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Bringing Into Questions the Results: Thomas Schütte's Sculpture

Andrea Bellini

Dinner with Thomas Schütte is always a challenging and intriguing experience. An imperious talker, he loves contradicting everyone, and at times even himself. Whatever you may think or say, the German artist will always find it interesting to enter into a head-on collision with what you are saying, even if it means he – quite consciously – finds himself defending the indefensible. It is not just that he enjoys provocation, but rather a natural tendency of his to feel he is somehow “different” and thus, instinctively, opposed to whatever you might be saying.¹ I say this not because I am particularly fond of anecdotes but because this “tension” of his seems to be the real driving force not only behind his normal behaviour but also, inevitably, behind his creative work. From this point of view, it could be said that Schütte's art is the result of his constant bringing into question the results he obtains and a direct consequence of his desire never to repeat himself but always to start out from a sort of ground zero.

Sculpture is the paradigmatic place of this “surprise inventiveness” of his,² of his extraordinary wealth of imagination. One need only consider the distance that separates his first figurative sculptures – little silhouettes that the artist placed in architectural models to give an idea of the scale – from the structural and sculptural awareness of the works he has made over past fifteen years. How has this shift come about? How does Schütte go from placing simple *Star Wars* toys in his models³ to making bronze statues four metres tall? What line of thought took the artist from an almost amateurish approach that was sceptical about sculpture to an intense dialogue – as we see in the case of the *Frauen* series – with the sculptural tradition of early twentieth-century Europe?

The whole story actually begins with a paradox: Schütte started to devote himself to sculpture by denying it. The little *Mann im Matsch* figure⁴ of 1982, which marked his debut as a sculptor, can be considered as a sort of monument to the impossibility of sculpture. It is a small wax figure made for an architectural model which, as the artist himself says, could not stand up on its own, so he fused it into its base up to the level of the knees. Schütte sees this little figure, which is held in by its own material and is thus incapable of moving forward, as a sort of allegory of his own sculptural process⁵ and, in more general terms, of the failure of Modernism⁶ and of its utopia based on an idea of history's constant progress. A state of deadlock, both historical and personal, within which even errors can be justified in allegorical terms, along with the idea of sculpture as an amateurish practice and as a place for experimentation and bricolage. Take, for example, the two busts *Mann und Frau* (1986) in wood and plaster, or the polystyrene sculpture dedicated to Alain Colas (1989), which is modelled in a rough-and-ready manner almost as though it were unfinished. The artist thus takes upon himself the question of the impossibility of figurative sculpture and the sense of deadlock in modernist culture, in an attempt to find a solution in free, original ways, in terms of both the technique and the materials he uses, in order to avoid any academic inducements. During the course of two decades he has passed from sculpture as hypothesis, model and bricolage to a sculptural

language that makes him an heir to the great tradition of pre-modern Western sculpture, pointing to a possible future for it.

This process, which is astonishing when one considers the radical nature of its premises, does not take place only in terms of purely formal mechanisms, because at the heart of his radical journey through the history of art, through sculpture, painting and architecture, there is always his need to arrive at something essential and necessary, not just from the point of view of a visual language but also in his striving for something more intimately human. The intensity of his work, which takes into consideration the great issues of existence, such as love, fear, authority, alienation, solitude and death, is unparalleled in the work of artists of his generation. It is as though Schütte were using his work to demystify reality itself, stripping it bare of the dross of everyday life and, often in the form of parodies, to talk of the universal human being and of our relationship with the present and with history. When he talks of man and – as we shall soon see – of woman, Schütte is naturally also talking about himself, and by doing so he touches the innermost chords of emotion and of the human psyche. In this sense, his entire oeuvre can also be seen as a mighty mechanism of self-analysis, and of comprehension and revelation of self.

Much of his cultural research in the 1980s plays a meta-narrative and autobiographical role, as we see, for example, in *Laufbahn* (1986-1987), a work in seven acts in which Schütte presents his entire career as an artist, from birth to death. This narrative appears in the form of various types of small sculpture, from the plywood silhouettes he had previously used in order to bring his architectural models to life through to his figures with heads in Fimo modelling clay (like our Plasticine or Play-Doh), modelled by hand and placed on little tripods. The latter, which proved to be fairly important for the later development of his work, first appeared in 1985 in *Die Bank*. These sculptures satisfy Schütte's desire to achieve a simplification of form and his need to rapidly produce characters to be arranged inside his little narrative theatres. He continued to work on these heads for a decade, giving names to some of them, as in the case of *Mohr's Life* (1988- 1999), and using them in complex narrative structures, as in *Laufbahn*, and he has gone on to bring them together in curious couples with evocative names such as *United Enemies*.

