

Struth laughed. “Maybe it’s a bad example,” he said.

“It’s a terrible example,” I said. We both laughed.

Struth went on to contrast the beloved, haimish Bechers, whose classes were often held at their house or in a Chinese restaurant, with the “much more difficult to deal with” Gerhard Richter: “Gerhard was very ironic. I never had the feeling that he is someone who speaks naturally or openly. He was friendly, but you never knew what he really meant. It was very coded language and coded behavior.”

Struth’s characterization of Richter did not surprise me. I had seen the portrait of him and his wife and two children that Struth took for the *Times Magazine* in 2002, on the occasion of a Richter retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It is a beautifully composed picture of four people whose bodies are rigid with tension, and whose staring faces illustrate different ways of looking hostile. White lilies in a glass vase and a picture of a skull on the wall reinforce the photograph’s primal unease.

I was surprised to hear that Richter and his wife liked the picture.

“It’s a very sad and disturbing picture,” I said.

“O.K.,” Struth said.

“They do not look like a happy family.”

“Well, that’s not the issue.”

“That almost *is* the issue of the picture.”

Struth conceded that “they don’t look relaxed and happy,” and added, “He’s not an easy person, that’s for sure. He’s a very particular person.”

As we were leaving the café, Struth said, “I feel bad about Proust and Atget.” Struth is a sophisticated and practiced subject of interviews. He had recognized the Proust-Atget moment as the journalistic equivalent of one of the “decisive moments” when what the photographer sees in the viewfinder jumps out and says, “This is going to be a photograph.” I made reassuring noises, but I knew and he knew that my picture was already on the way to the darkroom of journalistic opportunism.

During our conversation in the café, Struth received a phone call from the Grieger printing lab telling him that the first test prints of his portrait of the Queen and the Duke were ready for his inspection. The Grieger lab is considered the supreme printing lab for large-scale photography and is the place where many of its practitioners go to have their prints made. At Grieger, we were met by Dagmar Miethke, who was Struth’s “special person” there, and on whose eye and taste he depends for the finish of his photographs. Miethke, an easy and friendly woman of around fifty, pinned the print to the white wall, and the three of us silently regarded it.

My first impression was of a vaguely familiar elderly couple posing for a formal portrait in a corner of the palatial Minneapolis hotel ballroom where their fiftieth wedding

anniversary is being celebrated. The pair were seated on an ornate settee, and my attention was drawn to the woman's sturdy legs in beige stockings, the right knee uncovered where the skirt of her pale-blue silk dress had hitched up a bit as she settled her ample figure into the settee; and to her feet, in patent-leather pumps planted firmly on the fancy hotel carpet. Her white hair was carefully coiffed, in a sort of pompadour in front and fluffy curls on the sides, and her lipsticked mouth was set in an expression of quiet determination. The man—a retired airline pilot?—was smaller, thinner, recessive. They were sitting a little apart, not touching, looking straight ahead. Gradually, the royal couple came into focus as such, and the photograph assumed its own identity as a work by Struth, the plethora of its details somehow tamed to serve a composition of satisfying serenity and readability.

Struth broke the silence and said that the picture was too yellow, and for the next half hour color adjustments were made on test strips, until he was satisfied that the print had reached the degree of coolness he wanted. Then the issue of size arose. The print we were looking at was big, around sixty-three by seventy-nine inches, and he asked that a larger print be made. When this was produced, he regarded the two prints side by side for a long while. It seemed to me that the smaller print was more flattering to the Queen—the larger print made *her* look larger, almost gross. Struth finally asked that the smaller print be taken away so that he could study the larger print without distraction, and he finally decided on it. Further color adjustments were made on the big print—the Queen's hands were made less red, the background was darkened, to noticeably good effect—and Struth was satisfied.

Struth had positioned the settee—upholstered in green silk brocade, with curved gilded arms and legs—at a slant, so that the Queen was more prominent and lit with a kind of white glow, while the Duke receded into the shadows. The Duke is still handsome at ninety, his military bearing intact, but in the double portrait, next to the Queen's amplitude, he looked a bit shrunken.

Struth said of the sitting, “When we walked in”—he was accompanied by Hirsch and another assistant, named Carolina Müller—“they were not particularly friendly. No smiles. I was very nervous. I took a few shots and realized I hadn't adjusted the shutter opening. Then I saw that the pillow behind the Queen was not in a good position—exactly the kind of mistake I didn't want to make—so I said to her, ‘Excuse me, can you lean forward,’ and I just fixed the pillow behind her back. Then I made three or four more shots. And one of those shots was it. I knew it was it.”

