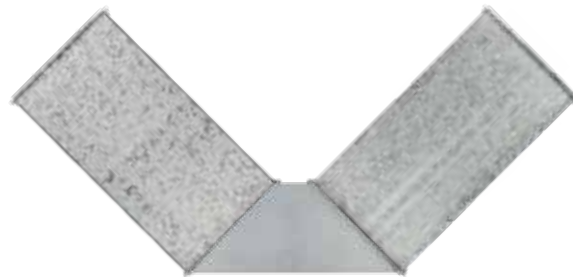


## Arresting Development: Formalism and the Process of Labor in Charlotte Posenenske's Work

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One of the—possibly satirical—stories surrounding Russian formalism at the beginning of the past century concerned the ideal poet who, in his wish to emulate as closely as possible the laborer in the factory or the clerk at the office, clocked in at the start of the working day, sat himself down at his desk, and composed eight hours of serial works. At the end of the working day, he arranged in trays the products of the day's labor—according to the classification of his work, its relative state of progress, or its quality—tidied his desk and clocked off through the factory, or rather studio, gate. The mechanics of such production would, so contemporary critics like Viktor Shklovsky hoped, fully integrate artistic and social practice/praxis and in turn allow for an objectified, scientific assessment of the artwork.

Although the mechanics of a working day echoed demonstratively and performatively the routine of the worker standing in a production line, laboring in the fields, or supporting the new society through administrative work, it proved contentious to assess the eventual product of the artist's labor by separate standards. This did not imply that poems, for instance, had to follow the traditional aesthetic program of autonomous art for learned (bourgeois) consumption. On the contrary, poetry and other forms of art were meant to employ new popular media (say, posters or cinema), support a different class—literally—of audience, and promote a new sociopolitical structure. Yet formalism's mechanical approach to plot, narrative, and character, which distinguished aspects like repetition, parallelism, gradation, and retardation, led to a critical impasse that advanced a simplified structural perception and could not progress significantly beyond a demonstration of techniques and devices.

Although the radical approach of Soviet formalism was instrumental in promoting an objectifying perspective on modernism, its alternative, the subjective (temporal, psychological) response to an artwork, continued to be seen as necessary in explaining aesthetic creation. The artistic product of labor—neatly sorted on the poet's desk into “in” and “out” trays—was still subjected to existing value judgments. Even the most mechanistic production of art would not escape its reception as the autonomous object of aesthetics.

The artists in Soviet culture battled hard with the new demands on artistic production. Despite the initial support structure of cultural commissions, new outlets for publication, and the everyday presence of their work on the streets and in advertising, the inherent desire for artistic autonomy inevitably clashed with their ambition to integrate their work into new productive and consumptive structures. Writers like Velimir Khlebnikov and his Zaum movement (a precursor of Fluxus) promoted in the 1910s and 1920s a language of neologisms to create an anti-art that could not be readily assessed by traditional reading, Vladimir Mayakovsky excelled in satirical agitprop posters that combined visual and



left: *Farbige Skizze (Colored Sketch)*, 1965. Felt-tip marker on paper, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches (34 x 24.1 cm)  
right: *Streifenbild (Striped Picture)*, 1965. Felt-tip marker on paper, 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (26.7 x 21 cm)

linguistic signs to address everyday concerns of a new social order, and Osip Brik coined productivism as an anti-individualist credo that championed industrial materials and techniques in art. Yet nearly all of the formalist artists during the period of Soviet high modernism ceased to produce publicly due to the incongruity between artistic innovation and political reality. Ironically, it was not the misplaced ambition to reshape society that clashed with an existing market structure for art, but it was the new social order's demand for a regressive realism that almost completely demoted formal innovation in favor of ideologically compliant illustration and narrative.

The dilemma of the formalists who aimed at objectifying aesthetic production, employing prefabricated and serial elements (linguistic signs as much as visual and plastic elements), and who moved against the individualist, autonomous, and precious work of art lay in their systemic opposition to both the smallest common denominator of Realpolitik and the market forces that determined the consumption of modernism. Half a century after the Soviet formalists, Charlotte Posenenske faced a similar dilemma in her ambition to analyze and innovate labor within aesthetic production—for her, however, it was under the auspices of an expressively capitalist art market that recast innovation as passing trends and fashion. And, also comparable to the Soviet formalists, Posenenske would cease to produce art publicly and turn toward a different method to analyze social practice.

