

notes

1. Thomas Schütte, "Inside and Outside," conversation with Martin Hentschel, in *Thomas Schütte* (Bern: Kunsthalle, 1990), p. 82.
2. Schütte realized several public sculptures between 1985 and 1987. *Tisch* (Table), 1985, commissioned to commemorate Hamburg's resistance movement, consists of an oversized and solemn granite table with twelve chairs. *Schutzraum* (Shelter), 1986, made for Sonsbeek '86, was a concrete "bunker" set into the slope of a hill. *Eis* (Ice Cream), 1987, devised for Documenta VIII, took the form of a functioning ice-cream parlor; and *Kirschensäule* (Column of Cherries), 1987, devised for Sculpture Project Münster, continues as a permanent piece in the city's civic parking lot.
3. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1964), pp. 4-5.

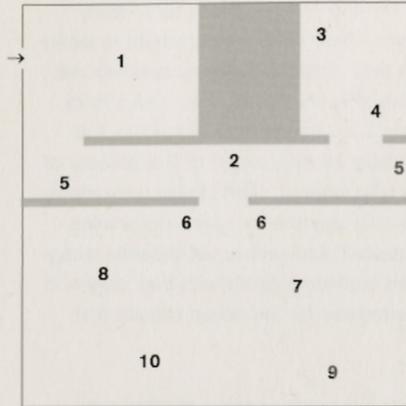
Thomas Schütte was born in Oldenburg, Germany, in 1954. Between 1973 and 1981, he studied fine art at the Düsseldorf Art Academy with Fritz Schwegler and Gerhard Richter. Since his first solo shows in 1979, Schütte has exhibited widely in Europe and elsewhere. A large touring exhibition of his work recently traveled to London, Tilburg, and Oporto. Among many group shows, he participated in Documentas 8, 9, and 10 (1987, 1992, and 1997), and the Münster Sculpture Projects in both 1987 and 1997.

selected bibliography

- Thomas Schütte*. Bern: Kunsthalle, 1990. Texts by Ludger Gerdes, Martin Hentschel, and Ulrich Look.
- Thomas Schütte*. Wolfsburg: Stadtische Galerie und Kunstverein, 1996. Text by Susanne Pflieger.
- Thomas Schütte*. London: Phaidon, 1998. Texts by Julian Heynen and Angela Vettese. Interview by James Lingwood.
- Thomas Schütte [Figur]*. Hamburg: Kunsthalle, 1994. Texts by Martin Hentschel, Annelie Lütgens, and Uwe Schneede.
- Parkett*, no. 48 (1996). Special edition by Thomas Schütte. Essays by Elizabeth Janus, Ulrich Look, Bartomeu Mari, Hans Rudolf Reust, Adrian Searle, and Neville Wakefield.
- Sculpture Projects in Münster*. Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum, in association with Verlag Gerd Hatje, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1997. Text by Friedrich Meschede.

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site map and checklist



Height precedes length precedes width

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Urns</i>, 1999
Ceramic
Dimensions variable
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 2. <i>Ceramic Sketches</i>, 1997-1999
Ceramic:
Dimensions variable
Steel shelf:
79 x 396 x 234 inches
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 3. <i>Green Head</i>, 1997
Ceramic:
16 x 39 x 19 inches
Drawings:
Pen, ink, paper
Each 20 1/2 x 16 1/8 inches (framed)
Collection of the artist 4. <i>Head (Red)</i>, 1997
Ceramic:
16 x 39 x 19 inches
Drawings:
Pen, ink, paper
Each 22 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches (framed)
Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg 5. <i>Knots</i>, 1999
Pen, ink, paper
Each 22 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches (framed)
Collection of the artist | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. <i>Mirror Drawings</i>, 1998-1999
Pen, ink, paper
Each 19 1/2 x 15 1/4 inches (framed)
Collection of the artist 7. <i>Steel Woman I</i>, 1998
Steel
60 x 97 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 8. <i>Steel Woman II</i>, 1999
Steel
51 x 97 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 9. <i>Steel Woman III</i>, 1999
Steel
54 x 97 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 10. <i>Steel Woman IV</i>, 1999
Steel
40 x 97 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York |
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"In Medias Res" is the third installation in a three-part presentation of Schütte's work. Part I, entitled "Scenewright" (September 24, 1998, through January 24, 1999), focused on issues relating to scenography and theater; Part II, "Gloria in Memoria" (February 4 through June 13, 1999) concentrated on (anti)monuments, public and private, dedicated to the famous, the infamous, and the unknown.

