

Josef Felix Müller, *Ohne Titel* (1983)

in: *Das schwache Geschlecht. Neue Mannsbilder in der Kunst*, Kat. Ausst. Kunstmuseum Bern, hrsg. v. Kunstmuseum Bern und Kathleen Bühler, dt./engl., Bern 2013, S. 139-141.

Ohne Titel (Untitled, 1983) is one of the earliest works that Josef Felix Müller (born in 1955) created after turning to wood sculpture at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties. As is also the case in his previous paintings, the human figure assumes a central position in Müller's sculptures. The turn to the body was based on the disengagement from "intellectual" art as it was represented, for example, in Conceptual Art. With reference to this, *Ohne Titel* takes up a special position: as one of the few sculptures, it (still) does not present a body that— notwithstanding frequent mutilations—can be recognized as a human likeness. Here, Müller's later ever-recurring theme of fragmentation already undergoes its most radical realization. With a degree of abstraction that is unusual for Müller, it is possible to make out hands as well as intimations of female and male genitals. A phallus-like stem seems to rise from a vagina impregnated with red paint, whereby it does not become clear whether what is concerned here is an act of violence or an erotic union. The function of the hands is also difficult to classify. They cling to the phallus in a parasitic manner—but are they intervening or caressing? Do they belong to the female sex by virtue of being painted in the same way or not? This ambivalence in perception is reflected in the materiality of the sculpture. The surface structure is unsanded and crudely sealed as in the case of all of his early wood sculptures. It creates an impression of being ungentle and correspondingly unfeeling. At the same time, in terms of haptics, it is nonetheless possible to recognize a sensual handling of the material by the artist, which here is intended to mean nothing else than the fact that Müller has a feeling for the material. The admittedly crude working technique with a buzz saw and with chisels in a second step makes it possible for him to experience the character of the wood – to feel in which cut it better yields or in which direction the grain runs. Here, the destructive quality also reveals its creative potential. In *Ohne Titel*, this back and forth between act of violence and caress finds its counterpart with respect to content. Carried over to the relationship between the sexes it means that even equality, when actively practiced, is always again confronted with the tilting moment of reciprocal tests of strength, of power struggles and dependencies. The difficulty here does not lie in a general impotence but rather in overcoming the perpetual delimitation of the respective other, which does not support but instead impedes living on equal terms. It is quite likely that Müller chose a high degree of abstraction for *Ohne Titel* in order to deliberately make impossible an unambiguous classification and differentiation of the individual body parts: "But the vision

lies in the wholeness, . . . in the androgynous being. Felix's dream of a neutral gender."¹
(Sarah Merten)

Notes

1 Andrea Hofmann, "Zurück zum Menschen: Über das Werk von Josef Felix Müller," in *Josef Felix Müller*, exh. cat. Museum zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen (St. Gallen, 1995), p. 11. The quote makes reference to Josef Felix Müller, "Ein fiktives Gespräch zwischen Josef und Felix," in *Butter Milch Seife* (St. Gallen, 1989).