

Ester Fleckner  
*Slow Tools*  
16 Sep–29 Oct 2023

How can pictorial abstraction be used as a tool for queer ways of knowing, for queer politics? Ester Fleckner mostly works in serial woodcuts. Through this time-consuming technique, in the physical confrontation with the printing block, Fleckner enters into processes that are characterised by unpredictability, errors, and loss of control. Instead of following a linear, result-oriented approach, Fleckner works with repetitions, revisions and transgressions.

In their exhibition *Slow Tools* Fleckner presents earlier works, including sculptures, along with new prints from the ongoing series *Woodbeds, brimming*. Whilst geometry describes bodies and spaces with mathematical precision, Fleckner cuts and moulds simple geometric shapes allowing moods, rhythms, and collisions to emerge. Fleckner's alternative language of shapes indexes bodies, spaces and distances, while engaging in a dialogue with conventional language systems, as an invitation to read, write, think and feel differently.

Fleckner's artistic practice emerges from queer perspectives, and is inspired by contributions from queer, trans and crip theory.<sup>1</sup> Fleckner negotiates questions of sexuality and gender, of sex and bodily norms, not through pictorial representation or figuration, but through an abstract aesthetic in the search for other kinds of representation. For Fleckner, the interpretative openness of pictorial abstraction holds the potential to test alternative modes of reference and imagination. Likewise, for Fleckner, it offers the possibility of reversing the gaze, steering it away from the marginalised body that stands outside the norm and directing it instead towards, for instance, language and sign systems. Several of Fleckner's works begin where body and language collide, or where they elude each other. This is not to dismiss the body, but to examine the relationship between language and body, to ask how bodies are also shaped and produced by language, and in doing so, to consider underlying normative systems and social structures.

The works presented in the exhibition *Slow Tools* share a common engagement with the strict formal language of geometry. Fleckner shifts attention to a discipline that substantially shapes the Western understanding of space and the body. Cartography and the scientific description of physical space, the construction of objects and buildings, and the establishment of body standards are deeply influential applications of geometric principles. Ever since its establishment within modern art, geometric abstraction has usually been associated with a universal visual language based on objective laws, characterised by hard edges, pure colour, mathematical operations or mechanical precision.<sup>2</sup> Geometric abstraction therefore serves additionally as a point of entry for confronting the structures of violence that are often masked by claims of rationality, objectivity and universality.

Although geometry is an acutely successful means of capturing, constructing and controlling physical space, it is nevertheless a cultural construct detached from it.

There are no points, no straight lines, no geometric bodies in the sensual world. "There are no octahedra in the chest," Fleckner writes, on one of the exhibited works, contradicting it immediately below: "There are octahedra in the chest."<sup>3</sup> Fleckner returns to simple geometric forms and bodies again and again, precisely to navigate the cleft between ideal and reality, between a universal, mathematical formula and a single, concrete form, between a normative standard and a physical practice; or, as Fleckner describes it: "I work with geometry through the approach of freehand drawing and woodcut printing. In this process imprecision, repetition and the presence of the cuttings and prints enter into dialogue with the stringency of geometry. It's a way to make the geometry my own."<sup>4</sup>

Left

Seven new woodcuts from the series *Woodbeds, brimming* (2023) are presented on the lefthand wall of the exhibition hall. In ultramarine blue colour fields, the compositions are formatted like texts or code, arranged into lines that stagger, fluctuate and layer — some characters even fall outside the frame. The supposed texts, however, consist each only of one geometric shape; sometimes triangles, sometimes pentagons, strung together in ever-changing variations and arrangements.

The sheets are the maximum size feasible within Fleckner's print workshop. Fleckner draws out, cuts and prints the motif by hand. The relationship between this original manuscript and the mechanical reproduction is complicated further: after the first print, Fleckner continues to work on the printing block so that the next print reveals an increasingly layered composition. Each woodcut within Fleckner's series is unique. Finally, Fleckner adds individual hand drawings to the margins of each print. Furthermore, the brief subtitles mentioned in the list of works create yet another linguistic level.

