

# Flags of Freedom

Mette  
Winckelmann

Contemporary Art  
16.04.2021 – 09.06.2021

Curator  
Jérôme Sans

Le Bicolore



**My language is a kind  
of visual activism.**

– Mette Winckelmann

# Introduction

For her first solo exhibition in France, Mette Winckelmann has deployed the full range of her abstract, conceptual vocabulary to deliver a veritable exhibition-manifesto, joining in the ongoing conversation on gender equity and issues of identity in a society where social and interpersonal bonds have become increasingly fluid.

FLAGS OF FREEDOM shines a spotlight on the troubled history of discrimination by repurposing supposedly feminine techniques like sewing, embroidery and patchwork so as to offer a counter-history of abstraction geared to gender equality and restoring arts and crafts to their rightful place in the contemporary art world. In her paintings, fabric collages, flags, ceramics, silkscreen prints and installations, the Danish artist deconstructs and revamps the rigidly defined forms and categories of abstract art by taking a mathematical approach to dealing with space, the scale of the human body and the physicality of materials. Boundaries are pushed back, rearranged and recombined in a constantly evolving process. Drawing on a variety of cultures, traditions and social movements, the resulting artistic language, with its signals and colours, speaks to the transformations currently affecting the social fabric and identity. Geometry serves as a guiding thread for Mette Winckelmann, who feels that mathematics reflect the underlying patterns of a society and its laws.

“Grey” areas thus emerge as spaces for negotiation. Through a vocabulary containing endless possibilities, the artist expresses strong commitment. And she manifests that commitment by conjuring up the movements of struggle that have meaning for all those who aim to reinvent the world or take a stand in it.



*30.000.000 Lesbians, 2009*  
Fabric banner, 190 x 190 cm  
Photo : Anders Sune Berg

# Mette Winckelmann

Interviewed by  
Jérôme Sans (2020)

**Jérôme Sans:** How would you describe your work?

**Mette Winckelmann:** I would describe it as flexible and open. In my practice, I am trying to stretch formats and categories all the time. My starting point is almost always to go deep into a specific material or medium in order to probe its properties and possibilities. I am trying to push beyond the expectations and limitations tied to a specific material and its traditional use, to allow it to perform new meanings.

**JS:** Your paintings are based on systematic combinations, shapes and colours that imitate or use visual techniques and structures drawn from the craft traditions of various cultures. How did you come up with this idea of the grid as a compositional system? The grid is often a metaphor of society's structure and rules, but you use the grid to push, challenge or even reverse it...

**MW:** Yes. First and foremost, I use the grid as a starting point to navigate the world. It helps me determine scale and my own position in relation to the objects and subjects I am exploring. When I start a work, it is very important for me to know where it starts and where it stops. In other words, where are its limits. I always begin a work by dividing the surface area into halves, thirds

and quarters. I proceed in the same way when I make commissioned murals for specific buildings, a cover for a book, a painting or drawing, or works for an exhibition space. I immediately take my ruler and divide the space; only then I do feel comfortable and can start thinking in and with the space. I adhere to these self-made rules, because for me systems are also about belonging, the longing to fit in, feel safe within a given structure, to feel your place in the bigger scheme of things. It is existential, really. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that rules, structures and norms often exclude diversity and discourage deviations and transformation. This is why it is important for me to trigger the grid and push its limits.

**JS:** In your work, geometry and mathematical systems are related to the human body and its measurements. Why?

**MW:** Geometry is embedded in the human body. Symmetry, measurements, balance, size, scale. Geometry and mathematics relate to the need to map, define and understand the individual vis-à-vis the collective, and the distances between them. Geometry is a way to define society or what is outside our body. At the same time, geometry alludes to the inner body. All concrete measurements, like the number of fingers, toes or

teeth, contain irregularities that confirm we are dealing with organic, living matter undergoing change.

