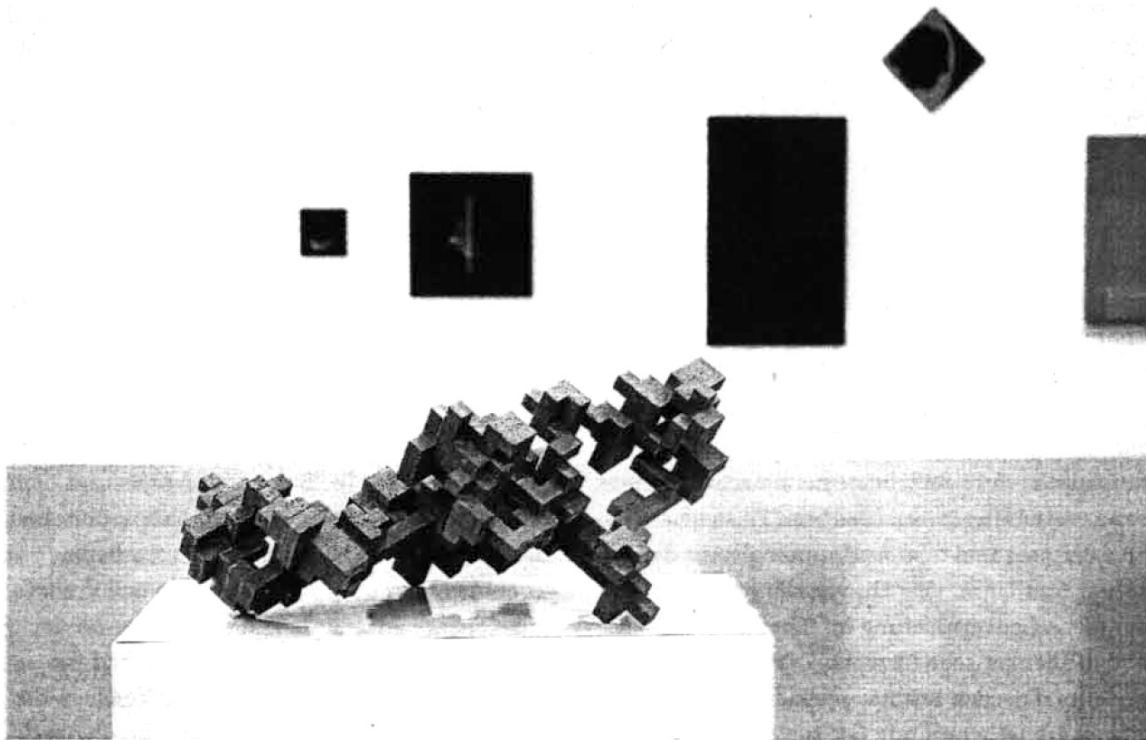


# TEXTE ZUR KUNST

## ON THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WORKING SPECULATIVELY

A survey with statements by Diedrich Diederichsen, Karin Harrasser, Jenny Jaskey, Jutta Koether, and Sam Lewitt



Cheyney Thompson, „Broken Volume (10L)“, 2013, mumok, Wien / Vienna, 2013/14, Ausstellungsansicht / installation view

Speculation, currently particularly visible in the philosophical movement of Speculative Realism, clearly is a topic *du jour*, conjured at an increasing rate in certain segments of the art system and in theory-oriented parts of academia. In such contexts, speculation is frequently positioned against practices that are grounded in the idea of criticism; and against aesthetics, as part of a tradition that investigates the conditions under which the subject and object of the encounter with art are correlated.