Fleckner chooses wood as a material deliberately because it is considered 'natural,' just like heterosexuality

and the binary gender system. However, the wooden block is not simply natural, but the product of an industrial manufacturing process. Fleckner wants not only to question the allegedly natural and reveal its cultural construction, but also seeks to work against deep-seated binaries, such as nature and culture, man and woman or original and reproduction.

Cutting and printing is a lengthy and labour-intensive process influenced by myriad unknowns, a continual balance of intention and chance, control and loss of it. With each step in the process, Fleckner pushes against a framework shaped by material and aesthetic parameters, expanding and transgressing it. Each cut deviates from the one before and each cut falls short of the geometric ideal. Mistakes occur constantly. Fleckner's woodcuts are studies in failure of the geometric norm. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Jack Halberstam explores failure as a condition for people adjacent to the norm, in relation to sex, gender and sexuality, and argues for the potential of failure as a queer strategy: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world".<sup>5</sup> In regard to Fleckner's practice one might add that this mode of failure can also be humorous.

The serial rows of signs testify to the repetitive process of creating the works, which continually returns to a supposed 'same' and yet constantly yields new transformations and constellations. With each repetition, variations and differences emerge on the print. The prints seem to insist on relationships and connections formed across a multitude of differences, as opposed to a categorisation based on one selected attribute.

Fleckner cites Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender and sex as another influence on their repetitive practice.<sup>6</sup> According to Butler, these identity dimensions are not natural conditions, but are produced through performative, discursive practices, the rules of which are stabilised through constant

repetition. Through deviant repetitions, counter-practices and radical proliferation, however, they can be distorted, softened and suspended.<sup>7</sup>

In the simulation of language, Fleckner explores questions of legibility, interpretation and meaning. What does it mean to recognise? Why do we identify a mark as a particular geometric shape? And how can a language function if its elements have no semantic reference? It is precisely this lack of conventional meaning that allows sensual qualities and moods to come to the fore, creating a surplus of meaning beyond what can be said. The prints in the series *Woodbeds, brimming* function as text images, images of texts upon which affective spaces unfold, permeated by rhythms, intensities, and dynamics. Each resembles a vibrant soundscape structured by the subtlest differentiations and shifts. They are utterances in a language of excess, that begins where language usually ends. Accordingly, Fleckner suggests that the prints can be thought of as text portraits. Poems. And beds.

Right

Along the opposite, righthand wall of the exhibition hall, there are works from the series *All models are wrong, some are useful* (2017-20). Whilst the series *Woodbeds, brimming* negotiates relationships of form, sign and body in two-dimensional surfaces, here, Fleckner explores geometry sculpturally. In its layout, the work resembles a parody of a didactic demonstration, showing the relationship between model and reality, between plan and execution, between geometric ideal and material realisation. On a black background, the woodcuts show figures formed from smaller segments, reminiscent of crystalline structures, abstracted organisms or utopian architectures. These are polyhedron nets which, when folded together, should produce a three-dimensional body delimited by flat surfaces. However, these representations are created by hand and are thus imprecise, with curved lines, occasionally drawn incorrectly, and uneven surfaces that undermine

any claim to mathematical precision. In the margins of each sheet, Fleckner has noted fragmented remarks regarding the calculation of bodies, as well as societal expectations of 'normal' and 'able' bodies.

Corresponding to the polyhedron nets, small sculptures cast in concrete are positioned in front of each print. They are asymmetrical and skewed with indistinct, irregular edges. Through an anthropomorphising lens, they could be seen as awkward or vulnerable but equally as nonconformist or eccentric. What is the relationship between these objects and the geometric constructs? Why do we think that the prints and sculptures refer to other, 'perfect' or 'ideal' bodies? Could it be that the individual bodies do not fail the geometric ideal, but the ideal fails the body? In their imprecision, deformation and multiplicity, both the woodcut representations and the sculptures encourage us not just to compare them with geometric standards, but to forget geometry and instead perceive the concrete figures and bodies themselves. It is a proposition to let the ideal of 'true' geometric bodies—especially restrictive ideas of the 'natural', able and gender normative human body—burst like soap bubbles in Plato's realm of forms, and discover that there are more body shapes, more cuts and folds than are dreamt of in our geometry.

