

In a precise and seductive practice exploring speech and artistic agency, **Falke Pisano** inhabits the art of others, mapping out the conditions of its existence.

But when asked to explain herself, she insists on the work doing the talking

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SHALL I TELL YOU WHY I didn't interview Falke Pisano? Well, perhaps I should leave it to Paolo Virno – whom the artist has quoted at length – to offer a hint. 'Every utterance is a virtuosic performance', writes the Italian philosopher in *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004). 'And this is so, also because, obviously, utterance is connected (directly or indirectly) to the presence of others.' In Pisano's work, interpersonal speech is taken seriously, given primacy. And when you frame speaking in terms of art, a discussion isn't just a discussion: it is something else, something more.

Imagine that human speech were transformed into tangible form. Imagine that someone said something which had effects – on her own ability to speak, on that of others, on the future – and that you could see these effects, like a perfectly formed, beautifully crystalline schema spilling forth from the speaker, mapping out all future potentials. Imagine this was a sculpture. Mapping and materialising characterises the kinds of propositions Pisano puts forward via diagrams, sculptures, writing, lectures, interviews (for she has done them, when she has elected to) and books.

The visual aspects of Pisano's art frequently involve flat blocks of colour and complex constellations of primary shapes. In one of her diagrams, for example, 'Position A' might be a drawing of three squares and three triangles based on Josef Albers's *Structural Constellation, Transformation of a Scheme No. 23* (1951), yet it will also represent the position of something called an 'l-machine', a concept Pisano has developed to try to understand changing forms of possible artistic agency – how one artist creates a set of possible futures for another, whether by speaking or producing. Her installation in Daniel Birnbaum's 2009 Venice Biennale exhibition *Making Worlds*, for example, was a large floor-based sculpture of flat primary colours and shapes, each with a black frame atop it.





This sculpture was also, if seen from above, a diagram of different speaking positions, so that when a viewer stood in a particular position, she faced a piece of text attached to the black frame that explained her speaking position. Part of a series entitled *Figures of Speech* (2007–9), the work attempted to enact the transformation of a sculpture into a conversation; more specifically, it investigated the formation of individual agency as it relates to speech acts, and moreover, aligned them with acts of artistic creativity.

Those textual directions are perhaps where we hit our first sticking point, like toffee in the mouth or coke spilled on a keyboard. Pisano's writings, lectures and signs are so very precise, employing such a strict philosophical vocabulary, that her recently published artist's book, also called *Figures of Speech* (2010), came with a glossary. Pullout, for ease of use. The dryness of some of her texts is striking, detailing points such as: '10) The Complex Object is constructed around the problematic proposition – indicating an impossible or problematic event – on which its internal logic is based. 11) Because the proposition is transferred from its original context to a context that is based upon it, its problematic nature dissolves; as the object is constructed the "taking place" of the event is enabled and written.' Trying to change the foundations of logic, it seems – to perform the magician's trick of transforming thought or speech into object and back again – means that the forbidding empirical language of logic itself is the only one that can be afforded.

And yet, this description doesn't do justice to how seductive the combination of these sculptures and ideas can be. The first element at play here is the latest manifestation of art's seduction by theory and reference. Many artists now acknowledge that their art plays within modernist ruins, destined to repeat and reconsider the art of a certain period in the past. It is also widely acknowledged that there are many artists who build their work out of references as though they were a plastic material. For her part, Pisano has gone so far as to collapse the relationship between text, reference and work entirely, creating installations of open book pages such as *Object Construction Number 1, Reflective Abstraction (Mishima)* (2007), in which the artist's circling around a particular paragraph from a

Yukio Mishima novel explores sculptural shape in its presentation – a set of open books as sculpture – and in the selection of severe geometric forms and sculptures pictured in the pages of some of these books.

The second element resides in Pisano's abstract imagery, if it can be called that. This is drawn from some of the most diamond-hard condensations of modernist art and design, those moments in which utopian ideas and deceptively simple constructions of shape and colour collide, and continue to subtly reverberate throughout our art history. A case in point is Pisano's ongoing *O Eu e o Tu/The I and the You* (2008–), a series of works based on Hélio Oiticica's tropicalist installations and specifically his *Penetráveis* (penetrable structures). Like Oiticica's, Pisano's constructions are made of soft, colourful hanging fabric and bamboo, and manage to seem both modernist and extravagant, hot and cold. Inside these constructions ('inside' the sculptures or paintings, as it were), one can hear Pisano's voice, reading a fragmented text, which occasionally addresses the listener, inviting her to play a part in or adapt the sculpture in which she now finds herself: to use her own agency.

