

Woodcuts are the outcome of contact between two bodies: the printing block and the picture support, which is often paper. The art historian Jennifer Roberts compares the transfer process with a sensitive physical act distinguished by engagement and disengagement, by presence, contact, and intimacy, but also by loss, separation, and memory.<sup>1</sup> These words resonate deeply in relation to the artistic practice of Ester Fleckner. Since 2013, the year Fleckner graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, the artist has been devoted to woodcutting as a thread throughout their practice, and a tool for investigating questions of gender and sexuality. After finishing their studies, Fleckner left their native Denmark and moved to Berlin, drawn there by its queer and trans scene. In 2018, Fleckner settled on the Danish island of Møn after purchasing their own large-scale printing press. While they may have relocated geographically, their focus on woodcut has remained.

### WOODCUT: A PHYSICAL ACT

Wood is an organic material that reacts to its surroundings. Humidity and temperature fluctuations have a direct effect on wooden printing blocks. Changes in temperature can lead, for instance, to contractions or expansions of the block that in turn distort the printed image. What is more, a wooden printing block becomes elastic as soon as ink is applied to it. The dampness causes the wood, unlike the copper plates of engraving and etching for example, to bend. And finally, owing to the individual grain of the wood and any knotholes it might contain, every printing block exhibits a uniquely uneven surface. In other words, every block exhibits distinctive characteristics and is in a sense alive, thus resembling a body.

To make a woodcut, an image is cut into the printing block with a knife or gouge. The block is injured but not destroyed; on the contrary, here “injury”<sup>2</sup> is creation. The processing of the printing block—both the cutting and the subsequent inking—takes Fleckner to the limits of what is physically possible. Slowly, calmly, and with concentration, the artist carves intricate compositions into the block after drawing them on transfer paper or directly on the wood. Their body not only leaves traces behind on the wood as they cut into the block, but also as they ink it, a procedure carried out manually by rolling ink onto the block’s surface. During these various stages, Fleckner and the printing block enter into a close and constantly changing physical relationship: the artist leans over the plate, turns it several times, moves around it, and even sits on it. During this process, the artist’s body writes itself into the block.

The artist pulls several proofs to check whether the wood has absorbed the ink enough to achieve the desired degree of saturation. They carry out the actual printing with their press—and not manually, as did, for example, Swiss artist Franz Gertsch (1930–2022), who, in a time-consuming process, rubbed the paper into the wood with a spoon to print woodcuts measuring as much as two to three meters in size. When Fleckner inks the block, pulls proofs on inexpensive paper, and then produces the small number of final prints on higher-quality sheets, longer breaks are not possible. This part of the production process must be carried out without interruption to ensure that the desired intensity of color is achieved and that the ink does not dry out on the printing block.

To generate both the proofs and final prints, Fleckner’s process unfolds over the duration of twelve to fourteen hours. During this labor-intensive period, the artist becomes deeply acquainted with the printing block down to tiny details. However, the final prints always contain a great number of unknowns as the printing process is infused with an ongoing loss of control.

### FROM GRAPHIC BOOM TO ONE OF A KIND

Fleckner does not produce large editions, but mostly unique prints. In recent years, many artists working in printmaking—including with techniques that vary greatly from woodcut—have been producing smaller and smaller editions down to single copies. This tendency seems to be a reaction to what has been termed as the graphic boom,<sup>3</sup> an upsurge in printmaking taking place in the US and

Europe in the 1960s, distinguished by large editions. This rise aimed to satisfy the aspiring art market by making prints available to a wider public at lower prices. In the 1970s, however, the printmaking market collapsed and interest in printed artworks rapidly declined.

During the boom, lithography and, even more so, screen printing were the mediums of choice for large print editions of several hundred copies. While woodcuts gained popularity throughout this period, they continued to be produced in a limited number of editions as they had before, regardless of the fact that the technique lends itself to printing up to a hundred sheets. Over time, though, the strong pressure of the printing press wears down the printing block and changes the image.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that present-day artists frequently decide to produce smaller editions or unique copies likely stems from a desire to increase the value of printmaking again. Yet it also reflects a shift in how printmaking is understood. Today, printmaking is no longer perceived and used primarily as a method of reproduction, but as an artistic medium on a par with painting, sculpture, and drawing. The fact that Fleckner primarily produces unique prints is a result of their extremely elaborate manual process, which makes the production of large editions impossible. What is more, the artist is not focused on the extensive dissemination of the same motif, but rather, on the ongoing development of their pictorial inventions.

