

The background of the entire image is a high-resolution texture of a red brick wall. The bricks are rectangular and arranged in a traditional running bond pattern. The color of the bricks is a deep, slightly mottled red, with some darker and lighter variations. The mortar joints between the bricks are a light, off-white color, creating a grid-like pattern across the image.

THOMAS SCHÜTTE

MoMA

How do you tie a bronze knot?

CHARLES RAY

I know how to make a bronze knot. That's easy. You start with clay or wax and model it with a tool or your hands. You make a mold and pour molten metal into it and you create the image of a knot that is made in bronze. It's not so hard to tie a knot with a rope or sculpt a knot in a soft material like clay. But how do you tie a knot in bronze? Does this happen in the sculpting process? Is the sculptor a magician who knows how to manipulate hard metal and make it pliable and soft? Or does it happen in the viewer's or the sculptor's mind? Can a knot be so beautifully sculpted that it seems to have been tied after the metal that forms it was poured, cooled, and made hard? What would a metallurgist say? What would a perceptual psychologist or even a philosopher think?

Thomas Schütte's sculptures not only have such knots but are such knots. They maintain a fluid, malleable quality even after leaving clay and being made in bronze. The bronze *Mann ohne Gesicht* (*Man without Face*, 2018; fig. 1) is made of a material I think of as super clay. As a bronze, the form is more pliable than the clay the sculpture's mold was patterned on. This fluidness isn't just across the surface of the figure, but it is a form that exists between the artist, his sculpture, and the perception of the viewer. I think the elements of this equation exist in the past, present, and future. The surface of Schütte's sculpture is not a manifold of details, but when the topology of his figure's face, drapery, foot, or hand ripples across one's



Fig. 1. Thomas Schütte. *Mann ohne Gesicht* (*Man without Face*). 2018. Patinated bronze, 14' 9 $\frac{3}{16}$ " \times 7' 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " \times 7' 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (450 \times 240 \times 240 cm). Thomas Schütte Stiftung, Neuss, Germany. Installation view, *Thomas Schütte: Trois Actes*, Monnaie de Paris, March 15–June 16, 2019

awareness of the surface, it creates a form that can only be sculpture. This modeling of the surface is not made simply from chunks of clay, as the space and place around the sculpture are modeled, too. The form of the figure, the surface of the sculpture, and the space it occupies are in the same equation to the extent that they become one and the same. It seems that an inward reverberation from the surface creates the gesture of the figure. Or is it the gesture of the figure that reverberates outward and creates the surface of the sculpture? Where does Thomas Schütte stand? I know he is the artist, and his touch is in the sculpture, but are his hands still as apparent to the viewer as they must have been to him? Is the fact that he made the sculpture and gave in to its gesture as important as the image of the sculpture is to us? Was the physicality of the work emergent from the image, or was the image emergent from the artist sculpting?

Schütte's sculptures have no debt to our present time. It's not that they're not part of the contemporary world. They emerge from it, but they weren't made with the need to be relevant. If he uses history as a pattern, the sculpture doesn't stand behind artists of the past. His works don't sit stably in my appreciation of Rodin, nor do they belong to Degas, although Degas also sculpted a figure in a tub of water. Degas's *Le Tub* (*The Tub*, modeled 1888–89, cast 1921–31; fig. 2) shows a lady in a bath with a sponge in her hand and a gesture that seems to spring forth from the artist's sculpture rather than his idea of the figure in a bath. This sculpture knots together the figure, Degas, and me. When I bend over to look down upon this work, it's hard to separate the activity of the bath, the water, and the bather. I am not a passive viewer, but my viewing has been sculpted, as I also form a gesture of bending over to look at the sculpture. I'm pulled in physically from my bent waist. This gesture necessary to view the sculpture is one strand of a string that ties a knot with the string of activity apparent in the sculpture. This sculpture exists in a matrix of a process of making and viewing that extends its contemporariness into the future. Schütte's sculpture not only is modeled in water-based clay but finds fluidness in the wetness of the clay and the wetness of our bodies and our minds. It's not to say his work is old fashioned or analog, but the digital retreats in the fluidness of looking and material. While Degas used wax, it too has a malleability that's translated up and out into the sculptor's world. Degas's bronzes were cast postmortem. Thomas Schütte's aren't. Great bronze figurative sculpture has a meaning that can be superimposed over the temporal qualities of culture. How do such works extend, both forward and backward in cultural or biological time? The modeling in Schütte's sculptures is not unlike the forces of geology. The geological has a different temporal register. Schütte's work, like a mountain or a desert, not only exists but shows evidence of the past and present, as well as projections into the future. There is a quickness and a looseness to the fluidity of Schütte's sculptures, but like the geology of a mountain, beach, or ocean, it couldn't be any other way.