Above

In texts, asterisks are used to outsource commentary, evidence or cross-references or to censor offensive words. The asterisk indicates a gap, something that is outside the text, but that completes it.

Given the architecture of Kunstverein Freiburg, it makes sense that works presented on the encircling upper gallery relate to those in the exhibition hall like commentaries or footnotes. There above is where four woodcuts from the older series *Wooden Scripts (How I love your obscure)* (2015) are hung. Each sheet is divided into large rectangular areas comprised of smaller boxes, which in turn are filled with asterisks. The grid as the universal

organising principle of modernity and epitome of rationality is here shaken by countless inaccuracies and seized by this glitter. Whilst the grid stands for rigid categories, control and violent identification, here it is overflowing with symbols that denote precisely that which falls beyond such orders.

Fleckner establishes another, looser symbolic relationship: they use the asterisk as a symbol for the anus, thus citing a body part that is as culturally charged as it is politically contested.<sup>8</sup> In a similar way to Fleckner's other series, each work within *Wooden Scripts (How I love your obscure)* is a unique impression of a body and a hand onto the woodcut, and, through the labour of repetition, a continuous production of difference and dissent. And just as each print generates variety, the sentence in the title's parentheses is also left unfinished, ready to be extended by the star symbol either as asterisk, anus, or some other body-part or emotion.

<sup>1</sup> The adjective ‘queer’ means something strange, odd, suspicious or even perverted. As a term was used for lesbians, gays and trans people, it was initially in a derogatory manner. They reclaimed the word and turned it into a political term for ways of living and desiring beyond heteronormativity. Unlike ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’, ‘queer’ has no fixed meaning. It is a relational term, a shorthand denoting, for example, that which is at odds with the normal, legitimate and dominant. The productivity of the term is also based on its potentiality, which lies in the fact that it does not simply describe a sexual orientation or gender identity, but a process directed towards the future and ways of living and desiring yet to be realised.

<sup>2</sup> In *Dragging Away. Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art*, art scholar Lex Morgan Lancaster questions individual strategies of pictorial abstraction such as the hard edge, use of colour or the grid in order to examine their queer potentials. As part of the programme accompanying the *Slow Tools* exhibition, Lancaster will present their book in the online event *Queer Abstraction*, followed by a discussion of topics from the book and exhibition together with Ester Fleckner. Cf. Lex Morgan Lancaster, *Dragging Away. Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Text from Ester Fleckner, *All Models are wrong, some are useful (solid pleasure)*, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Ester Fleckner in an email to Heinrich Dietz on 18 Jun 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ester Fleckner in: Macon Holt, “An interview with Ester Fleckner. Mapping the intersection of queerness, bodies, desire and abstraction.”, Blacklisted.d.k, Jan 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), 148.

<sup>8</sup> As, for example, described by Leo Bersani, who emphasised the self-shattering potential of this non-reproductive zone of sexuality in his influential essay *Is the rectum a grave* (1987): “But if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared — differently — by men and woman) of profound subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death.” Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 29.

Ester Fleckner (b. 1983) lives and works in Møn, DK. *Slow Tools* is Fleckner's first institutional solo exhibition in Germany.

Selected solo exhibitions: *Bedfellows*, M100, Odense, DK, 2022; *Woodbeds, brimming*, Kunstplass Contemporary Art, Oslo, NO, 2021; *Pressure/ Imprint*, three parallel presentations, Malmö Konsthall, SE, 2017; *All models are wrong, some are useful*, Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin, DE, 2017; *A closet does not connect under the bed*, Overgaden Institute of Art, Copenhagen, DK, 2016.

