frieze

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Heroes and Villains

For almost 30 years Thomas Schütte has been concerned with puncturing manifestations of power and subjection

One possible interpretation of a recent group of three architectural models by Thomas Schütte is to see them as Postmodern variations on late Modernist bungalows, along the lines of Pierre Koenig's Case Study House #22 of 1960, the night-time view of which Norman Foster has described as 'heroic'.1 Candy-coloured glass runs the entire length of each of Schütte's pavilions. The walls are made of Perspex in primary colours, and angled, free-standing columns cut through the mahogany floors like shark fins through water. But describing as 'heroic' a work that Schütte has actually titled Ferienhaus für Terroristen I, II & III (Holiday Home for Terrorists, 2002) would sound shrill, sardonic. Who are these 'terrorists,' enjoying the view as if through gigantic sunglasses and possibly lazily stroking a dog as they make their arrangements over the phone? It makes me think of an old song by TV Personalities: 'Here they come, lalalalalala, part-time punks'. Clearly Schütte is not so much imagining actual retreats for full-time terrorists as creating anti-monuments to the latest incarnations of Radical Chic.

What is it that fuels Schütte's ongoing concern with de-heroicizing manifestations of power and subjection? In 1980 he was commissioned to design a large installation for the exhibition 'Westkunst – Contemporary Art since 1939' in Cologne. More than a decade before the boom of the now familiar blockbuster contemporary art shows 'Westkunst' was an attempt to think big, and proudly to present West Germany's Rhineland as a stronghold of Modernism and the avant-garde. But Schütte's idea for the show was considered too big: his proposal would have measured around ten by 20 metres and was simply not financially viable. The maquette, however, took on a life of its own: Schiff (Ship, 1980) is a grand staircase built into what looks like the bow of an ocean liner, which would have functioned simultaneously as a platform providing panoramic views of the vast exhibition space and as a display wall in itself. Schütte then added maquettes of Bühne (Stage, 1980), an altar for the display of both art and viewers, and Kiste (Box, 1980), a tilted, upside-down shelter with a green banner decoratively draped across its front, proclaiming the slogan 'pro status quo'. The artist later exhibited the models on three tables (Westkunst Modelle, 1980), one of them stacked on top of the two others like an Olympic medal winners' podium.

What Schütte presented here was, on one level, a travesty of Western democracy and its translation into public sculpture: combining triumphant traditionalism with neo-liberal competitiveness, these were the mock El Lissitzky and Vladimir Tatlin monuments of Cold War conservatism and the dawning era of Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. On another level the maquettes were a reflection on the status of art within this political framework: in projects such as 'Westkunst', something that in the 1960s and 1970s had been a kind of cottage industry began to envision itself as an industry proper. So here you go – Schütte seemed to say – have your grand staircases and altars of popular consumption. Commenting on contemporary art grinding into gear as 'stadium rock', Schütte may almost look a bit smug from today's perspective, accustomed as we are to the proliferation of biennales and art museums, but at the time he was being stunningly visionary.

The architectural models, plans and public sculptures in Schütte's oeuvre are thus not self-assured proposals for

better living but actually reflections of doubt; it remains unclear whether they're more concerned with nutty realism or with an all-too-real nightmare. In these works affirmation and deep-rooted scepticism come together like a herd of cows with a car on a country lane. On the more sinister side, Pläne I–XXX (Plans, 1981), made at the height of the protests against the deployment of American Pershing nuclear missiles in West Germany, is a series of spray-painted icons in black on yellow oilcloth banners: starting off with a nuclear bomb explosion, the path leads via cenotaph, viaduct and mass grave, triumphal arch and World Trade Center, to a final view of a cinema audience illuminated by the words 'Plan XXX' projected onto the screen. It's as if the preceding visions served a kind of Armageddon porn, arousing the Germans' fear of being, and desire to be, the real victims after all – an angstlust that Schütte both acknowledges and parodies.

Almost ridiculously luscious in comparison was Schütte's contribution to 'Skulptur Projekte Münster' in 1987. Kirschsäule (Cherry Column) is a six-metre-high open-air sculpture of two gleaming red cherries balanced on top of a sandstone column placed in the middle of a square mainly used as a car park; it's like a propitiatory offering for any Gullivers who might happen to be passing through. At the same time, like the 'Westkunst' models, the piece overstates the demands society places on public art – to be grand, visually pleasing and decorative – while repudiating the worn-out gesture of frustrating these very demands.