In her programmatic turn away from art production, she published in May 1968 a final “statement” that laid bare the internal contradictions of her existing productive method: “The things I make are variable, as simple as possible, reproducible. They are components of a space [and] can always be rearranged into new combinations or positions, thus they alter the space. I leave this modification to the consumer, who thereby again and anew participates in the production.” Here, the aim to expand spatially/architecturally the object, which was a very common concern of contemporary sculptors at the time (from Donald Judd to Imi Knoebel) and the almost despairing invitation to the beholder—already denoted and exposed as a consumer—to participate in the production of the work indicate a deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the form of her artistic expression. The dilemma between new structural methods and their potential for social practice finds its expression in the simultaneous rejection and affirmation of the artwork: “I make series because I do not want to make individual pieces for individuals. . . . They are decreasingly recognizable as ‘artworks.’ . . . The former categorization of the arts no longer exists. The artist of the future should have to work with a team of specialists in a development laboratory. Though art’s formal development has progressed at an increasing tempo, its social function has withered.”

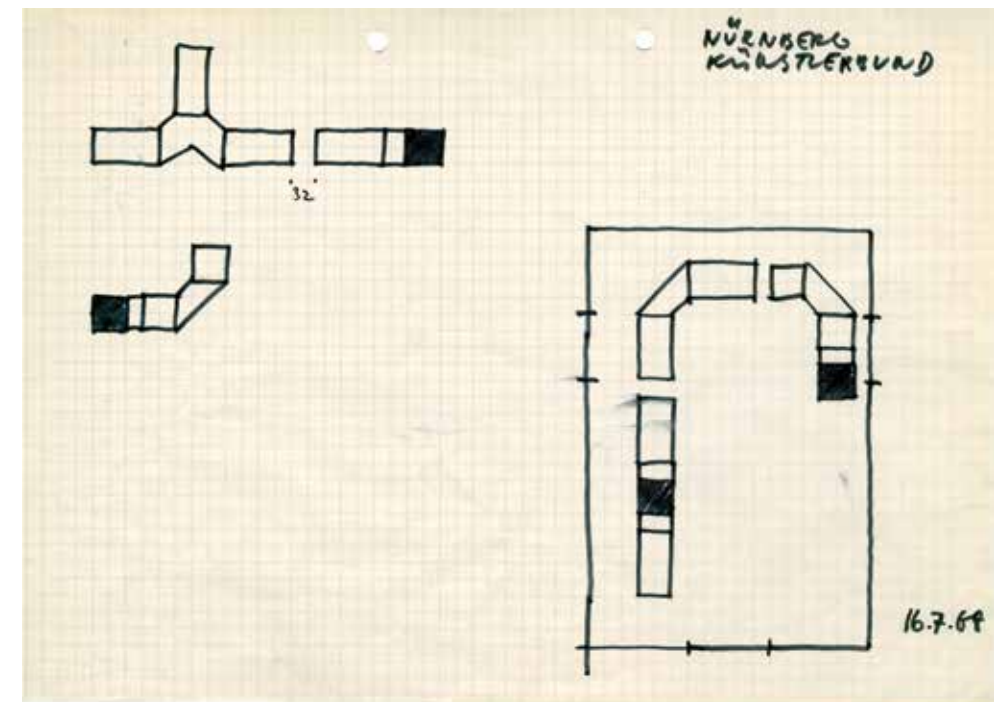
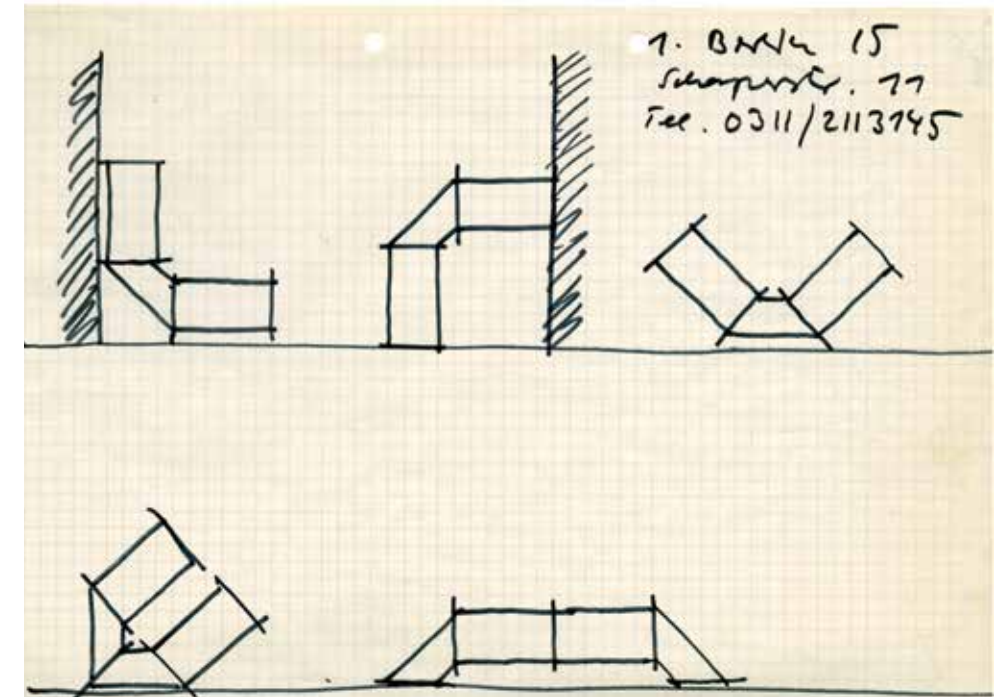


