

In 1978, Schütte painted the phrase “Alles in Ordnung”—which translates to “all in order” or “everything’s okay”—on the wall of a friend’s apartment. He made a subsequent version in 1981, which the painting on view here closely resembles. Schütte originally borrowed the expression from Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin’s film *Tout va bien* (1972), set in the aftermath of the May 1968 leftist revolutions. In one scene, striking factory workers paint their company’s offices blue while they hold their manager hostage. Here, Schütte uses a similar sky-blue color, over which he depicts letters as loopy contrails—but if jets are delivering a message from above that everything’s okay, chances are they are not.

Schütte created *Große Mauer* while still a student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, and it marked a pivotal moment in his practice. He took the format of the grid—so prevalent among the work of the modernists before him—and shifted alternating rows off-center. Through this simple intervention, Schütte changed an abstract pattern into something representational: a brick wall. In doing so, the artist complicated tidy divisions not just between abstraction and representation, but between painting and sculpture as well.

Since antiquity, nation states have used monumental figurative sculpture to convey authority, stability, glory, and heroism, thereby conferring status to ruling parties—whether dictators, monarchs, or democratically elected leaders. In *Vater Staat*, Schütte critiques both authoritarian state power and the role that art has played in reinforcing it. The towering demagogue is severe, but also vulnerably frail—he is bound by his garments in a way that suggests he may have no body at all.

Schütte produced *Amerika* over the course of five days in a hallway of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, in view of passersby. He diligently recorded his labor and materials in a log: thirty-one hours and twenty-five pencils by the drawing's completion. In this process-based work, the solid graphite square is buckled and pocked from the pressures of Schütte's hand. He titled *Amerika* after the name of the pencils he used, a seemingly banal gesture that implicates a wider geopolitical context. The sweeping reach of US imperialism was acutely visible at the time, exemplified by the Vietnam War, which came to an end in 1975, the year this drawing was made. "AMERICA is a trigger word, an irritation, an intentionally created ambiguity to provoke questions!" the artist wrote.

Schütte made these self-portraits—the only two in existence from a series that once totaled twenty in all—while studying under the painter Gerhard Richter at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Working from a picture, Schütte used a grid to transfer the image to canvas within a strict time limit: each painting was finished over the span of one day, regardless of how complete it appeared. His approach was both inspired by and departs from Richter's. As in contemporaneous portraits by Richter, Schütte reinterpreted the genre of the headshot through painting. But unlike his teacher, who worked in a photorealistic style and rarely did self-portraits, Schütte varied his painterly treatment and used himself as the subject.

The first figurative sculpture that Schütte attempted was a man made out of wax, no bigger than a handheld toy. Unable to get it to stand on its feet, Schütte resigned to submerging the figure in additional wax up to its knees. It was a technical solution to a material problem, but also a powerful visual metaphor—an allegory of the immobility of the artist, modernism, or even society. In the work on view here, the artist cast the original wax figure in steel, balancing it among staircases and circular rings. It is one of numerous iterations of men in mud that Schütte has made over the years.

Alain Colas was a French sailor who was lost at sea during a transatlantic race, on November 16, 1978—coincidentally, the same day as Schütte's birthday. A decade later, the artist was invited by the French government to submit a proposal for a monument commemorating Colas in his hometown of Clamecy. Schütte designed a figurative bust that would be anchored in the bay like a buoy, periodically submerged by the rising tide. Schütte's provocation that Colas be memorialized as reliving his death was rejected for obvious reasons—but the work set the tone of the artist's approach to monumental sculpture in the years to come.

Schütte would have died on March 25, 1996, had the inscription on this work come to pass. In 1981, shortly after finishing his studies at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Schütte gave himself just fifteen years to become a successful artist. Rendering his grave in both two and three dimensions, Schütte draws life and death near together: the structure's pitched design elicits both a headstone and a house. The themes of mortality and impermanence established in these works would remain important to Schütte's later practice.

Schütte dedicated this series of drawings, which pairs still lifes with clever word play, to Robert Walser (1878–1956). Walser was a Swiss writer who experienced modest success with his early poetry and later participated in influential German-language literary circles, but he struggled in relative obscurity for most of his career and died in poverty at a sanitarium. Walser's preoccupations with alienation, solitude, and the vanity of life are themes that resonate with Schütte's work.