In *Mohr's Life: The Collectors* he used a little figure modelled in synthetic resins for the first time. This was later used as a model for creating the *Kleine Geister* series and for the *Große Geister* in aluminium.

In the early 1990s Schütte started work on a sculptural project that was more challenging in terms of its dimensions. Here, a singular temptation to achieve monumentality is accompanied by a consistent and constant desire to experiment with new materials. His early ceramic works, like *Obst und Gemüse* and *Schwarzen Zitronen*, paved the way for the creation of *Fremden*⁷ (1992), his first life-size group, which he made for Documenta IX. During the course of this decade, Schütte acquired ever greater confidence in his handling of materials and techniques, and he went on to produce a stunning array of works, including the various sculptures of *Kleine Geister* and *Große Geister*, figures with human features that worked on some of the forms which had already appeared in *Laufbahn* and *Mohr's Life*. The *Kleine Geister* came about as part of a joint venture with Richard Deacon for a two-man exhibition called "Them and Us" at the Lisson Gallery in London, in 1995. Working in a manner that was to become characteristic of his work, the artist based his *Große Geister* on these little models. Shiny, plastic and monumental, the *Geister* represent an extraordinary episode not just for the history of sculpture but also for the evolution of his work. They form a group of 8 works that, unlike what happened in the 1980s,⁸ tend to appear as pure apparition, with no particular historical justification, from the viewpoint of stylistic a-historicism. They are forms that appear to materialise on earth from space, as characters that reflect a total otherness with regard to the world.

The *Frauen* series, of which 18 are being shown together for the first time in the Manica Lunga at Castello di Rivoli, are on the contrary part of a centuries-old tradition in sculpture. Once again they represent a completely new plastic paradigm in the artist's oeuvre. The bronze or aluminium *Frauen* stem directly from ceramic models chosen from 120 different studies created between 1997 and 1999. Barely sketched out in rapid gestures on a relatively thick, standard rectangular ceramic base, they are twisted in on themselves almost as though tied up in knots, crouching, stretched out on the base, rising up on their knees, crossing their legs, or ending up by being violently crushed, as though by a stemroller, on their own supports.⁹ Working methodically every day on five different pieces, Schütte is constantly in search of forms he can consider "correct". Once he is satisfied with his model, he coats it in enamel, and the colour ultimately gives the study new life, with a remarkable tactile and chromatic quality. He takes a hammer or a piece of wood and smashes the pieces he considers least interesting, but they nevertheless become part of the series, for even failures can be interesting from a formal point of view. Schütte does not make 120 studies simply to find a definitive, emblematic, final form: rather, he is interested in looking at how the material can transform itself before his eyes, reaching an interesting formal result. He works directly on the material to make these variations on a theme, very rapidly and with a lightness of touch. His aim is to build up a set of possibilities, variations and forms that he can then develop later on. The idea of creating a repertory and of leaving his work fundamentally open is, as we have seen, an integral part of all his work.

This rapid, inventive and agile process of creating studies¹⁰ changes radically in the procedure he has adopted to create the *Frauen*, which are "twins" in bronze and steel. Based, as we have seen, on a ceramic study, the large *Frauen* require quite different processing times, taking from 6 to 8 months to complete. The artist starts by deciding the scale, and thus the dimensions of the sculpture, and then he creates a polystyrene replica which is covered in jute and plaster.¹¹ Once he has obtained the mould, he casts the work in bronze or aluminium¹² and then starts on the laborious task of grinding and polishing. As in the case of the *Große Geister*, creating these works requires the use of a highly qualified technical staff as well as a clear strategy and precise logistics, together with a well-drafted financial plan. These are skills that the artist has acquired over the years and that now allow him to embark on new avenues of research. Particular problems of a technical nature lead to the often rough, comic-strip-like form of the hands and feet in *Frauen*, but also the presence or lack of a head or limbs. Ever since *Mann im Matsch* (1982-1983), technical issues and the type of material¹³ both play an important part in formulating his work.