This trend might bear the risk, if not the actual manifestation, of an unquestioned jump toward the “things themselves”, here merely restored as entities in *potentialis*. In several invec-

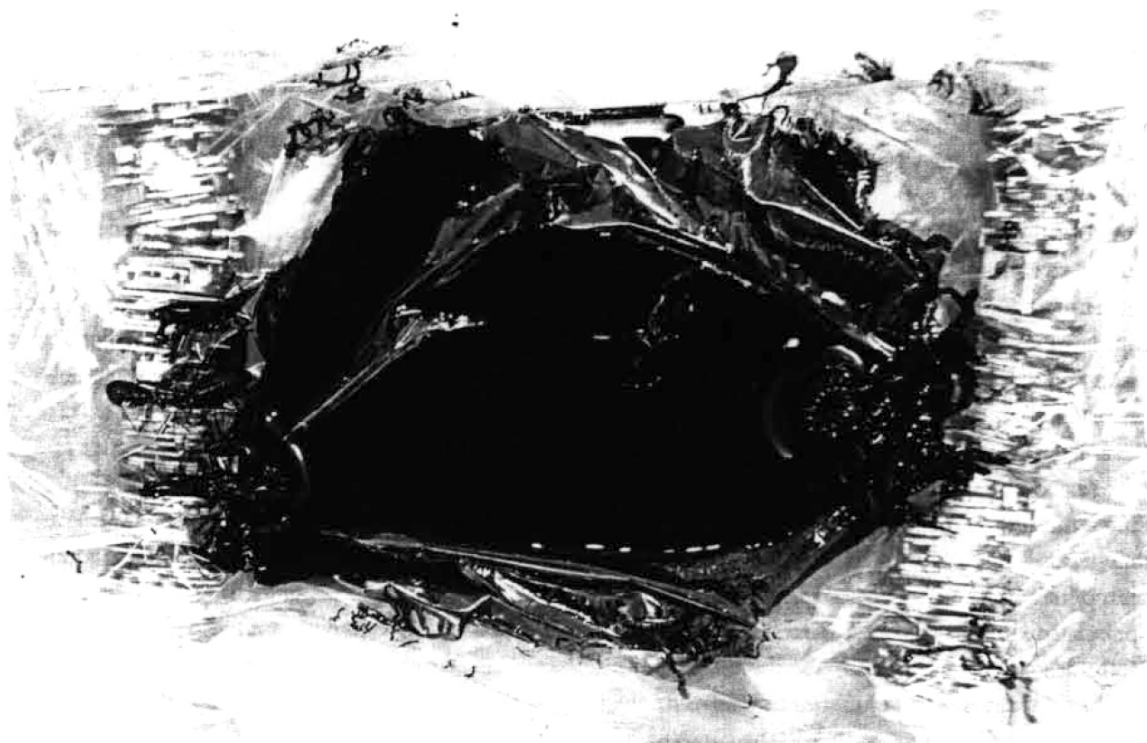
tives against the practice of criticism one could recognize the willful closing off against the questioning and doubting aspects of a reflexive activity all too easily cast as paralyzing and/or stifling. Speculation here moves in the proximity of an urge to action, which is buffered through assigning it the modality of the possible. We'll bracket the question of whether this does justice to the actual width and potential of the critical, i.e. what critique is, in all its diversity and multiplicity, and what it can be.

In fact, critique, too, depends on speculation as one of its necessary complements. The movement towards the untenable, into “ungrounded” procedures/practices/programs belongs to the

strategies of the potential. Eventualities are caught by speculation in its artistic and theoretical manifestations, imported into the system in order for something different to become thinkable and visible. In this sense speculation is a controlled charting of the possible.

Another reason for the current interest in speculation lies in its function as an engine for contemporary capitalism. In our current economy, we're now farming and exploiting the potential. In this yoking of the possible into production, in its harnessing of the potential for the generation of value, speculative activity in art, theory, and economy encounter each other.

We have asked artists, curators and theorists about the ways in which they approach speculation in their work and thinking: How does one conceptualize speculation, how does one understand it, and how does one make it productive? To what ends? As a theme or topic? Or as a method? What does one make of its current popularity, e.g. in the form of Speculative Realism? And which are the shortcomings, but also the genuine benefits of working speculatively?



