

# ROMAN PFEFFER | THINKING THINGS THROUGH

[Measuring]

1. “**Original sensory meaning**, determining something by measuring . . .”

JACOB UND WILHELM GRIMM I DEUTSCHES WÖRTERBUCH I LEIPZIG 1854-1961.

Rolled up and folded in: systems of measurement from different epochs and cultural spaces have been assembled in Roman Pfeffer’s studio. What they have in common are calibrations for “metres” or “inches”. Only in use do they reveal their potential: taking measurements, relating things to one another – sometimes also to himself – and discovering parameters in the diversity of the world as we find it, these activities have fascinated Pfeffer from very early on. He alternates between the “sensual” grasping of something concrete, the precision of measuring, and the abstraction of comparison. This approach seems scientific, and occasionally Pfeffer also chooses the presentation format of a scientific finding for his work: this particularly applies to the work » $30m = 0.387m$ .« (2011). It is part of a series of works whose titles simulate a scientific equation and consists of two equally large, almost quadratic fields measuring 62.5 x 61.9 cm. While the left field is formed by strips of a common, dark, 30 m industrial tape measure laid exactly over one another, the right-hand field is a surface painted evenly with blackboard paint. Associations with school blackboards as the medium of authoritarian teaching and science are evoked. Here things are conceived and prescribed in advance. And thus on the right Roman Pfeffer has entered the measurement that is calculated from the factors of height and width of the surface. In this way it becomes evident that the surface that a 30-m-long tape measure covers on the left-hand side corresponds to an area of 0.387 sq.m on the right-hand side. This “finding” is unsettling; the equation is impossible, because of the differing units of measurement, and – robbed of its actual use value – the instrument for measuring length itself becomes the area. Pfeffer thereby shows that scales are relative settings. Only the experienced fact of having two fields of equal size in front of one’s eyes remains undisputed. This is the actual parameter and the observers’ dilemma. Because they are thrown back and forth between image and text, between the subjectively-visually experienced sameness and the disparity perceived in reading, which additionally is cloaked in scientific language. The concept artist Roman Pfeffer addresses and deconstructs the seemingly objective and universal validity of scales. And yet more: even such a positivistic science, which determines what is to be measured unquestionably, is thereby put to the test.

In their characteristic of continuing themselves regularly, measuring systems offer a device to develop imaginary models of bodies and spaces in surfaces. Paolo Uccello (1397-1475), in whose Florentine surroundings central perspective was developed, could not resist this fascination. And thus, using the new art of representation, he extended the circle from the Platonic bodies that had been passed down from antiquity into another ideal stereometric form. Initially it remained only a drawn and painted “iconic body”, a theoretical body that – in analogy to the usual headwear of the period – contemporaries called a “mazzocchio” (hair torus). However, it was rather its circular frame that inspired Uccello’s construction. This concerns a ring-shaped, mathematically regular polyhedron. Its longitudinal section usually consisted of a tricontadigon (a polygon with thirty-two equilateral angles), its cross-section was a vertical octagon on the central axis. The surface of this polyhedron was split into 256 facets.

While Uccello integrated the mazzocchio into his paintings as an apparently natural headdress, Roman Pfeffer has decontextualised this product of intellectual fantasy and released the abstract idea behind it. Since 2013 he has been lending the theoretical body a material manifestation in ever new variants that extend far beyond the appropriation through a simple replica. His work [»Mazzocchio measured« \(2013\)](#) assumes a key function here. In creating this bravura handicraft work Pfeffer reduced the longitudinal section of the polyhedron made out of MDF to a hexagon. The now 128 facets in which the body consisting of 16 equal members opens itself to the space are laid out like a chess board, with dark, inch tape measures alternating with light, endless metre tape measures. In various other sculptural variations, Mazzocchio twisted, Pfeffer finally breaks up the circular formation of the mazzocchio and allows it to relate to its surroundings in all directions. Particularly the dark, single-Paint versions of the mazzocchio develop their own physicality through the multiple refractions of light in the prismatic surface.

In his latest work, [»Swip« \(2017\)](#), Pfeffer returns to the two-dimensional “theory” of the mazzocchio. Swip is based on the construction drawing of just such a 16-part and in cross-section eight-sided body, with the construction lines appearing in white on a black background. Pfeffer transfers this “model” to a 32-part large format made of individual 32 x 32 cm quadratic canvas panels finished to the highest perfection. They are arranged over one another in four rows of eight units, primed with dark gesso and rolled; the white construction lines were applied with a paint brush. The whole can only be taken in from a distance. As a result of the fragmentation, a clear number of white lines appear on the individual panels. In their reduction and concision these linear constructions assume the character of signs, and all the more so when Pfeffer disrupts the constructive context through a small coup de main: in contrast to the usual direction of reading in Europe, he turns half of the panels to the left by 90 degrees on their own axis and thereby simultaneously severs the construction lines from their implied vanishing point. The theoretical body dissolves, and the viewer, who just thought they could recognise the mazzocchio, stands in front of an image never seen before, whose symbols they do not know how to read. But the ordered multipartite nature and the proportionality of the individual parts to the whole remains. A new body that still has to be determined may have emerged. At the end the title, Swip, thus turns into an imperative that demands the further reordering of the 32 panels. In Pfeffer’s work, titles are always more than descriptive. They are essential components and with their poetry and verbal power they impact on the visual perception: with the challengee “swip”, Roman Pfeffer confronts us with a visual device that stimulates the search for a meaningful order. One’s own rationality is here experienced as a subjective and subjectively accountable process. Apparently objective laws – such as the perspectival representation principle – lose their natural validity. Rather, the only valid scale for measuring the world is the self-reflexive subject that is calibrated to its own experience and that at the same time is constantly testing it.

This circular conclusion can hardly be more fittingly expressed than in the work, [»Ich als Kreis« \[Myself as a Circle\] \(2017\)](#): in this highly complex handicraft work, Roman Pfeffer made his own body length into a parameter that he bends into a circle – in the form of a normal metric wooden rule. Without beginning or end, however, the “I” becomes a circumference and thereby also a parameter that does not permit itself to be measured by other references.

It is this extremely subtle approach to things and at the same time the occasionally mischievous play with their expected use value that turns the works of the artist philosopher Roman Pfeffer into virtuoso showpieces of the highest aesthetic as well as poetic intensity. Their aim is the criticism of rationality.

[Heidrun Rosenberg, April 2017] [HR APRIL 2017]