

frieze

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No Place Like Home

Thomas Schütte

Thomas Schütte's *Die Fremden* (The Strangers, 1992) consists of a series of large figures, each accompanied by one or two sacks or urns, modelled in clay and colourfully glazed. Arranged in three family groups, the figures, expressionless and with eyes closed, are caught in silent, suspended animation. Alternately recalling Etruscan funerary sculpture, Northern medieval portico figures and Russian dolls, each is carefully differentiated and socially typed by clothing and facial characteristics. The colour is very flat: the tonal depth that exists is achieved by covering the faces with rough washes of colour next to dryer surfaces with less glaze. In contrast, the odd, geometrically shaped torsos of the figures are treated monochromatically and glazed somewhat unevenly. Instead of legs, each figure incorporates a flowerpot-shaped base.

While the urns are impressively handled and refer to ancient pottery shapes, there is a deliberate clumsiness to the bags and figures. The body of each bag is persuasively sculpted, but the bottoms are entirely flat and unrealistic. The figures are even more naively handled, denying all reference to the plastic characteristics of the clay and instead being treated to give the impression that they are made of a more rigid material. The absence of all traces of manual handling gives the work its anonymous quality.

Initially exhibited at documenta IX in Kassel where they were placed on the portico of the former Roten Palais of the Landgrafen von Hessen, which currently houses a large department store, the figures overlooked the city. Indeed, whenever Schütte has installed *Die Fremden* in an outdoor public space, the figures and vessels have been placed on high, poised to survey the surrounding urban environment. When exhibited in a gallery or museum interior, they have been theatrically mounted on pedestals of unfinished wood, topped with bolted steel platforms. In a recent display at New York's Marian Goodman Gallery, a selection of the figures were arranged in such a way that they each faced in different directions, as if sealed off from the world. But at all times, whether inside or outside, they appear, like the blind seer Tiresias, to be overseeing all that surrounds them.

'With a kind of innocent irony', writes a critic, 'Schütte's everyday figures powerfully convey the internal meaninglessness of modern life.' 1 'The subject of Thomas Schütte', opines another, 'is, at its essence, an exploration of the human condition.' 2 The figures of *Die Fremden* are thus interpreted as symbols, as universal wanderers, as strangers. And, ostensibly, the stranger is always implicitly ourselves, 'a projection of how alien we feel to ourselves - our sense of dissociation exacerbated by the discrepancy between our external appearance and our inner reality, the former never adequately conveying the latter, despite all our efforts.' 3

What has been largely overlooked, however, is that while referring to the estrangement that characterises the contemporary human condition, the theme of displacement and migration in *Die Fremden* is also historically specific, referring to the particularly harsh conditions faced by the large number of émigrés that flooded into Germany with the end of the Cold War. This lacuna becomes all the more surprising if we consider that the subject of migration is a recurring one in Schütte's work. *Teppichman* (Carpetman) of 1985, for instance, a doll-like figure whose body is made of sticks and brightly coloured fabrics bound with rope and whose face is

modelled out of fimo, suggests the nomad from the East coming to the West to sell goods. An image of migration and the clash of cultures is evident again in *Chinatown* (1989), an architectural model of a row of identical, modern chinese-style buildings with windows and doors arranged in the shape of a face. Among other things, Schütte here comments on the futility of systematic attempts in public architecture to create ethnicity and individuality. Ethnicity, the project seems to say, cannot be reproduced wholesale in a digestible format since only individuals can make culture.

Even in those odd cases where the subject of migration is broached in discussions of *Die Fremden*, it is dehistoricised by summoning the considerable proportion of humanity that has always been in motion, migration or flight. But an overview of Schütte's work reveals that much of it is marked quite explicitly by a keen awareness of particular historical situations and, more specifically, Germany's geopolitical position. A case in point is his 1989 series, 'Notes', which consists of a number of dual language sketches and watercolours that allude to Germany's position in the out of synch world of post-Cold War politics. *Altes Sock Problem* (The Old Sock Problem), for example, depicts three mismatched socks hanging on a line, and *Time to Repair the Chair* surely refers to a world situation that needs fixing. A sketch of a map of the United States with the words 'Egologic' above, and 'NO BOMBS-NO BULLETS-WE BUY' in block letters below, is even more direct in its message, placing Schütte firmly in the political position of many West Germans who, at the time, were protesting the continued presence not only of US military bases, but also of nuclear weapons installations on German soil: the watercolour *Any Way The Wind Blows* features what appears to be a nuclear cloud. But perhaps the most striking sketch in this series is *Mann mit 3 Schatten* (Man with 3 Shadows), one interpretation of which alludes to central Germany's location in Europe, a site that many Germans feared would become the arena of a third world war.

