

In Conversation: Lex Morgan Lancaster with Ester Fleckner

*This dialogue began in the summer of 2023, in connection with an online event for Ester Fleckner's solo exhibition Slow Tools at Kunstverein Freiburg. The conversation continued online through autumn.*

LML For me, materiality is central to understanding how queer abstraction works (as a process or verb), and physical process also seems important for you. Can you talk about your use of the woodcut as a medium, and your material process?

EF I am drawn to woodcuts for several reasons. The medium allows me to stay open and slightly out of control in terms of process, and to arrive at an abstract aesthetic. The cut line is rough and blurry, and wood imprints its own marks and structures onto paper. The technique is simple and immediate, and the physical resistance of the wood, as well as the printing process, allow for differences, errors, and unpredictabilities. My encounters with wood are intimate. My work begins with drawings, and then some of these drawings are transferred to wooden matrices. Through a process of cutting and printing, I develop compositions along the way. I print everything myself, and the printing process is as much a part of the work as the drawing and cutting. Making an artwork is an ongoing negotiation and material dialogue that often ends the way the work begins: I draw on the prints as a last step.

Performative moments of testing and experimentation become embedded into each work. For me, sketches and material investigations are closely related to queerness and how I work with abstraction because they challenge the recognizable, the finished, and the categorized.

LML You have said that repetition and seriality are central for your work. What is it about the practice of repetition that yields alternatives that we might understand as queer?

EF I am inspired by queer and trans theory to work with the concepts of movement, failure, refusal, changeability, and the unfinished. Terms that have compelled me to investigate different ways of working with woodcuts, where seriality and repetition have been central. Some of my series unfold by adding more cuts to the same wooden matrix between each print. *Woodbeds, brimming* (2019–) (pp. 158–198) is an example. Compositions begun in earlier works continue in the next, forging connections and collectivity, but also embracing differences between the pieces. The series is structured by repetition. I continue from a previous thread, while refusing and failing to make the same shape for an extended time. In other bodies of work like *How to spell a sound that is physical* (2014) (pp. 58–89), I use a new wooden matrix for each print and make variations on the previous composition.

I think of each work in a series as a suggestion, an attempt at the concept of trying again. No version is more final than the other. There is a sense of exploration related to Butler's thinking on gender performativity where language and repetition play a central role to the production of categorial binaries and the social implementation of gender norms. I try to work with repetition in ways that destabilize the meaning that signs and figures can carry from other contexts. Repetition can be frightening, but also used to enable openness and questions. When repeated imperfectly by hand in skew lines, layers, and grids through woodcut, the meaning and expression changes. Repetition (and difference) can enable sensitivity and insistence. But also humor. Or refusal. New tones, rhythm and poiesis can appear and represent queer feelings, desires, and relations.

LML I'm wondering if you're interested in talking about the art historical relationships of your work to, say, Agnes Martin, and other legacies of abstraction and reference points you're engaging in? Your *All models are wrong, some are useful* (2017–2020) (pp. 126–143, 226–230), reminds me of Lygia Clark as well. I think about abstraction as a really loaded historical language, so I'd love to hear more about your queer attachment (or love-hate relationship, as you put it last time we spoke) with geometric abstraction especially, but also abstraction in general. How and why are abstract visual languages and models useful for you as a queer artist/an artist invested in queer politics? How might they also remain problematic, in ways we can't resolve?

EF I think in some ways my strongest queer attachments are to queer and trans theory. The notion of failure according to Jack Halberstam inspired me early on to explore chaotic ways of knowing and unknowing, and to think about queerness as a position or space from which to question and refuse, rather than to seek inclusion or explain: to turn the gaze away from the marginalized body, and instead to look critically at conventional norms and structures. Queer and trans theory has given me primary inspiration to develop a practice where methods, processes, and materials are closely connected to political content.

My work often stages a collision with organizing systems and metaphors like the closet in *A closet does not connect under the bed* (2016) (pp. 100–123), the family tree in *I navigate in collisions* (2014–2015) (pp. 41–57), and gender binaries in *Clit-dick Register* (2013–2014) (pp. 4–27). I have found abstraction to be an alluring and innate visual language to represent queerness in alternative or extended ways.

Having said that, I feel a humble and broad connection to many art historical practices, particularly those that explore a queer and feminist approach to abstraction, form, and materiality. Agnes Martin's mode of combining contrasts of tight lines and systems with a sensibility, intimacy, and softness is powerful and dragging. The presence of the process, material qualities, and relationships between her works has always moved me.