Yet there is something of a betrayal in attempting to reconstruct and repurpose the work another artist, which Pisano perhaps obliquely acknowledges in other works. How does one truly get inside the work of other artists without abusing or destroying it? *Object and Disintegration (The Object of Three)* (2008), which references Le Corbusier's fixation on and interior 'defacement' of Eileen Gray's E-1027 seaside home, subtly mocking the former's personal disintegration as he attacked the work of the latter, provides Pisano with another model of an agent inhabiting a work of art.

In approaching and remaking Oiticica's sculptures, and in essence sitting inside them, Pisano has torn through them – destroyed them to an extent – removing them from their original context to be used for her own means. If *Tropicália* was itself rooted





in anthropophagia (here referring to the cannibalising of other cultures for Brazilian ends), then Pisano has recannibalised Oiticica's works in her investigations of the relationship between speech, the individual and artistic agency. A series of her works titled *The point of view for my work (non-understanding within understanding)* (2008) feature framed black-and-white found photographs of baboons appearing to converse and of a parrot, referencing both the idea of the 'tropical' and of the mimic – a creature that repeats but is not sure what it says; inhabiting language, but not living in it.

It is Oiticica who perhaps provides the ultimate point of reference for Pisano's interest in the relationship of an art/object to a speaker or an agent. This is borne out by her recent use, in the exhibition *Figures of Speech (Formation of Crystal)* (2009) at London's Hollybush Gardens, of wall-hung fabric sculptures that also act as potential costumes. While Oiticica's costumes were designed for dancing in, Pisano's are designed to depict four different speech models (context, for example, or collaboration). Each fabric element of these sculptures is ascribed a particular meaning, and is taken from existing elements within her own work. One of the sculptures, *Figure 3 (Conditions of Agency)* (2009), borrows its form from *O Eu e o Tu*, and each piece of fabric represents a different position with potential agency. In another sculpture, *Figure 2 (Collaboration and Subjectivity)*, three sticks and three pieces of coloured fabric appear to be laid out in separate parts on a table, waiting to be made, worn and brought to life.

For an artist so interested in understanding conversation and collaboration, perhaps Pisano's works that perform collaboration

best (rather than suggest a potential collaboration on the viewer's part) are those conceived with long-term accomplice Benoît Maire. Their two most recent collaborations were *Organon* and *The Wave* (both 2009). *Organon* features several tables with small anonymous objects placed upon them: pieces of paper, mirror, cardboard and plastic in a variety of pale colours together with a wall text that appears to fathom how the viewer's interpretation of these objects may change as they are moved around the table. The small objects cannot help but have a relationship to one another – we are programmed to see a language in their placement, though it is language full of physical and spatial nuance that we can't completely articulate. Any attribution of artistic intention is thwarted by the fact that the objects are rearranged daily by gallery or museum staff as they please. *The Wave* is a 16mm film made in three sections. The first is an audio description of a shape; in the second we see a man and woman arranging objects on a beach, making meaning from physical and referential glamour; and finally we see a park with public sculpture and statues – people taking shelter beneath a sculpture suggesting that we question how objects really function in history, how they affect the ways people behave and genuinely 'enter' a sculpture or a dialogue with it.

For all Pisano's attention to how people can enter and inhabit art, precisely this engagement can occasionally be the most difficult aspect of her own work. One is attracted visually by the objects, but somewhat rebuffed by the text. Pisano has discussed her 'end products' – objects, performances, texts, interviews, etc – as 'moments of communication, constituting entrances to a structure that is activated through an investment in it'. But does this mean that every time an artist speaks, it is an artistic speech act that opens up an entrance into her work? When she speaks as Falke Pisano about her work, must it *become* her work? After reading her email to me, in which she explains why she cannot take part in an interview, in part because she views the interview as a crucial part of her own practice, and not a side product, one can only surmise that it must, and that this piece of writing is not an entrance, but the words of someone waiting outside. •

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Falke Pisano, *Object Construction #1: Reflective Abstraction (Mishima)*, 2007 (installation view).
Courtesy Grazer Kunstverein

Falke Pisano, *Figures of Speech (Diagrammed)*, 2009 (installation view, Venice Biennale, 2009)

Falke Pisano, *O Eu e o tu / The I and You, III*, 2010
(installation view, Berlin–Paris 2010, Balice Hertling c/o Galerie Neu / MD72, Berlin, 2010), mixed media,
dimensions variable. Courtesy Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris

Falke Pisano, *The point of view for my work (non-understanding within understanding)* (detail), 2008
(installation view, *Modern, Modern*, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, 2009),
nine framed c-prints and photographs, dimensions variable

Falke Pisano and Benoît Maire, *Organon*, 2008 (installation view). Courtesy Grazer Kunstverein