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THE TOWER AND THE VIEW

DURING AN UNUSUALLY MILD WINTER, **GIL BLANK** TRAVELED TO DÜSSELDORF TO SPEAK WITH **THOMAS STRUTH** AS HE PREPARED FOR TWO SEPARATE SHOWS AT MUSEO DEL PRADO IN MADRID AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY IN NEW YORK.

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Thomas Struth
...
Jianghan Lu
Wuhan
1995
90 x 116 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Previous page
Thomas Struth
...
Paradise 09
(Xi Shuang Banna)
Yunnan Province,
China
1999
267.9 x 337.9 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Having brought his photographic work to a broad audience with his midcareer museum survey in 2002, Struth is often cited as one of the primary champions of his medium's reassertion of an affirmatively pictorial stance, following the conceptual practices of the sixties and the postmodern assaults of the seventies and eighties. No such return, however, can legitimately proceed as a simple act of reclamation. At a time of often intense focus on photography, Struth and Blank spoke of the challenge to build and sustain a wholly personalized vision.

GIL BLANK: *I'd like to begin by asking how you perceive the nature of subjectivity within contemporary image-making. The concept of subjectivity, and even the word itself, is a loaded one within current artistic discourse, so I think it would be a helpful point of departure for us to tease apart the conflicts that it presents to someone attempting a means of making images now.*

THOMAS STRUTH: Well, first of all, in terms of an artistic practice, I can clearly only comment on something that exists, or that I encounter by direct experience. I think that my switch to photography from painting, for example, came about because I realized that I was more interested in working on things that resided out in the world and were not restricted to my own psychological field. I realized I was more of a social and political person, and that I was more fascinated by analytical processes. It also bears saying that every part of my work reflects the position of a human being who actively takes part in life, which maybe sounds very banal and general to say expressly, but that is nonetheless what I'm interested in.

In the beginning I was also interested in the relationship of the individual to the larger historical time span into which he's born, and the responsibilities of what might be called one's heritage. So, for instance, my specific experience at that time entailed an analysis of urban structures in the post-war German landscape, or the result of all that came after the Holocaust at that time, or more specifically, of being a witness to the emblematic structure of postwar German cities.

This led to a curiosity about other places and other patterns of historical heritage, and then more or less by intuition or accident, to looking at another type of structure, that of the family. Those pictures were a starting point for an analysis of the social group, of the way individuals learn about the group dynamic or group activity. Because this family unit is the elementary social structure, it sets part of the patterns for how you behave in life, where you learn your first steps as a social being. Essential to the function of those pictures, though, is an understanding that they are only emblematic, that in making family portraits I was seeking something like an emblematic platform for a play of thought about something common, that we all share. Even if you look at the narratives of families as different as from, let's say, Ghana, Finland, Mongolia, or Germany, the fact of a family dynamic built through a history of generations is a shared experience.

GB: *But you specifically avoided the kind of examples that*

"EVENTUALLY, AN OPEN-ENDED PERMUTATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE OEUVRE EMERGES AS AN ARTICULATED GROUP-OF-GROUPS, A FORMAL *SUMMA*"
— GIL BLANK

Clockwise
Thomas Struth
...
Clinton Road
London
1977
44 x 56 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Crosby Street
Soho, New York
1978
44 x 56 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Prince Regent Street
Edinburgh
1985
36 x 49 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Hofgraben
Munich
1981
44 x 56 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

v
Thomas Struth
...
Piazza Civilta
Di Lavoro
Rome
1984
36 x 49 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

“MAYBE PHOTOGRAPHY NOW HAS ALSO MORE OR LESS LOST ITS FUNCTION, OR ITS CREDIBILITY IN A CERTAIN WAY. THERE MIGHT BE ANOTHER TWO OR THREE DECADES DURING WHICH THE WHOLE COURSE OF PRACTICE CAN BE REFORMULATED IN A DIFFERENT, MORE EXPANSIVE MODE” — THOMAS STRUTH

Installation view of “Video Portraits”, 1996-2003, part of “Thomas Struth 1977-2002”, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

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Thomas Struth
...
Nôtre-Dame
Paris
2000
170.7 x 214.5 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

^
Thomas Struth
...
Museo Del Prado
Madrid
2005
169.5 x 210.6 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

>
Thomas Struth
...
Stanze Di Raffaello
Rome
1990
125 x 173 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