### INSISTENCE

After pulling the final prints from a printing block, Fleckner sometimes takes the same block in hand and resumes the cutting process. By adding further incisions, they change the image, and by repeating this process several times, they create a series of woodcuts consisting of continually modified compositions. In the series *Woodbeds, brimming* (2019–) (pp. 158–198) for example, the artist creates densely packed rows of triangles, squares, or pentagons, and organizes the shapes into horizontal rows that echo that of a text until the pattern covers the entire surface. These patterns have no center and no hierarchical structure. Each individual character, like each print in the series, is equal in status to the rest.

Every reworking of an already-used printing block means the loss of the previously cut image. At the same time, the predecessor is always also part of the new image. It is as if the past is constantly being embedded into the present. When the series *Woodbeds, brimming* is on view in its entirety, with each individual print beside the others, the artworks seem to be communicating. One print speaks to the other and the exhibition space fills with faint murmurs and soft whispers.

“Is there repetition or is there insistence,”<sup>5</sup> the modernist writer and avant-garde art collector Gertrude Stein inquired, “I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition.”<sup>6</sup> To go by Stein’s words, which have inspired Fleckner deeply, repetition is not to be equated with replication but can instead be interpreted as insistence, and both variation and insistence are vehemently at work in Fleckner’s art.

During the processing of the printing blocks, the artist exhausts both the wood’s ability to withstand pressure and their own mental and physical resilience. The artist describes the cutting of the wooden block as a physical dialogue, a fight with the wood, stating “This cut could be both like a conflict or a fight with the material, a way of somehow speaking against something, but also of speaking in a different way.”<sup>7</sup> This *discussion* is also steered by the respective wood type and its properties—how hard or soft it is, how pliant or resistant.<sup>8</sup> Fleckner used cherry-wood for *Clit-dick Register* (2013–2014) (pp. 4–27), but usually works with printing blocks made of birch plywood as was chosen for *Woodbeds, brimming*.<sup>9</sup> In their processing of the printing plates, the artist is in dialogue with the wood’s resistant qualities. Depending on the direction of the line, they work with or against the grain.

Georg Baselitz (b. 1938)—another author of extensive woodcut cycles—likewise works with the material as well as deliberately against it when cutting the wood. In his series *Women of Dresden I–V* (1990), he cut the lines of the motif—always an upside-down head of a woman placed centrally in the pictorial space—vertically, and thus against the grain of the wooden block, which ran horizontally. The resistive force of the wood made the lines’ edges splinter and the contours jagged,<sup>10</sup> creating a restlessness that obscures the main motif and sets the beholder’s inner eye oscillating. Whereas

Baselitz used the idiosyncratic nature of the wood to explore questions regarding the abstraction of figurative motifs—that is, questions inherent to the images—Fleckner pursues a different goal in their contestation of the wood’s resistance. Let us return here to the series *Woodbeds, brimming*. Of the many geometric shapes formed with fine lines and placed densely side by side, not a single one is identical to any other. The unpredictability of the wood does not allow for the precise replication of one and the same form, thus some unwanted differences occur among the cuts. At the same time, Fleckner consciously chooses to vary the sizes and shapes of the signs, often layering these forms. The artist uses birch plywood in particular because the hard material allows small details to be precisely cut. In the repetition and serial sequencing of a single geometric shape—the viewer experiences the ways in which one is different from the rest.

Besides the cut shapes, the specific characteristics inherent to each printing block also vary. The grain, the knots, and the knotholes leave traces behind in the printed image. Like artists before Fleckner such as Edvard Munch (1863–1944), the members of the Brücke in the early twentieth century, and later Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), Georg Baselitz, and Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), Fleckner integrates the woodblock’s physical properties into their compositions. Fleckner does not regard these aspects as limits. Instead, they emphasize the variety inherent to the wooden matrices. And although Fleckner’s woodcuts do not adhere to a clearcut narrative or illustrate an explicit figurative motif, they have something to tell us: every living being is unique in character, expression, and physique.