Cover Photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn

Thomas Schütte
In Medias Res
September 16, 1999-June 18, 2000



Dia center for the arts
548 west 22nd street new york

Thomas Schütte In Medias Res

The poem is not timeless. Certainly, it raises a claim to infinity; it attempts to grasp its way through time—through it, not over and above it.

—Paul Celan

"Fundamentally, my works are almost always in the nature of a proposal," Thomas Schütte contends, while conceding that, nonetheless, mostly "they exist in the form of models."¹ Schütte's notion of models is, consequently, encompassing and complex: at its core lies the proposition, the hypothesis, the speculation. And, given that it is imbued with both a metaphorical and a literal dimension, it has assumed an extraordinarily diverse and multifarious range of formulations in an oeuvre that now spans more than twenty years.

Décor and scenographic and architectural models formed the vocabulary of Schütte's first works. Vehicles for thought rather than action, they sketched a history of the reconstruction and reconstitution of the built environment in the postwar years, and, on occasion, proposed alternatives. Miniaturized worlds predicated on a kind of displaced placelessness, they inscribe a restless nomadism that rigorously eschews the settled and established. In his memorials, which followed soon after, the cast of characters ranges from the historically (in)famous to the forgotten and the fictional, from Adolf Hitler to the lone Gallic sailor Alain Colas, to the artist himself or his surrogates. As well as a number of large-scale works realized in public sites, he has made a series of speculative tableaux, often constructed from makeshift structures and mundane materials.² They have the appearance of rapid responses, temporary, even tentative, as if only in such terms can he avert rhetoric and grandiosity, and only through a kind of self-mocking inclusion of his own imago into this pantheon can he confront the perennial issues of glory, fame, and immortality.

By contrast in the late nineties Schütte has focused on what might be deemed canonical sculptural subjects, techniques, and genres. Such forays have led him to an increasingly self-conscious engagement with tradition, though his motivation, characteristically, remains a singular one. In accord with his previous practice, he again operates *a contrario* to current interests and concerns.

With the *United Enemies* (1993), a series of small puppetlike male duos inextricably and incongruously bound to each other, Schütte developed the role of the human form from that found in his early practice, where it served as a model that gave scale to an architectural context or a player who animated a theatrical *mise en scène* into an independent subject in its own right. He then issued a suite of sober black-and-white photographs shot in closeup of the heads of these protagonists, magnifying the quirks and oddities resulting from working rapidly and without revision on a miniature scale. Soon, however, his desire to make a freestanding figure led to forsaking Plastelene in favor the more pliable material wax, which he modeled again without benefit of

preliminary sketches or drawings, wrapping and twisting narrow coils to form limbs, heads, and torsos caught in highly animated poses. These were then enlarged to monumental scale and cast in aluminum, transforming their strangely uncanny behavior into something macabre and bombastic. Central to this affect is the way their forms lurch unpredictably in and out of an abbreviated realism, the consequence of nullities and lacunae in the undulating surface that arise inevitably as a byproduct of this process of extreme enlargement. Known as *Grosse Geister* (*Big Ghosts*), 1996, these endearingly familiar but ungainly grotesques manifest a voracious appetite for space, dominating effortlessly any environment in which they are situated. Anonymous yet instantly recognizable as members of a signature tribe, Schütte's lumbering giants with their origins in popular-culture expressions became perverse surrogates for the heroic statues that peopled former eras.