In 1981 Schütte made a work that is simultaneously narcissistic and objective, outrageously heroic and anti-heroic, as if the creepy 'Plans' and the knowingly idiotic 'Cherry Column' were rolled into one. Mein Grab (My Grave) is a proposal for a red gravestone with the artist's name, date of birth (16 November 1954) and fictitious date of death (25 March 1996) inscribed in golden letters. The piece was produced both as a model and a painting. Even if you already know about it, encountering Mein Grab in the flesh (as I did in Schütte's retrospective at K21 in Düsseldorf last year) is an unnerving experience. Despite knowing that the artist has thankfully outlived both 'real' and 'career' death, there is something both uncanny and daring in predicting, at the age of 26, one's own demise at 41. The fact that the gravestone is as large as a cosy house (as indicated by small figures next to it) serves to accentuate this unresolved tension between tragedy and irony.

Schütte's part-loving, part-deadly embrace of the monumental and symbolic cannot simply be explained in reference to the general trend in the 1980s towards large-scale, bold gestures. In Schütte's case it was fuelled not by a regressive impulse against, but an insistent struggle, with the notions of context and indexicality (i.e., the idea of 'just pointing at things', a pejorative description of Conceptual art by the painter Al Held that prompted John Baldessari to commission amateur painters to paint a person literally pointing at things; 'Commissioned Paintings', 1969). He began his studies at the academy in Dusseldorf in 1973, attending lectures by Benjamin H. Buchloh at a time when Gerhard Richter was finishing work on his 'Farbtafeln' series (Colour Charts, 1966–74). Buchloh's eloquent criticism of narration and representation within the Modernist paradigm and his tireless approbation of Michael Archer and Daniel Buren suggested contextual insertions as elements of an anti-heroic method rather than as part of a heroic style.

But Schütte must have been an irritating, precocious pupil, the one who asks the awkward questions and points out the elephant in the room: what if the critique of the monumental gesture itself becomes monumental? It seems that with his early work from 1977 onwards the artist was looking for loopholes in the system, using the indexical mode but deliberately loosening its grip on the field or space in which it was meant to 'intervene'. His Ringe (Rings, 1977) – small, flat wooden loops painted in bright colours and hung on little nails over the entire expanse of a wall – bring to mind Niele Toroni's brush prints, but only at first sight; the rings seem evenly distributed over the wall and you assume they follow a rigid grid system, but they don't. Lager (Storage, 1978) is a series of wooden boards, ranging roughly from a notebook to a window in size, painted in colours that look as if they were picked from a Pantone chart – light mint and terracotta, for example. As the title of the piece suggests, the rectangular boards, which have a hole drilled in each corner, lean against the wall like building supplies, as if waiting to be used as wall panels.

In Imi Knoebel's Raum 19 (Room 19, 1968), first shown at the academy in Dusseldorf, stretchers, cubes and Masonite boards were stacked or leaned against the wall, undercutting compositional display with the accumulative matter-of-factness of a storage space. Schütte's Lager short-circuits this earlier work with Richter's 'Farbtafeln': sober investigations into space and colour become chips in a game of interior decoration, like a hiccup disturbing the solemn rhetoric of artistic analysis.