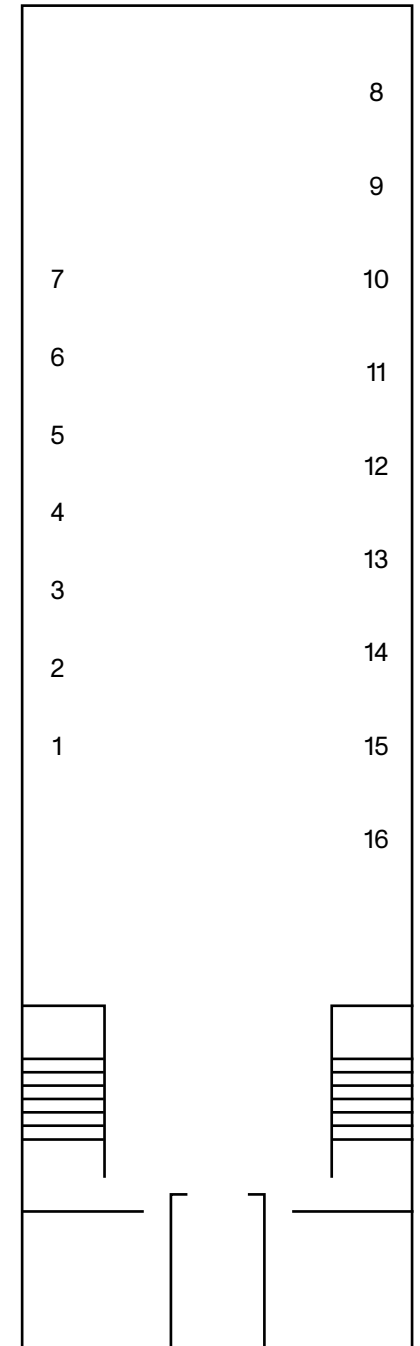
Selected group exhibitions: *spelling, slipping, ellipsis*, Lunds Konsthall, Lund, SE, 2023; *P for Perspective*, Simian, Copenhagen, DK, 2022; *Woodcut: From 1400 to the Present*, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, DE, 2022; *De Te Fabula Narratur*, Kunstplass Contemporary Art, Oslo, NO, 2021; *(in)visible*, Malmö Konstmuseum, Malmö, SE, 2021; *Now it is Light*, Galeria Municipal da Boavista, Lisbon, PT, 2018; *Homosexuality\_ies*, LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur, Münster, DE, 2016.

- 1  
*Woodbeds, brimming (back), 2023*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
164 × 135 cm
- 2  
*Woodbeds, brimming (turn), 2023*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
164 × 135 cm
- 3  
*Woodbeds, brimming (down), 2023*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
164 × 135 cm
- 4  
*Woodbeds, brimming (full), 2023*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
164 × 134.5
- 5  
*Woodbeds, brimming (in), 2023*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
164 × 135
- 6  
*Woodbeds, brimming (come), 2023*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
163 × 133.5
- 7  
*Woodbeds, brimming (soon), 2023*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
163 × 133.5

- 8  
*All models are wrong, some are useful, 1, 2017*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
111 × 86 cm  
Two concrete sculptures  
Ø 9.5 cm, Ø 10 cm
- 9  
*All models are wrong, some are useful, 2, 2017*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
111 × 86 cm  
Concrete sculpture  
Ø 10 cm
- 10  
*All models are wrong, some are useful, 3, 2017*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
111 × 86 cm  
Three concrete sculptures  
Ø 8 cm, Ø 9.5 cm, Ø 10 cm
- 11  
*All models are wrong, some are useful, 6, 2017*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
111 × 86 cm  
Two concrete sculptures  
Ø 8.5 cm, Ø 12 cm
- 12  
*All models are wrong, some are useful, 5, 2017*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
111 × 86 cm  
Three concrete sculptures  
Ø 8 cm, Ø 9.5 cm, Ø 10 cm

- 13  
*All models are wrong, some are useful, 7, 2017*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
111 × 86 cm  
Two concrete sculptures  
Each Ø 9 cm
- 14  
*All models are wrong, some are useful, 8, 2017*  
Unique woodcut on paper, pencil  
111 × 86 cm  
Two concrete sculptures  
Ø 7.5 cm, Ø 8.5 cm
- 15  
*All models are wrong, some are useful (copy and caress), 2020*  
Two unique woodcuts on paper, pencil  
Each 100 × 73 cm  
Concrete sculpture  
Ø 17 cm
- 16  
*All models are wrong, some are useful (solid pleasure), 2018*  
Two unique woodcuts on paper, pencil  
Each 100 × 73 cm  
Concrete sculpture  
Ø 17 cm