As in formalism, production is allocated to a form of labor that is understood as scientific and as neutral as possible in terms of value in order to escape the all-too-obvious generating of constantly passing commodities. The artist working under “laboratory” conditions (formally similar to the poet in his “office”) is meant to emulate a method of production that distanced the work from traditional aesthetic conception and consumption toward a formal evaluation as part of social practice. Yet such a production method, especially if a division of labor is implied (“team of specialists”), appears to adhere to the established system of labor as it existed in industrial societies. Is the formal deference to habitual art production as a subjective, individualist act sufficient to create markers of a changed system of labor that could challenge socioeconomic praxis?

Posenenske’s *Vierkantrohre Serie D* (*Square Tubes Series D*), the square-cut steel tubes that she began in 1967, highlight the need for industrial standards of production and for a formalized system of labor that employs mechanization to approximate objects in which subjective approaches and individual traces are reduced to an absolute minimum. Even in the context of contemporary US Minimalism (Carl Andre, Walter De Maria, Sol LeWitt), such an effort has to be noted for its radical disavowal of previous artistic techniques, but this very radicality, as the artist predicted in her manifesto, would facilitate the inclusion of such new labor processes in the existing art market rather than preserve their methodological autonomy.

Posenenske swerves between her formal concerns with the material and spatial impact of her art objects and the systemic refusal to participate in their cultural distribution and reflection. This was in line with many artists of the 1960s who had to square their own creative impulses with their avowed disinterest to display art within the existing culture industry. Although it was deemed necessary to continue to produce artifacts, it was equally opportune to reject their consumption—notwithstanding that few alternative methods for viewing art were being developed consistently by these artists. Posenenske’s retrospective glance at the formalism of Soviet artists (as is inferred strongly in her repeated references to El Lissitzky and Vladimir Tatlin), who pioneered industrial and serial production as part of the productive environment they embedded themselves in (applied art college, political agitation), brought her in line with a modernist tradition while alerting her to the need to formulate a contemporary position. Hence, one finds in her manifesto the explicit exposure of socioeconomic structures that commodify the history of art: “Art is a product of temporary topicality, yet the market is minute, and prestige and prices rise the less topical the supply is.”

