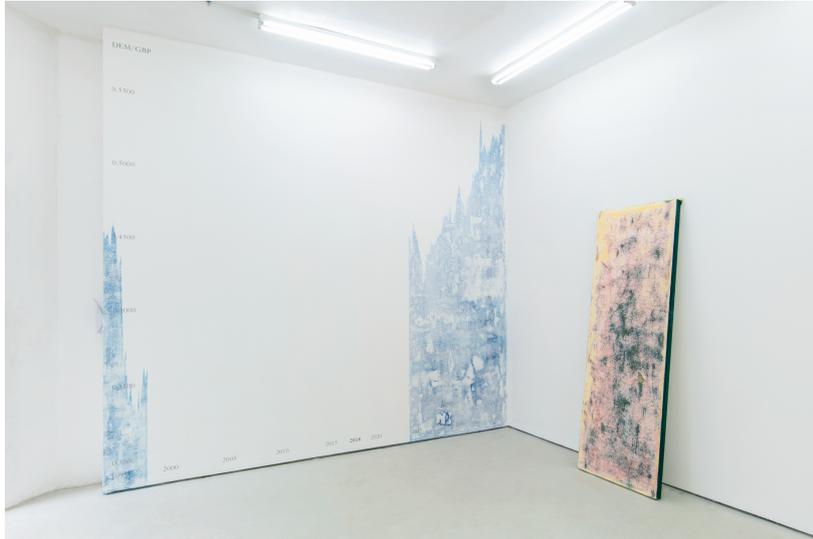


Speculation – On Yoi Kawakubo

Christian Berger



I/body/ghost installation view

image: Alexander Christie

Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares), 2018 (left)

Sanded panel of the Florence Trust studio wall III, 2018 (right)

speculate, v.

Etymology: < Latin *speculāt-*, participial stem of *speculārī* to spy out, watch, examine, observe, etc., <

To observe or view mentally; to consider, examine, or reflect upon with close attention; to contemplate; to theorize upon.

(Excerpt from *Oxford English Dictionary*)

The limits of knowledge is a leitmotif in Yoi Kawakubo's practice. He addresses it by employing a variety of strategies, derived especially from photography, experimental literature, the conceptualist investigations in art since the 1960s, and the logics of financial markets — a world he knows intimately from his past career as a financial trader. Focusing on the works presented in the exhibition *I/body/ghost*, this text identifies 'speculation' as a common thread in Kawakubo's practice, using some of its definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary* as touchstones.

Whereas the Latin verb ‘speculari’ emphasises visual activities, the English terms ‘speculation’ and ‘to speculate’ are more figurative in the sense of mental or theoretical as opposed to visual observation. As this etymology suggests, knowing and looking are intricately linked. Indeed, in his book *Downcast Eyes*, the intellectual historian Martin Jay demonstrates how visual metaphors dominate everyday language in Western culture.¹ In some of his works, Kawakubo draws upon Eastern traditions to make this link between seeing and knowing quite explicit. For instance, in *Study for a Zekkei VI* (2018), visitors are invited to attend an original Japanese tea ceremony, performed by a traditionally trained tea master, in a room decorated with a scroll of Japanese calligraphy and a flower arrangement. Yet the whole ritual takes place in complete darkness, so that neither the decoration nor the valuable pottery are visible, and the tea master herself must perform the complex and highly formalised ritual in complete darkness as well. ‘Zekkei’ (絶景) is commonly translated as ‘a superb view’ or ‘an absolute view’. However, a close examination of the two *kanji* characters also allows for other meanings, as the first character (絶) can also be translated as ‘cut off’, ‘interrupt’, or ‘suppress’ — an ambiguity that aptly describes the work itself.² But what do we experience when we cannot see? Is it the delicious taste of the matcha, the shape and smoothness of the ceramic tea bowl, the smell of the flowers, or the sounds and the sensations of our own bodies? At the end of the ritual, there is a shift from the sensual to the verbal, when visitors are asked to share their experience with the tea master, reflecting upon what they have felt and how they envisioned the room and the details they have not been able to see — an activity that again recalls the character of ‘speculation’ as a visual metaphor.

To engage in thought or reflection, esp. of a conjectural or theoretical nature, *on* or *upon* a subject.

One important point of reference for Kawakubo is literature, in particular Latin American magic realism, and Emily Brontë’s (1818-1848) classic Victorian novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847), which combines fantastic elements derived from Gothic fiction, such as ghosts, with social criticism. Kawakubo regards animism as a ‘local specificity’, and the exhibition title *I/body/ghost* therefore alludes to this British preoccupation with ghosts. *The God of the Labyrinth* (2016) takes its title from a short story by Herbert Quain, a fictitious writer dreamt up by Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). Not only does Kawakubo’s work draw inspiration from the Argentine author’s blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, but Borges’ text also serves as raw material for the artist in a more literal sense. As if creating a giant anagram, he uses all the letters that made up the original story and combines them into a new narrative, written in Spanish like the original. The visitor encounters the work through a set of

headphones in front of a monitor. Over the headphones, he or she hears the Spanish original on the left and a Japanese translation on the right channel. Both versions are spoken by the artist himself, who was brought up in Spain and later moved to Japan. The video shows an English translation in quick succession, almost too fast to read, in white letters on a black screen. The subtitles are the work's only visual element, and add another layer to its exploration of the nature of language and different languages. The story delivers a dystopic vision of human settlements on other planets, narrated from the perspective of an android, posing pressing questions on artificial intelligence and on what constitutes a personality.