Schütte's work of the 90s also markedly parallels the specific historical transformations that have taken place in Germany during this momentous decade. From the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, to monetary unification at the end of June 1990 and political unification in September 1990, things moved very quickly. The first months of official unification were marked by a heady euphoria. Germany was at last united, or, as some put it, re-united, to the national and geographical entity that it last claimed under the Third Reich. Communism had been defeated and Western liberal democracy had indeed triumphed. We get a glimpse of Schütte's view of these optimistic historical events in his early 1992 series entitled *Old Friends*. Each old friend consists of a fimo head, a bright, indistinct cloth body and stick legs, strongly reminiscent of Latin American folk art such as *We are Wayfarers of the Night and Pain* (1979), by the Ecuadorian artist Oswaldo Viteri. But the grotesque facial expressions on the fimo heads hark back to the sculpted gargoyles found on medieval cathedrals. A pastiche of several cultural traditions, each figure is given a name. The ensemble as a whole resonates with the heady spirit of unification, the bringing together of family and friends separated by world events.

The high hopes many had for unification soon gave way to disillusionment and to the realisation that there were, in fact, deep structural differences between the two Germanies after 45 years of separation: though the physical wall may have been dismantled, an invisible one, far more permanent, still exists. It is this tone of disillusionment that resonates in Schütte's next set of sculptural figures, *United Enemies* (1993-94). The grotesque features of the clay figures tied together, their distorted heads are attired in coloured fabric, evoke not only the tradition of sculpted caricature of Honoré Daumier in France and the late 18th century sculptor, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, in Germany, but also 15th century Italian caricature and the exaggerated characters of *Commedia dell'Arte*. Significantly, all of these genres were vehicles for political comment. Bound together, the figures in *United Enemies* suggest siamese twins, united for life, indivisible and yet necessarily at odds, clearly a comment on the growing resentment felt by both East and West Germans towards each other. On the one hand, former East Germans resent their Western counterparts for their wealth, sophistication, slickness - the *besserwessis* - as much as their treatment of Easterners as second-class citizens. On the other hand, former West Germans see the Easterners as embarrassing poor relations who represent everything about themselves that they sought to eliminate in the 50s, 60s and 70s. And yet, they now belong to the same nation, to one social, political, and

economic whole. To each other, then, East and West Germans are the uncanny other, simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, the same but radically different.

Which brings us back to *Die Fremden*. Revealingly, Schütte's *Mann mit Koffer* (Man with Suitcases, 1991), a study for *Die Fremden*, reveals the artist's original conception to be in sharp contrast to the solemnity of the final figures. In the former, a jaunty figure of a man modelled in clay and fitted with a cloth body carries a suitcase in one hand and a shopping bag in another. In mid-stride with his head up, the figure is wide-eyed and moves with an air of confidence. Similarly, Schütte's watercolour sketches for *Die Fremden*, *Figuren d IX, 6 Zeichnungen*, dated May 1991, represent smiling figures, often with their eyes open, accompanied by baggage.

In fact the the final figures in the *Die Fremden* series announce a remarkable shift in Schütte's response to the historical events of the early 90s and a new disillusionment. The richest country in Europe, Germany also held one of the most liberal admission policies for refugees. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, the stream of asylum-seekers grew into a flood in the second half of 1991, and Germans began discussing whether, and how, to change the rules to limit immigration. While politicians and journalists debated the asylum issue, outbreaks of neo-Nazi activity against foreigners began to flare up, not only throughout the former German Democratic Republic, but in Western Germany as well. In late 1991 and early 1992, this neo-Nazi subculture quickly broadened its appeal to the rapidly growing number of unemployed. Soon it was not only foreigners that were perceived as problematic 'others', but also the Germans who were moving to the West from the East.

It is in this historical context that Schütte's *Die Fremden* ought chiefly to be seen. Standing with their eyes closed and their bags or urns beside them, the figures' heads are slightly bowed and their mouths tightly sealed. The strangers have arrived in a new country with barely any possessions; funereal and stiff, their need is expressed in muted fashion. Schütte's decision to render them entirely out of fired clay reinforces the idea of a brittle, fragile frozenness - they display a kind of paralysis. Their silence speaks of the crimes that have been enacted against them. Furthermore, Schütte's placement of the figures on top of a department store at *documenta IX* alludes to the reality that though some may attempt to expel these 'strangers', their foreignness is an advantage in the world of consumer goods. For not only will these people provide the labour to make these goods, but also the exoticism of the Other that commodity culture must continually appropriate in order to operate successfully.

Of course, parallels are also implicitly made with the institution of advanced art, which must also constantly borrow from foreign cultures in order to revitalise itself. Schütte's illustrative method, together with his revival of the age-old medium of ceramics, signifies a peculiar restorative agenda, one that seems to reclaim legacies that sculpture had foregone or dismantled in the Modern period. This impulse for restoration is further amplified by the call for a return to liberal humanism that Schütte's work undeniably makes. But if we locate *Die Fremden* in its specific historical context, in a society increasingly dominated by tribalism and bloodbaths in the name of ethnic purity and recognition, the figures become more than a cliché or an existential symbol of the wandering stranger: they become particular individuals. In this context, the inaudible voice of the strangers becomes the need of the Germans, and is thus transformed into a cry.

1. Donald Kuspit, 'Thomas Schütte at Marian Goodman Gallery', *Artforum*, September 1997, p.123
2. Elizabeth Janus, 'Thomas Schütte at Carré d'Art, Nîmes', *frieze*, January-February 1995, p.52
3. Donald Kuspit, *ibid.*