As we see in various other groups of works, it is possible to find a whole compendium of different styles in this series of sculptures. The artist himself talks explicitly about his interest in the works of Aristide Maillol (1861-1944), and in those of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. In particular, there are many analogies between the *Frauen* and some of Maillol's sculptures: we can see this in the women's poses, for example, but also in the often sensual way of rendering the skin, backs and heads. So Schütte looks to the past, in particular to tackle and solve certain technical problems, but he is also able to take inspiration from it and find formal solutions, which may vary considerably, via an entirely personal, autonomous and profoundly eclectic manner. In a manner that is fairly rare among artists in the late twentieth century, it appears that in these works Schütte intends to go back to an idea of sculpture as stage direction: in their various versions, his works aim to capture their audience and bring us into the very immediacy of the sudden plastic formulation of the works. His sculpture is more moving than moved, as in the case of so much sculpture in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Schütte seeks the power of a physical presence in space, and an expression of tectonic energy. He is attracted by the potential of matter to express the deepest emotions: with all its monumentality, his initial model, a passive object in the space of existence,

needs to turn into a coordinating element and influence from a spatial point of view. The artist makes his *Frauen*, sometimes even the same model, with different materials, in order to study the effects of perceptive mobility. Reflective and alien, aluminium alternates with bronze, with a ferrous material, coarsely corrosive, harsh and violent.

What emerges so forcefully from this group is Schütte's ability to bring about a remarkable formal and imaginative revolution,¹⁴ and not just in terms of the sculpture of the past but within his own group of works. We can see this in the way he moves from allusion to a tremulous sensual classicism, which does indeed recall Maillol, in his *Frauen* no. 5, no. 7 and no. 9, and to a contrasting, almost raw archaism in his *Frauen* no. 16, a woman who turns into a rock, like the outline of a mountain. There is a remarkable variety of attitudes, for some *Frauen* lie on the ground, crushed by a blind, arbitrary force, whether of history or of man. Here I am thinking of no. 4 and no. 8. On the other hand, others rise up, powerful and captivating, in more classic poses, as in the case of *Frauen* no. 10, no. 12 and no. 17, while others are reduced to limbless bodies and busts, as in *Frauen* no. 9 and no. 7. In *Bronzefrau* no. 6 the artist appears to use a form of volumetric interpenetration in the tradition of Futurism and Bocconi: line becomes the centrifugal and centripetal forces that give the substance its shape. This sculpture, like no. 11, appears to emerge from a science-fiction film, for it brings to mind some strange metamorphic animal, some chthonic power engaged in acquiring the bone structure of an extraterrestrial. Here we find ourselves facing an anthropology that takes as its postulate a cosmic conjunction, and union with what is alien. This may be why, as in the case of the *Große Geister*, also the *Frauen* basically appear to be living in a sort mythical age which cannot be pinned down to any historical period. This can be seen, for example, in the artist's instinctive rejection of any attempt at portraiture,¹⁵ in favour of the creation of an independent mental form, a wide-ranging elegant spatial arabesque that is unprecedented in late twentieth-century sculpture.

In Rivoli the artist is also showing two previously unseen works he did in 2011 and 2012 specifically for this exhibition: his *United Enemies* in bronze. These two sculptures, which stand four metres tall at the entrance to the museum, are giant versions of the *United Enemies*, on which the artist worked during a residency programme in Rome about twenty years ago. Inspired by the statues of Ancient Rome and, to some extent, by the political situation in Italy at the time,¹⁶ they are modelled directly in wax, recalling the deformed features of Honoré Daumier's caricatures. Schütte thus continues to go back to his own works, as though they had not fully expressed everything they had to say when they were originally created. These are open polysemous forms that interact with each other and that are prone to radical transformations. This is why, in a conversation with Martin Hentschel in 1990, the artist postulated the existence of his own works in terms of models and proposals.¹⁷ Sculptures he made in the 1980s, and which played a fundamentally micro-narrative and theatrical role, are here enlarged and isolated on a monumental scale. This shift from micro to macro and his return to forms and intuitions of the past is made possible by his constantly evolving artistic practice. The artist's studio,¹⁸ which he refers to as a "moral" place, is a sort of Renaissance studio: a place for experimenting, analysing problems, working on mistakes and, especially, for building up the necessary technological skills, which have become fundamental for his creative work.

In this project-oriented laboratory, Thomas Schütte's sculpture remains essentially receptive and open to highly original developments. Here we find ourselves facing a creative adventure that acquires the sense of an in-depth investigation into human feelings and into man's relationship with himself, with authority and power, and with history. If this is a tragic age, Thomas Schütte is surely its poet.

¹ Cf. Interview with Thomas Schütte by James Lingwood, in *Thomas Schütte* Phaidon Press, London, 1998, p. 32.