But such an approach can function the other way round; the analytical can disrupt the decorative (and that's the beauty of it). Schütte's more recent work continues to be nudged by a Minimalist or indexical sensibility – even at its most figurative. Take Mohr's Life (1988), for instance: a black-headed Fimo puppet, wrapped in a piece of pyjama material and bandaged with a strip of cord, stands on a tripod in front of a series of thickly oil-painted canvases of raining clouds and money on easels; opposite, his white-headed alter ego, also clad in pyjama material but not strait-jacketed, marvels at a sky of old socks lined up on an iron stand. The roles of artist and spectator are so overdetermined here it hurts: Mohr is a pre-20th-century German exoticist term for a black person, and there is a Mohr – Muley Hassan of Tunis – in Friedrich von Schiller's Fiesco, or the Genoese Conspiracy (1783). If you take away centuries of theatrical convention and racism, Muley Hassan is what today would be called a spin doctor to both Fiesco and his opponents, and he also sarcastically remarks 'The Mohr has done his work, the Mohr may go' as Fiesco fails to acknowledge his services. Thus the artist in Schütte's puppet scenario is shackled not only by the constrictions of art itself but also by the power games involved. At the same time, though, the socks and the iron stand, with their humble presence, muffle any too self-assured allegorical readings such as this. It's not just their potential as a quotidian still life subject or ready-made that does this, but their indexical component, which a two-year-old could understand: if you have a pair of socks, doesn't one of them always go missing? Altes Sockenproblem (Old Sock Problem, 1989) is the title of a watercolour from the series 'September Notes' made a year after Mohr's Life, showing three – not four – socks on a line. And so, in our pyjamas, we marvel at the Old Sock Problem as if it could be the key to solving the mysteries of the universe.

So, to pose the question again, what is it that fuels Schütte's recurrent concern with de-heroicizing manifestations of power and subjection? What the figure of the 'hero' and the architectural model – understood as a plan for future realization – have in common is that they offer examples of how the world could, or should, be. 'In my eyes', Schütte has said, 'the figurative tradition failed at the point when the artist had to create heroes in a democratic system, which nowadays is something television networks can do much more effectively.'2 Schütte's conclusion, however, is not to abandon the 'figurative' but to continue a melancholic, archaeological and sometimes cruel engagement with it. It's easy to see the humour in a piece such as Tower of Talkers (2003), a metal construction that suggests a bottle-shaped skyscraper topped by a little blinking 'head' of a light bulb, with a metal 'infinity helix' hung around the 'neck' like a tie: the phallic manifestation of power is turned into a joke about small-minded heads with big aspirations. The 'Stahlfrauen' (Steel Women, 1998– ongoing) and 'Bronzefrauen' (Bronze Women, 1999– ongoing), larger-than-life reclining nudes resting on steel tables, are much harder to digest, as jam-packed with contradictions and clichés as a cellar full of the belongings of someone you don't like. Fastidiously made after the deliberately crude 'Ceramic Sketches' (1997–9), these elephantine women have been variously explained as Schütte's attempt to wheel the retired veterans of Modernism – the exponents of classical modern figurative sculpture from Aristide Maillol to Henry Moore – back onto the glaringly lit stage of contemporary production. The question is, of course, to what purpose? Simply to make defiantly 'incorrect', kitsch nude sculpture? Even with financial gain taken into account, surely it wouldn't be worth the effort of several years' work. Apart from the enjoyment of re-examining traditional techniques, and the endlessly exploited Pygmalionesque concepts of 'man' and 'woman' they are riddled with, what is at stake? Is it the libidinal investment 'eternalized' in a sculpture-as-partial-object? Bronzefrau Nr. 13 (Bronze Woman No. 13, 2003), for example, is a polymorphous combination of voluptuous buttocks, and angel wings that look like two pieces of roast pork in fishnet stockings. She seems to be lying in wait, challenging anyone to describe her negatively. These nudes are brides of Frankenstein who seem fully aware of their power, while the equally massive 'Große Geister' (Big Spirits, 1996–ongoing) – upright cast-aluminium figures that look like a cross between the Michelin Man and Freddy Kruger – are more the kind of childish ghosts that

underestimate their own ferocity.

Both the 'Women' and the 'Big Spirits' seem to suggest that making conventions and clichés (of sculpture or of gender) invisible will simply force them to return with a vengeance. For that is precisely the nature of power when it is not personified in kings and leaders: it is hidden or disguised within complex networks. The flip side of any strategy for unveiling the mechanisms of power is that it runs the risk of perpetuating precisely what it condemns. Schütte's sculptures seem to suggest that the only antidote to this dilemma is fundamentally to admit to embarrassment – the kind that is not about feeling exposed or exposing others but is a sad and silent epiphany, a glimpse into the mechanisms of self-legitimization that we crank up, even in our most solitary moments.

1 Norman Foster, foreword to James Steele and David Jenkins, Pierre Koenig, Phaidon, London, 1998, p. 5
2 'James Lingwood in Conversation with Thomas Schütte', in Thomas Schütte, Phaidon, London, 1998, p. 14