“WHAT’S IN IT FOR EVERYBODY? EVEN IF IT IS BEAUTY, FOR EXAMPLE, WHICH IS IN IT FOR EVERYBODY, IT HAS TO BE EMBEDDED IN A CONTEXT, THROUGH WHICH IT CAN TOUCH THE VIEWER” — THOMAS STRUTH

Steichen populated The Family of Man *with, or rather, the larger assembly of your family pictures do not tend toward that kind of didactic illustration.*

TS: Viewed as a single group of pictures, *The Family of Man* always seemed to me like an uncomfortable strategy for casting a net of illusions over peoples’ heads. One such illusion portrays the world as a miraculous place of coexistence of human beings and natural phenomena, which is understandable in retrospect as a reaction in the early fifties to the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust. The photography of that time was presumably apolitical and “subjective,” but we can understand it in actuality as being highly political.

With my family portraits, I try to examine the transition between the subjective/personal and the historical/political dimensions.

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Thomas Struth
...
The Shimada Family
Yamaguchi
1986
94.5 x 133.5 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

v
Thomas Struth
...
The Bernstein Family
Mündersbach
1990
104 x 76.5 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

GB: *We can, however, say that there are photographs of yours that are iconographic, that exist self-sufficiently and leverage the hermetic features of pictorial space, such as the image of the facade of the cathedral at Notre Dame. Its reading is beneficially complicated by considering it alongside the equivalent but differentiated flatness of, for instance, the* Paradise *pictures. Or, oppositely, beside the earliest street pictures, which convey a receding formal depth but the wholly evacuated sense of a social void. This wider view is critical to the possible range of meanings attainable in any single image you’ve produced, though it might not seem so far removed from the established capabilities of standard photo editing.*

Yet I differentiate this from the conventional understanding of the series in two ways. The first is structural, which I’m proposing as the creation and reception of your images as a model of contemporary social experience, rather than its literal illustration. And the second is the ontological fabrication of meaning in the photographs: in contrast, the conventional imperative of the series, rooted as it was in modernist photography’s ideas of transparency and attainable objectivity, was often documentary, and at times unabashedly didactic. We could cite the photojournalistic essay as the defining paradigm of that.

You’ve rejected that teleological inclination out of hand: an equally valid positioning of either the Paradise *or street pictures could be the absolute denial they propose of cognitive or emotional access to their subject matter, a result made all the more pointed in fact by the surfeit of information they provide. Eventually, an open-ended permutational understanding of the oeuvre emerges as an articulated group-of-groups, a formal summa.*

TS: Yes, I hate that too. The word “series” is a diminutive attachment. A series is something that pretends as if one picture has no value and you need the series to give it that value. You wouldn’t say, for instance, that James Joyce wrote “a series of books.”

The oeuvre’s construction is indeed like that of a larger, complex building. While each room has a different size, quality, and function, and may be considered independently, all have reference to each other, and an expression and aim as a total. Every part in its own way serves the total, and without that inherent connection, it remains a merely personal statement, a matter of taste.

TS: I would say that my interest, or my hope, or my intent, is to address something that has a larger scale, a larger value, than the specific details or locations shown. The photographs must ultimately be driven by interests on a more general level.

GB: *You’re not trying to infer any conclusions about the rainforest in Peru, for example.*

TS: No. That’s why I called it *Paradise*; it was meant somewhat to irritate the spectator. By choosing that title I wanted to ensure from the beginning that no one mistook it to be about botany, for example. That’s not my interest.

When my retrospective exhibition debuted in Dallas in 2002, I asked myself what function the room with the jungle pictures had in relation to my other bodies of work. Going to a very dense forest was an intuitive idea at first, but once I started to make the images, to show them and maneuver the pictures within a larger exhibition context, I realized that one of their abilities was to confine the individual in a meditative space. There’s no political or social context to the images. At least that’s been my own experience, which has surprised me.

It’s a bit hard to put into words without being too personal, but some of that comes from my experience with meditation practice or t’ai chi ch’uan. Similarly, in the course of a therapeutic workshop, you can have a moment when you look at the “whole picture.” You release your detailed vision of, for instance, your partner, or your wife, or your assistant, of all the things you constantly do, of the media, the war in Iraq, the explosions in Baghdad, and the Japanese minister who offends women’s roles by saying that they’re all birth machines, of all these kinds of everyday things. You come to a certain distance for a moment, and perhaps you can try to see the basic struggle of being human. It can sound very kitschy, but there is the attempt to see the whole picture in some way.

