

OVERGADEN.

Ester Fleckner
A closet does not connect under the bed
23.01 – 13.03 2016



Ester Fleckner, *A closet does not connect under the bed*, 2016. Installation view. Photo: Anders Sune Berg

Closet Constructs

Reflections on Ester Fleckner's *A closet does not connect under the bed*

By Mathias Danbolt

A network of white and dotted lines spreads across Ester Fleckner's woodcut series *A closet does not connect under the bed* (2016). The lines form patterns of large and small squares and rectangles. The figures that emerge are flat. There are no shadows to give an impression of depth, or lines that mark the perspective we see the forms from. In some of the works the same figures are repeated side by side with small variations, like a series of sketches of an object or space trying to find a definitive form. In other woodcuts, the form is more defined, but the presence of pencil strokes continuing the printed lines makes these appear processual as well. A line of text in one of the prints tells us what kind of form we are looking at: "The closet I told you so". The word 'closet' recurs in the title of the series and in many of the text fragments written on the prints. The closets that emerge in the

woodcuts are, like the texts, disconnected and incoherent. The images look like blueprints with squares and rectangles delineating the contours of closet doors, sides, frames, shelves and legs – the components of a larger construction. The prints seem more instructional than abstract, like a series of patterns or proposals for new closets. Yet most carpenters would probably find the designs strange. The dimensions and scale seem to vary within a single image, and they would probably not look like any closet we know if they were actually built. The sketches extend far beyond the frame of the closet, challenging the very concept of it. Why this interest in the closet and its construction?

The closet is not only a piece of furniture for storing clothes and other stuff, it is also a metaphor for structuring knowledge. This

is expressed in the figurative meanings of expressions like 'come out of the closet'. Those of us who deal with this closet on a daily basis know that this is about more than a repetition of prosaic-spectacular statements like "I'm gay". Even though people often perceive the fact that someone comes out of the closet as 'news' they already knew, it can be seen as a performative ritual, a requirement in order to be recognised as an honest, open and contemporary lesbian or gay subject in a heteronormative world order. As a sentence in Fleckner's prints puts it: "The closet see you again tomorrow". The closet is a reminder of the privileged role sexuality has played in the knowledge and understanding of identity in the West since the 1800s. As a result, the closet as a metaphor does not only influence the lives of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transpeople in various ways, although the social, material and political effects of being *in* or *out* of the closet do have significantly more impact on some lives than others. The fact that people today talk about coming out of the closet as a stay-at-home mother or ironman enthusiast (just a couple of the news headlines from the past year) does not mean that the closet metaphor has detached itself from its associations with the realm of sexuality and gender. Instead it shows how the closet has functioned as a central figure in Western thinking in terms of the delineation of boundari-

es between categories like visible / invisible, knowledge / ignorance, silence / speech, secrecy / disclosure, and private / public, as the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in her influential book *Epistemologies of the Closet* (1990)¹.

Since the Stonewall riots in New York in June 1969, the slogan 'Out of the Closet, Into the Street!' has been a mantra in the battle for the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transpeople. And since the closet continues to be a symbol of oppression, it is hardly surprising that many of us attempt to come out of it again and again. The poetic phrase 'to come out' also rings with associations of flourishing and progress – like a photographic negative being developed into a positive image. What often gets forgotten in the focus on the transition from the dark to the light, is questioning the framework entered 'into' when coming 'out' of the dark space of the closet. Is openness and visibility really a guaranteed path to growth and progress for everyone in society today? What are the costs associated with the demand to demonstrate transparency and recognisability in exchange for being acknowledged as a legitimate sexual and gendered subject? And what kind of perceptions of truth and accessibility are we confined to by the logic of the closet?



Ester Fleckner, untitled, 2016. Photo: Anders Sune Berg

Questions like these are not only relevant in encountering Fleckner's investigation of the construction of the closet. They are also relevant in this attempt to write about the works. Texts like this are often expected to reproduce the progress-focused logic of the closet by bringing the allegedly inaccessible contemporary art out into the bright light of clarity. Just as coming out of the closet can be both liberating and limiting, texts like this can both expand and limit the sphere of an artwork. Especially when themes like gender and sexuality come into the picture. These themes are often seen as clues to the 'true' meaning of artworks. When an artist like Fleckner uses something as familiar as the closet – something everyone has some kind of relationship to – there is a risk that people immediately presume to 'know' what the works are about, as if their starting point is their end point. Artists whose works deal with themes of identities in a political context can easily be pigeonholed in this way. Which is maybe why Overgaden asked me not to focus exclusively on sexuality in my reading of Fleckner's works. But if rendering sexuality perspectives visible creates new forms of invisibility, this is an effective reminder of the closet's structuring of what, from a presumably majority perspective, is relevant or irrelevant to talk about.