At his studio, Struth showed me the contact sheets of the sitting. There were the pictures with the badly positioned pillow behind the Queen. In another reject, the Duke had both hands on his thighs, rather than one hand strategically placed—as Struth instructed him to place it—on the seat of the sofa. Another showed the Queen looking majestic, the way she looks on money. In others, her mouth was slightly and awkwardly open, or her hands were

folded on her lap in what Struth called a “defensive” position. The selected picture was indeed the right one.

Struth said he believed that his preparations impressed the royal couple and contributed to the success of the portrait: “They saw we took the task seriously.” He spoke again of the bad photographs of the Queen and the Duke that he had studied, this time in terms of “the mistakes that make them look like almost comic impersonators of their functions rather than like real people. You would be shocked by how many terrible photographs there are of them. It’s clear that the best pictures of Elizabeth and Philip are by Lord Snowdon, because he was a family member. Elizabeth looks happiest in Snowdon’s photographs.” He added, “I think what matters is that when the circumstances are prepared well and the people sit and look into the camera there is always a chance of truth.”

In fact, there is more than a chance. Photography is a medium of inescapable truthfulness. The camera doesn’t know how to lie. The most mindless snapshot tells the truth of what the camera’s eye saw at the moment the shutter clicked. Only the person being photographed can assume the lying appearance of “naturalness” that the portrait photographer seeks and tries to elicit with his repertoire of blandishments. But this appearance is not enough to give the portrait the look of art. For that, the preparations that Struth talked of—the fussing with pillows and the tilting of sofas and, most crucially, the selection of site—is necessary. The portraits of August Sander, who may be the greatest portrait photographer in the history of the medium, are a great object lesson in the significance of settings in the art of the photographic portrait. His settings are not incidental backgrounds for the figures whose souls he seems to have captured with his camera; they are intrinsic to the viewer’s sense that such a capture has taken place. And so it was with Struth’s portrait of Elizabeth and Philip.

In one of our talks, Struth told me that when he was in high school he belonged to a little band of classmates—four boys and four girls—who spent all their time together and were determined not to be like their parents, whose recoil from the catastrophe of the war had taken the form of ultra-conventional behavior and a devotion to what was “safe and clean.” Later, as I was leafing through a book of Struth’s photographs, this phrase came floating to mind, for there is a sense in which it describes the world of Struth’s huge, handsome pictures, from which the dangerous and dirty is conspicuously absent. “Dallas Parking Lot” (2001), for example, a magnificent composition of cool grays and icy blues and warm browns that Struth extracted from the ugly mess of the construction boom in Dallas, shows a rooftop parking lot in early-morning near-emptiness and after-rain freshness, over which pristine glass high-rise buildings hover like benign guardians of the sleeping city’s security. As it happened, this picture was not included in a retrospective of Struth’s work in Düsseldorf (these days, there seems to be a Struth exhibition opening somewhere at every

moment), to which he accompanied me on my last day in Germany, but in which many other representations of Struth's safe and clean world were on view.

His monumental (fifty-seven by seventy-four inches) portrait of the eight members of the Ayvar family, in Lima, is a rare encounter with poverty. That the family is poor may be inferred from the room in which they sit—a piece of plasterboard with cracks in it appears behind the group, the foreground shows part of a patterned velvet sofa over which a sheet has been thrown to hide something torn or ruined, a dark muddy linoleum covers the floor, a small cheap religious print hangs high on the wall. Clearly the sparseness of the room is an object not of advanced taste but of want, of not having the things that advanced taste keeps at bay. The family members—a tiny, dark-haired mother, a gray-haired father, and six children, ranging in age from a seven- or eight-year-old boy to a grown son and daughter—sit at a small table facing the photographer. A current of sympathy runs between the subjects and the photographer that brings to mind the sympathy that flowed between Walker Evans and the sharecropper family he photographed in Dust Bowl Alabama, in the nineteen-thirties. But with this difference: Evans's black-and-white photographs are heavyhearted pictures. They show the hopelessness of the struggle of the people they dignify and beautify. The smell of poverty wafts out of them. If any smell wafts out of the photograph of the Ayvars, it is that of laundry detergent. The father's crisply ironed short-sleeved dress shirt, the children's neat white and pastel-colored T-shirts, decorated with cartoons, and, most conspicuously, the bleached white cloth draped over the table, every stitch of whose green-and-red cross-stitched border is made visible, you could almost say celebrated, by the oversized print's magnification—all this creates a gestalt that is far removed from that of the rueful Evans's homage to the dirt-poor. As with all Struth's photographs, it is hard to say what "statement" it makes, but its note is characteristically cheering, even elating. The dazzling white cross-stitched tablecloth (to which the eye is drawn as if to a central figure) emblemizes the work's optimism, like that of an Easter Sunday service—or an encounter with a friendly photographer.

