

Galerie Barbara Wien

Schöneberger Ufer 65 10785 Berlin www.barbarawien.de

Ester Fleckner and Malcolm Holt *There is a lot of queerness in nature*, Interview in: Blacklisted, January 21, 2019
<https://www.blacklisted.dk/art/ester-fleckner>



Intro

A couple of years ago, I walked into the room on the top floor of Overgaden to find an array of bespoke crafted pieces of wood lain precisely across the floor surrounded by what looked like diagrams on the walls. Diagrams that seemed to match the wood but never quite did, especially as strange markings were running interference across these diagrams. Symbols that in one moment appeared to look like an abstract language and in the next became more phallic or gynecic, or asterisks becoming anuses. I felt a sensation wash over me. I wanted to laugh but out of joy rather than some kind of prurient discomfort. There was an irreverence here that simultaneously recognized how high the stakes were for the revenant. The care in the construction and composition of each image and each item that comprised the installation gave depth to its central observation. It made you feel so as to know what it is to not fit into something so pervasive it becomes invisible. Which is to say, it made you aware of the discomfort inherent to this situation, but, more surprisingly, it made you aware of the potential in it.

This exhibition was *A closet does not connect under the bed* (2016) by the Danish artist Ester Fleckner. Fleckner's training is formidable. She graduated from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen in 2013 and also completed a Master's degree in Gender and Culture at Goldsmiths, University of London. From looking at her work, it would seem that these studies have provided Fleckner with the resources to really go deep into her subject matter in a way that only those with such an obvious dedication can. Through careful attention to process, materials and symbolism, Fleckner produces artifacts that explore the ironies of systemic disjunction between codes of meaning-making, physicality and forces like desire. But her work also seeks the new conjunctions that are made possible as abstractions are put into dialogue with queerness.

Through a dialogue with the artist, Katya Sander, during the final year of her studies, Fleckner began to incorporate everyday practices in her artist practice, and in so doing began to focus more on the development of "queer methods and approaches" to her art-making rather than being fixated on the outcome. The result is work that is fascinating in its resistance to categorization, both in its themes and as artworks themselves. Her work plays in the potential of incompleteness as a way to remain open by exploring repetition as the condition for producing differences, and illustrating the differences that inhere in that act of repetition. These ideas are so rich and so relevant to so many lived experiences that a single afternoon spent surrounded by Fleckner's images and objects has lingered in my mind for nearly three years, sparking potential forms of interactions with even things as banal as IKEA

furniture.

Since graduating, Fleckner has built up a reputation as a promising talent in the Danish art world, winning numerous grants and the Art Brussels SOLO Prize in 2016. Ahead of more solo show coming later this year, I took the opportunity to get in touch Fleckner to find out more about her work and the ideas she had made pleasantly linger in my head for the last couple of years.

Questions

Abstract art is often thought of as something terribly aloof and serious but what struck me about your work is how playful it is, especially in the use of symbols like the * as star/anus in *Arguments for Desire* and the U as clit/dick in *Clit/Dick Register*. How do you see the use of such witty devices as helping you to explore questions of desire and bodily identity?

My practice is rooted in an aspiration to navigate through trans, queer and crip perspectives. Turning to abstraction is useful for exploring unknown matters, and for making known matters unknown. Jack Halberstam reflects on failure as a condition for people standing next to the norm, in relation to gender identity and sexuality, and proposes to consider such positions as places that should be embraced and used to raise the political criticism of norms in society (rather than e.g. feeling shame and seeking inclusion). To think about failure has contributed to my practice. I often work in series and write and draw with pencil in the margins of my prints. Herein lies the desire for playing, and the rejection of perfection, control and finished ideas.

I am interested in the relation between the body and language and the ongoing development of meaning, interpretation and connection. It is central for me to queer and question how we are being created and create each other through language. A “U” shape we read as a letter. I suggest in *Clit-dick Register*, 2013-2014, that one can also perceive a row of U's as genital organs that exceed the binary ideas of male and female. The piece is both abstract but also very concrete and demand a listening to the body's own language.

