

Vulnerable State

Jens Kothe



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„The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own.

The body has its invariably public dimension.“

(Judith Butler: Gefährdetes Leben)

The exhibition *Vulnerable State* by Jens Kothe offers a clever commentary on the vulnerability of the human body, a much-discussed topic in recent years. With his impressive approach, the artist shows the intimacy inherent in vulnerability, through which pain and pleasure are revealed to be two sides of the same coin.

Skin is at the very center of his exploration. The organ is the most visible part of the human body and surrounds it like armor, protecting and concealing what is underneath. It is a border phenomenon that not only separates the outer and inner world but at the time acts as a transmitter of our inner state of mind. Whether we like it or not, no organ expresses our otherwise hidden emotional states such as health, illness, stress, excitement or fear so clearly.

Three large-format close-ups of skin make up the core of the exhibition. The inconspicuous centerpiece is the work **Outer Skin. Internal Tracks**, which in its uniformity can be read as a quasi "normal" state of the skin. Around it, the works **Excitation** and **Inner Crack** form the exhibition's thematic poles of injury and excitement. In contrast to **Outer Skin. Internal Tracks**, these two works reveal, through different types of fractures, the dimensions hidden behind the façade of the human condition.

The photograph **Excitation** unfolds the exhibition's first thematic dimension. On display is an armpit that transforms into an unidentifiable cleft, tempting the viewer to peer inside and sink into it. It toys with what is hidden, building up a sensual tension that oscillates between lust and desire as well as privacy and intimacy. This simultaneity is embodied further by a corresponding sculptural representation of a sexual organ - possibly the most arousing and intimate part of the human body. The special thing about it: The sculpture eludes sexual categorization. It remains an indifferent entity and thus stands for sex as such. Its body is divided like a sphinx: the lower part in the shape of a vulva turns into an oversized clitoris, which is suddenly reminiscent of a penis. The **Basic Want**

installation picks up on this chain of associations. The name says it all: on display is a long wand resembling the wands of droids, at the end of which is a massage wand of the same name designed by the Japanese company Hitachi in 1968. The “magic wand“ has entered cultural memory as a vibrator. Perhaps more than any other sex toy, it symbolized the sexual liberation and self-determination of women. Here too, however, the act of masturbation points to an implied vulnerability: after all, there are few situations in which we are as vulnerable as when we are caught in the state of maximum arousal.

Inner Crack also plays with a fascination of the unknown - albeit under entirely different circumstances. The second dimension of the exhibition comes to the fore in this work. In it, the unity of a homogeneous color surface is split open like a wound in the skin. Wounds open the split between inside and outside, thereby literally carving a view into a person’s interior. They are a direct expression of human vulnerability. At the same time, they are regions of deeply intimate experience: in pain, each of us is completely alone. Paradoxically, the sacredness of life is expressed in the life-negating power of pain. By directly pointing to a finite nature, the wound calls for a performative ethic of care, nurturing and healing.

Anyone who is injured stands on shaky legs and requires support - like the sculpture **Mobile Stand II**. The figure is reminiscent of the famous giant spiders by Louise Bourgeois. In contrast to the firm and frightening stance of the spiders, the sculpture holds a fragile stance despite its imposing appearance: if it were not for the small metal rods between its legs, it could likely collapse at any point in time. In his installation **High Table, Walk**, Kothe continues to toy with the ambiguities between strength and fragility. Carried by the sculpture **Horse’s Neck**, a scalped horse’s neck, and several stilts, it winds like a snake through the exhibition space at a height of 2.6 meters. From its underside hang three lifeless hands showing a sequence of a hand closing into a fist. This gesture established itself during the coronavirus pandemic as a silent cry for help, intended to silently draw attention during Zoom meetings to domestic and sexualised violence. In some respects, the installation proves to be a counterpart to **Basic Wants** Although the theme of vulnerability in the private sphere is once again addressed here, it is from an entirely different perspective: instead of lust and liberation, the work expresses patriarchal oppression, violence and pain, which are part of the sad reality of life for many women around the world. In keeping with this, every vibration in the room causes the lifeless bodies to tremble.

Kothe’s exhibition cleverly and sensitively illustrates the proximity of fragility, vulnerability and pain with intimacy, lust and sexuality. It illustrates how nuances can tip situations in one direction or the other. In this sense, the exhibition is a call for sensitivity: because in all people, without exception, there is a vulnerable core hidden behind the protective façade.











