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Another Kind of Comprehension Interview with Falke Pisano

In her work, language becomes speaking that manifests itself as an image or sculpture. The art of the Dutch artist Falke Pisano is not easy to understand. Nor is that necessary, she says. There are other ways of appreciating it.

Monika Szewczyk:

Your recently published book is entitled *Figures of Speech*, a phrase that touches on the concrete, sculptural dimensions of language, but that needs to be turned a number of different ways in order to reveal the way your work crosses dimensions: between language and sculpture, between the object and the situation. I wanted to ask you about how – despite the insistence on ‘the figure’ – the pesky abstraction of language haunts your work. But before we get into a theoretical discussion, I’d like to ask you something rather personal. How is it that you ended up working as an artist?

Falke Pisano:

‘After graduating from the Utrecht School of the Arts in 2001, I tried for a short while to continue making work, but I realized quite soon that I had not developed any tools or methods to translate what I was thinking about into something that I would consider a “work of art”. I was thinking about many things, but always side-stepped them when it came to the moment of production. So I decided to stop, and found a job as an assistant for Ellen de Bruijne Projects in Amsterdam. Of course, I learned a lot and after a while I started to curate the gallery’s project space, Dolores, which gave me the opportunity to engage directly with artists from my generation, like Frank Koolen and Keren Cytter who were then at De Ateliers.

After a couple of years, in 2004, I felt a desire that did not so much have to do with wanting to make art, but more with an idea of synthesis. I had all these thoughts and ideas and wanted to find a way to bring them together and externalize them, to find a form and a context for them. I wrote an application to the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, approaching it very strategically: I tried to write something that was concrete and precise enough to convince the committee, but at the same time left the subject of research completely open. The title of my proposal was “Thinking as (Pragmatic) Action”. Looking back, it was basically the formulation of a methodology (it came with a short list of subjects to think about). I applied to the Theory Department – I didn’t realize it was so academic then – but luckily they forwarded my application to the Fine Art Department, where I was invited for an interview. During the interview, I explained that it was not my intention to make art, but if I happened to accidentally make a work it would be fine as well. I was accepted, and in the first week of introductory lectures I presented my proposal. And the funny thing was that several people perceived the proposal as a “lecture-performance”, something that I didn’t know existed. And I was also positively surprised about how this simple format could communicate both subject matter and something more formal. I felt very comfortable with it, and I really felt I had walked around a wall that I had always been walking straight into before this. So, even if I did not “perform” this “lecture” again, I think we could say this was my first artwork.

I am still trying to figure out why it is so difficult for me to take a distance and speak about my practice in a more theoretical or reflexive mode. Sometimes I feel like my work is a black hole that absorbs all of the matter in its proximity.’

Monika Szewczyk:

A black hole! That's perfect – and better than slotting your work into an available category such as the lecture-performance. Seeing as you started out as someone in search of a conceptual home, which was not necessarily rooted in making art, I wonder if there's a determination in your work that has something to do with defying physics or alternately working alongside theoretical physics, which uses but also troubles the super-objective way science has come to construct truth. Could you say a bit about how your use of language has developed in relation to this?

Falke Pisano:

'There is certainly a strong sense in my text-based works of moving matter, of transforming or constructing in a very material way. I would connect it more to a combination of a materialist and a performative approach than to constructing truth, but I do see a link to the very forefront of science, where theories are being developed on the basis of many unknown and uncertain factors, and the only way of verification is deduction. When something comes to light that doesn't work with the theory, the theory needs to be adapted. And when this doesn't happen, scientists continue to build on their latest theory.

I might use a somewhat similar strategy, without the claim to explain the world, of course, because it simply does not make any sense to say, with a claim to truth: this is how a sculpture turns into a conversation, or: this is how an object disintegrates into a relational situation. What I do use is a method of stating things in an objective style, without references to a context outside of the work/text, as a way of making something concrete in language. And because I often try to make something concrete that is not possible in the material world, it also becomes an experiment in how much materiality language can take on before the link to the sensible is lost.