The symbol of the asterisk * entered in series I made afterward, *Arguments for desire*, 2013-18, and *I navigate in collisions*, 2014-15. The asterisk is typically used when we want to add a note or give an explanation of a word or phrase. In those series, I work with it simultaneously referring to the anus—a body part densely filled with meanings, opinions, pleasure, silence, outrage and politics. Abstraction gives us an opportunity to rethink shapes and signs we use all the time. It can function to deal with complex matters in a poetic and political way.

In my perhaps limited experience, I have found that art exploring queerness often starts in a more representative mode and then moves away from or queers that normative representation in some way. Your work, on the other hand, seems to start from abstraction and then queers that with symbology, humor, and an almost ironic insistence on the object specificity (e.g. these shapes are a definitely a closet). What

attracted you to abstraction as a way to explore queerness? And do you see anyone else working in this way?

Representation is apparent in much art dealing with queerness and I think it is due to the fact that LGBTQ* minorities have been made to feel (and continue to be) ashamed, discriminated against and overlooked in private and in public and, along with other minorities, have been studied and categorized by science. Problems that are ongoing. Visibility and self-representation are crucial parts of having a voice. Therefore, it is also both present and important in queer activism.

Abstract art touches me. It's not translatable. Sampling, repetitions and seriality are great tools to push material. Methods that are closely related to queer thinking that I use to arrive at abstract outcomes. When you don't know what you are looking at or can't clarify a piece, you start searching other links and cracks. I use queer perspectives to illuminate norms and structures. A focus that is more central to my work than the representation of deviation. But it is also not so clearly separated. And, of course, queer representation is present in my work too.

My work is also in dialogue with queer history and activism. Discussions in LGBTIQ* politics evolve with new situations, progress, and challenges. Some politicians manifest an image of Western liberty through certain inclusive rhetoric towards LGBTIQ* communities as part of establishing a new "them and us" divide, where the excluded minorities are those from non-Western countries. In my practice, I can process chains of arguments and simplifications at my own pace, mixing matters anew.

In the work you refer to, my intention was to investigate the metaphor of the closet. It was clear that the perspective should be on the cultural construction of closet narratives, not stories from within. The starting point was not representation, but negation and deconstruction. The concrete elements are castings of insides and outsides of many cabinet parts that cannot be assembled into one. In that regard, abstraction was used to shift recognisability and question what we think we know and see.

An artist whose work I came across recently is Loren Britton, who showed wonderful paper-pulp-sculptures installed in the exhibition space Stadium in Berlin. Jonah Groeneboer is another artist who makes admirable abstract works and addresses representation through various media. I follow both of their practices. The art historian, David J. Getsy, has written quite a lot on the topic of abstraction within the realm of queerness the last years and there also seems to be a broader focus on the potential of queerness and abstraction recently.

The first exhibition of yours I saw was *A closet does not connect under the bed*. At first, I took in the remarkable intersection of geometrical experiments with organic material that seemed as though it wouldn't entirely yield to the abstractions. Then I noticed the asterisks almost intruding into the piece as if something of the body could not long be kept out of this representative schema. This seems to resonate with your more recent work, *Contraposer*, which explores the disjunction between idealized bodily representations and the other bodies this excludes. Can you expand on how these tensions between systems and actualities interest you?

There is ongoing tension in encounters between cultural systems of logics in relation to different positions. Barbara Kruger famously stated that "the body is a battleground". Halberstam talks about chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing, explained appealingly in this quote: "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". (*Queer Art of Failure*).

I find it productive to work with what I call collisions. Often, I sample something specific such as a public standpoint, image or telling with queer perspectives—or 'chaotic knowledge'. I have already touched on *A closet does not connect under the bed*, 2016. Another example could be *I navigate in collisions*, 2014-15, a series of woodcut prints that play with the notion of a family tree, drawing into question the assumed naturalness of some relations over others. To navigate in collisions, is to navigate outside of straight and linear patterns of relationality, in order to forge new and different connections and ways of belonging.