Perhaps some of the artfulness in these works exists in another family of knots, tying effortlessness and exactitude together. In Schütte's portrait heads, the eyes are like bellybuttons, a remnant of an umbilical cord. There are both innies and outies in his sculpted heads (fig. 3). But what the innies and the outies have in common is that they puncture the image of the bust. It's not just physically; the eyes don't bulge out or open into a great hollow dark interior. Rather, both the innie and the outie eyes are like passages into a

perceived soul of the portrait—not that one has to believe in god or a soul to pass through the eyes of these busts, but their made-ness in clay translated into the super-clay quality of his bronze superimposes through this passage the interior qualities of our mind into the physicality of the portrait bust. The metallic qualities of the bronze, the psychological geology of the modeling pass out of the eyes of the sculpture into the mind of the viewer. An animation exists between our eyes and the sculpted eyes. The eyes are only a catalyst for this process as the entire surface of the sculpture exchanges information in a dialogue with the viewer. Through form and surface and fluidity of material, Schütte's sculptures dissolve



Fig. 2. Edgar Degas. *Le Tub* (*The Tub*). Modeled 1888–89, cast 1921–31. Patinated bronze, 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 17 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 18 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (22.5 × 43.8 × 45.8 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Acquired through the generosity of the artist's heirs and the Hébrards, 1931



Fig. 3. Thomas Schütte. *Walser's Wife*. 2011. Patinated bronze on steel pedestal, bronze: 25 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 14 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (65 × 38 × 54 cm), pedestal: 47 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 17 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 17 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (120.3 × 45 × 45 cm). Collection Anne Dias Griffin

a boundary between interior and exterior. If the surface emerges from the form or the form from the surface, we emerge from the sculpture as the sculpture emerges from us. There is no interior only because the exterior is the interior. The viewer and the sculpture exist in the same or an identical material world. The spatial reality that his art exists in is the same spatial reality that we create for our own existence.

Recently I had a conversation with a young artist without much money looking for ways to work while she couldn't afford a studio. I told her to look at Schütte's heads, his portrait busts; they're monumental yet they fit upon a kitchen table. It's like the saying "All that glitters isn't gold" has a sculptural equivalent in "All that's big is not monumental." I don't measure a sculpture such as the man with his face in his hand with a physical or even a psychological yardstick. It simply exists in a scale that is not big or small. The model of *Mann ohne Gesicht* (2018, fig. 4) is not a small version of the larger version. To me, it's not a study of the bigger version. In a sense, the bigger version could be a study of the smaller version. Perhaps scale is an



Fig. 4. Thomas Schütte. *Mann ohne Gesicht (Modell 1:5)* (Man without Face [Model 1:5]). 2018. Patinated bronze on steel pedestal, bronze: $48 \frac{3}{8} \times 26 \frac{3}{8} \times 26 \frac{3}{8}$ " ($123 \times 67.5 \times 67.5$ cm), pedestal: $39 \frac{3}{8} \times 31 \frac{1}{2} \times 31 \frac{1}{2}$ " ($100 \times 80 \times 80$ cm). Pinault Collection

idea of inside and outside that the two sculptures can be placed in. Is one sculpture a reference to the individual viewer and the other to the greater public that wanders in a public space that the work is placed in? Perhaps the larger of the two sculptures not only embeds itself in a public space but also embeds itself in the public itself. The sculpture needs the crowd, as it is part of the crowd even if the plaza is empty. Meanwhile the smaller sculpture is quietly embedded in the history of sculpture yet has a special relationship to the individual in the present moment. Here—and I am speaking strictly for myself—I find beauty, in that the sculptures, both the model and the one outside, are two completely different sculptures rather than two versions of one and the same. The big and the small, the model and the real dissolve or lose importance when placed in the indoors and the outdoors. This embedment is something Thomas Schütte may not necessarily think about, but the effortlessness of the perception of his work brings it forth.