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Thomas Struth
...
Eleonor and
Giles Roberston
Edinburgh
1987
41.5 x 59 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Following page
Thomas Struth
...
Drammen 1
Drammen, Oslo
2001
129.8 x 169.8 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Those results were very surprising for me, because after a number of years when there hadn’t seemed to be anything new for me to do except to expand the street subject matter to China, the idea I initially generated was to make pictures of extremely dense information, so that you could not in fact read every detail in them. When you look at one of the street pictures, you can spend time analyzing them productively. Similarly, when you look at a Walker Evans picture, you can see that there are two cars, and three houses, and the landscape, so that the hierarchy of meaning that you can relate to your own experiences is quite clear. Most of the time. But what I wanted to do was to make pictures that you couldn’t completely read in that way.

GB: *Which is why they so often appear as a wall of impenetrable data, so visually flat.*

TS: Yes. I was thinking of how to increase the depth of field, or how to make it such that even if you look at only one square foot of the picture, it would still take you a long time to see, or to absorb. My point, though, is that what ended up happening was that I photographed something that seemed, at first glance, to have no direct or obvious sociopolitical or historical contexts. At least in comparison to the other stuff that I’d been doing, they more or less left you alone.

GB: *Let me try to state it in another way: by directly implicating the viewer’s encounter in the cognitive formation of this work, it once again seems that the primary action of the photograph is not a depiction, but a modeling of experience. So that if the traditional operation of photography has been to document, to point toward, or to frame, it seems that in seeking the far-off or exotic example in this case, you did so not as a consummating*

illustration, but rather as a way to neutralize that same territory. In making the pictures, the integral halves of the project — your actions at these locations, plus the viewers' subsequent interaction within the newly neutralized spaces of image and exhibition — combine to synthesize or activate what I would refer to as the subjectivity.

I position this directly opposite other contemporary retreads of archly traditional notions of photographic subjectivity, such as that of Nan Goldin. The crucial distinction to be made here is between the continual replenishability of the neutralized space and the temptations of mere solipsism, or the dangers of mistaking subjectivity with one's life story. By suppressing the local, you not only imply the global, but further, you solicit the participation of the viewer.

TS: With Goldin, and also Wolfgang Tillmans, I find it so highly personal that the door is open to just about anything. It's all interchangeable.

GB: *Precisely because it's so specific, because it's in a specifically diaristic mode?*

TS: Yes. Besides the necessary personal involvement, the crucial question is, What's in it for everybody? Even if it is beauty, for example, which is in it for everybody, it has to be embedded in a context, through which it can touch the viewer.

It's true that for me things are only interesting when they're fed by my own passion and will to go out and do them in the first place. Furthermore, it has to be something that I know by experience, because otherwise one can always just invent things, in which case nobody will be interested. But it's always essential to address something that includes the experience of the other person, of the viewer in general. It's crucial.

GB: *It may be crucial, but you can't assume that the nature or force of that motivation is self-evident. It seems that from your earliest days when you put aside painting and a more overtly expressionist mode there was created instead an affirmative belief in the making of pictures, in photography. But that belief was also tempered by the limitations your generation experienced collectively as postwar German artists. So that now, that superstructure of the oeuvre seems to have provided a vast architecture within which new experiences might be proposed, if not expressly retold. Subjectivity need not reside in the metaphoric expression of one's life story, but the material enaction of that life.*

TS: That's also why it's complicated: at the moment I'm wondering what is missing, or what the next thing is, and I don't see it yet. It's a bit of a strange moment, actually.

You spoke earlier about this idea of the superstructure, and about how it created its own context within which anything was possible, that potentially any photographic action would fit into or connect with or dock onto that structure. That's an interesting question and something I've been thinking about over the past one or two years. I know, for instance, that the museum photographs will come to an end with my current work at the Prado. I feel the pictures are complete, or that they've fulfilled their function within the whole system.

The *Paradise* pictures are another example; that pillar of the larger building is nearly complete. I did two more pictures in Hawaii recently, and could already hear myself thinking, "That's all." When you work on a building, as with your entire body of work, there's no reason that one of the walls or segments has to be sixteen feet thick, because then the whole architecture just becomes comical.

