



**Yoi Kawakubo**

*I / body / ghost*

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Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix

## Speculation – On Yoi Kawakubo Christian Berger

**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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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), 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 *Ares Vallis (The 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*, 1968. Photo of Weiner installing the work in 1969: Shunk-Kender. © Lawrence Weiner / The Siegelau Collection & Archives / Stichting Egres Foundation, Amsterdam.

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'.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

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Notes:

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

<sup>2</sup> 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](http://www.shinjiohmaki.net/portfolio/zekkei/post_10_en.html) (accessed 14 July 2018).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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

<sup>5</sup> 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'.



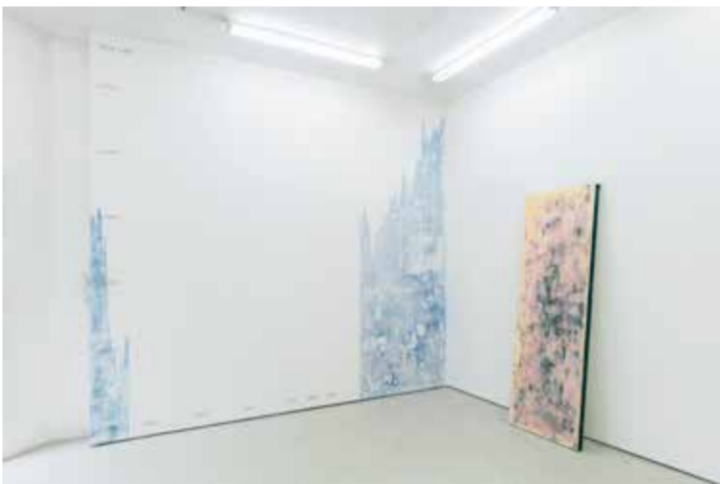
Lawrence Weiner, *A 36" x 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL*, 1968. Photo of Weiner installing the work in 1969: Shunk-Kender. © Lawrence Weiner / The Siegelau Collection & Archives / Stichting Egres Foundation, Amsterdam.



**Midas Hills**  
2018  
Wall sanding and polishing with shape of economic forecast chart  
Dimensions variable



**Sanded panel of the Florence Trust studio wall II (right) and detail (left)**  
2018  
sanded wall panel  
240 x 123 cm



**Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares) (left)**  
2016  
Wall sanding and polishing with shape of economic forecast chart (consulting and forecasting from analyst S.R.)  
Dimensions variable

**Sanded panel of the Florence Trust studio wall III (right)**  
2018  
sanded wall panel  
223 x 75 cm



**Sanded panel of the Florence Trust studio wall I**  
2018  
sanded wall panel  
220 x 123 cm



**The God of the Labyrinth**  
2016  
video  
stereo,  
15 min 15 sec

### Yoi Kawakubo

Born in Toledo, Spain in 1979, lives and works between London and Tokyo. BA in Human Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Japan. Following his time working as a financial market trader, Kawakubo embarked on his artistic career in 2008. Recent solo exhibitions include *Two million years of solitude, cherry blossoms and fifty thousand light years more*, Koganecho Site-A, Yokohama, Japan (2017), *Stella Maris was a name I found in a dream*, Daiwa Foundation Japan House, London (2016), and *Fall* Shiseido Gallery, Tokyo (2016). Recent group exhibitions include: *Islands, Constellations and Galapagos*, Yokohama Triennale 2017, Yokohama (2017), *Linguamania*, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (2017), *The Vision of Contemporary Art*, The Ueno Royal Museum of Art, Tokyo (2015), *Visceral Sensations*, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan (2013). He has been awarded the Ohara Museum of Art Prize at the VOCA (Vision of Contemporary Art) 2015, held at The Ueno Royal Museum of Art, Tokyo, and has been shortlisted for the Shiseido Art Egg Prize in 2016 and the Sovereign Asian Art Prize (HK) in 2012. He has been recipient of the POLA Art Foundation award for overseas research in 2016 and Fellow of the Overseas Study Programme for Artists, Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan in 2017.

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## RASHOMON On Works by Yoi Kawakubo at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix Terumi Toyama

In his solo exhibition *I/body/ghost*, Yoi Kawakubo examines the identity and attempts to redefine it; themes include individual and collective activity within society, collective consciousness and physicality of one's body. While these are frequently the focus of many contemporary art exhibitions in the West, Kawakubo presents a perspective that is inclusive, both on physical and conceptual planes. Having engaged with the show, it reminded me of the film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa, which tells a tale from various points of view where there is no single truth but multiple truths for every event.

*Midas Hills*, the largest work featured in the show, demonstrates the historical, as well as the future profit levels for UK companies, essentially seen to continue its rising trend. While the work seemingly rejoices over the economic growth, one is soon awakened to its pessimism upon reading its title. Kawakubo suggests we have created a monster, the Mammon, who obtained eternal life as the result of accumulation of our individual insatiable greed. It can no longer be captured within the realm of human intention, or indeed control, but this global monster now acts as an autonomous and self-propagating system. Collectively we have secured eternal life as a part of the system, however, Kawakubo suggests that in exchange, as individuals, we have ironically become 'ghosts'.