The work in which I follow this strategy most strictly is *The Complex Object (Affecting Abstraction 3)*, which is a step-by-step construction of a linguistic object. I state in the first sentence: 'The object of which this is the first sentence doesn't exist yet.' There is no way to verify if this sentence is true or not, and there is in my eyes also no way to read it as a metaphor. It means what it means, and it is the beginning of the linguistic object.'

Monika Szewczyk:

This notion of 'it means what it means' indicates both an abstraction of sorts (language abstracted from tangible material reference, say, and referring to itself) and therefore a possible problem for communication. In terms of the process of constructing the linguistic object, do you need like minds to play along? Or maybe I should rephrase that to ask: Who are the artists that may be said to speak a similar language or to best understand your rigorously speculative process?

Falke Pisano:

'I have never met an artist whose work I understood seamlessly, and I cannot imagine someone understanding my work to that extent either, but I've experienced something more productive, another kind of comprehension, where there was a correspondence in the language of thinking about work and thinking in the making of work. I find conversations often quite confusing, because I get usually very distracted by the languageness of things (What does it mean to speak these words? What is this statement based on?, etcetera), so I like to write about fluid conversations; but I very much like to have conversations that are more fractured, for instance through desynchronisation or suspension. So that there is time to see what it actually is that someone offers you by their words, or what happens when you put something on the table, but also where the other is speaking from. And I think this kind of conversation is very close to the way I have collaborated on works with Benoît Maire or, in a different way, on the book *Figures of Speech* with Will Holder.'

Monika Szewczyk:

The first work of yours that I ever encountered in person was performed with Will Holder (and Karolin Meunier), which was realized as part of the night programme of the Berlin Biennale in 2008. I'm thinking of *Object and Disintegration: A Performance in Triologue Form*. Could you discuss the construction of this piece?

Falke Pisano:

'*Object and Disintegration* was a reading of my scripted conversation between three voices: the Creative Subject (read by Karolin), the Engaging Spectator (read by Will) and the Constructing Artist (read by me).[1] The conversation comments on what happens during an encounter between the Spectator and an object. In short, the three voices together construct an overall transformation, where the Spectator's *perception* of the object evolves into *engagement with* the object, which causes the object to become transparent first and fractured later, until both the object and the Spectator lose their material consistency and autonomy and end up existing as something more like a site, where different kinds of relations are continuously enacted and transformed.'

Monika Szewczyk:

Just to be clear, is the Creative Subject the equivalent of the art object in this situation?

Falke Pisano:

'Well, actually, no, the object doesn't have a voice. The Constructing Artist corresponds to my own position. She speaks about the construction and structures of the work and the place that the object occupies in this. The Engaging Spectator speaks about what he sees and experiences. And the Creative Subject is not really an entity but more the mediating agency between the structures and the experience. She (she is nevertheless gendered) speaks mainly about the perception of the Engaging Spectator, how and why it evolves and what the consequences are.'

Monika Szewczyk:

I remember a tension between, on the one hand, language referring to itself and on the other, a sense that in scripting the conversation you must have had a very concrete notion of an object in mind, some 'thing' holding the linguistic exchange together.

Falke Pisano:

'Thinking back now, I would say that my concept of "the object" (and my use of language as I explained before) had very much to do with what may be the most non-linguistic objects in art history: the non-object of Ferreira Gullar and the *specific object* of Donald Judd.[2][3] These objects are decisively non-representational, and non-metaphorical. They are actually not exactly sculptures but objects; but they distinguish themselves from other, common objects like tables and chairs – and, in both Gullar's and Judd's concept, they distinguish themselves from painting in the sense that they don't exist in "illusionistic space" but in "real space". Both Gullar and Judd also included the spectator as being part of the object-being-made.