As Struth and I were looking at another big picture, and he was pointing out something in its foreground, a museum guard suddenly materialized and told him that he was standing too close and should step back behind a line on the floor. Struth did not say, "I took that picture," but obediently stepped back behind the line. A little further into our tour of the show, the guard—a small woman of Japanese origin, now informed of Struth's identity—reappeared and profusely apologized for her blunder. Struth good-humoredly reassured her, but she could not stop apologizing and finally withdrew, walking backward with her hands held in supplication and her head bobbing up and down in little Japanese bows.

The picture we had been standing in front of showed a semi-submersible oil rig in a shipyard on Geoje Island, in South Korea—a huge red thing, a colossus on four legs on a

platform afloat near the shore, taut cables anchoring it to the concrete pavement onshore, on which piles of miscellaneous building materials are strewn. The photograph (a hundred and ten by a hundred and thirty-eight inches) magisterially represents what can be called the new optics of the new photography, which sees the world as no human eye does. When you look at these photographs, it is as if you were looking through strange new bifocals that focus on things at a distance at the same moment that they focus on things close up. Everything is equally sharp. Struth's photograph of Notre Dame is another striking example of this phenomenon. Every detail of the façade is rendered in razor-sharpness, as are the clothes and knapsacks of the dwarfed tourists in the plaza in front of it. Reproductions of these photographs in books give only a hint of their breathtaking strangeness. One needs to see them full size to marvel at them.

After the museum, Struth took me to his studio, which was in the process of being dismantled. It was a very long room on the second floor of a former printing plant, filled with desks and computers, sofas and bookcases, a drum set, and a narrow mattress on the floor neatly covered with blankets, where, after giving up his Düsseldorf apartment, Struth would sleep when in town. Windows facing the street lined one long wall, and a line of black file boxes sat on the floor along the wall opposite. These files, which relate to the business end of Struth's enterprise, were being reorganized before being shipped to Berlin; Struth wanted them to be in order before the move. Much of Struth's work these days is running his business. His art has made him rich, and his dealings with the people who have made him (and themselves) so occupy a good portion of his time (and of the studio's functions). He is on the phone a lot: someone is always calling him about some business particular; he seems to be under pressure.

It wasn't always like this, he told me, and cited two events that changed his life from that of a carefree rich artist to that of one who feels he has to hustle to remain one. The first was the renovation, in 2005, for a hundred and fifty thousand euros, of the Düsseldorf studio. The second was his marriage, in 2007, to Tara Bray Smith, a young American writer, who gracefully accepted living in Düsseldorf for two and a half years, and then proposed the move to Berlin—which Struth was happy to make. “The time was over. I was so used to Düsseldorf—it seemed good to move somewhere else.” Good but not cheap.

“Before I did the renovation of the studio and before I got married, I had one assistant, not three, I needed very little money, my apartment was very inexpensive,” Struth said. “I made much more money than I needed—and I paid a fifty-per-cent tax to the German state. Then I did the renovation, I met Tara, we moved to Berlin, I rented a studio there that was six thousand euros a month, I hired two more assistants, Tara said she would love to have a small place in New York, and I thought, O.K., it makes sense, and we found one, though a bigger place than I thought. All of a sudden my expenses exploded, and I felt much more

pressure to sell.” I asked Struth what his photographs sell for, and he replied that at Marian Goodman, in New York, it is around a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The gallery takes fifty per cent, and the state takes fifty per cent of Struth’s share. Goodman sold thirty-five pictures in his last show, in 2010, but in Berlin only ten pictures sold that year. “There’s never certainty,” he said. At the same time, “I’m not worried. There’s always something.” For example: a commission from a billionaire (who wishes to go unnamed) to photograph his family, which Struth might not have accepted when he was flush and photographing only people he knew and liked.