My relationship to geometry is ambivalent. Through its strict formal language, geometry has historically dictated standards for bodies and their relationships to space and distance. I work with geometry through freehand drawing and woodcuts. The imprecision and repetition enter into a dialogue with the stringency and coherence of geometry. It's a way to make the geometry my own. In this way, the signs can also apply to moods, rhythms, breaks, and failures.

Abstract artwork touches me. Through materiality, form, spatiality, and color, abstraction addresses desire, emotion, and critique in ways that push us to think beyond simplified binaries. Abstraction can be an exploration of more open, chaotic, and poetic ways of representing not only a body, but also languages, intimacies, and relations.

You asked about the limitations of abstraction. The risk that artworks are understood relatively from person to person due to art historical legacies of abstraction, so political aspects can be disregarded, is something I think about often. Titles play an important role in my own way of underlining queer references and connections. Abstraction is not an alternative to direct representation for LGBTIQ+ politics. It can work as an addition. Visibility is important for movements and alliances. Abstract art can be the most powerful and touching, but it can also be overlooked. References can be very internal, but maybe that is an inevitability. Art requires curiosity and investment from viewers. For me, there is so much to unpack in abstraction as a strategy that the alluring aspects outweigh its risks and limitations.

LML I would agree that abstraction and representation need not be in opposition, and also that every aesthetic language will have its potentials and its limits. The contingencies of spectatorship, the mutability of looks, are always at play—abstraction just makes this all the more apparent. You reminded me of what Barbara Hammer wrote in her essay on “The Politics of Abstraction,” that abstraction insists on making the viewer active, and also opening a space for play.<sup>1</sup> It seems like abstraction is helping you to explore politics in different registers; for example, that the tension between your freehand exploration of form within a strict geometric system can act as a critique of closed binary systems while also opening space for something else to happen. I love that in some of your prints, little gestures seem to escape the central pattern or structure and wander off on their own to the edges of the page. You were already talking about the importance of queer failure and embracing a kind of chaos, so I wonder about the role that precarity, ephemerality, and intuitive process play in your work (both in terms of your making and how you think about the viewer's encounter). I think you've been circling around this already, but how and why is indeterminacy important in your work?

EF Politics in different registers is a fine formulation. Precarity, ephemerality, and intuitive process are

terms I value as points of orientation for my own work. They can point to vulnerability, gaps, complexities, and lived experience in relation to a specific concern. I test many variables within a frame or direction I give myself. I never work by intuition only, nor by strict concept alone, but prefer the combination of having a framework or starting point and moving playfully forward, often rubbing against the scaffolding. Some viewers read queer references immediately in my work, while others make more open readings about systems, language, and deviance. My own reflections and process drives the work, though I do think about how my interests and decisions communicate on many levels.

Indeterminacy is interesting in relation to abstraction and queerness. Indeterminable figures, signs, and visuals can express a gap or necessary complexity within an existing language and broader public mindset. Perhaps indeterminacy functions as an active term for me also. Like talking about queering something, it can be part of a work process to make something indeterminable, as a process of change, or a battle of ownership. I can use recognizable figures and signs in my works, but through abstraction and queering, the recognizable can be made insecure, thus questioning the stability of a figure and its usual context—similar to a process of destabilization mentioned earlier. Conditions and status of gender, sexuality, and relationships are often expected to be determined and clarified. Organizing structures are generally based on limiting discourse, definitions, and categorizations that link to a matrix with particular expectations for particular bodies. I think that indeterminacy can critically engage with such a matrix and help us to invent more open views of the body, gender roles, and beyond.

LML I'm wondering, too, about your play with systems of language, or seemingly linguistic signs that also perform a drag on language through the kind of instability you were just talking about. Do you think of your work as a text, and if so, what kind of text is it? How does it operate? And I'm also wondering, how do you arrive at the sign systems that you're using? That is, are there particular signs that you find most generative or more open to play with?

EF Many of my woodcuts mimic and reference text, words, and conversations. Dialogues move between the plates and the works in each series. It is exciting to investigate how language takes shape, in addition to where and how linguistic similarities arise and fall short. The power of language and the language of power, struggles over meanings, and the body's own language are respective preoccupations for me. It is through abstraction that I negotiate, dismantle, and challenge polarizing and biased communication.