**JS:** Several of your works consist of flags. What does flag represent to you: an object, a symbol?

**MW:** Often flags are made up of clearly defined, minimalist shapes of colour, which make them easy to identify from a distance and therefore also effective as symbols of identity, giving rise to feelings of both unity and division. By raising a flag, a group of people can declare: “We are all connected because of this flag,” and in doing so automatically exclude anything or anyone considered as being “other.” A flag is a sign, a clear visual statement and therefore an impactful tool of communication. I like that. At the same time the rules, ideas and traditions tied to flags are begging to be challenged and somehow disturbed in the artistic process. For the show at the Maison du Danemark, I am making flags of freedom, which are all in a state of transition, repeating patterns yet in the process of becoming something new.

**JS:** What role does colour play in your work, especially red, white and black? Red is often used as a forbidding sign. It recalls the history of revolutions, for example. Is it a way to deal with the other side of society and of the world itself?

**MW:** Colour is a topic I could go on and on about! In the series *Come Undone* (2016), for example, my starting point was red, black and white as pure colours. The first painting is black only. In the next I've added white. Then in the next, red. As I continued the series, I began mixing the three colours. Step by step, we go from colours that are clear contrast to colours that relate differently now that they are no longer binaries or contrasts [...] In my work, I try to always be conscious of the fact that working with colours is working with references, associations, feelings, senses. You are activating a certain atmosphere or ambiance, similar to the way a chord can fill a room and activates an emotional register in a listener. This is also what made me more interested in the "colours in-between." Unlike specific primary colours that are often assertive and declarative, in-between colours are less locked and can therefore activate our senses in new and unexpected ways. There is more room for negotiation.

**JS:** There is an underlying strand of feminist politics in your work. Is this perhaps a way to contribute to the writing of a counter-history to abstraction, which has so often devalued or excluded women artists and their work?

**MW:** The more inclusive and political notion of abstraction is certainly important to me. Geometry and colours aren't just free to be formal. Colours and shapes cannot be sublime or perfect in a neutral way. They are not fixed in terms of their meaning. For me this flexibility is positive. At any historical moment, abstraction depends on the gaze, who is looking and what associations they bring to it. Every form, every colour has a lot of connotations and references. It's one of my interests and something I've explored a lot so far: what role is colour performing in a space, public or private? What kind of impact is it having on an individual as you enter that space?

**JS:** How do you feel about the interaction between art, politics and activism? Even if it is not obvious at a first glance, your work is activist.

**MW:** Yes, activism is a basis for my work. I like to discuss important issues but I am not sure that I share the same language as people since I am more visual than verbal. You could call it visual activism.

*Flags of Freedom, 2021*  
Textile, 620 x 30 cm  
Photo : Anne Mie Dreves





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– Mette Winckelmann



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# Mette Winckelmann

Mette Winckelmann is a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, Slovakia (1996-1997), and of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (1997-2003). Her artistic practice involves conceptually treating tactile materials in ways that turn the spirit and techniques associated with traditional crafts into aesthetic statements in motion. Her work ranges from large-scale adornment of public facilities to ephemeral installations, and from rearrangement of space to discrete objects like textile prints, canvas paintings and ceramics.

In 2019, the Danish Arts Foundation (Statens Kunstfond) awarded Winckelmann a three-year grant. Her work has been featured at such venues as the National Gallery of Denmark, the Malmö Museum of Art, in Sweden, and FRAC Auvergne, a regional fund for contemporary art in France.

# Jérôme Sans

Jérôme Sans is a curator, artistic director and head of institutions who has gained international renown for his idiosyncratic, pioneering approach to how contemporary art should be presented, discussed and exhibited. He was the co-founder and co-director of Palais de Tokyo in Paris, before switching his focus to China as director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing (UCCA). Alongside his activity as a writer, he co-founded the French cultural magazine *L'Officiel Art*, serving as creative director and editor-in-chief, and worked with the Starwood group on a cultural hospitality initiative with Le Meridien. His key international exhibitions include the Taipei Biennial (2000), the Lyon Biennial (2005), Li Qing at the Prada Foundation's Prada Rong Zhai (2019) in Shanghai, Pascale Marthine Tayou at the Fondation Clément in Martinique and Erwin Wurm at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2020). He is involved as artistic director in several significant urban development projects and in the design of new contemporary cultural institutions worldwide.

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