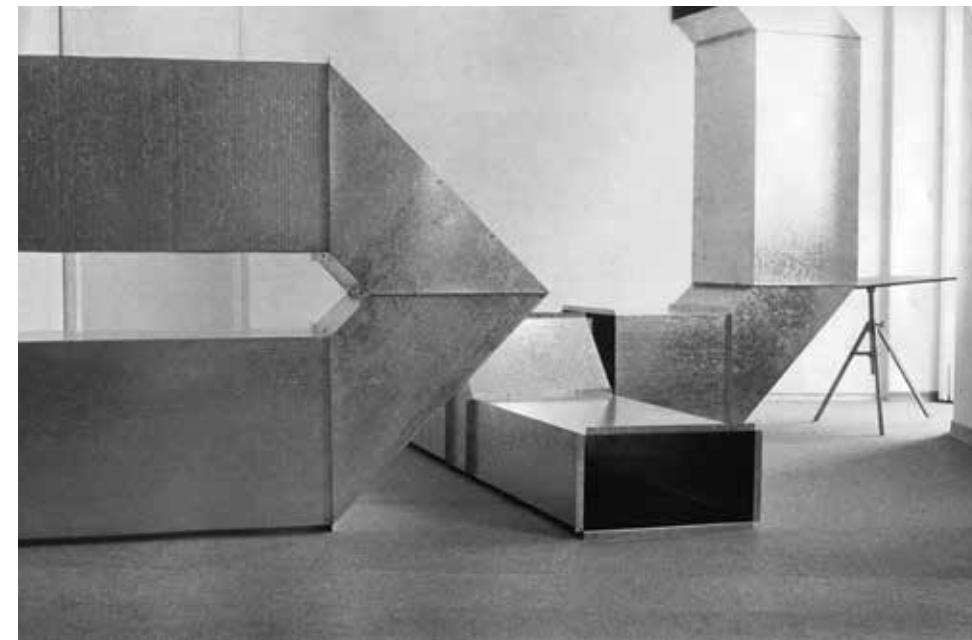
Tradition and modernist lineage can determine artistic expression only within a certain prefigured framework; Posenenske therefore required a systemic

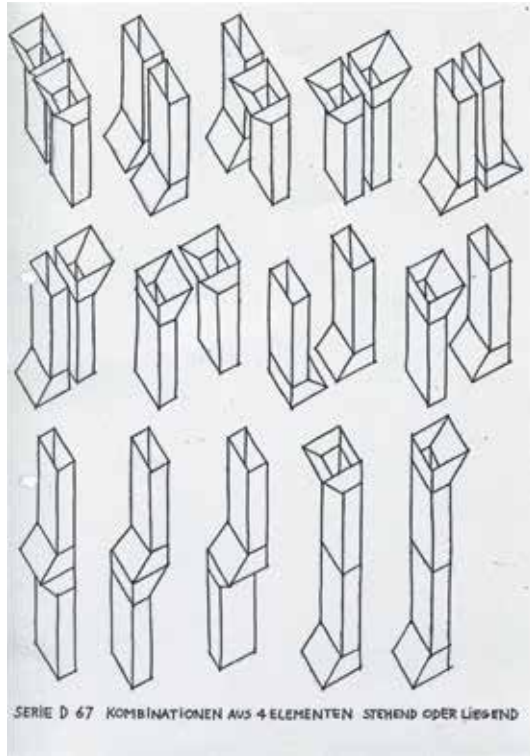


top: Sketch of configurations for *Vierkantrohre Serie DW* (*Square Tubes Series DW*, 1967) at Galerie René Block, Berlin, 1968  
bottom: Sketch of configurations for *Vierkantrohre Serie D* at Deutscher Künstlerbund, Kunsthalle Nürnberg, 1968



left and right pages: Installation views of *Vierkantrohre Serie D (Square Tubes Series D)* at Kleine Galerie, Schwenningen, Germany, 1967





analysis of labor structure and means of production. Looking at the methodological work that she undertook once her art practice had been relinquished in favor of sociological study, such systemic analysis, coupled with a sustained ideological critique, appeared provident. Posenenske published together with Burkhard Brunn in 1979 a volume titled *Vorgabezeit und Arbeitswert, Interessenkritik an der Methodenkonstruktion: Leistungsgradschätzen, Systeme vorbestimmter Zeiten, analytische Arbeitsbewertung* (Time Allocation and the Value of Labor, A Critique of Method Construction: Performance Estimates, Time Allocation Systems, Analytical Labor Valuation). Their thesis investigated the manner in which productive labor is assessed in structural and monetary terms, and how the efforts by economists to quantify and qualify labor are detrimental to the interests of those executing the work itself. The methodological critique of contemporary forms of Taylorism, in which labor processes are ostensibly rendered transparent and therefore can be directed more easily, leads to a wider analysis of the compartmentalizing of procedural steps, which are forwarded in order to ascribe the value (and therefore control) of labor not to the worker but to the owner of the means of production or to public, administrative powers.



