

The New York Times Magazine

Thomas Struth's Entanglement

By TEJU COLE MARCH 5, 2015



Struth's "Figure II, Charite, Berlin 2013" The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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The German photographer Thomas Struth, who was recently the subject of an exhibition at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), seems to work at the descriptive limits of photography. His eye is meticulous, and each of his images contains a tremendous amount of information. He is perhaps best known for his large-format photographs of people in art museums. Those photographs thrill the eye with double vision: We are looking at people who are looking at something. In fact, it gets more reflexive than that: We are generally looking at these pictures in a museum, and the images are usually of people who are themselves looking at something in a museum.

One of these photographs, which shows a large painting by Veronese at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice, is typical. Struth's recent work has taken a turn away from this optical loop. While they are still dense with detail, the newer photographs are also concerned with scientific complexity and with the role artificial environments play in contemporary life.

Among these new images, the one I find most striking is "Charité Berlin," a photo he made in 2013 of a patient about to undergo brain surgery, one of the standouts of the recent Met show. The patient is on the operating table,

her fleshy body only partly visible. Her head, soon to be cut open, is in restraints. But there is as yet no doctor in the room. She is surrounded by, and in fact entangled in, tubes, wires, sheeting and electronic devices. She seems to not merely be lying on this table, but rather to be trussed up on it, offered up like a sacrifice. The spotlighting on her, in the otherwise cold-looking room, is sacramental.

But these objects in which she is entangled represent some sort of hope for her. Our inexpert eyes see only the unresolved complication, but we also know that the complication is not decorative, that everything depends on each of those tubes being in its right place. It is a bewildering and moving picture, one that involves both mystery and worry. The patient lived, the caption tells us. (And Struth, eager to defend her privacy, has not allowed a reprint of the actual image here, only an installation view.)

Struth's picture reminds me of one by Thomas Eakins: not the more famous painting of a surgery in progress, "The Gross Clinic" (1875), but the lesser known and more monumental one that now hangs opposite it at the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#): "The Agnew Clinic" (1889). Like Struth's photograph, what is visible of the patient is half the torso. The head can be seen, but it is indistinct. The body is summarized.



"The Agnew Clinic" (1889) Thomas Eakins/Philadelphia Museum of Art

The difference between the two images is obvious: Where Eakins's canvas is populated with spectators and health workers, Struth's photograph is pared down to the single patient and her inanimate material apparatus. Eakins's optimistic painting is a demonstration of modern medicine. Struth's image, on the other hand, is realist, enacting the stark existential condition of the patient. But realism has its satisfactions. Struth himself

has mentioned two paintings as inspirations: Andrea Mantegna's "Dead Christ" and Matthias Grünewald's "Isenheim Altarpiece," two masterpieces, not of medical procedure but of troubled flesh, the body *in extremis*.



"Dead Christ" Andrea Mantegna/Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

"Charité Berlin" is a reminder: This could be the fate of any of us. In fact, it will certainly be the fate of a number of us to be bound, wanting help, trusting that all the wires are in the right places, that all the blinking lights are in working order. Pulsing at the back of each of our brains is a premonition of that coming day when the various contraptions to which we have to outsource our bodily functions will be grafted onto us. And also there, even if with less intensity, is the knowledge that we are likely to die in a hospital surrounded by devices very much like these.

The New York Times Magazine
Cole, Teju: Thomas Struth's Entanglement
5 March 2015



"Cleveland Clinic,
Intensive Care Unit,
2011"
Lee
Friedlander/Fraenkel
Gallery

The subject of Struth's photograph was touched on in a different way by [Lee Friedlander](#). Friedlander is our great visual poet of entanglement: Things in his pictures intertwine and insinuate with unrelenting, almost joyous, complexity. The picture of his that I have in mind is from 2011, a self-portrait taken in the intensive-care unit after a surgery. He faces the camera frontally. There are wires all over his chest, and plasters and bandages. His face is deadpan, tired and ironic. He is in the aftermath of the tactical helplessness [Sylvia Plath](#) wrote about in her poem "Tulips": "I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons."

If Struth's photograph is the "before," Friedlander's is one possible "after." It is a little beat of wonder that reminds us of something else about our fate: that thanks to these machines and tubes and the people who work with them, we so often live to tell the tale.

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