

Wolfgang Ullrich  
A New Form of Folk Art

In her most recent works, Veronika Veit has become a sociologist. Her theme might be one of the most ancient in sculpture, that of the human figure, but she is well able to imbue the subject with something new. In contrast to many other variants of contemporary objective sculpture, the viewer is spared those stiff, alienated and surreal figures that originate from a lack of artistic ability; rather, the impression is of an encounter with real personalities complete with character and life-story, in a word, living contemporaries – neighbours, colleagues, fellow citizens. Didn't you see that lady in the blue suit carrying a big handbag just yesterday in the pedestrian zone? And that elderly man with the too-short tie, wasn't he next to you on the bus the other day?

In their postures and expressions, as well as in their clothing, Veronika Veit's figures possess sufficient detail to be recognizable representatives of a specific milieu: Those following conservative or alternative lifestyles; rich and poor; intellectuals and tradesmen; freaks and introverts; even the pragmatic individual and the complicated one can be distinguished from one another with ease. Whichever sociological or psychosocial categories one applies, they are always applicable to Veronika Veit's figures; categories which can even be elucidated using the figures as examples. What makes them comprehensible is that they express with great clarity something that is usually perceived, at best, peripherally – subconsciously; namely the complexity of society with its countless, disparate individuals. Nevertheless, Veronika Veit repudiates caricature-like exaggeration and particularly the denunciation by confronting them with animosity of individual types. On the contrary, she is fair to all types of individuals. And where else can you find art which imparts insight into the social fabric of modern times?

As Veit's figures are smaller than life, one does not perceive them as "real". However, this makes it easy to view them from a reflective distance, to feel oneself invited to take one's time and to examine them minutely. One can study the position of a hand which has been sculpted naturalistically even down to the veins or wonder at the juxtaposition of several figures in a group. The way the artist groups together people waiting at a bus stop, for instance, or as guests at an opening night creates downright social frameworks. Sometimes it appears as though two figures facing each other are taking part in a spirited dialogue or are at least in accord with one another. And just as easily there are constellations in which harmony hangs in the balance. What is that strict old lady going to think of the "fast" young woman? And what could a rather staid man and a sophisticated woman have to say to one another?

As Veronika Veit does not present isolated figures detached from space and time, but rather gives her sculptures an environment, it makes her appear superior to nearly all other sculptors who work with figures sometimes more – and rather more often, less – skilfully. The experiences she has gained over the years with her installations find fruition here. Accustomed to designing entire rooms and bringing diverse individual objects together in a single composition, Veronika Veit knows how to create an entire environment using just a few elements and even how to draw the viewer into a central position. Thus, he or she is encouraged to relate to the figures, to feel included in their affairs and at the same time to be an eye-witness, as it were.

One can put it that way because the figures appear as individuals although occurring in groups. Among them, one feels as if one is on a stage on which a scene is being enacted. Indeed, contemporary fine art is rarely as narrative as is the case with Veronika Veit's art. Not only is one tempted to give names – or at least nicknames – to the individual figures, but preferably to start making them into the protagonists of a novel or of many small stories and dramas. This is reminiscent of other, famous groups of figures from art history such as the figures of the founders of the cathedral in the semicircle of the West Choir in the Naumburg Cathedral, in which some interpreters like to discern dramatic heroes such as those in Shakespeare's plays. This leads one to imagine that a form of art is being created here which could, in a good sense, become a new form of folk art. Not necessarily because these are figures of the people as such, but rather because these figures are so lovingly and carefully designed that one seeks their proximity, even feels comfortable in their presence. One would like to become acquainted, even with the less sympathetic figures; there is not one figure which awakens aversion. Ultimately, transcending all differences, they seem to be just people; thereby nourishing the hope that understanding can always be arrived at.

As a new form of folk art, one could imagine Veronika Veit's figures installed in many different places – certainly not only in museums and "white cubes". Could we not imagine them in city squares and in institutions, in shops and even in natural surroundings? That they could act as role models, reflections and counter-images that play a similar role to the dwarves, "good folk" or other helpful creatures who only appear in fairytales? If this seems too absurd, remember that ancient Greek cities were populated with an almost unimaginable number of sculptures. Each city had thousands of them, and one can assume that various groups in the cities set up their own figures in order – with a mixture of mascot and testimonial – to promote their own interests. These figures,

therefore, served for the shaping of public opinion and as a social exchange. They also helped to integrate the individual citizens more closely into the community and to facilitate contact. And thus, they were a political as well as a traditional folk element in the public space. And is this not something that every society needs?

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