## Hall



Courtesy the artist and  
Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

17  
*Wooden Scripts (How I love your obscure), 4,*  
2015  
Unique woodcut on paper  
123 × 90 cm

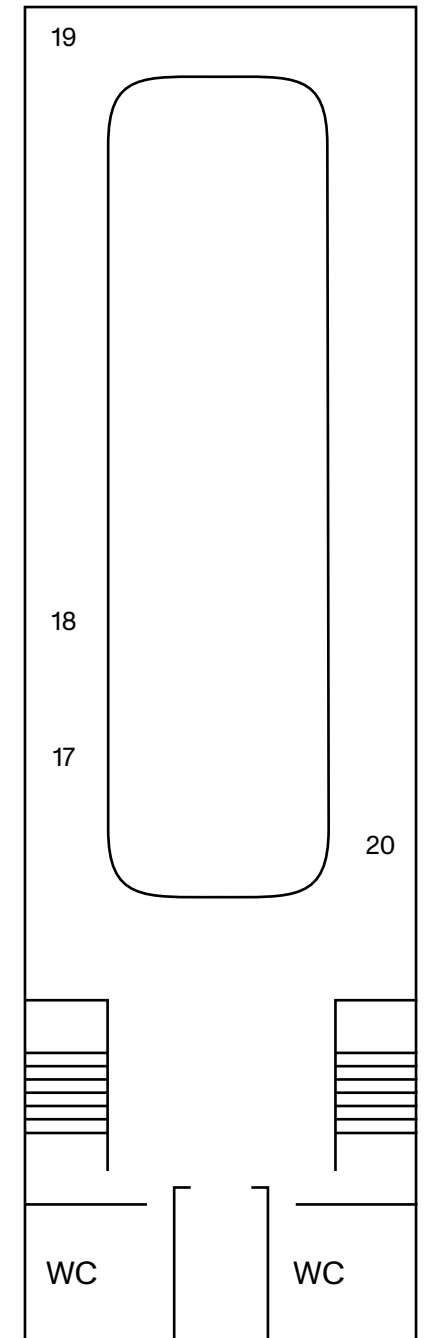
18  
*Wooden Scripts (How I love your obscure), 6,*  
2015  
Unique woodcut on paper  
123 × 90 cm

19  
*Wooden Scripts (How I love your obscure), 5,*  
2015  
Unique woodcut on paper  
123 × 90 cm

20  
*Wooden Scripts (How I love your obscure), 3,*  
2015  
Unique woodcut on paper  
123 × 90 cm

Courtesy the artist and  
Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

## Gallery





## Programme

Fri, 15 Sept 2023, 7 pm  
Opening Night with an Introduction  
by Heinrich Dietz

Sat, 16 Sept 2023, 4 pm  
Exhibition Walk with  
Ester Fleckner and Heinrich Dietz

Thu, 28 Sept 2023, 7 pm  
Guided Tour with Marilena  
Raufeisen

Thu, 12 Oct 2023, 7 pm  
Curator's Tour with Heinrich Dietz

Sat, 14 Oct 2023, 4 pm  
*Queer Abstraction*  
Lecture by Lex Morgan Lancaster  
and Talk with Ester Fleckner  
(online, registration required)

Mon, 16 Oct 2023, 7.30 pm  
*Blue* (Derek Jarman, 1993)  
Film Screening  
Location: Kommunales Kino  
Freiburg

Sun, 22 Oct 2023, 2–4 pm  
Workshop for Children 6–12 years  
Printing Workshop with  
Buchkinder Freiburg e.V.  
(registration required)

Thu, 26 Oct 2023, 7 pm  
*Queer Poetry and its Aesthetic  
Strategies*  
Reading and Talk with Noah  
Anderson and Kevin Junk

## Opening Hours

Wed–Fri, 3 pm–7 pm  
Sat–Sun, 12 am–6 pm

Entrance: 2 € / 1.50 €  
Thursdays free  
Members free

The exhibition is supported by:

Grosserer L. F. Foghts Fond



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