What I was trying to figure out (or "imagine") in *Object and Disintegration*, was whether it was possible to draw a line from the highly modernist *non-object* or *specific object* via relational, but still object-based practices like those of Helio Oiticica (in the late 60s and early 70s) and of Lygia Clark (after 1963) to something that doesn't include any objects at all, something that might resemble a conversation in the sense that it is based on exchange, that it is informal and doesn't adhere to rules or Constructivist principles.'

Monika Szewczyk:

I wanted to ask you about the way visuals function in your work, and in particular your use of diagrammatic tools. A gap for the imagination seems to open between language and images

and the diagrammatic frame. I'm thinking in particular of the work which is actually titled *A Sculpture Turning into a Conversation*.

Falke Pisano:

'This earlier work (2006/2007) consists of a double projection with voice-over. The left black-and-white projection has the subtitle *Part Zero (Collection and Construction)* and consists of images of modernist sculpture, people looking at or making sculptures, images associated with alchemy, text fragments and small drawings, all embedded inside a large diagram loosely based on László Moholy-Nagy's *Dynamics of the Big City*, over which the camera pans.[4] The right projection, which together with the voice-over has the subtitle *Part One (Description)*, shows a series of (kind of atmospheric) colour photos of a group of people, seen through fragments of a red sculpture, having a conversation. In comparison to the text part, I worked much more loosely on the visuals. They are there to make space, like you say, to prevent the text from becoming the only account of the transformation.

By contrast, the voice-over is that of a text quite literally describing a sculpture turning into a conversation. The language establishes/shapes the material as it were, and the main motif is the search for a logic that can bring about the transformation (turning) mentioned in the title. It was not an easy text to write. My biggest problem was to figure out how a *specific object* (a non-referential object that is described through its material qualities) could transform into an informal and content-based conversation. Where does sensation (of material and form) connect to meaning that can be verbally articulated? I was drawing a lot of diagrams to help me write the text. I finally came up with quite a complicated solution, where I constructed the text explicitly around the transformation, and neither the sculpture nor the conversation ever exist as whole and concrete.'

Monika Szewczyk:

Do you mean the struggle of language/text to communicate what is on one's mind?

Falke Pisano:

'I think here, and likewise in other texts that rely on such a convoluted logic, my work comes to a point where there is a real resistance against the mode of conversation. There is a turn where the text becomes an object (again). What I want to achieve with this, is that a part of the attention is shifted from the text as representative meaning-making to the text as gesture, highlighting the performative aspect and the way this work functions within a broader system. To articulate and visualize the relations between works, I make use of line diagrams, for instance to re-think the connections between three earlier works. A clear instance of this occurs in the lecture *Figures of Speech 1* (2008). I subsequently translated the diagram that this lecture is based on into four wall sculptures *Figure 1 - 4* (2009) for the exhibition *Figures of Speech (Formation of a Crystal)* at Hollybush Gardens in London, 2009. Later, these sculptures re-appeared deconstructed in the form of indexical diagrams that I presented both on posters and as wall paintings.

So the diagram functions as a methodological tool, becomes form, attains a materiality, then falls back into an intermediate state coming closer to language and thought, where it evolves before it becomes form again, and so on.... I think I only really started to think about the diagrammatic, and work with it consciously, in this later lecture, *Figures of Speech 1* (2008).'

Monika Szewczyk:

In your book entitled *Figures of Speech*, I observe something of the diagrammatic frame that is first found in *A Sculpture Turning into a Conversation*, this time holding together a lot of material related to your work, which has been by necessity very fluid and dynamic for several years. Could you tell me how you went about constructing this book?