## BODY LANGUAGE

Fleckner is interested in the close relationship between language and the human body, a connection that ultimately informs their woodcut characters. The abstract shapes that the artist chooses for their woodcuts—stars, triangles, rectangles, and pentagons—frequently trace back to signs and symbols of Latin script, but also the human body—that is, individual extremities or organs in highly abstracted forms. The star-shaped signs in *Wooden Scripts (How I love your obscure)*, 1 (2015) (p. 90), for example, are derived in part from the asterisk on a computer keyboard. In the context of a text, this sign fulfills the function of adding a supplement or further explanation. Another reference for these signs is the human body, or, more specifically, the anus and its ring-shaped sphincter. It is no coincidence that Fleckner chose the anus as a motif. Few body parts are as politically charged: fraught with opinions, meaning, and joy, but also silence, shame, and violence.

Since their first woodcut series *Clit-dick Register*, instead of shying away from sensitive, shame-fraught topics, the artist has dealt with these subjects with the language of abstraction. In the abovementioned work, Fleckner arranged U-shaped crescents next to one another in countless rows. The prints spark associations with the text-based works of Hanne Darboven (1941–2009), for example, who outspread a kind of handwritten diary across hundreds of sheets and aimed to achieve as even a typeface as possible. Fleckner likewise conceives of their U-shapes as signs, as well as being representative of a multiplicity of genitals. And in choosing woodcut, Fleckner has decided on a medium that is itself based on a technique consisting of the simultaneous presence of opposing or binary characteristics. Thus, the final woodcut is an imprint of the elevated sections of the printing block—that is, everything that has not been cut away. In other words, a woodcut is based on an interplay between high and low, present and absent, light and dark, zero and one. Both are constantly present, and together bring forth the image. At the same time, abstract structures inherent in wood such as the grain or knotholes intersect within the composition and set the two-part system into vibration.

The artist conceives of their sign-based compositions as a form of writing that combines geometry and rigid systems with abstraction and poetry. “Words are marks and marks are words,”<sup>11</sup> declares American artist Harmony Hammond (b. 1944), with whom Fleckner’s work is well-acquainted. Fleckner’s words pick up on this thread, “Abstraction gives us an opportunity to rethink shapes and signs [that] we use all the time. It can function to deal with complex matters in a poetic and political way.”<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on their abstract depictions of the body, the artist adds, “These small signs give me a way to consider how the language used to describe bodies so often fails in relation to gendered and sexual identities and categories. The simple forms create estrangements or ‘abstractifications’ of what

is categorized and knowable in normative terms and understandings.”<sup>13</sup>

Fleckner also touches on the limits of language through the text passages they carve directly into the wooden block or write in the margins of the sheets in pencil, as in *A closet does not connect under the bed* (2016) (pp. 100–123). In this body of work, the text reads, “How can I tell you without considering anxiety / pleasure / love // ~~How can I~~ // \* \*” Again and again, they erase or cross out writing and then add a new line. The corrections reflect the struggle to express a feeling or idea that language falls short of describing. For Fleckner, language’s inadequacies and defectiveness possesses a value in its own right. “When I cross out words and sentences in my woodcuts, I don’t consider the print to be a failure or any less perfect. Instead, [...] the print becomes a space to reflect on the failing relationship that exists between, for instance, the body and language. [...] I seek to stress and visualize a set of values that gives uncertainty and the unfinished a central position. That is also why I mostly do serial work. My prints reflect different attempts in the process.”<sup>14</sup>

### CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

“I think of the whole paper as my playground, not a margin with certain rules,”<sup>15</sup> Fleckner explained of their idiosyncratic approach to woodcut. Not limited solely to the printed zone, the artist supplements the printed image with handwritten notes or geometric forms drawn in pencil on the bright white periphery of an artwork’s margins. Sometimes they add these markings after the printing process has been completed, sometimes before it has begun, which conflates the drawn and printed motifs.