² Over the past thirty years, the artist has thus built up such a complex and wide-ranging corpus of works that it is impossible to categorise or define it in any way. In oils, water-colour, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, architectural models, wood-prints and public works, Thomas Schütte's oeuvre reflects a "surprise inventiveness", to the point that at times there appears to be an underlying discontinuity. And yet this discontinuity is only an impression, as can be seen, for example, by the fact that the artist often returns to models, ideas and solutions that may date back decades. It is as though his works had not said all they had to say in that particular period and are thus susceptible to further narratives and developments.

³ The first time that three-dimensional figures appeared in Schütte's work was in 1980, when he used little toy sculptures, Princess Leia and Mr Spock from *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, as a sort of pretext to indicate the scale of 1: 20 of his first architectural models. Later, from 1982, Schütte started populating these models with stylised silhouettes cut out of plywood, thus staging a sort of theatrical plot.

⁴ A sculpture that he worked on in subsequent versions until 1994.

⁵ Cf. on this subject, Ulrich Loock, *Thomas Schütte*, Dumont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, Cologne, 1984, p. 24.

⁶ With their faith in the idea of progress, innovation and linguistic revolution, the work of the historic avant-gardes led to a rift with the tradition of figurative sculpture and to a loss of traditional techniques and skills, and thus also in a certain manner to the impossibility of sculpture in the classic sense.

⁷ While the bodies are highly stylised, recalling the structure of large urns, the faces are more detailed, and almost realistic. Schütte made his *Fremden* during the Gulf War, a time when there were xenophobic attacks on foreigners in Germany. They carry suitcases and parcels, and their facial expressions are inscrutable and absent. As is often the case in Schütte's work in their play of cross-references these figures have an equivalent in some little figures of the early 1980s seen carrying their luggage in a bunker: they are people fleeing, in need of protection.

⁸ During the course of the 1980s, Schütte's sculptures always made reference either to his autobiography or to precise, historically established events.

⁹ Critics have often dwelled on Schütte's difficult relations with women. And indeed, as the artist himself admits in a conversation with Ulrich Loock (op. cit. p. 163), these works also reveal his complex relationship with the female universe. A relationship that may be controversial, but that Schütte still manages to keep on a poetic level, and especially on one of formal inventiveness. An example of this can be seen in a previous group of works explicitly dedicated to the world of women: here I am thinking of his women weeping in *Weinende Frauen*, on which he started work in the mid-1980s. Schütte seeks the essence, touching deep human sentiments and thus finding his way through territories left unexplored by much of the art of the second half of the twentieth century.

¹⁰ In his interview with Ulrich Loock, the artist says: "With the small *Women* it was just fun", alluding to this aspect of carefreeness and pleasure in creating his studies. Op. cit. p. 172.

¹¹ Plaster of Paris, in this case.

¹² Schütte says he started with aluminium because he was rather worried about the technical aspects of bronze. But once he had built up enough knowledge, he started using bronze as well.

¹³ *Mann im Matsch* was a small wax sculpture that could not remain upright on its support, but constantly fell over, so the artist decided to fuse it with its base at the height of the knees. This was a solution to a practical problem but also a powerful image of a man imprisoned in his pose. Cf. Interview with Thomas Schütte by James Lingwood, cit. p. 22. 14 Ibid, p. 24. Cf. with what the artist himself says, ibid. p. 28.

¹⁴ The artist himself maintains that he does not have history in mind but rather the future when he creates his sculptures, Phaidon, op. cit. p. 24. "Fundamentally, my works are almost always in the nature of a proposal. (...) They exist in the form of models". Cf. in *Thomas Schütte*, Kunsthalle, Bern; Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, Paris; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1990, p. 82.

¹⁵ Portraits with a certain degree of naturalism do however appear in Schütte's watercolours.

¹⁶ Here I refer to the "*Mani Pulite*" anti-corruption drive in the 1990s, which was characterised by a series of judicial investigations carried out at the national level into leading figures in the world of politics and in that of the economy and of the institutions. The investigations revealed a system of corruption, graft and illicit funding at the highest levels of the political and financial world, a system known as "Tangentopoli". Ministers, members of parliament, senators, businessmen and even former prime ministers were all involved.

¹⁷ “Fundamentally, my works are almost always in the nature of a proposal. [...] They exist in the form of models”. Cf. in *Thomas Schütte*, cit., p. 82.

¹⁸ The reference here is to his extended studio - in other words, both to his personal studio and to the metalworking centre where he makes his works.