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Figures in Waiting

Dieter Schwarz

After twenty years of working with models and objects that were, by definition, improvised and made from transient materials, in the late 1990s Thomas Schütte embarked on new motifs and techniques that would previously have seemed neither possible nor admissible for a member of his generation. For all at once here was someone daring to model female figures, and cast them bronze, using a technique that had been alive in art ever since antiquity up until the Second World War, after which it was largely sidelined. Compared to the model, which is so to speak a gesture towards the future when its potential will be realized, the durable characteristics of a bronze figure bespeak a finished, definitive work that is certain to endure. This new departure changed many things in Schütte's work and took it to different dimensions, but in many ways he himself stayed the same, for he was not pursuing some form of eccentricity but rather seeking support from this tradition, despite its having fallen into obscurity.

Frauen—female figures—made from bronze, aluminum, and steel, by means of a technique that is all too familiar from the history of sculpture. In the 1960s artists declared the artisanal aspect of this technique and its material obsolete and replaced them with everyday industrial processes and materials, which avoided any auratic gesture. Sculptural figures without titles, in other words, without allegorical designations raised them to another level, and thereby with a much reduced likelihood of confrontation; figures, that is intended to be speak unusually and directly to the viewer. Female figures that cannot be translated into any other language; as Schütte himself says, they are tied to the German singular and plural, *Frau* and *Frauen*, to the artist's own language, to familiar vowel sounds and consonants, to a tonality that still resonates when the viewer encounters them.

These *Frauen* first emerged from small, spontaneous ceramic figures— not *bozzetti* as such, for they were made for their own sake and not as tryouts for sculptures. Soft clay is malleable and offers little resistance to an emotional gesture, with the result that the artist's mood immediately leaves its mark on the material. From pin-ups to barely recognizable flattened shadows the figures cover a wide range of fantasies. Before they were fired, these often brutally deformed beings were finished with a glaze; this gave some the appearance of having a sugar coating, while others sank yet deeper into the mire. Schütte later selected some of these small sculptures as prototypes for larger figures. At a foundry in Düsseldorf's docklands they were recreated in Styrofoam, much larger than life. These were then further worked until in the end the mould was ready. The process of enlarging changes a figure, for many different hands are working on it, and the artist—present in the workshop—now takes on the role of someone not creating a piece on his own account in his studio but responding to the practical experience of the workers and making the necessary decisions. Questions of forming arise that can simply be ignored in the making of a small clay figure. These questions—how is a hand, a face, to be formed? what will give the figure stability and

presence?—led Schütte to some surprising solutions, which in turn gave rise to an impressively succinct sculptural language that he had never used before.

The first five bronze *Frauen* were exhibited in Schütte's 1999 exhibition at the Dia Foundation in New York, along with ceramic sketches that were presented on shelves like an extra fund of images. The following year, these first *Frauen* were installed in the grounds of a dreamy German castle; it was here that Schütte's intention to connect with traditional openair sculpture first came properly to light. Subsequently some of the *Frauen* found homes in the grounds of various museums—in Krefeld, Winterthur, Bielefeld, and elsewhere. In the meantime the total has risen to eighteen and their appearance has changed quite considerably. While the early sculptures had a lyrical air and clearly originated in the classicist figures of the early twentieth century, over the years Schütte's handling of his motif became ever more ruthless: sawn-off limbs, distortions, rolled-flat bodies, the titillating pose of a porn model—all mercilessly exposed on steel work benches. In his treatment of the materials and of the theme of the female figure, which had become such a taboo in contemporary art, a whole array of ambivalent feelings broke through ever more powerfully—attraction and aggression, repulsion and fascination—all embedded in a form that no longer complied with any binding tradition and had to be reinvented time after time.

But this artistic theme was not new to Schütte, for besides the figure of the artist and his studio, besides public spaces with scenarios of anonymous power and platforms for everyday life, on which fates are played out, the female figure had always been present in his art. She served as a counterpart to the figure of the self, of the artist; she was the object of the artist's longing, the focus of his feelings, outside the closed realms of his innermost existence. Schütte approached her tentatively, searching, as we see in the watercolor portraits, tenderly, as in his images of the *Weinende Frau*, who has recently been joined by more examples and now appears, defiant and feisty, in the group of sculptures cast in bronze, steel, and aluminum. This list of materials alone—from softly flowing watercolors to hard steel—reveals the range of emotional states that are conveyed in these representations.