When the artist draws, the figures flow directly from their hand to the paper where they are immediately visible. An image cut into a wood block, in contrast, remains hidden until the printing process is complete. Because the image must mirror and thus be cut into the plate in the reverse of the intended final version, the process of making the woodcut demands patience as well as the ability to reverse one’s perspective. This may not seem as relevant for abstract compositions, however for text works, the need to reverse-orient is essential. The change of perspective correlates with Fleckner’s perception of the world from a queer point of view. The artist asks, “What does it mean to feel different? What does it mean to have different experiences? [...] I tried to look at different systems in society from queer perspectives more than looking at queerness as a thing in itself. So for me queerness is very much about looking at the world, questioning it.”<sup>16</sup> This questioning of perception is inextricably linked to Fleckner’s approach to traditional woodcut, an approach characterized by crossing boundaries and breaking with norms. The artist treats the entire sheet, and both the recto and verso as the pictorial surface rather than only the printed section in the center. Drawing helps them occupy and appropriate the surface beyond the boundaries of the printed zone. Fleckner signs, dates, and numbers their woodcuts on the back rather than the front. This is not uncommon, but other artists make this choice primarily for aesthetic reasons—that is, so as to not sully the front with inscriptions. Fleckner’s decision, however, is based on the desire to utilize the sheet to the fullest.

### FROM PAPER SURFACE INTO SPACE

The geometric forms that occupy the picture planes of Fleckner’s woodcuts extend beyond the surfaces of the paper into three-dimensional space through object-like works and installations. The series *A closet does not connect under the bed*, for example, is composed of twenty woodcut prints that were initially exhibited alongside twelve sculptural components (*Untitled* [2016]) (pp. 210–214). While the prints translate elements of disassembled closets into contour drawings and position them in varied relation to one another on a brown background, the sculptures are concrete imprints of old wooden closet parts. Star-shaped polyhedra with diameters of approximately 8–17 centimeters, also cast in concrete, accompany the woodcut series *All models are wrong, some are useful* (2017–2020) (pp. 126–143, 226–230). With their asymmetrical forms and visible tape marks, these concrete objects lack any semblance of perfection. In the respective woodcut series, the sculptures appear unfolded in different formations as white contour drawings against a black background. Though the ink is black, it is applied transparently, allowing the viewer to see the grain of the wood as part of the image. As a result, the organic material is part of the collision with the predictability of geometry. In this series too, the artist supplements the prints with fragments of text and drawings, written in pencil in the margins, addressing

expectations and emotions around bodily appearance and ability. The notes on sheet no. 2 (p. 133) of the series read, “You were talking about appearing/ about polyhedrons / turning on sides to orient, rest / in four\_ other dimensions.” Those on sheet no. 8 (p. 143) include the words “There are no organs in a triangle / there are ~~no~~organs in a triangle.” Both series—*A closet does not connect under the bed* and *All models are wrong, some are useful*—moreover revolve around the opening of closed, confined spaces, which are disassembled and dissected.

Fleckner grants the viewers of the woodcuts and objects an immediate experience. The artist often presents the prints unframed when shown for the first time, placing the accompanying objects without bases in direct proximity to the paper works, encouraging them to be circumnavigated and closely contemplated from all sides. As three-dimensional objects, they enter into direct physical relationships and their compactness provokes intimacy.

## POLITICAL ABSTRACTION

Fleckner’s work activates the physical and political potential inherent to the woodcut. Though connections to early woodcutters, particularly of the twentieth century, are discernible, Fleckner is primarily indebted to artists working with a proto-feminist<sup>17</sup> or feminist approach to abstraction such as American painter Agnes Martin (1912–2004), German-American artist Eva Hesse (1936–1970) and American artist Hannah Wilke (1940–1993). These artists established a new pictorial language and approach to representation.<sup>18</sup> With the woodcut medium, and in Fleckner’s own lexicon of abstraction, the artist expands on this legacy. Problematizing prescribed definitions of gender and the body, they explore the failures of rigid systems and narrow hierarchies, using woodcut as a lens for appreciating queerness and deviant ways of being. Thus, their abstract imagery is permeated by a political subtext, which is inherent to printmaking. In the words of Jennifer Roberts, “[...] pressure is a basic physical force that transfers images in printmaking but it also opens out onto social cognates like impression or oppression. Each of these terms, like pressure, denotes a specific form of intelligence and a specific area of sensitivity that allows for specific kinds of intervention in social and political life.”<sup>19</sup>

1 Jennifer Roberts, “The 70th A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts: Contact: Art and the Pull of Print, Part 1: Pressure,” posted April 25, 2021 at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, video, 46:01, <https://www.nga.gov/audio-video/mellon/mellon-2021-1.html>.