The question I'm asking myself now is what the nature of that structure is. Is there another part of the

palette of existence that I would like to and would be able to make pictures about? Again, I'm embarrassed to talk in these terms, but is there another element to one's existence for which photographs could provide an emblematic expression?

To put it a different way: I remember that when I stopped teaching in 1996, the Internet was a very tiny and new sort of thing. Now it's begun to influence patterns of social activity — you have, for example, the *Second Life* Web site — and I think the effectiveness of that influence is only going to accelerate. Which makes me question your proposals of subjectivity at all, and what subjectivity will look like in, say, 20 years from now.

GB: *Are you specifically questioning photography's viability as what you call a relevantly emblematic expression?*

TS: As a more general question, you could ask why photography became so popular in the eighties and nineties. I think Hilla Becher would probably say that once photography was invented, painting lost some of its previous functions. And as a direct result, there was an explosion of painting, though on a more scientific, or experimental, or analytical level. It tested all the possibilities of the medium at that time. Maybe photography now has also more or less lost its function, or its credibility in a certain way. There might be another two or three decades during which the whole course of practice can be reformulated in a different, more expansive mode. That could be one thesis.

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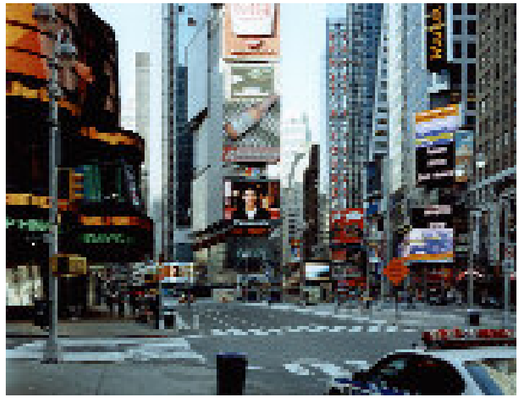
Thomas Struth
...
Go and Ayaka Okutsu Yamaguchi
1996
44.4 x 58 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman



Installation view of "Video Portraits, 1996-2003", broadcast by Astrovision as part of Creative Time's "The 59th Minute" at Times Square, New York, 2003 Courtesy of Marian Goodman

"THE POINT AT WHICH THE PHOTOGRAPH CEASES TO FUNCTION AS A METAPHOR IS THE POINT AT WHICH IT IS FREE TO PROPOSE AN EXPERIENTIAL MODEL"

— GIL BLANK

>
Thomas Struth
...
Raphael Hartmann Dusseldorf
1997
Digital frame grab from *Video Portraits*
1996-2003
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

v
Thomas Struth
...
Times Square New York
2000
140.3 x 176 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Thomas Struth
...
Cerro Morro Solar
Lima, Peru
2003
138 x 242.2 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Following spread
Thomas Struth
...
Pantheon
Rome
1990
137.5 x 194 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

GB: *We've been mentioning primarily American and German photographers, and historically I think that's critical. The American dedication to — one could even say faith in — the series structure, and the German attachment to the organizing structure have a direct bearing on our questions. As a postwar artist, and one who has interests in methods of social analysis, it seems to me that you're operating in a space that is at all times aware of the pitfalls on every side. There is a sense of personal urgency, that these pictures can only be done in this way.*

TS: Mmm …

GB: *What are the conditions as such for one who would propose a subjective system? For years, such attempts were either strictly disavowed, or else took repressed forms like* arte povera, *or Otto Steinert's near-abstractions, forms that held themselves aloof from concerns that were at all socially contingent.*

TS: Yes, that's … [*Sighs.*]

I had already made the decision to photograph streets even before I knew the Bechers. But once I did come to know them, and saw the work, my first thought was "Great system … wrong subject matter." [*Both laugh.*]

Because in the early and mid-seventies, the Becher's subject matter had for the most part lost its visibility in the landscape, and my postwar generation had a totally different turn on history, art, and politics.

I felt like the problem there was that the passion and the love that they had for these things was … hidden under the blanket. In order to make work like that, it's clear that you have to love it, that you have to really love water towers and blast furnaces. But they also have …

You know it's amazing, their love is really for … how can I say it … an understanding of historical contexts in the most profound manner … it's like advertising for historical awareness, in a way. If that sounds too dry, we can also think of it as a passion for the dynamics of human existence, which I definitely share. It's so …

The austerity of the structure, of that archival order, it's such a strong expression that what they mean, or what they really want to do, is kind of … it's almost hidden.