At the studio, Struth leafed through the catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum exhibition to illustrate another seminal event. This was the taking of a photograph entitled “The Restorers at San Lorenzo Maggiore” on the last day of a three-month stay in Naples, in 1988. In Naples, Struth experienced the famous effect that the South has on industrious Northerners. “I discovered I was just very happy there. I fell in love twice. I thought, I’m not only the strict German, I have some joyful capacity in me that wasn’t unearthed until now.” The picture—a lovely composition in muted ochre and umber colors of four people posed in front of a long row of the large old religious paintings on which they have been working in a high-ceilinged room in a former abbey—was the first photograph Struth saw reason to print big. It was also the work that opened the door to the project for which he is perhaps best known: his museum pictures. These show what we see when we walk into a museum gallery: people looking at paintings. We only secondarily see the pictures themselves.

For about a decade, Struth ingeniously played with this conceit. In some of the museum photographs, the relationship between disturbing subject matter—such as that of “The Raft of the Medusa”—and unperturbed viewers was the point, or part of it. In others, spatial relationships were explored, such as in the photograph entitled “Galleria dell’Accademia I,” a work showing Veronese’s “Feast in the House of Levi,” whose depth perspective supports the momentary illusion that the visitors in shorts and jeans standing before it are about to enter its bustling scene. Yet another concept was to focus solely on museum visitors, photographing them from the point of view of the work they were gazing at. In one series, Struth shows tourists at the Galleria dell’Accademia in Florence gazing up at Michelangelo’s “David” and in another at The Hermitage, looking at a da Vinci Madonna and Child. These “audience” pictures are intermittently amusing but, to my mind, a bit trite. We have seen pictures of unself-consciously gaping tourists before. I am also unable to appreciate the series called “Paradise,” large, straightforward pictures of jungles and forests. (“His jungles look like the potted plants in a dentist’s office,” the critic Lee Siegel wrote in 2003, putting his finger on it.)

Struth’s photographs taken in factories, laboratories, and nuclear power plants, on the other hand, look like nothing one has ever seen before. These glimpses into what the critic

Benjamin Buchloh calls “the technological sublime” were on view at Marian Goodman last year and constitute some of Struth’s most powerful images. While at SolarWorld with Struth, I had these images in mind. The feeling of not understanding what one is seeing, of not knowing the functions of madly tangled wires and tubes and cables and mysterious flanges and pulleys and levers, is brilliantly conveyed by these huge pictures of places few of us have ventured into and on whose products many of us depend. Predictably, the places are not satanic mills but belong to the world of Struth’s benign photographic vision. They reassure even as they baffle. They tell us that the people who are absent from the pictures are back there somewhere and that they know what it all means and know what they are doing.

On our way out of the Düsseldorf studio, Struth paused to play a twenty-second riff on the drums, relics of the days when he played in a rock band. We drove to my hotel for dinner, where Struth—after ascertaining that he wouldn’t be acting like a rude guest—joined me in mocking the pretentious food served in mercifully stingy portions. (Everywhere else I ate in Germany, the food was elegant and delicious.) Back in New York, I have been corresponding with Struth by e-mail. In August, he sent me digital images of four of the pictures he had taken at SolarWorld. They were both surprising—while at the factory I hadn’t “seen” any of these images myself—and of a piece with the incomparable Marion Goodman photographs. I wrote to ask if he or Hirsch could also send me the snapshots that, after the formal sitting, Hirsch had taken of the Queen and the Duke looking at a picture of Struth’s dog, Gabby, which Struth had thought to pack when making his meticulous preparations. Hirsch promptly sent three of them. They are wonderful. My favorite shows Elizabeth beautifully smiling at the picture of the dog that Struth and Philip hold toward her as they broadly grin at each other over her head. In another e-mail, Struth wrote that he had heard from the curator of the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery that Philip “was clearly touched by the portrait, and asked, ‘How did he do that?’ ” I wrote back and asked about the Queen’s reaction, and the answer was that it was unknown. In a recent e-mail, Struth wrote, “Still have not given up to find out what the Queen thinks. I tried to get in touch with the dresser, but I heard they are all in Scotland right now.” He added, “Not that that is at the top of my agenda.” ♦