Although this was, of course, an established Marxist adage, it gained new currency in the context of an assessment that could be applied more broadly from industrial to cultural production. Looking at the manner in which Posenenske attempted to mediate between producing art and producing commodities, the issue might indeed have rested with the form of labor employed to generate objects for aesthetic experience. The surplus value of the contemporary artwork, which the artist in her manifesto allocated to the passage of time, could therefore be situated more concretely within the formal generation of objects.

In 1967, Posenenske had conceived a variant of her square-cut tubes in corrugated cardboard, *Vierkantrohre Serie DW* (Square Tubes Series DW). Similar to the steel version, these tubes came as a construction set of four serial elements that could be combined in seemingly infinite arrangements, from self-contained sculptural objects in a “white-cube” context to linear connectors within architectural, public space. The works can be understood as prototypes, which suggests mass production or at least an extended form of application to various environments—as indeed Posenenske proved in their first incarnation in the courtyard of Galerie Dorothea Loehr in Frankfurt. Here, the mechanized production that generated meaning for the steel tubes is taken back in order to contemplate a different form of accumulation: not the serial production of many elements that would allow an expanding installation of square-cut metal elements within an industrial setting but a plastic representation of the original accumulation of labor, which Posenenske continued to investigate through aesthetic as well as socioeconomic methodologies.

For the cardboard tubes, the labor resulted not in ready-made objects proper but in markers for subsequent production; it does not generate directly an accumulation of capital—not even cultural capital. The labor process for *Series DW* is