GB: *But* what *is hidden?*

TS: Well, I know them very well, and what I find most inspiring when I talk to them is that they always talk about, for example, Proust *and* French politics *and* blast furnaces. They do have a very specific analytical reading of historical processes, but in the pictures …

GB: … *It doesn't come across.*

TS: No, that doesn't come across.

GB: *When they first formulated their work, a diagnosis of that conflict was not permitted, or at least unavailable.*

TS: Totally. I remember Hilla saying that in the first decades, in the fifties and sixties, what was forbidden as a notion in Germany was to really look at something. To simply open your eyes and look at something and talk about it. That's what they wanted to do, so they used these different kinds of objects that could come to life, or that have a particular design without openly demonstrating a design intention. That was their choice.

I felt that making those comparisons or providing that bigger structure was a great idea, but that it was so exotic, and so far away from most people's life experiences …

GB: *By "exotic," you're referring to their designated topics or ostensible subjects. The blast furnaces and coal tipples, for example.*

TS: Yes. Perhaps they're not necessarily so exotic, but …

GB: *Obscure.*

TS: They're obscure examples, not inclusive; they're specialized. It's like collecting butterflies, or snakeskins, and so on.

GB: *Perhaps there's another point here by which we can orient ourselves, another teacher of yours, Gerhard Richter — both the Bechers and Richter seeking a way to, as Adorno said, cry without tears, to seek some mode of expressionless expression.*

TS: That's it, yes.

GB: *And I would add to that another viewpoint, from Camus, speaking in postwar France about the refusal to capitulate to the simpler urge for vengeance, or, in the larger sense, the easier cynicisms that ultimately dehumanize each of the actors involved. Any existence of dignity requires of its participants that they be "neither victims nor executioners."*

So that within the space marked by each of these limitations, there is still the insistence within the impossible to proceed. I don't believe that this is a uniquely German position, though I do think that German artists of the last generation or two have addressed its conditions with exceptional candor.

It's possible that because of the Germans' unique historical circumstances during the last century, they have a greater wariness of the kind of persistent documentary fantasies that even now so many Americans abide by: that it's still feasible — if indeed it ever was — to seek out distant territories like an island off of Japan or a Ku Klux Klan meeting, to pursue the quasi-mystical journey for informative subject matter. When you did in fact go to Yakushima, you closed the picture off in a way, and organized its space as visual white noise, at once plentiful in data and emptied of connotation. The point at which the photograph ceases to function as a metaphor is the point at which it is free to propose an experiential model.

Despite at first appearing as a breakdown of possibility, the greater structure effects a continual insistence on finding a tenable means, however elusive, of defining pictorial value and meaning. Now. At this moment. Here.

TS: Of course.

GB: *But how can you say that, as if it were just a given?*

TS: No. It's very difficult, actually. [*Laughs.*]

Maybe the most honest thing I can say is what I said earlier, that at the moment I'm in a difficult situation finding a reason to take photographs. I'm testing myself, thinking about whether it could be necessary to go to a problematized place — say Iraq or Israel — to try to photographically capture something that's going on there. Would there be any possibility there, is there any way to address something problematic, or would it be more generalized? I'm thinking about what's missing, or what kind of construction could be addressed.

My goal has always been to address something more generalized than a specific historical moment. I would consider it a disadvantage if people looking at my street photographs were to think "Oh, right, that's a car from the eighties," for example. I'm always more interested in making a picture the central message of which is still valid in 50 years or so.

I'm sure that there were similar questions during periods of transition in the past. But it's also important that I feel it myself. You'll be able to see it too if I felt it, if I know it. If none of my skin has felt it, how can I judge or how can I say anything about it? It would be only voyeurism.

"YOU'LL BE ABLE TO SEE IT TOO IF I FELT IT, IF I KNOW IT. IF NONE OF MY SKIN HAS FELT IT, HOW CAN I JUDGE OR HOW CAN I SAY ANYTHING ABOUT IT? IT WOULD BE ONLY VOYEURISM" — THOMAS STRUTH

Thomas Struth
...
Las Vegas 1
Las Vegas, Nevada
1999
141.8 x 204.7 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

Thomas Struth
...
Pudong
Shangai
1999
139.9 x 170.9 inches
Courtesy of Marian Goodman

The catalog for Thomas Struth's exhibition at the Museo Nacional del Prado, *Making Time*, will be published in Spring 2007 by Schirmer & Mosel.