

ARTFORUM

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Thomas Schütte



Thomas Schütte, Ferienhaus für Terroristen (Vacation House for Terrorists), 2009, wood, fabric

FOR THOMAS SCHÜTTE, the architectural model functions as a prototype world, one in which ordinary notions of space and scale are subverted and the relationship between signifier and signified is offered up for interpretation. His models—like his sculptures, installations, photographs, and works on paper—display both an obscure taciturnity and a pronounced eloquence in their incorporation of seemingly explicit and literal titles, inscriptions, banners, and other lures. The title of his show at the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, “Big Buildings—Models and Views,” combines the titles of two works (from 1989 and 1982, respectively). Promising multiple “views,” Schütte draws attention to the specific trail the show weaves through his multifaceted, idiosyncratic oeuvre (comprehensively showcased earlier this year in a retrospective at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid) and emphasizes the viewer’s perspective in navigating the shifting terrain between object and reference.

Schütte's profound involvement with architecture provides the show's terra firma. After more than thirty years of responding to architecture, the artist has—in the words of Robert Fleck, director of the Bundeskunsthalle—“rebuilt sculpture to a certain extent.” The show thus brings together architectural models, figurative sculptures, and drawings under a rubric whose strength relies not so much on chronology or medium as on the way Schütte recirculates certain motifs, like his ongoing reflection of the legacies of modernism or the relation between scale and power. For example, immediately on entering the show, the viewer encounters a small bronze model for *Mann im Matsch* (Man in Mud), 2009, only to see the figure again in monumental scale when exiting, this time as a 1:1 model for a sculpture in a public urban space, but made of Styrofoam and plaster, and with a divining rod in its hand. Stuck, and trying in vain to get its bearings, this huge figure cuts monumentality down to size and comments, in the process, on the perennial longing for “leaders.”

The relationship between this nearly twenty-foot-tall figure and the architecture that surrounds it is constantly renegotiated through its presentation in different contexts, while the tiny figures in the architectural models in the side galleries of the Bundeskunsthalle pin down the scale of their models. These relationships are at once grounded and complicated by a third factor: the viewer. Schütte's approach is both experimental and calculated, and the various shifts in the perception of scale bring with them many moments of uncertainty, as in the crystalline colored-glass construction of Schütte's *Model for a Hotel* that stood in London's Trafalgar Square in 2007, where it served above all as a refuge for pigeons; or the skeletal metal-and-glass *One Man House I* (1:1), 2010, whose scale renders it a structure that viewers may walk into, as if into an elegant drawing in space. Nearby, another walk-in sculpture, *Ferienhaus für Terroristen* (Vacation House for Terrorists), 2009, beckons us into a wooden construction flooded with colorful light; its external skin is composed of translucent colored fabrics, making the house permeable to both the gaze and the ear. Ostensibly a site of regeneration—it's for vacations, after all—it would hardly enable any terrorist inhabitants to hatch secret plots. Or, as Rainald Schumacher, the show's curator, suggests in the exhibition catalogue, might doing nothing, or even gazing at art, be considered a “terrorist” or renegade activity in a society defined by labor efficiency? The title is not only inherently paradoxical but also contradicts the object it describes.

Indeed, Schütte's titles frequently have a sting to them; they undermine what we think we've already grasped on a visual level. Like the slogans and inscriptions often incorporated into these works, the titles have political and social undertones, creating moments of sometimes punning, sometimes lucid and sarcastically mordant humor. This humor takes aim at both the tradition of architectural modernism—or rather its degeneration in the name of capitalist profit maximization (as in *Renditekiste* [Interest Yield Box], 2002, and *Alte Hänger* [Old Deadbeats], 2003)—and its postmodern counterpart (for example, *Golfhalle* [Golf Hall], 2003). Nor does Schütte hesitate to take on the art establishment. While his 1982 project *Museum* evoked a large incinerator—as if to take issue with the museum's self-understanding as a place of preservation—his 2002 model *Amusement* (reproduced in the catalogue), with its title inscribed on its windowless facade, points to the commercialization of the art world as entertainment industry. The present show is watched over by *Vater Staat* (Father State), 2010, a twelve-foot-tall figure standing ominously near the *Ferienhaus für Terroristen*. *Vater Staat* surveys the show with a solemn face, yet appears strangely disembodied. The figure's long coat falls in a narrow silhouette; its arms—as is often the case in Schütte's sculptures—are not fully executed; and its hands, their outlines merely suggested in the folds of the garment, are bound.