In his work, Kawakubo repeatedly addresses controversial political issues more directly. In the wake of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima in 2011, he buried 8x10-inch pieces of film into the earth close to the power plant, excavated them months later and printed them. The resulting series of large-format prints, titled *If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky* (2013, See illustration below.), show vague shapes in deceptively beautiful colours that powerfully evoke the high level of radiation present at the site and could very well be the direct result thereof.³ The work thus combines an expanded photographic practice, undertaken at high personal risk, with a speculative investigation into the lasting consequences of the Fukushima catastrophe — a topic on which many questions remain unanswered, and one that has largely been excluded from public debate in Japan.

To engage in the buying and selling of commodities or effects in order to profit by a rise or fall in their market value; to undertake, to take part or invest in, a business enterprise or transaction of a risky nature in the expectation of considerable gain.

Since 2014, Kawakubo has been working on a series of wall works that play with the conventions of easel painting and simultaneously analyse the creation of value. For the present exhibition at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix, the artist has partially sanded down two walls of the gallery, to the effect that underlying layers of paint that had been applied to the walls earlier reappear, testifying to the former uses of the space and thus to the time that has passed. In a highly laborious process, the walls have been meticulously polished, their surfaces becoming shiny and smooth, inviting touch, which the artist has explicitly permitted.

Kawakubo has turned the walls into systems of coordinates, with the boundaries between the highly polished sanded and the unsanded sections of the walls marking the lines of two charts. The latter project economic forecasts the artist generated based on interviews he conducted with financial traders and economists. *Midas Hills* (2018), taking its title from the mythical

Phrygian king whose touch turned everything into gold, projects the net return of UK corporations twenty years into the future, whereas *Valley of Ares* (2016), named after the Greek god of war, sketches out the future development of the German Mark based on a scenario of the collapse of the European Union in the mid-2020s.

Kawakubo cut out a square section of *Midas Hills* from one of the gallery walls and placed the fragment elsewhere in the gallery space. While both the wall work and the removed section resemble a mountain landscape and thus have a strong pictorial dimension, this interaction with the wall is also a conscious nod to the Conceptual art movement of the 1960s, or more precisely to an iconic work by the Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner (b. 1942), A 36" x 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL. Although it is formally distinct, Kawakubo's cut-out roughly mirrors the dimensions of Weiner's removal piece; in strong contrast to the American artist's work, however, Kawakubo's removal becomes a saleable work — and it is particularly this transformation into a marketable object that interests the artist. In addition, two large sections of sanded-down and polished studio walls from his residence at the Florence Trust in North London in 2016 are now presented in the gallery space, a place that has, according to the critic Brian O'Doherty (b. 1928), the function of 'assigning material value to that which has none'.⁴ By transferring his actual studio walls into the gallery, Kawakubo enacts this transfer in the most literal manner.

A further interaction with the legacy of conceptualism is *Investment Piece* (2018), a reprise of Lee Lozano's (1930-1999) eponymous work from 1969. As the art historians Jo Applin and Sophie Cras have shown, the art-life pieces that Lozano conducted between 1969 and 1971 were closely linked to the artist's own living conditions and served the purpose of using money as a disruptive element within the art world.⁵ By contrast, Kawakubo's piece addresses the contemporary global economy: The profit derived from its sale would turn the artist into a subversive shareholder of HSBC, one of the corporations with the highest corporate net profits in Britain in 2016. The typewritten certificate is adorned with small cut-outs of banknotes from various currencies — another interrogation of value. One of the details is a section from a French 20 Franc note, which carries a watermark portrait of the artist Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). Yet this watermark, as it cannot be held against the light, is barely visible. Thus, in a subtle way, the work reunites two main strands of Kawakubo's practice that are encapsulated in the term 'speculation' — on the one hand questions of seeing and knowing and on the other issues of value.

¹ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

² The artist Shinji Ohmaki (b. 1971) explored this ambiguity in a project presented in 2009 at *Tokyo Wonder Site*, an artist residency and exhibition space where Kawakubo was Creator in Residence in 2013/14. See http://www.shinjiohmaki.net/portfolio/zekkei/post_10_en.html (accessed 14 July 2018).

³ The experts Kawakubo has consulted with regarding this question have considered it very likely that the colours did indeed derive from the radiation. For instance, the yellowish colour of the film resembles the traces that airport security scanners leave on photographic film, and the wavelength of the hard X-rays that these scanners emanate is quite close to that of the gamma rays that the radioactive caesium particles in Fukushima emanate.

⁴ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986, 76.

⁵ See Jo Applin, *Lee Lozano: Not Working*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018, 159, for Lozano's 'art-life experiments', and Sophie Cras, 'Art as an Investment and Artistic Shareholding Experiments in the 1960s', *American Art* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 5, on how Lozano and fellow artist Dan Graham (b. 1942) 'used money as a disruptive factor'.

Illustration



If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky 1 (2013/2016)

pigment print from photographic colour negative buried in a high radiation site for 6 months

image: Yoi Kawakubo

Christian Berger is a historian of modern and contemporary art and currently a Marie Skłodowska Curie Postdoctoral Fellow of the European Union at The Courtauld Institute of Art in London.