This is reflected not only in the title given to this body of work, but in how it is created. The walls are sanded to make the older layers of the paints apparent, and as the result of this procedure, the colour we see is not saturated but merges its white background and emerges in a ghost-like state which is neither completely present nor absent, rather a disembodied in-between. Though the artist invites viewers to touch the surface of the work which is unexpectedly and pleasantly smooth, it is only a single facet of the integral whole that one sees and can have physical contact with. The essence of its existence is almost metaphysical, beyond physical reach. The act of touching the work, therefore is analogous to the brink of non-existent self. In the middle of this wall installation work is a 70cm-side square hole, exposing the structural brick wall of the building, and the void, which might lead us, as ghosts, to see yet another face of the monster.

Facing *Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares)*, another wall installation work created for the current show, one is struck by the vast emptiness sandwiched between yet more mountains of un-saturated colours. According to the artist, the work is deeply political, capturing the twenty-year cycle of catastrophic nuclear disasters, the fluctuations unmistakably resonating in the foreign exchange markets. This work features the German Mark to British Pound exchange rate which forms the peaks and valleys of the blue mountains. These indices and numbers, however, seem to place a veil over the essence of the work, blurring my vision and diluting my attempt to grasp the its core. The blank gap between the blue mountains, or the void, is created due to the emergence of Euro and the accompanying demise of German Mark in 1999, and the pessimistic forecast that Euro be abandoned giving German Mark a renewed life in the 2020s. It is this void that gives me the sense of absolute helplessness. Rather than the specific events that eventually shapes the movement of the chart, the resulting feel of nothingness is what helps me understand Ares. Contemplating the blank, white wall, I see myself almost transformed into the Greek god of war, quietly waiting for his destiny, the verdict to be pronounced in a trial after he committed a murder.



Left: Back panels of the *Modena Triptych* (1568) by El Greco (1541-1614)

Right: *Wind God and Thunder God* (c.624) by Tawaraya Sotatsu (c.1570-c.1640) photographs: public domain



It may provide us with intriguing insight to investigate art works from entirely different epochs and culture and compare them with the works of Kawakubo, including *Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares)*. In this short essay, I would like to take up two examples, the back panels of the *Modena Triptych* by El Greco (1568), and *Fujin Raijin-zu* of Tawaraya Sotatsu (16th century). The back panels of the El Greco's early period triptych depict pilgrims on their way to the Saint Catherine's Monastery with the backdrop of Mount Sinai at its central panel, with the Annunciation featured on its left-hand panel, and Adam and Eve on its right. The Mount Sinai, undoubtedly one of the most symbolic mountains for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, emerges from the earth with vigour as if to pierce heaven for unity. A viewer may see violently erotic connotation in the holy mountains, which adds to its dynamism and the sense of destructive but also powerful renewal force that a radical change calls for. Kawakubo's *Ares Vallis (The Valley of Ares)* also alludes to the dynamism and power that destroys but also brings about new order to the world. He expresses it by way of nothingness, while the Spanish painter makes it known through highly expressive visual manifestation to highlight the ultimate climax of events. However, we should not forget that the panel is the back side of the religious object, it cannot be seen but it does exist, is a recurring Kawakubo, giving us a surprising similarity

The second example is a pair of screen and Thunder, featuring Gods of respective It is suggested that each panel was placed at placed at distance from each other with empty triptych on a conceptual level, ingeniously way of void, and exactly because it is the void absolute, the state that is inclusive of (*The Valley of Ares*) and the state its viewers works is to try to see what is not depicted. centuries apart in age, share the similar what is essential.



Some of the traditional utensils used in *Study for a Zekkei VI*, a Tea Ceremony in the Darkness. photo: Yoi Kawakubo

paintings *Fujin Raijinzu* or Gods of Wind natural phenomenon, by Tawaraya Sotatsu, either side of a statue of Buddha, or simply space in between.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the work is a conceived to present the central image by we concentrate on, it drives us to the everything. This brings us back to *Ares Vallis* experience: to engage with Kawakubo's Kawakubo and his compatriot, though five procedure of presenting, or not presenting,

In the current exhibition, Kawakubo rigorously explores identity on physical and conceptual planes, and during the process, he makes the viewers aware of his/her own physicality and non-physicality, providing the rare opportunity where the physical self is invited to vanish, but exist in the form as a ghost, the state in tune with the oeuvre that surrounds them.

Terumi Toyama is an independent scholar and a catalyst around art, history and crafts. He holds a PhD in History of Japanese Art from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Notes: Murase Hiroharu 村瀬博寿, 'Design: Thinking on Tawaraya Sotatsu's 'Gods of Wind and Thunder': Creativity as Novel Implication', 依原宏道《風神雷神図》にみられるデザイン思考 - 意味の新規性としての創造性 (in Japanese), Cognitive Studies 認知科学, bulletin of the Japanese Cognitive Science Society, 17(2010), 3, p.563-571.