Contraposer, 2018, that you mention is a series that takes a starting point form sampling of anatomically fit bodies, a Rubik's cube, Frankenstein's monster, crip thinking and trans desire. Elizabeth Freeman puts forth a powerful reading of Mary Shelley's early sci-fi novel in her book *Time Binds*, in which Dr. Frankenstein constructs a monster from fragments of different dead people. People who, according to Freeman, perhaps were of different genders and who had lived at different times. The monster is a queer hybrid who embodies atypical knowledge across time and place. I am drawn to putting things together letting and stories and systems cross in the works.

The recurrent use of these abstract symbols seems as if your trying to develop your own artist language in a really sophisticated way owing to its combination with organic materials that require real effort to be manipulated. As if the meaning of the symbol is contingent on your ability to overcome or work through the difficulties or particularities of the material. And because you're building a language you need to build in the redundancy of repetition and variation. Is this a reading of your work that makes sense to you? If so could you expand on it?

I am trying to build other languages and tools through combinations of redoing, remaking and sampling and material processing is part of that endeavor. Nature and 'the natural' is used in arguments against queerness. But there is a lot of queerness in nature, which is, however, not considered natural by many. Wood as an organic material in my prints goes

into dialogue with some of these views. Besides that, it is lovely to work within a graphic process. Wood is, partly, unpredictable in its outcome and structure. This media is somehow related to bodily representation and the cutting is a physical act that leaves marks from the hand. Process and struggle are present, and the transformation takes my sketches to a staggering level I cannot find elsewhere.

The other aspect is repetition. Repetition is my bed. Gertrude Stein's formulation on the difference between repetition and insistence should be mentioned here. She says "Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be" [...] "if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different. It has to be, anybody can know that". (*Lectures in America*). She makes a fabulous point here. No anus is alike. Judith Butler's theory of performativity has obviously also affected my preoccupation with seriality and reiteration and induced a passion for exploring similarities, variations, and consistency.

As a philosophy nerd, I get this flash of recognition whenever I see your work, and what it reminds me of is the places my mind goes to when I try to read books of incredibly dense (French) philosophy. And as a fellow Goldsmiths alum, I'm always thrilled when I see something that can take these kinds of ideas and shows them to the world in new, and perhaps more comprehensible, ways. So I was wondering if such ideas were an influence on your work, and if so, which ideas in particular and how?

Theory goes into my practice as a source of inspiration like much other knowledge production. French philosophy, specifically, is not my strongest point. Sometimes I can identify a source, book or talk that influenced in a given series.

An example could be Robert McRuer's considerations on overlaps between queer theory and disability studies, that he names 'crip', that inspired the series *All models are wrong, some are useful*, 2017-18. He reflects on the system of compulsory able-bodiedness (that in a sense produces disability) and heterosexuality (that produces queerness) as coinciding part of society's disciplines of normality. My works explore polyhedra figures based on imprecise hand drawings of mathematical models. Skew and uneven the shapes insist on moving away from stringency and predictability towards an outcome of maladjustment. It is appealing to me how unfolded models of polyhedra are abstract and difficult to connect to their solid. That gap of visual clarity between formula and body attracts me.

In general, I can say that trans theory, especially Susan Stryker's work, feed a curiosity to begin doing sculptural work and spatial installations. *Manoeuvring Overload*, 2014, as an example, is a floor piece consisting of nine clumsy concrete frames that were cast from the outline of a standard Danish paving stone. The frames have been pushed by the weight of the concrete, and, as a result, each rectangle comes out slightly crooked. Where I had earlier focused on two-dimensional media and poetry, trans perspectives brought more physicality into my practice.

What is coming up next from Ester Fleckner?

I have spent the past months doing new works and preparations for some ongoing series, including *All models are wrong, some are useful* and *Contraposer*. There will be more works in both of these series. This last summer, I moved to Møn island in Denmark to get a large studio and my own graphic printing press. The press is coming soon and I am doing initial sketches for a new series in large scale format which I have been looking forward to for a long time. The outcome of the latter will probably be part of my next solo show at Avlskarl Gallery, Copenhagen in the summer of 2019.