In many of my works, the text may be an invitation into images, spaces, and conversations. Self-reflexive in form, these modes of ill/legibility address questions of community and formations of meaning, in addition to the stuff that falls through the cracks of language. My works *Clit-dick Register* and *Arguments for desire* (2013–2018) (pp. 28–39), for instance, are based on language and signs from the body. Clit-dicks, like U's, tongues, or genitalia, operate as texts and poetic images that explore communication about gender through linguistic and pictorial abstraction. The asterisk star, known as a sign on the keyboard referring to a footnote or the omission of letters or words, can be read both figuratively and abstractly, like stars and anus, creating room for new associations. It can be super banal—unpacking meaning through repetition and letting meaning grow while retaining its inherent simplicity. There is much that goes unsaid. Yet something seductive arises through the changes formed through repetition.

Typically, I am preoccupied with a field of interest before ideas for artworks come. At times I write texts often as part of researching a subject, and as a way of creating a framework for a process. Some of my writing takes on a more poetic character and fragments are incorporated into works or titles.

Gertrude Stein's writing and contributions to literature have been a great inspiration for my approach to investigating language. I admire her way of breaking with the linear narrative within a single sentence itself. Her works contain an enormous amount of humor and play with grammar, in addition to the construction and breakdown of composition and narrative.

My series *How to spell a sound that is physical* was based on frustration and recognition surrounding

the challenge of communicating coherently from A-Z. The crooked lines that cross and fail linearity became a way to investigate how language and narrative can work in different directions simultaneously. On each piece of paper, I first wrote different pieces of text about navigating language with a pencil and then printed them over with the woodcuts, so that it was completely random where the written text hit or didn't hit the lines from the woodcuts. The printing colors have a great deal of transparency in them, so that the pencil can be sensed or read through the print. Inspired by Stein's work, it is a series that tries to depict the possibilities and limitations of language and to express what language can feel like.

In *Woodbeds, brimming*, basic geometric shapes act as a series of letters. Exploring their inherent rigidity and reference to mathematics and architecture, I engage these figures through woodcuts in a direction where presence and instability can enter. In *All models are wrong, some are useful* woodcut prints depict unfolded polyhedrons in imprecise hand-drawings. The prints relate to knotty and uneven concrete sculptures that are based on the blueprints of woodcut graphics. The series resembles a parody of a didactic demonstration, underscoring the relationship between geometric ideals and material realization, model and reality, formula and form, and the body and language.

I often follow a desire to collide, obstruct, and play with the signs I want to challenge. Cracks, openings and flirtations can make room for queerness and other ways of talking about quirky, sometimes indefinable desires or dreams.

LML The way you're pressing at the limits and excesses of language points to the interpretive challenge posed by abstraction, and I appreciate how you make that part of the work by exploring language and linguistic codes in relation to form. In this way, you seem to be combining queer and trans thinking with conceptual approaches to information systems—theoretical discourses that can be felt in and through form.

I'm thinking especially about your works like *A closet does not connect under the bed; All models are wrong, some are useful; or How to spell a sound that is physical*, where the prints appear in strained relation to sculptural objects in the space. So then, we attempt to read the three-dimensional geometric structures in relation to the images that appear like diagrams—you were just describing the strained relationship between model and reality, or perhaps body and language. Now I'm wondering about the affective register of this, because one might see this more minimal and conceptual approach as austere and even cold; and yet, you're thinking about bodies and desires. Could you speak more to the relationships between the sculptures and prints, as well as the embodied relationship we have to them and the ways we might feel with them in space? What is generative about exploring your core aesthetic concerns across these different spatial registers?

EF In *All models are wrong, some are useful*, the prints and sculptures are directly and conceptually connected: lines, mistakes, and errors mirror each other. While both the print series *A closet does not connect under the bed* and the concrete installation *Untitled* (2016) (pp. 210–214) investigate the closet as an object as well as a metaphor, the relationship between the two bodies of works is less obvious. The prints depict abstracted construction drawings with different cabinet parts. There is no start, direction, or end to them. The installation *Untitled* consists of casts of twelve different interiors and exteriors of closets that are presented as fragments on the floor. While it might seem as though these parts form a single coherent object, neither the print series nor the installation function, together or separately, as instructions or models that form a functional closet.

The works address the metaphor of the closet which has an important but problematic role in queer history. The term "in the closet" is often used to describe that one is hiding, covering, or lying about one's sexuality and gender, in contrast to the societal norm of gendered and sexual transparency. On the other hand, the closet can also be thought of as a hideaway and temporary safe place in contexts where deviation from the norm is dangerous. However even in contexts where being LGBTIQ+ is somewhat accepted, we must also carry this furniture with us, ready to shoulder the burden of justifying, explaining, or correcting assumptions about our identities

endlessly. I aimed to reflect on and question dominating constructions of normativity, in addition to the speech acts related to the closet metaphors, by literally working and reworking the form and function of a closet as a material object. In my casts and prints I do not directly represent or visualize queer bodies. I am instead interested in investigating the language and images that shape the construction of bodies. My focus on fragments and material imprints can hopefully provide an opening for another affective register in the work.