Sam Lewitt, *Material für / material for „Fluid Employment“*, 2012

### SAM LEWITT

Many of the recent debates over speculative philosophy receive their imperative from advanced forms of scientific rationality. Science is understood here as a sieve that filters out the subject from representation. Speculation emerges as the activity of theoretical knowledge attempting to look beyond its reflection in the forms of intuition, in order to lead thinking outside of itself toward its field of absolute constraints. This movement outside attempts to generate judgmental criteria out of a reality unconditioned by the subject, determined neither by experience nor guaranteed by any transcendental law.

Possibilities emerge here for thinking techniques of control and structures of determinacy from a non- (or highly qualified) anthropocentric perspective. It suggests, for instance, an account of technology that departs from mere prosthesis of biological systems associated with humans, which now demand to be thought according to *insensible* material processes and organizational structures; it suggests that the current world age is determined by humanity's having become a force of catastrophe on a geological scale (the Anthropocene) impossible to experience on an individual level, but knowable from the perspective of the anonymous mass of the earth's popula-

tion sliced up by dismally unequal distributions of material impact; it tries to take behavioral and linguistic accounts based on cognitive neuroscience to their nihilistic conclusions; it suggests the inhuman core of the gaseous corporate state as an anonymous automation, filtering human material through a gradient mesh of permissions and rent, congealing into the sludge of contemporary global capitalist exploitation.

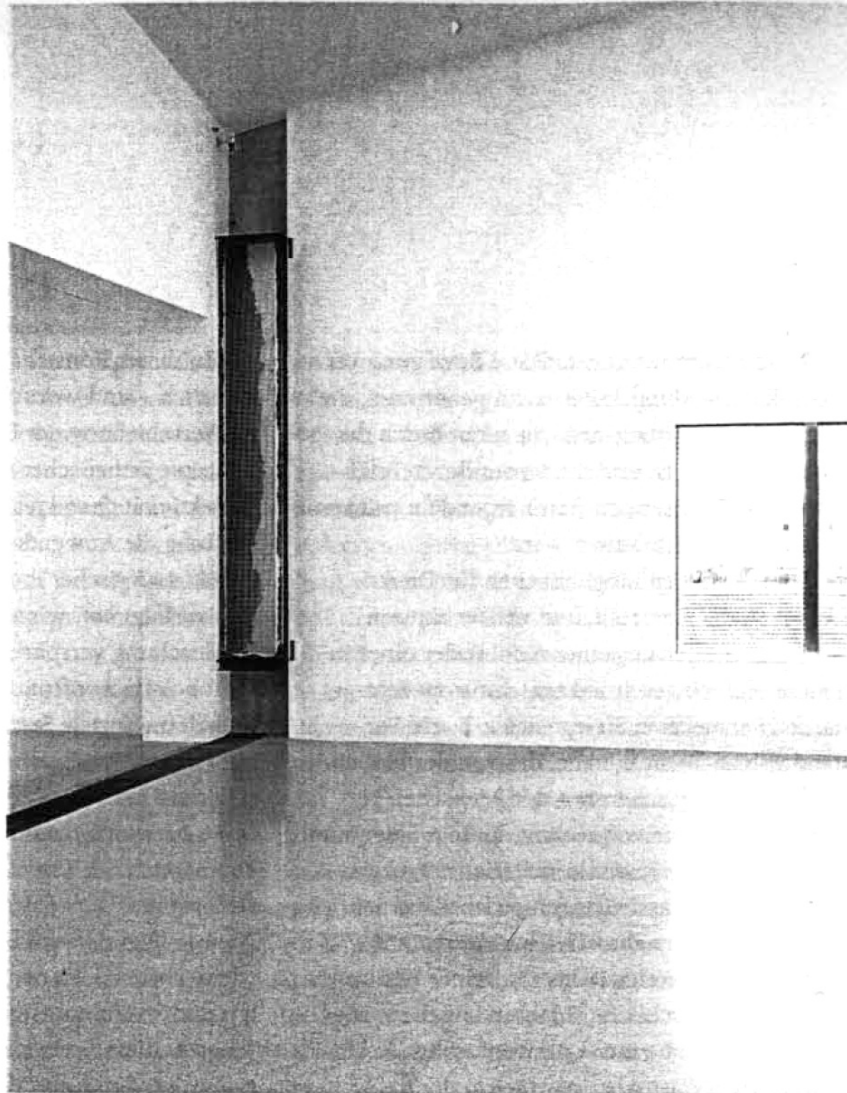
While this constellation of phenomena includes the displacement – and what else is being discussed here? – of the judgmental resources that characterize notions of aesthetic autonomy as a model of subjective freedom, anyone who has paid even cursory attention to the attendance of auto-critique to the field of artistic production in the twentieth century will undoubtedly feel the disappointment of being confronted with the same old shibboleths. Yet there are interesting implications that the social semantics of “speculation” carries for relationships between art and philosophical theory. Thinking this relationship, however, falls within the purview of critique, not speculative philosophy. The central claim of critical theory is that rationality has a fractured form shaped by the forces and relations of production, and that an attempt to shatter the cast of that form – or rather, have the cast shatter under its own internal pressure – is integrally tied to a critique of the identifying power of the concept. This problem of conceptual identity certainly applies to an art world that compulsively searches for new philosophical models to “quantitatively ease” the coin of the realm with successive conceptual frameworks that the words “contemporary art” may otherwise lack. Once the speculative becomes thematically inscribed as a subject for a seemingly absent concept of contemporary