Falke Pisano:

'Well, the funny thing is that Will Holder and I started to talk about how to translate my work to print when I had made only about half of the work that was finally included in the book. We discussed different formats, from a script for a theatre play to a songbook, but nothing really seemed to fit. Ultimately, my conversations with Will and my growing awareness of the space of the book had an effect on the works that I was making: they became more hybrid and I saw them as less attached to a specific medium. So, for instance, a sculpture could very easily become a wall-drawing. From that point, the translation into print became easier. We still struggled a bit with how to deal with the specific chronology of my work, which is not straightforward but consists of a series of loops. But we found a solution that I am really happy with. What becomes very clear in the book is that the whole *Figures of Speech* cycle consists of several circuits of concepts being developed and then being translated into a formal expression, being re-approached, combined with other concepts, re-formulated and re-translated into another form, and so on. At the same time, a certain coded system of representation surfaces, where specific forms and colours, or language expressions, attain specific meanings, and a kind of grammatical logic is developed. It became something of a performative fiction of the process of transformation.'

Monika Szewczyk:

With the book now printed, is there also a kind of closure on certain on-going processes that have energized your work and a possibility of moving in a different direction? I'm curious: What are you working on in Brazil and do you have a sense of how this might translate into your upcoming exhibition at Ellen de Bruijne?

Falke Pisano:

'The book definitely was a kind of closure, and afterwards it took me a long time to figure out how to proceed. Actually, these months in Brazil have been very important in an unexpected way. For me, Brazil has always been very much connected with fluidity and exchange, with social relations that are being performed and transformed, raising questions about how to evade institutions and how the unofficial and informal can work on the official and formal. Conceptually, I'm thinking through Deleuze, Guattari, Oiticica, Clark etc. In that sense, my idea of Brazil was very much connected to the work in *Figures of Speech*.

But since I have been in Brazil, I have started thinking about things that interfere with these ideas: I'm finally reading some post-modernist texts, thinking about representation and image and about how representation functions in relation to distance. Previously, in thinking about diagrams (the image as diagram) I assumed that different contexts could be brought together without planes of real resistance, but in thinking about representation I became more sensitive to obstructed flows, or ways in which things stay fragmentary, cannot be integrated, are being kept at a distance even if a meaningful connection can be made between very different contexts.

At the moment, I am researching the format of comics, and especially comics made during and after military dictatorships (for instance in Argentina), thinking about strategies that were used to address the violence and oppression in the face of state censorship, but also how comics played a part in reconstructing a suppressed collective memory after the fact (where indexical images failed). Simultaneously, I am looking into representations of the body in repressive conditions where the institutions and structures thrust the organic body into a state of crisis, not only through direct state violence, but also through institutionalized definitions of (mental) health and illness, for instance. I am not sure what will come out of it.'

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- *Falke Pisano*
Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam
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Notes

1. The title is a reference to Piet Mondrian's text *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: An Essay in Triologue Form*, which consists of a conversation between a Layman, a Naturalist Painter, and an Abstract-Real Painter.
2. Ferreira Gullar in an interview: 'The non-object does not rest upon references of use or of sense (meaning) because it does not form part of the condition of utility or of verbal designation. The non-object is transparent to perception. It is a meaning immanent to its own form that is simple signification. The non-object is not a representation but a concrete presence that is perceived above the real space of the world and not above the metaphoric ground of abstract expression. The verbal non-object is anti-dictionary: space where the isolated word irradiates its charge. The non-object demands a spectator (does it even have to do with a spectator?) as proper condition of its act of 'being made' and not so much that passive boundary of its existence. Without a spectator the work exists only as potentiality, awaiting the human gesture that actualizes it.'
3. Anna Dezeuze in 'Minimalism and Neoconcretism' (lecture, 2006): 'New York, 1962: Puzzled, Donald Judd looks at one of his first free-standing pieces, which he describes as "a right angle of wood placed directly on the floor." He is thinking: "The work is not lying flat upon the floor, therefore it isn't a low relief on the floor. But on the other hand, it isn't heaped upon the floor either, so it isn't a high relief either." Years later, Judd would look back onto this moment and conclude: 'Before the right angle and its predecessor, nothing had ever been placed directly on the floor.... My work on the floor was a new form, creating space amply and strongly.'"
4. This work by Moholy-Nagy was a schematic/script for a film, spread across several pages.
5. 'Performative fiction' is a term I borrowed from Daniela Castro, a Brazilian curator and writer.