If Fleckner's literal approach to constructions of the closet draws attention to issues of gender and sexuality, it remains far from easy to describe or decipher what the works want with these issues. Fleckner's prints never come out of the closet with what they mean. Even though the sketches draw on blueprints as a genre, they are far from informative or instructive in any traditional sense. The closets that appear in the woodcuts seem abstracted, incapable of being assembled to keep either clothes or secrets. Instead, the repeated forms pursue their own order or logic. In this they apparently draw inspiration from the poet Gertrude Stein, who Fleckner has borrowed the exhibition's title from. "A closet does not connect under the bed" is a line from Stein's famous book of poetry *Tender Buttons* from 1914.² The line is taken from a poem in the first part of the book called *Objects*, a series of texts that has often been described as an example of 'literary Cubism'. Whereas Cubist painters like Pablo Picasso and Georges

Braque abandon the central perspective as a way of structuring the image, allowing objects to appear from a range of different angles simultaneously, Stein breaks the syntactic rules of language so the relationship between the words and objects is displaced and mixed up. Illegibility is central to Stein's writing, as the literary theorist Joshua Schuster underlines: "Stein does not allow meaning to settle on one interpretive system, instead continually moving between sound and sense, normative and non-normative grammar, familiarity and alienation, immersion and exclusion".³ Stein's poetry, in other words, demands an ability to see the possibilities in the confusion that emerges when the conventional rules and framework of language are abolished.

Fleckner's woodcuts can similarly be seen to focus on the potential of confusion in the movement between the literal and the abstract, the instructive and the obscure, the open and the opaque. Instead of coming out of the closet, Fleckner's woodcuts invite us into another space that tries to make room for what falls beyond established categories and frameworks – the fragmentary, the incomprehensible, the irreconcilable. Or as a sentence from one of the woodcuts describes it: "the closet from one to many, many to many, and between two".

Mathias Danbolt is associate professor in Art History at the University of Copenhagen.

Translation: Jane Rowley

Notes:

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.
2. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms*. New York, Dover Publications, 1997, p. 4.
3. Joshua Schuster, "The Making of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*". *Jacket2*, April 21, 2011: [jacket2.org/article/making-tender-buttons].

CV

Ester Fleckner (b. 1983) lives and works in Berlin. She graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2013, and also studied at Goldsmiths University of London. Fleckner has previously exhibited at Avlskarl Gallery in 2015 and C4 Projects in 2014.

EVENTS

Thursday 18 February 6-7pm

Walk and talk // Ester Fleckner in conversation with Maria Kjær Thomsen

This evening, Ester Fleckner will talk about the ideas and the process behind her current exhibition and her work in general in the company of art critic and curator Maria Kjær Thomsen. The event will be in Danish.

Sunday 21 February 3-4.30pm

Presentation and reading // *The Potential of Poetry*

Poetry plays a central role in Ester Fleckners practice, and in her works text fragments often appear as an integral part of the visual expression. Following this interest Overgaden invites you to an event that both offers reflections on the potential of poetry by Julie Sten-Knudsen as well as lyrical readings by Caspar Eric and Lea Marie Løppenthin.

THANK YOU

Ester Fleckner would like to thank Mathias Danbolt, Malene Dam, Line Hvidbjerg, Michael Schultz, Bogg Johanna Karlsson, Sara Fleckner, Susanne Fleckner and John Vilstrup, Overgaden.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 1 April 2016 Overgaden presents the solo exhibition *Bugs in the War Room* by Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter and the group show *Varulv!*, which is curated by Overgaden. The exhibitions run through 29 May 2016.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: www.overgaden.org

The exhibition is supported by:

THE DANISH ARTS FOUNDATION



DANISH
ART WORKSHOPS
STATENS VÆRKSTEDER
FOR KUNST

Overgaden is supported by the Danish Arts Foundation's Committee for Visual Arts and the Obel Family Foundation.

Overgaden.

Institute of Contemporary Art
Overgaden neden Vandet 17
DK-1414 Copenhagen K

www.overgaden.org
+45 32 57 72 73