But what of the image itself? How does the image of a man with his face in his hand standing in muck or water bring meaning to the perception of the sculpture? Was the image of the sculpture thought of and then made? Did the image of a man with his face in his hand start out as an idea for Schütte to sculpt? I'm not saying that he didn't see the image first in his head and then set upon the activity of sculpting to bring it forth, but somehow it ends up, this image, as a compositional part of the larger mechanics of this project. How could he sculpt this sculpture? How did he sculpt the sculpture? How could the face of the figure be in the figure's hand yet the head of the figure still be completely and totally complete? The facet left where the face is missing doesn't function as a meta-face. It creates a face of another part of ourselves. It's as if I'm looking at myself as a kind of centaur or other creature. But this image of the man with the face in the hand doesn't create a Surrealist window where I am on one side and the image is on the other. It's not dreamlike, though I imagine it could appear to you in a dream. The sculpture itself is active. It's not stable enough to become an image on the other side of the line between reality and unreality. That is to say, the sculpture is completely and totally, in image and physicality, real. Its physicality and its made-ness bring a reality to the object that has to be dealt with and pondered if you want to look at the sculpture not as a photograph but as an object in front of you.

When I first saw the model of the man with his face in his hand, it was in Francois Pinault's collection at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris. It was over in the corner of the room, but that didn't matter. I remember liking the pedestal, but that also maybe didn't matter. I first saw the facet left by the missing face. In the hand of the figure, I didn't see a face but a sponge. Perhaps because the figure was standing in muck or water. If in the hand I saw a sponge, a split second later I saw it as a face, the face of the figure. The magic of this sculpture is that the face never seems to be missing. It was sculpted in such a powerful relation to the totality of the sculpture that in this context it almost seems to have been left in its correct anatomical position. The figure being in the water in a kind of barrel or rub that is missing its sides is what perhaps brought the first impression of the face as a sponge. It's an impression that I have no need to correct, even after connecting the face to the identity of the subject. The surface of the liquid that the man is standing in is modeled not like a rough sea or even wind on water but more like a bog. But the boggy-ness is a kind of meta-liquid, the water or wind we exist in.

My perception of the face as a rag or sponge of the figure standing in the bronze, waterlike fluid is what brought me in the first instance of viewing to Degas's *Le Tub*. I do see this as a relationship between the two artists, as a temporal vibration between the past, present, and future. How could Degas's sculpture of the bather surface in the now, so present and powerfully? Schütte's relationship to history is not anachronistic, even if the dress and drapery of his sculptures appear so. His relationship to history springs out of a figurative tradition, like if we could dive on a diving board into the future. I think our experience of the sculpture is the meaning of the work. I can write about it and put my thoughts to pen and paper, but the experience of its embeddedness in the space and time of culture springs from a language not of words but of form, surface, and material. You may tell me that everything is embedded in the world and that would be true. A car, the space shuttle, an apple, a tree, or a shoe—they are all artifacts of the beehive. But Schütte's work and its embedment is different because the embedment is not a function of the object but is central to the experience of the object. Somehow it is the experience itself rather than the object alone that finds embedment in space and time. You don't drive his sculpture on errands through the town. You don't pick a hybrid apple from its branches. No, the sculpture affects you in a different way. It's a work of art. Look closely at the figure, the image of the figure, and what the figure is doing, the narrative of the figure. However understandable, however masterfully rendered, it exists in a fluid. The fluidity of culture, space, and time don't matter. What matters to me is that the figure and the nature of fluidity are somehow completely one and the same. This figurative sculpture, with his face in his hand, is embedded or standing in the muck. It is an image or a juxtaposition of an internal sculptural structure superimposed on our human condition. In other words, it is a metaphor. But if this figure is embedded in the muck of its imagistic environment, the larger idea of the sculpture itself is embedded in the cultural muck existing all around us. That is to say, the sculpture of this embedded figure is embedded in a larger matrix of our condition. If you walk into a room and say, "Who put that here? How long is that going to be here?" Or in a city plaza, where one sculpture can be replaced with another. Or when the crowds of people rise up against an old hero and topple his or her bronze edifice for whatever sins they may have committed in the past. If this happens before, after, and during the experience of looking, the game is over. The art has collapsed. But if a sculpture is complete, it is never standing in the way. The complexity of the artfulness of a sculpture embedded in space and time is both physical and cultural. Schütte's sculpture of a man can withstand or at least gives the perception of withstanding disruptions geological and cultural. The weight of the sculpture's ground is both physical and mental. The flat facet left from a displaced face is one and the same as the flat unseen facet under the volume of water, the round wheel of liquid whose flatness and weight stabilize the sculpture. It will not gravitationally topple in the physical and popular culture of human activity.

I would like to end with this thought about knots. The knot that ties the shirt ends of Schütte's bronze sculpture *Mann ohne Gesicht* looks to me like the looping tail ends of looking, thinking, and making. A mathematician will tell you that if you remove from the world the space that a knot exists in, each and every kind of knot with the space removed will open to a new dimensional domain. Perhaps this is what happens when looking at the knot Schütte's sculpture ties.

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