The first group of *Frauen* was cast in bronze, a familiar material for outdoor sculptures, and the patina of the figures underlined the elegance of their appearance, turning them into monumental goddesses or natural creatures, as the case may be. Their smooth bodies, from brown-black to green, stood out distinctly against the sober steel tables that had turned from work bench into plinth, bringing with them echoes of the close scrutiny the models were subjected to in the workshop. The Corten steel used for the second version, which with time develops a fine skin of rust changed the aspect of the *Frauen*; they now appeared both more corporeal and vulnerable, and in this material their powerful limbs looked all the more forceful, even more threatening. Lastly, Schütte had a third version cast in aluminum, and it was astonishing to see how one and the same figure, which had previously conveyed oblivious physicality and touching vulnerability, now radiated cool perfection. The gleaming polished, reflective surfaces caught the light, which set the forms in flowing motion and—as in *Frau Nr. 7*—obscured the transitions from torso to limbs. Whereas the patina of the bronze version of Number 14 made it look almost like a stone sculpture and the steel version merged into and became one with the table, the aluminum version looked a little like a droll toy. And since this figure in particular is so very reminiscent of the monumental female figures by Henry Moore, the threefold realization can also be read as a threefold commentary on the story that underpins this cycle for Schütte.

In both his modes of expression and themes Schütte has always created his own context, which is not that of the canon he encountered as a student at the art academy, where Minimalism and Arte Povera held sway. For, turning his back on the powerful impact of these contemporary movements, he set his sights instead on a very different, not so brightly lit corner of art history populated with

the dark fantasies of Goya, the barely known portrait sculptures by Daumier, and the grotesque tales of Wilhelm Busch, who has never found a firm footing in the history of either literature or art. There is a common thread here, for all these artists combine gravity and intensity, sarcasm and scorn in their work, and Schütte's heads in ceramics and bronze pay due respect to them. For his *Frauen*, Schütte again turned to his artistic forebears –Maillol, Despiau, Matisse, Picasso, and Moore—the great figurative sculptors who constantly returned to the female figure, from Venus to the odalisque. Some of them have become household names with their works in public spaces, which must have had a particular appeal for Schütte who has always given deep consideration to the presence of art outside galleries and museums. The sculptors listed here are only the most visible exponents of the much wider realms of figurative sculpture that were striving for historic continuity even as the figure was being destroyed by the Modernists. The question debated so often in recent years is whether figurative art of this kind is merely imitative, harking back to a pre-modern epoch, and what distinguishes it from the figural concepts that official anti-Modernist art adopted in the 1930s. Did the Fascist dictatorships in Europe, which appropriated figurative art for their own ends, destroy its legitimacy in the artistic consciousness once and for all, or is there a way to continue the figurative line, without descending into archaism or conservatism? Those who know Schütte will understand that he is only too ready to take up the challenge inherent in these questions, for any suggestion of conforming to the *Zeitgeist*—particularly when it appears in the complacent mode of Modernism—can only induce him to do the opposite. Deep regret at the loss of this once natural, possible method of artistic forming and the hope—entirely against the flow of history—of being able to draw on it once again, have prompted Schütte to enter this abandoned field of work.

But Schütte would never take the easy way out and merely oppose Modernism for the sake of provocation or simply pour scorn on its world of forms. When elements emerge in his *Frauen* that recall the odalisques of Moore and Picasso, it is impossible not to see the respect he has for this heritage. He is certainly not out to expose a particular language of forms as devalued and declassed; on the contrary, Schütte's aim is to breathe new life into this figurative world, which enjoyed such acceptance in the past that it was ultimately taken for granted. He is endeavoring to reconnect it with that degree of reality that those earlier artists engaged with in their work, and when he talks of reality, he is also talking about himself. The contradictory feelings that come across in his work on these *Frauen* relate just as much to what is outside him as they do to him as an individual. Like all great art, this body of work by Schütte is also, in the widest sense of the term, a self-portrait, in which the artist portrays himself and in which we the viewers may also recognize ourselves.

Ultimately the only way to describe this contradictory body of work by Schütte, which resolutely resists any conclusive explanation, is to close with an admittedly subjective reminiscence. In a studio view painted in New York by the aging Max Beckmann, we see a bust of a female figure and a female torso, placed seemingly casually on the floor during the course of the artist's work, behind the modeling stand and in front of a canvas facing away from the viewer. Although there are no plinths to show the pieces in the right light and although the figures are partly hidden by the legs of the stand, they are the real subject of the painting. In this corner of the studio where Beckmann presents his figures, the fragmentation of the bust and the torso take on an air of veracity, which suggests that these supposedly provisional items, set temporarily aside, are in fact the essence of this situation and most appropriate to it.