In June 1992, Schütte traveled to Rome to participate in a residency at the Deutsche Akademie Rom Villa Massimo for six months. While there, he made dozens of little puppets that would become the *United Enemies* series. Schütte sculpted the heads by hand from modeling clay, spending no longer than an hour on each. He then used scraps of his own clothes or other found materials to dress the figures and bound them in pairs. Akin to scientific specimens preserved under glass, the diminutive adversaries are studies in human moods, impulses, and affects.

Massive reconstruction efforts took place in East and West Germany in the 1970s and '80s in the wake of World War II and amid the ongoing Cold War. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, governments commissioned civic monuments designed to promulgate triumphalist nation-building narratives. In *Großer Respekt*, Schütte satirizes the formulaic logic of the tradition: the bigger the monument, the greater its importance, no matter how compromised its protagonists may be.

In 1996, Schütte's friend and longtime gallerist Konrad Fischer passed away. Fischer opened his gallery in 1967 in Düsseldorf, where he presented contemporary art and introduced audiences to Minimal and Conceptual artists who were virtually unknown in Europe at the time. His gallery was also one of the first places Schütte exhibited. Here, Schütte pays homage to Fischer through drawings of flowers and a ceramic based on sketches the artist made of him after he died. With a touching, gentle humor, Schütte installs the ceramic on a moving blanket—a standard item in any gallery, but evocative of a spiritual journey in this work.

“I don’t see decoration in a negative sense,” Schütte said in 1990. “It’s one of the most fantastic fields to work in.” The artist’s ongoing interest in the relationship between contemporary art and decoration is evident in a number of works that involve appliqué rings. He began with a version made from painted wooden circles but later explored other materials—including reflective vinyl, as in this gallery. The array draws attention to the surrounding architecture, as if it were a wallpaper. “What I was attempting to do . . . was to work without a mechanical system, without grids, or rectangles; to create a free-form, discrete decoration,” Schütte explained.

Over the span of one year, Schütte drew his reflection from a round shaving mirror, recording his moods and temperaments in diaristic sketches. “It’s the attempt to fathom oneself,” Schütte remarked, “and it failed miserably.” The artist’s disappointment with the fact that that he carefully studied himself for so long and had no personal revelations attests to the mercurial nature of the self and the limitations of the apparatuses that structure what we see.

This photographic series unfolds in fourteen acts, each scene picturing a dioramic stage with a painted backdrop that refers to other artworks by Schütte—establishing an artist’s universe of sorts. On one of the backdrops, text ominously reads *Achtung* (warning), followed by *Freiheit* (freedom), *Zukunft* (future), *Hoffnung* (hope), *Frieden* (peace), and *Etwas fehlt* (something’s missing). Two toy figures—Spock from *Star Trek* and Princess Leia from *Star Wars*—appear in the foreground. Here, the sci-fi characters imbue the work with themes of empire and futurism—at the same time, their diminutive size undermines any suggestion of grandeur or utopia.

The genesis of many of Schütte's earliest works can be traced back to ideas prompted during his 1972 visit to Documenta, an exhibition that occurs every five years in Kassel, Germany. There, a seventeen-year-old Schütte learned of photorealism, Minimalism, and Conceptualism for the first time. Works by artists like Daniel Buren made a lasting impression on him, particularly Buren's striped installations that clad the walls of the exhibition spaces. This encounter left Schütte with questions: Is this painting or wallpaper, and what, exactly, is the difference? Schütte's *Großer Tapeten* makes a nod to Buren, but its curling edges and flaking paint reckon with the concepts of impermanence and deterioration.

The figures of Schütte's *Krieger* are saber-rattling militants. Although they stand at nearly ten feet tall, whatever strength their stature may convey is compromised by Schütte. He capped each head with screw-top bottle lids, so that these "warriors" appear more like dunces or clowns. Carved from wood, the knotted, disproportionate bodies resemble the callused burls of a tree. Thus diminished, these figures can be understood as farcical depictions and moral anecdotes on war.

*Schutzraum* was Schütte's first full-scale architectural model, originally commissioned for an outdoor exhibition in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Amid the growing threat of atomic annihilation across Europe, Schütte based the shape of this bunker-like structure on omega, the final letter of the Greek alphabet—and thus a harbinger of the end. Any promise of safety that this shelter might have offered was thwarted: the door was locked shut. Two months before the exhibition opened, the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Pripyat, Ukraine (then part of the Soviet Union), had a catastrophic meltdown, adding another layer of meaning to *Schutzraum*.