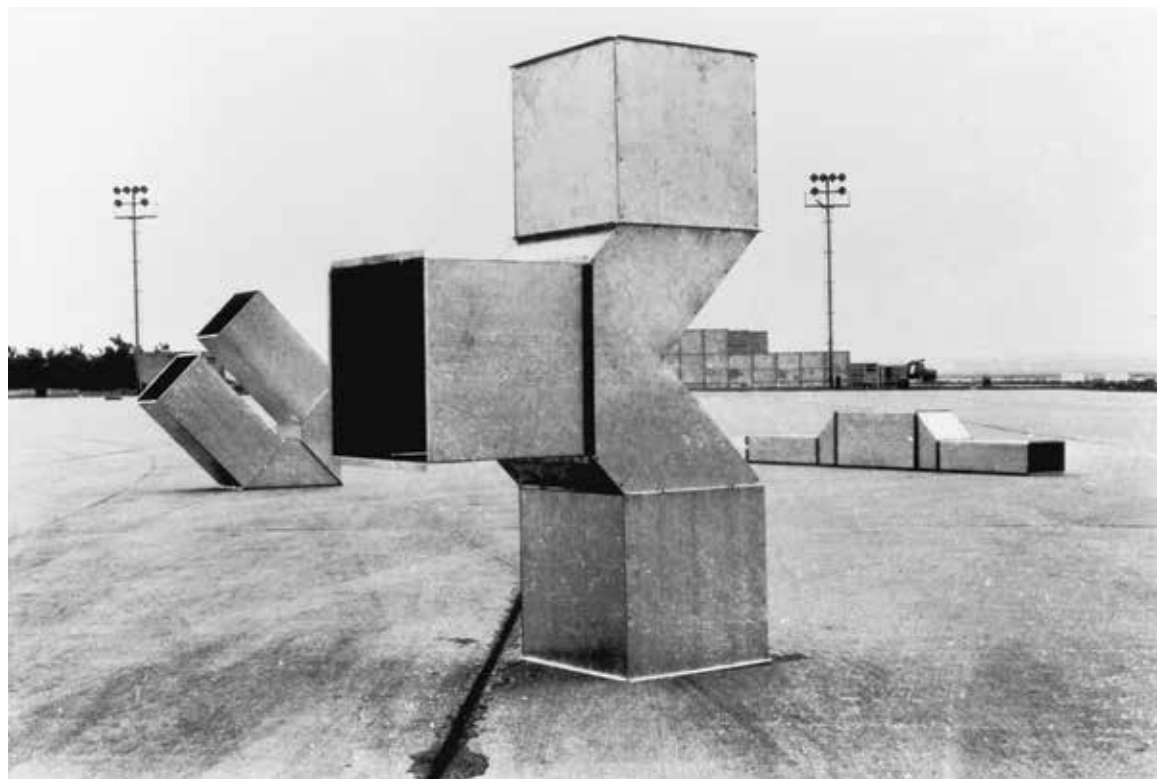


Vierkantrohre Serie DW (Square Tubes Series DW) at Deutsche Bank headquarters, Frankfurt am Main, 1989

formalized yet does not result in the production of a commodity form—unlike their steel counterparts, the cardboard version does not visually echo existing functional objects in the market, for instance ventilation shafts. It does not possess a similar reference to manufactured goods.

The cardboard tubes suggest industrial labor but do not require it for production; they toy with the notion of the industrial prototype but subvert it through transitory, seemingly insubstantial material. The formalist edge is maintained, as the plastic character of *Series DW* still submits to an assessment through formal markers like repetition, serial variation, and structural installation, but it significantly contained a progression from the direct application of formalist methods: Posenenske's work had to move toward a self-directed objectification of her productive method without referencing previous aesthetic positions or simply emulating mechanized labor processes. Her art production had to reflect on the labor that was needed in generating the objects—certainly in terms of quantifiable and qualitative markers: how long does it take, how economical is it to make the serial elements, and how close do they come to a material ideal. But, equally, the objects had to have systemic significance in reflecting on the manner in which objectifying and seemingly transparent labor processes can create power structures that are detrimental to the producer herself. Namely, the objects had to confront how these power structures allocate the accumulation of (cultural) capital exclusively to those who advance the objectification of art and who promote the transparency of the artist's creation to further commercial interests (gallerists, curators, and public commissioners).

While the steel *Series D* is formalist in appearance, *Series DW* is formalist in essence: the serial cardboard elements arrested the mechanized production before perfected industrial forms could be achieved. They became prototypical *après la lettre*—as initial steps that were only traced retrospectively. Thereby Posenenske was able to avoid the formalist impasse: as the analysis of her aesthetic had been in danger of becoming an aesthetic itself when materialized in sculptural form, it became a matter of objectifying her approach through an analysis of the accumulation of labor and the procedural process. How the plastic realization of this objectification plays out in the commodified arena of the culture industry can be assessed through a comparison between two installations of *Series D* and *DW*. In 1967 the steel tubes were photographed in a hangar and on the airfields of the Frankfurt airport. They are shown as autonomous objects whose character is defined by the “industrialized” context of a working airport. The artificial drama of the galvanized elements that are pictured like humanoid forms, erect, reclining, and doubling over, concocts a narrative of mechanization taking command in a (post)industrial landscape devoid of its public. In contrast, in 1986 the German



left and right pages: *Vierkantrohre Serie D (Square Tubes Series D)*  
at Frankfurt airport, 1967





airline Lufthansa supported the posthumous installation of two sets of *DW* elements in their hangar in Frankfurt. Even when presented as a sponsored advertisement in an art magazine, the cardboard tubes contradict the industrial-cultural complex of the airport. They appear as subversive, transitory simulacra of mechanical elements, as copies without an original, integrated by the prefabricated forms but removed by their expressively crafted material. The airliner towering over the two assemblages from *Series DW* remains unrelated, and the commodified context positively alienates the works.

Here, Posenenske seems to have achieved in cardboard (see also the visually similar pressboard employed for the last works she fabricated, *Drehflügel Serie E* [*Revolving Vanes Series E*, 1967–68]) a realization of the labor process as an analytical tool. The production of the object was arrested before it mutates into a readymade that closes materially the gap between industry and culture; it preserved the autonomy of the process as objectifying the power relations between laborer, owner of the means of production, and consumer, while still experimenting with formalism as a continuous aesthetic alternative.