2 Ibid.

3 On the so-called print revival or graphic boom, see: Christiane Lange and Nils Ohlsen, eds., *The Great Graphic Boom: Amerikanische Kunst 1960–1990* (Oslo & Stuttgart: Nationalmuseet & Sandsteen, 2017); Jenny Graser, “Eine ‘Kampfansage’ an das Informel: Die Druckgraphik der 1960er Jahre zwischen Avantgarde und Graphik-Boom,” in *Freiraum der Kunst: Die Studiogalerie der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt 1964–1968* (Frankfurt am Main: Museum Giersch der Goethe-Universität, 2018), 32–49.

4 See: Georg Josef Dietz, “In Holz geschnitten, auf Papier gedruckt – Material und Technik des Holzschnitts,” in *Holzschnitt: 1400 bis heute*, eds. Georg Josef Dietz and Christien Melzer (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag & Kupferstichkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 2022), 25, 21–27.

5 Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition,” in *Lectures in America* (New York: Beacon Press, 1957), 166.

6 Ibid.

7 Avlskarl Gallery, “Ester Fleckner Interview,” in conjunction with the exhibition *Woodbeds, brimming*, November 26, 2019, 10:42–10:51, <https://youtu.be/DxRrRJGi-jE>.

8 On this subject, see also: Georg Josef Dietz, “In Holz geschnitten, auf Papier gedruckt – Material und Technik des Holzschnitts,” in *Holzschnitt: 1400 bis heute*, 21–27.

9 Ester Fleckner, email message to author, December 6, 2023.

10 See: Carl Haenlein, ed., “Georg Baselitz – Gespräch mit Jean-Louis Froment und Jean-Marc Poinot (Derneburg, Januar 1983),” in *Georg Baselitz: Skulpturen und Zeichnungen 1979–1987* (Hannover: Kestner-Gesellschaft, 1987) 51, 49–55.

11 Harmony Hammond, “Feminist Abstract Art – A Political Viewpoint,” *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, 1977, 68, 66–70.

- 12 Macon Holt, "'There is a lot of queerness in nature,' an interview with Ester Fleckner," Blacklisted.dk, January 2019, <https://esterfleckner.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Blacklisted-Ester-Fleckner-Interview.pdf>.
- 13 Mathias Danbolt, "Fragments of Failure: A Conversation between Ester Fleckner & Mathias Danbolt," ed. Sille Storihle, (Oslo: FRANK, 2021) 6, 1-8, [www.academccessedie.edu](http://www.academccessedie.edu).
- 14 Ibid, 4.
- 15 Ester Fleckner, email message to author, March 19, 2022.
- 16 Avlskarl Gallery, "Ester Fleckner Interview," 5:30–5:41.
- 17 For more information on Proto-Feminism, see "Proto Feminist Artists," The Art Story, accessed March 30, 2024, <https://www.theartstory.org/artists/proto-feminist-artists/>.
- 18 See: Eleanor Nairne, *Eva Hesse and Hannah Wilke: Erotic Abstraction* (New York: Rizzoli & Acquavella Galleries, 2020). See also: Annette Tietenberg, *Konstruktionen des Weiblichen – Eva Hesse: ein Künstlerinnenmythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Reimer, 2005). For a broader overview, see: Christine Macel and Karolina Lewandowska, eds., *Women in Abstraction* (Paris: Thames & Hudson and Centre Pompidou, 2021).
- 19 Jennifer Roberts, "The 70th A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts: Contact: Art and the Pull of Print, Part 1: Pressure."