

Ernest W. Uthemann
The reality of dwarves

On the Indonesian island Flores in September 2003, a group of palaeoanthropologists found the fossilized remains of a hominoid including a well-preserved skull. At first they thought the skeleton was that of a child as it only measured a little over one metre. To the surprise of the scientists, however, on further examination it became apparent that it was that of an adult individual, and, judging by the pelvic bones, a woman. Further finds confirmed that this was not a case of possible pathologically stunted growth; instead they had stumbled on a human type so far unknown to science which resembled a miniature version of early *Homo erectus* more than anything else. As was the case with legendary “Lucy” (*Australopithecus afarensis*), the researchers immediately came up with a nickname for this find too: Hobbit. *Homo floresiensis* had yet another surprise in store. The most recent finds are no older than 13.000 years; that means these people were contemporaries of our own kind, anatomically modern humans. “We” did not share the world with only the Neanderthals – as had been assumed until now – but with another type of human completely different from *Homo sapiens sapiens*. But could the reality of that world be compared with ours, or rather, with that of our ancestors? Did the two human types ever encounter one another? And if so, in what way? As hunters and prey? Or with mutual indifference?

Veronika Veit’s figures have several common traits with the Hobbits, with those invented by Tolkien as well as with the “dwarves of Flores”. And apart from the proportionally over-large feet that the British writer bestowed on his heroes and that the figures sculpted by the Munich artist possess, thanks to their need for stability and the difficulty of obtaining or making footwear of a suitable size, they are at least very similar in their bodily proportions. The figures share the world with us, not only because they are in the same room with us. The ambience they find themselves in does not correspond to their scale of dimension but to ours; not only the surrounding museum architecture but the doors and windows created for them by Veronika Veit are too high for them, the seats, chairs and chaise longues are overproportioned. The monitors which the artist occasionally combines with her (if I may call them so) “Hobbits” also correspond to the dimensions of our reality. With their usually slightly raised heads, as if they were looking up at their surroundings and at us, the figures gaze upon the world with their black-button eyes, often with an indifferent, faintly baffled facial expression. A form of communication with us is thereby hinted at, although not necessarily one free of care. This expression becomes comprehensible when we realize with what reality (what realities) Veronika Veit is confronting her little people. It is not just this Brobdingnag that they have been set down in, like travellers from another world, like a throng of Gullivers. In the “tableaux” that the artist has created for the exhibition, we, the viewers, are integral elements, are Swift’s giants who could be either threatening or protective. But Veronika Veit plays with various realities in a much more complex way than merely with the confrontation of scale. To begin with, her figures do display a certain naturalism in their depiction – due not least to the “real” clothing and “genuine” hair – but it is not because of their size alone that they are far removed from the optical illusion of reality as presented by Duane Hanson or John de Andrea. The bewilderment and confusion that their sculptures evoked in viewers at the beginning of the 1970s fizzled out in museum presentations and build-up, and the dermoplasts at Madame Tussaud’s have long achieved the same standard. Today, the digital production of things, living creatures and humans supplies the gauge of “veristic” mimesis (even if one asks oneself if Anthony Hopkins, John Malkovich and Halle Berry would not have done better to appear personally rather than to lend their appearance to wooden, soulless avatars in “Beowulf”...). With her figures, Veronika Veit cleverly avoids competing with realities created on the computer. However, in the things she designs, in chairs, beds, cloths, in frothy soap bubbles or even in an ice cream on a stick, the artist borrows the artificial, textureless sleekness available in the trompe-l’œil of the digital age. Thus appears as though the objects have taken a journey through the virtual world of the computer and have arrived back in the three-dimensionality of “true reality”, recognizable in their naturalistic appearance but significantly changed. Kitchen (2003, Veronika Veit: substitute, Bielefeld 2005, p. 36), Escalator (2004, see above, p. 39) and Blue towel (2005, p. 32) follow these aesthetics, whereby the moment of change is not only apparent in the aforementioned adjustment to digital image-worlds, but rather, beyond this, things seem to develop a peculiar life of their own. This is particularly unsettling against the background of the actually quite trivial objects being depicted: The fridge is dripping poisonous-looking yellow globules; the towel is disappearing into the drain like a vortex; the handrail of the escalator writhes like a snake – the Mechanic (2003, p. 34) will not be able to achieve much here. After their journey through an artificial world, the things no longer seem to be able to find their place and function in reality. One may, *cum grano salis*, regard this as a parable for the sometimes mysterious, almost inexplicable changes influenced by the digitalizing of the world, everywhere and in all fields.

What seems even more involved is the ratio between reality and virtuality in those groups of sculptures in which Veronika Veit has combined figures, objects and digitally processed videos with one another. On the one hand, the figures represent living creatures who gaze at the world, obviously their only occupation. On the other, however, as an artificial human substitute they become a type of avatar, incorporating in a certain sense the inability to contemplate reality, which increasingly disappears behind the media into virtuality. But even this conveyed reality seems no longer to be truly perceivable although it attempts to attract attention to itself as is the

case with the Alsatian in the group *Man with Dog* (2006, p. 58), and although it has become a part of the person like the dangling legs of the woman in *Contrast Bath* (2006, p. 50). But what is actually more real? The figures, belonging after all to the real world (although they are themselves “imitations” of reality) or the moving pictures on the monitors (also partially digitally altered) that our naïve perception spontaneously believes to be undoubted and immediate images of the actual world around us? But then the viewer comes to the realization that the copy obviously exists without a corresponding original image, such as in the installation *Shower* (2004, p. 33), from which the person – as well as the sculptural copy – has disappeared. All that remains is their projection on the ceiling. This is also something of a parable: the convincing “copy” of reality no longer needs reality as a reference (Roland Barthes); reality does not copy itself but is calculated – namely in the computer.

What is the “realest” reality? One asks oneself this question in the face of Veronika Veit’s works. Is it our familiar, tangible environment? Is it the exaggeration and reflection in an artistic mimesis of this same environment, conjoining the material with the no less extant spiritual? Or is it even the virtuality in which humans generate their own creation? The answer is: Today, these zones of reality are indissolubly linked to one another – Veronika Veit demonstrates this. The image no longer just mirrors reality but also makes it. And digital reality has a no lesser degree of reality than all the other man-made things, perhaps even than all the other phenomena in the world.

What is truly named is subject to a continual alteration. In the eighteenth century, the *Homo floresiensis* was not real because there was still no conception of evolution; and up until 2003 it was not real because no-one would have conceived of a human of such miniature stature. Veronika Veit’s art reflects this change, and it is one thing – real.

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