My first concrete installation was *Manoeuvring Overload* (2014) (pp. 206–209). I had made the *How to spell a sound that is physical* print series, and my thought was to cast some heavy and silly frames in concrete for them, that should lie on the floor. I made the outer dimensions of the casting frames according to measurements from a Danish standard pavement tile, 62.5 x 80 cm, and a smaller inner frame, so that the concrete work itself became an outline. Due to my lack of experience, the casting frames I used were too thin, causing the heavy concrete to push the frames to the sides. The sculpture became convex and crooked, a pleasant surprise that reflected my interest in failure. I continued this way, and made floor works from the errant tiles, *Manoeuvring Overload*. Similar to woodcut printing, errors that emerge during concrete casting become part of the object. If you want to change something, you must start again. Concrete is an industrial product used for the construction of buildings, formations intended for bodies to inhabit and to be enclosed within. I am interested in exploring concrete through processes in which its formal quirkiness and deviations connect to aspects of queerness, thus also investigating how identities are molded and constructed by material and spatial properties.

In addition to experimenting with concrete, in Danish there is a dated term for a masculine lesbian who is not deemed attractive according to the heteronormative male gaze, a “concrete lesbian” directly translated. In 2014, the year the work was made, this figure was shamed for her masculine appearance. Though the implications have changed by now, the (in)visibility that this figure can experience in a larger public, as well as the sex appeal she can represent in queer environments, interests me. Using this material is also a small queer gesture, and a reference to a mocked figure whom I appreciate.

LML I like this method of using casting to investigate social constructions and deviations in a material way. I get the sense that moving through the spaces with these concrete sculptures involves a maneuvering that makes us feel disoriented in relation to this deconstruction you’re talking about. We would try, and fail, to visually construct a coherent structure out of these parts and the prints that seem like diagrams but don’t work that way—so the failure that is so important to your process is also registering from the viewer’s perspective.

In exploring both the interiors and exteriors of the closet as object, and thinking about this incredible formulation of the “concrete lesbian,” you’re pointing to the ways it is assumed that inside and outside will always align, when it comes to identity categories generally and especially those created to contain us. Your work both points to the representational frames used to define queer and trans bodies, and gestures toward their undoing—we might think here with Jack Halberstam’s take on architecture in relation to signifying systems in “Unbuilding Gender.”<sup>2</sup> In past art historical writing, there have been some problematic ways of approaching abstraction as though it were a kind of closet, a covering-over of difference, when it has historically been used by queer artists. Do you think there is something particularly queer about using certain models (such as the geometry of the closet) against their own logic? Or a political strategy of bringing something into visibility that was otherwise under the surface, in order to dismantle it? Can you say more about the relationship between visibility and invisibility?

EF With the use of abstraction as a visual strategy, the issues between visibility and invisibility are central. I have always found it difficult to directly represent trans and queerness. They are capacious terms used in many different ways, and visibility is much more than the body.

For me, visibility and invisibility can also be understood through the recognizable and the unrecognizable. Through the use of abstraction I can question gender in a complex way, as embodied and something that cannot be entirely legible through appearance. Visibility and

invisibility can relate to specific questions such as “which words are available to us?” and more abstract questions like “what is visible and how is visibility expressed?” Matters of in/visibility also point to how desires for queer relationships can be visible to some and not to others. Visual queer codes and signs, such as the handkerchief code, nail polish, earrings, etc. have been used to create internal visibility and initiation. I guess many of us still navigate partly through visual cues in public. Codes and appearances also point to how abstraction—through form, colors, and materials—often carries references and meaning in artworks.

Creating visibility around an object such as the closet or an architectural structure under the surface can be a useful approach to demand space for more diverse bodily representation and queer navigation patterns.

Thinking of queer as a verb, rather than a noun, is useful. My practice is largely grounded in unmaking, and rebuilding, to use Halberstam’s excellent terminology. I don’t think we are at all finished with tearing down and transforming all of the rigid establishments in language, architecture, legislation, and beyond.

## Enotes

1 Barbara Hammer, “The Politics of Abstraction” in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, eds. Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar & John Greyson (New York: Routledge, 1993), 70–75.

2 Jack Halberstam, “Unbuilding Gender: Trans\* Anarchitectures In and Beyond the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark,” *Places Journal*, October 2018.