art, it runs the risk of entering the feedback loop of discursively circumscribed experience: A conceptual valorization of what goes under the name “speculation” as an administered form of tamed instability.<sup>1</sup> This self-valorizing feedback loop reflects more the theory of speculative finance than philosophical speculation. Speculative financial theory *performatively* produces and regulates its objects, as opposed to *describing* thought’s capacity to know an absolute outside to its own operations. Its enthronement of the myth of efficient markets produces theories as discursive, crisis-ridden actuality: “As real-world intermediation and markets become increasingly more efficient [...] products and institutions will become increasingly more accurate. In short, reality will [...] imitate theory.”<sup>2</sup> It disastrously attempts to mitigate future risks in the present via the stabilization of present risks in a calculable future, essentially postulating the riskless risk in a future that it brings under its control.

Such riskless risk of an absent future, like the tamed instability of the concept of contemporary art, configures the speculative as a specifically historical (hence constructed and conditioned) mode of thinking. If it is true that art’s relationship to capital has morphed from the umbilical cord of gold to the intestinal circuit of the Human Centipede, then speculation is its most recent metabolic catalyst.

The point is not to criticize the use of philosophical theory or its publication by a non-specialized audience, whose instrumentalization and intentional misreading usually make for better artistic practices than those that are desperately reverent. Nor is the point a critique of the attempt to think through new theoretical positions from the point of view of artworks, which would be

Sam Lewitt, „Weak Local Lineaments (E2, E3, E4)“, 2013, mumok, Wien / Vienna, 2013/14, Ausstellungsansicht / installation view



utterly reactionary. The issue is rather the seeming inevitability that philosophical theory can ratify what goes on in artistic production, as if theory *should* be methodologically adequate to the production and interpretation of whatever is counted as contemporary art. Here it might make sense to extend Marcel Broodthaers' critique of conceptual art in the: "View according to which an artistic theory will be functioning as advertising for the rule under which it is produced." If this "rule" is understood as the domination of all relations by the exchange abstraction, speculative theory as artistic theory enters into a halting dialectic. The problem in the conjuncture of the speculative under the law of exchange is that thought alone

cannot dissolve the incessant activity of the absolute subject of value. Its potential is that it risks making this thinkable.

#### Notes

- 1 Suhail Malik has done some of the most challenging work on theorizing the "tamed instability" that characterizes a regular and generic, that is conceptually coherent, character of contemporary art in a series of talks delivered at Artists Space between May and June 2013 titled "On the Necessity of Art's Exit From Contemporary Art".
- 2 Robert C. Merton, *Continuous-Time Finance*, quoted from Joseph Vogl, "Taming Time. Media of Financialization", in: *Grey Room*, 46, Winter 2012, pp. 72–83