The late work of both Kasimir Malevich and Oskar Schlemmer casts a shadow over the family of monumental ceramic itinerants that Schütte made at the beginning of the decade, to be sited on the roofline of a department store in Kassel, as part of Documenta 9. When some five years later he resumed working directly in clay, he bifurcated his approach between abstraction and figuration. The simple geometric volumes that constituted the bodies of the nomadic wanderers, *Die Fremden* (*The Strangers*), 1992, now formed the basis for a repertoire of vessels—urns—which, like their predecessors, could once again be grouped into provisional families. Although their demeanor still betrays an overtly stately, even funereal, aura, these statuesque pots are paradoxically garnished in a brilliantly hued palette of succulent turquoises, reds, and metallic bronzes, the product of a highly unorthodox experimental approach to glazing. The alternative, the figural legacy, veered off unpredictably, in that, as Schütte began to explore a female counterpart to the *Grosse Geister*, he took as his point of departure the reclining nude, a sculptural paradigm.

Drawing on the debased legacy of Aristide Maillol and Ernst Barlach, that is, on what today has become a conventionalized enervated vocabulary, these cast female figures testify to the impossibility of utopian or idealistic languages of representation. However, in contrast to the mordant, savage parody that became the hallmark of his engagement with the male subject, from his mortification of the female form, something more tender and more melancholy supervenes: through willful misprision, this hyperconscious late twentieth-century heir wily mourns the loss of idealist aesthetics and of their subtending belief systems. At the same time, Schütte undertook a classic self-scrutiny in the guise of a series of what he termed Mirror Drawings in which he limned his radically abbreviated head reflected in a shaving mirror. But since he removed his spectacles before beginning to sketch the results diverge radically from the detailed and individuated rendering—and hence from the intimate portrayal that discloses the personal and private—that such a method normally ensures. Neither psychological revelation nor

narcissistic display but the antithesis, a schematic conformity rooted in the generic and stereotypical, is the defining character of this intensive immersion in self-portraiture. Poised between near blindness and hypnagogic vision, the myopic draftsman inevitably has recourse to the known, the normative, the predetermined. Denied the option of revelatory introspection, and divested of redemptive utopian and idealistic visions, the artist's task becomes, as explicated in these concurrent bodies of work in which the human form is at once defaced and disfigured, one of wrestling with this circumscribed condition. For Schütte this requires a resolute affirmation of the craft of making coupled with a profound recognition of the problems, theoretical and aesthetic, that shape and govern the practice of this profession, determined as it is as much by its traditions, its founding self-representations, and its artistic heritage as by its current predicament, the compound threat of marginality, irrelevance, and elitism.

Through his recent dialogue with early twentieth-century precedents, Schütte directs his abiding engagement with history more narrowly to the art of the past than hitherto. In so doing, he engages with what T. S. Eliot defined in a celebrated and seminal essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," as "a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." Cognizant of "the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together," this historical sense, the poet asserted "is what makes a writer traditional." For Eliot, this was a far from restricted position since, he contended "it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity," adding "In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead. . . . It is a judgement, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other," he concluded. As Eliot well understood, "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them."³ By engaging with the art of the past in this self-conscious and sustained manner, Schütte's work reformulates contemporary readings of it, just as it crucially informs apprehension of his. Focus on that impulse to contrariety, which has long galvanized his shifting aesthetic, risks diverting attention from the exigent seriousness with which he probes his thematics. Adopting as his subject tradition or, more properly, history, Schütte concentrates in his latest works on various of its twentieth-century idealist or utopian expressions—Russian Constructivism, the Bauhaus, and multifarious classicizing revivals—in order to measure the past and present against each other. Like those of his carefully chosen forbears, his works, too, in this way embody a metaphysics by means of their aesthetics.