflect mental and linguistic operations. Her writings and the voice-overs in video pieces such as the remaining videos at Extra City, “Affecting Abstraction 3 (The Complex Object)” (2007) and “Figures of Speech”, abound with meditations on agency, speech acts and performativity, as do the related texts in the book “Figures of Speech”.

The book includes the text “Object and Disintegration: The Object of Three” – which also exists as a three-channel video shown on a large sculpture some of whose planes function as projection screens; sadly, the work is not included in the Antwerp show. Here, Pisano delineates the disintegration of the object from three positions that are each represented in one column: the *creative subject*, the *engaging spectator* and the *constructing artist*. This is perhaps her best text, and one that exists in close relation with her “open” sculptural pieces. In different ways, all three voices chart a progression from a state in which the object starts out as a solid entity distinct from its surroundings and talked about as an entity that exists somehow separate from the rest of the world to a situation in which it entertains manifold relations. In the column on/of the creative subject, we read: “Where first the object possessed a finality, it now becomes endless both in potential form and temporality. The original physical composition and the semantic structure of the object break up and the relation between form and linguistic form becomes provisional.” In the artist’s column, we follow a parallel process that results in “[the] end of the autonomy of the object, and thus the end of the possibility of contemplation as a whole by the spectator”, who “is not in the position anymore to

contemplate anything. His thinking becomes concrete and he becomes part of what he realizes. His own form too becomes dependent in the relations he establishes and enacts and his original sense of autonomy disappears”.

Leaving aside the question of autonomy, the gradual transition from a primary perception of and discourse about the object as something single and solid to a provisional and perpetually changing thing is presented in highly elusive terms. Pisano speaks the contemporary language of agency and speech acts, but she seems to appropriate it for very particular ends. While her references range from J. L. Austin to Gilles Deleuze and Paolo Virno, her ahistorical and apolitical stance seems closer to the former’s analytical philosophy. Time and again we are confronted with speech acts and disintegrating objects, but the setting always seems to be a social vacuum. The video “Affecting Abstraction 3” and in a related text in the book “Figures of Speech” contain Deleuzian ruminations on replacing the I with an “I-machine” that combines “the possibility to speak with the possibility to act”, but in her writings the two often seem to be magically identical, as speech acts function as agents that can dissolve both the object and the subject. One might say that the abstraction in Pisano’s work is insufficiently concrete.

A comparison with Liam Gillick is probably somewhat unfair, as comparisons often are, but it is instructive nonetheless: Gillick’s take on the progression of abstraction and the move from object production to discursive production addresses fundamental socioeconomical and cultural transformations, even if this often takes the form of an overly simplified caricature. By contrast, Pisano’s work rarely addresses a collective dimension and is seemingly content to operate with abstractions such as “the creative subject”. When they don’t read like uneasy combinations of analytical philosophy and phenomenology, her

texts seem to describe mystical-alchemical mental operations. “Affecting Abstraction 3” and the book contain images of work by Brazilian modernist artist Hélio Oiticica, but the social aspect of Oiticica’s work has largely been filtered out of Pisano’s sculptural-textual assemblage.

When, in “Affecting Abstraction 3”, Pisano drones on about “a singularity, an abstract machine with the proper name I-machine”, any conversational and properly discursive elements seems to be lost. For all their unmistakable earnestness and desire to communicate, Pisano’s texts form a monotone monologue, and her video lectures have an oddly self-defeating quality. Pisano speaks in an almost narcoleptic voice, quasi-intimate yet strangely affectless. As the murmuring on the headphone continues, her sharp pronunciation of words such as “conversation” which at some points draws more attention to itself than to the content. This would not happen (to such an extent) in an actual conversation or a live talk, but the medium she has chosen puts undue emphasis on such elements. The problem is not that Pisano’s spoken and written texts have a texture that hinders easy consumption; rather, that this texture is too even. Everything is shredded and dissolved to such an extent that there is not enough texture, not enough coagulation. Even if the formal, often diagrammatic elements in her works themselves seek to chart the dissolution of objecthood, it is these elements that offer resistance to assimilation into noise, into sameness.

“(Conditions of Agency)” is presented as the culmination of five years of work. By contrast, a small group show with Achim Lengerer, Karolin Meunier und Charlotte Moth that Pisano curated simultaneously for the Academiegalerie in Utrecht (Pisano attended the art academy in this city) suggests a new project, a new line of inquiry, as yet only partially defined. “Yucatan is Elsewhere” takes its points of departure from Robert Smithson’s notion of the nonsite, and the first (larger)

room contains a version of Smithson's 1969 article "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan", redesigned and rearranged by Pisano on the gallery wall – emphasizing the voices of the Mayan and Aztec gods that interpellate Smithson. Yucatan is elsewhere: displacement is the central notion of this presentation, and in front of the rearranged Smithson one encounters six low and lengthy, frieze-like blackboards, all perched on the floor at an acute angle as if to evoke some of Smithson's mirror displacements.

If Smithson's mirror displacements shatter the consistency of the site, Pisano's displaced blackboards introduce certain materials into the gallery nonsite: most are empty, but three boards contain some notes on the Ancient physician Galen, on World War I soldiers suffering from "shell shock" and on Oiticica's colleague Lygia Clark and her transition from working in the art world to a therapeutic context. The boards thus emphasize the body as site – site of symptomatic eruptions and therapeutic interventions, acting and enacted upon, an I-machine of uncertain agency. The piece seems more confidently fragmentary than either the Extra City exhibition or the book. Instead of attempting to dissolve everything into a discourse of uncertain discursivity, it offers resistance to the gaze. As open and improvised as it looks, it has an obdurate quality. Challenging but also limiting the "engaging spectator" with its obdurate thingness, frustrating an all too easy transmutation of objecthood into discourse, such a work might turn into a conversation.

#### **SVEN LÜTTICKEN**

Falke Pisano, "(Conditions of Agency)", Extra City, Antwerp, October 17–31, 2010.